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It's a Long Story: A Collection of Short Stories

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IT'S A LONG STORY: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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Western Kentucky University
2014

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2014

ABSTRACT

According to editor Alan Rinzler, “Short story collections are big business. Thousands of anthologies are in print with many more published each year. A quick look at Amazon shows 29,000 story collections listed.” Rinzler estimates that 3,500 of these are single-author collections. (Rinzler, 2009)¹. With all of those short stories in print, it is no wonder that short story writing remains the focus of many university-level creative writing courses. Short stories are relatively quick and easy to read, and many are filled with insight, meaning, and some thrilling twists. Over the course of my college career, I have written numerous short stories, and it is my aim to bring them together in a short story collection for my Capstone Experience/Thesis project, and to display the growth of my craft over the course of the past four years at Western Kentucky University. The stories vary in length and genre, but share the general theme of the past. These stories revolve around characters who experience varying ties of bondage to their own personal pasts, family histories, and the stories of those who have come before them. I hope to create meaningful and entertaining fiction that will challenge readers to think about issues such as family relationships, love, and friendship, while examining what it means to be tethered to the past.

Keywords: Short Stories, Fiction, Creative Writing, Short Story Collections

¹ Rinzler, Alan. "Why book publishers love short stories." alanrinzler.com. Alan Rinzler, 12 Oct. 2009. Web. 2 Sept. 2013.

Dedicated to my friends and family, and to God, without whom I would have nothing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I would like to thank the Honors College faculty and staff for the direction and reassurance that they provided, and for the opportunity to present my writing at the Kentucky Honors Roundtable.

Additionally, I would like to thank my friends and family. Thanks to my parents for encouraging me to excel, and for supporting my writing, even when I wouldn't let them read it. Thanks to my friends for helping me find inspiration and being patient with me through the stress. Thanks especially to Jill, for never failing to point out when things didn't make sense, and for being an enthusiastic reader of draft after draft.

Most importantly, I would like to thank God, the creator of the universe, from whom all blessings flow. I would never have the talent or perseverance to create without first being loved by my Creator.

VITA

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Film

Minor Field: Creative Writing

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND INTENT

Teacher. Pop star. Veterinarian. Figure skater. Archaeologist. Filmmaker. Writer. At some point in my life, I have entertained thoughts of pursuing each of these careers, but only one has been consistently interwoven throughout. Considering the nature of this CE/T project, it is not difficult to guess which won out in the end. For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated with storytelling. Most, if not all, of my former career choices have been based around stories. Did I ever really want to be a figure skater? No. I was a kid who had watched Disney's *Ice Princess* one too many times. Did I know anything about archaeology? Of course not; I only knew that I wanted to be Indiana Jones. It didn't take me long to figure out that a generous portion of what motivates and inspires me in life comes from fiction. Fiction has shaped who I am, as well as who I would like to become. At a young age, I discovered that not only did I enjoy consuming stories, but I also had them in me. I have been writing ever since.

The stories included in this collection are only a small sampling of the breadth of writing I have done academically and for my own enjoyment, but they have, through meticulous drafting and revision, become my finest work. Components of this collection range in genre from sci-fi to romantic comedy and feature characters of different ages, genders, and backgrounds. Nonetheless, each of these works revolves around a character who must face his or her past in order to survive the present and envision a future. I chose

the concept of the past as an overarching theme because it is such a relevant part of each and every person's life. We are defined by our pasts, and each day of the present becomes the past eventually. Still, it is not the past alone that determines who we become; it is the way we use knowledge and wisdom from the past to improve the future.

Each story in this collection features a character's reaction to previous events and circumstances. Some must learn to forgive past mistakes, such as Heather in "Bathroom Graffiti" and Katie in "Twenty Seconds," both of whom are weighed down by the burdens of their parents' harmful choices. Others must let go of past fears and insecurities, such as Jason in "Parasailing with My Father" and the unnamed narrator in "Lip Syncing." Still others must accept the past, such as Clarissa in "Shadows," who tries to ignore her history of mental health problems, and Inga in "The Beholder," who is oblivious to her futuristic origin.

The theme of the collection is broad and universally applicable, and I believe that the stories I have written could be enjoyed by readers of all ages. That being said, if I had to specify a narrower target audience, I would say that these stories might best be enjoyed by young adults. The majority of the stories feature characters of high school or college age, and many of them deal with parent/child relations, a topic that is relevant to almost all teens and young adults. Furthermore, I have written the collection in an accessible style that would be appealing to the young adult reader demographic. Several of the stories are narrated in first person, using the present tense, which is a common trend in modern young adult fiction. However, it is my hope that anyone of any age can enjoy the works that I have created and consider them a relevant contribution to the literary world.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Once an idea is born, I do not find it incredibly difficult to put words on paper. Yes, there are challenges, such as pinpointing the right descriptive phrases, or conveying certain emotions without sounding cliché, but on the whole, actually *writing* is the easy part. The true difficulty lies in finding inspiration, which is the first step in my writing process.

Before I typed a single word of any of these stories, I had to have ideas: plots, characters, motives, and conflicts. Some, I borrowed from real life. “Lip Syncing,” for example, stemmed from my feelings for a former classmate, while “Parasailing with My Father” is based on the idea that my own father wants whomever survives him to spread his ashes over the ocean from a parasail when he dies. In both cases, I took details from reality and spun them into “what if” scenarios. What if I had confessed my feelings to that boy? What if the only time I’m brave enough to go parasailing is once it’s too late to go with my dad? From there, I separated myself from the hypothetical situations and created fictional characters to stand in my place. I got to know them, figured out their pasts, and decided how they would react in similar situations.

Other stories did not sprout from personal experiences, but they still have some details rooted in the familiar. For instance, I have never experienced a love story similar to that which I wrote in “Bathroom Graffiti,” but I have vacationed in Pensacola, where

the story takes place. No matter the story, some details are grounded in my own life, because it is from those life experiences that I draw inspiration, be it for the setting, the characters, or the plot. Regardless of how much is adapted from reality, all of the stories started as seeds of ideas that would grow as I began to form text from my thoughts.

Throughout the process, I wrote many drafts and made significant revisions based on feedback from others. Many of the stories were originally written for creative writing classes, and I used comments from instructors to guide my revisions. Additionally, I worked with my CE/T advisors to revise and had input from my peers and friends.

For the duration of the rewriting and revising process, I tried to focus on stories that reflected a common theme. In this case, that theme was the effects of the past on characters' lives in the present. Writing a collection based on a common theme allowed me to produce a more cohesive and organized project. However, it was not until I had written drafts of each of the stories that I discovered the underlying themes in my work. Upon deciding which stories I wanted to revise for the project, I began to notice a pattern of characters whose lives were strongly affected by specific past events, particularly family turmoil. As the only child of happily married parents with whom I am incredibly close, I am uncertain as to how I managed to produce a collection of stories revolving around so much family drama. Nonetheless, familial issues, and the past in general, make up the overarching theme of this collection, and it was the decision to pursue this theme that allowed me to direct my writing toward a specific purpose.

CHAPTER 3

CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS, AND STRATEGIES

As previously stated, finding inspiration was the most difficult element of my writing process. However, there were additional obstacles along the way to completing this project. Maintaining the proper motivation and time management skills was probably my most overwhelming challenge. It seems to me that inspiration and motivation go hand in hand. When inspired by a particular idea, I am more motivated to write, and when I follow that motivation, further inspiration pours forth. On the other hand, it is nearly impossible for me to motivate myself to work on a story if I do not feel inspired or engaged. This was a prominent obstacle during the revision stage. I had produced numerous drafts of the same stories, over and over, until they had transformed in my mind from creative outlets to mere homework. There came points at which I lost passion for my own writing, or at least for the stories included here. I would go through periods of writer's block, or else I would develop new ideas which I had no intention of including in the project, and then I would work on those instead.

It also did not help that the ideas I was most passionate about were novel-length ideas. "The Beholder," included in this collection, is one such example. I wrote it as a short story, but it could also be interpreted as a first chapter of a novel. I attempted to write it in a stand-alone short story format, but in my mind, it is a part of something much bigger. To overcome this particular challenge, I had to discover the heart of the conflict

that spanned the length of the novel I had envisioned, and transfer that essential conflict into a more compact, succinct scenario. Telling a story on a smaller scale by no means reduces its impact. Rather, the short story format allows the writer to dig for the heart of the story and find the best way to communicate that central idea without an abundance of complicated plot devices. In probing for the heart of each of these stories, I was able to regain my motivation and cultivate new inspiration, even in advanced stages of the revision process

CHAPTER 4

REFLECTION

Completing this collection was by no means easy. It took countless hours of brainstorming, drafting, and workshopping to produce the stories that follow. One was completed in the span of a semester, while another was written over the course of two all-nighters. The rest fall somewhere in between, within a more reasonable range of time. Some of these are stories I have been developing since my freshman year of college, and all of them have been through more revisions than I can count. They serve as a culmination of four years of hard work and as evidence of my growth as a writer.

I know that all of these stories could be better. I could revise indefinitely and still find room for improvement. That is the struggle that every writer faces: the constant drive to change, to fix, to improve. As much as I chase perfection, I realize that there comes a point at which I have done my best work. I have edited, sought advice from instructors, and nitpicked at each phrase until finally producing a product with which I am satisfied. I hope that someday several years down the line, I will be able to look back at this project and use it as a comparison against how much more I will have grown as a writer, while also taking pride in this collection as a representation of the skills I developed during my undergraduate career. Furthermore, I hope that everyone who reads this collection will not only appreciate the work I have invested, but will, more importantly, enjoy the stories I have to tell.

CHAPTER 5

TWENTY SECONDS

00:00:20

Katie

My phone buzzes for the fifteenth time this morning. It's nearly noon, and about this time, all of my friends are probably seeking out a great seafood place along the Gulf coast. The most recent text is from Spence: a picture of him poking at a disgustingly large jellyfish. At least that's one plus of going to the lake with my family for spring break: no unsavory marine life. Unless you count my little brother, Lucas, that is.

Right now, he's being a typical ten-year-old, playing out in the water with his new beach ball but not really watching what he's doing. From what I can tell, that ball won't last too long, considering that he just spiked it way out in the deeper section of the lake. The dark water laps around it, pulling it further and further away.

"I got it," Mom calls. Lucas beams. Of course. So quick to forgive. Call me bitter, but I can't just push things aside so easily. Granted, I'm seven years his senior, and I don't exactly have that childlike wonder. But he's old enough to understand what Mom did, even if he can't grasp why. None of us can, and I guess that's the problem.

She's classically beautiful, swimming out there, one masterful stroke after another as she makes her way to the ball. The sun reflects the shimmer of the water on her sun-

kissed skin, and I glance down at my own pale arms. It doesn't matter. People always say I look more like Dad. The point is, Mom's beautiful. Even though she's in her late forties, she could pass for mid-thirties, at least. It makes sense that she'd get attention from younger men, but none of us knows if that was it. I mean, maybe Dad knows. Maybe he hired a private eye to track her down, like Lucas suggested when he found out she'd left. Maybe there was some exotic, young womanizer who lured her away. Or maybe she was just tired; she just packed and left, sick of her same old life. Maybe there was no reason at all.

The point is, she's back now, they're back together, and we're all trying to make it work. That's why I'm stuck here at the lake for spring break instead of roadtripping to Florida with my four best friends. Don't get me wrong, the lake isn't so bad. It used to be the spring break destination of choice for my folks, but we haven't been in a few years, despite its proximity to our town. It's been a while, and I can tell. The docks look more weathered than before, and the ice cream shop up the road has been abandoned. The boats at the yacht club are dilapidated, covered in rust, barnacles, and chipping paint. It can't just be me, right? Sometimes I think the others are gritting their teeth, pretending so hard that they convince themselves they can't see the ruins everywhere.

A boat speeds by a bit too close to the roped off swimming area, stirring up waves that remind me of the ocean, where I could be right now if not for Dad's brilliant idea of a family vacation.

"Mom!" Lucas shrieks as a wave breaks over her head, forcing her under. I tense, waiting for her head to surface. And it does. She comes up gasping but starts to swim just fine in the strong current. It must be awfully strong, come to think of it. She doesn't seem

to be making much headway, just sort of bobbing there. I feel the hairs on my arms stand on end. She's not swimming; she's drowning. The safety lecture from my swimming class comes pounding back into my head. In the final twenty to sixty seconds before a person drowns, the instinctive drowning response sets in. People typically paddle their arms, without leg movement, to try to stay afloat, but are unable to keep their mouths above water. Like Mom. Right now.

The cool water embraces me before I realize I've jumped in. The adrenaline takes over and I'm propelled toward my mother, my arms wrapping around her in a matter of moments. I stabilize her, guiding her mouth above the water's surface and patting her back in hopes that she'll cough up the water she's ingested. I begin to swim with her back to the dock, but from behind me I can feel it. The hum of another boat, the wave forming, building. I give Mom a firm shove, hoping that boost will enable her to make it back to the shore before--

The wave crashes over me, dragging me down. My eyes shut instinctively, but when I try to open them, all I can see is the murky greenish-gray of the lake water. I can't tell which way is up and which is down. All I know is the swirling, the gurgling. My mouth snaps shut before I realize I had opened it, and my throat burns. I can't breathe, but as much as I think about fighting to reach the surface, I can't bring myself to move. I get a vague feeling that I'm sinking, but it's strangely peaceful. I'm sure I'll drift back up in a second. Right now I should just....

00:00:19

Katie

Cold washes over me as I feel my feet plant themselves on an unforgiving concrete floor. A stale wind whips around me and coaxes me to open my eyes.

It looks like a subway platform, with the rounded walls, the dim lighting, the tracks. But that's impossible. I was just sinking in the lake, and now....

They start out as two lights, undoubtedly the headlights of the train, but as they draw near, they morph into one blinding beam. The train stops in front of me without a sound, and its automatic door slides open. I take a step back, playing along, waiting for the passengers to disembark, but no one comes. Instead, the blinding light from the headlights seems to shine out from inside the train car. I look down toward the other cars, but none has an open door: only this first one. The light radiates a warmth that sinks into my bones. It's so inviting. My right foot is the first to volunteer, but the left follows suit almost immediately, guiding me step by step toward the open door. I can see nothing beyond the light, but it hardly seems to matter. It's just so warm, so pure.

The door slides shut behind me with a foreboding final clang and the blinding light disappears, leaving me in an overwhelmingly gray compartment. Suddenly I want out. I want to wake up. This must be a dream. Thrashing in the water, sinking, riding on trains: it's all so insane, so sporadic. My heart knocks at my chest, demanding to be let in on whatever is happening, but I have no way to answer it.

I feel a pair of hands grasping my shoulders from behind. They remain firm as I struggle to turn around, to face my captor, if that's what he is.

“There, there. I know it’s difficult,” says the man behind me, loosening his grip. His tone is soothing, although I can’t place his accent. I turn and examine him. At first, he seems only a few years older than me, but upon further inspection, I realize he could be anywhere from twenty to thirty-five. His face is round and boyish, despite the slightly crooked nose that looks as if it’s been broken at some point. Only his eyes give me pause. They’re gray. Really, actually gray. You always read about characters with gray eyes in novels, but you never notice people like that passing you by on the streets. Eyes in the real world are brown, and blue, and green, and hazel, not gray. At least, not this gray. These eyes are the murky water of the lake, the drab tiles of the train station, the imposing walls of the compartment holding me prisoner.

I want out. I lunge toward the door, knocking the stranger’s hands away, but the door that was just there a moment ago is gone, leaving nothing but a gray wall in its place. I sink to the floor, burying my head in my hands. I have to think. I have to get out. I have to wake up.

“Ms. Spearman?” The stranger asks in his gentle, lilting tone. He squats next to me and places a hand on my arm.

“Who are you?”

“Ah, finally, we’re getting somewhere.” He extends his hand for me to shake, but I just stare at it. While the skin of it matches the rest of him from what I can tell, there’s something off about his hand, just as there is about his eyes. It’s so thin and bony, and it quivers a bit as he waits for me to respond.

“I’m Charon,” he chirps. “But please, call me Ronnie. We’ve modernized.”

Taking his hand back, he reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a miniature clipboard.

“Now, I’m going to need you to answer a few questions.”

“Charon?” I ask, dumbfounded. Public schools catch a lot of crap about leaving children behind and being dumber than the Chinese, but if there’s one thing they do teach us, it’s mythology. I think back to freshman year in Mrs. Scott’s class, and how she drilled this knowledge into my head, even though I swore I’d never use it. Charon, in Greek mythology, was the ferryman who transported the souls of the dead to Hades across the River Styx. Who in their right mind would name their kid after him? Unless....

Charon must see the look of realization and horror on my face. I know it’s there, contorting my features. I will my mouth to close, but it stays the way I left it, dropped open. He cracks a smile.

“Yep,” he says. “There it is.”

“I’m dead.”

Charon nods, pursing his lips. “That’s actually very good, yeah. Usually takes a little bit longer. Somebody’s studied up.”

“What the hell? No. I’m *dead*, and you’re talking about my studies?”

Now the imp really smiles, showing every tooth in his head. It’s like he’s getting some sick pleasure out of this.

“Or ‘What the Hades,’ you might say. ‘What the Erebus?’ Right? Oh, come on. Lighten up. Live a little!” He pauses. “Ooh, too soon, huh?”

This has to be a dream. This wiry, punny little man cannot be Charon. He's supposed to be old and ugly, like the grim reaper. And that's all mythology anyway. None of that's true. I'm dozing by the lake right now. I'm...I'm....

I'm noticing that my heartbeat, which a moment ago was slamming against my chest, echoing in my ears, is now subdued. It's odd, because I definitely feel like my heart should be racing. I place a hand over my heart, like I'm about to say the Pledge of Allegiance, and notice that the pulse is barely there at all. If I'm not dead yet, I'm close. I pinch my arm but don't awaken, and my heart rate continues to slow.

"Don't worry, that's normal," Charon offers as a means of comfort. "By the time we get there, it'll be gone."

Gone. Just like that. That's my heartbeat he's speaking of with such nonchalance. I feel my stomach roll, but at least I can still feel something. I can't tell if it's just in my mind, or if my limbs are really going numb.

"Now," Charon says, flipping a sheet on his clipboard as I'm kind of hoping to wake up in a psych ward. "There's a smidge of paperwork, but it'll be over soon enough."

"No." Death and bureaucracy in the same day? I don't think so. I'll play along with the whole "you're dead" thing for now, because I can't come up with a better explanation, but I have to get out of this compartment. I'm suffocating, and I know there's an entire train attached to this musty, claustrophobic chamber.

Charon bites his lip. "Mmmkay...That's different. When you say 'no,' do you mean--"

“I mean no. I want out of here,” I say, standing to my full height in hopes of seeming authoritative.

Charon is silent for a few moments. Finally, he clasps his hands together and nods rapidly. “Yeah, okay. Let’s start the tour. A little change of pace. I like that.” He nods some more. To my left, a door appears and Charon opens it, stepping aside for me to enter first. I swallow the lump in my throat and step through the door. I don’t care where it takes me, as long as it’s not gray.

00:00:18
Katie

Well, it certainly isn’t gray. Somehow, I’ve walked straight into a 1950s style kitchen, complete with the garish olive green appliances and gaudy fruit patterned wallpaper. A lady stands at the oven, tight brown curls hugging her forehead. She turns to me, and I would know her face anywhere, even though I never saw it like this.

“Grandma?” I speak before I can sort out the confusion. I still feel the movement of the train beneath me, yet here I am, in my grandmother’s house, years before I was even conceived. Of course, she doesn’t respond. She can’t hear me. Had I taken just a second to think about it, I would have guessed. Whether she’s the ghost or I am, I can’t be sure. But what does it matter? We’re both gone now.

A little girl wearing a dress of robin’s egg blue enters the room like a vision from a Technicolor film. Her stubby nose and dark eyes are all I inherited from her end of the gene pool, as far as appearances go, but I don’t have to look twice to recognize my own mother. She seems to be about five or six years old. Looking at her in her Norman

Rockwell purity, I almost forget how she turned out. What would Grandma say if she knew that her lovely little bluebird had grown up to abandon the nest?

I get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I don't want to think these things; I just want to see her the way she was, the way she is now, right in front of me.

"Mommy," she says. Her voice is like the frosting on a gourmet cupcake: almost too sweet, but you want more of it anyway.

Grandma glances at her and smiles faintly, stirring a pot of vegetable soup on the stovetop. "In a minute, Tara."

"You said you'd come see," my mother whines. I sense her disappointment, even though it's not overly evident in her tone. I mean, I'd be disappointed too after working so hard on that finger painting.

Wait. What finger painting? I look over the scene, trying to concentrate, trying to discern where I got that memory. But my focus is pulled from my own logic as more and more details pour into my consciousness. These thoughts aren't mine. I can't hear them, no, but I feel them on some molecular level. *Mommy, you promised.*

"Mommy, you promised," little Tara sighs.

00:00:17

Tara

"Just a second, sweetheart," Mommy tells me. But she said that forever ago.

"I painted you and Daddy," I say. That will make her want to see for sure. She has lots of pictures of her and Daddy hanging on the wall. In some of them, she wears a pretty white dress. That's from when they got married. I tried to paint that, but the paper was white, so it didn't show up, so I painted her in her pretty yellow apron instead. It's

what she wears whenever she cooks. So she wears it a lot more than she wears the white dress anyway.

“That’s nice, honey. Daddy will be home in a little bit. Why don’t you go wash your hands, and when you get all the paint scrubbed off, I’ll come see the picture?”

I race down the hall to the bathroom and stand on my tiptoes to reach the faucet. I rub and rub with the soap in between my hands until a rainbow runs down the side of the sink. I even get underneath my fingernails like Mommy always gets onto me about.

When I go back to the kitchen, the pot of soup is sitting on the table with steam coming out, but Mommy isn’t there. I run back down the hall to my room, and she’s standing in the doorway, holding my picture. I want to ask her if she likes it, but I stop. She looks sad.

“It’s not good?” I ask her.

She turns around and sees me, looking surprised, like she didn’t even hear me coming. “No, baby, it’s beautiful.”

She scoops me up and carries me down the hall, stopping in front of the wedding picture.

“I’m going to hang it right here.” She points to the spot right under the one of her in the white dress. She looks so pretty in that picture.

“Mommy, I want to get married,” I tell her. “Just like you.”

00:00:16
Katie

I give my head a good shake, regaining control of my thoughts.

“What was that?”

“Memories. Personal history,” Charon says from behind me, making me jump. I don’t know how long he’s been there or if he just experienced what I did. Could he feel people’s thoughts, too? Could he sense mine?

“I don’t get it, Charon.” It feels weird to call this living, breathing human being by the name of a long-obsolete Greek myth.

“It’s Ronnie. I told you. We’ve modernized.”

“Yeah, this isn’t exactly a ferry over the River Styx.”

“Course not. That turned out to be too costly, too time-consuming. Now we go under it, like a Eurostar for the dead. It gets you there within the last twenty seconds of your life. Isn’t that something?”

He’s entirely too chipper about all of this.

“Oh sure, it may feel like hours, days, weeks. It’s all subjective,” he continues, leaning back against the kitchen table. We’re still in my grandmother’s house, after all. Or we’re inside a memory, or something. Charon--or Ronnie, whatever--rambles on. “But really it’s twenty seconds or less, guaranteed.” He beams at me like a used car salesman.

“How can you have a job like this and be so perky?” I snap at him, and the easy smile hardens in place. Something in his gray eyes flashes obsidian for a moment, but it’s long enough to remind me that I don’t know this man, this force of nature. He’s not a normal human being like he appears. If he is who he says he is, he’s immortal, and probably dangerous. If I’m already dead, there can’t be much he can do to me, but he did say the last twenty seconds. There’s still life in me somehow. I bring two fingers to my opposite wrist, clinging to the fading pulse.

“Got to stay sane somehow,” Charon finally replies through gritted teeth. “Ready to move on?”

He opens the kitchen door and guides me through a little more forcefully than before, but I barely notice. It’s what’s on the other side of the door that demands my attention.

The sun is golden, reflecting off the serene, blue water of the lake as bright pink and yellow speedboats zip by, towing water skiers. My bare feet step onto the warm, smooth dock, and I allow myself a moment to close my eyes and let the heat soak into my body. Two fingers slip to my wrist again, and I convince myself that my pulse has accelerated, that I’m back on the dock like before, and that none of it ever happened. But the giggle of children flocking around the multicolored ice cream shack is a dead giveaway. I open my eyes, and I don’t see Lucas or his infernal beach ball. I’m not where I started. But I do see Mom.

She looks to be about my age now, although she makes seventeen look a lot more glamorous than it is in my world. What I don’t get, though, is why it’s her. Is it because I saved her? Because I was thinking about her right before I died? Because the last words I said to her were probably snide and hateful? Why is it her out on an inner tube on the lake instead of me?

I feel the battle beginning again: her thoughts vs. mine. This is the most literal definition of turning into one’s mother. I’m staring at her and can’t turn away, and soon I feel her consciousness grab hold of me.

I should have put on more sunscreen.

00:00:15

Tara

“Seriously, Margaret, I’m frying.”

Margaret turns over on her float and smirks at me. “Do you want a tan or not?”

I shrug. Of course I do. It’s been a long, cold winter, and my legs are ghastly white.

“It is hot, though,” Margaret concedes, glancing toward the Frosty Freeze ice cream hut.

“You read my mind,” I tell her, sinking down through the middle of my inner tube and resurfacing behind her. I flip her float before she has a chance to spot me.

“Ugh! Tara!” She yelps, shivering and spitting lake water at me. All of a sudden, our giggles mingle with a lower tone.

“Who’s that?” I ask Margaret, looking at the boy on the dock laughing at us. He looks familiar, like I’ve seen him around school, but I can’t place him.

“Go find out,” Margaret says, shoving me closer to the dock. The boy raises his eyebrows as I swim closer. I can’t tell if it’s the recklessness of summer or a heatstroke coming on, but I’m feeling bold and kind of breathless when I look at him.

“Hi,” I say, reaching the dock. He extends a hand and I reach up to shake it, but when I do, he takes me by the arm and pulls me up on the dock.

“Hey,” he says, after effortlessly lifting me out of the water. “I’m Robert Spearman.”

His smile is enchanting, mind-numbing even. I can usually hold an intelligent conversation, but there's something about the sparkle of those green eyes and the sunlight reflecting off those golden curls that makes me forget my own name.

00:00:14
Katie

Nope. Nope. Too weird. That's my father. I shake my head again, making sure my mother's thoughts have fled. It's awkward enough now, watching them flirt in hushed tones while Margaret continues to tan and business booms at the Frosty Freeze. I look around for Charon, who, once again, conveniently appears behind me. Only this time, he's licking a strawberry ice cream cone.

"How did you...?" I begin. "No, never mind that. What's with this train, these memories?"

"What? They seem pleasant enough, yeah?"

"Yeah, but how far back do they usually go? Not that a little family history isn't lovely, but isn't *my* life supposed to be flashing before my eyes?"

Charon narrows his eyes and considers me for a moment before pulling out his clipboard.

"Spearman?" He reads from the chart.

I nod.

"Tara?"

"That's my mother, sir."

He scoffs when I call him 'sir,' like he's too young and hip for that, even though he must be thousands of years old. But like he keeps saying, they've modernized. His

eyes bore into the clipboard for several seconds. They race up and down the page until, at last, they meet mine again.

“You’re not Tara Spearman?”

“Katie Spearman, Tara’s daughter,” I say, extending my hand as Charon did at the beginning of the voyage. He ignores it, much as I rebuffed him. Instead, he flips frantically through the clipboard’s pages, his nostrils flaring.

“What do you mean, you’re not Tara Spearman? It says right here: Tara Spearman. Date of death: March 12. Method: drowning. Didn’t you drown? At least tell me you drowned.” He’s starting to pace, wringing his hands.

“I did drown,” I say. It may be the first time I’ve processed the logistics of the situation. “I was trying to save her.”

Charon’s eyes flash obsidian, then cool to gray. The pacing has ceased, and he’s standing still as a statue. I half expect him to crack and fall to the floor in pieces, as he should be: the ruins of an ancient culture. But instead he composes himself, running a hand over the brown stubble that decorates his chin.

“Brave as well as cheeky?” He tries to tease, but his tone is a bit too airy to be believed. He’s still upset. He glances at the clipboard again.

“What’s on that thing anyway?” I ask. He tucks it closer to his chest, as if on instinct, and it’s only now that I see the beauty and craftsmanship of an otherwise dowdy office supply. The clipboard is thick, made of real wood instead of that cheap, corky material that normal ones are composed of. Intricate carvings adorn its back side, depicting a small boat on a river, guided by a grim, grotesquely bent figure.

“None of your business,” Charon snaps. After a moment, he heaves a sigh. “I keep telling them, the insurance doesn’t cover unexpected feats of heroism,” he mutters, more to himself than to me. “No exchanges. No returns.”

“What are you--?”

“No, this won’t do. Looks like we’ll have to turn her around.”

Turn around? We’re going to turn the train around? Just when I thought I’d reached the summit on this mountain of weird, another peak rises before me. My fingers slide to my wrist again. It’s becoming quite a habit. The pulse remains weak, but my hopes are rising.

Charon has turned his back to me and is about to walk through the door that’s just materialized. I can only speculate that he’s going to the engine room--if death trains even have those--to steer us back to my place of death.

The thought of it drops like a boulder in the pit of my stomach. I imagine my mother coughing and spewing as Dad runs up and pulls her out of the water. Lucas will be crying as they all turn back to see my body pulled beneath the waves. Or maybe I’ll just float up to the top, arms and legs splayed out in all directions. It’ll be like when my neighbor taught me to do “dead man’s float” in his pool, only I won’t cease the act after a few seconds with a flourish and a “ta da.” I’ll just cease. Cease breathing. Cease thinking. Cease living.

“Charon, wait,” I call out, grabbing him by the arm. He lets me follow, still holding onto him, through the door, and somehow we’re back in the original gray compartment. My muscles tense, but I take it as a good sign. At least some parts of my body are still responding accordingly.

“Look, Katie,” Charon begins, his voice reverting back to the gentle, soothing tone he took at first. “It’s Katie, isn’t it?”

I nod.

“Well then, I have good news. You’re not on my list.” He taps the clipboard with one finger to make the point. “All I have to do now is reroute this sucker and you’ll be--”

“Alive?” I interrupt, probably a bit too eagerly.

“Of course. So sorry for the mix-up, but what’re you going to do, you know? Sometimes you just get a stubborn one who won’t die the first time. I remember back in 1916, I had to go back for one guy about four times. Not pretty.”

The elation that had been building inside of me flees. *The first time*. That’s what he said. He’s going back, not just to return me, but to take her: my mother. She’s still going to die. Suddenly I’m racking my brain for the last words I uttered to her. I can’t remember. Were they spoken in love or in anger? I have to know, because as much as I’ve hated my mother for the past year and a half, I can’t imagine her dying thinking that I never loved her at all.

That’s when the thought dawns on me: the past year and a half. The time it’s been since she took off unexpectedly. I’m on a train where her memories, her very thoughts, are ripe for the picking. I could finally know why she left.

“...ripped apart by the biggest mountain goat I’d ever seen!” Charon’s voice explodes at the climax of some story I had tuned out. I’m assuming it was about the guy who nearly died four times back in nineteen-whatever. “Were you even listening?”

I expect his eyes to go black again, but they fill with concern instead.

“I guess I could work on my timing,” he mutters, ducking his head like a scolded child. “You’ve figured...about your mom, yeah? But we’ll get you back. You don’t have to stay here.”

I don’t have to stay. An hour--or maybe just a few seconds--ago I would have leapt for joy at that announcement, but now that I realize the knowledge this train holds and all the secrets I could learn, I almost want to linger a bit longer.

“And if I refuse?” I ask, throwing in a nervous smile, just to make sure I’m not too bold.

This gets a genuine laugh out of Charon, albeit a bitter one, I think.

“Impetuous girl,” he taunts. “You think you really have a choice in the matter?”

The obsidian is coming. I don’t have to meet his eyes to know that that cold, black stare has me in its sights. He says I don’t have a choice. Ha! We’ll see who has a choice.

I burst through the door we just came through, expecting a dock on the other side, but what I find is quite different indeed. It’s my grandparents’ farm in Tennessee, only with more trees and a tire swing that looks like a recent addition. The smell of hay and horses lingers in the air, and I know I could stay in this car of the train forever. But my mom wasn’t at the farm when she left. I know exactly what I’m looking for, and I have to find it before Charon finds me.

I race through the other train cars, past Mom as a cheerleader, flying up in the air at pep rallies, Mom getting picked up for a date with Dad, Mom dancing at a sorority party. I have a while to go before year 47, but in one car, something stops me. It’s the wedding dress: the pretty, white dress Mom was crazy about as a little girl. It’s draped over a chair in a small dressing room, and I know what happens next.

My mother, wearing a floor-length white robe, practically floats to the dress and admires it.

Finally.

00:00:13

Tara

“Finally,” I sigh, glancing at the locked door before dropping my robe and slipping into the most gorgeous wedding gown imaginable. It’s the only one I’ve ever considered. It was Momma’s, after all. I gaze into the mirror, losing myself in lace for a while. That’s precisely what I need to take the edge off my nerves. The dress even smells like Momma, after all these years. It’s a comforting smell: roses mixed with chamomile tea.

“Is it on?” Margaret asks before tapping lightly at the flimsy wood of the church’s dressing room door. No sooner have I turned the lock than I’m engulfed by the arms of my maid of honor.

“You’re perfect,” she exclaims.

“My makeup’s not done.”

“Makeup? Ha! You’re ‘a vision of youth and beauty,’” she says, quoting an ad we saw in a bridal magazine. I smile into the mirror, reflecting my joy to her, because I know if I keep it all to myself, I’ll turn it into something ugly.

I am young. Momma’s mentioned it many times, just how young I am. But I’m twenty-two, not thirteen. It’s a perfectly suitable age to marry. I’ve been with Robert for five years now. I’m more than ready to become Mrs. Spearman. Aren’t I?

“Something new,” Margaret says, fastening a beautiful bracelet of glass beads around my wrist.

“Oh, Margaret! You didn’t have to do this!”

“Of course I did. I couldn’t just go to Italy without finding the perfect souvenir for my best friend. I’m really going to miss you.”

She squeezes my arm, and I know that’s her way of apologizing for that last comment. We had agreed not to talk about our impending separation until after the wedding, but I’d be thinking about it constantly, too, if I were moving to Venice in a few weeks. She had studied there in the spring of our senior year and had secured a position teaching English at a grade school.

I could never do that: just up and leave on my own. I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have Robert by my side. I mean, it’s not that I haven’t thought about what it would be like to live on my own and drift with the wind, but it all seems a bit too lonely for me. A little too directionless, maybe *too* free: the kind of freedom that’s scary.

“Honey, let me see you,” Momma cries, bursting through the door, tears welling up in her eyes.

“What do you think? Just like you, right?” I ask.

In response, she wraps me in her embrace of roses and chamomile tea and mumbles, “Just like me, but so much more.”

00:00:12

Katie

Charon tugs at my shoulder roughly, snapping me out of my mother's thoughts. Her second thoughts. Even on her wedding day, she wasn't sure she could stay. I'm honestly surprised it took her as long as she did to up and leave on her own. It was something she thought she could never do, and I'm as determined as ever to find out what changed her mind. I brush Charon's hand away and make a break for the dressing room's little blue bathroom door. I know it will lead me out of this memory and on to another train car.

But no. The bathroom door does, in fact, lead to a bathroom.

"Quit playing games. Just let me go," I yell to Charon. He squeezes into the tiny, green tile room and blocks the only exit.

"I am letting you go," he says in an even tone. "You for Mummy, and no more peeking. That's the deal."

You for Mummy. I feel as though I've been slapped. There's only one life on the line and on the clipboard, and it isn't mine anymore. It never has been.

"Don't think of it as a trade," he continues, knowing full well that that's what it sounds like. "You seem bright. You must realize it has to be this way. It's her time."

No. Her time never came. She never got Italy. She never got the travel, the adventure. She got my dad, and my brother, and me. She got the white picket fence and the yellow apron: the same life as her mother before her. So much for the "more."

Sometimes I really hate myself. Granted, I usually have some sort of logic behind my self-loathing, but at the moment, I can't tell if it's because I never understood my mother or because I actually am starting to understand her.

"Katie, come on now," Charon continues. His soothing tone sounds more sickening now.

"What if it were a trade?"

Charon appraises me, looking me up and down until our eyes finally meet and lock on one another for a little too long.

"You for your mother?"

"That's right. I die. She lives. How long do I have now, a few seconds? Most of your work is already done."

He reaches into the pocket of his brown corduroy jacket and retrieves a pocket watch. "You're down to twelve seconds. But I really don't think--"

"Ronnie," I say, taking a less direct approach. "How long have you been doing this job?"

He cocks his head and rolls his eyes, puffing out a breath. "It's been a while."

"And how long have you had to deal with the bureaucracy? No returns, no exchanges, file the death certificates, row the boat," I go on, making up half of it.

"Haven't you ever wanted something more?"

I realize how cheesy it sounds, but I just can't get away from that word: more. Maybe this is my "so much more:" taking Mom's place on the train. If she's honestly trying to be part of the family again, wouldn't it be better to let her stay, to get rid of the

one who's still resentful, not the one who's eager to start fresh? They'll mourn me, sure, but they'll all be closer because of it.

Charon looks me in the eye again and sighs. "You know what you're getting into?"

I nod, even though I have no idea.

"Well then, you for her?" he asks, extending his hand.

"Me for her," I reply, and we finally shake.

00:00:11
Katie

Charon's hand is surprisingly warm, although I feel it trembling as it clasps mine. He pulls away and reaches for his pocket watch again.

"Down to eleven now. We'll see if you stick it out."

Is he glaring at me? I don't even know how to react to this. I can't tell if he's satisfied with our arrangement, or if I can even trust him, but this is as close as I can come to saving my mom. I'll just have to wait and hope it works out.

It takes me a moment before I remember that we're standing face to face in a tiny church bathroom in one of my mother's memories, and I'm leaning on the back of the toilet.

"Um, can we...?" I let the question linger as I gesture around the cramped space. Charon blinks.

"Right."

He opens the door and we emerge in a corridor between train cars. Then the thought occurs to me: will these cars still hold my mother's memories? Or will they be mine now that the switch is official?

Charon brushes a hand through his hair, leaving stray bits standing straight up. He stares at the floor, still clutching the clipboard in a death grip, and I really don't want to ask him anything right now. I don't think he's in the mood. But eleven seconds isn't much time, is it?

"So, how does this work?"

"Hm?" He looks up and raises his eyebrows. "Ah, right. Your passing protocols. Well, we're nearing the final ten. Might as well go over a few of the finer points."

I was hoping for a quick synopsis, not an orientation, but I cross my arms and decide to listen. For now.

"There's rarely any pain involved. That's usually surface level," he continues. "Once you get here, it's a pleasure cruise. Which reminds me--be back momentarily--got to switch over the flashes."

He turns to head toward what I imagine is the control room.

"Wait. The flashes?"

"The memories. Flashbacks."

"Could I--"

His eyes begin to darken as he holds up one finger in a position between pointing and scolding.

"These aren't yours."

"No," I say as my eyes slide to the ground. "Of course not."

He tosses me a satisfied nod and turns to go.

Of course these memories aren't mine. But that doesn't mean I'm not taking them.

00:00:10

Tara

“That’s the problem, Tara. You just take and take! Not everything is for your sole benefit! Do you even know how hard I work to provide for this family?”

I can’t believe this. That ingrate! That pig!

“Do you know what *I* gave up for this family?”

“Oh, enlighten me, Tara,” Robert shouts. I’m glad the kids are both over at friends’ houses. But even though they’re not here to hear it, I’m sure the entire neighborhood is getting a nice taste of twenty-something years of pent-up frustration as it reverberates through our laundry room.

“Not so loud, Robert!” Great. Now I’m shouting, too.

“I’ll be as loud as I want. Just please, tell me about all of *your* hardships. None of which include working two jobs every damn day, that’s for sure.”

I hate him. I hate the lump in my throat and the hot tears searing the edges of my eyelids. I hate the vein that’s popping out of his neck, reminding me to go easy because of his hypertension, reminding me that if he drops dead of a heart attack, it’ll be because we were having this stupid argument again.

“Forget it,” I say, sinking to let my elbows rest on the washing machine. I slouch over the hulking appliance and bury my head in my hands, waiting for him to go off in a huff, as usual.

“No, Tara. What on earth do you want? I’ve been trying to figure it out for years, but you’re impossible to please. You haven’t had to work a day in your life. You get to stay home with the kids.”

He’s right, but so was Momma. I was young--too young--when I married him. From the dorm room to the bridal suite, that’s what Momma had said. No independence in between. There was my mistake. And soon the kids came, and any thoughts of any career were tossed aside. Not that I knew what I wanted to do, anyway. But maybe I could have done something.

“I’m just tired, Robert. Tired of laundry, tired of dishes, tired of this repetition. I just want to go.”

I don’t know where it came from. I said it without thinking, but now that it’s out, it makes total sense. I want to go. I want to leave. I want to see what else is out there.

“Go, then.”

Robert drops his arms at his side, palms upturned. He shrugs, shakes his head.

“What?”

“I won’t stop you. Do what you need to. Just go.”

He really doesn’t care. He’s just letting me go. The teardrops that were threatening to fall earlier pour forth much more freely now, as I push past him and lock myself in the bathroom. I sit atop the toilet lid, box of tissues in hand. If that’s how he wants things to be, fine. In the morning, he just might find me gone.

00:00:09

Katie

Gradually, I regain my own consciousness and leave my mother in the bathroom, crying. Yet I remain in the memory. In the familiar kitchen of wood paneling and knotty pine cabinets, my father stands alone and empty handed. He's frustrated, to be sure, but he can't know how much worse he'll feel tomorrow, when he finds that Mom wasn't bluffing.

He'll try to let us down gently, but there's no good way to tell your kids that their mother is sick of them, so you say you don't know why she's gone. You let them go on believing that there could be a million reasons. You let your nine-year-old think his mother is a spy called away on a top-secret mission, if that's how he needs to cope. And then throw open your arms to the prodigal wife when she returns one day, out of the blue, begging for a second chance. I don't blame him, though. He never really wanted her to go. The question at hand is, do I blame her? Because even that is getting harder to do.

Kind of like breathing. I know it's not just my imagination. The art of breathing is eluding me. It's not as easy as it was a few seconds ago. I feel my pulse again, and it's barely there. I try again to take a deep breath, but it falls short, shallow. I yawn.

No. I don't have much time, but I'm not finished. I take off down the corridor at what seems like an impressive speed, but when I pass a window on one of the compartments, I can see from the reflection that I'm barely jogging.

What am I even looking for? Didn't I find my answers already? All the logic in the world, all the reasoning behind her decisions, doesn't change the fact that she left.

I throw open a door at random, not knowing what to expect, let alone hope for. What I find is the most beautiful vineyard I've ever seen, with spindling vines scaling the stucco walls of an earth tone villa stuck right in the middle of all the luscious greens. Italy.

00:00:08

Tara

“Another beautiful day in Italia, no?”

Margaret, barefoot as usual, strides out onto the patio with a bottle of red wine. This is how we begin each day: wake up early, lounge around a bit, drink some wine with breakfast because we can, and then get ready for work. Then, of course, in the off time, enjoy Italy. It's perfect. Never a dull moment. I teach English, just like Margaret. We meet people. We go dancing. Speaking of which, we're going out tonight, actually.

“So where to this evening?” I ask her.

“Oh, just this little club Abramo has been wanting to show me. You know, he has friends, Tara.”

I toss my crumpled breakfast napkin at her.

“What? I'm just saying.”

“Margaret, I'm...”

She gives me a look. *The* look. The one that says, “If you still consider yourself married, then why are you here and not with your husband?” The one that says, “It's been over a year now. Give in and date around.” The one that says, “Who knows if Robert's even carrying a torch for you?” She'd never say any of that, but we've been best friends since grade school. I know she's thinking it.

I shake my head. “I’m married, Marg. Remember that before trying to set me up, okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Married with children. That’s a hard sell anyway.”

My stomach rolls. What am I doing? Married. With children. It’s not like I haven’t thought of them before. I think about my children every single day. Every time I go into school and teach these kids to speak my language, I’m confronted with the face of a little Lucas or a tiny Katie. They smile up at me, trusting me, and I want to cry, and I want to hold them, but I have to maintain my job and my sanity. So I ignore it: the nagging in the back of my mind. I haven’t even called them. No letters. No postcards. No emails or Facebook messages.

“What kind of mother am I, Margaret? I ought to be shot.”

Margaret sighs. “You know, I thought when you came here to be an ‘independent woman’ you’d shut up with the baby talk. But nope, you talk about them more now that when they were first born. Oy.”

“Don’t ‘oy’ me,” is all I say, but what I mean is, “I’m a worthless sack of manure.” What kind of indulgent fantasy have I been living, just pushing any unpleasant thoughts to the side as I sip wine and dance to techno pop?

“Margaret, what day is it?”

“The seventh. Why?”

I’m an idiot. A selfish, mindless idiot. That’s why.

“Tomorrow is Katie’s prom.”

She sighs, but I don’t care if she’s exasperated. I’m too busy imagining Katie getting ready for prom without her mother. Who’s her date? Will Robert scare him off

like he's always jokingly promised? What does her dress look like, and who will help her with her hair? Robert doesn't know how to use that camera. Maybe Lucas can make the pictures. No, Lucas won't want to; he's nine. No, gosh no, ten now.

I push back from the table, nearly overturning my wine glass. I almost want to throw it at something. But it's not the wine nor the glass that made me so worthless. It's me. And it's up to me to fix it.

"I want my kids, Marg."

"You sure? Because before--"

"No. I always wanted them. And Robert, too. I love them."

She pauses, no doubt thinking how silly and fickle I am. She's probably judging me for returning to the seemingly lackluster domestic life. But I need that, and for the first time, I really want it. Without my family, I--

00:00:07

Katie

"What? No!" I shout before realizing it won't do any good. I'm ripped from Italy, from my mother and her sudden revelation. No. I want it back. I want her back.

Instead I'm in a dim room punctuated with strobe lights and music that's entirely too loud. Couples are grinding everywhere I look, and I'm pretty sure someone has spiked the punch by now. I'm reliving my own prom. Charon must have changed the flashes, or whatever he called them. And speaking of which, here he is. Dressed in a tux now, with a little boutonniere, he saunters my way.

"Enjoying the party?"

"You've got to be kidding me."

He cracks a smile. “Oh, lighten up. You’re almost there.”

“Where’s the exit?” I ask. I have to project over the beat of the so-called music.

Rolling his eyes, Charon leads me through a door and back into the gray corridor.

“Talk about a buzzkill,” he mutters.

“Prom sucked enough the first time.”

He shrugs.

“Find what you were looking for?”

When I ran off to peek at the last couple of memories from my mom, I wondered if he’d catch me, if he’d even care, if his eyes would do that freaky obsidian flash thing. But he’s just kind of...blank.

“Yeah, I think I did. Sorry if I cheated. Or something.” I don’t know why I feel bad for taking advantage of my last moments, but there are a lot of things I can’t fully explain.

“Your mother...” He begins but his speech fades, like my pulse. I’m feeling weaker now. Only a few seconds.

“My mother what?”

He shakes his head, dismissing the thought, whatever it was.

“My mother what?”

“She...she must be a great lady.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I answer. In all honesty, I don’t know. Is she a good person, a decent mother? She left us. But she came back. She wanted us that whole time. And she did love us. Does that earn her the benefit of the doubt? Does it even matter? She’s my mother. That’s what’s clear, and right now that’s enough.

“Did you ever think....No, never mind.”

“Charon, spit it out,” I demand. He’s acting weird. Well, weirder than he has been. Once full of wisecracks, he’s now grown sheepish. “I don’t have forever.”

As if on cue, my legs begin to tremble. I can’t stand much longer. I lean against the wall, but I end up sliding down, resting my head against the cool steel. Whatever reaction I expect out of Charon doesn’t come. He simply nods. All according to procedure, I suppose.

“Any pain?” He asks clinically.

“Not really. But please, what about my mother?”

He sighs.

“I’ve seen a lot of death,” he says, taking a seat beside me. “A lot of sniveling, crying, and begging. Some go valiantly. Some think they’re doing the world a favor. And some are brave about it. They think what they’re doing is so hard.”

Bitterness drips from his tongue as he pronounces each word. I can’t imagine where he’s going with this, but it hardly seems like a comfort in my last moments. Nonetheless, I don’t interrupt.

“It’s not hard! Anyone can die. Everyone does, sooner or later. I just want to ask them, ‘What is so remarkable about you?’ Yeah, good job, you died. Big deal. Living: now that takes a whole different breed of courage. To live and be left behind: there’s the true valiance.”

00:00:06

Katie

Another second has passed while Charon was monologuing. I'm acutely aware of each one now, and they seem to be going faster. Six left. Breathing is just about too much effort.

Charon glances at me as I struggle to get a good breath. He's expecting something, a reply.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I hear what you're saying but..."

His forehead wrinkles, his eyes locking on me, narrowing.

"I'm just so tired."

He tips his head back to rest it on the wall. "I know the feeling."

"You think...you think I should live? Don't you?" I ask after a bit of a pause.

What else could that speech have been saying?

"Seems you really care about her. No one wants to bury their child. Trust me, I know."

00:00:05

Katie

I wonder, just how much does he know? What all has he seen and how can he still be doing this?

To live and be left behind....

No. I can't go back on my bargain now. I can't leave Lucas motherless. Then again, it's a 50/50 shot. Losing her firstborn might be enough to drive her away all over

again, when she's needed most. Or what if she becomes depressed and just stops responding to anything? What will happen to Dad if I'm gone? I'm not foolish enough to think I won't be missed. Either way, this is going to kill everyone in our family, not just the one who rides this train.

No. I've made my choice. Curse him for giving me these second thoughts.

00:00:04

Why's it going so fast? I know another moment has elapsed, and I just want it to slow down. I need to think. I can't. I can't...

"Four seconds," Charon announces, tilting his head to where it's nearly on my shoulder.

"Wait."

"Can't."

"I need more time."

"Can't. You know how many rules you've already broken today?"

"What, are they going to fire you for this?"

A bitter chuckle escapes his lips, but then he grows silent.

"It only takes a word," he finally says. "Just tell me and you can go."

"She's my *mother*." I could never. No. No way could I be responsible for her death. I just couldn't. She's my mom.

"I know," he answers. But it's more than "I know." It's "That's the point." It's "Do you really want to save her?" And I hate myself for knowing that he's right.

I force myself shakily to my feet, and Charon rises, spotting me.

“Do it,” I say, hoping to sound sure and confident, but only sounding like a frightened child.

Charon nods.

00:00:03

The shock of cold water around me nearly causes me to drown all over again. I’m back in the lake. I’m right where I was before I reached her, but I only have a few seconds. There’s no way. I know I can’t make it to her in time, and I know I’m not meant to.

00:00:02

Time moves so much faster here, but I’m still hyper-aware of each passing second. I wonder if it will be this way for the rest of my life: each solitary moment resonating as though it’s an hour or a day. Two left. Then she’ll be gone. I can only hope Charon will be kind to her on the train. After that, who knows?

But I can’t think about that now. I’m still swimming toward her, knowing it’s fruitless, but I want to say something.

“Mom,” I call.

She doesn’t answer, of course, and I don’t know what I’d say if she did.

00:00:01

“It’s okay,” I tell her, watching her head sink below the water for the last time.

CHAPTER 6

LIP SYNCING

The air is warm, full of energy and the smell of beer. Your best friend's band is playing in the corner of the small bar, which is busier than usual thanks to all of us groupies. The terracotta walls seem to add heat to the stifling room, and it doesn't help when you suddenly glance in my direction. My pulse quickens and my cheeks burn. I can almost hear you asking, "Do you love me?"

Years before the band and the bar, you did ask me that, in a way. You were lip-syncing as we stood backstage at our high school's production of *Fiddler on the Roof*-- you in a ridiculous fake beard and me in a headscarf. I stood there frozen, unable to open my mouth, which, in retrospect, was probably a good thing. You turned to the girl behind you as you silently mouthed the next line of the song. And that was as close as the two of us ever got to discussing what could have been our relationship.

But sitting at this table, surrounded by friends and listening to the band, those memories shouldn't cross my mind. I should be drinking more and thinking less, not staring at you on the other side of the room as you lean against a wall, one foot kicked back and an iPhone in your hand instead of a drink. Tall and confident, as always.

True, I came to the show tonight with some aimless hope of seeing you, but I

didn't expect this rush of adrenaline, this sudden urgency to be near you. I scoot back my chair, stand up, and lie to my friends about my impending absence. They aren't paying attention anyway, since the band's front man has started playing the guitar behind his head. Your eyes are on him too, your mouth half open in an amused smile. I try to put that smile and those brilliant green eyes out of my mind and think rationally for a moment as I move through the crowd, still without a plan. My legs propel me forward, but my mind has yet to catch up.

Moist bodies, sticky with sweat, surround me on all sides as people vacate their seats for a closer view of the show. I push through them despite the fact that I'm shaking all over.

"Oh, hey." A voice calls through the hoi polloi, breaking my concentration. With a sinking feeling, I turn to find one of my former classmates waving at me from a nearby table. I peek in your direction briefly, making sure you're not about to slip away, before I shove my way over to talk to her.

"How have you been?" she shouts over the ear-splitting guitar solo.

"Pretty good." I glance your way once more, hoping to appear nonchalant. The thought of what I'm considering doing sets my face ablaze. You, on the other hand, are perfectly composed, tapping your foot in time with the music.

I make forgettable small talk with the girl, whose name I can't recall, until she excuses herself to get another beer. I readjust myself, tugging on my tank top and smoothing down my hair, feigning confidence.

I look your way, but it's obvious that I'm the last thing on your radar. By this point, you've shifted your focus from the band back to your iPhone, obviously texting a girl much more beautiful and intelligent than me. Okay, so maybe you're just playing Angry Birds, but either way, I'm about to interrupt you.

I'm a few steps away from where you're leaning against the terracotta wall. My legs wobble drunkenly, but I haven't touched alcohol all night. As if on cue, you glance up and smiled at me. If I felt tipsy before, now I'm wasted.

If that's not bad enough, it's also incredibly hot in here. The building must be filled to capacity. I'm pretty sure we're breaking a fire code, in fact. I just hope you can't see that I'm sweating profusely, or that I can barely breathe.

Finally, I fill the space next to you against the wall, my body tingling, forming goose bumps despite the warmth. You open your mouth to speak, but I beat you to it. If I don't say it now, I never will.

"Charlie, I like you." It just comes out. I regurgitate the words I've said in my head a thousand different ways over the last four years. I vomit them, syllable by syllable, and I can't stop until everything comes out, until I'm retching on the emotions I've harbored. "I've liked you since freshman year of high school. I'd almost say 'love,' but that would sound crazy. Especially now, when we haven't seen each other since Josh's Christmas party last year, and even then we hardly spoke, but it doesn't matter, because I've felt this way for so long and I can't seem to stop...."

There. It's gone. It's out, but I still feel no relief. Instead, I feel my face turning from beet red to a ghastly white.

“What?”

You're shocked, clearly. You can't believe my sudden, rambling revelation. Maybe you just need time to process things. But then you point to your ear and nod toward the band, whose drummer is in the middle of a particularly violent rampage.

I stare at the ground for a second, my hands fiddling with a thread that had come loose on my shirt. You really didn't hear me, did you? I open my mouth to repeat myself, but the words won't come. It's down to dry heaving now. Everything of substance has already come out, and I can't make a single sound. I don't know what I was expecting. I'm soft-spoken. This place is loud, and it's not really my scene, and of course I wouldn't know how to talk to people here. I guess you would've heard me if I'd been louder, if I'd been more confident, if I'd been drunk on something other than the sight of you. If I'd been more willing to bare my soul in a smelly, crowded bar. But I wasn't. And I'm not. And I can't. I don't know what I expected, but maybe it *was* this. I gave up hope of ever having a shot with you a long time ago. Still, at least I said it, even if you don't know that.

At this point you're still staring at me. You're waiting for an answer that I can't begin to explain, so I don't even try.

“Nothing,” I say a bit louder, venturing a glance at you, searching your face for signs that you really did hear what I said before. Nothing. You're just standing there as if nothing monumental has just happened, because for you it hasn't. We're both quiet for a minute, but then your reflex for politeness kicks in.

“How are you?” You ask. But you're not really asking. It's just small talk, just

lip-syncing.

CHAPTER 7

SHADOWS

It was dark. Very dark and very damp. Clarissa opened her eyes, only to find herself face down in a puddle of her own saliva in the middle of a psychology textbook. Her back was stiff, and the view from the nearby window was black. She glanced at her iPhone: six unread messages, five of which were from her roommate Kaitlyn.

7:30 Kaitlyn: Almost done studying?

7:42 Kaitlyn: Ice cream with Josh and Dean at 8. Don't forget!

7:52 Kaitlyn: Where are you?

8:00 Kaitlyn: Clarissa?!?!?!?!?

8:05 Kaitlyn: Ok, well, we're going to Baskin Robins near campus. Thanks a lot.

She glanced at the time. 8:29. She had been in the library since five, studying for a midterm. She must have dozed off, which meant....

She glanced at the other message.

7:45 Mom: Don't forget your meds. Good luck on the test!

Clarissa gathered her books and stuffed them into her ratty, off-white backpack. The rattle of pills in a plastic bottle stopped her momentarily with a familiar pressure on

her chest. Her mother might as well have been there in the eerie library reminding her, watching as she ignored the prodding. Sure, she felt guilty, but the occasional throb of guilt was better than the shackles of a daily medication that altered her very being, right? She had gradually stopped taking the tiny, lilac-colored nuisances a week or so ago, and she'd felt relatively normal. She could beat this. And when she did, her family would have the money to do normal family things again, like the yearly vacations to the mountains they used to take.

But that didn't matter now. She had to concentrate on getting to Baskin Robins to make sure Kaitlyn didn't completely hate her.

8:32 Clarissa: So sorry, Kaitlyn! On my way.

She had no idea why Kaitlyn wanted ice cream, anyway. It was October and, as she discovered upon exiting the library, the night was exceedingly chilly. Any excuse to see Josh, she supposed, rolling her eyes.

Clarissa had never realized how dead campus was on Saturdays. Of course, she was the nerd studying in the library all night, instead of out having fun, like most of the student body. Still, she couldn't help thinking it was a stupid idea to walk all the way across campus alone after dark. She had to fight back her mother's voice again, this time telling her to always travel in a group. *A beautiful young girl like you is easy pickings for rapists and killers.* Clarissa shook her head and continued down the sidewalk. The streetlights shed enough light for her to travel safely, she rationalized.

She glanced down at the shadow she cast as she walked briskly toward the west end of campus. The dark copy of her petite frame glided across the pavement alongside her, but it was joined by another silhouette a few steps behind, off to the left.

Clarissa's eyes widened. She quickened her steps, not daring to look back. Whoever it was would leave soon enough. He couldn't possibly be following her. But if not, why was he getting closer?

Clarissa turned with intentional speed, hoping to deter her pursuer by acknowledging his presence. The sidewalk was empty, however, and on the ground only Clarissa's own slender shade taunted her. Taking a breath, she continued. The part of campus she was approaching was older and dimmer. During the day, the hum of construction was a constant irritation, but this late on a weekend, only the dark edges of hulking machinery were visible in the flickering streetlight, and not a sound came from their direction.

Clarissa readjusted her jacket, pulling the collar tighter around her neck. A twig snapped beneath her feet, causing her gaze to drift toward the ground again. Her heart seemed to stop for a moment as she stared down at her own trudging shadow, followed by three more close behind her. They were keeping a steady pace, not chasing, just proceeding behind her, their arms outstretched, and their spindly fingers grasping at the air.

Again, she turned, resolving, at least, to catch a glimpse of her pursuers before her inevitable demise. But when she looked behind her, no one was around. She pulled out her phone.

“Hi, this is Kaitlyn,”

“Kaitlyn, it’s Clarissa. I’m a little freaked out right now so—”

“Please leave me a message and I’ll call you back.”

Clarissa shoved the phone back into her pocket. Up ahead was the old, decrepit environmental science building. As an education major, she pitied the science students who had to spend their days in the place she and her friends had dubbed “Janky Hall.” But at the moment, any building would feel safer than her current position.

The metal of the door handle was cold against Clarissa’s hands, which she had kept in her jacket pockets, one clutching her keys in case she needed to use them as a weapon. The door opened with a foreboding squeak. *Naturally*, she thought, recovering after jumping slightly at the sound. The hallway was deserted, of course. She was surprised the building was open at all, what with it being a weekend, but it was, and it provided a momentary refuge.

She reached for her phone again. Ring...ring...Kaitlyn still made no answer. Probably too busy with her tongue down Josh’s throat to notice. Clarissa wondered what Dean would be doing while his best friend made out with her roommate. Dean was supposed to be Clarissa’s date, clearly a setup, but not an unwelcome one.

Ring...*Come on, Kaitlyn, answer.*

Clarissa stood against a classroom door, staring back at the glass door that she had entered through. She could see nothing but darkness outside, yet the prickling feeling at the back of her neck told her someone could see in. She hung up the phone and

immediately pressed redial.

Ring...

Clarissa decided walking would help calm her nerves until she could reach her friend. Walking and counting. It was a technique she used often when anxiety would get the best of her, when the world was too much, and the world inside her head was even more daunting. *Don't think. Just count. Count your footsteps. One. Two. Three.*

Ring...*Kaitlyn, please answer. Four. Five. Six.*

She had not yet reached seven when a faint echo joined her. Her footsteps were not the only ones in the hall.

Ring...

She walked faster, disoriented in the dim light given off by exposed bulbs that hung from the ceiling. The second set of footsteps continued. Like the shadows, they were consistent and steady, never approaching too suddenly, as though Clarissa were a doe in the forest that could easily spook and disappear into the brush.

Clarissa flinched, preparing for an attack as she rounded a corner. When none came, she made her way toward a door at the end of the hall. It led outside, but a staircase veered off to the right. At least she had choices. For a moment, it seemed the footsteps had ceased. But then there they were again, still pursuing. She startled at another sound. A third set of feet roamed the halls now.

By this point, she was nearly running. The exterior, she decided, would be safer than getting trapped upstairs, and her spirits lifted at the sight of the blue, glowing

emergency call station just a few paces from the door.

The footsteps grew faster, matching Clarissa's pace, and now it seemed there were more than ever. Three, six, maybe ten sets of feet, their owners scrambling after her. This time, she didn't dare turn around.

At last, Clarissa reached the door. An instant before she opened it, she ventured a quick glance at the reflection in its darkened glass. No figures lurked behind her. Only an empty, quiet hallway.

Clarissa burst from the door, stumbling toward the emergency pole and pressing its bulbous red button repeatedly. After some static, a voice crackled over the line.

"Campus police. What is your emergency?"

"Help me," she said with a gasp. Regaining her breath, she continued. "I think someone's following me. I s-see shadows and, and the footsteps and they're, they're—" Clarissa stopped mid-sentence. No one could help her if they didn't know where she was. She had to be rational about this. "Could you send an officer to escort me to my dorm?" she asked, trying to make her voice sound much calmer than she felt, all the while looking over her shoulder. "I'm at—"

"Oh, we know where you are," the voice interrupted. It sounded sinister, twisted. It made Clarissa want to run, but she reasoned that each emergency pole must have a certain call number. *That's how they know where I am. It's standard protocol. It's nothing more. One. Two.* She counted as she tapped her foot, waiting for the voice to continue. *Three. Four.* Still nothing.

“So, you’re sending an officer?” They’re not answering. They’re not coming. I’m alone. No, I’m not alone. You’re behind me. I know you’re there. I can’t see you, but you’re there. Stop following me. Leave me alone. No, Clarissa, just count. They’re coming.

More static erupted from the emergency station. Then the voice, the same twisted voice came over the speaker. “Just be very still, Clarissa. I’ll be right there.”

“I never told you my name....”

Eyes wide, Clarissa bolted from the emergency pole, taking off at a dead run toward the street nearby. She didn’t care who or what was behind her, whether she saw them or heard them. Something was there. The footsteps grew louder and louder, so many footsteps, and this time, they weren’t hesitating.

The path Clarissa took toward the street was dark. All she could see were the occasional headlights of a car passing up ahead. With her sight obstructed, her hearing was all the better. The footsteps, running now, nearly upon her, thundered like a herd of horses galloping through a paddock. And then there was the breathing. Heavy breathing seemed to surround her on all sides, along with subtle whispers. She could barely make them out.

“Clarissa,” they hissed.

“Who’s there?”

“Clarissa, where are you?”

“Kaitlyn?”

“Clarissa, what are you doing out here alone?” This one sounded like her mother’s voice, yet it had an otherworldly tone that her mother could not possibly utter.

“Clarissa...Clarissa...Clarissa...”

“Leave me alone,” she shrieked.

There, the street was so close. And the light; there was a light up ahead. A beautiful, bright light. Two of them, in fact. They were getting closer and closer. *I’ll be safe in the light*, Clarissa thought, barely able to breathe. *I’ll be safe, and I won’t hear you anymore!* She ran faster and faster toward the lights. They were so close. So close to safety. Just a few more paces. *One. Two....*

A loud screeching of brakes penetrated the night, and Clarissa squeezed her eyes shut.

The voices, the footsteps, everything went silent.

CHAPTER 8

BATHROOM GRAFFITI

“You’re a cruel woman, Heather Flannigan,” Sal said with a crooked smile. He stared up at her on the second story landing of the whitewashed beach house as though she were a marble goddess on a pedestal. His eyes followed her as she glided down the staircase toward him and breezed past him into the kitchen. She could feel those eyes burning through her back, but she dared not turn around. Instead, she avoided his gaze and feigned ignorance.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I, uh, I mean....” His voice trailed to nothing as he searched for a fitting response.

“Does this dress look okay?” She bit her lip and began putting away the clean dishes that had been sitting out on the counter to dry. She still couldn’t look at him.

“It looks—you look—beautiful.”

Beautiful wasn’t exactly the word that had come to mind when Heather had examined herself in the mirror a few minutes beforehand. *Awkward*, *out of place*, or *ridiculous* would have been more appropriate. In all her twenty one years she had never worn anything so *shiny*. The midnight blue knee-length dress she had borrowed from her

aunt for the Santa Rosa Island Historical Society Banquet only dwarfed her already petite figure, and her auburn hair fell awkwardly around her bare shoulders. What Sal was calling *beautiful* was a mystery to her.

“Do you want an orange?” Heather asked, spinning around to acknowledge the bowl of fruit on the kitchen table. “Bobby Lundy brought them over this morning. He made a pie, too, for Aunt Maggie. I told you he was sweet on her.” Internally chastising herself for the outburst, she turned back to the counter, hoping Sal wouldn’t notice the deep shade of red her face was turning. It was already pinkish from a bit too much sun, though her embarrassment was hardly camouflaged. She could sense Sal approaching behind her. His hands arrived abruptly on her shoulders and gently turned her around.

“Sal, please. What is this?”

Sal only shrugged casually, but his eyes were far more serious than his overall demeanor.

“Aunt Maggie’s coming to pick me up soon, Sal. You should go.”

“I thought I was going with you guys.”

“You were, but now—”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I say what I came here to say. I love you, Heather.”

The phrase lingered for some time. It bounced around a bit, pinging off the drying silverware, clanging in the wind chimes, finally coming to a stale silence within two inches of Heather’s nose. She could smell bittersweetness in each word. She could almost

taste it, like stale coffee.

An unwarranted terror rose up inside her, along with so many questions. But all she could manage was a feeble squeak of “Why?”

“Because I’ve never heard you as quiet as you are now,” Sal responded with a chuckle, attempting to lighten the mood. “And because you prefer Chocolate Rocks to M&Ms. Because you randomly burst into song like your life is a Broadway stage. Because you called me ‘sir’ when we first met, even though we’re the same age. Because you’re always referencing all those old movies with Audrey what’s-her-face, and because of the way your eyes lit up that day I took you out on my catamaran. Because—”

“Sal, please.” Heather lifted her hand. Somewhere in her vocabulary, the word ‘stop’ was located, but she couldn’t seem to find it. For once in her life, she was at a loss for words. Sal had stopped for the moment, but he leaned forward and took a breath as though he were about to pick up right where he left off. Heather pushed him back softly and maneuvered around him, taking large and purposeful strides toward the sitting room. Like a good dog, he followed.

“Heather, won’t you listen to me?”

“I’ve heard enough about my own eccentricity. It’s the way I am. Why must you love me for it?”

“Because you talk like that,” he said. “You have all these crazy questions.”

“I’ll only hurt you.”

He rolled his eyes. “No, you won’t. You couldn’t.”

“You’ve known me, what, two months?”

“It’s been a little longer than that. And even in that time, you’re the best friend I’ve ever had. Heather, believe me, I do love you.”

She faltered there. The trouble was just that. She did believe him. She took a seat in the white wicker rocking chair and busied herself arranging the pillows behind her. “Sal, why couldn’t we just be friends? We got by most of the summer that way. Why do we have to complicate things now? I get a little dressed up, and suddenly you’re drooling.” Heather laughed nervously, trying desperately to get Sal to crack that impish smile she was so fond of.

“You know it’s not that.”

“And you know that you can’t make someone love you. It doesn’t matter how hard you try, how sweetly you talk, or how many nights you spend thinking of nothing else. How badly you want it is irrelevant. My father taught me that.” Heather rose suddenly and strode toward the front door. Sal had no choice but to follow her.

She opened the door and looked at it expectantly. “Sal, you should probably—”

“Yeah, I’m going. But I just want you to know....” Heather’s piercing stare caused his memory to falter, and he could only exit silently.

In the distance, Heather could see Maggie’s headlights approaching, but her eyes were mainly fixed on the slumped figure of her friend, halfheartedly pushing his bicycle down the driveway toward the deserted beachside road, no doubt acquiring an uncomfortable amount of sand in his shining black loafers.

“And it’s Audrey *Hepburn!*” It was her last defense. There was nothing left to say, nothing that she could say, at least. Sal’s silhouette was still for just a second or two, but he didn’t make some sarcastic comment, as he usually did when Heather corrected him. He didn’t say a thing. He didn’t even look back.

It had been a lovely banquet, from what Heather could remember. Of course, she hadn’t been paying much attention. It had been held in the quaint museum on the grounds of Fort Pickens, where Aunt Maggie was a curator, and they’d had delicious parmesan chicken. Heather was ordinarily interested in Floridian history. The speeches given that night should’ve been right up her alley, but she had been too distracted by thoughts of the brief history she and Sal had shared to listen closely.

The highlight of her evening had been hovering by the punch bowl, spying on Aunt Maggie and Bobby Lundy while they flirted. A couple of times, she’d catch a glimpse of a guy who looked like Sal, with the sandy blond hair, the tall, lanky build, and the posture that was never quite straight. Of course, it was never him, so she’d drink another shot of punch, pretending it was alcohol. Where was the alcohol when she needed it?

While Heather was reflecting on the banquet, her aunt wandered into the living room.

“Hey, Heather? Heather? Yoo-hoo!”

Heather glanced up from the television to find Maggie leaning on the doorframe,

wearing her pink silk pajamas and a goofy grin.

“You had a good time, huh?”

Maggie nodded vigorously.

“Did Bobby kiss you?” Heather asked, arching one eyebrow quizzically.

Maggie blushed in reply.

“Gosh, you’re like a preteen,” Heather said with a chuckle. “You’re thirty-two. Get a grip. And get some sleep. It’s late.”

“Says the girl who’s watching *Roman Holiday* for the seventeenth time at one in the morning.” And with a giggle, Maggie was gone. Heather could hear her aunt’s footsteps on the comfortingly creaky stairs as she made her way up to bed. It was funny, Heather thought, that she felt so natural in a house she’d only inhabited for roughly two and a half months. She’d never visited Aunt Maggie’s before this summer; she’d never even been to Florida. Now it felt like home, and Heather almost wished it were.

She knew, of course, that in less than a month she’d have to return to the university up north to finish her history degree. She’d have to say goodbye to the feeling of sand like burning hot sugar between her toes and to the way everything was more colorful—more alive—than she knew people and places could be.

With a sigh, she switched the TV off and pulled the seashell-patterned fleece throw off the back of the couch. She felt cold at the thought of bidding farewell to the easygoing, idyllic life she had known for so brief a time.

Heather shook her head, as if waking up from a dream, trying to shake its memory from her muddled mind. She leaned over the arm of the couch to switch off the overhead light, but a dim light from the porch shone in the living room window, disrupting the otherwise complete darkness. She closed her eyes, hoping to fall immediately asleep and avoid the inevitable mental recap of the day. No such luck.

As soon as her eyelids covered her green irises, the image of Sal pathetically pushing his bike down the empty beachside road appeared before her. She could hear his cracking voice. “I love you, Heather,” it proclaimed. The weight pressing on her chest grew heavier as the images continued. There she was on the beach with him, chatting casually, suspecting nothing. And there they were on that same couch, dangerously close, now that she thought about it, watching *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* on TCM.

The torturous montage continued as she recalled the day they’d met in a surf shop at Pier Point...

“Is that going to be all for you?” the cashier asked.

“Yes, sir.”

The cashier whose name tag read ‘Sal’ chuckled. “You’re from the South, aren’t ya?”

“Yes. But how would you know that?” For a second, Heather imagined her worst nightmare was about to be confirmed. That blasted accent. Her mother had a horrid Southern accent when she let herself slip, and Heather had always hoped that her father’s Los Angeles roots would negate the possibility of her own hickish drawl.

“You called me ‘sir.’ I’m what? Two years older than you? If that.”

Heather sighed with relief. “Well, I’m...I was just...”

“You were being polite. That’s how I knew you were Southern.” He shrugged and smiled crookedly.

Heather chuckled, and the cashier stuck his hand across the counter. “The name’s Zachary Salmon, but those who love me call me Sal. And those who merely tolerate me, for that matter.”

Heather remembered the way her cheeks had burned as she exited the store, clutching her plastic shopping bag with white knuckles. She recalled the inexplicable rush of adrenaline she experienced the next time she encountered Sal, and the lightness of her heart each time he was around. The way he made her smile without even trying. So that was it: she’d loved him all along, ever since that first crooked smile, she supposed.

“Good to know,” she whispered ruefully to herself. She rolled over to face the back of the couch and attempted to doze off. But sleep did not come without one more flashback. It was a brief one this time, in the final instant between states of consciousness: merely the sight of her father, suitcase in hand, slamming the door behind him.

It was the delectable smell of fresh strawberry waffles that finally woke Heather from her fitful sleep.

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” Aunt Maggie said cheerfully, setting a plate of

waffles down on the coffee table in front of Heather, before taking her own seat across from the couch.

“These smell amazing, Mag. Thanks.”

“Anything for my favorite niece. So about Sal...?”

“Wow, you don’t beat around the bush.” Heather knew it was inevitable that Maggie would ask what had happened. She had been too preoccupied with her speech to the Historical Society to ask why Sal wasn’t going to the banquet the night before. And then afterward, her mind had been too consumed with Bobby Lundy. But now her arched eyebrows made it clear that she wanted answers.

Maggie continued. “So he’s in love with you. And...?”

“What?”

“Oh, please, Heather, it’s been so obvious all summer.”

“No, what? How?”

Maggie’s grin hardened on her face, suddenly forced. “I’m guessing that, since he didn’t come to the banquet, you don’t feel the same way?”

Heather took a deep breath and exhaled with more of a sigh than she’d intended. She shoved a forkful of waffle into her mouth, hoping to stall for a few more moments. She swallowed hard.

“It would never have worked out anyway.”

“Because you’re leaving?”

“Among other things.”

“Heather Flannigan, you look at me and tell me that ‘other things’ do not include your father.” Maggie was rarely completely serious; that was one of the main reasons Heather liked her so much. It was why she wanted to spend this summer with Maggie instead of with her own mother, who was currently undergoing an emotional rollercoaster of a midlife crisis. But at the moment, Aunt Maggie’s eyes—identical to Heather’s mother’s—burned with unyielding gravity.

Staring at her waffle, she took another bite and mumbled, “I just know that love doesn’t work sometimes. And when it does, it still screws everything up half the time.”

Heather recalled the words her mother had said to her father one night while they were fighting. It had been nearly a decade, but she still remembered verbatim.

“I gave up everything for you. Don’t you know I could’ve finished school? I could’ve been somebody. I’m not enough for you, but I could have been enough for me.”

It was late, and they had taken their argument out to the back porch to keep from waking Heather, as if she could sleep through all that. She was used to it, though.

“Well, I’m sorry if you’re dissatisfied,” her father chimed in as Heather turned over and pressed her pillow down on her head to muffle their embarrassingly loud squabbling. “You don’t think I’ve made sacrifices to keep you happy?”

“Oh, don’t even talk to me about sacrifice. I could have gone to med school. No, you were so ready to be married.”

“Well, if I forced you to marry me, I’m sorry,” he said with a sneer. “Allow me to free you from this terrible state of matrimony.”

Heather didn’t remember them fighting so much when she was younger. Maybe it was because she was younger, but she had a feeling it had something to do with the way they used to look at each other. It was something in their eyes, something she saw less and less of as the years went by.

Seeing her parents constantly bickering, seeing them seem to fall out of love, had convinced Heather that even if love was good at the start, it couldn’t stay that way forever. She resolved to let nothing get in the way of her doing whatever made her happy. She would remain a free woman, not get tied down by feelings that would eventually disintegrate.

“So I guess it wouldn’t be ideal to mention that Sal’s out on the back porch?” Maggie asked, bringing Heather back to the present.

Heather hated the fact that her heart leapt inside her chest, turning flips to rival the Cirque du Soleil. She hated that she had been secretly hoping Sal would come back since the moment he left. But most of all, she hated her own stubbornness, for she had no intention of setting eyes on him, let alone talking things out.

Three days later, Heather stared across the guest room she had inhabited for most of the summer at the discarded suitcase in the corner. She supposed she could begin packing her copious belongings two weeks in advance, but that didn’t fit her usual habit

of procrastination. Instead, she decided a walk on the beach would be more suitable. There wasn't much else to do, since Aunt Maggie was at work down at the museum, and Sal obviously wasn't around.

The sky was appropriately overcast, and she welcomed the feeling of raindrops pelting her skin and gusts of wind playing with her hair. Thunder rumbled in the distance, catching her off guard for a moment, just long enough to shift her focus from the churning sea to the beautifully iridescent seashell poised perfectly atop a little mound of sand. In the sand was written "DIG HERE HEATHER." With a jolt of excitement, Heather dropped to her knees and picked up the shell, fondly remembering the day she and Sal had discovered it on the beach while digging up the quarter they'd found with his metal detector.

"A lousy quarter," Heather complained.

"Yeah, but look at this shell." Sal held it up to the sun and they watched the array of colors dance. "You know, if you hold it this way," he said, tilting the shell, "it's kind of the color of your eyes."

He was always noticing that sort of thing, unlike most stereotypical oblivious guys. And though he was often sarcastic, he could surprise her with moments of complete sincerity. Putting aside the shell, she unearthed a folded sheet of loose leaf paper covered in Sal's chicken scratch.

Heather,

I know you'll probably never speak to me again, but I've been waiting out on your

back porch every morning, hoping that I'm wrong. (I know it seems creepy. Maggie told me so, actually. I just didn't know what else to do.) The point is, Heather, you mean the world to me, and it's not because you got a little dressed up the other night. For some crazy reason, I thought you might feel the same way. I thought, when you looked at me, that one moment out on the boat, I thought there was something there. Maybe if we went out to sea again, we could figure it out. I set sail at one this afternoon. You know the place.

Sal

The ache in Heather's chest returned full force. It was nearly eleven. Sal would be sailing in a matter of hours.

The wind whipped Heather's bangs into her eyes, providing an excuse for the moisture that was beginning to appear there. The sound of a car horn broke her concentration.

"Let's do lunch," Maggie yelled out the car window. "Bobby's waiting for us."

It was eleven by the time they got to the restaurant and noon before they finished eating their seafood platters. When Bobby finally became more occupied with all his other customers, he left Maggie and Heather alone to split a key lime pie.

"You look twitchy," Maggie noted the instant Bobby walked away.

Heather looked at the brightly-colored fish clock hanging on the wall. It was the one that played a different Jimmy Buffett song every hour, and they had just heard

“Margaritaville.”

“Hello...?”

“It’s nothing,” Heather snapped. “Sorry, I was just a little distracted. Sal. He’s sailing today.”

“His little catamaran that you’re so fond of?”

“Yeah...” Heather replied, thinking of the day Sal had referred to in his letter. That day Heather had felt freer than she had her entire life. She had resolved in the past to be a free woman, depend only on herself, and have anything she wanted without asking anyone’s permission. But that day on Sal’s sailboat, feeling the rhythm of the waves beneath her and inhaling the salty ocean spray, something felt different.

One minute she was laughing with Sal, feeling so natural, and the next, he was leaning in closer, saying, “Isn’t this nice?”

And she was agreeing. “So simple,” she said. “I wish life could always be like this, just on a little boat, in the middle of the ocean.”

“You know, we can see the shore from here. I wouldn’t exactly call it the middle,” he argued.

“Shhh,” she whispered, closing her eyes. “No, we’re in the middle of the ocean, just floating.”

“Whatever you say.”

She heard him chuckle like he always did when she was being stubborn.

When she opened her eyes, Sal's face was inches from her own. His eyes widened, as did hers. And then a wave came crashing toward them, bringing them back to reality. They were very close to shore after all, and things couldn't always be that simple.

“Heather?” Maggie asked, knocking on Heather’s head as though it were a locked door. “Anyone home?”

“What? Oh, I need to go to the bathroom. Be right back.”

Maggie’s brow wrinkled with concern. “What are you up to, anyway? Are you going with him or not?”

“Well, it was raining earlier.”

“It’s not raining that hard, and Bobby said it’s going to blow over soon anyway. No excuses.”

“I’ll think about it,” Heather said, dashing away from Maggie’s penetrating look.

She rushed into the ladies’ room, slamming a stall door behind her and glancing around the bathroom aimlessly. *What am I even doing?*

According to the clock in the other room, she had exactly fifteen minutes. She stared blankly at the graffiti that covered the door and walls. There were countless declarations of love and girls’ names with “Spring Break” and a year etched underneath. But up in one corner of the door, there was a striking lack of vandalism. Only three words were written in faded black Sharpie: “Believe in love.”

Heather had never considered herself one to believe in signs or omens, but there

was something about that simple message scrawled on the bathroom door. Perhaps it was the fact that the handwriting so resembled her own when she was younger, back when she could've written such a thing in full faith.

With her heartbeat echoing in her chest, Heather bolted from the restroom and through the middle of the restaurant, with patrons staring open-mouthed, dropping forkfuls of crab cakes. She ran along the side of the road toward the marina and away from the guarded existence she had known for far too long. Maggie and Bobby called after her but she hadn't a clue what they were saying. She had no idea what she was doing. She realized she looked like a rom-com cliché and didn't much care. Fat drops of rain beat down on her, chilling her bare shoulders and arms. Her tank top and shorts were soaked and her flip-flops were sliding under her feet. Heather usually tried to look put-together, but today it didn't matter. She wasn't sure if she had truly fallen in love with Sal or merely with the possibility of finding someone who wouldn't give up on her. But this was the most she had felt since her father left years ago, and she wasn't about to lose it.

Arriving at the familiar dock, Heather found Sal standing on the side of his boat, preparing to cast off. His despondent gaze became hopeful at the sight of her, unkempt as she was.

“So...?” he asked.

“So I don't know anything about love, Sal. But I think I'd like to learn.”

He secured the rope and stepped onto the dock, wrapping his sturdy arms around

Heather's frame. As they stood there, still except for the rise and fall of their chests, Heather was reminded that life didn't have to be so complicated. She felt the raindrops running gently down her body, and in each drop she imagined a photograph. Off her back slid the snapshot of her mother crying into a cup of coffee. Down rolled the scene of her father slamming the door. Away went the nights of screaming, the broken dishes, the broken hearts.

"That's it then?" Sal asked.

Heather nodded with a slight smile as she leaned in to hug him. They both gazed at Heather's over-stuffed car, with suitcases and garment bags poking out in every direction.

Sal pulled his arms tighter around her. "So, I guess I should've seen this coming," he said.

"One more semester," Heather replied. A sudden smile spread across her freckled face as she imagined herself graduating and moving to Pensacola, where Aunt Maggie had secured her an internship with the Historical Society. She would be moving into Maggie's house in about four months, but by then it would be all hers. After all, Maggie wouldn't be needing it much longer, seeing as she had recently become engaged to a certain Mr. Bobby Lundy.

And that just left Sal. "I'll be here," he whispered into Heather's ear as she leaned back into his embrace. He'd been repeating that for days, wanting to be sure that she

believed him.

“I know,” she replied without hesitating, without flashing back to the slamming door, without doubting, but not without blinking back a few tears of her own. “I know you will.”

After a few more moments, Heather broke free of Sal’s embrace and started to walk toward her tightly-packed vehicle.

“Here’s looking at you, kid...” Sal mumbled, nearly inaudibly.

Heather turned. “You’re quoting *Casablanca*,” she said with a smirk. “I’m rubbing off on you.”

He simply winked and smiled his crooked smile.

“See you soon,” Heather said with confidence.

“I’ll be here.”

CHAPTER 9

THE BEHOLDER

The morning sun poured through the small, rectangular bathroom window so brightly I was nearly blinded as I entered. I could see the tiny particles of dust swirling, illuminated in the sunbeam, and I blew at them, as I often did in my childhood, watching them spin faster. I smiled at the simplicity, though I didn't know then that that was the reason for my joy.

As my eyes adjusted, I could tell that the sun's rays were concentrated in one spot on the wall across from the toilet: the place where my older sister's most recent painting hung. She'd brought it home from her sixth-grade art class a few weeks beforehand, and I'd barely gotten a glimpse when our mother whisked it away, exclaiming that she knew the perfect place for it. I was hardly impressed that morning when I learned that the perfect place was the guest bathroom.

The painting was impressionistic, a word I knew even in the fourth grade, and it depicted the moon rising over the Potomac. It was a view I'd seen many times from my bedroom window, but never like this. I could see why the sunbeam had landed on the painting and wouldn't budge. It was beautiful.

All I wanted for my eleventh birthday were painting lessons.

By the time I was twelve, my paintings were hanging all over the house; two in the dining room, three in the den, and one in each bedroom, even Tess's. Meanwhile, her work continued to accumulate in the bathrooms and the laundry room. I should have noticed the way Tess glared at me as she passed the study where my tutor and I would work at matching easels. I should have noticed the way she watched me when I did anything, really, and the way she always came in the house through the back door to avoid the shelves of trophies lining the front entryway. But I was young and naive, and I thought I was pretty special then.

It's hard to believe that I didn't find out until I was thirteen. People must have talked, but I suppose I was always too wrapped up in my own world to notice.

It was a holiday weekend, and our father had dropped Tess and me off at our aunt's house in rural Pennsylvania so he could go on a "business trip," which we understood to be code for another wine tasting. Our mother was recovering from her most recent plastic surgery and didn't feel like having us underfoot the whole time we were out of school, so we were sent to stay with Aunt Paige, the one our parents never talked about in front of us. When they did talk, when they thought we weren't listening, they called her a prude and a bigot.

Naturally, I was nervous when we pulled into her driveway for our first weekend alone with this woman. As our car glided to a halt beside Aunt Paige's, I noticed the bumper stickers: "STOP TAMPERING WITH AMERICA'S CHILDREN," "NATURAL

IS BEAUTIFUL,” and plenty of other political propaganda adorning her vintage Mustang.

I glanced at my sister to see if she was as confused as I was. She only wore an amused smile. Paige had always been her favorite aunt.

When we’d been at Aunt Paige’s for a couple of hours, I began to settle in and feel comfortable. I liked her well enough. She offered us freshly baked cookies and milk from the cow she kept in the field behind her house. I was a little wary about the milk, but Tess gulped it down with fervor, so I drank mine to be polite.

“Go on, drink up,” Aunt Paige prompted me. “It’s natural. It’ll be good for you.”

Tess giggled and Aunt Paige shot her a look, then promptly changed the subject.

I had gone to bed early the first night at Aunt Paige’s. She didn’t own a computer--further proof that she was as crazy as my parents seemed to suggest--and all of her books were either about gardening or politics, neither of which interested me. So, being bored, I opted for sleep. As I snuggled between the cotton sheets of the cozy guest bed, I glanced across the room and my eyes fell on a painting of the night sky. The softness and peace of the painting--its brushstrokes and style--struck me. I knew only one person could have painted it, but I crawled out of bed to make sure.

Under one of the stars in the little dipper, down in the bottom corner of the canvas, I read my sister’s name, just as I had expected. But what I did not expect was to hear Tess’s voice coming from down the hall.

“Of course she doesn’t know,” Tess said.

“How could they be so irresponsible?” Aunt Paige responded in a whisper.

“I don’t know. There are plenty of kids at school like her. She hasn’t quite figured out the difference yet. Does it really matter? She’s everything they’ve ever wanted, anyway....”

“Unlike you?” Aunt Paige interrupted. “Don’t shrug. I know you were about to say it. Tess, your parents do love you.”

By this point, I had inched out the bedroom door and down the hall a little way. I could see them sitting at the kitchen table when I peered around the corner, careful to stay hidden. I understood that they were talking about me, but I didn’t want to believe it. What were the other kids at school like? What difference? What could’ve been wrong with me, anyway? A disease? A disability?

“You know it’s true, Aunt Paige. They chose who she would be. With me it was nothing but the luck of the draw. They wanted her the first time.” Tess’s voice cracked, and I couldn’t resist. Most people would have lingered longer, but I’d heard enough of Tess’s vague complaints. I rounded the corner, exposing myself for the eavesdropper I was and hoping for some more succinct answers.

Aunt Paige dropped the plastic cup she was holding, and milk spilled all over the hardwood floor. One of her many cats dashed in to lap it up, while Paige took to the floor with a handful of paper towels. Tess kept her seat and wiped at her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, suddenly ashamed. I could feel my cheeks beginning to

burn.

“No, honey, it’s alright,” our aunt said, sounding twenty years older than she was and looking more frazzled than I’d ever seen her.

“What were you talking about?” I was usually more tactful, especially when speaking to adults, but there was a knot tying itself in my chest and I had to know what, exactly, they weren’t telling me.

Tess’s coffee-colored eyes bored into my green ones. Her face was blank. When she finally did speak it was after opening and closing her mouth several times in indecision.

“Mom and Dad designed you, Inga.”

Aunt Paige gasped at my sister’s bluntness, but I could only shrug in confusion. I’d led a sheltered life up to this point. I know now that my parents kept this secret from me so I wouldn’t see myself as different, so I wouldn’t see it as anything other than perfectly normal. Many of my classmates, many of the children born around the time I was, were just like me. It was Tess who was different.

“Inga, sweetie,” Aunt Paige addressed me as she stood up and threw away the soaked paper towels. “Have you heard of designer children?”

I nodded my head to acknowledge that I had, but only vaguely. I remembered the bumper stickers and felt my heart sink. Everything my aunt stood against: that was me. No wonder my parents said the things they did.

That night, Aunt Paige sent Tess to her room and then sat me down to explain

how I was created. My blonde hair and emerald eyes, it turned out, were chosen for me, not by random genetics, but with the help of chromosomal mapping and gene manipulation. My parents had chosen my complexion, my metabolism, my height--which explained why I was so much taller than Tess--and even my resistance to nearly every disease known to man. They chose for me to be both intellectual and athletic, and they threw in musical ability for good measure. I was designed to be their perfect specimen. Their prized possession. Their collector's item. And every part of me was their choice, not mine.

Aunt Paige didn't put it that way when she explained it to me, but I was designed to be a smart kid. I could read between the lines.

"You have to understand, Inga, they wanted someone special, like you are," she told me, offering me another cookie, as if I were five years old. I couldn't eat anything if I wanted to. My stomach was churning, and it wasn't from the organic milk.

Everything made sense once the secret came out: my flawless report cards, my position as captain of the soccer team, my case full of trophies that Tess obviously despised. Everything made sense except Tess.

"Why aren't Tess and I more similar?"

Aunt Paige grew very quiet for a moment, pursing her lips, clearly trying to put difficult thoughts into words a baffled and burdened thirteen-year-old would understand.

"Tess was...supposed to be like you," she said. She picked at her fingernails for a moment before continuing. "The procedure went wrong somehow. The doctors couldn't,

um, 'fix' her, so to speak. It nearly killed your mother. It was...it was bad. But Tess came through, and she was born a perfectly natural baby. I always say she kind of laughed in the face of modern science. Your parents sued the doctors, of course, and they tried again. But no matter what, they got one baby they couldn't control."

By the time Paige and I finished talking it was after two in the morning. I trudged back to the guest room with my eyes glazed over but my mind still alert and my heart racing. As I made my way through the house, I began to notice that the walls were covered with Tess's artwork. Paintings, sketches, collages; they were everywhere. I couldn't believe I didn't notice them before. How Aunt Paige acquired all these, I had no clue. I only knew that each one of them held more emotion and beauty than all of my efforts combined. They communicated a certain humanness that I would never be able to possess, that quality of being a natural slice of existence.

I was supposed to be superior. I had all the advantages. But even as I drifted off to sleep that night, gazing at Tess's rendering of the night sky, I had to wonder, *If I'm so perfect, why can't I do that?*

I spent the following week at school learning what I should've guessed years before. Many of my classmates were designed, but others were natural. I made it almost a game: guessing which was which. Who came about organically and who was a more deliberate creation? Once I opened my eyes to the reality of this difference, the distinction became blindingly clear. Jenny? Well, she won the science fair three years in a

row. Above average intellect. Must have been designed that way. Arnold? First clarinet in the All-State Band. Definitely designed. Mary? Always in detention. Behavioral problems. No one would be so careless with their specifications. She must not have been designed at all.

The list went on. Each class held a new pool of candidates for my judgment, and I had to wonder, did they know what they were, or were they as oblivious as I had been? I was supposed to be smart. I was designed to be ahead of the curve. How had I not seen what was right in front of me?

The question plagued me for weeks, until, once again, I found myself in the guest bathroom at my house. I came in with the intention of fetching a pair of tweezers, but Tess's painting took hold of my attention with alarming force. She shouldn't have been so good. She wasn't created with any extra artistic ability. What good were genetic enhancements if someone with nothing but natural talent could still win out? I knew, even at thirteen, that life wasn't about winning or losing, but that didn't mean I didn't want to win.

CHAPTER 10

PARASAILING WITH MY FATHER

“Today, I’m going parasailing with my father.” I don’t know how many times I’ve told myself that, but this time it’s true. After twenty-five years, he’s finally asked me in a way I can’t refuse. The old coot had better be proud. If he knew just what I had to go through to be here, sitting in this sticky plastic deck chair on a balcony at the Panama City Days Inn....

I just hope I remembered to unplug the toaster. Yes, I did; I triple checked. And I hope the cats are getting along. Tubby always hogs the food. Did I leave them enough water? I know I locked the doors. Didn’t I? I did, surely.

My wife Connie snaps me out of my daze as she joins me on the balcony with two cups of coffee in the hotel’s generic white mugs. The heavy door slams behind her, thanks to the same wind that will almost certainly blow me away to Cuba later.

I nod my thanks as she hands me my coffee. She smiles, but not really. It’s that closed-mouth half-smile reserved for the moments when she’s not sure what to say. If it were a real smile, I would see her teeth, with that cute little gap in front. But regardless of her smile, she’s glowing. Even today. She can’t help it; the tiny life inside her womb infuses her with radiance.

We sit in silence, sipping our coffees, and I stare down at the hotel pool. It hasn't changed since I was here as a kid. All it's missing is my mother in her flamingo pink fanny pack, squawking at my sister and me for jumping in without sunscreen, and my father lounging on a nearby chair, chuckling at us all. But the synthetic waterfall that was magical when I was nine years old now appears tacky and downtrodden. Its paint is chipped and it has been tattooed with profanity and lovers' names.

The diving board—which I hope has been replaced in the past couple of decades—is still as popular as ever. Right now, for instance, there's a line of gangly preteen boys shouting at a pint-sized girl to hurry up and jump. Even from up here, I can tell that she's trembling. She fidgets with her light brown ringlets as she stands on the edge of what—to her—must look like blue oblivion.

"It's okay, honey," the man I take to be her father calls to her. His posture relaxed and his lips curled in an easy smile, he exudes a confidence only a patriarch could. "Remember, you're my beautiful butterfly. It's just like flying."

"Just like flying. That's really how it feels, Jason! You've gotta try it, just once."
My father grinned, staring up at some poor soul strapped to a festively colored piece of who-knows-what, drifting through the sky, much higher than I ever wanted to end up. Sure, the fellow was technically tethered to a motorboat and could be reeled in if need be, but that wouldn't really help if the rope snapped or the harness came undone.

Dad looked at me, waiting. I bit my lip.

“He’s not going to go, Daddy,” my sister Lucy said. “He’s the only kid in the third grade who’s still scared on a Ferris wheel, remember?” She snickered, and my mother gave her a reprimanding nudge.

“I will too go,” I said, my chest puffing up with false pride.

“That’s my little man,” Dad said. He clapped me on the shoulder and led me toward an outdoor kiosk, pulling out his wallet. All the while, my eyes were glued to the guy on the parasail. One minute he soared nauseatingly high, and the next, his feet skimmed the ocean’s surface. I imagined a shark jumping up to take a bite, but before that fantasy could come to fruition, the man was flying even with the rooftops again.

“They’ll dip us like that if we tell ‘em to,” Dad said with obvious excitement in his voice. I shook my head in refusal. My stomach was churning like the ocean at high tide. I closed my eyes and concentrated on not losing my lunch. I just knew that any moment could be the one when the scruffy kiosk man in the aviator sunglasses would strap me into some flying death trap and send me careening toward the sun. And that is why “height restriction” became the two most beautiful words in the English language to me in that moment. Of course I couldn’t act relieved, and my father, believing my forced frown and downcast eyes, suggested, “Maybe next time, tiger.”

“Jason. Jason? Your coffee,” Connie says, raising her eyebrows. “Are you—?”

“I’m fine,” I say, cutting her off. And then I have the pleasure of noticing the moist consistency of my left shoe and sock. I won’t even try to figure out how I managed

to spill coffee there.

Connie chuckles. “We’re at the beach, anyway. You can just wear flip flops.”

I hate flip flops. Not only are they impractical for walking, but they will also most likely fly off while I’m parasailing and eventually become part of the trash island that’s floating somewhere in the Pacific.

“I’ll just go barefoot.”

“That’s the spirit.” She cranes her neck to look at my watch. “Well, it’s almost three.” She knows she doesn’t have to say it. We’ve been married for eight years; surely she knows that I’ve been looking at my watch all day. But what else can she say? It’s almost three. Almost time for me to take flight.

“Finally,” my father exclaimed, kicking off his fishbone patterned flip flops and unbuttoning the flowered shirt that looked like something from Magnum P.I. It was the summer after fourth grade and we were back at the beach. I was thrilled until I saw a pink and yellow parasail fly over and remembered that it was “next time.” The way its fluorescence contrasted against the gradually graying sky made it impossible to miss. My stomach churned at the sight.

Dad must have seen the panic on my face, because he leaned down, laid a hand on my shoulder, and whispered, “Only when you’re ready.”

But instead of feeling reassured, I felt my face flushing. I jerked my arm away and glared at him, muttering, “Okay, okay.” How dare my father think I was afraid? And

how dare I let him see it?

The weather turned stormy shortly afterward and they didn't take up parasailers for the rest of the week. It seemed luck was on my side once again.

But in the following years, I didn't need luck. My father rarely mentioned parasailing, and when he did, I only had to give a feeble excuse before he would drop the matter.

My watch beeps and I know I have about ten minutes left on the ground. I slip out of my loafers, pull off my soggy sock and its partner, and stand, popping my back as I rise.

I'm drumming my fingers on the rail of the balcony when Connie appears in the doorway. Re-appears, I should say. I suppose she went back into the room at some point, but I must have zoned out again.

I try to look confident, but my posture ends up deflated; my cheesy grin, forced. She smiles for real this time and tells me she's proud of me. Of course *she* is. She's the most supportive person I know. But will the baby boy growing inside her be proud? What will he think of his father? And what will *my* father think of me? What will they all think if I freeze up, or try to run, or even if I scream?

Coward. That's what they'll think. That's what Lucy's always thought. Probably my father thought it too, from time to time. Why should my son think anything different?

The sand burns like hot coals under my bare feet as I walk toward the familiar figures on the beach: Mom, Lucy, assorted family members, Dad's old buddies from the Elk Lodge. And a scruffy old man in aviator sunglasses.

I walk straight for Aviator Man and say, "Let's do this," before my mind has time to compile a list of reasons to turn and run.

"Wait," Lucy says. She holds out Dad's flowered shirt. "You should wear it." I'm surprised to get an approving smile as I slip the gaudy garment on over my black t-shirt.

"Is Dad ready?" I ask.

Lucy pulls a Ziploc bag from her purse, containing some of the ashes from the new urn on Mom's mantle. What's left of my father is placed in my hands as I trudge toward the boat from which I will be launched.

The man in the aviators stops the boat and beckons me to the back, where he straps me into the seat-like harness. I am now connected to a colorful parachute that will supposedly keep me from dropping to the water like a shot duck.

My entire body is sweating, especially with the extra shirt. As Aviator Man gives me one last thumbs up and starts to reel me out, I once again fear I'll lose my lunch. Wherever Dad is right now, he'd better be proud.

Gripping the handles tightly, I start to ascend. My stomach rolls in reaction to my feet leaving the solidity of the boat. Aviator Man, his speed boat, and the glassy surface of the ocean shrink beneath my bare feet. But I drift up slowly, gracefully even. I see my

family waving to me from the shore, and I even venture to let go of one handle and wave back. My hands are shaking, but it's adrenaline, not nausea, that causes it.

I'm flying, just like Dad said. The wind is whipping against my face, and my eyes are watering, and I am flying. I open the Ziploc bag, take out a handful of ashes, and slowly let them slip through my fingers. And for just a moment, Dad and I are flying together.