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# Olive in an Oak Grove: A Novel

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OLIVE IN AN OAK GROVE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

Haley Quinton

\* \* \* \* \*

Western Kentucky University

2016

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## ABSTRACT

Olive Delaney has not seen her dysfunctional family in seven years, but now she has to return to her childhood home in Louisiana because her father is dying. She is reunited with her simultaneously strict-but-absent parents, her twin brother, Hugo, with whom she was once close but has now grown apart, and her childhood best friend and possible lost love, Owen. Olive must learn how to be part of her family again while also dealing with the problems and family secrets of the past.

The novella shuttles back and forth in time--every other chapter contains an event from Olive's childhood that helped shape the person Olive became. It explores how childhood family, friends, and situations affect people long into adulthood.

Keywords: fiction, family, the South, Louisiana, death

For Mom and Austin

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## VITA

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## FIELDS OF STUDY

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## Part I

### Nothing But the Dead and Dying Back in My Little Town

#### Chapter One

2007

The buzzing office seemed to revolve around Olive Delaney, who stood in front of the storyboard with her hands on her hips. Her eyes passed over the pages. The next issue of the magazine was set to go to press in a week, but she was missing several articles from her writers, and there was something distinctly outdated with the new page layout. Interns chirped to one another, laden with armloads of clothes and files and papers and coffee. Olive's desk phone was ringing again, its shrill tone cutting through the cacophony. She'd already told Sam, her assistant, to let it go to voicemail twice. The caller was insistent.

"Sam, just answer the damn phone," Olive said. She rubbed at the tension headache building between her eyes. The phone buzzed again, sending daggers into the migraine forming behind Olive's temple. She turned to yell at her assistant, but Sam, carrying two armloads of files under her chin, gave Olive a wide-eyed, helpless look.

Olive sighed and marched to the phone. Her heels clicked against the floor, then were muffled by the lush rug under her desk.

"Glass Magazine," she said, yelling over the noise.

“May I speak to Olive?”

Olive narrowed her eyes. She could hardly hear, but it was a man speaking with an American accent.

“Who is this?”

“My name is Hugo Delaney. I’m her brother, and I really need to talk to her.”

“This is Olive.”

“What, really? You sound different,” he said. He did, too.

“It must be the noise in here,” Olive said. She’d talked to him just a few months previously, on their birthday. “I didn’t recognize you, either. How are you?”

“I’m all right,” Hugo said. “How are you?”

“Busy,” said Olive. Someone was shouting her name. She turned to face the wall, blocking it out.

“Sorry,” said Hugo. “I’ll make this fast.”

“What’s up?”

“It’s Dad,” Hugo said. “He has cancer.”

Olive didn’t say anything. There was nothing she could think to say. She felt a sharp pain on the inside of her lip and realized she was biting it.

“It’s, well, it’s lung cancer,” Hugo said.

“He doesn’t smoke,” said Olive at once. It was preposterous to even consider that her father had cancer. “I mean, he quit smoking. Years ago.”

“I know, but that’s what it is.”

“Okay,” said Olive. She tasted something hot and salty on her tongue. Blood. She’d bit the side of her mouth.

“It’s inoperable.”

“Okay.” The salad Olive had eaten for lunch churned in her stomach.

“He’s been doing chemo and radiation, but....”

“He’s *been* doing? For how long?”

“He was diagnosed six months ago.”

“And you’re just now calling me? What the hell, Hugo?”

“I only found out last week,” Hugo said. “Mom told me.”

“Then why didn’t you call me last week?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” said Hugo. “I wanted to see him for myself, talk to the doctors before I bothered you.”

“Why didn’t Mom call me herself?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Same reason she didn’t tell me for six months, I guess. Who knows why Mom does anything she does?”

“Should I be worried?” she asked, then amended, “How worried should I be?”

“Worried,” Hugo said. “You should be worried. You might want to make your way over here soon if you want to see him again. Before.”

*Before what?* Olive almost asked.

Olive had been sitting in the driveway in her rental Mercedes with it running for fifteen minutes, trying to muster the courage to walk into the house. It had been a week before she’d been able to leave Dublin, but she’d sorted out most of the problems with the next issue and could make any last-minute changes over the phone and e-mail. She stared at the imposing house and wide expanse of lawn, impossibly green for Louisiana.

She'd been setting herself up for the house to be different than she remembered; smaller, maybe, but it wasn't. It was exactly the same: a castle made of stone, looking like it had been plucked straight from the Irish countryside, carried across the Atlantic, and planted in Louisiana. The oak trees that lined the driveway were taller than she'd remembered. Had they grown that much in seven years? Their ancient bark was deep and craggy, and deep-green Spanish moss dripped from the branches like curtains.

The longer she sat here, the more she lost the will to get out of the car. She felt the heavy weight of seven years away from this place pressing on her chest. According to the dashboard gauges, the gas was almost on empty, and the temperature was creeping towards a hundred degrees outside. She was not about to run out of gas in her own driveway.

She pushed open the door. A wall of moist heat slapped her in the face as soon as she stepped out of the car. In the seven years she had lived in Ireland, the temperature had only gone above seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit once. Sixty degrees in the summer was what Olive was used to. Here, the soupy humidity had her immediately covered in a thin sheen of sweat. It pooled beneath her button-up shirt, and she shed her suit jacket immediately. She thought her tights would melt into her skin. Why the hell had she worn tights?

Like most Louisiana plantations, the driveway led straight through the yard and dead-center of the symmetrical mansion. It was only the Irish castle part that had deviated from the norm in New Alsace. She knew the story of how her parents had purchased the Oak Grove plantation, then complete with a crumbling old manor house. Instead of renovating the house, like their fellow New Alsatians normally did, they'd done away

with the ancient house and put the Irish mansion in its place. It did not win them favor in the town, but her parents had never been concerned with fitting in here. In fact, it had been quite the opposite. Her parents, especially her father, wanted to be special, better than everyone else. And “special” meant building a castle for a house.

Olive shouldered her overnight bag. Her Louboutins clicked on the pavement of the driveway as she started to the house. She tripped in her high heels about halfway up the drive. She hadn’t so much as stumbled in them in years. Maybe it was the heat. The sun was beating down so fiercely that it felt personally oppressive. She had forgotten what it felt like to sweat this much, and the house still felt like it was miles away. She almost wanted to take her shoes off, but then her hose probably *would* melt into the pavement.

“Hey, Olive.”

Olive squinted into the shadow of the house to see a man walking towards her.

“Is that you, Owen Todd?” she asked. She wondered if he’d seen her sitting in the car for fifteen minutes.

“It’s me,” he said, coming to a stop a few feet away from her. He looked different. Owen hadn’t exactly been fat, but there was always something soft and round about him, even as a teenager. Now, he’d finally gotten taller, and the softness in his chest and stomach had hardened. His cheeks, which still had the remnants of baby fat at sixteen, had hollowed out. His nose, though, still had a smattering of light freckles that you could only see when you stood close to him, and his face was still red with sunburn. Owen had never quite adjusted to the Louisiana climate.

“Hi,” said Olive. She tried to smile at him, but she was pretty sure her lips just twitched awkwardly. She hadn’t so much as sent Owen a Christmas card in seven years, which really wasn’t a way to treat your childhood best friend. And here she was, smiling and saying “hi” like she’d seen him yesterday. She finally reached up to put her arms around him.

He stepped back, hands up. “I’m dirty,” he said, eyeing the emerald green suit she shouldn’t have worn. His palms and t-shirt were streaked with dirt.

“It’s okay,” said Olive, hugging him anyway. He felt firmer in her arms than he used to, and he smelled of dirt and sweat. He tried to hug her back without actually touching her with his hands. Olive let go.

Then they just looked at each other.

“Want me to take this for you?” Owen finally asked, pointing to her bag.

“Oh,” said Olive, shrugging. “Sure, I guess. I mean, I can manage it.”

She let him take it, anyway. She followed him up the driveway.

“The lawn looks great,” said Olive. “Is it still you and Jake doing the gardening?”

Owen shook his head. “Jake left a few years ago. It’s just me now. Your father keeps saying he wants to hire someone else to help me, but they’d probably screw it up, anyway.”

Olive laughed. “I guess you’re still pretty particular about it.”

Owen shrugged.

They climbed the porch steps and stood in front of the huge oak door. The porches had been the only addition to the Irish mansion that her father had borrowed from their southern neighbors. It was a bit cooler in the shade, but she still felt like she

was in an oven. She paused. Should she knock? It felt strange to knock on her own front door, but it felt even stranger to just burst in. She could feel Owen's eyes on her back, and they felt pretty judgmental. Finally, she rapped on the door. The deep, hollow sound reverberated through the stone entrance chamber inside, bouncing down the stone corridors, and winding up the stairs like a living thing. It felt like she waited hours for a response. She glanced at Owen, who was staring off over the yard with her bag dangling off his arm. He seemed to forget he was holding it. Olive turned back to the door as it swung open with a heavy groan.

"Sorry, darling, I was upstairs with your father," said Lucia Caruso-Delaney.

Olive pushed the sides of her mouth up into a smile. Her mother's long, dark hair was streaked with strands of gray, and there were a few little creases in her skin that hadn't been there before, but Lucia looked very much the same.

"Hey, Mom," said Olive. The words felt foreign on her tongue. *Hey, Mom...* How long had it been since she'd said that? Olive had called her recently, but that was just to say she was coming home. She'd been packing at the time.

Owen sat the bag on the floor beside Olive.

"I'll be off," he said. "I've got some, uh, watering to do."

"You sure you don't want to come in, Owen?" Lucia asked.

"Yeah, Owen, come on in," said Olive. She turned to face him, trying to look at him in a way that was pleading but not too desperate.

"No," Owen said with a firm shake of his head. "Far too much to do."

He gave Olive a smile that was a little too close to a smirk for her liking. Then he reached out and touched her arm. "Enjoy the time with your family."

Olive waved as he stepped off the porch. She picked up her bag and followed her mother into the house. The door shut with a thud behind her. It was cool and dim inside, and Olive had to wait for her eyes to adjust from the blasting brightness outside. Growing up, she'd never noticed how the house smelled because she had been part of the smell. Now, she could: lavender, pine, vanilla, and some kind of sweet musk. Her eyes had adjusted now; her parents hadn't redecorated, at least not drastically. It was the same juxtaposition of dark stone, Victorian furniture, and paintings of the Irish and Italian countryside. Beside the stairs sat a suit of armor, and the cowboy hat she and Hugo had perched on its head years ago was still there.

Suddenly, Olive felt her mother's arms close about her. She hugged back. Her mother felt frailer than Olive expected.

"Sorry I'm so sweaty," said Olive.

"That's all right," said Lucia. She pulled back.

"Is Hugo here now?" Olive asked.

"No," said Lucia. "I mean, yes, he's been here, but he had to go into town to make some business calls. We still don't get good cell phone reception out here, and he said those calls were important."

Olive nodded. *How's Dad?* That shouldn't be so hard to say. *Say it...*

"Do you want to get settled?" asked Lucia.

Olive let out a relieved breath. "Yeah, that would be great."

"I assumed you'd want to stay in your old room."

Olive nodded. "Yes, that's fine."

She followed her mother up the stairs and into the past.

## Chapter Two

May 1992

Owen sat on the front porch of the castle house while his mother talked to Mrs. Delaney. He sweated and squinted against the sun. It was much hotter here than in Connecticut. He would have to get used to it, though. His mother was going to be the gardener for the Delaneys. They lived here now. His mother and Mrs. Delaney were standing by the car. Mrs. Delaney towered over his mother, who looked short and a little bit dumpy next to her. Mrs. Delaney was wearing a white sundress and had expensive-looking bangles stacked on her wrists. She pointed to something in the yard, probably telling his mother what she wanted in the garden, and the bracelets slid up and then back down. Her hair was very long and very dark, and her skin was tan. She was thin, but Owen could see muscles in her arms. She didn't even look like she was sweating at all. She reminded Owen of a big jungle cat. A panther, maybe.

Owen was thirsty, but his mother had told him to sit on the porch and be quiet. They had to make a good impression on her new bosses, she had said. It was a new start for them. What was he going to do here all day? In Connecticut, he'd gone to first grade and was going to start second grade soon. Maybe they didn't have second grade in Louisiana.

He heard a rustling noise coming from under the porch. It was wooden, so he got on his hands and knees to peer through the slats. He couldn't see anything. He heard it again. The hairs on his legs felt prickly. What if it was a snake? His friend Denny from

school had told him about how his cousin got eaten by a snake. His mother had given him a book about the Louisiana swamps when she told him they were moving. The book said there were lots of snakes in the swamp.

Owen stood up and wiped his sweaty hands on his shorts. He backed away from the porch, keeping his eye on it.

“Owen, what are you doing?”

Owen turned to face his mother. Something hard and heavy tackled him from behind, and he fell to the ground. It sure didn't feel like a snake. Owen rolled over to find a girl about his own age sitting in the grass beside him. Her skin and hair were streaked with dirt, making her green eyes look even brighter. She let out a cackle, stretching her mouth in such a wide grin that Owen could see all her teeth.

“Be nice,” said Mrs. Delaney, but she didn't seem to be paying attention, instead looking off in the distance.

The girl ignored her and stood up. She was wearing a green dress that was streaked with mud and bright red rain boots. It wasn't raining.

“I got you,” said the girl. “You didn't even see me at all.”

“I could hear you,” said Owen, frowning. “Under the porch. That's why I got up.”

“Is your name Owen Todd?”

“Yeah.”

“My name's Olive,” she said. She pointed underneath the porch where a boy was crawling out of a hole. “That's my brother, Hugo. We're twins.”

Hugo looked like his twin sister, even though he was a boy. They were tan, though not as tan as their mother, and had hair the color of earth. Their eyes were swamp-green, the same shade as in the book his mother had bought him.

“Hi,” said Hugo. He walked over to Owen and held out his hand for Owen to shake. Hugo’s hand felt small to Owen. He’d only ever shaken hands with grown-ups, not other kids.

“Do you want to come play with us?” asked Olive.

Owen turned to look at his mother. “Can I?”

His mother looked at Mrs. Delaney for a second. “Sure, honey.”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” said Olive, sprinting away towards the trees.

Owen took a deep breath and ran after her. He couldn’t keep up, not even close. He jogged into the twist of trees, and some kind of vine wrapped around his feet. He fell on top of a bush. It had thorns that sliced into his wrist. A drop of blood oozed out of the cut. Owen licked it off.

“Be careful not to fall!” Olive said, dropping out of the sky to land beside him. Owen jumped.

“Or else the monsters will get you!” Hugo finished, landing on Owen’s other side.

“Were you in the trees?” asked Owen.

“Yeah,” said Hugo.

“How did you climb up there so fast?”

“We’re the best tree climbers,” said Hugo.

“In the entire world,” said Olive. “Now, come on!”

“I can’t keep up with you,” said Owen. “I’ll get lost.”

“Too bad!” Hugo sang out.

“No, we’ll wait for you,” said Olive.

“You were supposed to say ‘so sad,’” said Hugo, frowning.

“Yeah, but we will wait for him,” Olive said.

She held out her hand to help him up. Owen took it, climbing to his feet.

“Did you cut yourself?” asked Olive, poking the cut on Owen’s wrist. It stung sharply.

“Ouch!” he said. “Yeah, on that plant over there.”

“Hurry up, let’s go!” said Hugo.

Olive kept holding Owen’s sweaty hand and pulled him through the woods.

“Are you allowed to go this far?” asked Owen, frowning. In Connecticut, he wasn’t even allowed to leave his front yard.

“We’re allowed to do anything we want,” said Olive.

“Your parents don’t care?”

“Nope,” said Hugo.

The ground was getting squishier, and soon he noticed a funny smell. He wrinkled his nose. “What’s that?”

“What?” Olive asked.

“That smell.”

“Oh,” she said. “The swamp, I guess. You get used to it.”

Owen could see the water now. At first, he’d thought it was just grass because it was covered in a layer of green scum. He wasn’t sure he should be here. There were all kinds of animals that could kill you in swamps.

Hugo crouched down next to the water and took off his shoes.

“Do you want to get in with us, Owen Todd?” asked Olive.

Owen shook his head. “I don’t think I should. And you can just call me Owen.”

He also didn’t know how to swim, but he didn’t really want to tell them that. They might make fun of him like Emily did in kindergarten in Connecticut.

Olive let go of his hand and took off her boots, too. She and Hugo splashed into the water. Owen looked around for crocodiles or snakes. He looked back at Olive and Hugo. They were covered in swamp grime now. Olive turned to look at him. Her eyes looked bright green against the mud on her face.

Owen sat down on a log and smiled. He’d never thought any girls besides his mother were pretty, but maybe Olive was.

## Chapter Three

2007

Olive's bedroom was untouched. It was like a museum to her old self. Seven years hadn't seemed so long, but now it felt like an eternity. Her desk stood in the corner displaying the science kit with its microscope and test tubes. Posters and pictures littered the walls, mostly of herself and Hugo and Owen. Olive studied the one closest to her. She stood in the middle of the two boys, her dirty face split into a wide grin. She was probably around eight years old. She clutched a huge bull frog in her hands, displaying it to the camera with a proud smile. Owen's arm was thrown around her, and Hugo held another frog on her other side. Olive remembered that Martha, Owen's mother, had taken the picture.

The bigger posters in the room were blown-up prints of pictures she'd taken: landscapes of the bayou, snapshots of the cloudy sky, and various wildlife she'd come across. Others were from her travels around the world, like the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben. Some were more bizarre, like a series she'd done on a single twig that she'd taken to different spots and photographed. She must have thought she was so artsy back then. Her old terrarium stood by the window. It was blessedly empty. At least she hadn't left Bert the turtle there to starve and die.

She put her bag down and fished out her laptop. She probably had about a thousand emails from the magazine she worked for. She smoothed her hand over her suit skirt. It felt out-of-place here, where she used to run around in her mother's overalls from

the seventies and all kinds of other ridiculous outfits. She'd change clothes, then she'd start to work on those emails.

Olive heard a tap on the doorframe behind her. She turned to see Hugo standing framed in the doorway.

“Hugo!”

“Olive,” he said. He looked older, though she couldn't pinpoint exactly what had changed on his face. She supposed she looked older, too.

She rushed forward and threw her arms around her brother. Hugo returned the embrace. He smelled like sweat and nice cologne, which she thought was something by Giorgio Armani.

“I've missed you,” said Olive, releasing him.

Hugo smiled, but he didn't say anything.

“What, you haven't missed me?” said Olive.

“I have missed you,” he said. But there was something strange--almost bitter--in the pull of his mouth. She used to know exactly what Hugo was thinking just by looking at him, but those days were gone now.

“How are Violet and the kids?” she asked.

“Fine,” said Hugo. “They're still in Atlanta. LV's birthday was last week.”

“How old is she now? Four?”

“Three.”

“And Max is?”

“Six months.”

“Have you visited Dad yet?” She hadn’t been able to ask her mother about him earlier, but it was the only thing she could think to say now.

“I’ve seen him, yeah. Mom’s really picky about when she’ll let me go upstairs.”

“Upstairs? He’s here?”

“Yeah,” Hugo said. “He’s on hospice.”

“Oh. I thought he was in a hospital. If I’d have known he was just upstairs....” She drew off. She knew she wouldn’t have done anything differently even if she had known he was up there.

“Mom probably wouldn’t have let you see him, anyway.”

“Yeah,” said Olive, nodding. If she hadn’t let Hugo see him, she sure wasn’t going to let Olive. *Why did Mom tell you Dad was dying and not me?* she wanted to ask him. “Do you want to get dinner?” she asked instead.

Hugo shrugged. “All right.”

“Do you want to see if Owen wants to go? I want to take a shower first.”

After she’d showered, Olive unzipped her bag. It smelled like her house in Ireland, like black tea and the sea. She sifted through her clothing, having packed mostly suits, long-sleeved button-ups, and a few pairs of jeans. The extreme heat of Louisiana hadn’t seemed to exist when she was packing in Dublin. She didn’t know how to dress for hot weather anymore, but she’d slow roast in the jeans. She dug out a sundress that she’d bought to wear on holiday in the south of France. It was a simple blue dress with little red flowers, much more casual than her normal clothes, and it was a little on the short side, but it would be cool enough. At least she’d packed a few sundresses.

Hugo and Owen were standing on the front porch when Olive went downstairs. Owen had showered, too. His hair was still damp, and when Olive stood close to him, she could smell the minty-sage smell of his shampoo. He'd changed into a pale blue shirt that brought out the blue in his eyes--but Olive tried not to notice all that.

"I can drive," Olive said.

Owen took one look in the diminutive backseat of the coup and nixed the idea. They piled into Hugo's SUV instead, Olive in the passenger seat and Owen in the back. Olive drummed her fingers on the door, and Hugo flipped on the radio. The American accents fell heavily on Olive's ears with their sleepy enunciation and twanging vowels. She looked out the window. Oak Grove was situated a few miles from New Alsace, so there was nothing to see but trees. Olive yawned. It was almost two in the morning in Dublin.

Once they did get into town, Olive saw that nothing much had changed. New Alsace was so small that there wasn't much that *could* change. The town was divided almost in half between the wealthy and the poor. In New Alsace, the rich were very rich, and the poor were nearly impoverished.

Hugo pulled into the Cynthia's parking lot. They hadn't even discussed where they would go because they didn't have to. Cynthia's was the only restaurant that wasn't fast food. If they wanted any sort of variety, they would've had to drive the forty-five minutes to New Orleans.

Cynthia's was dimly lit with faux-elegant red lamps set into the walls, and the black-and-white checkered floor looked like it was trying too hard to look European. White lights were strung along the ceiling, and candles flickered from the tables.

After they were seated, Owen sat back in his chair.

“So,” he said. “Ireland.”

“Yes,” Olive said. “Ireland.”

“How is it there?”

“Cold and rainy, mostly. You’d like it,” she said. “You hate the heat, right?”

Owen nodded. “I do.”

“And it’s really green. Lots of nice vegetation.”

“My favorite,” Owen said, smiling. “Vegetation.”

Olive smiled back. When the waitress came, Hugo ordered them a bottle of wine.

“How’s working for the magazine?” Owen asked. “That’s still what you’re doing, right?”

Olive nodded. “I like it. I’m the editor of the fashion section.”

Owen raised his eyebrows. “Fashion?”

Olive laughed. “Yeah, not exactly what I thought I’d be doing. To be honest, I couldn’t care less what the Pantone color of the year is. Blue iris, by the way.”

“I thought you wanted to change the world,” Owen said, a small smile playing about his lips.

“I did,” said Olive. “But it’s an achievement to even be editor of anything. I was only an intern when I started.”

Owen nodded. “So you’re happy there?”

“Yes,” she said. “I think I’ll be editor of the whole magazine someday. I have a lot of changes I want to make.”

“Like what?”

“Well, it’s a women’s magazine that focuses primarily on fashion and lifestyle. I want to expand that to focus more on the broader concerns women face, as well as drawing attention to social issues. Just because it’s a women’s magazine doesn’t mean it has to be frivolous. The fashion editor thing is just a springboard.”

“You can finally have a wider audience for your feminist rants,” said Hugo.

Olive felt a flash of heat in her cheeks.

“I’m only joking,” he said.

Owen was staring down at the table. Olive tapped her finger against her wineglass. Hugo cleared his throat.

“I like your feminist rants,” Owen said.

“Thank you, Owen.”

“One question, though,” Hugo said.

“What?”

“Why didn’t you come home for seven years?” Hugo asked.

Olive stared into her wine glass.

“It sure wasn’t the money,” Hugo said. “Dad would have paid for you, you know.”

Olive didn’t answer. At first, it had been the money. She was only an intern at the magazine, and her salary was meager. She’d only gotten the internship because the Delaney family--specifically Doreen Delaney, her father’s first cousin--owned the magazine. She’d set out to prove, from the beginning, that she was worthy of being there, that it wasn’t only the family connection that would make her successful. Asking her father for money to come home would’ve been humiliating. Then, later, once she’d

moved through the ranks of the company and made more than enough money for a trans-Atlantic flight, home had been the furthest thing from her mind. There was always so much work to be done, not to mention having to jet off to London or Paris at a moment's notice.

"Now our father is dying," Hugo continued. "And you haven't seen him for seven years."

"Well, she's here now," Owen said. "All right?"

"Yeah," said Hugo. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"He's right," Olive said, ripping her straw paper into little bits.

"He kind of is," Owen said. "But he didn't come home much, either, you know."

"Yeah," said Olive. "He's acting like he's so perfect, like such the dutiful son. I'm sure he wasn't."

"He wasn't," said Owen. "But...."

"But at least he came home, right? Is that what you were going to say?"

Owen shrugged, smiling. "More or less."

"I just...I really wanted to get away from here, you know? Get out and...do something."

"I know," Owen said. "I understand. I'm not judging you, or blaming you for leaving."

*Maybe you should be,* thought Olive. But instead, she smiled. "Thanks."

When Hugo came back from the restroom, he didn't say anything more about their previous conversation. They made small talk instead. Owen caught them up on the town gossip, Hugo told them about what he did for the family business in Atlanta, and

Olive talked about the magazine. It was surreal, Olive mused, talking to your twin and childhood best friend about your life as if they were strangers. Still, it was better than arguing.

## Chapter Four

July 1992

Owen was lying on his stomach the stone floor in the Delaney mansion front of the empty fireplace. The icy cold from the floor seeped through his sweat-soaked shirt. He turned his face to press the other reddened cheek against the cold. It was always cold in the Delaney house, even in July. Owen had never known heat like this. He and his mother lived in a little cottage near the Delaney house. His mother told him the house belonged to the Delaneys, and they got to live there for free because of his mother's gardening. She had forbidden him to ever go into the Delaney house unless Olive or Hugo invited him inside. It would be rude to ask to come in, she'd told him. Owen was never supposed to be rude, especially to the Delaneys because they paid his mother and let them live in the cottage.

Owen had been playing outside with Olive and Hugo in the woods near the house. They probably weren't supposed to be in the woods. Owen wouldn't go there by himself because the woods bordered the swamp, and the swamp scared him. His mother had told him that alligators and snakes lived in there. But Olive and Hugo knew exactly how far they could go without falling in the swamp, and the alligators didn't bother them.

They'd been climbing trees. Owen couldn't climb very high, so he usually stayed on the bottom branches and watched Olive and Hugo fight over who could go higher. Olive usually won. Olive and Hugo were eight, and Owen was only seven. Maybe when Owen turned eight, he would be able to climb that high, too. It had been very hot and

steamy outside, but Olive and Hugo didn't care. They could play for hours in the heat. He was glad when Olive wanted to go inside for some popsicles.

Olive and Hugo came back out of the kitchen. Olive sat down on the floor beside Owen. She handed him a purple popsicle.

"Thanks," said Owen. He sat up. The sweat had dried on his face. His throat felt like it was on fire with thirst. He took a huge lick, then coughed. He didn't like grape, but he was thirsty and the popsicle was cold and, besides, Olive had given it to him.

Hugo sat down a little bit away from Olive and Owen. Olive crawled over to Hugo. She cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered into his ear.

Owen looked at the floor. He didn't like it when Olive and Hugo whispered without him. He'd told his mother about it, and she'd said that the twins just weren't used to having someone else there to play with. She explained that they'd been together since they were born and they didn't mean to leave him out.

Hugo was whispering back to Olive now, then they both sat and stared at Owen.

"What?" Owen said.

"Do you want to play a game?" Hugo said.

"What kind of game?"

"A fun one," said Hugo.

"It's called Dare," said Olive. "It's like Truth or Dare, but it's only dares."

"How do you play?" Owen asked.

"We tell you to do things, and you have to do them," Hugo said.

"What kind of things?"

Hugo shrugged. "Things."

“Do I get to tell you guys to do things, too?” Owen asked.

“No,” said Hugo. “That’s not part of the game.”

“Maybe later,” said Olive. Hugo looked at her and shook his head. They whispered some more. “Okay, if you do everything we say, you get to tell us something to do.”

“Just one thing?”

“Yeah,” Hugo said.

“Come on, Owen,” Olive said, crawling back over to him. She poked his arm.

“Don’t be a chicken.”

“I’m not a chicken,” Owen said.

“Then prove it,” Hugo said.

Owen shook his head.

“Please?” Olive said. She grabbed his chin, making him look at her. She had red popsicle smeared all over her lips and chin.

Owen sighed. “Okay, but I’ll only do one thing.”

Owen stood in the hallway in front of Mr. and Mrs. Delaney’s bedroom. It had taken a while for Olive and Hugo to decide on what he had to do, since he said he’d only do one thing. It had to be special. Hugo had dared him to kiss Olive, but she’d wrinkled her nose and said, “No way.” Owen wouldn’t have minded that very much. Just a peck and it would be over, like kissing his mother good night. Instead, they’d decided on this.

Stealing something from Mr. and Mrs. Delaney’s bedroom was probably what his mother would call rude. She might get fired, and it would all be Owen’s fault. He

couldn't back out now, though. Olive and Hugo would call him a chicken, and maybe even a baby. They were waiting for him downstairs. They told him that their father was in his office down the hallway from the bedroom, and their mother was in her own office on the other side of the hallway. They shouldn't be able to hear him, but what if they did?

Owen put his hand on the doorknob and turned. He had to push the door hard to get it to move. It made a creaking noise. Owen froze and turned around, looking both ways down the hallway. He crept into the bedroom backwards. The furniture in the room was huge, and he felt even smaller. They had a dresser on one side of the room. Owen ran over to it.

There were several bottles of stuff on top. Owen thought it looked like the smelly stuff his mother sometimes sprayed on her neck. Maybe they wouldn't notice one of them missing since they had so many. Owen reached out to touch one, running his finger down its cool surface. It was tall, thin, and clear. It looked different from the others. Actually, they all looked different. Mr. and Mrs. Delaney may notice one missing.

Owen heard footsteps coming down the hall. He scrambled for the bed, slipping underneath. He held his breath when he saw Mrs. Delaney's feet appear in the doorway. She walked across the room and opened the dresser drawer. Owen heard the sounds of her rifling through the drawer. He couldn't hold his breath anymore, and it rushed out of his mouth in a gasp. He clapped his hand over his mouth. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest, pressing into the floor. He wondered if Mrs. Delaney could hear his heart. She closed the drawer again and crossed back to the hallway. She paused in the doorway. Owen held his breath again. Then her footsteps faded away down the hall.

Owen wasn't sure how long he sat under the bed, but he finally managed to crawl out. There was a pack of cigarettes sitting on the desk by the door. Owen grabbed it and ran back downstairs. He was out of breath when he got back to the living room. Olive and Hugo were sitting on the floor with a deck of cards spread out in front of them.

"Oh, there you are," Olive said.

Owen couldn't say anything. He was still breathing too hard.

"What did you get?" Hugo asked.

Owen dropped the pack of cigarettes onto the floor. The twins stared at each other, then grinned.

"You stole Dad's cigarettes?" Olive whispered. She sounded awestruck.

Owen shrugged. "It was easy," he said, getting his breathing under control.

"Then why are you breathing so hard?" Hugo said.

"Your mom came in," Owen said. "While I was in there. I hid under the bed."

Olive picked up the cigarette pack. She handed it to Owen.

"Here," she said. "You keep it."

"No way," Owen said. "My mom would get mad if she found them."

Olive put them in the pocket of her overalls. "I'll keep them, then. So what do you want to make us do?"

Owen thought for a second. "Nothing," he said. "Can I just play cards with you?"

## Chapter Five

2007

Jet lag had Olive awake with the sunrise the next morning. She'd gotten very little sleep. They'd returned from the restaurant fairly late, and she'd had to wait until midnight to call the office. Her assistant got in at seven in the morning, which was midnight Louisiana time. It took almost an hour to make sure everything at the magazine was running smoothly. After that, she'd almost called William, the man she was sort of dating in Dublin, but decided not to and gone to sleep instead. She woke up at five-thirty and tried to go back to sleep, but gave up by seven due to her growling stomach.

Her mother was drinking coffee in the dining room when Olive went downstairs.

"You're up early," Olive said. Their family had never been early risers, preferring to stay awake half the night and sleep for half the day.

"I have to give your father his medication at six," said Lucia. "It's easier to just stay up. There's more coffee in the kitchen if you want some."

Olive went to the kitchen and poured herself a mug. Hugo was cooking eggs at the stove. He was already dressed for the day. Olive and her mother were still in their robes.

"Morning," he said. "Want some eggs?"

"You know I like sunny-side up," Olive said.

Hugo shrugged. "These are scrambled. Take them or leave them."

"I'll take them, I guess," Olive said.

She went back into the dining room.

“Your father is feeling all right this morning,” said Lucia when Hugo came in with a frying pan full of eggs. Olive wondered exactly what her mother had meant by *all right*. “You can go up and see him after breakfast.”

“Both of us?” asked Olive. She put some eggs on her plate. Hugo sat down next to her.

“If you want,” said Lucia.

“I’ll let Olive go see him by herself,” Hugo said.

“You can come with me,” Olive said. Her voice had taken on a whining quality that she did not appreciate.

“I’ve had time alone with him,” said Hugo. “You can have your turn.”

“Okay,” said Olive. She could tell by his tone that he wasn’t just being considerate to her feelings. He considered it her duty to talk to their father alone.

“I’ll be right outside the door,” Hugo said, patting her shoulder.

“Okay,” she said again.

Olive showered and dressed after breakfast, then went back downstairs. Hugo was reading the newspaper in the living room.

“Ready?” he asked.

Olive nodded, and they climbed the stairs to the third floor. Their bedrooms had been on the second floor, and their parents had had the third floor to themselves. They stopped in front of their parents’ closed bedroom door. They’d rarely been allowed inside as children. Olive hardly knew what the bedroom looked like. She put her hand on the doorknob. It was cold and heavy against her skin. She glanced at Hugo.

“I’ll wait out here,” he said. “Let me know when you’re ready for me.”

Olive nodded and turned the knob. It resisted for a second before it clicked. Olive pushed the door open.

## Chapter Six

August 1992

Olive sat in front of the mirror in her room. Her mother was running a comb through Olive's short hair. Olive was so excited she wanted to squirm like a puppy, but she forced herself to sit still. She glanced at the pair of them in the mirror. Her mother, as always, was the picture of grace and elegance as her hand slipped through the strands of her hair. Olive forced her face to mimic her mother's: the hooded eyelids and the relaxed--almost careless--mouth. She just looked like she was falling asleep.

Olive loved parties. Everyone always looked so fancy, and Olive always felt fancy while her father paraded her around and showed her off to all his friends and colleagues. Last time, he'd given her and Hugo a sip of champagne. It had tasted funny and burned her throat, and the bubbles made her nose hurt. She had pretended to like it, though. Her mother had half-heartedly scolded her father, saying that eight years old was far too young for champagne, but she hadn't taken the glass away from them.

"Finished," said her mother. Olive's hair was swept up into a French twist. Olive stood up and smiled at her reflection in the mirror. Her parents had dressed her in deep green to match her eyes. The top of the dress fit tightly and was trimmed in white ribbon, while the bottom fanned out in fluffy piles of tulle. It reached her knees, and she wore white tights and black Mary Janes. Her mother had taken her and Hugo on a rare trip into New Orleans to buy the clothes, and they'd had the novelty of spending an entire day with their mother. Olive loved parties.

“Look at my pretty little girl!” said her mother.

Olive smiled and twirled in her dress, watching the tulle fan out around her.

“Olive, are you ready yet?” Hugo called for the third time. He was starting to sound annoyed.

Olive’s mother always liked to wait until the party was in full-swing before making her appearance. The twins made their own appearance a bit before their mother, but still after most of the guests had arrived. It was the peak time for her father to show them off. Judging from the sound of chatter over the string quartet, it was time.

“Come here, darling,” said her mother, reaching into the pocket of her robe to pull out a little crystal bottle.

“What’s that?” asked Olive, nodding at the bottle.

“Some of my perfume. Do you want some?”

Olive smiled and nodded. Olive’s mother grabbed her wrist. Her fingers were cool against Olive’s skin. She spritzed the perfume onto Olive’s wrist. Olive sniffed it.

“There,” said Olive’s mother. “Like a real lady.”

“Thank you,” said Olive.

“*Olive!*” Hugo yelled from the hallway.

“I’m *coming*, Hugo,” Olive bellowed. Then she remembered she was supposed to be a lady for the evening. She tossed her hair back and pursed her lips. “I am coming, my darling brother.”

She opened the door. Hugo, as always at parties, was dressed to match her. He wore a white suit with a green vest and bow-tie. His usually shaggy hair was neatly parted and combed. “Finally,” he said.

“Shut up,” she said. She stuck her tongue out at him, then glanced guiltily back at her mother. Her mother hadn’t noticed.

She slid her arm through his as they descended the staircase. Olive felt like one of those pageant queens she had seen on television when they stepped into the living room. It looked like about a hundred people in there, but she knew there were probably only around fifty or so. The ladies were all in cocktail dresses and the men in tuxes, swilling champagne from their glasses. The room tinkled with well-bred laughter above the string quartet, which was playing from a corner in the room.

“Ah, my children!” Olive’s father’s voice rose above the din. He was standing in the center of the room with Mr. Ellington, whom Olive knew worked with her father at Delaney Heavy Industries. Olive’s father swept his arm towards her and Hugo. He wore a pure white suit. His golden hair was parted at the side and swept over magnificently, every strand carefully in place. He smiled broadly, his white teeth matching the tuxedo. The smile reached all the way to his eyes, which crinkled in the corners. She only saw smiles like this directed to her at parties. Olive couldn’t help but smile back. She loved moments like these, when she could see her father swell with pride at the sight of her.

Olive slid her arm from Hugo’s when they reached their father. Her father placed a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Children, I want to introduce you to some people,” he said, sweeping them away towards the corner of the room where two unfamiliar people stood. “Mr. and Mrs. Fitzpatrick, these are my children. This is Hugo, and this is Olive. They’re *twins*.”

Olive smiled and held out her hand to shake. Her father always emphasized that his children were twins. Olive sometimes felt that her greatest accomplishment in life, at

least in the eyes of her father, was being born a twin. The Fitzpatricks were older than most of the party. They were dressed just as elegantly as anyone else, but Olive thought they smelled like mothballs.

“So nice to meet you, dears,” said Mrs. Fitzpatrick.

“It’s nice to meet you, too, ma’am,” said Hugo.

“So polite!” said Mrs. Fitzpatrick.

“The children attend St. Joseph’s Preparatory School,” said Olive’s father.

“They’re first and second in their class.”

“Oh, who’s first?” asked Mrs. Fitzpatrick.

“Hugo is,” their father said, clapping his hand on Hugo’s shoulder. Olive forced her smile to freeze in place. “Hugo also plays lacrosse for the school.”

“They have lacrosse in elementary school?” asked Mr. Fitzpatrick.

“Yes,” said Hugo. “There are only a few other elementary schools with lacrosse teams in the state, so we mostly play scrimmage games. But when we had a tournament last spring, St. Joseph’s won first place.”

“There isn’t a girls’ lacrosse team,” Olive said, unable to stop herself from butting in. “They won’t let me play for the boys’ team.”

“Well, I imagine not,” said Mrs. Fitzpatrick. “Lacrosse isn’t really a sport for a young lady, is it?”

“I play piano,” Olive said quickly, hoping Mrs. Fitzpatrick didn’t notice her face turning red. She also hoped piano was ladylike enough to impress Mrs. Fitzpatrick.

“How lovely!” said Mrs. Fitzpatrick.

“Yes, Olive is quite the piano player,” said her father.

Olive felt herself beam against her will. She didn't want to appear too pleased with herself.

"Perhaps she can play us something?" asked Mrs. Fitzpatrick, pointing to the grand piano. Olive's smile slid off her face.

"Yes, Olive, go play something," said her father. "I'll just tell the band to stop for a minute."

Olive nodded, feeling sick. She hadn't practiced for several days. She *was* a good piano player, she hadn't been lying, but what if she wasn't good enough? She looked at Hugo, trying to keep the horror out of her face.

Hugo took her hand. "I'll sit with you," he whispered.

Hand-in-hand, they walked over to the piano. Olive sat down, and Hugo slid next to her on the piano bench. She opened the lid and placed her hands on the familiar keys. She slipped her fingertips over them, feeling the smooth, cool ivory.

"Everyone," her father was saying, "my daughter, Olive Catherine Caruso Delaney, would like to play a song for you all."

The room grew quiet.

"What should I play?" Olive whispered.

"Which song do you know best?" Hugo whispered back.

"'Never Gonna Give You Up,'" Olive whispered back.

Hugo giggled quietly. "Maybe not that one. 'Für Elise?' You're good at that one."

"Yeah, but it's too simple. Not very impressive."

"'Moonlight Sonata?'"

Olive paused, her hands twitching on the keys. “Moonlight Sonata” was one of the hardest songs she knew. She could play it perfectly. At least, she could play it perfectly when only Hugo could hear it. She closed her eyes for a second. At least everyone was quiet. She pretended it was just her and Hugo. She opened her eyes again, and began to play. Her fingers took over on their own, and the music swelled and echoed over the room. She felt like someone else were playing it. She was surprised when the song was over. She hadn’t made a single mistake.

Thunderous applause. Olive let out a breath and realized she’d hardly breathed during the performance. She glanced at Hugo, who grinned. Then she felt her face split open in a smile. She stood up from the piano bench and turned to face the crowd. They were smiling and clapping and sipping their champagne. Olive’s eyes lighted on her parents, who were standing towards the back of the room. Olive’s mother had come downstairs some time during the song. The crowd had parted around them. They looked ethereal. Olive’s mother was wearing a long white gown which matched her father’s tuxedo. Olive’s mother held a glass of champagne aloft between her fingers, and Olive had never seen anything so elegant in her life. Their arms were linked, and both their faces smiled at Olive all the way up to their eyes. Olive felt like she might float right up through the ceiling.

## Chapter Seven

2007

Stifling heat rose up to meet Olive as she pushed open the door. The air conditioner was turned off. It smelled like a hospital, like sickness and death blocking out the usual scent of the house. It was dark, too, and it took her eyes a few moments to adjust to the dim lighting. She could hear the steady beeping of the machines. They looked out-of-place amongst the elegant furnishings her father loved. The purple velvet curtains were pulled over the windows, blocking out all light. She looked at one of the machines, a heart monitor. She followed the coiled wire to where it ended in the middle of the bed.

At least they'd put him in his own large four-poster rather than bringing in a horrible hospice bed. Olive was starting to sweat. Her father was not a small man, but Olive could hardly see him in the pile of blankets. Olive stepped closer.

John Thomas Delaney was in the very center, propped up on a blanket. Olive couldn't believe--didn't want to believe--that this withered little figure could possibly be her father. Leathery, yellowed skin hung off his face. His hair, which seven years ago had still been thick and full and golden blond, was gone. His mouth hung open slightly, and he breathed in rattling gasps. A trickle of drool dribbled down the corner of his mouth. His chest fluttered weakly with each shallow breath.

"Father," Olive forced her dry throat to whisper.

"Olive?" he said, his previously booming voice now nothing more than a wheeze.

“Is that you?”

“Yeah,” she said, stepping closer. “It’s me. Hi.”

“Your mother said you were coming in,” he said.

“Yes,” Olive said.

“If I’d have known this was what it took to get you here, I’d have gotten sick years ago,” he said.

Olive laughed. She felt a hysterical sort of bubble in her chest, the kind that could only be relieved by intense laughter or intense crying. Crying would be more appropriate, but laughing might be more dignified. She did neither.

“I would have come sooner,” said Olive. “But I didn’t know. No one told me.”

She hadn’t meant to accuse, but her tone was sharper than she’d wanted.

“I--well, your mother didn’t want to bother you,” he said. “And I was doing chemo, and really, it wasn’t going badly. It’s only been recently that I’ve taken a turn.”

Olive nodded. She stepped even closer to the bed. She peered into her father’s face, trying to see some remainder of John Thomas Delaney, the almost mythic figure who presided over her childhood. The man, the myth, the legend.... But there was nothing left in the wasted face. Even his bright blue eyes had dulled, looking washed-out, like murky dishwater.

“I should have visited,” said Olive. “Some time in seven years, at least.”

John Thomas nodded. “I wish you would have.”

*Why, so you could ignore me some more? Or did you just want to use me to impress your friends?* The poisonous retort flicked into Olive’s mind, but she pushed it

back down. This wasn't a time for fighting. If there ever were a time to air out old grievances, it had passed.

"Are you happy at the magazine?" John Thomas asked.

"Yes, I'm the editor. Just of the fashion section, I mean, but I'll be the editor of the whole thing someday soon." The words bubbled out of her, and she suddenly felt like she was eight years old and showing off her straight-A report card. *Pay attention to me. Tell me I'm good enough.* It was pathetic.

"That's good," he said. "I'd have liked for you to work at the company, of course, but you had to make your own choices. All I ever wanted was for you kids to be happy."

"Of course," she said, nodding. That was a lie. Her parents paradoxically had been lenient to the point of neglect, letting their children do whatever they wanted, but they also had extremely high expectations, particularly in regards to education. Olive wasn't fluent in three languages because she wanted to be. Her parents were very hard to impress, and the only way to draw their eyes was to succeed in anything and everything. Her happiness hadn't factored much into it.

John Thomas coughed, a small and pathetic noise. It grew to be a deep hack, his whole body shaking. Olive saw blood ebb out of his mouth and join the spit running down his chin.

"Are you okay?" she said, then realized how stupid she sounded. Of course he wasn't *okay*.

"It'll pass," he choked out, his voice a growl between coughs.

Olive couldn't stand it, couldn't be in here alone anymore. She opened the door.

“Hugo,” she called, trying to keep the alarm out of her voice. He squeezed her shoulder as he passed her and strolled over to their father.

“Dad,” he said. “Try to breathe through it, okay? Like the doctor showed you.”

Hugo sat down on the side of the bed, rubbing John Thomas’s back. It was an odd scene to see any sort of physical affection between father and son. Olive fought down a prickle of jealousy.

John Thomas’s coughing slowed, finally ceasing. Hugo stood up and stepped back closer to Olive. John Thomas’s eyes went back and forth between the two of them. Olive wondered how he was comparing them this time.

“Hugo’s been great this week,” said John Thomas.

Olive nodded weakly.

“Of course, he’s been great all along. He’s been managing the Atlanta branch, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Olive. Her father *knew* she knew.

“He does an excellent job there. Excellent,” he said.

“I’m sure he does.”

“I’m sure you do well with the fashion section, too, of course,” John Thomas said.

Olive pasted a smile on her face. “I do try.” Cancer or not, her father was still an asshole.

“Are you two glad to be back together?” he asked.

Olive’s eyes met Hugo’s. “Yes,” they chorused. They used to be in sync all the time, Olive remembered, saying the same things at the same time. Sometimes they did it on purpose to make other people think they were telepathically linked, but most of the

time, it was by accident. Maybe they really *were* telepathically linked. It hadn't been a lie, either. Even though she'd argued with Hugo the day before, and even though being together again was weird and awkward, she was glad they were reunited.

“Good,” he said. “You know what I always say, right?”

“Olive's my secret weapon,” he said. He turned to smile at her, and she smiled back. Their father had always told them that they were each other's secret weapons. She was never really sure what it meant, but she always thought it had something to do with taking care of each other. Their parents sure weren't going to do much to take care of them, so they really had no choice but to be there for each other.

“You got it,” said John Thomas. He sagged back against the pillows. “I think I'm going to rest now for a while. Could you tell your mother to come back in? I sleep better when she's near me.”

“Okay, Dad,” said Hugo. “Sleep well.”

“Bye,” Olive said. She hesitated, then bent over to place a single kiss on his cheek. His skin felt sweaty and cold at the same time. She wasn't sure what to compare it to, though, because she'd so rarely kissed her father.

She followed Hugo out of the room. It was blessedly cool in the hallway. Olive closed her eyes. The hospital smell faded a bit, but it permeated her clothes.

“I have to get some air,” she said, hoping the outside breeze would blow the smell off her body and the images of her crumpled father out of her head.

“Want to walk in the garden?” Hugo asked.

“Yeah,” Olive said.

They went downstairs.

“Mom?” called Hugo. Lucia shuffled out of the dining room. “Dad’s resting, and he wants you up there.”

Olive felt a surge of bitterness snap into her heart at the sight of Lucia. As John Thomas had said, it was her mother’s idea to withhold the information about his cancer from Olive. She pushed that bitterness back down, too. This was not the time, not with her father dying.

Now she *really* needed some air.

The main garden was behind the house. Olive stepped outside, breathing in the heavy scent of flowers. Hugo came out behind her. It was hot and muggy, but the light breeze felt good on her skin.

The garden was huge, with a stone path winding through the middle. In the very center, there was a large marble fountain featuring a young Apollo and Artemis, the twin Greek god and goddess their parents had put in shortly after finding out that Lucia was pregnant with twins. Olive had always found the statue of the half-naked siblings draped around each other a bit creepy if they were meant to symbolize her and Hugo. Rows and rows of flowers ran around the garden, splashes of subtle pinks, cheerful reds, deep purples, and bright yellows; roses, magnolias, violets, orchids, and other more exotic flowers Olive couldn’t name. Owen had a way of making the garden look tame and wild at the same time, like a patch of wildflowers only slightly domesticated. It was neat without being too orderly. Olive put her arm through Hugo’s as they strolled down the path.

“Owen is amazing,” said Olive. She reached out her hand to stroke the soft, tender petals of a magnolia bush.

“He’s really talented,” said Hugo. “It’s a shame he’s stuck here.”

“Yeah,” said Olive. “He makes these beautiful gardens, but there’s no one to see them. But then again, where could he even go? Who hires gardeners anymore?”

“Our parents,” said Hugo. They laughed. “But he could probably work for a business or something.”

“I guess,” said Olive. “But I don’t think he would like that very much. Our parents trust him with the garden, and I think he likes the autonomy to do the garden as he likes. Maybe he could go out and find some more pretentious rich people.”

“Like you and me?” Hugo asked.

“Well, yeah,” said Olive. “Who could blame us, though?”

“It’s how we were raised,” Hugo said, nodding in agreement. “We had no other choice.”

“We raised each other,” Olive said. When she had needed someone for love and support, she’d gone to Hugo, and vice versa.

“Yeah, I guess we did,” said Hugo.

“And Owen.”

“We raised Owen?” Hugo said.

“I think so, don’t you?” she said.

“I suppose, but at least he had his mother at first,” Hugo said.

“None of us were fit to raise each other,” Olive said.

“I know,” said Hugo. “But that’s how it was.”

“I know,” said Olive. “And look how we turned out.”

“Owen turned out okay,” said Hugo.

They laughed again.

“You turned out okay,” said Olive. “Wife, two kids.”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Hugo. “Actually, no. I didn’t say anything earlier, but things are not going well with Violet and me.”

“What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

“She’s talked about leaving me. She’s unhappy with how much time I spend at work.”

“Leaving her with the kids all the time?”

“Well, yeah,” said Hugo. “But what choice do I have? She doesn’t want to hire a nanny. She knew work was important to me when she married me.”

“And surely you knew how independent she was when you married her,” Olive said. Olive had known Violet in high school, but she hadn’t really been friends with her. Violet and Hugo hadn’t had even a hint of romance--or even friendship--until Olive was already in Ireland. She never would have pictured them dating, much less getting married.

“I did know,” Hugo said. “Her art is important to her. I can support her financially, and she can work on her art.”

“But she doesn’t want you to support her financially, I’m sure,” Olive said.

“How the hell do you know what she wants?”

“But I’m right,” Olive said. “I’m sure you trot off to work at all hours, just like our parents did. Only at least your kids are lucky enough that their mother gives two shits about them instead of leaving them with a nanny all the time.”

“I do care about my children, Olive!” Hugo said. “But I also care about the company. Maybe if I had someone else to lighten the load at work. Maybe, oh, I don’t know, my twin sister?”

“You’re proving exactly why I want nothing to do with the company,” said Olive. “Your wife wants a divorce because you care more about the company than you do her.”

“That’s not what it is!” Hugo said.

“Then leave the company and save your family,” Olive said.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“There always has to be a Delaney at Delaney Heavy Industries.”

“There doesn’t have to be a Delaney at Delaney Heavy Industries,” Olive said.

“You could just...not.”

“Well, unlike you, I don’t just run away from my responsibilities,” Hugo said.

Olive crossed her arms across her chest. “Well, I don’t see working for the company as a *responsibility*. If anything, I think it’s more important to make a difference in the world.”

“By writing about fashion? Right, Olive, you’re really changing the world here,” Hugo said.

“Well, I’m trying, Hugo,” Olive said. “Pardon me for not moving up fast enough, but I actually care about real issues rather than sitting on my ass amassing money.”

“Right,” he said. “You’re practically impoverished with that Hugo Boss suit you showed up in. Do you really make that much money as a fashion editor, or are you still accepting Dad’s money?”

“I make enough money to not need Dad’s, thanks,” she said. Actually, the Hugo Boss suit she had worn was one of the cheaper suits she owned. And it was true that she did well enough on her own, but she had dipped into her trust fund once for Alexander McQueen. “But money isn’t my motivator.”

“And you think it’s mine?” Hugo said. “Well, it isn’t. Delaney Heavy Industries is our family company, Olive. As in, generations of Delaneys have literally poured in blood, sweat, and tears for it. Whether I like it or not, I have to keep it going. Especially since you obviously don’t care about it. Or our entire family history. Or, hell, our family itself.”

“I *do* care about it, Hugo,” Olive said, speaking more gently this time. “I do care about the company. I’m glad we have the company, obviously, and I understand that it’s a source of pride for you and for Dad and Mom. But I can’t help but resent it. Look what it did to us. Look what it’s done to your family. The company is a black hole, Hugo, and I didn’t want to get sucked in. But I do care about it, and I do care about our family.”

“So why did you ditch us for seven years?”

“I didn’t *ditch* you, Hugo. I left because I didn’t want any part in the company, and because I actually did want to work for the magazine. And, yes, maybe I should’ve come back to visit. But you could’ve visited Ireland when Mom and Dad did, Hugo.”

She’d spent three years trying to forget the sting when Lucia had phoned to say they were visiting Ireland, but that Hugo wasn’t coming.

“I couldn’t get away from work when they went,” Hugo said.

“*Exactly*,” said Olive. “You couldn’t get away from work, just like I couldn’t get away from work.”

“For seven years? You say DHI is a leech, but then, so is the magazine.”

“And maybe it is,” Olive said. “But it’s a leech I’m willing to dedicate myself to. I really do love what I do, and I know I will make a difference if I keep working at it. I was wrong in not visiting, though. I apologize, okay?”

Hugo nodded slowly. “And I apologize for not visiting, too.”

“Thanks,” said Olive. “I’m sorry about Violet.” She slowed down a bit, taking his arm again.

“Thanks,” said Hugo.

“You could fight it, you know,” Olive said. “Try to get her to stay.”

“Would you fight it?”

“No,” said Olive. “But you shouldn’t ever be like me. I wouldn’t fight for anybody.”

“Not even me?”

“Well, you, probably,” Olive said, smiling. “You’re my secret weapon.”

“How could I forget?” Hugo said, smiling. “I think I’m going to stay here until Dad... well... dies.”

“You’ll take over the whole company, anyway, right?”

“I’m sure,” Hugo said. “We haven’t talked about it, but I think it was just assumed.”

“And so you’ll move here eventually,” she said.

“Yeah,” said Hugo. “So I might as well stay here. There’s nothing keeping me there now.”

“Not your kids? Just because Violet’s leaving you doesn’t mean you aren’t a father anymore, Hugo,” said Olive.

“I know,” said Hugo, sighing. “I want to see them as much as possible. I don’t know. We’ll work it out somehow.”

“Won’t you still have to manage the Atlanta branch for now?”

“Yeah,” Hugo said. “But I can run things from here. I’m going to have to find someone else to manage that branch, anyway. Might as well see who steps up.”

Olive felt the sudden, irrational desire to stay, too. Was it really irrational? Hugo thought she’d neglected her family responsibilities for seven years. If she left now, leaving Hugo and Lucia alone to care for the dying John Thomas, she’d *really* be neglecting her family responsibilities. Besides, her boss was her father’s first cousin. She’d be understanding. Olive could run things from here via phone and email. It would be difficult, and she’d have to rely a lot more on her assistant Sam than she wanted to, but it was doable. It was certainly something to think about.

Olive sat alone on the back porch. The sun was setting, casting everything in a dreamy haze of blue-violet shadow. It was cooler now, though Olive had had to douse herself in acrid mosquito repellent. She sat and listened to what she had called “swamp music” as a child, a cacophony of chirping insects and frogs and whatever other beasts could be found. She closed her eyes, letting the waves of sound wash over her. In Dublin, she used to take some of her work out on the balcony and listen to the rain and the rush of traffic. That was nice, but the swamp music had a soothing sound all of its own. She hadn’t realized she missed it.

But now, with her eyes closed, she almost felt like a child again. She tried to picture her younger self running wild through the garden and into the swamp. Had her parents known they actually played in the swamp? She couldn't remember if they kept it a secret, but she knew they came in enough times dripping wet and covered in mud and scum. Not that her parents paid much attention. They were usually working in their offices. She couldn't imagine any parent letting their seven-year-old child play in the swamps, even her own. But that was what they'd done. She'd been a happy child, though, back then when she was too young to realize that her parents' carefree parenting style was actually closer to neglect.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Owen in the garden. He was wearing faded jeans and a t-shirt with the sleeves cut out. His arms were rounded, muscular. He really had filled out over the last seven years. He was snipping at the flowers with his pruning shears. Which flower he cut seemed arbitrary to her, but she was sure there was some kind of method to it. Owen's mother Martha had taught him about gardening before she died. Martha had been an amazing gardener herself (her parents never would have hired her if she weren't), but Olive thought Owen might be even better. He was never formally trained, after all, so he relied only on his natural eye to make the garden so beautiful. Olive watched him for a while, then finally called his name.

He turned and squinted towards, then walked over to the porch.

"I didn't see you there," he said. He held out his hand, cradling a pure white magnolia in his palm. "Here."

"Thanks," she said, smiling. The magnolia was soft in her hand. She stroked a petal, then sniffed it.

“Sorry to distract you,” she said.

“It’s getting too dark, anyway,” Owen said, sweeping his hand towards the sky. It had lapsed into a deeper blue.

“Come sit,” she said, pointing to the chair beside her.

Owen sighed as he sank down onto the cushion. He propped his brown work boots up on the rail and rubbed his eyes. His face was smudged with dirt.

“Tired?” she asked.

“Sufficiently,” Owen said.

“I’m sure they keep you busy,” Olive said.

“Of course,” Owen said. “Plus I’m taking classes at the community college.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah,” said Owen, shrugging.

“Are you tired of the glamorous gardening lifestyle?”

“No,” Owen said, laughing. “But it’s really the only thing I’ve ever done. I just wanted to try some things, take some classes. Your parents pay me enough to fund my college education.”

“I believe it,” said Olive. “What are you taking?”

She tried to remember what Owen had been interested in as a kid, but she couldn’t think of anything. He’d had always done whatever she wanted to do and never seemed to be interested in anything else.

“Just general education courses right now,” Owen said. “Well, that and an art class.”

“I didn’t know you were into art,” said Olive.

“I didn’t either,” Owen said. “I wanted to take another class and everything was full, so I ended up in art. I’m not very good at drawing, but I’m pretty good at structuring the painting and picking out which colors look good together. My art’s all very abstract right now.”

“I guess the colors and stuff isn’t much different than putting the right flowers next to each other,” said Olive.

Owen nodded. “That’s what I thought, too. Anyway, it’s nothing I’m going to pursue or anything, but it’s a fun hobby for now. Not that I really have time for hobbies.”

“Do you know what you want to study when you’re done with general education?” Olive asked.

“I’ve thought about a few different things. If you remember correctly, I’m not very good at school.”

“That’s not true,” Olive said. “You did fine. Hugo and I just... well, we did better, but we had private tutors at two years old, so don’t compare yourself to us.”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Owen. “But I’ve actually been thinking about looking into teaching, if I’m good enough at school.”

“Teaching? Really? Like, teaching children?”

“Maybe,” Owen said, shrugging. “But I was thinking more like high school, maybe middle school.”

“Interesting,” said Olive. “Mr. Todd. It has a nice ring to it.”

“Yeah,” Owen said. “But I’m really not wanting to quit gardening or anything. It’s just an idea.”

“How many classes are you taking right now?”

“Five,” said Owen.

“Five?” Olive was surprised. The way he was talking, he’d sounded like he was just taking two or three. “No wonder you’re so tired. How do you get everything done?”

Owen shrugged again. “I like keeping busy. I sleep much better when I’m worn out.”

“You still have trouble sleeping?” she asked. After his mother had died when Owen was eleven, he had been plagued with bouts of insomnia.

“Not when I’m this tired,” Owen said.

“Why did you stay here?” she asked suddenly. Owen’s eyes, which had drifted shut, opened. Olive put her arm on the armrest closer to him, leaning towards him and waiting for his reply.

“There was nowhere else I wanted to go,” he said. He studied a bit of dirt beneath his fingernail. “I didn’t have anything I wanted to do other than gardening.”

“Really? Nothing else?”

“Well…” he paused. “Yeah, I mean, sure, there were other things. But nothing realistic.”

“You’re so smart, though, Owen,” Olive said. Owen opened his mouth to protest. “And stop saying that you aren’t, because I know you are. You could have done anything.”

“Not anything,” he said. “But, honestly, I love doing this.”

“Don’t you ever get lonely out here?” she asked.

Owen laughed. “I have friends, Olive. We’re not *that* far from town, and I can go to New Orleans whenever I want.”

“Yeah, I guess you can,” Olive said. “So, do you have...well...are you seeing anyone?”

“Well, not, um, regularly,” said Owen. He ran his hand through his hair. “I mean, you know, I can get dates.”

“I’m sure you can,” Olive said.

“What about you?”

“Oh,” said Olive. “Well, yeah, I guess I’m dating this guy, William.”

“You guess?”

“It’s not very serious,” she said. “At least, I’m not very serious about it.”

“Well, that’s familiar,” Owen said. He said it lightly, but Olive knew this was not a light topic.

“We missed the first star,” she said, changing the subject. The sky was a deep purple now, and the pinpricks of stars were starting to appear. “Remember that game we used to play?”

“Yeah,” said Owen, smiling. “The only game I ever beat you and Hugo in.”

They used to have a contest to see who would be the one to spot the first star. She remembered lying on her back in the tall grass, smelling the summer honeysuckle, peering into the darkening sky. Owen almost always won because she and Hugo couldn’t sit still long enough. They usually ended up pinching each other or chasing each other or wrestling while Owen waited patiently for the stars.

“I always thought you’d come back,” Owen said. “After you left, I mean. I kept waiting for you to visit. And after Hugo left, it was just me.”

“I’m back now,” Olive whispered.

“Yeah, I know,” Owen said. “For now.”

“For now,” Olive repeated. “Actually, I do plan to stay for a bit. You know, until my father...dies.”

She hadn't realized she'd made the decision, but there it was.

“Really?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Hugo's staying. I haven't talked to him or my mother about it, but I don't feel right about leaving them like this.”

“I'm sorry about your father, Olive,” said Owen.

“Thank you,” she said.

Owen's hand was resting against his knee. Olive reached out and took it. Owen squeezed her fingers. His skin was rough and calloused. His hands had still been baby-smooth at sixteen. Olive looked back at the sky. It was getting late. She needed to call Dublin. Owen's hand was warm in hers. It wouldn't hurt to sit out here a little bit longer.

## Part II

### Each Unhappy Family Is Unhappy In Its Own Way

#### Chapter Eight

November 1993

Olive had a knot in her stomach the size of Texas, and she now knew just how big Texas was because she'd spent recess filling in map after map of the fifty states. She'd done poorly on her geography exam, and now she was taking the results home to her parents. Often, it was hours before Olive even saw her parents after the driver brought her home from school. Sometimes she didn't see them at all. The cook would make dinner, and Olive and Hugo would do their homework at the kitchen table. Sometimes, when they finished their homework in time, they'd go play with Owen. They used to have a nanny, but the sixth one quit soon after the twins' eighth birthday, and their parents decided not to hire another. They were old enough to take care of themselves, as long as someone cooked for them. On Fridays, though, their parents didn't have the cook come in. They cooked for themselves and had dinner as a family. They chose Fridays to do this because that was the day St. Joseph's sent home weekly progress reports. On this particular Friday, the progress report would show Olive's failure on her geography test.

*Failure* was being a bit dramatic about it. Olive had gotten a C. Hugo got a B plus. Olive had chosen to spend recess filling in the states on the map because she hoped

her father would let her prove that she could label the whole thing now. Then, maybe he wouldn't be so disappointed in her.

The town car pulled to a stop in front of the Delaney house. Olive waved to Marco, the driver, as he pulled away. Marco was hired specifically for Olive and Hugo. He drove them to and from school, and sometimes other places they needed to go. Their parents preferred to drive themselves around, and Lucia never wanted a house full of servants. The only one who lived on the grounds was Martha. Marco and Nancy, the cook, and Rhonda, the housekeeper, lived in New Alsace and came to the house only when they were needed.

Olive started sweating as soon as she stepped out of the car. It was hot for November, even for Louisiana standards. Her wool uniform was hot and itchy where it stuck to her sweaty skin. It included a button-up shirt, a sweater, and a blazer on top of that. Hugo was stripped down to the button-up and his grey trousers, just as Olive usually was after school, but today the hot, itchy uniform felt like a security blanket.

Olive could smell a spicy tomato sauce when she stepped into the house. They usually ate Italian food on family dinner nights. Olive's Italian grandmother had taught her mother how to cook. Olive's father had grown up with a personal chef, so no one ever taught him how to cook. He mostly assisted their mother.

The door slammed behind Hugo. He'd been quiet in the car, knowing that Olive was upset. Even though the twins could get competitive, they were never smug when the other had done poorly on something. As much as Olive wanted to beat Hugo, she still wanted him to succeed, and vice versa.

Olive went into the living room and sat down on the couch to wait for dinner. Hugo sat beside her and flipped on the television. Wordlessly, he handed her the remote. It normally took at least ten games of Rock, Paper, Scissors to decide who controlled the remote.

It seemed like an eternity before their mother called them to the dining room. Hugo put his sweater and blazer back on. Friday dinners were always a formal affair, with at least three courses and three forks. Olive took her place beside Hugo at the table. She wiped her sweaty palms on her wool skirt. Her tie felt tight around her neck.

“Hello, children,” said their mother, placing the plates of salad down in front of them.

“Hi, Mom,” said Hugo. Their parents had a rule that they didn’t discuss school or work at family dinner. That typically meant they didn’t talk about much, since their parents’ lives were consumed with work and Hugo and Olive’s were consumed with school. They could talk about the parties they held, but their last party had been several weeks ago, and there was only so much to say.

“What have you been working on for piano, Olive?” her father asked as she dug into her salad.

“I’ve been on a fugue kick lately,” said Olive. She struggled to swallow her salad. She didn’t feel like eating.

“And what about your violin, Hugo?”

“I’m still working on Pachelbel’s Canon in D,” said Hugo. It was no secret to anyone that Hugo hated playing the violin with a passion.

“You’ve had plenty of time to master that by now,” said their father.

Hugo shrugged and munched on a crouton. He could always take their parents' criticism better than Olive did.

"Lacrosse is going well for him, though," said Olive.

Hugo nodded. "And we've been playing field hockey in gym. We're both pretty good at it."

"The fifth grade girls have a field hockey team," said Olive. "I want to play when I'm in fifth grade."

"If you're still interested in it by then, I don't see any reason why not," said their mother.

Silence fell. They had already exhausted their topics.

Each dinner course seemed to last an age. Finally, Olive swallowed the last bite of chocolate mousse. Everything tasted like shredded cardboard.

They went to the living room after dinner, where Olive and Hugo handed over their progress reports. Their father flipped through Hugo's first.

"Good on your spelling test. This says you're ahead on math, too. Very good. You could use a little work in science, though. Not bad in geography, although I expected better. What books have you read this week?"

"I'm almost finished with *Huckleberry Finn*," he said.

"All right," said their father. "Get that finished this weekend. Also, your French tutor is coming on Sunday, so be ready for that."

He opened Olive's report.

"Spelling is good. So is math. Good on science, too." Her father paused, eyes scanning the geography section. "What happened here?" he said finally.

Olive bunched her skirt up in her hands, wetting the wool with her sweat. “I don’t know,” she said. “I thought I knew them. I studied a lot, but I got Colorado and New Mexico switched, and it threw off the rest of them.”

“This is disappointing, Olive.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What did you do last night?”

“I did homework and studied until eight,” she said.

“And then did you go play?”

“Yes, we went to play with Owen,” said Olive.

“Well, that’s a problem, then. You’re spending too much time playing with Owen when you should be studying.”

“I’m sorry,” Olive said again. “I really did think I knew them. I spent all recess today filling out maps. I can do it perfectly now. I’ll show you if you want. I have a blank map in my bag.”

“No, that’s not necessary,” said her father. “I’m getting a geography tutor here tomorrow. You can work on geography all morning, and then I want you to work on science in the afternoon. You too on the science, Hugo. And no more playing until I see these grades improve, Olive.”

“Yes, sir,” said Olive.

Her father handed her the folder and stood up. “I’ll be in my office,” he said.

“Olive, I want you to finish your homework tonight so you can have all day to work with your tutors.”

“Yes, sir,” Olive said again.

Her father went upstairs. Olive picked up her backpack and curled up in the armchair with her science book. Her mother was still sitting on the couch, watching her.

“I’ll do my homework with you,” Hugo said.

“You don’t have to,” Olive said. “You can go play with Owen, and tell him I won’t be able to see him this week.”

“I don’t want to play with Owen,” he said. “I just go with you.”

“Just go tonight so you can tell him I won’t be there this week,” Olive said. “I don’t want him waiting for me.”

“Okay,” Hugo said with a sigh.

“I know you work hard, Olive,” her mother said.

Olive looked up and shrugged.

“Your father knows how smart you are,” said her mother. “He wants your grades to reflect that.”

“Yes,” said Olive. She wished her mother would go away so she could read. She felt humiliated, and her mother’s weak attempts at a pep talk weren’t helping. Maybe she should have been more grateful, since her mother didn’t even talk to her some days. She set the book aside.

“Thanks, Mom,” Olive said, smiling at her mother. Maybe they could have a real conversation.

“You’re welcome,” her mother said, smiling back. Then she stood up. “Good luck on your homework.”

With a little wave, Olive’s mother disappeared up the stairs. Olive sighed again and picked up her science book.

## Chapter Nine

2007

Olive lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. She couldn't even remember the last time she was this tired, but every time she closed her eyes, she saw her father's withered, yellow face. Finally, she slipped out of bed and put her robe on. She was obviously not going to be sleeping.

She'd called her assistant in Dublin to inform her of her plans to stay in America. Then she'd called Doreen, who was very understanding of the situation. Olive would still make most of the major decisions via email, but Sam was competent enough to deal with the day-to-day issues. That was done, then. Olive had basically committed to staying in Louisiana until John Thomas died.

The stairs were cold on Olive's bare feet as she went down to the kitchen to make some tea. She wasn't sure tea would help her to sleep, but maybe it would make her feel better. Then again, if she *really* wanted to feel better, large amounts of whiskey was probably the better option. She'd only been here for a few days, so it was a bit too early to use drunkenness to cope. Maybe later, though.

After the water was boiled, Olive poured it over the teabag in her mug, watching the water stain brown. Her Irish friends would have a fit if they saw her putting the water directly in the mug. The proper way included a kettle. She would have to buy one. She added a drop of milk, then slipped into the living room. The heat seeped from the mug, warming her hands. She put her face close to it and breathed in the musky tea smell. The

steam rose in front of her eyes. She took a sip. It was still too hot to drink, but she took another sip, anyway. American tea was weaker than she preferred. She wished she'd thought to bring some tea with her from Ireland, but she hadn't exactly planned for this to be an extended stay. She'd have to have Sam mail her a bag of Punjana.

She heard the sound of slippers coming down the stairs. Olive hadn't bothered to turn on the lamp, opting instead to sit in the dark. The footsteps went into the kitchen. Olive stood and slid into the doorway. When the footsteps came back out of the kitchen, Olive saw that they belonged to her mother, who had a piece of dry toast in her hand.

"Mom," Olive said before Lucia could go back upstairs.

"Olive? What are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"I couldn't either," said Lucia.

"I'm having some tea," Olive said. "You could sit with me, if you want."

"In the dark?"

Olive shrugged.

"All right," said Lucia, and she shuffled in to sit in the armchair. Olive took her place on the couch again.

She took a sip of tea.

"Mom?" she said. "Why didn't you tell me? About Dad?"

She hadn't planned on bringing it up at all, and least of all in the middle of the night, but she was feeling tired and vulnerable.

"I--I don't know," said Lucia. "I should have. I'm sorry."

“No,” Olive said. “That’s not good enough. I may not be a model daughter, but I’m still part of this family, whether you like it or not.”

“Of course you are, Olive,” Lucia said. “Of course you’re part of the family, and of course, I want you to be part of it.”

“Then why did you leave me out of this? Were you ever going to tell me? Were you content to just have me stay in Ireland until--,” Olive broke off.

“No, I just... Olive, I--I haven’t been handling this well,” said Lucia. “I thought he would get better. Even as the doctors were saying that he wouldn’t, I didn’t believe them. I couldn’t believe them because him not getting better was unthinkable. I don’t know how I’m supposed to live without him, Olive. I--I’m not strong enough. I can’t.”

“You *can*, Mother,” said Olive. “You have to.”

“Olive, you grew up in this house. You know how your father is. He’s--he’s so big. He just... commands everything and.... I don’t know how to put it into words.”

“He’s like the sun,” Olive said. “And everything orbits around him. It’s like he doesn’t even know it, or mean for it to happen. Or maybe he does.”

“Yes,” said Lucia. “Things orbit around him, and they always have. Without him, what am I? I was something, once, before I met him. And I never meant for it to be this way, Olive. I didn’t. I had my own life, my own plans. But your father swooped in and he changed everything and I got drawn in. He didn’t even demand it, not on purpose, but... I’m a different person now, and who I am now can’t exist without him. You’re right. He is the sun, and when he’s gone, we’ll all be out spinning into space.”

“Not all of us,” Olive said. “Not me. I got out. And yeah, I’m a little ashamed of it, Mom, but that’s part of the reason I didn’t come home for so long. I couldn’t be what

he wanted. I didn't want to be who he wanted me to be, so I got out. I didn't want to be influenced by him anymore. I wasn't strong enough to stand on my own next to him. I'm sorry that I left and didn't come back, but that's why. Or at least, partly why. There was other stuff, too, but that's a big reason."

"I suspected that, sometimes," said Lucia. "I didn't push you to come home because I wanted you to have your own life. But it broke my heart to have you so far away."

"I thought you just didn't care if I came home or not," said Olive. "You didn't-- Mom, you hardly even paid attention to us when we were kids."

"That's not true, Olive."

"Yes, it is," she said. "You and Dad both just... left us alone. All the time. Unless, of course, you were pushing us to do better and better and be the perfect children. And it was fine, really, it was. I'm glad you guys gave us the drive to want to succeed, except... you never said anything to him when he went too far. When he pushed us too much."

"I know," Lucia said. She sighed, the breath leaving her like she couldn't hold onto it anymore. "There were times when I wanted to say something, but... I thought your father knew best. All he wanted was for you to do well and have good lives, and--"

"You *know* that isn't true," said Olive. "I mean, yes, it is. He *did* want us to have good lives. He wanted us to have good lives following in his footsteps regardless of whether we wanted that or not."

"But you did want that," Lucia said. "At least, as far as I knew. When you moved to Ireland, Olive, it really came out of left field."

“Right, because I didn’t tell you what I was thinking and feeling,” said Olive.  
“What a surprise that I didn’t confide in a person who didn’t want to give me the time of day unless you were showing me off at a party, or I’d won the big field hockey tournament and you and Dad showed up so word would get around that the Delaneys were family people.”

“Olive, I have always loved you. I have always cared about you.”

“You did a piss poor job at showing it,” Olive said.

“Would you have come home if I asked you to?”

Olive pursed her lips, staring at her mother in the dark.

“No,” she said at last with a sigh.

“I didn’t think so,” Lucia said.

They sat in silence for a few moments. Olive’s anger began to simmer down. After all, she’d had seven years to think about all this stuff. She was tired.

“You can be strong enough, Mom,” said Olive. “You can. I know you love him, and I know it will be near impossible to live without him. But you can do it. You can survive, and you will. You’ll have Hugo. You’ll have me.”

“You’re going back to Ireland,” Lucia said, and Olive couldn’t help but hear an accusation in her voice.

“No,” Olive said. “Well, yes, eventually. But I called Doreen today and told her I’m going to stay here until... everything is... settled.”

Olive found the true words impossible to say. *Until my father dies.*

“I’m glad,” said Lucia. She stood up and crossed over to stand in front of Olive, reaching down to squeeze Olive’s fingers. Lucia’s hands were cold and soft against hers.

“I’m glad you’re here, and I’m glad you’re going to stay. At least for a little while.”

“Thank you,” Olive said, her voice a raspy whisper.

“I’m going to go back upstairs now,” said Lucia. “Your father may need something.”

Olive nodded and sank back into the cushions, thinking about what her mother had said. Lucia had always been a strong woman on her own, but she was so easily pulled into every whim and wish of John Thomas. She never contradicted any of John Thomas’s criticisms of Olive and Hugo, either. Olive couldn’t hold her blameless for that, but she could try to understand. She still held resentment in her heart for her mother and her childhood. Most of that centered around John Thomas, it was true, but Lucia contributed to it, too. She contributed by not standing up against it.

Olive sat alone in the darkened living room for a long time that night.

## Chapter Ten

December 1993

Owen's stomach growled at the smell of the tacos his mother was cooking. He tried to concentrate on filling out his multiplication chart. He had his times tables memorized all the way through six, but he was struggling to move on to sevens.

"That's easy," said Olive, who was hanging off the edge of the couch, watching him do his homework upside-down.

"Do it for me, then," said Owen.

"Okay," said Olive.

"No!" called his mother from the kitchen.

Owen sighed.

"We started multiplication in first grade," said Olive.

"Well, we didn't," said Owen.

"Hugo and I did," Olive continued chattering. "And some of the other kids in the class."

"The smart ones?" Owen asked. Olive grinned and shrugged, which looked funny since she was still upside-down.

Olive coming over to Owen's cottage for dinner had become a weird tradition. She'd come over a little earlier than usual one day in the previous month, just as Owen and his mother were about to eat. His mother had offered her a plate and, even though she'd already eaten, she accepted. Now, Owen's mother always made extra food in case

Olive popped by. Hugo never came for dinner, though he sometimes showed up after.

“Dinner’s ready,” said Owen’s mother.

Olive flipped over the rest of the way off the couch, landing on her knees. She still wore her school uniform, which Owen thought looked itchy and stuffy. It was a light green sweater with a dark blazer over it, grey skirt, and black tights. It had the school crest on the blazer. Owen kind of wanted to wear a cool uniform like it, but was also kind of glad he could wear whatever he wanted to school.

“Would you like to say the blessing, Owen?” asked his mother.

Owen said a quick prayer, bowing his head and folding his hands. He always felt embarrassed to pray in front of Olive. He knew Olive and Hugo didn’t go to church, and they might think it was strange that he prayed. He knew that didn’t matter, though. His mother had always taught him that God had blessed them with food and a job for his mother and a place to stay, and that they had to thank Him for it.

“How was school today, Olive?” his mother asked as they started to eat their tacos.

“Good,” said Olive. “I think this week’s progress report is going to be good, too, as long as I do well on my science test tomorrow.”

“I’m sure you’ll do great,” said Owen’s mother. “You’re very smart.”

Olive beamed as she chewed.

Owen thought it was odd for his mother to act like Olive’s mother. Once, after Olive had left the house, Owen’s mother explained to him that Olive’s mother didn’t have a lot of time for her. Owen knew that was true. In all the time he spent playing with Olive and Hugo, he only saw their parents a few times. They were always working, either

upstairs or at their offices in New Orleans. Owen's mother didn't like to leave him alone even when she was just in the garden, but Olive and Hugo's parents would go all the way to New Orleans and leave them behind. Olive seemed to soak up all the attention from Owen's mother. Owen didn't exactly want to share his mother with Olive, but he could tell it made both of them happy. Owen knew his mother had been pregnant with a little girl before him, but the baby had died before she was born. His mother had never told him so, but he knew she secretly wanted a daughter.

Owen was only a little bit jealous of Olive.

"What about you, Owen?" asked his mother. "How was school?"

Owen shrugged. "Fine," he said.

"Did you make any new friends?"

"No." Owen wished she wouldn't ask that in front of Olive. He only had one friend at school, a boy named Cody. Everyone else at the school had grown up together, and it was hard for someone new to break in. Cody was the only other new kid, but Owen didn't care that Cody was his only friend. He hadn't had any friends there at all until Cody came in November.

"How about tomorrow, you try to talk to someone you've never talked to before?" said his mother.

Owen rolled his eyes. "No, thank you."

"I just wish you'd make more friends."

"Olive's my friend," said Owen.

"Hugo's your friend, too," Olive said.

"Yeah," said Owen. "And Cody. That's three. I don't need any more."

“You just had so many friends in Connecticut,” said his mother.

Owen shrugged.

“I don’t really have friends, either,” said Olive. “Kids at school don’t like us that much.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because they don’t,” Olive said, shrugging. “Hugo and I just play with each other. Mostly.”

“You have to have some friends,” said Owen’s mother.

“Well, there is a boy who sits next to Hugo in class. Antony. He plays with us on the playground sometimes. We don’t get very much recess, though. There isn’t much time for playing with anybody. Our school is *academically rigorous*.”

“Yes, I imagine it is,” Owen’s mother said. There was a funny sort of tone to her voice, like she was trying not to laugh. Owen wondered why.

After dinner, they ate chocolate cake and drank cold milk in front of the television. Hugo got there just in time for *Wheel of Fortune*.

“Hugo!” Olive shouted.

Owen sat in the chair while his mother stretched out on the couch. The twins sprawled on their stomachs on the floor, looking even more alike in their matching uniforms. Watching *Wheel of Fortune* had become another tradition at Owen’s house. Olive and Hugo always fought to see who could guess the puzzle first. It took some of the fun out of it because the twins could usually figure it out long before the contestants. Owen didn’t mind much, though. The twins--especially Olive--laughed more during these times than ever.

## Chapter Eleven

2007

Olive propelled herself out of bed the next morning and was heading for the shower when she stopped abruptly. Why was she rushing? What did she have to do today? It wasn't like she had to go to work. She really didn't feel like facing her family just yet. She grabbed her laptop and took it back to bed. She answered the emails from work. Then she put her laptop aside. This was bizarre. She had nothing to do. How long had it been since she'd had nothing to do?

She rolled out of bed again and padded over to her bookshelf, looking over all her childhood books. *A Wrinkle in Time* had been her favorite for a while. She pulled it out and carried it back to bed. It was a trade paperback copy, which was odd because her father had usually gotten them special edition leather bound books. This one was well taken care of, but the cover was worn and the spine was cracked. Olive opened it, smelling the musty-vanilla scent of old books. The front cover was stamped with the logo of a used bookstore in New Orleans. Now she remembered purchasing this book herself while they were staying in New Orleans one summer. They owned a house there in the French Quarter. Olive remembered some of the wild parties she and Hugo had thrown there. She tried not to think of them for too long, though. One of the parties had spiraled out of control, and the consequences went far beyond that night.

Olive read until she was so hungry she could no longer concentrate on the book. She plodded downstairs in her pajamas, bringing the book with her. It was quiet down

there. She peeked out the living room window. Hugo's car was gone from the driveway. Olive couldn't say she minded. She wasn't much in the mood for fighting with him today, and fighting was all they seemed to be able to do these days. She fixed herself some toast and eggs, which she ate in the living room with the book open on her lap. They were never allowed to eat in the living room as children. It felt oddly rebellious, which only made Olive feel even more like a child.

Olive managed to last a few hours before the quiet started to grate on her. She wished Hugo would come home. Even fighting with Hugo was better than this silence. She hadn't realized how accustomed she'd become to the busy days rushing around Dublin. She even wished her mother would come downstairs. She supposed she should really be upstairs with her father. Wasn't that why she was staying, to spend the final days of her father's life with him? But the image of his shrunken, yellowed face was still fresh in her head. She didn't want to be up there, didn't want to see him like that. She didn't want to think of him like that. That wasn't her father.

Olive dressed and headed for Owen's cottage. She knocked on the door, but he didn't answer. She went around to the little garage behind it. There was an old Ford Ranger in there, which she assumed belonged to Owen. He was probably out on the grounds somewhere. It *was* his job.

She wandered around until she found him spreading mulch behind the house.

"Hi," she called.

"Hello," he said, taking off one of his gloves and wiping the sweat off his forehead on his sleeve.

"How's it going?"

“Oh, you know. Just mulching.”

“I see that.”

Olive stopped a few feet from him.

“Did you...want something?” he asked.

“No, no,” Olive said. “Just...I really don’t have anything to do.”

Owen grinned. “You’re bored?”

“Well...I guess,” Olive said, smiling. “It’s a new feeling.”

“You’re welcome to help me here,” said Owen.

“All right,” she said, shrugging.

“I was kidding.”

“Oh.”

“But you can help if you want.”

“Teach me your ways,” said Olive. “I’ve always wanted to learn to garden.”

“No, you haven’t.”

“True,” Olive agreed. “I haven’t. But I do now.”

They spent the rest of the morning working in the garden. Olive couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so sweaty. She had a distaste for manual labor, but Ireland was also cold. The closest she’d get to sweaty on a normal day was being coated in the cool, misty rain.

“It feels good to work with my hands,” Olive said as they sat in the shade of the porch, drinking iced tea.

“It’s a new feeling for you,” Owen said.

Olive swatted his thigh.

“Well, it is,” he said.

“True. I work with my brain a lot.”

Owen laughed. “Right.”

“I’m serious!”

“Yeah, yeah. I know,” Owen said. He peered at her face, then grinned. “You have a sunburn.”

“What?” Olive said, clapping her hands to her face. “I do not! I don’t get sunburns.”

“Well, you have one now,” said Owen.

Olive rubbed her nose. It was a little tender. “I guess seven years in the pale Irish sun does that to you,” she said with a sigh. She reached up and trailed her finger along the bridge of Owen’s nose, tracing over the pink tinge and the light freckles. “You have a sunburn, too.”

“Yeah, I know,” Owen said. “I’ve had it since we moved here when I was seven.”

“Yeah,” Olive said. “You really should wear sunscreen.” She moved her hand to cup his cheek, then dropped it back to her lap.

Owen rolled his eyes. “I do wear sunscreen.”

“You should live in Ireland,” said Olive. “There’s no sun.”

Owen gave her a sidelong glance. She stared out in front of her, eyes focused on the horizon. She hadn’t meant anything by the statement, but....

“Maybe I will,” Owen said softly. Then he grinned.

“Do you want to go out for drinks tonight?” Olive asked. She didn’t look at him.

“Sure, okay,” Owen said. “Do you want to ask Hugo to come too?”

Olive shrugged. “Do *you* want to ask Hugo to come?” She turned to look at him now. She thought he might be blushing, but she couldn’t tell with his pink cheeks.

“No,” he said. “That is, of course, unless *you* want to ask him.”

## Chapter Twelve

March 1995

“Give it,” said Olive, trying to snatch the Game Boy from Hugo’s hands in the back seat of the car. “It’s my turn.”

“Not my fault you left yours at home.”

“You said I could play after you died.”

“I changed my mind.”

Olive managed to get her hands on the Game Boy and flick the switch to off.

*“Olive!”*

Olive shrugged. “You should have let me play.”

“Fine, take it.” Hugo dropped the Game Boy in Olive’s lap and crossed his arms, glaring out the window.

Olive played Tetris for a little while, but it really had been more fun to try to take it away from Hugo than to actually play. She glanced up from the game when the car phone rang, and Hugo took the opportunity to snatch the Game Boy back.

“No fair! I was in the middle of a game!” But Olive heard the distinct sound of the bricks stacking up all the way to the top, followed by the losing sound.

“Ha ha!” said Hugo.

“Hey, quiet,” said their driver Marco from the front seat. “I can’t hear.”

Hugo started a new game, and it was Olive’s turn to stare out the window.

“Yes, sir, okay,” Marco was saying. “I’ll ask them. Yes, sir.”

Marco hung up the phone and pulled off to the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” asked Olive. Hugo glanced up from the game. Marco turned around in his seat to face them.

“There’s been an accident,” said Marco.

“Our parents?” asked Hugo. Olive felt her heart start to thump.

“No,” he said. “That was your dad on the phone. It’s the gardener, Martha. She had a car accident, and Owen was in the car. Your father knows how close you are to--”

“Are they okay?” asked Olive.

“Owen’s fine,” said Marco. “He’s in the hospital with some bruises, but he’s fine.”

“And Martha?” Olive asked, her voice hoarse around the lump that had suddenly taken root in her throat.

“Martha... is not. It’s touch and go right now. Your father wanted to know if you wanted to go see Owen.”

“Yes,” said Olive.

“But I have a lot of homework,” said Hugo.

Olive glared at him. “Shut up, Hugo. We have to go see him. His mom....”

Hugo grimaced. “Yeah, fine, okay.”

The ER waiting room smelled like bleach and blood. It was empty except for a family with a sick toddler. Marco went to talk to the receptionist while Olive and Hugo sat down in the uncomfortable plastic chairs. Olive picked at a thread on her school skirt.

She could hear machines beeping and nurses and doctors shouting behind the swinging doors that separated the waiting room from the rooms.

Marco came back over to them. “The receptionist said only one of you can go back there.”

“Me,” said Olive.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” said Hugo.

“Normally, they wouldn’t let kids go at all, but Owen’s all by himself.”

“Is Martha--”

“They wouldn’t tell me,” said Marco.

“Does Owen know?”

“He doesn’t know anything about her condition. A nurse will take you back in a few minutes to see him, okay?”

Olive nodded. She went back to picking at her skirt. The sick toddler was whining now. The sound grated on her. She crossed and uncrossed her legs. Hugo pulled his Game Boy out and started playing it again.

Finally, a nurse in soft blue scrubs popped her head out the swinging doors and motioned for Olive.

“How old are you?” the nurse asked as Olive swept through the doors. The sound of beeping monitors was louder now, and she could hear shouting coming from down the hall. She had to meander around an empty rolling bed that was parked in the hallway.

“Eleven.”

“All right, well, we normally wouldn’t allow this because you’re so young, but he doesn’t have any family here. What about that man with you?”

“He’s, uh, my driver,” said Olive. “He doesn’t really know Owen.”

“Oh,” said the nurse, pausing to look back at her. “Well, all right. Owen is your friend?”

“Yes,” said Olive.

“He’s right through here.”

Olive followed her into the tiny room. Owen was sitting on the edge of the paper-covered bed, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. His hand was in a splint, his lip was busted, and he had a black eye. There were small cuts all over his face.

“Olive?” he said, cocking his head to the side.

“Hey,” she said. “Did you know I was here?”

“No,” he said.

“Is your hand okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Just a sprain.”

Olive went and stood next to the bed.

“How did you know I was here?”

“My dad called Marco while he was driving us home from school. Hugo’s here, too, but they’d only let one of us come in.”

“I don’t really remember the crash,” said Owen, “which is weird because I’m not really that hurt.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Is my mom okay? They won’t let me see her.”

“They haven’t told me about her, only about you,” Olive said, willing her face not to reveal anything.

Owen's eyes locked onto hers. "They didn't tell you *anything*?"

Olive could see tears start to collect along the bottom row of Owen's lashes.

"No," she whispered. Her eyes started to feel warm, and snot collected in her nose.

"She's not okay, is she?" Owen whispered.

"No."

Owen's chin fell to his chest, and Olive stepped closer and wrapped her arms around him. She felt his face against her neck, and his tears were warm against her skin.

"She might still be okay, though," said Olive, and she realized she was crying, too. "They really didn't tell me any details or anything."

Olive heard the squeaking of tennis shoes on the floor. She turned her head, keeping her arms around Owen. The nurse was in the doorway.

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing," said Olive. "I didn't tell him anything."

Owen picked his head up off Olive's shoulders. She looked back at him, his face red and tear-streaked. Owen looked at the nurse.

"Is my mom going to be okay?" he asked.

The nurse sighed, coming in to stand beside Olive. "She wasn't supposed to tell you. Owen, your mother didn't make it."

Owen's head fell to Olive's shoulder again. She felt the hot tears squeeze through her eyelids. She was glad Owen's head hid her face from the nurse. She wasn't sure exactly why she was crying. She cried for Owen, yes. She could feel the pain seep from his body into hers. But she also already felt Martha's absence cut through her chest. Plus,

what would happen to Owen? He didn't have any family here. Olive buried her face in Owen's hair, trying to push down the feeling that she was going to lose her best friend.

The funeral parlor was sparsely populated. Martha had lived in New Alsace for less than two years. The Delaneys and their staff were there, as well as some of the elderly members of Martha's church. Martha's sister and brother-in-law had flown down from Connecticut with their two sons. Owen was sitting beside his aunt.

Olive glanced at Owen throughout the funeral. He wasn't crying anymore, but simply staring at the preacher. He had borrowed one of Hugo's old suits. It was a bit too big for him, the jacket falling down past his wrists to rest around his knuckles. It was baggy in the shoulders, too, making him look even younger. His face, though, looked older than his ten years.

Olive was hardly listening to Martha's preacher, who was delivering the eulogy. She didn't really think the man had known much about Martha. He was currently talking about what a good mother Martha was to Owen, which was true, but he could have just as well been talking about anyone. There was nothing personal to Martha.

Then again, what did Olive know about her? Not much. She was a fantastic gardener. The flowers surrounding her casket were almost insulting because they paled in comparison to her living creations. She was a good cook; she didn't make anything fancy like the Delaney chef, but Olive preferred her cooking, anyway. And she was a good listener. Olive's own parents very rarely actually listened to anything she or Hugo had to say. With Martha, Olive didn't even have to try to be heard. She didn't have to try to use

big words just to impress her parents enough to answer. She just had to talk, and Martha would listen. She was going to miss that.

Still, she knew she was being selfish. She would miss Martha and miss the evenings she spent at their cottage, but that was nothing compared to Owen's loss. He had never spoken of his aunts and cousins, so Olive didn't get the impression that they were very close. She also had never heard anything about Owen's father. Martha was virtually Owen's only family, and now she was gone. Olive glanced at Owen again. His two cousins were fidgeting and poking one another. Owen was even sitting a bit separated from the rest of the family.

Olive still hadn't been paying much attention to the proceedings, and suddenly everyone was standing up and shuffling around. Olive stood up.

"Are we going to the burial?" she asked her father.

"I wasn't planning to," said her father, looking at his watch.

"I want to," said Olive.

"Marco can drive you home if you want to stay," said her mother.

"Okay," said Olive. "Are you staying, Hugo?"

"I don't think so," he said. He tugged on the sleeve of his jacket.

"Well, I want to," Olive said.

She slipped around her parents and stood in the aisle. Owen was standing by himself beside the casket, staring down at his mother. Olive walked up and stood beside him. He turned to look at her. His eyes were dry but bloodshot.

"Hi," Olive said. "Sorry, I'm sure you want to be alone right now."

"No," he said. "It's okay."

They stood there by the casket. Olive couldn't bring herself to look at the body. She stared at a white rose next to the casket instead. Owen's aunt came up behind them and put a hand on Owen's shoulder.

"Let's go on to the car so they can load the casket," she said.

"Okay," Owen said, his voice blank as he stared at his mother.

"I'm going to go find Marco," said Olive. "He's going to drive me to the cemetery. I'll see you there."

"Do you want to ride with us?" Owen asked. He turned to his aunt. "Can she?"

"There should be room in the limo," she said.

"Do you want to?" asked Owen.

"Sure," said Olive.

They filed out. Owen's uncle was standing outside with the two little boys, who were currently pinching one another. The limo was old and once white, but had turned a kind of yellowy beige color. Owen slid in all the way and stared out the window. Olive piled in after him, taking the middle seat.

A few minutes later, Owen's aunt and uncle came in with the boys. The kids immediately started squabbling.

"Dylan, Matthew, *stop it*," Owen's aunt hissed.

Owen was silent all the way to the cemetery. Olive took his hand when they got out of the car. It was warm and humid outside, and the deep green grass was marshy as they set out across the grounds. The burial service itself did not take long. Olive watched as the casket was lowered into the ground. The earth smell was rich and warm. Owen's

hand grew sweaty in hers, but they didn't let go until Owen's aunt came to take him back to the hotel. Olive followed Marco back to the car.

Olive sat with Hugo on the living room floor, their homework spread out in front of them. She had found a marble in her pocket and was rolling it along the hardwood. Hugo kept glaring at her over his homework at the sound of the marble rolling, but she ignored him.

“Would you stop that?” he finally snapped.

“What? Oh.”

She picked up the marble and rolled it along her palm. The marble was cool and hard against her skin. Her science homework sat next to her, abandoned.

“I think I'm going to go talk to Dad,” said Olive.

“You're *what*?”

“Going to go talk to Dad.”

“In his office?”

“Yeah.”

“He'll kill you.”

Olive shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Talk to him about what?”

“I want him to adopt Owen.”

“You're kidding, right?”

“Well, maybe not adopt. But let him stay here.”

“He's not going to do that.”

“He might.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s my friend.”

“I don’t think that answer’s going to work for Dad,” said Hugo.

Olive shrugged. “Well, I’m going to try.”

She stood up and pocketed the marble.

“Wish me luck,” said Olive.

“You’re crazy.”

With each step up the marble staircase, Olive was less and less sure of this plan. There was no way in hell her father was going to agree to take on Owen. But Olive couldn’t stand the thought of Owen moving back to Connecticut.

Olive paused in front of her father’s door. She could hear him talking on the phone. If she interrupted a phone call, she’d never hear the end of it. He’d probably ship her off to Connecticut along with Owen. Although maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad idea....

She sat down on the floor, leaning her head against the wall and listening. She pulled the marble out of her pocket and began to roll it along her palm again. After several minutes, she heard the sound of the phone being placed back in the cradle. She stood, taking a few steadying breaths, and knocked.

There was a pause. “Yeah?” her father said at last.

“It’s me,” Olive said. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah.”

She opened the door. He frowned at her from behind his desk. She was breaking what was practically the first commandment in this house: *Thou shalt not bother thy father or mother while they are working.*

“Hey, Dad.” Olive gave him a little wave.

“What do you want, Olive?”

“I have a proposition,” she said. “A sort of a... business proposition.”

“Do you really?”

“Well, no. Not business. It’s a proposition of a more personal nature.”

Her father glanced at the clock on the wall. “What is it?”

“As you are aware, Owen is my friend.”

“Yes?”

“And as you are also aware, he’s moving back to Connecticut to live with his aunt.”

“Get to the point, Olive.”

“All right. I propose that Owen *doesn’t* move back to Connecticut. I propose that he gets to stay here. And we can take him in. He can be your ward. You know, like Dick Grayson to Bruce Wayne. In, uh, Batman. Only without the superhero stuff.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because he’s my friend,” Olive said. “He doesn’t even know his aunt, really. He wants to stay here.”

“Did you talk to him about this?”

“No, I didn’t want him to get his hopes up or anything.”

“Good.”

“But I do know that he doesn’t want to leave. And I don’t want him to leave. And we have plenty of rooms in the house. Plus, and here’s where it’s sort of a business proposition, he knows a lot about gardening already. Have you seen the little garden they have out in front of the cottage? Martha let Owen tend that himself, to teach him, and he’s good. He has natural talent. I think if you hired someone else to be the gardener, Owen could help out. Earn his room and board.”

Her father steepled his fingers and rested his chin on the point.

“You are aware that this is a bit ridiculous.”

Olive bit her lip. She wanted to cry, but she knew that tears were the last thing to move her father.

“I know it sounds that way, sir,” she said. “But he is my friend. My only friend, really. What if I used some of the money from my trust fund to pay for him to stay? For his rent and expenses and such.”

“You care that much that you would use your own money to keep him here?”

“Yes,” Olive said without hesitation. “Plus, I’ll work even harder at school if you say yes. I-I’ll do anything you want me to. Just let him stay here. Please.”

Her father sighed. “I’ll think about it. I have a lot of work to get done here before Monday.”

“Okay,” said Olive. “When will you give me an answer? He’s supposed to be leaving next week.”

“I’ll let you know Monday.”

## Chapter Thirteen

2007

Olive had lost track of how many bourbons she'd had, but she wasn't drunk.

"I'm not drunk," she told Owen.

"Okay," he said, sipping his beer. "I didn't say you were."

They sat on bar stools in a tacky, touristy little bar on Bourbon Street. The floors were sticky, the light was scarce, and the smell of sweat almost overpowered the alcohol scent. This was Olive's first trip into the city since being back in the country, aside from when she flew into the airport. Usually, she would never choose this bar, but something in her tonight reveled in being surrounded by sweaty, drunk tourists. It was fitting, somehow.

"So what are bars in Ireland like?" Owen asked.

"They're called pubs, for one," Olive said. "And a lot of the ones in Dublin are a lot like this."

"Really?"

Olive shrugged. "The touristy ones, I mean. They're mostly full of Americans getting drunk. The only difference is the decor."

"But you don't go to bars like that, do you?" Owen said, his voice teasing.

"They're called pubs."

"Fine, *pubs* like that."

"Not really, no."

“You’re way too classy for that.”

Olive smiled at him. “Stop making fun of me.”

“I’m not.”

“Do you want to dance with me?” she asked.

Owen glanced over at the writhing, drunken masses swaying in some semblance of rhythm to the loud, crackling music pumping out of the speakers. He grimaced. “Not really.”

“Well, drink a few more beers and then you’ll want to,” she said.

Owen smiled and took a gulp.

“Still a no,” he said.

Olive laughed and drained the rest of her bourbon. She felt warm and comfortable. She leaned her head on Owen’s shoulder.

“You smell like flowers,” she said. “In a manly way, I mean.”

Owen laughed. “Okay. You sure you’re not drunk?”

“I’m not,” she said. She closed her eyes, burrowing closer into Owen’s neck.

“Right,” he said. “Well, how about that dance now?”

Olive pulled back and frowned. “Really? See, I only asked because I thought you’d say no.”

Owen laughed and stood up. “Nope, let’s dance.” He held out his hand. Olive took it and stood up. The room spun.

“Damn,” she said. “Maybe I am drunk.”

“Still want to dance?”

“Not really,” she said.

“Good.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Olive said. “We can stay at the house here tonight. I have the key.”

“Let’s take a walk first,” Owen said.

“Okay,” Olive said with a shrug. “I’ve missed New Orleans. I can’t complain about seeing it.”

“It’s finally starting to look like itself again after Katrina,” said Owen as they stepped out onto the street.

With the sun having set, it had cooled down considerably. A light breeze pressed against Olive. It was almost chilly in her sundress, but it felt good. Her head buzzed pleasantly. She slipped her arm through Owen’s, pressing her head against his shoulder again. He really did smell like flowers. The crowds of tourists in the streets were loud, and Olive smelled the distinct smell of urine.

“I saw the pictures after Katrina,” said Olive. “Broke my heart. I almost came back.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No,” she said. “What good would it have done to come after the storm?” She laughed breathily. “Then again, I guess that’s what I’m doing now. Coming back after the storm, when it’s too late.”

“You didn’t know,” said Owen.

“We never know, do we?”

“No.”

They started to walk. A man crouched by a gutter at the side of the street, vomiting loudly.

“Let’s go to Royal Street,” said Olive. “I always liked it the best.”

Royal Street was only one street over, but its antique shops, art galleries, and little cafes were the antithesis of Bourbon Street.

“The shops will be closed,” said Owen.

“I know,” she said. “But we can look in the windows.”

They cut down St. Anne’s Street. Olive could see the top of St. Louis’s Cathedral.

“I’ve missed the colors,” she said. “Dublin is very... grey. And I love grey. Don’t misunderstand me. You don’t know how beautiful grey can be until you live in Ireland, and you never know how many shades of grey there are, or how complex dark grey looks when it’s layered on a lighter, more delicate grey. I love it. The cities’ color pallets are just different. Dublin has grey and bright green and sometimes a nice cool blue when the sky’s out. But New Orleans is pink and yellow and pastel blue and bright sunshine and heat.”

“You’re very poetic when you’re drunk,” said Owen.

“I’m not drunk,” said Olive. “And I’m always poetic.”

Royal Street was quiet and empty compared to Bourbon Street, and Olive paused in front on an antique shop. She released Owen’s arm so she could peer inside the window, her hands blocking out the scant light so she could make out tea kettles and Victorian furniture. The glass was cool against her face. She could still hear the raucous crowds and the blaring jazz, but the sound was dulled here, as though it echoed from a place far away.

“My father is dying,” Olive whispered into the glass.

The words hung in front of her, between her and Owen. She hadn’t said it out loud until this moment, as if not saying it would mean it wasn’t real. She hoped Owen wouldn’t answer. If he didn’t acknowledge it, it still wouldn’t be real.

“I know,” he said finally.

Olive sucked air and pulled back from the window. The condensation from her breath hung on the glass, fading along the edges. She traced a finger through it, drawing the letter “D.”

“The noble house of Delaney,” she whispered as the rest of the condensation slipped away, taking the letter D with it.

Owen put his arm around her, lightly, his hand resting on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I know.”

Olive turned to Owen, pressing her face into his neck. Hot tears welled up in her eyelids, then escaped and chased each other down her face, dropping off her chin and landing on Owen’s shirt collar. Owen’s arms went around her, holding her to him.

After a few minutes, Olive pulled back. Her hands rested on Owen’s shirt collar.

“Let’s go home,” she said.

“Do you want to walk or call a cab?”

She paused, staring into his eyes. “Cab,” she said.

## Chapter Fourteen

July 1997

“Heads up!” shouted Olive. Owen scrambled to swim out of her way, but he mostly succeeded in splashing himself in the face. Olive swung on the rope from a tree stump up above and splashed down squarely on top of Owen. He went under, her skin slick with the water but still abrasive on his sunburnt chest. He came up coughing.

“Sorry!” said Olive, paddling away.

“You did that on purpose.”

“No, I didn’t!”

Owen was pretty sure there was water in his lungs. He doggy-paddled over to the edge of the swamp and pulled himself out onto a rock. The good thing about swimming in a swamp when you couldn’t really swim well was that he could almost always touch the bottom. He still liked to keep an eye out for alligators, though. So far, they hadn’t bothered them. He would sometimes see them in the distance, but they never came close. Owen hoped they never got too hungry or too curious.

He lay back on the rock and closed his eyes. The skin on his face was perpetually red from the sun, but this new burn on his chest was worse. The sun felt good on the rest of his body, but it grated on his chest.

“I need to go in soon before I burn to death.”

He heard Olive splashing towards him, then heave herself up on the rock next to

him. The cool water dripped from her onto his sore skin.

“Have you ever kissed anyone?” Olive said.

Owen cracked open his eyes. Olive was lying next to him, propped up on an elbow.

“No.”

“Have you ever wanted to kiss anyone?”

“No,” he said. “Well, I don’t guess. I don’t know.”

“You’re turning red.”

“It’s called a sunburn.”

“Do you want to try?”

“Try what?”

“Kissing.”

“No,” he said, closing his eyes again.

“Are you sure?”

He opened his eyes again. “No.”

“No you don’t want to, or no, you’re not sure you don’t want to?”

“What?”

“Do you want to kiss me or not? Wouldn’t it be nice to just get your first kiss over with.”

Owen sighed, looking up at the sky. The sunlight was mottled through the tops of the trees.

“All right,” he said.

He sat up, turning to look at Olive. She put her hand on his shoulder, which stung because of the sunburn. He ignored the sting.

“This is weird,” she whispered, leaning closer.

“Yeah, it is,” he whispered back. All he could see anymore was her bright eyes. Then, her lips were touching his, still wet from swimming. His lips were cracked and dry, and hers were a little chapped. He closed his eyes and tried to think about what people did in movies when they kissed. He put his hand on the back of her neck, hoping that was what you were supposed to do.

Then Olive pulled back. Owen opened his eyes. She was hovering a few inches from his face. He could feel her breath on him. Her lips quirked upwards in a small smile. Owen suddenly took a gasping breath, realizing he hadn’t been breathing.

“That was nice,” said Olive.

“Sure,” Owen said, still trying to catch his breath. Olive jumped from the rock back into the water and paddled away.

## Chapter Fifteen

2007

Olive unlocked the door of their French Quarter house. It had the familiar, pleasant-but-musty smell of a well cared for but very old house. She closed the door behind them. Like the manor, this house still looked the same as when she'd last been here. It was less eclectic than Oak Grove, probably because her father entertained his important business partners here more often than he did at Oak Grove.

Owen sat down on the couch. He groaned. "I forgot how uncomfortable these couches were."

This house was furnished with exact replicas of furniture from a plantation house her parents had toured before she and Hugo were born. It was beautiful to look at, but definitely valued style over comfort.

"Do you want something to drink?" asked Olive.

"Water," said Owen. "But I can get it myself."

He stood up and grabbed a glass from the kitchen. Olive poured herself a glass of bourbon.

"More?" Hugo asked. He sat down on the couch again.

"Stop judging me."

"I'm not."

"You are."

Olive joined him on the couch, bringing the glass of bourbon with her.

“You sure you don’t want some bourbon?” Olive asked, holding the glass under Owen’s nose and wafting the scent towards him.

Owen grasped the side of the glass, his fingers touching Olive’s, and took a tiny sip. He wrinkled his nose.

“You know I’ve never really liked bourbon,” he said, releasing the glass.

“I’ve always liked it,” said Olive.

“Oh, yeah. I remember.”

“I tried it when I was, what, sixteen?”

“Um, pretty sure you were, like, twelve,” said Owen.

“No!” she said. “No way I was that young.”

Owen shrugged. “I know you were younger than sixteen.”

Olive finished the rest of the glass and reached for the decanter. Owen grabbed her wrist.

“Okay, Olive, I know it’s not my place to tell you what to do or anything, but really, haven’t you had enough?”

Olive scowled at him. “You’re right. It isn’t your place.”

She pulled her wrist free from Owen’s hand, but she put the top back on the decanter. She grabbed his hand and settled back onto the couch.

“Maybe we should get some music going,” she said.

“Sure, okay,” said Owen.

Olive crouched next to their antique record player, sifting through their records.

“How does Glenn Miller sound?”

“Fine, I guess.”

Olive slid the record from the sleeve. She smelled the musty paper and wax. She put it on the record player and lowered the arm, the needle slipping into the groove as the record began to spin. Glenn Miller's "In the Mood" filled the room, its brassy, upbeat notes bouncing off the walls.

"That has good sound for an antique," Owen said.

Olive turned to look at him. "We can dance now," she said.

"Seriously?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well," Owen said. "Okay."

He walked over to her, stopping to stand a few feet away. Olive grasped the front of his shirt and pulled him closer, sliding her hands around his neck.

"Um," said Owen. "This isn't really a... slow dance kind of song, Olive."

"It's okay," she said. "Besides, 'Moonlight Serenade' is next."

"All right, then," he said. He put his hands on her waist. "You know I can't really dance, right?"

"Oh, yeah," Olive said. "I know. That's why we're slow dancing. All you have to do is sway."

She pushed in closer, resting her cheek against him, smelling his flower smell. As promised, "In the Mood" faded away and "Moonlight Serenade" took its place. Olive pulled back, looking up at him.

"See? Told you," she whispered.

She kissed him. He froze like he was going to pull away, but then he kissed her back. She laced her fingers through his fine, soft hair. She broke off from his mouth and pressed her lips to his neck.

“Olive,” he was saying, but the sound came from far away. “Olive. *Olive!*”

“What?” she said finally, pulling away, dazed.

Owen put his hands on her shoulders.

“Olive,” he said. “I’m not going to sleep with you.”

Olive felt her face turn red. Not from embarrassment, but from fury.

“And you assume that I’m trying to sleep with you?”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, Olive. I don’t. I’m just telling you now in--in case that’s what you *were* trying to do.”

Olive turned away, sitting down on the couch. “Maybe that is what I was trying to do,” mumbled. “I don’t know.”

Owen sat down next to her. “You have a boyfriend,” he said.

Olive rolled her eyes. “Not really,” she said. “William and I aren’t exclusive.”

“Right,” said Owen. “Well, I’m more of the... exclusive type. You’re leaving, Olive.”

“You never could just... live in the moment,” she said.

Owen shrugged. “I know. Sorry.”

Olive groaned. “Don’t *apologize*.”

“Sorr-”

“Stop.”

Owen smiled. “Can’t you face what this is really about?”

“What do you think this is about?”

“Distraction,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been here for several days now.”

“Yeah? And?”

“You’ve only seen your father, what, once?”

Olive stared at her hands, which she clasped in lap.

“Why?” asked Owen.

Olive shrugged.

“Olive,” he said, putting his finger on her chin and turning her to face him. “Why haven’t you been up to see him?”

“Fine,” she said. “Multiple reasons. One, I don’t want to see him like this. Have you seen him? He looks awful. He doesn’t even look like my father. Two, we didn’t have a very good relationship when I lived here. I don’t know what to even... say to him. Do you think we had actual conversations when I was a child? We didn’t. How am I supposed to start now, just because he’s dying? What is there to say? And three... I’ve spent the last seven years resenting him, Owen. That’s a lot to undo in a few days.”

## Chapter Sixteen

April 1997

Owen perched cross-legged at the foot of Olive's bed. Hugo leaned against the headboard while Olive was lying on her back, staring glassily at the ceiling.

"Come on, try some," Hugo said, passing the bottle to Owen. Owen took it, stroking the smooth glass. He sniffed the opening, wincing at the acrid-but-sweet scent.

"It's good," Olive said with a smile. She'd had considerably more of the bourbon than Hugo had.

"I don't know," Owen said. He sniffed it again. It wasn't the taste that worried him so much as the thought of being a twelve-year-old drunk. The preacher at his church would sure have something to say about this. He was always raving about the evils of alcohol, but Owen had never found anything in the Bible that said taking a single drink would be a sin.

Owen took a sip. It was sweet but bitter, and burned like fire in his throat and stomach. He couldn't help but gag a little as he handed it back to Hugo, who took another swig.

"Give me some more," Olive said, holding her hand out for the bottle.

"Haven't you had enough?" asked Owen.

"No."

Hugo handed it back to her.

“Sit up or you’ll choke,” Owen said.

Olive sat up and took another huge swig before sinking back onto the mattress.

Owen took the bottle from her before she spilled it all over the bed. He set it on the floor next to them.

Olive giggled and curled up on her side, pressing closer against Owen. He didn’t think she even noticed.

“I miss your mom,” she said with a sigh.

Owen looked down at her. Her eyes were closed, and her face was red.

“I do, too,” he said.

“She actually cared about me, I think,” Olive said. “My mother doesn’t care about me.”

“Olive, shut up,” said Hugo.

“It’s true and you know it,” Olive said. “Neither does my father. He only cares about whether or not I succeed.”

“Well, that’s what’s important,” Hugo said. “We’re going to take over the company, and he has to know that we’ll do a good job. That’s more important than anything else.”

“Whatever,” said Olive.

“Grow up,” Hugo said. “Don’t act like other kids.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” he said.

Olive put her head in Owen’s lap.

“Piss off, Hugo,” she said.

When Owen woke up in the morning, he wasn't sure where he was. He was lying on his side, curled into an awkward position that made his back hurt. He cracked open an eye, seeing Olive stretched beside him. Owen sat up quickly. He was still lying at the foot of Olive's bed. She was curled up in the center of the bed, and Hugo was sleeping stretched across Olive's pillows.

Olive groaned and started to sit up before collapsing back down on the bed.

“Ow, my head,” she groaned.

She kicked at Hugo.

“What?” he said, snapping awake. He groaned, too.

“Does your head hurt?” Olive asked him.

“A little,” he said.

“I think mine's splitting in half,” she said. “What day is it?”

“Sunday,” said Owen.

Hugo sat up with a start.

“Owen's in here?”

Owen gave him a little wave.

“Morning, Owen,” said Olive.

“Morning.”

“Olive?” said Hugo.

“Yeah?”

“Don't we have the company brunch today?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Do you think Mom and Dad will buy that I’m sick?”

“Yeah, they’ll buy it,” said Hugo. “But they won’t care.”

Olive groaned again. “I know.”

“You should probably drink some water,” Owen said. “Alcohol dehydrates you. That’s why you have a headache.”

“How do you know that?”

“They taught us at school to try to keep us from drinking,” said Owen.

“Oh, yeah,” Olive said. “Public school.”

“They don’t teach you that kind of thing at St. Joe’s?”

Olive laughed.

“Anyone who’s not an alcoholic by age eighteen at St. Joe’s is a rarity,” said Hugo.

“Seriously?”

“That’s what the older kids say,” said Olive.

“Yeah, like Lucas,” said Hugo, his voice mocking.

“Who’s Lucas?” asked Owen.

Olive kicked Hugo straight in the ribs.

“Ow!” Hugo said, grabbing Olive’s foot and holding it down onto the bed. “Lucas is Olive’s boyfriend.”

“He is not my boyfriend,” said Olive.

“How old is he?” asked Owen, trying to make his voice sound casual. He felt like throwing up, and it had nothing to do with the single drink of bourbon he’d taken.

“Sixteen,” Hugo said, smirking.

“Oh,” said Owen. The pasta he’d had for dinner last night was now a nauseous lump in his stomach.

“He’s really not my boyfriend,” said Olive.

“Of course not,” said Hugo. “You’re just in love with him.”

“Shut up!” said Olive, freeing her foot from Hugo’s grasp and kicking him again.

“Stop that!”

“Then shut up!”

“Fine, truce!” Hugo said.

Owen climbed over Olive to get down on the floor. He looked at Olive’s bedside clock. It was already eleven.

“Don’t you usually go to church on Sundays?” asked Olive.

“Yeah, but I’m already late,” he said. “I bet Marcus was waiting for me, too.”

“Oh, well,” said Olive. “Maybe you can go to the brunch with us!”

“Will your dad let me?”

Olive shrugged and sat up, this time slowly. She winced and sucked in a breath, holding her hand to her head. Her hair was plastered to the side of her head, and there were deep circles under her eyes.

“You look awful,” said Hugo.

“You don’t look so good yourself,” Olive said, but she was lying. Hugo didn’t look near as bad as she did.

“Go drink some water,” said Owen. “Do you want me to get you some?”

“No,” said Olive. “It’s fine. I’ll get it myself. I’ll ask Dad if you can come to the brunch. You can wear some clothes of Hugo’s.”

Olive painstakingly got out of bed. She groaned again. Owen almost wanted to laugh at her, her dark-circled eyes narrowed to slits in the faint sunlight coming through the blinds, but he really didn’t think it was very funny.

Olive was sandwiched in the back seat between Hugo and Owen on the way to the company brunch. Her head throbbed dully, but her Ray-Bans were keeping the bright spring sun at bay. Her father had (surprisingly) agreed to let Owen come to the brunch, and he was wearing a grey suit of Hugo’s. Olive wanted to feel fancy in her white dress and pearls, but really she just felt like vomiting. She slumped over to lean on Owen’s shoulder.

Olive’s mother, who was driving, glanced in the rearview mirror.

“Olive, dear, you’ll get creases on your face.”

Olive groaned. “Don’t care.”

“Olive.”

“I’ll sit up when we get closer,” Olive said. “That’ll give them time to fade.”

“Why are you so tired?” asked her mother.

“I don’t know,” Olive lied. “We stayed up too late, I guess.”

The night before was a bit of a blur. She remembered getting the Maker’s Mark from her parents’ cabinet, of course, and their little impromptu party in her bedroom. She remembered feeling warm and kind of floaty as she laid there, words falling from her mouth before she could really stop them. She had a sense that she said something

embarrassing, and that she'd fought with Hugo over something. Whatever she said, though, she knew Hugo wouldn't bring it up ever. Owen might, but she was pretty good at diverting him.

"We're ten minutes away, Olive. Fix your face." Hugo's voice seemed to come to her from across some sort of void. Olive's eyes snapped open, and the sun pierced straight through to her aching head. She had fallen asleep.

"Shit," she groaned.

"Watch language like that at the brunch," said her father.

She sat up, rubbing her cheek where she had been pressed against Owen's shoulder. She patted Owen's shoulder, feeling a bit of dampness from drool. "Sorry."

"I don't mind," said Owen.

"I drooled on you."

"Oh, well, that's kind of gross," said Owen.

"Hey, that's my jacket," said Hugo.

"Does anyone have any ibuprofen?" Olive asked.

Her father popped open the glove compartment, tossing the bottle of pills back at her.

"Thanks," she said. She dry swallowed two of them.

"You really should have had some water with those," said Owen.

"Shh."

The brunch was being held in a park outdoors, which was always a bad idea in Louisiana, even in spring. Margot, the Delaney Heavy Industries event planner, had

convinced her father that an outdoor brunch was some kind of a trend that he should definitely be tapping into. Olive was already sweaty, and they had only walked from the car to the table.

The table was long and covered with a stark white tablecloth. The brunch was only for shareholders, so it was considerably smaller than the once-yearly company party for everyone who worked there. Her father spent much more money on the shareholder parties, though, since they were filled with more important people than factory workers. She spied a table off to the side stacked with mimosas.

“Hey, Owen, think you can snag me a mimosa?” she whispered.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough alcohol to last you, like, forever?” he whispered back.

“Come on, it’ll make my head feel better.”

“Can’t you get one yourself?”

“Everyone will be watching me.”

“Always so humble,” said Owen.

“Shut up, they will,” Olive said.

“Yeah, I know,” said Owen. “But they might be looking at the weird kid the company owner dragged along, too.”

“You’re not weird,” said Olive. “Mimosas? Please?”

Owen stared at her for a few seconds. “I’ll do my best,” he said with a sigh.

Olive grinned. “You’re the best!”

Olive sincerely regretted everything. She knew she would have to socialize with the shareholders. Why had she had so much to drink?

“Hello, Olive,” said Mr. Fairfield, who was dressed in a full, baby blue seersucker suit.

“Hello, Mr. Fairfield. How are you this morning?” she said, plastering on her best diplomat smile. She continued to make small talk with half her brain while trying to surreptitiously watch Owen’s progress at getting her that mimosa. He was too nervous for this, standing near the mimosa table and trying to look around casually. She should have just snagged one herself.

“Yes, now that I’m starting eighth grade, I’ll be able to take real business classes,” Olive said as Owen sidled up to the table. He seemed to be trying to make small talk with the man at the table. Owen was bad at small talk. “Of course I have been taking economics classes since second grade.” She paused to laugh in what she hoped was a sophisticated, tinkling way, and Mr. Fairfield joined her. “But now, I’ll be taking real business classes.”

Olive almost groaned. Owen was actually pointing at something in hopes of getting the cater waiter to turn around so he could grab a mimosa. The waiter leaned down towards him, then winked. Owen smiled, and the waiter pushed a mimosa towards him. Olive sighed in relief.

“Well, I hope you enjoy the business classes,” said Mr. Fairfield. “Although I doubt they can teach you anything you don’t already know. Your father is, of course, a fantastic businessman.”

“Oh, I know that,” said Olive with a smile. “I want to be just like him someday. My dream is to run the family business.”

“And you are well on your way.”

Olive smiled, and Mr. Fairfield patted her shoulder before moving on. Owen came towards her.

“Here, take this before someone sees me with it,” he said, trying to thrust the mimosa into her hand.

“Wait, I don’t want them to see me,” she muttered. “Come on. Over here.”

She set out across the park towards a little pavilion. Her kitten heels sunk into the marshy grass. The sun was beating down on the crown on her head. Why they didn’t have the brunch in the pavilion and out of the sun, she didn’t understand. She slid into the shade, holding out her hand for the mimosa. The glass was cool against her hand, the condensation slick on her skin. She tipped her head back and gulped. The orange juice was tangy against her tongue, and the champagne tickled her nose.

“Mm, that’s good,” she whispered. There was still a bit left in the glass. “Here, want the rest?”

“Don’t you...need it?” asked Owen.

“No, I’ll be fine. Take it.”

Owen shrugged and sipped it.

“Good?” she asked.

“Better than that bourbon,” he said.

Olive laughed. “I liked the bourbon.”

“Oh, believe me, I know you did,” said Owen.

She elbowed him in the ribs. “I’m not so sure I like it now.”

Owen laughed.

“Come on,” she said. “I’d better get back before someone notices I’m gone.”

## Chapter Seventeen

2007

When Olive returned to Oak Grove the next morning, Hugo was sitting at the table, drinking coffee over the paper. They had stopped for brunch in New Orleans, but Olive was craving hot tea. No one in America made it right.

“Morning Hugo,” she said.

Hugo glanced up at her over the paper, eyebrows raised.

“Morning,” he said after a long pause.

“What?” she said, sitting down next to him with her tea.

“What do you mean, what?”

“What’s that look?”

“What look?”

“The one with your eyebrows going up, and that little downward turn of your mouth there,” she said.

Hugo carefully folded up his paper and placed it on the table. He steepled his fingers and rested his chin on them, narrowing his eyes at Olive.

“You look like our father,” Olive said, wrinkling her nose. “It’s weird.”

He continued to stare at her.

“*What?*”

“You and Owen spent the night in New Orleans last night,” he said finally.

Olive sighed. “Yeah.”

“Interesting,” he said.

“We didn’t have sex,” Olive said.

“Okay,” he said.

“No, seriously.”

“All right.”

“He... turned me down, actually.”

Hugo’s eyebrows shot up, and his hands dropped back to the table. “Seriously?”

“Yep,” she said.

“Owen ‘Hopelessly in Love With Olive Delaney For a Thousand Years’ Todd?  
Turned you down?”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “Apparently the fact that I’m going back to Ireland means we can’t have fun now. You know Owen.”

“I do,” he said. “The boy’s future oriented. I thought I knew *you*, though. Have your feelings for Owen changed?”

“No,” she said. “My feelings for Owen are exactly the same as they’ve always been.”

“So what does that mean?”

“That’s the problem, isn’t it? I don’t know.”

She chewed on her lip and took a sip of tea, which was just now cool enough to drink. She knew she loved Owen. That wasn’t even a question. She loved him now, and she’d loved him for a long time. She just didn’t know what it meant. Was she *in* love with him? Probably not, considering she didn’t really believe in being “in love,” anyway. Was

he a brother to her? Their relationship wasn't the same as hers and Hugo's, of course, but Hugo was her twin. Was Owen just her best friend? Or was he something more?

It didn't matter, anyway. She was leaving soon and going back to Ireland. There was no point in pondering over something as trivial as feelings, anyway.

"Owen thinks I'm avoiding our father," Olive said.

"Well, it's not hard to avoid him, considering he doesn't leave the room."

"Avoid was the wrong word. Ignoring. Owen thinks I'm ignoring our father."

"You have only seen him once," Hugo said.

"Our mother doesn't want to, anyway," she said.

"Right," he said. "She doesn't want me to go up there anyway. I go up anyway because he is dying and every day may be his last."

"That sounded cheesy," she said.

"But it's the truth," he said.

"I know."

"What are you afraid of?"

"I don't even know what to talk to him about," she said.

"He sleeps most of the time," said Hugo. "You don't exactly have to worry about keeping the conversation flowing."

"I hate seeing him like that," Olive said. "He used to be so...."

"I know," said Hugo. "But now he's not."

"I know," she said.

"You have to just push through that," Hugo said. "It's still our father underneath it all."

“Maybe that’s the problem,” she said. “He *is* still our father.”

“Why do you resent him so much?” Hugo asked.

“Why are you even asking me that? Don’t you know?”

“I grew up with him, too, and I don’t carry as much resentment as you do. I know he was a shitty father, but he’s dying now and we owe it to him to be here for him.”

“Do we?”

Hugo frowned.

Olive sighed. “Yeah, I guess we do. He always did like you better, though.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” said Hugo.

Olive shrugged.

“Is that what this is about? That you think he liked me better?”

“No,” she said. “More the years of neglect. Borderline abuse.”

“Abuse?”

“I said borderline,” she said. “It’s not healthy to push kids as hard as he pushed us.”

“I know,” Hugo said.

“Plus the company,” Olive said. “All that... stuff with the company.”

“I guess I still don’t understand your resentment of the company, either,” Hugo said.

“Never mind,” she said, feeling suddenly nauseous (although that may have been the hangover talking). “I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t even want to think about it.”

## Chapter Eighteen

September 1999

Owen eyed the stacks of beer cases and liquor bottles in the back bedroom of the Delaney's house in the French Quarter in New Orleans.

"Where did you get all of this? You're fifteen," said Owen.

"Don't worry about it," Hugo said, setting another case of beer with the others.

"The less you know, the less trouble you could get in," said Olive as she breezed by carrying a stack of paper plates.

"And what about you?" Owen followed her into the kitchen.

She turned to him and smiled, patting his cheek. "Don't worry about me."

Owen shrugged. "All right."

He didn't mean to worry about her, but lately, she'd been acting strangely.

Neither Hugo nor Olive had cared about having friends at school in the past, but that all changed when they started their sophomore year. Owen still went to public school, so he didn't see their interactions at school, but Owen suspected that Hugo was the one getting popular. Olive, afraid as always at being beaten at something, started going to parties. Now, she wanted to host her own. That was fine, but he couldn't help but feel uneasy, especially with the small mountain of alcohol in the back room.

"You sure you actually want to come to the party?" Olive asked him.

"Sure," he said. "Why?"

"Not really your kind of thing, is it?" said Hugo, coming into the kitchen. "I

thought church picnics were more your style.”

Olive threw a roll of paper towels at Hugo, hitting him squarely in the face.

“Be nice,” she said.

“Nah, he’s right,” said Owen. “I did go to the church picnic last Sunday.”

Olive laughed. “You don’t have to come to the party if you don’t want to.”

“No, I’ll come.”

Owen was regretting his decision by ten o’clock that night. The house was packed with Olive and Hugo’s classmates, none of whom Owen knew. They were, of course, all fabulously wealthy and were dressed like magazine models. Owen sipped a beer in the corner of the living room, watching Olive dance with some guy in a suit that probably cost more than most peoples’ houses. Olive was wearing a short, tight sequined spaghetti strap dress. Owen had never seen her in anything so sparkly. She and the suited man were kissing now. Owen took another gulp of beer.

Olive didn’t owe him anything. They weren’t dating. He couldn’t call Olive his girlfriend, but he couldn’t really call her just-a-friend, either. At least, he didn’t think so. She might disagree, but Owen didn’t think you frequently spent the night in your just-a-friend’s bed. They didn’t have sex or anything. Some nights, Olive couldn’t sleep and came to sleep in his bed. She always went back to her own room before Hugo was awake. They’d also kissed a few times since that first kiss in the swamp. Owen didn’t know if she meant anything by it. For all he knew, she was just... practicing. Either way, he didn’t like watching her make out with some guy from school.

Owen finished off the beer and shoved his way through the room. The music blared in his ears, vibrating all the way through his body. He reached the French doors and slipped out onto the balcony. It's was cooler out here, which was rare for New Orleans, even in September. The music was muffled through the doors. Owen leaned out on the handrail, looking down at the drunken tourists weaving through the cobblestone streets below. The sky was clear and starry, and he took deep breaths of the cool but humid air. He could probably stay here all night as long as he didn't have to pee first.

"There's always the ficus," he muttered, eyeing the plant at the corner of the balcony.

After several minutes, the music got louder as the French doors slid open. He turned to see Olive stumbling out of the house with the boy in tow. Olive was giggling, which was not a usual sound for her. She leaned against the railing as the guy bent down to kiss her. Owen cleared his throat.

"Owen!" she said, extracting herself from the kiss. "I didn't know you were out here."

"Here I am," he said. "Hello." He gave the other guy a little wave. Olive's friend, though, leaned against the balcony, taking deep breaths.

"Is he okay?" asked Owen.

"Yeah, he's fine. He--"

Just then, the guy retched and vomited over the side of the balcony. Owen looked over the side. On the bright side, no one down there was in the line of fire.

"You should probably get him back inside," Owen said.

“Yeah, uh, Reg, we have a perfectly functional bathroom in there,” Olive said.

“Through the living room and the door beside the kitchen.”

“Sorry,” the guy mumbled, and Owen almost felt sorry for him.

“Think you can make it on your own?” asked Olive.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” he said, but his skin had a sickly green tint. He fumbled with the French doors before slipping back inside.

“I’ll check on him later,” said Olive.

“That’s cold,” said Owen, but he smiled. “Shouldn’t you, I don’t know, hold his hair back or something?”

Olive laughed. “I don’t really know him.”

“Really? You two looked like you knew each other there for a second,” said Owen.

To Owen’s shock, Olive’s cheeks actually turned a bit pink.

“He’s name’s Reginald Peterson.”

*“Reginald?”*

Olive laughed. “Yeah, yeah. I know. He’s captain of the lacrosse team.”

“Of course he is,” said Owen.

“I got... carried away,” said Olive. She stepped closer to him and leaned on the balcony railing.

“Why did you do this?” Owen asked.

“Do what?” Olive looked at him.

“Throw this party. Make out with the captain of the lacrosse team. This isn’t... you.”

“You really think that? Then who do you think I am, exactly?”

Owen sighed. “I don’t know. I really... don’t know anymore. Just last summer, we were still playing in the mud.”

“It’s called growing up, Owen. Everyone does it,” said Olive.

“I know, I know. I’m not saying we should still be playing in the mud. It’s just....”

“It’s just what?”

“I don’t... I don’t know where I’m supposed to fit in in all this. I don’t really have my own friends at school, Olive. I never minded because I had you. And Hugo, of course. But now, you guys have all these new friends. And Hugo was right earlier, parties like this aren’t my thing. I don’t fit in here, at all. But if I don’t fit in with you anymore, where am I supposed to fit? I don’t have a family, or friends. I live with you. Was that a mistake? For me to move in with you? For me not to go back to Connecticut?”

Olive sighed and rested her head on his shoulder again. “No, it wasn’t a mistake. There will always be room for you in my life. Always. You’re my best friend. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Owen said, looking back down at the street below.

“This party is just... one thing I like to do. I’m still me, Owen.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m sorry. I can’t get upset that you have friends other than me.”

He put his arm around her, and they stood there like that for a while in the moonlight.

### Part III

#### The Horses' Heads Were Toward Eternity

##### Chapter Nineteen

2007

Olive's eyes slid open, immediately assaulted by the bright sunlight that was filtering through the window. Her head hurt, she wasn't sure what day it was, and her neck was at an awkward angle. She sat up, rubbing the back of her neck. Apparently, she'd fallen asleep on the couch at the manor.

She'd had every intention of going up to see her father after her conversation with Hugo that morning. But she and Owen had stayed up half the night chatting about old times--after his humiliating rejection of her, of course. That hadn't actually been humiliating, really. She didn't blame him for it. He wanted a relationship with her, and that was simply something that couldn't happen. Not now. Maybe when they were younger, but she'd thrown all that away.

Olive stood and stretched. Her head felt awful. She'd taken an ibuprofen, but it was starting to wear off. She went to the kitchen and popped another one. The house was silent. She wondered if Hugo was upstairs with John Thomas. Only one way to find out.

Olive made a quick detour to her room to grab her copy of *A Wrinkle in Time* before ascending the stairs. She stopped by her parents' room, pressing her ear against the door. She heard the mechanical noises of the machines, but no voices. She knocked.

Hugo opened the door.

“Hey,” he said.

“Is he awake?”

“No,” said Hugo. “Do you want to sit with him for a while, though? I’m getting hungry, and I don’t want him to wake up alone.”

Olive nodded. “I got it.”

Hugo squeezed her arm as he passed. Olive sat down in the chair by the bed. Asleep, her father actually looked better, more like himself. Some of the deep lines around his eyes were relaxed. The room was only lit by the small lamp on the nightstand, but it cast a faintly golden light that made his skin look to be a healthier color than in reality. He wheezed faintly, but it was better than the hoarse coughing. The beeping of his heart monitor was rhythmic and soothing. Her earlier nap had only made her feel dazed and more tired. She settled back in the chair. Her eyes slid closed.

When Olive opened her eyes again, the room had the cool, quiet nighttime feel, though the curtains blocked out the outside, so she couldn’t be sure. John Thomas’s eyes were open. She could see the pale pools of cloudy blue, but he was still. Olive watched the faint rise and fall of his chest. The first few buttons of his pajama top were open, exposing snags of milky grey chest hair.

He blinked.

“Are you awake?” Olive whispered.

The eyes turned towards her.

“Hi,” she said.

“Olive,” he said with a small nod, then relaxed back into the pillow with a small sigh. His heart monitor metronome kept the time. Olive glanced at her watch, the lamp’s golden light casting her skin in a bronzy glow. It was a little past midnight. She had slept in this chair for several hours. She rubbed at the crick in the back of her neck.

“How are you feeling right now?”

“Not feeling much of anything,” he said, slightly raising his left hand where his morphine pump nestled.

“Well, that’s good, I guess,” she said.

“Yes, it’s good,” he said.

“I brought a book,” Olive said, holding up *A Wrinkle in Time*. “I thought I could read it to you, if you want. It was one of my favorites as a kid.”

“Go ahead,” he said.

““It was a dark and stormy night,” Olive read. ““In her attic bedroom, Margaret Murry, wrapped in an old patchwork quilt, sat on the foot of her bed and watched the trees tossing in the frenzied lashing of the wind.””

Even after John Thomas’s eyes slid closed a few chapters in, Olive kept reading aloud. Reading to him like this felt intimate and close in a way that Olive had never been able to be with her father. Even though these were someone else’s words, and even though John Thomas was sleeping, Olive felt like she was communicating with him.

She stopped her throat started to hurt, slipping her bookmark in and settling back in the armchair. John Thomas opened his eyes again.

“Did you get to the end?” he asked.

“No,” Olive said. “I thought you were asleep.”

“I was,” John Thomas said. “But I could hear your voice in my dreams. I dreamt of space travel and other planets.”

Olive nodded. “That’s what the book’s about. You were dreaming what I was reading.”

“It got too quiet in my dreams,” he said. “That’s why I woke up.”

“Do you want me to keep going?”

“Only if you want to,” he said.

“I do,” she said. She smiled as she picked up the dusty book again. That was the first time her father had ever given her a choice about something. *Only if you want to.*

## Chapter Twenty

October 1999

Olive's stiletto heel caught in a crack in the pavement. She had to grab Hugo's arm to keep from tumbling to the ground. Her head spun. Apparently, the police station didn't get adequate funding to pave their parking lot. The parking lot would have been difficult to navigate even if she weren't a little bit drunk.

Her father hadn't spoken or even looked at them since they had stumbled out of the cell. They got to the car, and Olive sat heavily into the back seat. Hugo paused as if considering sitting in the front, but then went around to sit in the back. Olive had to scoot over for Owen.

Her father started the car and reversed. Olive reached down to rub her sore feet.

"You're in trouble," her father said in a casual sort of tone as he pulled out onto the main road.

Olive glanced at Hugo. They'd never been *in trouble* in their lives. Sure, they were forced into extra tutoring sessions whenever their school work was less than perfect, but they had never been punished for any sort of bad behavior. Surely her father knew they partied frequently. What else did he think they were doing at the family house in New Orleans?

"I'm going to have to keep this out of the papers," he said. "Actually, you know

what? I don't even know if I *can* keep it out of the papers.”

“But we're minors,” Olive said. “They can't put it in the paper.”

“You're right there,” her father said. “They can't put your names in the paper, and they can't say that you've been arrested. That's true enough. You know what they *can* put in the papers?”

“No.”

“They can put that a party was busted up in the well-known Delaney house in the French Quarter. They can say that underage drinking was involved. Now, I tend to not hold the general public in very high esteem, but I think even they can deduce that the underage drinkers at the Delaney house were most likely the Delaney children.”

Olive and Hugo glanced at one another again. Olive picked at her fingernails.

“You'll have to do something to make up for this, of course,” said her father.

“Like... punishment?” Hugo asked. The word sounded funny, like Hugo's mouth didn't know how to form it.

“Yes, you can call it that if you want. But you have to do something to reverse the public image. First of all, you'll be coming to work with me. Every day after school and on most weekends. You'll be learning the ropes of the company, which only makes sense because you will take it over someday. You should have been doing that anyway. Maybe that's where I'm to blame in all this. If you were busier doing productive things, you wouldn't have so much time for frivolity. Aside from that, you will need to do public philanthropy. I'll be expecting to hear your philanthropy plans by tomorrow evening. I'll have to approve whatever you want to do, of course.”

The silence stretched on. Olive closed her eyes. All she wanted was to go to bed.

“Owen, I am surprised that you were part of this as well.”

Olive opened her eyes and sighed. “Owen hardly even drinks at the parties. I think he’s just there to keep an eye on us.”

“Well, Owen, I suppose I owe you a kind of thanks for that,” said her father. “I would have thought I had instilled some kind of wisdom in my children to where they could keep an eye out for themselves, but I was wrong there. Too bad my own children can’t make good choices like you can.”

Owen blushed and cleared his throat. “Um, thank you.”

Olive leaned in close to Owen’s ear. “Suck up,” she whispered. But then she pulled back and smiled at him to show him she wasn’t really mad.

## Chapter Twenty-One

2007

Olive's watch told her it was morning when Lucia opened the door holding a glass of water. Olive had had to stop reading again because it hurt her throat, but John Thomas was still sleeping deeply. He was breathing slowly and gently now, and the rattle in his chest had quieted.

"Hey," Olive whispered. "I've been reading to him."

Lucia opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out a pill organizer. The pills rattled noisily against the plastic.

Lucia sat down on the bed next to John Thomas.

"I hate to wake him," she told Olive. Lucia put her hand on John Thomas's shoulder, shaking him gently. "John Thomas?" She put her mouth right up next to his ear.

His breaths hitched and grew shorter, and then he coughed. He struggled to sit, and Olive and Lucia helped him up. Lucia held a handkerchief to his mouth, and he coughed into it. When she pulled it away, it was stained brightly with a blossom of blood.

"It's time for your medicine, John Thomas."

"I don't want it."

"I know, but you have to take it."

Lucia popped open the "morning" section of the pill container and dumped the pills into her palm. She fed them to John Thomas one by one. He struggled to get each of them down, choking on them and having to stop several times to cough.

“You need to eat something,” said Lucia once he’d finally swallowed all of them.

“No.”

“John, you have to. The pills will make you sick if you don’t eat.”

“Right, like I’m not already sick,” John Thomas said, looking at Olive and rolling his eyes. Olive couldn’t help but smile a little at his gallows humor. Her father was joking with her, letting her in on it; that was something that never happened.

“You know what I mean, John Thomas,” said Lucia. “You’ll throw up. I’ll go make you a milkshake.”

“I’ll do it,” Olive said. “I’ve been with him all night. How do I make it?”

Lucia explained how, and Olive went downstairs to the kitchen. She pulled the vanilla ice cream out of the freezer and dropped a scoop into the blender. She poured the milk on top, watching it pool around the lump of ice cream. Little bubbles rose to the top and popped. She added the instant breakfast powder last. It stuck together, congealing in little piles on top of the ice cream. She slapped the lid onto the top of the blender and pushed the button. It shrieked loudly. After a few seconds, she opened the lid. The ice cream was only half-blended. She kept going until it was smooth. It had taken on a grey color from the breakfast powder. Olive was hungry, but now she felt nauseous. She put a straw in it.

She took it back upstairs. Lucia was sitting on the bed, leaning back against the headboard. John Thomas’s head rested on her shoulder. Olive carried the milkshake over.

“Here’s breakfast,” said Lucia.

John Thomas grunted and opened his eyes. Lucia held the milkshake next to him, and his crusty lips closed around the straw.

“Ugh,” he said after the first swallow.

“Did I make it wrong?” asked Olive.

“No, it’s always awful,” said John Thomas. “Everything tastes awful all the time. I eat so the medicine won’t make me throw up, and I take the medicine for what? To prolong my life? I’m already dying. I just want to die faster.”

He sank back onto the pillow and closed his eyes.

“Don’t,” Lucia whispered. “Please, just don’t leave me yet.”

John Thomas opened his eyes again. “Give me the damn milkshake, then.”

Hugo was coming upstairs as Olive was coming downstairs.

“Did you stay with him all night?”

Olive nodded. “I read to him.”

Hugo smiled. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, it was actually kind of nice,” she said. “Like we’re just a normal family dealing with... this.”

Hugo nodded. “What are you doing now?”

“Breakfast, I guess,” she said. “Or, dinner? I haven’t slept all night, but then I slept most of the day yesterday.”

Her days were inverted, but what did it matter? The real world didn’t exist here in Oak Grove. In the real world, things like morning and night had meaning. Oak Grove existed on another plane, a plane where cancer and death dictated sleeping and waking rather than the arbitrary position of the sun.

“I’m going to go see Dad,” said Hugo. “And then we can go somewhere to eat if you want.”

Olive nodded. “I need to get out, I think.” The closed room with its golden lighting had been warm the night before, but by morning, Olive had felt closed in by the thick curtains and stifled by the heat. She could use some fresh air.

“Let me take a quick shower and we can go,” she said.

“Should I ask Owen, or is it too awkward?”

Olive laughed. “Sure, ask Owen. It isn’t awkward at all. You don’t understand.”

Hugo waved her off and continued upstairs.

Olive turned the water to cool in the shower and stepped in. She hadn’t realized how sweaty she was getting in her father’s room. She took deep breaths of the air, cold and moist from the water. Last night was probably the most pleasant interaction she had ever had with her father. Maybe her mind was exaggerating now--it probably was. Surely, she’d had some good times with him as a child, but she couldn’t think of anything. And this morning, when he’d made that joke and let her in on it.... That had felt good.

She felt cool and clean as she got out of the shower. She dressed in another sundress, then brushed her teeth slowly and carefully. She felt new and fresh and rested, even though she hadn’t slept all night.

Hugo was waiting for her on the front porch. The morning was cooler than usual, though still humid. The sun was just making its way up above the horizon.

“Ready?”

“Is Owen coming?”

“Yeah, he’s getting his truck.”

“We’re taking his truck?”

“Yep,” Hugo said.

“Why?”

“He wants to pick up some plants or something while we’re in town.”

“Won’t they fit in your SUV?”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t want to worry about getting it dirty.”

Olive shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“There he is,” Hugo said.

“You might want to roll down that window,” Owen said as Olive climbed in the car. “The air conditioner’s busted.”

The truck didn’t have a back seat, so Olive had to sit in the middle between Owen and Hugo.

“This is... cozy,” she said. Hugo rolled down the window, which had a manual crank. The air filtered through the windows, whipping Olive’s hair into her eyes. She was glad she hadn’t tried to fix it. Any effort would have been ruined.

“Feel free to change the station,” Owen said, gesturing at the radio. Olive flipped through the stations until she landed on an 80s station. “Take on Me” by A-ha blared over the truck’s tinny little speakers.

“I had this record as a kid,” Olive said. “We used to listen to it all the time. Do you remember?”

“We used to listen to music in your living room when it was too cold or rainy to play outside,” said Owen.

“I remember Owen could hit the high note,” said Hugo.

“Yeah, when I was six,” said Owen.

“Nah, more like sixteen,” said Olive.

They laughed.

“Try to do it next chorus,” said Hugo.

Owen tried valiantly, and failed miserably. Olive laughed so hard she fell against Hugo.

“Nice try,” said Hugo. He stuck his hand out the window, feeling the breeze.

Olive remembered that first night they’d gone to dinner in Hugo’s SUV. It had been stiff, awkward. They hadn’t known what to say to each other. The past had hung heavy over them, but simultaneously had seemed too far away. This, though... this felt like old times. No, better than that. There was a lightness in Olive’s chest that hadn’t existed back then. Even as her father’s impending death drifted through her like a dark cloud, she felt an unfamiliar sense of peace about him and her mother. Like they were almost a normal family.

They had breakfast at a greasy little diner in New Alsace, then went to the nursery to get Owen’s new plants. Hugo went to find a bathroom while Olive and Owen loaded the bushes into the back of the truck. They were heavier than Olive expected.

“These will bloom in late summer,” Owen was telling her. “I have a lot of early summer stuff planted, so I wanted to have something colorful once August rolls around.”

“What color will the flowers be?”

“Purple,” he said.

Olive loaded the last one into the truck and clapped the dust off her hands while Owen made sure they were secure and closed the tailgate. He leaned against the back bumper, and Olive sat next to him while they waited for Hugo.

“I’m sorry about the other night,” Owen said.

Olive sighed. “Owen, you have nothing to be sorry for. Hell, *I’m* sorry. I drank too much, and I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“You know I didn’t turn you away because of how I feel about you.”

Olive winced. “Please, let’s not talk about feelings. Your feelings, my feelings... No feelings.”

Owen grinned. “I can deal with that, I guess. To be frank, Olive, I just don’t do casual sex.”

“It wouldn’t have been casual for me.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” said Olive. “I just... well, fine. Obviously, I do care about you. It wouldn’t have only been a casual thing. Would that have changed your mind?”

“No,” said Owen. “Because it still would have only been... temporary, which is too close to casual for me. But, it is good to know.”

“All right, this is getting dangerously close to feelings territory,” said Olive.

“Let’s just cut the line right here.”

Owen laughed. “Works for me.”

Hugo came back to the truck. “I basically had to hike through the woods for the bathroom, but I made it back.”

They piled back in the truck and sang along to 80s pop all the way back to Oak Grove.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

December 1999

“I’m tired of looking like a linebacker,” Olive said. She leaned back in her chair at the boardroom. The harsh fluorescent lights at DHI gave her a headache.

“What?” said Hugo, glancing up at her from the file he was reading.

“Shoulder pads,” said Olive, fingering the offending poof of fabric on her blazer.

“You could take them out,” said Hugo.

“Nah,” said Olive. “That’s too much effort to put in for this job.”

“*This job* is what you’re going to be doing for the rest of your life,” Hugo said.

“Don’t remind me.”

Olive walked over to the window, trying to soak up the weak amount of sun that managed to come through. She looked down at the little cars on the ground. DHI had its offices--where Olive and Hugo usually worked--in a skyscraper in the business district, even though the factory was located a few miles outside of the city.

“You think there’s any way out of this?” Olive said, resting her head against the thick glass.

“Any way out of what? Working here for punishment?”

“No,” Olive said. “Any way out of working here, period.”

Hugo laughed. “No.”

“What if we just... didn’t take over the company?”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“No,” she said.

“Well, Dad would disown us, for one,” said Hugo.

“Yeah,” Olive said. “Might be worth it, though.”

“Why? What’s so bad about it?”

“I don’t know,” said Olive. “I just... I want to do something that *matters*.”

“Shipbuilding matters,” said Hugo.

“Sure, it matters to put more money in our pockets.”

“I never hear you complain about our money when you’re buying new shit,”

Hugo said.

“I know,” said Olive. “But I just want to do *more*.”

“Tell the U.S. Navy that shipbuilding doesn’t matter,” said Hugo.

Olive rolled her eyes. “There are just... things that matter more.”

“Like what?”

“Like the shelter,” Olive said. “They’re doing things that actually make a difference in the lives of real people.”

“Never knew you’d turn into a bleeding heart,” said Hugo.

“Yeah, me neither,” said Olive. As her restitution for the party and in order to regain favor in the eyes of the community, she had been volunteering at a women’s shelter once a week. At first, it had been miserable. Her initial duties involved cleaning the residents’ rooms and bathrooms, plus helping to cook their meals. It wasn’t until she’d started talking to some of the residents that she realized the realities of their lives. Even without abusive husbands and boyfriends, some of these women led hard lives. Olive had always known intellectually that she was very fortunate compared to most

people, but it hadn't really hit home until she'd started volunteering. One woman, Bertha Jones, was still hobbling around on crutches because her leg had been broken in four places when her ex-husband threw her down the stairs. He was already out of jail after only three months, and Bertha was terrified that he was coming for her. She didn't only want to help Bertha, though. It was bigger than that. She wanted to do something that made women safer and more empowered. She didn't know what, exactly, but she didn't think she'd be doing it at DHI.

“Are you going to work, or are you going to stare out the window all day?” said Hugo.

“I'm going to stare out the window all day.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

2007

Olive fell into a strange routine. She sat with her father all night, starting at nine o'clock in the evening. Luckily, there were five books in the *Wrinkle in Time* series, so she started on *A Wind in the Door* once she finished reading him the first book. She'd make him his breakfast milkshake, and then Lucia would sit with him. Olive had breakfast with Hugo and Owen, and then slept from around noon to seven. It would be hell to get back on a regular schedule, especially with the jet lag, but she'd manage.

Olive read. John Thomas slept. They didn't talk beyond exchanging a few words here and there until one day, a few days after Olive had started these readings, John Thomas interrupted her when she thought he was sleeping.

"Why'd you like those books so much?" he asked. He sounded alert, almost normal. That was rare for him.

Olive paused and set the book in her lap, her finger marking her place. "I don't know," she said.

"You were never into that kind of thing. Fantasy, science fiction. You didn't like *Star Wars*," he said.

"I liked *X-Files*," Olive pointed out. It surprised her that her father knew she didn't like *Star Wars*. Why would he have even known that? Had she told him?

"Why *A Wrinkle in Time*?" he asked again.

Olive sighed, running her finger over the smooth, thin page. She looked down at

the cover, her face getting hot. She felt like a child. “I liked it because Meg got to run away and explore the galaxy. And because... because of her relationship with her father. He was gone, and she went to go save him, and he came back with them, and... I just always liked that part.”

There were several seconds of silence. Then,

“I can see why you liked it, then,” said John Thomas. “I’m sorry that I didn’t know how to be a father. I cared about all the wrong things. You know, I knew I’d fucked things up by the time you were teenagers, but it was too late. I can’t believe I’m telling you this, but I really hoped you two would have children so that I could start over. Then Hugo had Max and LV, but they live far away and I don’t even get to see them.”

They sat there in silence. Olive felt the apology roll over her like ocean waves. She knew she needed to say something, but it felt like something had crawled inside her throat and lodged itself there. Her stomach churned, prompting her to speak, but she couldn’t say anything at all.

“Keep reading,” said her father, settling back down into the pillows. Olive cleared her throat and read.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

March 2000

Olive stepped into the office elevator and pressed the button for the fifty-first floor. As soon as the doors closed, she unbuttoned her school uniform shirt and threw it to the floor. She grabbed her work shirt from the bag and pulled it on. Then, she stripped off her school skirt in favor of the black suit skirt. She'd started changing clothes in the elevator a few months back. She considered it to be a kind of game, though she realized it was a strange one. It was a race to get changed before the elevator reached their office's floor. The fact that the elevator could stop to pick up passengers on any of the fifty floors just added to the tension. In the months that she'd been doing this, the elevator had only picked up new passengers three or four times. Usually, she was just switching jackets. Once, she'd been pulling up her skirt. She'd flashed the young intern a dazzling smile, and he hadn't said a word. She was pretty sure there were cameras in the elevator, though. She imagined the security guards having fun with this one.

The elevator reached the fifty-first floor just as she was buttoning up her work blazer. She'd finally taken out the shoulder pads.

"Is my father here?" Olive asked Alice, her father's assistant. She had a large reception desk in front of his office.

"No," she said, glancing up from her computer. "But he left this list of work for you to do."

Alice slid a notebook across the desk. Olive's father had handwritten a list of

twelve things for Olive to do.

“As soon as you’re done with that, you can leave,” said Alice.

“Wow, is this all?” Olive said. Alice fixed her with a chilly stare. Olive got the impression more and more each day that Alice did not like her.

Olive started to go to the office their father had designated as hers and Hugo’s, but the thought of using her father’s office (complete with its very comfortable leather computer chair) was too tempting. Alice was currently frowning at the computer, so Olive slipped into the office.

It was decorated similarly to their home. Everything was dark wood paneling and rich leather. A large gilded map of the world was framed on the wall behind the desk, and the shelves held several scale models of sailing ships. She helped herself to a glass of bourbon from the cabinet and sank into the office chair. The leather smelled warm. Olive closed her eyes, breathing it in. She downed the rest of the bourbon.

Olive stood up and stretched, feeling the pleasantly warm, fuzzy effects of the bourbon. She walked over to one of the filing cabinets, running a finger over the rich, dark wood. She traced her finger down to the brass plate and over the letters of PERSONNEL RECORDS. The cabinet next to this one was labeled ACCIDENT REPORTS. Olive laughed, the breathy sound loud in the silent room. She tried to open the drawer, but it was locked.

“Damn,” she whispered. Those would have been fun to read. She went back to the desk and felt around for the key. To her surprise, her hand landed on a keyring in the top drawer. It was unlike her father to leave a key within reach. He had probably forgotten to

lock the office. She pulled the keyring out of the drawer and tried the keys until she found the one to the accident reports file.

The cabinet was filled with manilla envelopes, each labeled with the name of the employee. Some only contained a few pages, while others looked to contain enough material for a small novel. Olive grabbed a few out at random. She added a few more of the thicker files to the top of her stack. The thicker ones were probably more interesting. She carried them back to the desk and poured herself another glass of bourbon.

She flipped open the top file. Apparently, an unfortunate factory worker named Anthony Moore had lost a few fingers. She yawned and flipped through the other files. It seemed lost fingers were not quite rare for Delaney Heavy Industries employees. Nor were concussions.

“Manuel Garcia,” Olive said to herself, enunciating his name in her best imitation of a Spanish accent, rolling her tongue dramatically on the “r.” She fingered the envelope. It was one of the thicker files. Olive flipped it open and began to read.

She froze, her hand flying to her mouth.

“What the fuck,” she whispered. She read through the rest of the file. She felt nauseous, and it had nothing to do with the copious amounts of bourbon she had consumed.

It took over a month for Olive to confront her father with what she found in his office. It stewed inside her the entire time, sitting low in her gut like week-old poundcake. She could hardly stand to be around her father. This made family dinner miserable, and it was all she could do to eat enough so as not to draw suspicion. Hugo

and Owen both noticed a change in her. Hugo confronted her one night after dinner, but she couldn't bring herself to tell him what was wrong. Owen was more subtle, but Olive could see him watching her, could feel the questions bubbling beneath the surface.

She picked up more volunteer shifts at the women's shelter, which enabled her to spend less time at the office. When she did still go to the office, she went in and got her portion of the work done, quietly and alone. It really didn't take that long, now that she wasn't messing around for the majority of the time. She'd also started working on the school newspaper. She'd signed up on a whim one day when she'd realized that the meetings conflicted with Monday afternoon meetings at Delaney Heavy Industries. To her surprise, her father had allowed her to work on the newspaper; she hadn't asked his permission, but he excused her from Monday meetings when she told him about the newspaper. Even though it was originally a ploy to get away from her family, she actually found she enjoyed writing. Journalism was somewhat in her blood, though. Her father's first cousin in Ireland owned a magazine. When they'd visited Ireland, Doreen had taken them on a tour of the offices.

For her entire life, Olive had wanted to spend more time with her father. Now, she couldn't get far enough away from him between family dinner and running into him at the office. Finally, after hardly managing to choke down salad at dinner, she couldn't stand it anymore. She climbed the stairs, each one feeling like a mountain, and paused in front of her father's office. She knocked. The sound reverberated, deep and hollow. She tried to remember the last time she'd actually knocked on the office door, but she couldn't remember. It must have been years.

“Yes?” came her father's voice. “Luce?”

“No,” said Olive. “It’s me.”

She heard him sigh. His desk chair rolled back, and his footsteps sounded as he crossed the room. The lock turned in the door. It swung open.

“Yes?”

“I was wondering if I could talk to you,” said Olive.

“I’m busy, so you’re going to need to make it fast,” he said. He crossed back over and sat behind his desk. Olive had no choice but to stand in front of it, feeling like a small child in trouble at school.

“What is it?” he said after she was silent for several heartbeats. Olive hated the sight of his face. She noticed for the first time that his pale hair was starting to streak with grey, and there were lines and crinkles around his eyes.

Olive was silent for a few more heartbeats, then, “Manuel Garcia.”

John Thomas froze, his face first getting pale and then red. Then, his eyes rose to meet Olive’s.

“What about him?”

“You--you *killed* him,” Olive said, her voice suddenly laced with an uncharacteristic bitter venom.

John Thomas sat back in his chair. He had regained his composure, and he regarded her with the kind of cool dismissiveness she was used to.

“That’s being a bit dramatic, Olive.”

“Well, he’s dead and it’s your fault and you covered it up,” she said.

“It was not *my fault*, Olive,” he said. “Accidents happen in factories. The safety switch failed to engage, and he was killed. I compensated his family adequately. I can assure you of that.”

“By that you mean you paid them off,” said Olive. “Who else did you pay off? How did no one else care that he died?”

“It’s more complicated than that,” he said. “Manuel Garcia was in the country illegally. Believe me, his family didn’t want to get mixed up in any legal proceedings, anyway.”

“And you didn’t want to get in trouble for hiring illegal immigrants, so it was a win-win, right? No fuss for you. No extra inspections. And I know you hate inspections because you always find ways to get around them, which is why the safety switch failed to engage in the first place.”

John Thomas just looked at her, his cool blue eyes slightly narrowed.

“Does Mom know about this?” she whispered.

He didn’t answer.

“I quit,” she said. “I am not working at the office anymore. I don’t want to be part of this. And Hugo won’t either once I tell him what you’ve done.”

“Hugo already knows,” said John Thomas.

It was Olive’s turn to stare. “What?” she asked in a whisper, which was all she could manage. She felt like she’d been punched in the stomach. Again.

“Your brother knows about it already. I’ve given him more responsibility at the company than I gave you, as I’m sure you’ve noticed.”

“No,” said Olive. “I didn’t notice, considering I’ve been trying to stay as far away from that place as I possibly can.”

“Well, I have, and he knows a lot more about that company than you do.”

“There’s more, isn’t there,” Olive said, but it was a statement, not a question.

“There have been more deaths, and Hugo knows about them.”

The corners of John Thomas’s mouth quirked up in a tiny smirk. He shrugged. Olive had never wanted to hurt someone as much as she wanted to hurt her father (and her brother, for that matter) in this moment.

“I’m done,” she said. “That’s it. I’m done.”

She turned on her heel and marched out of the room, the door slamming in its frame behind her with finality.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

2007

Olive was really starting to feel the final mile of her run. She hadn't done much running since being back in Louisiana, and it was blazing hot compared to Ireland. She all but collapsed onto the porch of the house, then went to the kitchen to gulp some water from a glass. Sweat dripped off of her.

"Olive? That you?" Hugo's voice was coming from upstairs.

"Yeah," Olive managed to get out, her breaths still coming in gasps.

Hugo appeared in the doorway. Olive immediately knew something was wrong.

"What?"

"Dad's taken a turn for the worse," said Hugo. "It's... it might be the end, Olive."

"But we hadn't finished *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*," Olive said absurdly.

"What?"

"Nothing." Olive rubbed her sweaty forehead. "Never mind, that was stupid."

She followed Hugo back upstairs. The room was hot, and Olive's sweating started up again. Nausea filled her stomach, and her limbs felt tingly. The heart monitor's beeping was slower than it used to be.

Lucia sat next to him, pressing a cold cloth to his face. Olive and Hugo stood on the other side. John Thomas's breaths were shallow, lightly fluttering his chest. His mouth gaped, displaying his pale tongue. His eyes turned to look at Olive and Hugo.

"My children," he whispered, his voice raspy. "Twins. Secret weapons, you

know.”

“I know,” said Olive.

“Me, too,” Hugo said.

“Dad?” Olive said. “I left because of Manuel Garcia. That’s why. That’s the reason. Not because I didn’t want to be part of this family. Not because I didn’t want to be part of the company just because I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to, but I was going to. Until Manuel Garcia, and then I just couldn’t.”

Lucia turned to look at her. “I didn’t know you knew about that.”

Olive nodded. “I couldn’t get past it.”

Lucia nodded and turned back to tending to John Thomas. “You were right to leave when you did, then.”

Olive’s breath left her in a sigh. Relief? Peace?

John Thomas wheezed again. His mouth moved. “Your brother,” he said, his pale eyes moving over Olive. “He didn’t know. Lied.”

Olive felt like the wind was knocked out of her. Hugo hadn’t known about Garcia and the coverup? She remembered how it felt when she thought Hugo knew, like a knife had been stuck through her, severing something that was once part of her. Severing her from Hugo, painfully. And it had all been a lie, orchestrated by John Thomas for... what, exactly? Just to hurt her, to take away the one person she was supposed to count on more than anyone else? Her secret weapon?

But then she looked at her father, mouth gaping like a fish, eyes stricken. The face was full of regret. This was an apology. Olive knelt down on the floor beside him, pressing her lips to his clammy cheek.

“I forgive you,” she said.

He nodded. Olive stood up again, and her mother stroked her father’s face.

“Should we give Mom time alone with Dad?” Hugo whispered in her ear.

Olive looked at them and nodded. Hugo reached down and squeezed his father’s hand.

“I love you, Dad,” he said. Had Hugo ever said that to him in his life? Had Olive?

“I... I also love you,” Olive said, the words coming out stiffly on her tongue.

She followed Hugo out of the room, and the door closed behind them with finality. The breath rushed out of Olive again, and she teared up. But it was partly out of relief.

“Manuel Garcia,” she choked out. “Did you know about Manuel Garcia? John Thomas, he-- Father told me you... he told me you knew.”

“Knew what?” asked Hugo, utterly bemused. Tears had started in his eyes, too, but now he was staring at her.

“About Manuel Garcia!”

“Who or what is Manuel Garcia?”

Olive quickly regained control. “Manuel Garcia,” she said, “was a man who worked for DHI. An illegal immigrant. He was killed in an accident at the factory, and our father covered it up so that he wouldn’t have to change the safety regulations in order to prevent more deaths. He said he did it to protect Garcia’s family because they were illegal, but he was only covering his own ass. He said you knew and didn’t care.”

“I didn’t,” said Hugo. “I didn’t know, Olive, I swear. I suspected he was hiring illegal immigrants, but I swear I didn’t know any of them died.”

“More died than just Garcia, I think. That was the final straw for me. I just couldn’t be a part of it. I thought it was... corrupting. The company, I mean. My own father was killing people and covering up their deaths, and then he said my twin was in on it, too, and I just couldn’t stand it. I thought it would corrupt me if it corrupted you, because we’re the same.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me about it?”

“Because it made me sick to even think about it!” said Olive.

Hugo sighed, pulling Olive to him. She wrapped her arms around him, and they cried. They cried for their dying father, for the close-knit family they never had, and for the seven years of loss between them.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

May 2000

Olive didn't tell anyone her plan until she was sure she could do it. She'd spoken with her cousin in Dublin, made international phone calls to several colleges, and spoken with the guidance counselor at her school. She was all set.

Normally, she'd tell Hugo first without question. That was how it had always been. But she thought of Manuel Garcia and how Hugo was a willing participant in the coverup of his accidental death. She was betrayed by her own twin, the male version of her, and that betrayal felt like the sting of antiseptic on her skin. She didn't want to be around him anymore, and she didn't want to be associated with him. She didn't want to have hair and eyes the same color as his; she didn't want to be his twin.

So she knocked on Owen's bedroom door.

"I'm leaving," she said, lying down on his bed.

"What?"

"Close the door."

Owen closed his bedroom door and sat down at the foot of the bed.

"I'm leaving," Olive said again.

"I heard you," said Owen. "What do you mean?"

"I'm moving to Ireland."

"After high school?"

"No," she said. "Now."

“What? How?”

“I have enough credits to graduate early,” said Olive.

“Okay, okay, so... Why? Why Ireland?”

“Because our cousins have a magazine there. I can graduate from high school early and do the three-year journalism program at Trinity College in Dublin. Doreen, my dad’s cousin, said I could work on staff at the women’s magazine.”

“Journalism? Really? I thought that was just a hobby,” Owen said.

“It was,” said Olive. “But I’m pretty good. I’ve read some of my stuff to Doreen over the phone. And it’s a women’s magazine, so I can write about important women’s issues. I’ve been doing a lot of reading on that sort of thing since working at the shelter, and I think it’s actually pretty important. I want to change the world.”

“Why are you leaving now, though?” asked Owen. “Why not finish senior year?”

“Because--” Olive stopped. She didn’t want to tell Owen about Manuel Garcia. Owen was going to work here as a gardener. He already knew John Thomas was a less-than-stellar father, but he didn’t know he was the type to cover up the death of an illegal immigrant. Owen was too sensitive to handle that. He may not even want to work for John Thomas anymore, and then she would be jeopardizing his future. She couldn’t tell him.

“I just... don’t want to be here anymore,” she said. “I hate working for the company, and I like journalism, and I want to leave now.”

Owen crossed his arms tightly across his body.

“You okay?” Olive asked him.

“I don’t want you to go,” he said. His eyes fell to his lap. Olive suddenly realized how insensitive she’d been, barging into Owen’s room and spilling her plans without any regard to how he might feel about it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, crawling across the bed to sit next to him. She put her arms around him, squeezing tightly, and put her head on his shoulder. “I don’t want to leave you, either.”

“Then don’t,” said Owen.

“I have to,” she said. Her throat felt hot and tight, and she realized with horror that she might cry. Then she felt something warm fall on her arm, and she realized Owen was crying.

“Don’t,” she said. “It’s not you I want to leave. You’re my best friend.”

Owen stood, ripping out of the circle of Olive’s arms.

“Yeah, I know that,” Owen said. “Please, just get out of my room.”

“Owen--”

“Please, get the hell out.”

Olive stood and crossed the room, hand on the doorknob. She glanced back at Owen. He walked over to the window, rubbing his eyes furiously.

“I do love you,” Olive whispered, opening the door and slamming it behind her.

She wasn’t sure if he’d heard her.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

2007

It rained the day of the funeral. The funeral home was packed with people, many of whom Olive had never seen in her life. Some of them she recognized from some of the parties and work events from her childhood; they now sported greying hair and thicker frames. Olive sat in the front between her mother and brother. She held Hugo's hand. Hugo's wife, Violet, sat on his other side, holding Max, the baby. LV, Hugo's daughter, sat on her other side.

A projector beamed pictures onto a white screen at the front of the room. Olive watched as they flashed by. John Thomas as a grinning little boy in the arms of his nanny. A portrait of John Thomas with his stern-faced family. John Thomas with his classmates at boarding school. John Thomas on the rowing team. John Thomas away at college. Then, John Thomas with Lucia Caruso where they met in Mexico City. A photo from their wedding, which was a huge affair.

John Thomas and Lucia holding two tiny bundles in a hospital room, one swaddled in pink and one in blue.

John Thomas in the garden holding a baby girl dressed in white lace, smiling at the camera.

John Thomas holding toddlers Olive and Hugo at a company party.

John Thomas with the five-year-old twins in New Orleans, then with six-year-old twins in London.

John Thomas with Olive in front of the piano, Olive dressed all in white and green. Her party best.

John Thomas with Hugo in front of the hockey field.

A family photo in Mexico City, Owen's sunburned face tagging along this time.

Olive watched the photos flip through. It was like looking at someone else's family, someone else's happy faces. But she *was* happy in those moments. Those brief flashes where her father cared about her, or at least cared about the family image. But, for all his faults as a father, that obsession with the family image *was* his version of love. A warped version, yes, but that was what John Thomas was capable of. And he'd done what he was capable of fervently, even if that meant pushing Olive and Hugo places they'd never wanted to go.

But they'd both accomplished much. Olive, because she'd pushed so hard against what her father had wanted, but Hugo because he'd fulfilled their father's image of what he had wanted him to be. John Thomas had forced them, kicking and screaming most of the time, into the kind of functioning adults he could be proud of. And Olive had to be content with that.

Olive was absent from the photos at the end of the slideshow. John Thomas with Max and LV, at work events, with Hugo, and with Lucia. But Olive couldn't feel the familiar stab of guilt anymore. She had done what she had had to do for her own sanity. She'd built a life for herself in Ireland, and she was sure now more than ever that her decision had been the right one. Sure, she should have come home more. She should have visited, called, kept in touch. And she should have treated Owen better. But the initial decision? She was at peace with that now.

At the burial, Owen stood next to Olive and held her hand. She remembered when she'd been with him at his own mother's funeral. Olive watched as they lowered the coffin into the ground, as they lowered the mythic John Thomas Delaney six feet under the marshy ground. Back at the funeral home, she'd taken one last look at her father's body in the coffin. Death (or maybe just the mortician's makeup) had erased the atrocities of the lung cancer from his face, and he looked more like the man she'd left seven years ago, albeit with some grey in his pale blond hair.

Now, she watched as Lucia dropped a fistful of dirt over the coffin. Her mother was taking it better than Olive had thought, though she feared a breakdown was coming at any second.

Olive pulled her hand from Owen's and knelt next to the open grave.

"Nothing is hopeless," she whispered, directing her voice down towards the coffin. "We must hope for everything."

It was one of her favorite lines from *A Wrinkle in Time*.

She stood again and took her place next to Owen, linking her arm through his. They began to walk, leaving Lucia to mourn beside the grave on her own for a little while. Hugo stood a little ways away under an oak tree, LV on his hip. Violet was nearby with the baby. Olive hoped the two could work it out. With the revelation of the truth of Manuel Garcia, Hugo was starting to understand Olive's idea of the toxicity of the company. Olive didn't think he'd sell it, but maybe he would learn to put his family in front of it.

"What will you do now once my mother sells the house?" Olive asked Owen.

Owen shrugged. "I don't know. I might do college full-time. I love gardening, though. But maybe if I get a degree...."

"You could always come to Ireland," Olive said.

Owen stopped walking and glanced down at her. "Are you being serious?"

Olive shrugged. "Yeah. I already said you'd like Ireland."

"I know, but.... What does this mean?"

"I don't know," Olive said. "I can't promise it means anything more than... I want you to come to Ireland."

"As your friend?"

"Sure."

"As more than your friend?"

Olive turned to face him. "We can try, don't you think?"

"Try?" Owen said, and let out a small laugh. He glanced towards the graves in the distance, then back at Olive.

"If it doesn't work out, I still think you'd love Ireland."

"I can't believe you're actually suggesting that I move to another country on the promise that we can *try* being more than friends."

Olive put her hand on the back of his neck and kissed him.

"I also can't believe I'm actually considering going."

Olive linked her arm through his again and turned to look out over the cemetery. Lucia was walking away from the grave now, hands to her face. Olive pulled Owen over to where Hugo stood under the tree. Hugo put LV down on the ground, and Olive let go of Owen. She leaned against Hugo, her twin, the male version of her. She remembered

the sting she'd first felt seven years ago, a sting that had been there in varying degrees for those same seven years. It was gone now. Hugo was Hugo again. Hugo put an arm around her. Lucia made her way over to them, scooping up LV. Violet and Max wandered over, and Olive took Owen's hand again. The Delaneys stood together under the oak tree.