

WITHOUT FAIL

A Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Marissa Marangoni

May, 2010

WITHOUT FAIL

Marissa Marangoni

Thesis

Approved:

Accepted:

Advisor
Ms. Varley O'Connor

Dean of the College
Dr. Chand K. Midha

Faculty Reader
Mr. Robert Pope

Dean of the Graduate School
Dr. George R. Newkome

Faculty Reader
Mr. Eric Wasserman

Date

Department Chair
Dr. Michael Schuldiner

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|------------|------|
| CHAPTER | |
| I | 1 |
| II | 10 |
| III | 18 |
| IV | 22 |
| V | 35 |
| VI | 54 |
| VII | 68 |
| VIII | 76 |
| IX | 91 |
| X | 100 |
| XI | 118 |
| XII | 131 |
| XIII | 149 |
| XIV | 174 |
| XV | 185 |
| XVI | 211 |
| XVII | 239 |

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| XVIII | 268 |
| XIX | 284 |
| XX | 299 |
| XXI | 315 |
| XXII | 319 |
| XXIII | 331 |

I

Over the tops of her wire-rimmed glasses, Mrs. Klein glared at me as she signed my hall pass to go to the bathroom. She was giving us a test that day. I had already finished mine, but I didn't want to hand it in before my classmates who were still squinting with concentration at the papers on their desks. I kept my smarts to myself. I kept most everything to myself.

I shut the classroom door quietly and, after I was a few feet away from the English classroom, I dragged the soles of my shoes across the hallway floor, liking the squeaking sound that echoed in the emptiness. I opened the door to the girl's bathroom, and when I walked inside, Alice Rayburn, the only pregnant girl in Elmwood High School, was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall by one of the sinks. Her long, blonde hair covered her face. I didn't think much of it; plenty of girls went to the bathroom to waste time during class. When I walked to the sink, Alice picked her head up, and I saw that her face was as white as the few pieces of the wall that were clear of graffiti behind her.

"Hey," she said heavily to me.

"Hey," I said, turning on the faucet to make it look like I was in there specifically to wash my hands. The running water interrupted the awkward silence.

I turned the faucet off, wiped my hands on my pants, and glanced at Alice from the mirror above the sink, trying to make it look like I was studying my face. I watched as Alice tried to prop her head up on her knees, but her stomach was too big to do that anymore. She let her legs sink back to the floor in defeat, and I noticed there was red seeping through the crotch of her jeans.

“Alice, are you okay?” I asked her quietly, turning from the mirror to face her.

She shook her head and then looked at me.

“They were in here, you know, they could hear me. I walked in with them. And they just left me here,” she said.

I knew she meant Hallie, Jessica, and Renee. I didn’t know what to say. Alice and her group of friends were the girls with perfect hair, perfect nails, and the seemingly perfect lives, but after Alice got pregnant, the perfection she had owned was marred, and her friends left her alone.

Alice’s eyes were flushed with sadness. I didn’t know if it was because of her friends or because of the baby inside of her.

I bent and offered Alice my hand. She grabbed onto my fingers tightly and let me help her to her feet. As she stood, I saw streaks of dark, red blood on the dirty tiles of the old green linoleum where she had been sitting.

“I think something’s wrong,” Alice whispered as she followed my eyes to the floor.

“It’s okay.” I unzipped the red sweatshirt I was wearing. “Here,” I said, handing it to her.

Alice made a weak attempt to smile at me but the smile looked more like a grimace. Her hands flew to her belly and lingered there, and the sweatshirt fell to the floor.

“Something’s wrong,” she whispered as I bent and grabbed the sweatshirt.

I tied it around her waist and said, “Lucky this is the right color.” I felt stupid the second the words were out of my mouth. Who says that kind of thing at a time like that? But Alice smiled at me and grabbed my arm as a wave of pain lined her face.

“Can you walk?” I asked her.

“I think so,” she said. “You know, you’re the only one who’s talked to me in weeks?”

I felt my face flush as we moved slowly through the bathroom door to the hallway with Alice letting much of her weight lean on my small frame. She stood nearly a head taller than I did. Each step we took down the hall felt like it lasted for minutes. And with each step that we didn’t fall, I worried that someone would come into the hallway and disrupt the delicate balance we were working hard to maintain. But, for whatever reason, classes continued behind closed doors, the muffled sounds of teachers’ voices barely audible through the walls. As we got closer to the office, I felt positive someone would open their door and try to help us, but no one did and I knew yelling for help would only make this a spectacle for people to talk about the rest of the week.

I concentrated on each step, our heels and toes hitting the linoleum simultaneously. Occasionally, a squeak or two from the weight on my old sneakers sounded in the emptiness and bounced off the lockers. The creak of a door interrupted the pattern as we were almost at the office, and I tightened my arm around Alice’s waist. I

looked to my right to see Billy Thorburn sneak out the door of Mr. Harris's math class and look both ways to make sure no one was watching. My mother and Billy's mother were friends, and when I was younger and both my parents were busy, Deena Thorburn babysat me. According to my mother, Billy was my childhood playmate. The only problem with that was that we never played anything together—he made the rules and I had to do what he said.

When he saw Alice and I wavering through the hall, Billy did a double take and stared hard at my face. We didn't speak outside of his mother's house unless he was teasing me. I stared back for a minute, and then quickly looked to Alice, whose eyes were squinting in pain and unaware that we were being watched. We kept moving and I reached for the doorknob to the office while glancing behind us only to see Billy's bull-like frame and a shock of dark brown—almost black—hair disappear just as abruptly as he had come into sight.

The minute we walked through the office door, the school secretary, Mrs. Graff, jumped to her feet and took over. She grabbed Alice's elbow and helped her to sit in a chair and called the school nurse. The nurse took one look at Alice and directed Mrs. Graff to call 911. I stood in the midst of the chaos until Mr. Schwarzenheimer, the principal, noticed me.

"Salma, you may return to class now," he said hurriedly, dismissing me with his hand.

I looked at Alice and she looked at me, her hands over her belly, and she said, "She can stay."

“No, Ms. Rayburn, I think we have enough people in here as it is.” Mr. Schwarzenheimer’s voice sounded annoyed, as if Alice’s situation was a simple aggravation.

Alice gave me an apologetic look, and I turned to leave. I looked to her again before I opened the door.

I walked over to Alice and stood in front of her chair and said, “Hey, um, I hope it’s—I mean, the baby, I hope it’s okay. And you too.” I stumbled over my words.

“Thanks,” she said, her blue eyes looking into mine. I could see that she meant it, and I could also see fear. Sometimes it was hard for me to believe that those girls, girls like Hallie, Jessica, Renee and Alice, were real people, but this reminded me that we were, somehow, all the same.

I stood to exit.

As I opened the door, Alice said, “Hey, Sal?”

“Yeah?” I turned my head.

“It’s a boy,” she whispered, tears welling in her eyes.

Alice lost the baby. She came back to school a week later in a plain sweatshirt and jeans. Her face looked older. Hallie, Jessica, and Renee asked her to sit with them at lunch, attempting to show concern on their faces, but she shook her head and walked past them. Carrying her lunch tray, Alice Rayburn, once one of the most popular girls at school, walked to the table I ate at alone and asked me if she could sit down.

I nodded in a state of shock and interest as Alice lowered herself slowly to the bench beside me.

“Sorry, I just don’t feel like sitting by myself. We don’t have to talk or anything though,” she said, reaching for a carton of milk on her tray.

“It’s okay. I mean—if we talk, it’s okay,” I stammered, feeling my face grow red.

“Good,” Alice sighed, “I didn’t feel like being quiet anyway.” She smiled at me. She un-wrapped the straw for her milk and attempted to insert it into the carton. “So, you live over on Brick Street, right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling awkward. I didn’t know what else to say to Alice, how to have a normal conversation. Not after everything that happened to her. I sensed she felt me squirming.

I watched as she struggled with the milk carton. She finally picked up a fork and carved a hole into the top of the cardboard box and stuck her straw inside.

“I’m on Elm—the other side of town. Clever name, isn’t it, Elm Street in the town of Elmwood?” she said, taking a sip of her milk. Her lips were pink like the pencil erasers I sometimes chewed on when I was nervous.

“Yeah, they couldn’t come up with anything else to call anything. The Elm Dairy, Elm Farmer’s Market, Elm—”

“Street Park Square,” we both said in unison and laughed.

Elmwood was small. Most people my age were doing anything and everything they could to get out of it. But the reality was that most people who were born in Elmwood died in Elmwood without ever leaving. Most of the people in Elmwood lived in little ranch homes built in the 1970s with green and white awnings over their front windows. My parents removed the awnings on our house last summer. On Elm Street—

the street where Alice lived—the houses stood large and tall, with pillars to mark their driveways.

After the brief connection over our geographical location, the air went silent between Alice and me. I pretended to be thoroughly interested in my carrot sticks while Alice pushed spaghetti around on her tray with her fork.

“I just wanted to tell you thank you,” she said softly.

I turned my head and let my eyes meet hers. They were deep and blue.

“For last week,” she finished.

“I guess—I mean, I don’t know, I—I just walked in the bathroom.” I shrugged. I didn’t feel as if my actions warranted thanks. After all, I just walked down a hallway.

“Well, I’m glad you did,” she said, turning her eyes back to her tray and sticking her fork again into her cold spaghetti.

“Not hungry?” I asked her.

Alice laughed and said, “Not really. After the first few bites, I lost my appetite.”

I smiled with understanding. Our cafeteria food wasn’t anything to brag about. Upon entering the large, communal feeding room, the overwhelming scent of over-cooked frozen vegetables and unidentifiable meat substance that was labeled differently each day made that apparent.

“Here,” I said, handing her the rest of my carrots and some crackers. “You should probably be eating more than me.” I wasn’t sure if I should have said this and looked at the table as I did. I hoped Alice wouldn’t think I was talking about her weight in some way. I just meant that, after all she had been through, maintaining a consistent and healthy diet was probably pretty important.

“Probably,” Alice agreed, shaking the bench we shared as she nodded her head and accepted the food from my fingers.

She ate a few carrot sticks, and I snuck looks at the table where Alice’s friends sat. They whispered to each other, letting their eyes move in our direction every few seconds. I folded my arms across my chest and set my elbows on the table.

“Hey,” Alice said.

I turned and looked at her.

“Don’t let them bother you.”

“Who?” I asked, pretending I wasn’t watching her friends.

“Oh, you know who, Jessie, Hallie, Renee, and the boys. Them.”

“Oh. They’re fine,” I said.

The bell sounded in the room to signal the end of the lunch period. I grabbed my empty sandwich bags from the table and stuffed them into the paper bag my father wrote my name on in red marker. Turning the bag so my name was against my stomach, I stood as Alice rose slowly beside me. As she bent to pick up her tray, I remembered something about how pregnant women weren’t supposed to lift heavy stuff, and I figured women who just gave birth or whatever probably weren’t supposed to lift things either. I set my lunch bag on the table and reached over Alice to take the tray from her hands.

“I can do it. I’m not broken, you know?” Alice said, long fingers curled around the edges of her faded green tray, with a half-smile on her face.

I shrugged, feeling sheepish, and picked up my lunch bag again. Alice and I walked beside each other to the trash cans, and I didn’t know if I should wait for her as she scraped the uneaten food off her tray. I waited to the side of the room as she stood in

line to hand the tray over to the lunch lady in the washing window. Hallie, Jessica, and Renee walked and positioned themselves behind Alice. Hallie said something to Alice, her lips close to the back of Alice's head, and then laughed, prompting the other girls to do the same. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but it didn't matter because I knew it wasn't nice. Whatever it was, it wasn't something best friends were supposed to say to each other.

If it were me, I would have shrunk further into my sweatshirt, sunk more into my shoulders, and walked away. But Alice was different. She turned around to face her so-called friends, stared hard at them, and turned back around without a word, tipped her chin up, straightened her shoulders, and walked right past the girls after returning her lunch tray. She walked right past me, too, though I think it was because she didn't see me standing there. As I watched her glide by, shining blonde hair swinging across her narrow shoulder blades, I had a fleeting feeling that Alice Rayburn might be more important to me than I knew. But, like she said, she wasn't broken—and if she wasn't broken, then she probably didn't need me around.

II

When I walked out of the lunch room, the halls had started to fill. I got to geometry class quickly, but realized I didn't have my books. I returned my locker only to find it empty of the notebooks and hardbacks for which I was searching. I figured I must have left them in English. I walked down the hall, and Mrs. Klein looked up from her chair as I made a beeline for my desk and gathered my supplies.

"Salma, would you come here for a moment?"

I picked up the last book, my math book, and walked to Mrs. Klein. I stopped a few feet before her and waited. I wondered what she wanted.

Mrs. Klein slid open her top drawer and pulled out what I quickly recognized to be my paper from the previous week.

"What is this?" she asked me, looking at the paper.

"Um, m-my paper?" I asked.

"No, what I mean is, where did this come from?" Mrs. Klein held the paper out to me and pointed at its cover. Before I handed it in, it sat on my desk while Mrs. Klein lectured about something or other, and, before I knew what I was doing, my pen had wandered its way across the title page, scratching the delicate form of a gold finch onto the paper.

"I drew it," I said.

“Hm,” Mrs. Klein said, studying the bird, “besides the fact that this illustration does not follow the proper MLA formatting guidelines, it’s quite good.” She peered at me over her glasses, a slight smile on her lips.

“Thanks,” I said, embarrassed.

“Next time follow the proper format, okay? Save this for the blank sheet it deserves,” she said.

I nodded and accepted my paper from her wrinkled fingers. I slipped it inside my book and left the room.

The halls were starting to clear, and I walked quickly to geometry. I thought of Alice. I had meant what I said, that I hoped she and the baby were okay, regardless of the fact that Alice Rayburn wasn’t someone I necessarily liked. I was still surprised she let me help her to her feet and rested her weight against me. I was more surprised that she sat with me at lunch. But, I supposed, if I had been in her shoes, I would have accepted anyone who was around.

As I walked, I felt my right shoe stick to the hallway floor. I raised my foot and noticed a wad of gum stringing between the old linoleum and my rubber sole. I looked around at the emptying hallway, and hurriedly walked on my toes to the bathroom to clean the mess, still thinking of Alice.

In elementary school, while Alice and her friends jumped rope and monopolized the three lone swings on the cracking cement of our playground, I was content blowing on blades of grass between my thumbs like Daddy taught me. I practiced and practiced until I could get any blade of grass to shriek and sing with one soft breath. My mother was convinced I was shy the minute I was born. According to her, that was why I never

made friends: I was defective the moment I left her womb. However, I don't remember wanting friends. I spent most of my time living inside my head, too scared to open my mouth and speak in fear of stumbling over my words. I was content to be by myself. And while I spent most of my time alone, I wasn't lonely. I didn't know anything else.

I entered the bathroom and pulled my shoe off and walked to the sink. The cold of the floor beneath my sock spread quickly through my toes and up my ankle. The fluorescent light lit my face a sickening shade of yellow in the mirror. The gum on my shoe was green and marked with dirt. I reached for a paper towel and pulled it off the rubber. I tossed the towel and the gum into the trash and ran my shoe under the water. I wiped it dry with another towel and left the bathroom. The hall was empty as I walked as fast as I could to class. When I reached the door to history, I could feel a damp cold settling into my right foot.

I got to the classroom just as Mr. Harris was shutting the door.

"Sorry," I whispered inaudibly as I rushed to my seat and he started the lesson.

I looked out the window, and watched cars drive by outside. I watched everything.

I watched the way girls' boyfriends held their hands tightly under the lunch table so Mrs. Murdock, the lunchroom attendant, wouldn't see. I watched the trees, the way their branches tilted in the wind, gently dipping into the sky, paddles into water, the squirrels running across the grass in the woods behind Mr. Fenster's farm. As Mr. Harris's voice droned on about proofs and theorems, I wished I were in the woods.

Mr. Fenster lived right behind us; my parents' property met his off the side of house. Our side of the woods was full of overgrown weeds and brush, but Mr. Fenster's

had dirt paths through it that were still partially visible from when his children had played there. I spent most of my time on his half of the trees along the creek. I liked to skip stones in the spring, skate on the ice with my tennis shoes in the snow, plant watermelon seeds in the dirt with the tips of my fingers while the sun heated my back, and lie on the ground and wait for leaves, when October turned them all orange and red, to separate from their branches and fall across my body.

Mr. Fenster had the good half of the creek. We got the half with the trash in it from all the people driving by and throwing unwanted papers and cans of beer out their windows. I liked to be where the water was clear, with only the dirt and algae that was already in it without the help of humans. There was something sad about seeing a creek with half-filled beer cans floating by, McDonald's wrappers resting on its bed, and cigarette butts buried in its banks. I didn't like to be sad.

The squeak of chalk interrupted my thoughts. Mr. Harris was writing on the board. I opened a notebook and picked up a pen. I quickly copied the notes onto my paper and then let my pen drift about in the left margin. I tried to draw the butterfly tattoo that sat on my mother's left hip. I used to beg her to look at it when I was small, delighted to share such a naughty secret with her.

When I was a little girl, my mother tried to make me like her. She tried to turn me into the socialite she had been in her younger days, but I didn't want to be like her. When I was eleven, I used kitchen shears to cut off all my hair when the librarian, Mrs. Pinkton, said that I had beautiful curls just like my mother while we waited in line at the grocery store. After my mother stopped crying about my "boy haircut," and it grew back in, limp without curls, I think both of us realized I wasn't going to be like her at all.

I finished the butterfly. My hand seemed to have a mind independent from me. Ink had a way of creeping out of the margin and into my scribbled notes before I could stop it. I tried to etch the letters I had copied from the board harder into the paper, shaping them over and over again to be sure I would be able to read them well enough to study later. I doubted my mother ever studied.

I had always done just enough for no one to notice me. I didn't want to stand out like my mother had in school; I didn't want to be a beauty queen or go to parties or spend a bunch of time talking about what guy liked what girl. I liked to read, think, and wander. I remember working hard to blend in—and, for the most part, I succeeded. Except when it came to Billy Thorburn.

I continued drawing across the bottom of my paper and was interrupted by a piece of paper hanging over the front of my desk.

"Salma," Mandy Wilcox whispered loudly, waving the paper around impatiently.

I took the paper from her, set one on my desk, and passed the stack of sheets to Brian Jacobs behind me.

Once everyone got a sheet of paper, Mr. Harris resumed his lecture, and I went back to my doodles.

During middle school, as hard as I tried to remain in the background, Billy seemed to find me everywhere I went. I avoided him, walked in the other direction any time I saw him coming. But when Daddy was laid off from the shop and couldn't take me to school in the morning, he had to take another job the next town over and I found myself trapped on the school bus, unable to escape Billy's attention no matter how hard I tried.

I traced the tip of my pen around a squiggle and turned it into a worm. I remembered worms on the driveway one day after Billy had started bothering me. I remembered looking at the worms as the bus pulled away, wondering what it was like to lay there, limp, in a puddle of water, to have been under ground for so long and suddenly find oneself pink and exposed to everyone who looked down.

Billy had stood behind me and shoved his arm over the bus seat into my face.

“Sign it, Mosquito,” he had demanded.

I shook my head.

“Why not?”

“I don’t have anything to say.” I remember the words rising from my throat with bile from my stomach.

“Sign my fucking cast, Salma!” He hit the back of my head with the hard plaster protecting his arm.

My eyes teared, and I remember shaking as I dug out a pen from my backpack. I could smell sweat from Billy’s skin. I imagined his arm underneath the cast, green and twisted, as I turned to face him around the corner of his seat and lifted my pen.

“Tell me how much you want me. Write it right there.” Billy sneered and pointed to a blank space on his cast. It was almost already full of my classmates’ signatures. Generic messages like “Get well soon” and “Feel better” surrounded Billy’s broken bones.

I didn’t know what to do. More than anything, I remember wanting to hit him across his chapped lips and twist his mangled arm so it’d never be straight again. But I only had a pen and my ninety-pound body at my disposal. I had wanted so badly to write

all the awful things I could think of on Billy Thorburn's cast. I sat with the pen in my hand for what seemed like forever, feeling a hot, burning anger inside of me and fear and wanting desperately to make Billy feel those things himself. I remember thinking that maybe he'd stop being so mean if he did.

"Sign. My. Fucking. Cast." Billy punctuated each word of the command with anger at my delay. "Sign my fucking cast, Salma, and tell me how you dream of me at night." His voice hissed into my ear.

I scribbled furiously in the corner of the sheet of paper as Mr. Harris scratched more notes onto the chalkboard. I scribbled until I made a solid, black circle with no trace of white in it.

I remember putting the tip of the pen to the cast, feeling the grip of Billy's fatty fist around a chunk of my hair, and trying to figure out what he wanted most so I could do the opposite. Billy jerked my head back and hung his face over mine, he stared into my brown eyes with his cold, sunken black ones, then snapped my forehead against the seat in front of me and spit in my hair. I could feel warm saliva dripping down the back of my neck as I held the quivering pen in between my fingers, and I sat stone still as he laughed his ugly laugh behind me.

When I felt the pen scratch onto the plaster, I watched the letters form out of the ink that felt like it ran through my fingers. The foul taste of an already-digested bologna sandwich filled my throat, and I shuddered as Billy loosened his grip on my hair and shifted his gaze from the back of my head to his cast to look at the finished product.

When I finally got off the bus, it took all I had not to burst into tears before it rolled away

from my driveway. The bell rang and jarred me from my thoughts, sending my pen through the worm I was finishing. I gathered my books and stood to leave

III

There's a picture in a photo album on our bookshelf of my mother and Billy's mother, Deena, walking Billy and I in our strollers side by side. I don't remember it. I also don't remember the point at which Billy stopped playing with blocks and started throwing them instead. I don't know if there was a time when he didn't throw them.

There were rumors. But, then again, there were rumors about everyone. People said that Beth Jenkins smoked pot behind the bleachers in the morning. That Hallie slept with Alice's boyfriend, Aaron, just because she didn't have her own boyfriend. Mrs. Murdock wasn't really married. I still don't know what's true and what's not. The school and the town were full of stories. It was hard to be sure what the truth was. Maybe it wasn't important anyway.

Elmwood was no different than any other small town. People speculated about Billy's situation all the time. Some people said he turned out bad because of the drugs his mother did, that she did them while pregnant with him. Other people said she did the drugs because of Billy's father. All I knew was that Mrs. Thorburn's face had hardened with years of abandonment by Billy's father and nicotine. Her hair was dyed one too many times, and her voice was raspy and deep. My mother never grew out of her friendship with Mrs. Thorburn, and the two of them never left Elmwood.

Even when we very little, I knew the way Deena Thorburn left her son and I alone for hours at a time had something to do with the way Billy turned out. The way she ignored him after I told her he had hit me in the face in the sandbox also had something to do with the way he turned out. I had overheard, on a number of occasions, hushed conversations between my mother and Deena about Billy's father.

I remember hearing things about child support, and leaving—but also death. Billy's father had left Billy's mother when we were in elementary school. I remember going over to their house after Deena called one day. I could hear her sobbing over the phone. When my mother and I got out of the car in their driveway, Deena met us outside. The skin around her eyes was purple and blue, and she was holding her shoulder. My mother held her for a moment and then hurried her into the house. She took Deena into the bathroom and shut the door behind them, only reappearing for a few minutes to tell Billy and me to stay in the living room and eat some apples from the refrigerator if we were hungry. I could hear Billy's mother's muffled cries while we sat on the carpet and watched television. When a piercing shriek sounded through the house, his face remained blank and his eyes stayed fixed to the television.

When I first started riding the bus, Billy's teasing was manageable.

He'd say, "Your mama don't have any titties either, do she, Mosquito Bite? She probably stuffs them bras of hers."

I can remember his warm breath hitting my face and wrinkling my nose involuntarily. Pieces of the sandwich he had eaten for lunch stuck to his yellowed front teeth.

I remembered hearing somewhere that what most bullies wanted was a reaction—and that if you didn't give them one, they'd leave you alone. For a while, it seemed to work. Every day, Billy would come up with some new way to criticize me, and every day I stared ahead, like he had done that day his dad left and our mothers huddled together in the bathroom. For a few days, Billy left me alone, and I thought the worst was over. Unfortunately, it seemed like Billy spent those days formulating ways he could get a rise out of me. The next two years I spent riding the bus with Billy were some of the worst memories I have of school.

I was saved in eighth grade when Daddy was offered a full time position again with the shop and started taking me to school. I made sure I stayed alert but quiet for the remainder of middle school, attentively and successfully avoiding the attention of Billy. The move from eighth grade to ninth grade was easier than I had thought it was going to be. High school was all about attention. Everyone fell all over each other just to get noticed. Billy got a whole new selection of people—four years worth of them—to torment. The girls wore less clothing so the boys would take them to dances; the boys gave the girls flowers in hopes of shorter skirts and tighter shirts. And some of the girls and guys succeeded better than others in these endeavors.

I didn't follow the rules of high school cliques. Most of the time I didn't know what they were. There were a few moments when I found myself wondering what it would be like to be one of them, to be a part of a circle everyone tried so hard to get into, but I never wanted membership. I only wondered about it. There were others like me, students who didn't seem to fit into any group, but I didn't bother talking to them either. It was always me by myself until I found Alice.

When Alice got pregnant, I watched the way her life changed. Jessica, Hallie, and Renee, right at the beginning, before her stomach grew, held her arms as they walked down the halls, carried her books for her to class, called themselves “aunties,” and proved that they were the best friends a girl could have. But once Alice’s mini-skirts and cleavage shirts turned to sweats and stretchy jeans, once her stomach turned round and hard like a basketball and she couldn’t hide it from anyone any longer, Alice was left to carry her own books and wince while bending to tie her shoes in gym class. They invited a new girl who moved from the next county to ours to sit in Alice’s seat at lunch and whispered and looked the other way when she waddled by in the hall.

For a while, Alice held her books over her bulging midsection, but once her friends quit talking to her, she didn’t try and hide her belly from anyone anymore. I watched her sometimes in chemistry as she rubbed her hands over her round stomach and, occasionally, a troubled look would cross over her face, her thoughts clearly not on electrons or protons. The funny thing was that, even in the midst of losing all of her friends and the child whose beating heart she would never feel beneath the tips of her fingers, Alice didn’t fall apart. She smiled and continued to sit next to me at lunch every day. It was funny how she lost everything that seemed to define who she was, but she didn’t seem to be lost.

IV

For a long time, I looked at Alice's initial connection with me as an instance of luck—being in the same place at the same time. I was pretty sure the only reason Alice sat down with me that first time at lunch wasn't because she wanted to be friends, but because she felt as if she had an obligation to talk to me. I'm not too sure how I explained all the lunches we ate together after the first one, but I continued on in this delusion for months. At first, I would sit at the lunch table alone, pulling the hood of my sweatshirt closer around my face and trying to keep myself from wondering if Alice would show up and sit beside me. She didn't have to sit next to me that first time, and she definitely didn't have to do it any time after that. She could stop sitting beside me any old time she wanted, I remember reasoning in my head.

I tried to make myself believe that I didn't care whether she came or not; she would probably just go back to Hallie and the rest of them anyway sooner or later; that's how it always went when the popular girls fought. I was pretty sure Alice was only with me to ride out her time of exile—and, as I mentioned before, because she felt indebted to me. But every day, I'd see her walking through the cafeteria entrance, heading right to the spot on the bench beside me. And every day I breathed a sigh of relief that I wouldn't have to sit another lunch alone as I had done for so much time before her--except, of course, during the years of assigned seating during lunch when I was given the

unfortunate assignment of sitting next to Billy Thorburn and enduring his torment with no outlet of escape for an entire year.

The first lunches Alice and I spent together were filled with awkward conversation and, often, more awkward silence. We didn't have a lot in common at first. Alice grew up in a household with cooks and cleaning ladies and went with her family to the town's uppity country club on weekends to play tennis. The house I lived in with my parents was stuck in the 1970s, my mother cooked all of our meals, and the closest thing to a country club that I had ever set foot in was the high school football stadium to run the mile for gym class. The initial conversations people tend to have with one another were difficult for Alice and me.

"Do anything interesting last night?" Alice asked with a mouthful of mashed potatoes one day at lunch.

"Not really," I said, combing a fork through a container of cherry Jell-O, "ate dinner, did English homework, went to bed."

"Sounds exciting," Alice said sarcastically, "and, unfortunately, just like my night. Except I watched TV, ate dinner, and then watched more TV. No homework. You really just did homework?"

"And ate," I said, feeling a little embarrassed. I'd actually read a book, too, but I didn't want to tell Alice that. She wasn't the kind of girl who read.

"Right," Alice shrugged her shoulders and took another spoonful of potatoes.

I worried that I seemed boring to her and decided to admit to my real activity of the evening.

"Well, oh—" I said as if I'd forgotten, "I read a book, too."

“Yeah?” Alice asked. “What book?”

“Oh, um,” I felt my face turning red, “I don’t even remember really.” I knew exactly what I was reading.

“I read, too. A lot, actually,” Alice said. “Probably stupid stuff, though.”

“What?” I asked. My interest was piqued.

“Well, honestly, lately I’ve been really into comics,” Alice said.

“What, really?” I asked.

Alice nodded.

“I don’t read them all the time,” I said, “but I really love *Calvin and Hobbes*.”

“No you don’t,” Alice said, hitting the table with the end of her spoon.

I nodded.

“Aren’t you supposed to be reading stuff like—oh—what’s that book Mr. Fredrickson’s always talking about—*Crime and Punishment*?”

My face turned red. So that was what she thought of me. That I was too smart to have fun.

“I don’t know,” I said, looking into the Jell-O wiggling in front of me.

“Sorry, Sal, I didn’t mean—I just—you know...” Alice said and let her voice trail into silence.

“It’s fine,” I replied quickly, waving my hand. “I probably should be reading that stuff. I just don’t think it’s as fun.”

“It’s not,” Alice with a smile. She took a bite of her potatoes.

I reached for an apple.

“I can’t believe you read something with pictures,” Alice said.

“Why?” I asked. I was curious about the way those at the top of the social ladder saw me. I didn’t think I had a label past being quiet

“You just—I mean—come on, Sal, everyone knows you’re some kind of genius.”

“I like the drawings and the humor,” I said, staring at my apple and feeling silly.

“I mean, why do you like reading comics?”

“Because I don’t have to work at it,” Alice said after thinking for a moment.

“Neither do I,” I answered.

Even after establishing a connection with Alice, friendship only became a possibility in my mind when she invited me to her parents’ house for dinner on a Friday night a few months after we started talking. We were sitting at lunch, both eating a half of a bologna sandwich and half of a peanut butter and jelly, each sandwich half from one of our packed lunches that we swapped.

“Hey, so, my parents are having this party tonight, do you like clams?” Alice asked through a mouthful of bread.

“Yeah, um, I think so. I mean, they’re not my favorite, but I can eat them okay,” I said, feeling awkward. I didn’t admit to her that I had never eaten a clam.

“Yeah, well, there’s going to be other food there too. Do you want to come? It’s just something my parents put on every year for their clients and friends,” she said, lifting a hand to push her bangs out of her face. I noticed her nails were short.

“Um, yeah, I guess—I’ll ask my dad—I mean, he’ll say yes, so, but I—”

“Cool,” she replied, smiling as she cut off my blabbering.

I felt my mouth stretch into a natural, effortless smile before I even thought about doing it. Maybe Alice really did want to be friends with me.

“Did you take that test yet in geometry?” Alice asked.

I nodded and shrugged.

“That good, huh?”

“It wasn’t bad,” I said, “I at least got a B I’m pretty sure.”

“I’ll probably fail,” Alice said, keeping her eyes on her sandwich.

“No, you won’t, I mean, you studied right?”

“For hours. But it won’t help anything. I just don’t get that stuff. And Mr. Harris gets all huffy when I ask him to explain it a different way because he doesn’t know how. He just tells me the same stuff over and over, so I get D’s over and over.

“I can help you,” I said slowly. “If you want, I mean, I—I’m okay at math.”

“You’re probably busy so I don’t... You know, I probably won’t even get it anyway,” Alice said.

“I don’t mind,” I said, taking a bite of my sandwich, “I’m not busy. You’re the one who’s busy.”

“Sal, come on, what do you think I’m busy doing?” Alice scoffed.

Before I had time to answer, a deep voice behind me replied.

“Oh, I think plenty of people know what you’re busy doing.” Billy Thorburn’s voice scraped against my eardrums.

Alice’s face hardened at the sound.

“And just what do you think that is?” Alice shot back.

“You really want me to say it,” Billy said as I turned to face him, “in front of your new friend here? That you’re a slut?” He whispered the last word and leaned in near the

table. His gray tee-shirt up rubbed against my back when he placed his hands on the tabletop, his face nearing Alice's.

I hated that I could feel the heat from Billy's large frame almost burning against me—like the flame of a gas lighter approaching the wick of a candle. I hated that I couldn't see his face, that I wasn't a safe distance away from him. The heat of his body burning with my own reminded me of the heat of my shame after he forced me to sign his cast.

When Billy hit his fist against the table, the heat of his body boiling across my back, and Alice's stoic face made my muscles tense. For a moment, I was sure Alice was going to cry. She stared at him hard, and I could feel him staring back. My stomach flipped over. I had never felt this kind of intense tension when Billy was just tormenting me. Alice's face changed, her features tightened and hard, and I wondered if I had imagined the hint of upset across her face. Alice's blue eyes were frozen and locked to Billy's. In the space that hung between their faces that hovered above the table, they were all that existed to each other. I faded into the background, even though I was between the two of them. Usually when people talk about the world disappearing when they're with another person, it's because the tense air between them exists out of love or electric physical attraction. The air between Alice and Billy was full of electricity but not the kind that drew people together.

"Say it as many times as you want," Alice said calmly to Billy, "but she knows the truth."

I guess Alice meant that I knew she wasn't a slut. From what I did know, Alice wasn't exactly any angel. She had a reputation at school for partying and, from what I

observed, had always liked being the center of attention. She also had a reputation of sleeping around with the football team and guys at other schools. I didn't know much more than that. Not yet anyway.

"I'm sure she does," Billy replied, leaning away from the table and slipping his hands into his pockets. The shadow of his large frame fell over my own. "And so does everyone else," he finished with a smile that turned only half of his mouth upwards.

Billy walked away. The bottom edges of his jeans were torn and the strings on their cuffs dragged on the orange and tan tiled floor behind him. Instead of going to sit down at a table like Mrs. Murdock shouted at him to do, Billy continued past all the tables in the cafeteria and out the door to the hallway. I turned my attention to Alice and as Billy disappeared from sight, her shoulders dropped, and even though I didn't hear anything, I imagined she let out a sigh of relief.

Unsure of how to continue our lunch in any manner of normalcy, I smoothed out the wrinkles in my paper lunch bag and folded it into the smallest square I could make, waiting for Alice to break the silence. But before either of us had the chance to exchange any awkward words, the bell to signal the end of lunch rang.

"Hey, I'll see you later—tonight—okay?" Alice said, not looking at my face.

"Sure," I replied.

I nodded and watched Alice leave before I rose and gathered my own trash.

When I entered the house that afternoon, the door banged shut behind me, and my mother walked to the edge of the living room and hovered there, looking at me. She stood shorter than I did. I always felt like a giant next to her. I outweighed her by

probably twenty pounds by the time I was a sophomore, and I inherited most of my looks from my father. Her face was tiny, her hands were tiny, and her hair was always styled and a bright shiny brown unlike my own dull strands. Her eyes were rimmed with thin, brown lines of eyeliner, and the skin on her cheeks was smooth and free of wrinkles. My mother was a picture-perfect beauty. Next to her, I felt like someone else's daughter.

"How was school?" my mother asked.

"Fine."

"Did you do anything new today?" she asked, pointedly.

"Nope," I answered, setting my backpack on the floor and shuffling through its contents to look busy. I could feel my mother looking at me, but before she could say anything else, I quickly said, "I won't be here at dinner," I said. "I got invited to a party, and it's tonight."

I could practically hear my mother's jaw hit the floor, so I didn't look at her face.

"I—I have to be there soon. I have to go," I said and turned away from her.

I quickly walked to my bedroom, aware of my mother's footsteps behind me, and shut the door. I opened my closet. I had a large collection of jeans and sweatshirts and not a whole lot else, save for a dress my mother bought me two Christmases before. I had hated it the second I un-wrapped it. It was a shiny, pink thing, with lace at the bottom edge. I had never even tried it on.

I pulled the dress out of the closet and slipped off my shirt and pants. I tugged the satin material over my head and wrestled to get my arms through the openings on the sides of the dress. I looked down, and the hem stopped right above my knees. I shivered

a little seeing the pink against my white skin, seeing myself bare and thinking of other people seeing me that way. I felt naked.

My mother was hovering outside my closed door; I could almost hear her standing there, trying to decide if she should come in or not. Her eyebrows raised in surprise when I opened the door.

“Oh, Salma,” she breathed after a moment, “it’s the dress.”

“Yeah, there wasn’t anything else.”

I picked at the lace by my knees that were dotted and scratched with scars I had accumulated over the years from jumping off swings and landing wrong on the blacktop below.

My mother’s eyes looked over my body taking quick measurements, and I crossed my arms against my chest, feeling exposed.

“Honey, what are you going to do with your hair?”

She reached out her hand, and I shrunk from her touch.

“Nothing.”

“You know, most girls your age would—”

“It’s fine, okay?” I said, feeling my face turn a shade of red, knowing that my mother was right. I hadn’t looked in a mirror, hadn’t seen my hair today, but I knew that what was there wasn’t something I should be taking to a party on Elm Street. I thought of Alice’s silky blonde hair and unconsciously raised my hand to my own head.

My mother lingered in the doorway, even after I turned away from her, searching for something to say. Her thin fingers twirled a long curl of her own dark brown hair as she looked at mine, thinking of all the wonderful things she could do with it.

I was still standing in front of the closet in my socks and the pink dress. I bent over and pulled off the socks and then knelt down inside the closet to search for dress shoes. I remembered owning a pair; I would have worn them for Grandpap's funeral a few years back. My mother's moved and I could feel her behind me at the closet. I didn't want to turn and look at her. I didn't want to see that smile she wore that had pity in it. She felt bad that I didn't understand or care about the things she loved.

I couldn't find the shoes. Just a pair of black rubber boots I'd had since I was in third grade and a few books. I turned and let my eyes meet my mother's. And for a minute, I expected her to reach out to me and smile. Instead, with the look of pity that I had wanted to avoid in the first place, she asked, "Salma, do you need a pair of shoes to go with your dress?"

It took all I had in me to say yes. I didn't want her to get her hopes up thinking that today I'd borrow her shoes, and tomorrow I'd be asking her to take me to the hair salon.

"Come on," she said, excitement in her voice, "I'm sure I have something that will match."

I walked behind my mother, following her as if I didn't know the way to my parents' bedroom. As we walked down the hall, I noticed the picture of the three of us, me, my mother, and Daddy, in the backyard. We were all squinting from the sun, but we looked happy. Daddy's arm was wrapped around my mother's small waist. His tanned face was turned toward hers, her eyes squinting straight at the camera, her mouth open, laughing. Her head leaned against his shoulder. I stood with Daddy's other arm wrapped around my shoulders that were aligned with his chest. I was wearing a yellow tee-shirt

and a pair of green shorts exposing knobby knees and ankles. A grin with gaps in it rounded my cheeks.

We had spent that afternoon outside, grilling and playing, and I was happy. A week later, Daddy and my mother got into an argument—I don't know what about—and he left us. For a week. She picked at him, and he got tired of it. I remember standing in my bedroom, her shaky sobs coming from the living room after the screened door slammed against its frame. I had watched as he backed the truck out of the driveway, nearly clipping the mailbox as he left. I didn't think he was coming back, and I hated her for it.

As she led me to her shoes, my mother's thin shoulders were outlined through the pink polo shirt she wore. She paused at the entrance to the bedroom and looked at me, almost as if she forgot where she was going. She walked over the worn beige carpet, slid open the white slatted closet doors and pulled a few pairs of shiny shoes from the top of the closet and placed them on the floor.

"One of these has to work, I'm just not sure what size you wear." my mother explained. "Go on, Salma, try them on."

Still standing in the doorway of my parents' bedroom, I moved toward the shoes and awkwardly stuck my bare feet into a pair of white heels. My feet didn't even fit into the shoes all the way. I shook my head.

"Try the others."

"They're all going to be small," I said bluntly. I was going to have to figure out something on my own.

“Well, fine, Salma. What will you wear then?” My mother’s eyes narrowed, and she sat her hands on her bony hips.

“I guess just my tennis shoes,” I said, knowing full well that I couldn’t wear tennis shoes with the pink dress awkwardly clinging to my body.

“I might have something bigger,” my mother said, turning to reach under the bed. She pulled out a pair of plain brown flats.

“When I was pregnant with you, I went up a whole shoe size because my feet swelled,” she said as she handed the shoes to me.

“Sorry,” I snapped, knowing she didn’t mean it that way.

I set the shoes on the floor next to my bare feet, and I knew they weren’t going to fit. My giant feet weren’t meant for my mother’s princess shoes—or her pregnant ones.

I turned to walk out of the room, but my mother beat me to it. I felt the breeze of her body as she passed me in the doorway and headed to the living room. I stood in the hall, slowly following her, and watched as she picked up the phone.

A few minutes later, I was ready to leave to go to my first high school party. My mother had called Deena Thorburn, Billy’s mother and asked if she had any shoes for me to borrow. I never would have imagined that such a brittle, small woman would have any shoes to fit me, but before I knew it, I had a pair of Billy’s mom’s white dress shoes on my feet. Mrs. Thorburn stood next to my mother in our kitchen, smoking a cigarette, the bluish-black dye in her hair looking out of place in the daylight that covered our kitchen. I turned to leave after thanking her, and heard the weight of my mother’s footsteps follow close behind me.

I pretended not to know she was there and continued through the living room to the screened door.

“Salma.” My mother’s voice was quiet.

I turned to face her, my fingers absorbing the coolness of the metal door handle.

“Where exactly are you going?” she asked, her face serious. She stood behind the old plaid couch, holding tight to its back.

I looked at the palm of my hand where I had copied Alice’s address and crossed the room, shoving my hand in my mother’s face.

She backed away to read my print, and then nodded.

“What time are you coming back?” she asked.

“I don’t know. In a few hours I guess,” I said.

She pressed her lips together and blinked her round brown eyes, looking like she wanted to say more, but instead she nodded and said, “Enjoy yourself.”

I walked out the door onto the concrete, the white heels of Billy’s mother clicking under my feet. I walked down our driveway, wondered if my mother was in the window watching me leave, but didn’t turn to look and quickly walked a few streets over to Elm Street. My head had been clouded with nervousness and anxiety all day, but all I could think about on my way to the party was that I was going to Alice Rayburn’s party in Billy Thorburn’s mother’s shoes.

V

The late fall air was cool against my cheeks as I walked to Alice's. I had thought briefly about wearing a coat to the party, but I didn't want to ask my mother for anything else. I teetered on the thin heels, worried that I would fall, so I took them off the second I got down my driveway and resolved to put the shoes back on once I was within viewing distance of Alice's house. I wondered why anyone would ever choose to wear shoes like these when there were other, more practical options. Once I reached Elm Street, I looked at the palm of my hand to check the address. I had transferred it from the piece of paper Alice had given me to the palm of my hand in pen since I had no pockets. As the numbers in the addresses climbed, I did all I could to keep my jaw from dropping. I'd lived all my life in this little town and I had never been down Elm Street to see the small but impressive section of affluence everyone always talked about and dreamt of having for themselves.

I approached a mailbox with the number that was written on my hand, and, at first, didn't even see the house. Brick pillars on either side of the driveway to Alice's house marked its entrance. I followed the slowly curved line of blacktop back behind bushes and trees and my eyes landed on the house. Before I took it all in, I set the heels on the road and brushed the soles of my feet off with my hand. I put the shoes on my feet, buckled the straps, and started my walk down the Rayburn family's driveway. It

was even longer than it looked—and despite the fact that blisters were forming quickly on the backs of my heels due to the stiff shoes, the house at the end of my walk demanded my attention. It was a house that deserved its pillars. I walked slowly, staring at the massive dwelling. The word “house” didn’t exactly do Alice’s place justice. It was more than a house. But not quite a mansion. I don’t know what you’d call the thing in between the two, but that’s what it was. When I reached the circular part of the driveway that sat in front of the house, I tried to prepare myself for this evening of what I believed was going to be formal, social interaction. The driveway had its own flower garden in the center of it: tall purple flowers with smaller red ones framing the cement. Decorations for the land the cars perch on.

The house had two stories, a huge picture window in front that went from the first floor to the second, a porch that started on its side and wrapped around to the back and held at least twenty tables with white tablecloths and silverware. As I got closer and closer, I couldn’t believe I was about to go inside this palace. As I marveled, I felt the painful rubbing sensation of the shoes against my heels. I was positive that the blisters that had so quickly developed on my tender feet were going to bleed all over Billy’s mother’s white shoes—and probably all over the white tiled floors that were behind the huge wooden door on Alice’s big house. I stopped walking to check my feet. Bubbles were forming, but no blood yet.

The front doors were bigger than any doors I had ever seen—and there were two of them instead of the typical one. But with a house that’s double the house most people around Elmwood had, double doors were a necessity. I remember thinking of Jack from “Jack and the Beanstalk” and how he must have felt when he first met the giant. I think

that giant lived in something like a cottage, but the doors still would have had to be huge and impressive for a person of atypical proportions. Alice wasn't a giant, but she definitely lived in something like a castle.

I raised my hand to knock on the door on the right, and then realized that my palms were sweating. I might have to shake someone's hand or something, and I didn't want to be hot and clammy. I went to wipe my hands on my dress but then realized I had a dress on and wondered where I could wipe them. Before I had time to think of a solution, the huge door swung open and an older, more textured version of Alice with darker and shorter hair stood in front of me.

"Well, hello, sweetie! You must be here for Alice!"

"I—I'm—yes."

"Come on in," Alice's mother said, placing her hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I don't remember your name—we've probably met before?"

"Um, no, I—I'm Salma."

"Oh my goodness!" Mrs. Rayburn exclaimed, stopping in mid-step and turning to fully face me. Her hand flew up to her chest and landed on her heart. Her blouse was delicate and probably made out of silk. A large necklace with round green beads lay neatly across her collarbone.

"You're Sal. I am just—just so glad to finally meet you."

Mrs. Rayburn's eyes had grown teary.

I was confused.

"Oh, I'm sorry sweetie, come in, come in!" She set her hand on my shoulder and we walked a few steps into the house while she talked. "No sense in us standing in the

doorway where it's cold, and you don't even have a coat! I'm sure Alice has one you can borrow. Now, Sal, or Salma? Which do you prefer? I suppose "Sal" right? That's what Alice has always called you and that's what I've pictured you as so that's what I'll call you, too. Is that okay?"

She said all of this in one breath, and I thought that even if she looked a lot like Alice, she wasn't much like her. Alice talked, but not like this. I felt the heat of Alice's mother's hand on my shoulder. I wasn't quite sure if I should wait for her to tell me where to go, or to try and find Alice myself. Mrs. Rayburn continued talking, gesturing to the kitchen and the crowd of people standing in it, busy at the glistening granite counters with brightly colored fruits and foods I had never seen before. I looked at the crowd and wondered who everyone was, but quickly let my mind wander from the people in the kitchen to the décor of the house itself.

I didn't really look at the entrance when I was standing in it. Heavily lacquered wood framed the entrance to the room we were standing in now. Some kind of living room, I guessed. Maybe a formal living room, since, I noted, there was no television in it. There were two mahogany colored leather couches sitting perpendicular to each other, the one's back facing me, the other's facing the kitchen, and a huge fish tank was on the only wall in the room. There were probably hundreds of tiny fluorescent fish swimming around inside the glass tank. The living room bled right into the kitchen. No walls separated the two rooms. Only a wall to shield the inside of the house from the outside. A big wood table that was the same color as the couches sat in the center of the kitchen and the counters wrapped all around the perimeter of the room. There were more drawers and cabinets in that kitchen than there were in my entire house.

“Sal?”

Coming back to earth and trying not to let my bewilderment in the presence of the things I had only ever seen on TV show through, I heard Alice’s mother’s voice as she turned her entire body to face me.

“Sal? Are you okay, sweetie? You look pale. Come, sit.” Mrs. Rayburn set both her hands on my shoulders and guided me to one of the leather couches and practically pushed me down onto it.

“Teresa, can you get a glass of water for this poor girl? I just talked her ear off, and I think she’s going to pass out.” Mrs. Rayburn raised her voice at the kitchen crew and winked at me.

A short, dark haired woman with light brown skin and brown eyes reached for a glass out of a cabinet. I watched as Alice’s mother sat down beside me and patted my knee. Teresa opened the refrigerator, and I watched as she poured me a glass of water from a special filtered dispenser. I drank water from the faucet at home.

The small woman walked carefully across the kitchen, avoiding the other people in the kitchen, arranging melons and cheeses on plates and cooking, and offered me the glass. My hand was already cold from the walk to the house, and it grew colder with the glass against it. I took a sip of water. I wasn’t thirsty.

“Sal, I just want to tell you how thankful I am that—”

“Sal!”

Alice’s voice broke into her mother’s, almost blended right with it, and I turned to my left to see her running down the grand staircase that I had missed in all the

commotion of entering the house. The banister was so big I figured that two people could probably slide down it at once. Alice took the steps two at a time.

“Mom, why didn’t you tell me she was here already?” Alice stood in front of her mother and myself, her hands on her hips. She was pretty tall for a girl. I never really noticed before just how far above average she was since most everyone was taller than me.

“Oh honey, she’s barely just in the door. I just wanted to get acquainted with her is all. I think I should be able to do that, don’t you?”

“Mom,” Alice said. “You talk too much. Sal doesn’t want to listen to you, do you, Sal?” Alice grabbed my hands, pulling me to my feet.

“Oh no, I mean—your mom she’s not—Mrs. Rayburn, you-you’re—”

“Oh, don’t worry about it sweetie. Go on with Alice. I’m sure I’ll get a chance to steal you later,” said Mrs. Rayburn, winking again. She was the kind of person who couldn’t quite manage a one-eyed wink so when she tried, her whole face crinkled up and all the muscles in her face worked to blink just one eye and only half the other.

Alice led me up the wood staircase and down a hall with various doors. At the very end of the hall was a door with wooden letters that spelled “Alice” across its surface.

Alice walked into the room and threw herself on her bed. I wasn’t sure what to do with myself so I stood in the doorway. The bedroom was huge. With two big windows and a bed that would take up my entire room.

Alice wasn’t dressed yet. Or at least, I assumed she wasn’t. It looked like she was wearing pajamas—a pair of short shorts that barely grazed the tops of her thighs, and a tight, sleeveless, green top. Since I was never quite up to date on style, I thought there

was a possibility I was wrong. Alice's long legs draped gracefully over the edge of her big bed that was at least twice the size of mine. The shorts she was wearing were printed with green and blue stripes, and coordinated with the green of the comforter on the bed.

"So," Alice said, drawing the word out as she stretched her arms over her head.

"So."

"How was the trip over?"

"Oh, it was okay," I said, wincing as I walked over to a rather empty bulletin board to inspect the pictures that were tacked to it.

"Your feet hurt," Alice said matter-of-factly.

I nodded.

There was a picture of Alice and her parents in bathing suits in front of bright blue water that definitely wasn't in the United States anywhere. Alice's hair was shorter and her smile was younger. Her teeth were crooked. One thing I knew from talking up close with her was that her teeth were perfectly white and straight. I guess she must have had braces. I didn't get them, but I probably should have.

"I didn't think you were going to dress up tonight," Alice said.

"I just figured, I mean, that you had to at this kind of thing," I said.

"What kind of thing do you think this is?" Alice said in a mocking tone.

I squirmed.

"I mean, I just—I thought, you know how it is," I said trailing off.

"I'm just kidding," Alice said, "you look nice, Sal."

"Thanks," I muttered, feeling self-conscious of the dress clinging to my thighs.

"Oh, hey, did you bring your geometry book?" Alice asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think I forgot it downstairs on the couch.”

“Good,” she said, “I really need some help.”

For a fleeting moment, I wondered if Alice had only invited me over so I could help her study.

“Are you, um, getting dressed?” I asked Alice.

She laughed.

“Yeah, don’t worry; you won’t be the only one without pants.”

I smiled.

As it turned out, I would have been the only one without pants. Apparently, the parties on Elm Street weren’t like I imagined them to be. When guests started showing up, I looked out of Alice’s big bedroom window and it was apparent that Alice was only putting on a dress to make me stand out less in mine. The attire could be considered “business casual.” Cars crowded the long driveway.

“Okay, which one?” Alice was standing in front of her closet, her white skin even whiter when set closely against the backdrop of her muted green bedroom walls.

She held two dresses out in front of her bare body, standing in front of me in only a bra and underwear. I was embarrassed and didn’t pay attention to what the dresses looked like and instead arbitrarily pointed my finger in the general direction of the material she held. I tried not to look like I was surprised, but Alice caught me off guard. I had moved to her bed and was engrossed in the photo album that was lying on her nightstand. Alice had said she was going to get dressed, but I didn’t realize she was going to do it right in front of me. I tried to look like I wasn’t looking at Alice’s body, but then I worried that she’d think I was embarrassed, and I didn’t want her to. In the

locker room at school, I always changed as quickly as possible. I never looked at anyone else and always turned myself towards the corner of the room.

Alice held up the dress I pointed to, a yellow, strapless one, next to herself and sighed. She looked in her mirror and held the dress in front of her body, smoothing it against herself as if it would help her see exactly how it would look once she pulled it over her head. Alice frowned and dropped the dress to the floor and ran her fingers across her stomach. She turned to me.

“It’s ugly, isn’t it,” Alice said, her voice flat.

I looked at her, not sure what she was talking about. “I don’t think so,” I said slowly, “But maybe yellow isn’t your color?”

Alice shook her head and looked down. I followed her eyes to her stomach where she absentmindedly ran her fingers back and forth across the skin right below her belly button.

“They said it’d fade, but I don’t know anymore. It seems like it’s been forever already. And I don’t think the stretch marks will ever go away,” Alice’s voice grew quiet.

I didn’t know what to say; I couldn’t really see the marks Alice was talking about from where I was sitting. And we didn’t talk about the baby stuff much. I figured if she wanted to talk about it, she would.

“Are they really bad?” She looked straight at me, her blue eyes serious.

I shook my head.

“Don’t lie to me, Sal.”

“I’m not lying, Alice,” I said quietly, getting up from her bed, and walking over the white carpet to her, “they aren’t really bad.” I stopped a few feet away from her. She crossed her arms over her chest. I looked at her stomach. Across it ran a horizontal dark, red line. There were smaller vertical white lines that ran up and down around her belly near the horizontal one. They reminded me of cat scratches.

“You can barely even see the stretch marks—a lot of girls have those anyway—and like they said, the other one will fade. You don’t think it will?”

“It’s...hard,” she said, looking me straight in the eyes. I wanted to look away, but I couldn’t.

“I just, you know, it’s hard to believe what anyone says after...” Alice’s bottom lip trembled.

I hoped she wasn’t going to cry, but I knew she was, and I was scared. I didn’t know if I should be quiet or if I should say something to make her feel better. But I didn’t know what to say to make Alice feel better. I was so very scared she would cry, but as the first tear slid down her cheek, all I wanted to do was make her feel better. I closed the space between the two of us and wanted to put my hand on her bare shoulder but couldn’t yet will my arm to move. I worried she’d think I was weird.

I felt like a child. Alice had been through so much more in her life than I had. I didn’t have much to offer her. I hadn’t been to parties, had never had a taste of alcohol, didn’t know the first thing about shopping, couldn’t figure out the difference between blush and eye shadow, and I certainly hadn’t had sex with a boy, let alone even held hands. I hadn’t been where Alice had been; she and I didn’t make a lot of sense together.

As tears continued to slide down Alice's cheeks, I looked at her pink cheeks and her pointy shoulders and the thin skin that covered her sternum between the cups of the light blue bra she was wearing. I watched as a tear slid down the side of Alice's neck and followed it as it ran over the transparent skin covering her clavicle, stopping at her heart covered by the blue of the band of the bra that matched the blue of the veins that webbed across her chest. I lifted my hand and let it rest on Alice's warm shoulder.

"Girls! Where are you? Alice! Alice! Everyone's here and asking about you!" Alice's mother's voice rang through the hallway outside Alice's bedroom and stopped right outside the door; I pulled my hand away.

"Girls?"

Alice quickly wiped the backs of her hands across her eyes and her palms across her cheeks, and I walked over and sat back down on the bed.

"Mom! We heard you the first time, okay?" Alice snapped as her mother pushed open the door.

Her mother didn't look at all surprised to find her daughter unclothed.

"Honey, I'm sorry, but you girls need to come out and see everyone! They're all asking about you, Alice!"

Mrs. Rayburn's hand was on her rounded hip.

"Okay, well, tell them I'll be out when I feel like it," Alice grumbled. "You know I didn't want to have this stupid party."

"Please, honey, just be nice tonight, okay? Remember what I told you. This is important for all of us. The cooks just finished the clams and even made pizzas in case you and your friends want something else. Come down soon."

Alice looked at her mother and their eyes locked together, something unspoken flashed between them, and Alice's mother turned to smile at me before she walked out of the room.

"Five minutes, Alice, I mean it," she called down the hallway.

Alice shook her head, shut the door behind her mother, and slipped on the yellow dress from the floor. A silky, yellow dress that looked like it could have been worn for a school dance—or on a dinner cruise.

She stood in front of the mirror mounted to the back of her bedroom door and frowned as she turned from side to side.

"I never used to look like this you know."

"I know," I said.

"I hate it."

"It's not that bad," I said.

"Yeah it is. Don't pretend. I was never fat. And now I can't get rid of it. And all those people down there, they want to see me and they haven't seen me since before, and now they're going to see this," Alice's words rushed out of her. "Of course, it's not like cared before anyway."

It really wasn't that bad. You couldn't get pregnant and not gain weight as far as I understood. It was good to gain weight. And I didn't know a whole lot about losing weight, but I imagined that it wasn't an easy thing to do, especially if you got it from a baby.

"It's only been a few months, Alice," I tell her.

She shook her head.

You could barely see the roundness of Alice's stomach through her clothes. It was hardly there, but it was definite and that's where I agreed with her. You couldn't just pretend it wasn't there, not on her anyway. Plenty of people could hide a round stomach, but not Alice. She wasn't built to hide anything.

Alice stood and stared into the mirror as if she were trying to see something different from the image that met her eyes.

"You look nice," I offered up.

"Thanks," Alice said sourly. "You don't have to say that. I'm not even done yet."

"What?"

"I haven't even started my make-up," Alice said rolling her eyes.

"Oh, right," I said, thinking about how long it took my mother to get ready to leave the house.

Alice took a box from the top of her dresser and stood so close to the mirror I was surprised her nose didn't hit it. Once she examined her face, she extracted a compact from the glittery purple box and began to powder her face. I resumed my wandering through Alice's past by way of the photo album she had interrupted me from. She was beautiful—in every stage of her life she was beautiful, and there was no disputing it. Even with crooked teeth and in a picture of Christmas morning where her hair resembled the badly matted wig from a Halloween costume sitting in my parents' front closet—even with that, Alice was bright and drew immediate attention.

Minutes dragged on, surely more than five, and Alice took out what I knew to be a mascara wand and wiggled it through her lashes as I finished the album. I set it back in its place on the nightstand and noticed the black corner of another leather-bound book

sticking out from under the bed. Bending, my fingertips made contact with the book and I dragged it out and set it on my lap. This album was much smaller than the other I was looking at and a lot less colorful. It reminded me of the wedding albums my parents had—rich, leather books that had grown dusty and cracked over the years, the kind of albums everyone has but never looks at. I rubbed my hand across the black cover and when I opened it, I drew in a sharp breath as I was met with the image of Alice smiling down at her round belly from months ago. Before I could set the album back under the bed, Alice turned to me.

“Is this even?” she asked, quickly losing her train of thought at the sight of the book on my lap.

“I—I’m sorry—I just—it was—,” I stammered.

“It’s okay,” Alice said, approaching where I sat. She sat down beside me on her bed, folded her legs underneath her bottom, and took the book from my hands. “I haven’t looked at this in a while.”

I nodded and looked at her. One eye was shadowed a smoky gray and the other was blank.

“For a while, I looked at it more than once a day. Not now. I don’t always want to think about it,” Alice said, opening the album and staring at the photo of herself as if she had no idea who that person was.

“We don’t have to look at it—I just thought it was...” I let my voice trail off.

I just thought it was full of pictures like the other album.

“No, it’s okay, I mean, I’ve never showed anyone before. I don’t even know why I really kept the pictures. I guess as a reminder.”

Of what, I wondered, but I didn't ask.

Alice turned the pages of the album as I watched her grow bigger and bigger until she stopped on a picture that I recognized as being taken on the day I met her in the bathroom. She wore the same tight white shirt and jeans, but in the picture they were clean from the blood that would later soil them both.

I tried to watch Alice's face out of the corner of my eye to see if it hurt—looking at the pictures.

It did.

She gently slid her hand across the plastic film covering the photograph.

"I was so huge," she said halfheartedly and turned to me for a reaction.

If it were someone else, I would have disagreed or shrugged, but I knew it was okay to agree. She was huge in her jeans and white top. She looked almost as if the smile on her face in the photo was forced—as if her mom grabbed the camera and yelled, "Smile!" and Alice did, just to get it over with. I wondered why her parents would document the pregnancy of their teen daughter, why they wouldn't just try and forget it was happening or hide it. But it was clear, as we continued looking at the pictures, that even when there were hints of worry and fear in their faces, the baby was going to be celebrated when he arrived. There were pictures of Alice's mom kissing her belly, of her and her parents together, of the three of them painting a room in the house blue and of her dad assembling a white crib.

Alice turned the page again and stared at the photo. On this page, she was in a hospital bed giving the thumbs up to the camera with her mother beside her, hand on her shoulder. They were scared, but proud. Alice's mom was going to be a proud

grandmother in spite of Alice's mistakes. In the following pages, I watched as Alice's face went from smiling to grimacing in pain. Her mother was to the side of her, saying something into her ear and holding her hand as a nurse positioned what looked like a shower cap on Alice's head. A shot of Alice's father off to the side of the room with his arms crossed and a helpless look on his face was next. And then Alice turned the page to reveal a purple baby in her arms.

The camera had been focused closely to Alice's face. Her lips were pressed against the baby's blue cheek. I didn't know what to do or say. I remembered seeing a documentary about photos of dead people. Back when everything was still grainy and shot in black and white, people used to take pictures of the dead to document their deaths. Or maybe their lives. I don't quite remember which one. I didn't know why Alice would want a book of photos commemorating her dead baby boy. Twisting my fingers around each other, I tried to think of something to say to Alice who sat quietly beside me. She shut the book and slid it back under her bed.

"My mom doesn't know I have it," she said quietly, still looking at her lap.

"But didn't she take some of those?" I asked.

"Yeah, a lot, but after—you know—after he was gone, she threw the camera away. The good one was getting fixed somewhere, so we'd been using a disposable one. I found it in the trash that night when I tossed some Kleenex in the kitchen can. I had to get it out."

I nodded, understanding that undeniable impulse to do something—even if it wasn't something you understood. I understood that Alice needed to have those pictures.

“I bought the album the next day, and took the camera to get developed. Mom thought I was out with Hallie and the girls. She said it’d be good for me to get some air.”

Alice shook her head and continued to speak. “It’s weird, but, I, I just—I only got to see him for a few minutes.” Alice’s voice was eerily quiet. “The doctor asked me if I wanted to hold him, and I said yes. But it wasn’t like I imagined it.”

I nodded. I had only seen dead things—birds, a cat, raccoons—but I’d never touched one, much less held it against myself.

“When he handed him to me, he was still warm. I thought he’d be stiff and cold already, but he was still warm. Mom was crying so hard she left the room.”

“And your dad took the picture?”

“Yeah,” Alice said, scratching her thigh. She tucked her hair behind her ears. “Mom walked back in when he did it. I’ve never seen her so mad before.”

“At your dad?”

“Yeah,” Alice said, shaking her head. “I get why she was mad that he took it, and I’m pretty sure that’s why she threw the camera in the trash so quick. But I’m not mad.”

I looked at Alice’s bulletin board and stared at the vacation picture. Her dad looked normal enough. His eyes squinted at the camera and his light brown hair was ruffled.

Alice continued to talk. “I spent so much time with the baby inside me, you’d think I’d feel like I knew him, but I never did. I had to keep the pictures. I don’t want the only reminder I have of him to be from someone else’s face. Or the scars.”

I wanted to ask whose face reminded Alice of the baby very badly but restrained myself. There were rumors that it was a guy she slept with while drunk at a party only

once, but I was pretty sure the father had to be the boyfriend, Aaron, she had for a couple of months before she started to show. I wanted to know where Aaron was in those pictures, why he wasn't at the hospital with her, why they weren't together when she had the baby. But, I knew, Alice would tell me if she wanted to. And, then again, what if she wouldn't?

My heart raced as I let the word "whose" escape my lips.

Alice turned her face to me and, eyes rimmed red, opened her mouth and named the person at the top of the list of the people I never would have guessed to be Alice's dead baby's father.

"Billy Thorburn."

My eyes grew wide like golf balls.

"It was a mistake," Alice said quickly, shaking her head. "I never meant for it to happen. He's horrible," she said with a shiver, making the bed quiver beneath us.

We jumped when the door flew open and Mrs. Rayburn entered.

"Alice, get downstairs and outside. Honey, I know—"

"—Mom, we're going, okay?" Alice's voice was edgy. "I had to get ready! And I don't even want to do this. It was your idea anyway!"

"Well, go now that you are ready. I know that this isn't easy for you considering..." Mrs. Rayburn lingered on the word and a dark shadow passed over her face. "But it's just a fact of life and you have to go outside and talk to everyone. Remember, we didn't just make this decision alone. The clam bake happens every year, and it's important for you to come out and socialize. You cannot stay cooped up here

forever—Sal or no Sal.” Mrs. Rayburn turned and smiled at me. I wondered what she thought about her grandson’s father.

Alice and I stood up, but she paused at her mirror to finish applying make up to her other eye while her mother and I stood, awkwardly, waiting for her. When Alice placed the small brush back in its case, Mrs. Rayburn walked out of the bedroom. After she grabbed a pair of shoes from the bottom of her closet, Alice and I followed her mother’s lead down the hall. As we walked, I tried to digest what Alice had divulged. The father of her baby was the same guy who locked me in his mother’s closet for hours when I was seven years old. By the time he let me out, I had peed my pants. I burned with shame and embarrassment as Billy Thorburn’s mother scolded me and handed me a pair of his cargo pants to wear until my mother came to pick me up.

Alice slept with Billy Thorburn.

As we walked, Alice turned to me and said under her breath, “Just don’t say anything. No one knows.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering what Alice told her mom if she hadn’t told her the truth.

When we reached the entry to the back porch of the house, we both breathed a long breath without looking at each other. I was worried that I wouldn’t fit in and everyone would be staring at me, the girl from the poor side of town, wearing the wrong clothes and turning red at any sign of attention paid to her. Alice probably worried her parents’ guests would talk about her baby and that they would want to tell her she looked great when she was pretty certain she didn’t. And maybe she was worried that, somehow, they could see Billy Thorburn’s face in hers.

VI

It'd be an understatement if I said I wasn't shocked by Alice's confession. She had a reputation, one that didn't suggest she spent her weekends studying. If there was one thing everyone in school knew—even the most uninformed students—it was that there were a lot of boys in Alice's life. It didn't surprise anyone that she got pregnant. But no one in their right mind would have suspected Billy.

The thought made me shudder.

Maybe Alice saw something in Billy that I didn't.

I saw the way Billy made May cry in seventh grade. The way I remembered it made it difficult for me to come up with any sympathy for Billy's situation, even knowing as much as I did about his life behind the broken, screened door on his sagging front porch. Alice had to have heard about what he did to May. May was the only real slow kid we had at school then, and Alice had just moved to our district. Someone surely would have told her about May.

May should have gone to a special school, but her family didn't have much money; sometimes she wore the same Bambi tee-shirt two or three days in a row. The little deer's head was so stained you couldn't see his eyes anymore and there was a hole in the back of it where the butterfly sat on his tail. May wasn't that far gone; she smiled at

everyone and said “hello” when anyone walked past her. Her goggling eyes often looked at me sincerely behind her thick, gray-framed glasses strapped securely to her head, her arm always cocked at an awkward angle at the side of her body. A lot of kids would tell her to go to hell and said other mean things to May when she talked to them, but I never said anything to her. I don’t know if she understood my classmates’ cruel words or not; she’d just smile with her crooked teeth and wiggle her fingers.

I saw a show about people in comas. Some of the people who were interviewed had recovered and said that they could hear people talking to them the whole time they were sleeping. I always kind of wondered if May could hear us somehow from another place in her mind and if she could understand what everyone was saying to her. Maybe one day she’d be normal and remember everything. I couldn’t imagine what it was like to have a mind like hers, but I understood what it felt like to be trapped inside a body that was a lot less strong than the person inside of it.

May got on the bus later than everyone else. It picked her up late in the morning, and in the afternoons, when we all were ready to go home, she boarded five minutes after everyone else because during the last period of the day, May sat in the office with the nurse who helped her go through all her homework due the next day. When May finally got on the bus, it took her a while to walk down the aisle. And because she wasn’t like the rest of us, she always had trouble finding a seat to sit in; no one wanted to share their seat with the slow kid. Billy would hiss at her, “Sit down, retard! We’re already late ‘cause of you.” May would just smile and wiggle her fingers at him.

One time, when Mrs. McGill stepped off the bus and left us there alone for a few minutes before we left the school, Billy blocked May from walking down the aisle. He

told her she had to say the password to get through. May, not understanding, tried to go around Billy. She pushed herself up against his round chest. The top of her head didn't even reach his shoulders. Billy, with a look of hate, pulled back his thick arm. May was too busy trying to push her way through Billy to notice his sausage-fingered hand coming at Bambi's smiling face. I braced myself, all my muscles tightening, for what was about to come. Billy's hand connected with May's round shoulder and there was a gurgling thump, the sound of an unsuspecting body hitting the floor. Billy knocked May flat on her back. She looked up at him with in surprise, her eyes round, as he smirked down at her. If May would have been like the rest of us, she would have known to be afraid.

I wanted to get up and hit Billy back, to knock him to the floor, but I knew if I stood, I was just asking to occupy the space next to May on the floor of the bus. May lay on the floor for a moment in shock and then began to wail. The noise was horrifying and reminded me of the sounds rabbits make when being tortured by a cat. It's one of the worst sounds in the world, the sound of a rabbit screaming. When May started making that noise and flailing her arms around, rolling on the dirty, black floor of the bus, Billy plugged his ears and laughed, looking to the rest of the kids for a similar reaction. Most of us, like me, were quiet. I wondered what May saw when she looked up at Billy's face. I wondered if Alice had looked into his eyes when they made the baby, if she had seen the darkness that was inside of him.

May died a week later due to complications with vertebrae in her spine, a condition, we were told, that had already existed. I don't remember what the condition was called. No one ever said that Billy had anything to do with May's death, but, inside, I've always believed it was his fault. In a way, May got lucky. Billy would have

probably done worse to her later on. I never told anyone that I thought Billy was responsible for May's death because I was afraid of what Billy'd do to me. I guess that's why some of the kids laughed along with him when May lay on the floor alone. They were scared. You can say what you want, but when somebody tells you they swear they won't tell anyone else what you've told them—even adults—they always do anyway. Being brave is good and all, but I wasn't ready to get my face rearranged because of it. And, at that time in my life, I never imagined I would be ready to compromise my own safety to do the right thing. I wondered what Alice would have done had she been next to me when Billy shoved May.

Alice and I walked out the front door and the late afternoon sunlight made me squint. I smoothed the pink dress that hung around my thighs and watched the cement of the front stairs pass underneath my feet. I let Alice walk in front of me, leading the way to the back of the house. We could have just gone out the back door that would have put us directly on the porch, but I got the sense that Alice wanted to see the crowd of people before they saw her.

Even though she had spent most of her time going along with the crowd assembled on her porch, Alice was different after she got pregnant. When her friends left her alone in the wake of a life-altering mistake, she embraced it mistake, carrying it proudly through the halls of unforgiving, sneering classmates. And after she lost the extra weight that had made her into more than just a cheerleader party star, she didn't go revert back to her weekends of parties, boys, and booze.

We walked across the grass along the front of the house slowly. I noticed how the blanket of green that highlighted the house; every individual piece of the grass fit together to form a bright and lush carpet. As we kept walking, I noticed each blade was different from the next—an imperfection on its surface, a piece of dirt interrupting the brilliant color. But, when all together, not one piece of grass stood out more than another.

Billy picked on those who stood out the most, so when Alice's belly ballooned, she became Billy's new object of affection. When rumors first started going around that Alice was pregnant, I had no idea what was hidden behind her blonde cheerleader hair when Billy hissed "whore" into her ear just loud enough so everyone around her could hear as he passed her in the hall. As her stomach grew rounder and rounder, Billy tried to trip Alice in the lunchroom. I watched him as he would bump into her desk in class, knocking her books all over the floor, and he'd laugh as she struggled to bend over and pick them up. There was even a time he tied her shoestrings together during an assembly and caused her to fall forward onto the baby growing inside of her.

It was difficult for me to understand how he went from sleeping with her to calling her a "slut." It was also difficult for me to understand how she slept with him in the first place—and, then, how she stayed so tight-lipped while he tormented her and his own child. But, the more I thought about it, the more I understood. Alice wouldn't want anyone to know it was Billy's baby. And everyone was pretty certain that the baby was someone else's. And, I thought further, maybe Billy hadn't wanted to sleep with Alice either—maybe it was just a mistake, like she had said.

Alice and I climbed the stairs of the massive porch. It started on the side of the house and continued around the back. The scents of shellfish and pizza filled my nose. People littered the surface of the smooth dark wood so much that some stood on the different sets of stairs. On the porch were five or six grills, the kind I had seen at the barbecue restaurant my parents took me to for the celebration of their ten year anniversary. Flames licked at racks of ribs and pizzas on the grates of the grills. Big silver buckets of clams sat in the center of some of the tables on the porch, and there were more of them scattered neatly on the bright, green lawn behind the porch. The people from the kitchen I had seen earlier were now outside in the crowd of guests with pizza slices on platters and pitchers of water and some kind of alcohol.

Teresa offered us some pizza. Alice reached for a slice, and I followed her lead. I felt very out of place amidst the friends and family of the Rayburns. I almost wished I had just worn jeans and a tee-shirt. Alice, even though she was wearing a homecoming dress, still looked like she belonged. These are her people, I remember thinking, not mine. I didn't have people. A man with a bald head came up to Alice as we headed to a cluster of tables at the far end of the porch to get away from the crowd of polo shirts and khaki shorts. The man put his arm around Alice's shoulders.

"Allie, honey, how are you?"

Alice forced a smile.

"Oh, hi Uncle John, I'm fine."

"Really?" He said it as if he didn't believe her. He stepped in front of Alice so we had to stop walking.

There was an uncomfortable silence. I worried that I'd drop the pizza from my plate. I couldn't imagine what I'd do if it fell on the ground.

"Yeah," Alice said tossing her hair and trying to sidestep Uncle John. His goatee twitched, and he grabbed her arm.

"I just want you to know that Aunt Hilary and I are praying for you every day. And if you ever need anything, you just call. We know how hard this must be—"

"Thanks," Alice said, cutting him off. "I'm fine." She stepped around him, twisting out of his grip, and grabbed my wrist and steered us down a set of glossy wood stairs that I would have liked to study a little longer if we weren't in such a hurry.

Glancing behind her, Alice let her hand drop from my wrist, leaned to my ear and said, "He's so freaking creepy. My aunt, too. My dad's brother. He thinks he can 'save' me, you know? Because I got pregnant, I must need to be saved, right?" Alice brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "He's just trying to make up for his own issues."

I nodded and asked, "What do you mean?"

We climbed another set of stairs to go back onto the porch.

"He drinks. You couldn't tell?" She whispered. Alice looked curiously at my face as we found a table that was still empty.

"I mean, I thought something was weird, but, you know, I didn't—well, I mean, yeah..." I let my voice trail off. I felt stupid. I didn't want Alice to know that I had no idea what she was talking about. She knew a lot more about all that stuff than I ever did—she had probably even done it, too.

We sat down, and I picked up my pizza and realized I didn't have a napkin. I worried about the pink dress and the red sauce that would probably end up on it before I

finished the first slice on my plate. I could never manage to eat without making a mess of myself. Just the fact that I was dressed up guaranteed that I would spill something. The thought of it made my skin grow sticky, and I was glad I at least remembered to wear deodorant. As I worried about the absent napkin, I tried not to look at anyone who walked by the table. Alice looked like she was doing the same, her face hidden by her hair.

“This isn’t so bad, is it?” I asked with my eyes on my plate.

Alice shook her head.

“It’s worse, actually,” she said. “I figured everyone’d be swarming me with questions and whatever, but they’re ignoring me.”

“I don’t think, um, I mean, maybe they don’t know what to say,” I said carefully.

“My mom said it was important for me to be here today so everyone could see that I was still the same as before and that being here would also show everyone that I respected myself enough to keep doing the same stuff I was doing before the baby.”

“That sounds good,” I said.

“I thought so, too,” Alice said, “until I realized that I don’t care what these people think. I don’t care if they don’t want me to go back to the country club, or if they don’t want me to babysit their kids anymore. I don’t care. None of them cared enough to try and help when everything was happening; they only sent flowers for his funeral. They only care that I keep their image of perfection safe.”

Alice’s voice was angry.

“Alice!” Alice’s mom walked around the corner of the house and bounced up the stairs on the back of the porch. Her leopard print shirt rippled in the wind.

“Alice, honey! Your friends all just arrived. Hallie, Jessica, and Renee—they’re setting their things in the house first and then heading back here to sit with you. Shall I ask Mary to bring more chairs?” Alice’s mother gestured at a brown-haired woman with a white collared dress shirt holding a pizza tray out to a sea of women wearing white pants and bobbed haircuts.

“Mom,” Alice said narrowing her eyes, “I told you about them.” Alice’s face tightened, and she looked hurt.

“Oh, Alice, I know, but they’re you’re best friends—you used to be in ballet together when you were little tiny girls! Don’t you remember? They’re anxious to see you. The first thing they asked me was ‘Where’s Alice?’”

Alice shook her head as her mother trotted back around the house to catch up to Mary for the chairs.

“I can’t believe her sometimes,” Alice said, stabbing at her pizza with a fork.

“I think she’s just trying to help, you know?” I said.

“Well, she has no idea how to do that.” Alice took a breath and opened her mouth to say something else, but before she could say anything, Hallie, Jessica, and Renee were climbing the porch stairs beside our table. Alice folded her arms across her chest. Her elbows were pointy.

The girls’ heels clicked across the porch.

“Allie!” Hallie cried as if she hadn’t been able to speak to Alice when she saw her earlier that day at school.

The other girls said hello to Alice as well, but none of them even glanced at me. My skin grew clammy and cool as the sun started to set. The glare of the sunlight cast an

orange glow around Alice. She didn't say anything. Mary arrived with the extra chairs which the girls quickly surrounded Alice with, leaving me on the other side of the round table alone. Alice kept her eyes locked with mine. I didn't know what to do, but I felt like this was a piece of Alice's life where I didn't belong.

"So, Allie, what's been going on? You haven't come for a Friday fun night in a really long time. We miss you. My mom was asking me when you're going to come back over again for her special secret cocktails," Hallie giggled.

Alice hadn't spoken to Hallie in months, but Hallie was acting as if nothing had happened between them. As if she hadn't replaced Alice with another girl just dying to be a part of her social group. But Hallie was Alice's best friend out of all the girls, and I guessed that maybe she wasn't ready to give that up.

"Allie, we miss you," Jessica chimed in and Renee nodded. "Where have you been?"

I wanted to get up and excuse myself to the bathroom, but I was torn. What if Alice needed me? Then again, what would she need me for?

Alice's blue eyes were cold—and in that moment, I felt afraid of what was about to erupt from inside her. The same kind of electricity entered the air as when Billy had stood behind me in the lunch room and Alice seemed to fill with anger.

"Where have you been," Alice hissed, standing and hitting her hands on the table. The girls jumped at the sound. Jessica picked up her purse and held it to her chest. Renee's glossed lips trembled, and she looked like she was going to cry. Hallie, on the other hand, stared right at Alice's face and stood up herself. She pushed her dark hair away from her shoulders and pulled her tight, black dress around her thighs.

“You think we can just pick right back up where we left off like you were so worried about me and like I’ve been the one who decided to ignore you?” Alice continued.

“Allie—” Hallie said with a small smile, her small brown eyes fierce and patronizing.

“Stop calling me that. I hate it. Why’d you even come here?”

“Because,” Hallie said pressing her shiny pink lips together, “we were invited by your mother.”

“I don’t care who invited you. Why would you think you should come here? Why would any of you think I’d want you to sit with me? Why the hell do you think I’d want to talk to you ever again?”

Renee mustered some courage and in a shaky voice said, “Maybe you’re overreacting. We should just try and talk about everything and then...” she didn’t finish her sentence.

“And then what, Renee? There is no ‘and then’ for me with you guys. It’s over.”

“Alice, come on, we didn’t know what to do,” Hallie said, her voice getting high.

“Oh you didn’t, did you? Let me recall what you did know how to do. You did know how to spread rumors and call me names. You did know how to find another girl to be best friends with and then you definitely knew how to come find me when you found out there wasn’t going to be any baby. You all knew exactly how to do that, didn’t you? You never think of anyone but yourselves.”

“Oh, and you’re such a victim, aren’t you, Alice?” Hallie stood from her chair and put her hands on her hips. She turned her body to fully face her former best friend.

“You’re just oh-so-perfect, aren’t you? If it weren’t for that baby, you never would have left us. Don’t you remember who you were, Alice? Don’t you? If it would have been me, would you have stayed beside me when I was getting fat and sacrificed that crush you had on Tyler just to help me? I don’t think so.” Hallie’s face grew red and she pushed her hair off her forehead. Her fake pink nails glinted in the sun.

“Yeah, in fact, I would have because you were my best friend.” Alice’s voice grew quiet. “You were supposed to be my best friend.” Her eyes stayed cold.

“Well, you took care of that, didn’t you?” Hallie said, finally looking at me. She let her eyes connect to mine, and I dropped my head and looked at the table. I could feel all the girls staring at me.

“Don’t even, Hallie. Salma was there when none of you were.”

“Oh yeah? Salma just swooped right in and saved you, didn’t she? With her sweatshirt wings, right?”

“Stop it,” Alice said and a pained look appeared on her face.

I didn’t know what was going on.

“I can’t believe you,” Hallie’s voice grew loud.

I looked up from the table and noticed that everyone was looking at us. All the guys in their cargo pants and polo shirts and the women with their frosted hair and sparkling jewelry were watching Alice and Hallie unravel. I wondered where Alice’s mother was.

“Hallie, stop,” Alice pleaded.

“Don’t you remember what you used to say about her? You wouldn’t have been caught dead talking to Salma Porter. You said she was so out there she didn’t even

belong with any group. You said she was her own friend—that's why she didn't have any. That her mother was crazy and her father was crazy for marrying her—and that they probably never let Salma outside of the house besides to go to school and that was why she's so weird and..."

I tuned Hallie's voice out and looked at Alice's face.

"Sal, I'm so sorry—I—"

I got up. The big house and the green grass and canopy of trees blended together in the setting sun. My heart was pounding. It filled my ears and, though I could see Alice's lips forming words and was aware of her hand lightly sitting on my shoulder, all I could hear was my heart and all I could feel was a wave of heat that suddenly enveloped me. I ran down the stairs of the porch, across the grass and to the driveway, keeping my feet in rhythm with the rapid beat of my heart in my ears.

I ran down the long, paved driveway and stopped at the end, only after I reached the street, and bent to take off my shoes. The blisters were bleeding. My hair fell into my face and I pushed it across my forehead, dampening it with mingling sweat and tears. I couldn't believe what I just heard, couldn't process what just happened, so I looped Billy's mom's shoes around my wrist and started to run again. I didn't think about what Hallie said about Alice, didn't think about Alice's face when she said it, instead I just thought about getting to Mr. Fenster's woods to sit down by the creek.

I ignored the pain in my feet and just felt the pavement beneath them. I counted my breaths after I decided if in and out counted as one breath or if in equaled one and out equaled another. I ran and looked at the ground beneath my bare feet, the orangeing sky

of the sunset, the line of small trees that grew bigger as I neared them. I didn't think of Alice, or Hallie, or my mother, or anyone—I was just running and breathing.

VII

When I reached my gravel driveway, I hesitated. I wanted to take the dress off, but it was already dirty. I kicked the gravel with my toes, leaving a streak of blood across the gray stones, and tried to ignore how much they hurt, but every time I quit thinking about that pain, I thought of Alice's face and I didn't want to focus on that either. I started up the driveway slowly and stopped halfway, knowing what I would face inside the screen door.

My mother would want a full report the minute I got in the door. She'd ask a bunch of questions about the party. She'd want to know who I talked to, if there were any boys there, when the next time I would be going out again was, if I danced, if I turned into a socialite in the span of the mere two hours I was gone, not remembering that one of those hours making up the time I had taken to walk there and back. I wished I could drive. It rarely bothered me that I couldn't, but I could imagine how much better driving into the sunset, driving until I couldn't keep my eyes open, would be than running to the woods. My parents didn't have a spare car for me, and I didn't see the point in getting a license if I couldn't go anywhere. And, besides, I didn't usually have anywhere to go anyway. I turned and faced away from the house.

The last thing I wanted was to walk through the door of the home I had grown up in and be confronted by my mother about one of the worst days of my life, so I snuck a

quick look at the windows on the house to make sure my mother wasn't peering at me from inside the living room, and ran down the drive and back out to the street.

I ran until I knew I was at the point of where our property and Mr. Fenster's met. I would have gone through our back yard, but I knew my mother would see me or maybe just sense me, even though there was no way to see all the way to the property line from inside the house. I set my hand lightly on the barbed wire fence that kept trespassers from the street off Mr. Fenster's land. I pushed the palm of my hand against the points of the barbs and thought about them puncturing my skin.

Jumping the fence wasn't an option—especially not in a dress. I tried it before in pants and ended up with ripped jeans and red scratches on my thighs. I would have to slide underneath. I dropped the shoes in the grass and bent and picked up the fence from its bottom wire and slowly slid myself under it. I was glad I lived in the country part of Elmwood or cars would have driven by and gotten a nice glimpse of what was under that dress.

In mid-crawl, I flipped over on my back and took a second to look at the sky. Orange had spread all over and only hints of the bright blue that colored it earlier remained. As I flipped back onto my stomach, I felt the skirt of the dress lift from my skin. I reached to detach the pink material from the barb and when I started to crawl again, I heard a rip. I imagined what my mother would say if I told her what happened to the dress. She had been so happy when she gave it to me that Christmas—even happier when I put it on earlier in the afternoon for the party. When I had seen the wrapped shoe box under the tree, I was hoping for the set of walkie talkies I asked for even though I had no one to talk to, and instead was met with the shining dress that was now torn. I

remembered looking in the box and trying to smile at my mother when I thanked her, Daddy watching from the old green chair in the corner of the living room.

I stood up and turned my head over my shoulder to examine the rip. It was right above the back of my knee. I would have to make up a good story about it. The last thing I wanted to tell my mother was that I left the party early because my only friend in the world had betrayed me and I was embarrassed and ran to be alone, snagging the beloved dress in the process.

I walked into the woods and realized I left Mrs. Thorburn's white shoes lying on the other side of the fence by the road. I thought about going to get them, but I didn't think anyone would take them anywhere. The rocks were padded by the layers of grass and leaves didn't hurt so much under my feet anymore either. The path in the woods had grown over since I was little. Mr. Fenster always kept it clear when his wife, Ellen, was alive, but after she died, people said that he just lost his motivation to move. I wondered if that was true. If Mr. Fenster just sat inside his house all day and looked out at his farm land, thinking about what it used to be. Or maybe thinking nothing at all. I wondered if it was possible to think nothing.

I got to the edge of the creek and, for a minute, I worried about how I would find my way out of here in the dark. There was little light left now that I was surrounded by trees. The creek only reflected small speckles of light. I sat down on the bank and stuck my feet in the water. It was cold, but it relieved the stinging pain of my blisters and made me think about something other than hurt for a moment. I lifted my feet out of the water and then put them back in again. I watched the way they completely disappeared as they

were consumed by the liquid. It looked like I had no feet. I wondered what that would be like, to have no feet. Probably pretty bad.

I avoided thinking about what had happened at that party as long as I could. I recounted the things Hallie said in my memory and folded my arms across my chest. Goosebumps spread across my skin. If Alice had said those things, then she probably was not who I thought she was. I wasn't sure that Alice had said everything Hallie said she did; girls like that lie. But I didn't know why Hallie would lie. I wasn't in Hallie's way or anything. Alice could be her friend if she wanted to, and she decided she didn't. I thought back on the time before I knew Alice, before I walked into the bathroom that day and saw her sitting, bleeding, on the floor. Alice was flat in my mind before the months we had spent together. I remembered going to a mandatory pep rally at school once and Alice doing a performance with the cheerleaders. I remembered seeing her walk past me in the hall, but I never took the time to really see her—and I didn't think you really could see a person until you actually knew them. But maybe I didn't really know Alice.

Maybe, like I had thought in the beginning, Alice felt like she owed me something for being there that day when no one else was. And because she thought I was such a friendless loser, the only way to pay me back was to be my friend. If that was what she thought, she was wrong. I didn't need friends. I was fine on my own for a long time before Alice came around, and I would be fine again now without her. But as much as I tried to convince myself that it would be simple to go right back to the existence I had led before I met Alice, I felt a restlessness inside of me that, more than anything, wanted her

by my side. I was right, though, I would be fine again without her. I could easily return to where I had been before, but I could not easily forget about where I was.

I pulled my feet out of the water and hugged my knees. The creek no longer sparkled. It was a sheet of black, as were the ground I was sitting on and the trees that stood surrounding me. I should have gone home earlier. I thought my mother might worry, but, I figured, the longer I stayed gone, the happier she would be when I got back because I'd tell her about the friends I'd made and fun I'd had all those hours I'd been gone. The only problem with this plan, as I saw it, was going to be that my mother would expect me to be gone more often with my newfound friends. But maybe it wasn't a problem after all. It just meant I would spend more time over at Mr. Fenster's. That didn't seem like such a bad idea.

An owl hooted from somewhere in the trees. I heard leaves rustle and felt my arms bristle. I worried that someone was there. I figured the noise had to be the breeze. And even if someone was there, it wouldn't be anyone threatening. No one went in these woods, as far as I knew, besides me. When I was younger, some kids made up stories about how the woods were haunted here, that Mr. Fenster's wife walked around, bloody and howling, trying to find her husband. I never did understand that story. She died in her sleep, and she wasn't bloody. Her heart stopped and no one knew why. Death just happens, whether it can be explained or not. The only other person who might have been back here was Mr. Fenster, and it couldn't have been him because he never left the house.

“Sal!”

I heard Daddy's voice yell out from somewhere behind me, and I turned and faced the darkness.

“Sal!”

I turned back to the creek. If I answered him, he’d know that I wasn’t at the party anymore. I didn’t want to explain it to him, but I did want to go home.

“Salma!”

He rarely used my full name.

Daddy’s voice got closer until he sounded like he was right next to me. I saw light reflect off the creek and squinted as it bounced from the water to my face to the bank of the creek.

“Daddy?” I asked quietly.

The light washed over my face for a minute, then flickered back to the trees around me, then quickly back to my face.

“Salma, where have you been?”

Out of the tall black trees, one moved forward and was the unmistakable shape of my father. His lean frame moved in my direction, and he sat down beside me.

“I—I was at a party.”

“Your mother told me. But why are you here now? Why didn’t you come home?”

“I just needed to think.” I stared at the invisible water in front of me.

There was a pause.

“It didn’t go well,” he said.

I was glad he didn’t make me say it. I felt a rush of emotion run through me, just because someone was connecting with me, and I shook my head in response.

“What happened?”

Daddy didn't usually ask me questions about things like my mother did. I opened my mouth to tell him about Alice, about the other girls, about how weird I felt around all those people at that big house, but when I did all that came out was a squeak.

Daddy put his arm around my back and pulled my head to his shoulder as I cried. I couldn't remember the last time someone was around when I cried. There, leaning against my father, it felt like all the frustration and upset of the day—and other days, too—was running out of me.

Daddy waited until I was silent again before he pulled my hand to stand. We walked back through the woods to the house by the light of the flashlight. I felt awkward holding his hand but comforted. When we got to the house, Daddy stopped, let go of my hand, and stepped back from me. He shined the light over me and I squinted and felt half of a smile draw across my face.

“You look pretty, Sal. Real Pretty.”

My cheeks heated, and I shook my head. But I felt happy.

“Listen, uh, when we go in, I'll talk to your mother. You just go wash up, okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

Daddy moved to the door on the back of the house and turned the knob. I stood close behind him and waited for him to go into the house first, but before he moved, he held the door and motioned for me to enter.

I walked down the hall to the bathroom and shut the door before my mother even knew I was back. I could hear muffled conversation through the bathroom door, but when I turned the water on in the shower, I heard nothing. I slipped off the torn dress and tossed it on the floor. I stepped into the shower and pretended that the water pounding

across my skin was rinsing the day away—and a lot of days before it—and that when I emerged from the bathtub, a new life would begin and I could start over. The drops from the showerhead pelted me and slipped into the drain and then they were gone.

I imagined myself starting a new life with friends and hair that was pretty, living up to my mother's expectations and being happy about it. And then I remembered Billy Thorburn's mother's white, heeled dress shoes sitting by the side of the road in the grass.

VIII

I couldn't believe I left those shoes outside. What if it rained? What would I do then? I got out of the shower and dried myself with a towel from the cabinet below the sink. I flicked off the fan and listened for my parents' voices. I didn't hear anything. I dried my hair roughly, rubbing the towel quickly across my scalp. When I was younger, my mother used to dry my hair. I think she was afraid to hurt me because when I went to bed after my bath, I always woke up with a big wet spot on my pillow in the morning.

I took a deep breath and nervously ran my fingers through the tangles in my hair. I would just have to deal with it. It wasn't like they were Billy's shoes, I reminded myself. They were his mother's. My fingers got stuck in my hair and I tried to look at the knot but couldn't see it. I moved to the mirror on the medicine cabinet above the sink and pulled the clump apart hair by hair. I let my eyes drift from the hair to my reflection. I tried to see what Daddy saw, but I didn't. I couldn't find pretty on my face at all.

I wrapped the towel around me tightly, picked up the dress from the floor, and opened the door of the bathroom. I walked quickly down the dark hall to my bedroom and shut the door. I could hear my mother's voice in my parents' bedroom on the other side of my wall. I didn't want to know what she was asking, but I wondered what Daddy was answering.

My stomach growled as I pulled on a pair of well-worn sweatpants. I remembered the slice of pizza I left sitting on my plate at Alice's house. I thought about the waffles in the freezer and figured I could be quiet enough to make them without anyone knowing I was up and moving around. I heard the sound of my parents' bedroom door opening, a squeak and a click, and decided instead not to risk a collision with my mother over a trip into the kitchen. My stomach could wait. I pulled a tee-shirt out of my dresser and slid it over my head. The outfit was a relief after that dress the past few hours. I hated the way that dress clung to my body. I looked at the pile of pink in front of my closet on the floor. I wished I had taken my mother up on those sewing lessons she wanted to give me last summer. I had decided I'd rather read than stick myself in a room with her and a pincushion of needles for more than twenty minutes—but now I almost regretted it.

I picked the dress up and let it slide through my fingers, the material still silky even after the barbed wire fence and the dirt that soaked into it from the bank of the creek. It must have cost a lot—probably a lot more than we had to spend on a Christmas present—even then. My mother never sacrificed quality of clothing for a decent price. Every time the credit card bill came in the mail, Daddy would leave it sitting on the kitchen table until a few days before it was due, almost as if he were hoping it would disappear. And when he opened it up, he'd drag his hands up and down the sides of his face and rub his eyes till they were red.

I climbed into bed and lay awake, still thinking. My mother came from a different kind of world than my dad did. She grew up in a big white house with a lake in front of it. Her parents owned the gas stations in the nearby towns. She didn't have time

to want things; she had them before she could ask. In the pictures she kept in her dresser drawer, the ones she used to show me when I still sat on her lap, she smiled big and wide and her clothes were always edgy and expensive. She wouldn't have been caught dead with someone like me for a friend when she was in high school. My mother had a canopy bed in her white-carpeted bedroom, and a case full of cheerleading trophies. I guess she was what people think of when they say "refined." And when Daddy showed up in the driveway in his beat up Ford with rusting doors and a rumbling engine, it seems like "refined" kind of fell to the wayside.

My mother's parents, my grandparents, forbid her to see Daddy. They told her that he wasn't right for her, that she could date someone who lived in their neighborhood, not someone from the country. But my mother wanted Daddy—and maybe more when they told her she couldn't have him. She told me their story when I was younger quite a few times. I'd sit, her legs underneath my bottom, and she'd rub her hand absentmindedly over my arms and shoulders while she disappeared. She'd go back to that time when Daddy first showed up in the driveway to ask her out. She'd find herself back in those hallways at school where the girls would whisper and the boys were in disbelief that she wasn't with Tim Carpenter, the quarterback of the football team, that instead, Margaret Jean Hatter was dating Daniel Porter. I'd play with her hair while she talked. I remember looking at her eyes and knowing that she wasn't with me.

"Salma," my mother would say to me as she petted my hair, "your father, he was something else then. My parents made me date Charles Horn, one of my father's colleague's sons. He grew this twitchy little mustache and when he laughed, it went up and down and he'd try and kiss me and it tickled and poked and I always pulled away."

She'd run her fingers through my hair and look out the window as I studied her face.

"I never did kiss him. They made me go on so many dates with him—for months—and I never did kiss him, Salma. I saved my kisses all for your daddy. And you know what? That first date I kissed him five minutes after I got into that truck of his. I got in the passenger side—opened the door myself. Before I brought him home to my parents, I had to teach him how to open doors and pull out chairs for me. Because, you know, my mother never would have looked pleasantly on him if he didn't have proper manners. Although, even after he learned them, it didn't seem to help."

My mother would talk and talk and I'd watch as she went back to that place where she knew who she was, where she was the daughter of rich and respected parents who expected her future to be the same kind of life they had already built for her. But when she didn't pick that future, when she brought Daddy home and announced they were getting married, her parents were so beside themselves that they didn't say a word or object to the wedding. My mother had a secret, and even though she didn't tell her parents right away, not until after she and my father exchanged their wedding vows, my grandparents knew that the secret was me.

I guess they just kind of didn't like Daddy, but maybe because they loved my mother so much, they tried to accept him into the family. And I guess they kept trying to be okay with it, but they weren't and, as my mother told it, they just kind of stopped calling and stopped visiting. I wondered how you did that, just stopped talking when you really cared about someone, but maybe it was easiest to avoid the awkwardness that filled the room when they were all together. Maybe it wasn't so hard not to talk to people.

I fell asleep on top of my covers and woke up cold and hungry in the morning. The scent of coffee hung in the air and my stomach growled. I got up and walked down the hall to the kitchen. Daddy was sitting at the table with the newspaper and my mother was standing at the stovetop, cooking pancakes. I stood in the doorway between the living room and the kitchen and looked at my parents. Daddy's tanned hands held the newspaper and his eyes were glued to its pages. My mother's thin back arched as she bent over the pancakes sizzling in a pan on top of the stove.

"You're going to burn them if you don't flip them now," Daddy said, not looking up from his newspaper.

My mother's brown curls bounced as she hit the spatula on the counter.

"They're not going to burn," she said, turning and noticing me standing there. "Salma, come sit. Would you like pancakes?"

I nodded and padded into the kitchen and sat down in one of the faded wood chairs with ripping vinyl backs and seats and folded my legs underneath me. Daddy reached over and patted my head.

My mother set a pancake on a plate in front of me and handed me a fork.

"Salma, you know if you sit like that, you have poor posture. And you'll get spider veins."

I shrugged my shoulders and ate a bite of the pancake. I didn't care about spider veins; I hated shorts anyway. The pancake practically melted in my mouth. A stack of them sat in the center of the table, and I proceeded to eat three more of them before my mother even sat down at the table.

“Well, you must have worked up quite the appetite at the party last night. How was it?”

I reached for a glass of orange juice she had set by my fork and took a drink before I could answer. I thought of all the possible ways I could answer this question as I swallowed the juice.

“Fine,” I said.

“What did you do all evening?”

“Nothing,” I answered, reaching for another pancake.

My mother shook her head. “You didn’t do nothing, Salma, that’s impossible.”

“Okay,” I said, sighing, with a bite a pancake still in my mouth, “Well, you know, we ate. And talked. And stuff.”

“So what are you girls doing today?” my mother asked as she took a sip of coffee.

One of Daddy’s eyebrows raised behind the newspaper.

“Who?” I asked as if I didn’t know who she meant. I knew exactly what my mother was talking about, it’s just that I had been hoping to avoid the question even though I knew that’s exactly where she would head the minute I talked to her after the party.

“Alice and the other girls you’re friends with.”

I wanted to say, “We’re not friends,” but I knew if I did that, things would go right back to the way they were before. My mother would be pushing me to go out and socialize again, to make friends, to get involved.

“We’re going over to the Dairy Freeze in a little bit,” I said, surprising myself with my own quick thinking.

“Oh good,” my mother exclaimed. It was almost as if she was trying to hold in her excitement. “What are you going to wear?”

“This,” I replied, gesturing to the sweatpants and tee-shirt I had slept in while I stood up.

“Funny,” my mother snapped.

I slid my chair out from the table. I caught Daddy’s inquiring eyes over his newspaper. I’m sure he wanted to know where I was really going and probably meant the look to tell me that I better be home before dark this time. I raised my eyebrows back at him. I wondered what he said to my mother last night when I came home so late.

I walked back to my bedroom and changed my clothes and yelled that I was leaving before I walked out the door and through the yard. As I traipsed across the grass, I realized that I needed to at least pretend I was going to the Dairy Freeze. I turned around and walked back past the house and my mother caught me. She knocked on the window and motioned for me to come to the porch door. I climbed the stairs and stood waiting for her to emerge.

“Salma, where’d you put Deena’s shoes? I was thinking I’d go return them to her this afternoon.”

I had forgotten all about the shoes.

“I already took them back,” I said without thinking.

Now I would have to take them back myself. I shuddered at the thought of going to Billy Thorburn’s house.

“Oh,” my mother said sounding surprised. Her face was unclear through the screen door.

“Well, have fun then,” she said.

I waved and walked down the stairs and driveway. When I was about a block and a half down the gravel road, I crossed to the other side and turned around. I headed to the shoes. Luckily, when I got there, they were still lying in the grass by the fence where I had left them. I picked them up, brushed them off, and hoped that Mrs. Thorburn wouldn't be home when I got to the house. I also hoped she wouldn't notice the faint smears of dirt across the shiny white fabric.

I squinted as I tried to decide which direction to head. If I walked back the way I was going, if my parents saw me, they'd wonder why I wasn't in town yet—but if I didn't head that way, I was going to walk an extra mile to go in a circle to get to Billy's house. I considered the possible outcomes. I didn't really want to be alone with my thoughts, but I decided I would walk the extra mile. I swung the shoes in my hand. I thought about how when you swing a bucket of water around, it doesn't spill out. I knew about gravity and force and all that stuff, but I liked to think the reason the water stayed in the bucket was because it wanted to, not because it didn't have a choice. It was comfortable there.

I spent my two mile walk trying to observe the scenery. The way the sky was bluer than I usually saw it. The trees that I forgot to look at when I was on the bus or in the car. The points of the stones underneath the thin soles of my tennis shoes. I wondered when the last time I had new shoes was. I thought of Jessica and Hallie and Renee's shoes at the party. They were bright—one pair was red and another yellow and I

didn't remember the other. I bet Alice had a whole closet full of shoes like that. I didn't remember her shoes from before, but it would have been hard to wear those pointy-toed heels on pregnant feet. I really thought she had changed after I met her. She didn't wear short skirts anymore—and the only time I had seen her in heels was at the party. Maybe I was silly to have thought she was different. I hadn't changed at all from who I was before. Maybe no one ever did.

The sidewalk was cracked in front of the Thorburns' house, but there wasn't any grass poking up through the dirt. The Thorburn's garage was empty—it was always empty. The story was that Billy's dad left him and his mom one day when he got home from his job at the hardware store downtown. People said he walked in the door and Deena was lying on the floor passed out from drinking or drugs or something like that, and Billy was in the other room crying. I didn't know why Mr. Thorburn didn't take Billy with him. But I guessed he wasn't a whole lot better than his wife, so it made sense. I heard he used to beat Billy when he was around, so maybe it was for the best.

I walked across the street to the Thorburns' front door and pressed the doorbell. It didn't make a noise—must have been broken. I really hated knocking on doors. There was just something about making that loud noise that felt intrusive to me. I pulled open the screened door on the sagging wooden porch, and it tumbled off its bottom hinge, just barely hanging onto the frame by the top one. I looked at the door, its rusting handle clenched in my hand, and wondered what to do next.

For a moment I contemplated leaving the shoes sitting right where I stood and running away, but I had to make sure they got to Mrs. Thorburn since I already told my

mother I had dropped them off. I couldn't take the chance of her not finding them—or someone's dog finding them. I shoved the shoes between my knees and raised my fist, still holding the door up, and knocked on the splintering wood. I almost breathed a sigh of relief when there was no response, but then I realized if I didn't give them to her now, I would have to come back over here later. I wiped my sweating hand on my pants and raised my fist to knock again but before I could, the door creaked open a crack.

“Who's there?” Mrs. Thorburn snapped.

“M-M-Mrs. Thorburn it's—I'm—Salma Porter, ma'am.” My face flushed.

I could see Deena Throburn's red-veined, black eyes in the small open space of the door and an overwhelming medicinal odor hit my nose so hard that it was difficult not to make a face.

“Oh,” she coughed, lifting her bony fingers from the door to cover her mouth, the door swinging open further to reveal a faded and stained baby blue tee-shirt that hung to her bare, knobby knees.

“Whaddya want?” she said, dropping her hand and pushing the door forward again so I could only see her eyes, the rest of her swallowed in the darkness behind the door.

“Sorry, um, for disturbing you. I brought your shoes back.” The words came out in a rush and I thrust the shoes toward the door.

Mrs. Thorburn's fingers reached toward mine, but instead of taking the shoes like I expected, she grabbed the thin red tee-shirt I was wearing by its front and pulled me inside the house. I tripped over a loose board on the floor separating the outside from the inside and the door I had been holding slammed against the side of the house and the

floor of the porch. Mrs. Thorburn's grip on my shirt was tight, and I stumbled through the familiar entryway under her lead.

"Wanna snack or something?" she gruffly asked me.

I looked at her, stunned, and noticed her usually black hair was now an awful shade of patchy red and clung together like pieces of straw. She noticed the shoes in my hand and took them from me. I ran my hands over the front of my wrinkled shirt and looked next to me at the familiar room I had spent so much time in as a child sitting and waiting to leave.

"Want somethin' to eat?" Mrs. Thorburn asked again.

"Um, no, thanks. I have to get going."

As if she didn't hear me (and maybe she didn't), Mrs. Thorburn turned and walked into the kitchen. There were ashtrays everywhere. Some on the end table, some on the window sill, even one on the banister that led upstairs, all full of ashes. I put my hands in the pockets of my pants. I wanted to leave, but I didn't want to be rude. Mrs. Thorburn probably wouldn't have noticed if I was rude, but I knew enough about her to know that sometimes if you moved too fast, it upset her.

"Salma," she called from the kitchen, "come in. It's not like you've never been here before. You aren't a guest, you know."

I didn't want to be a guest. I also didn't want to be whatever a not-guest was.

I slowly walked from the entrance way into the kitchen. I noticed how dirty the house was. The pure white carpet in the sitting room and then the living room wasn't pure white anymore. It had been a few years since I had been to the house, and things had really changed. Mrs. Thorburn was always kind of weird from what I remembered,

but I guess things had really taken a nosedive since I had been around her. She used to clean a lot, was always yelling at Billy to keep his filthy shoes off her clean carpet.

I entered the kitchen and cringed as my tennis shoes crunched across the tiled floor. I looked at Mrs. Thorburn to see if she noticed. She used to sweep and vacuum every day.

“How’s school?” Mrs. Thorburn asked, leaning against her kitchen counter.

“Okay,” I replied.

“Billy always says that shit, too,” she said and coughed.

The cough was awkward. It shook her entire body, and I wondered if I should ask her if she was alright or not.

“He doesn’t say much to me. He say anything to you? He always liked you,” Mrs. Thorburn said.

I didn’t know what to say to that. He never said much to me, but probably more than he said to her, though I doubted she’d want to know the details of our one-sided conversations. And, based on those conversations, I was absolutely positive that Billy Thorburn did not like me.

I shook my head.

“I don’t know about that boy.” Mrs. Thorburn opened a cabinet above the sink and reached over me to grab a package of cigarettes, pulled a lighter out of her pocket, and lit one of the bright white sticks of rolled paper. She inhaled deeply, eyes closed, and I pictured her lungs turning black. My mother always said that she had the most beautiful skin when they were young. It was hard for me to believe. Her nails were yellowed and so was her skin.

She tapped the box and a cigarette fell into the palm of her hand. I noticed she wasn't wearing her wedding ring anymore. She always told my mother that even though Billy's dad was bad to her and a bad guy, she hoped he'd come back someday because things were easier with him around. I wondered if Billy felt that way. But with the absence of the rings, it seemed as though she'd finally given up hope. Mrs. Thorburn stretched out her hand, offering a cigarette to me. I shook my head.

"Probably a good choice," she said as she took another drag. "Once you start, you don't have a prayer."

I wanted to leave. I felt uncomfortable. Not just because Mrs. Thorburn was disturbing but also because I felt like someone was watching me, as if Billy's eyes were following every minute movement I made. I wondered if he was even home. I also wondered, if he wasn't, where he could be. What if he saw me come in the house? I reminded myself again that he wouldn't do anything to me—not with his mother there. Of all the people Billy hated, I felt like maybe his mother wasn't one of them. He seemed to respect her—or maybe it was just fear that made him obey. I'd seen Billy Thorburn as angry as could be around his mother, but he always put up with her nagging and listened to her demands. Billy didn't seem to treat his mother the way he treated everyone else.

"M-Mrs. Thorburn, I really have to get going." I said meekly, wondering if she had even heard me.

"Right, that's all you kids do these days," she said flippantly, leaning against the counter, "leave. You're always leaving."

On her face was anger and irritation, but her eyes looked sad. She leaned back and waved her hand at me and said, “Go, go, go.”

“Thank you, um, thanks for the shoes,” I said, walking out of the kitchen and past the living room.

“Tell your mom to call me,” Mrs. Thorburn yelled from the kitchen.

I didn’t reply and quickly opened the door and walked onto the creaking porch and down the stairs. I speed-walked for a few blocks and then slowed, relieved to be away from that house. It was dark in there. It always had been—even when Billy’s mom had been back in her cleaning years and the rooms were free of dust and dirt. The place had always made me feel a little sick inside.

I always wondered why my mother was friends with Deena Thorburn. I think a lot of people did. Compared to Mrs. Thorburn, my mother was a saint—and people knew it. No matter what Deena did, my mother was always defending her. She would be at her doorstep in seconds when Mrs. Thorburn called her to come over. My mother always spoke of what Deena used to be, back when they were pageant queens, not of what she had become. One morning, when my mother had explained to me that I couldn’t stay home alone while she went to the Thorburn’s, that I had to go with her, I threw a tantrum. I rolled around on the floor and hollered. I was sent to my room, and I sat there, angry that I had to go to that dreaded house again when I had wanted to go play at the playground down the street. Daddy came into my room and sat down beside me on my bed.

“Sal,” he had said, “do you know that your mother grew up with Mrs. Thorburn?”

“No,” I said sourly with my arms crossed.

“They were best friends. Mrs. Thorburn’s father worked with your mother’s father—they both owned parts of the gas station. Your mother and Mrs. Thorburn spent a lot of time together when they were young, and when they grew up, they stayed friends.”

“So?” I said, “I hate her. She’s weird and Billy’s mean.”

Daddy was silent for a minute.

“I don’t want you to say that about anyone. Ever again. Do you understand?”

I nodded, surprised at the seriousness in my father’s voice.

“Mrs. Thorburn’s had some bad things happen to her; your mother is being a real friend to her. Do you understand what that means?” Daddy asked me.

“No.”

“It means that even though Mrs. Thorburn might be weird, like you say, she wasn’t always that way. And that she needs someone to be there and help her out. That’s what your mother is doing.”

“Okay,” I said, leaning my head on Daddy’s shoulder. I felt bad that I made him angry.

“I don’t want you to complain about going over there. I want you to be a good girl and listen to your mother.”

I was a good girl and I listened to my mother. Sometimes I still wondered about her friendship with Deena Thorburn. I didn’t know what it meant to stand beside someone through everything.

IX

I walked to the library from the Thorburn's house. It was only a few blocks further, and I wanted to know what time it was before I headed back home. The library was small, and it was impossible to blend into the place because of the limited space, but if you hit an afternoon rush, sometimes you could avoid everyone—or, at least, you could avoid the lengthy, awkward conversations. I wished I had worn a jacket as I entered the town square. I never did understand why people called it “the square” when it was clearly a circle.

The wind gusted out of nowhere and the tee-shirt I wore let the cold air rush right through it and across my skin. I looked down at my feet as I walked—not only to avoid catching eyes with anyone who might have known me, but also to look at the bricks underneath my shoes. Bricks made me feel comfortable—kind of secure somehow in the fact that they had been here for more years than I had been, and they were still doing pretty okay. Some of them were crumbling around their corners, but they were mostly still intact.

When I got to the library door and pulled on its handle, it didn't budge. The library didn't usually close until two on Saturday afternoon, and I didn't think it was possible that it was that late already. Maybe Mrs. Pinkton was sick or something and closed early. Mrs. Thorburn had talked a lot, but not so much that I could have been

there more than a half hour—and I kind of doubted I had even been there that long. I tried to think of a place where a clock might be. I didn't want to go into Hattie's Diner because someone I knew from school would surely be there—and in the slim chance that they wouldn't be there, someone else I didn't want to talk to, would be. So the diner was out—the gas station probably didn't have a clock and I'd have to ask Margaret Hanes, the cashier with the crossed eyes and perpetual frown, to look at her watch. And then she'd start talking, about any old thing, and I wouldn't be able to leave without looking rude. She'd ask me what I was doing, how school was, and if I knew her daughter won a scholarship to college.

I decided on the drugstore. Albert, the store manager, usually worked weekends and he was quiet enough. Albert never said much of anything. As long as he was there, I didn't have to worry about explaining why I wasn't out with my friends this weekend. Albert didn't care. Hopefully there was a clock behind the counter, like I was thinking, so I wouldn't have to talk to him at all. I walked into the store and my skin stopped bristling from the cool air. It was a relief to enter into the heat of the store. There wasn't a clock behind the counter. I walked down the sale aisle. It was the one my mother skipped, and the one I always went down. I rarely bought anything, but I liked to look at the way things were organized—by color, by size, by weight—on the shelves. When I was little, I wanted to work in the drugstore just so I could set the items out on the shelves and organize them myself.

Bags of candy, coffee mugs, flip flops, erasers, pens, packages of paper and notebooks all lined the sale aisle. Last summer's items were all seventy-five percent off; the shelves had to get emptied to make way for the new summer items that were coming

out soon. I fingered a box of colored pencils. I loved the way they looked when I opened the top of the box to reveal the rainbow of sharpened points. I hadn't used colored pencils in a long time. I continued down the aisle and looked at each post that went from floor to ceiling to see if there was a clock on it. No luck. I was going to have to ask Albert. I walked to the back of the store, where the pharmacy was at, and looked at the sales on Aspirin and Tylenol. My mother always offered them to me when I was sick, but I never took them. In a way, I didn't believe in pain killers. I wasn't positive they'd work and wondered what good was found in numbing a feeling that was present in your body.

I took my time moving back up to the front. I started thinking that I should probably buy something in exchange for the time. I reached into my pocket, hoping for a few dollars, and found one and a quarter. My mind automatically went to the colored pencils. For a minute, I thought that maybe I should buy something more mature—like make-up or something like most girls my age Albert saw come through there. But I would feel more uncomfortable buying the make-up than I would the colored pencils—and, anyway, what would I have done with make-up? I walked back up to the front sale aisle and looked at the colored pencils. They were a dollar. I wasn't sure if I had enough for them plus tax, but I thought I'd try and if I ended up short, at least it would look like I came in to buy something and not just ask what time it was.

Albert's mustache was gray. I didn't know how old he was, but if I had to guess I'd say in his fifties. His wife, Norma, was our school nurse. They lived in a little house right off the town square with their dog, Bertie. Norma called everyone "sweetie." Albert was quiet and was mostly bald. I picked up the pack of pencils and took them to

the counter. Albert was on the phone. His blue buttoned and collared shirt was wrinkled and his tie was crooked and he looked at me over his glasses and nodded. I waited and pretended to be looking at the gum. Maybe I should have set gum on the counter instead of the colored pencils. Albert hung up the phone and scanned the box.

“That’s a dollar and twenty-seven cents,” he said, looking at me expectantly.

The door chimed as someone else walked into the store.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the money. I pretended to look puzzled when I counted the coins and reached back inside my pocket. I smiled sheepishly at Albert.

“Uh, I’m sorry, I um thought that I had more.” I looked at Albert’s face.

He didn’t smile back.

“I can’t sell them to you then,” he said firmly.

“I’ll just put them back,” I said, my voice shaky, reaching to pick up the box from the counter.

“Hey, here,” I heard a deep voice say behind me.

In mid-reach, I turned and was taken aback when I was met with Billy’s face. His hand hovered near me with a dime in his palm.

“Oh, um, n-no, that’s okay. I don’t need them anyway,” I stammered. I had no idea why he was doing this, and I was scared of what he might expect in return.

“Just take it,” Billy said forcefully shoving the dime in my face.

I looked at Albert, almost as if to ask him if he thought I should accept the change, but he was unaffected.

I took the dime from Billy and muttered, “Thank you.”

Billy's eyes were on me as I waited impatiently for Albert to finish the transaction.

"Would you like a bag?" Albert asked.

"N-no. Thanks," I replied, leaving the change on the counter after Albert handed it to me. I walked away quickly—hoping to escape before Billy caught up with me.

The box of colored pencils was clutched in my hand. Billy hadn't bothered with me in a long while—and he'd certainly never done anything nice for me before. I kicked myself for accepting the dime, but, then again, I was afraid not to. I walked out of the driveway and onto the sidewalk.

"Mosquito!"

My steps slowed, even though everything in my body said not to. I pictured Billy's hand tight around Alice's wrist.

"Mosquito!"

Billy was out of breath when he reached my side.

"Hey, aren't you gonna thank me? That was the last dime I had, you know."

"I already did," I said, still walking.

I turned and looked at Billy's face—I didn't do it much. He looked old. Not old like an old man, but old like the dirty stuffed bear I couldn't take my eyes away from when we went to the landfill for a field trip in second grade. Billy's eyes had dark circles under them.

"Hey, what are you in such a hurry for?"

I tried to think of something to say, but I never was a good liar.

"Uh, my mother—she—my mother wants me to be home soon."

“What are you going to do with those?” Billy asked.

“With what?”

“The pencils,” he said, pointing at the crunched box in my hand.

“Oh, um, I—my mother wanted them,” I said.

“What the hell’s your ma want them for?” Billy asked, as if he knew the pencils were for me.

I didn’t reply.

“Are you listening to me?” Billy asked. His voice changed; it started to sound familiar. I hadn’t recognized it before in the drugstore—and even just a few moments ago, the almost gentle tone was haltingly out of character for him. I got lost in thought and fear and still didn’t answer him.

“Hey! You don’t have a mouth, Mosquito?”

“I heard you,” I said.

“What the hell’s your mom want those colored pencils for?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my body starting to heat.

“You know. You have to know. You live with her. She’s the one that asked you to get them, right?” Billy asked as we neared the front of the library.

“I don’t know,” I said again, trying not to shake, and wishing someone would walk out of the library, wishing the library was open. No one was going to save me.

“Maybe you don’t want to tell me ‘cause they ain’t hers, huh?”

We exited the square. I was walking fast, but it didn’t take much effort for Billy to keep up with me. His strides covered a lot more distance than mine did.

“Are you crazy, Mosquito?”

I didn't know what to say.

"You gonna take those pencils home and color pictures of your dreams on the walls?"

Billy's face was getting closer to mine. I stopped walking when he stepped in front of me. His breath hit my cheek.

"Are you?"

"No." I replied.

"You're not? What are you gonna do with them then, huh?"

"Nothing."

"So you just wasted my last dime, didja, Mosquito?"

"You didn't have to give it to me," I said quietly. I could tell that he had smoked a cigarette not too long ago. Billy Thorburn could have used braces. I wondered if his mother ever noticed that.

"But I did give it to you, Salma," his voice grew quiet as he drew out the sound of my name, "and that's what counts, right?"

Billy took his finger and ran it down the side of my face. I shivered at his touch, the feeling of his cracked skin against my own. His finger stopped on my chin, and I stepped back.

"I—I have to go," I stammered. I had been trying to ignore the urge to spring away that had been running through me since the beginning of our encounter at the drugstore, but I fought it. From past experiences with Billy, I knew it was better to stay and tolerate him, rather than give him something to chase.

"Why? Scared? Are you scared of me, Mosquito?"

My hands shook, rustling the plastic bag, and I looped the handles around my wrist and shoved my hands deep into my pockets. I took them out again when I remembered someone somewhere saying that you should always try to keep your hands free when in a dangerous situation.

“You should be.”

“What?” I asked, scanning the area for anyone walking around. I saw the mailman, Pete, walking by the drugstore, but he was too far away, and I was too scared to yell.

“Weren’t you listening to me? I asked you if you’re scared.”

“Oh.”

“Are you scared, Mosquito? Because you sure are acting like it.”

I shrugged. Billy’s nose was almost touching mine now. I could see the whites of his eyes were red. Kind of like his mother’s.

“No,” I said, knowing full well that I didn’t look anything but scared.

“You watch what you say, Sal.”

“What?” I asked, genuinely confused about what Billy was saying to me.

“You watch what you say to people around here,” Billy said, his voice firm and low.

I took a step back from him.

“I see you and that girl, Alice, you hang around now, right?”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. I decided the truth might work okay.

“Not anymore.”

“Somethin’ happen?”

I shrugged and wiped my hands across my jeans, transferring the plastic bag from hand to hand.

“Well,” Billy continued, “don’t let her tell you shit. And you don’t say shit to no one else, you got that?” Billy’s eyes wouldn’t be anything like his mother’s without the red veins. Hers were dead. His were quivering and very much alive.

I nodded as I heard voices behind me—and when I turned to see whose they were, I saw Alice. And Hallie, Jessica, and Renee. Alice waved at me when she saw me turn.

The last people I had hoped for were them.

Suddenly Billy moved back and took his wide hands to my shoulders and shoved me. I fell on the sidewalk. Stunned, I looked up at him.

“Don’t you say nothing,” Billy repeated himself as he walked away, his dark hair a shocking contrast with the gray sky, and me in a surprised heap on the sidewalk, my leg burning where it had scraped against the pavement.

X

I stood up and winced. I felt stupid that Alice and her friends had witnessed Billy push me, and I felt stupid enough already for running away from Alice's party like a little kid.

"Sal?" Alice said, as she got closer. Her face was serious—and concerned. The other girls walked past me and continued on without Alice.

"Yeah," I said.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, "I'm fine." I let my hand wander to my leg and winced before my fingers even hit the beginnings of the lump that was starting to form.

"Sal, I just want to—"

"—Where'd everyone else go?" I asked in an accusatory tone.

Alice shook her head and said, "Forget them."

"You were walking with them," I said, "you don't have to stop for me."

"No, I wasn't. They were following me. They're still trying to tell me it's my fault we aren't friends anymore."

"Is it?" I snapped.

I shifted my weight from foot to foot. My calf stung.

Alice looked concerned.

“Look, I’m fine, okay?” I was angry still. I wasn’t going to forgive Alice for going behind my back and embarrassing me in front of all those people yesterday. I was stupid to think she was my friend, yes, but I didn’t want it advertised to everyone.

“Yeah, Sal, are you sure? You hit really hard.”

“I’m fine,” I said shortly.

“Why’d he push you like that?” Alice asked, quietly.

“Do you think he ever has a reason?” I said, picking the plastic bag with the colored pencils up off the ground. “Look, Alice, um, thanks for everything and whatever, but I don’t need you, okay?” I started to walk away, leaving Alice standing in the spot I fell in.

I heard quick footsteps behind me and she appeared at my side.

“Look Sal, I know you’re mad about yesterday and I just wanted to say—”

“What? That you’re sorry?” I interrupted, walking quicker.

Alice nodded, keeping pace with me, “I am, Sal, I am so, so, so sorry about the party. I hope you can forget about it?”

I shook my head.

“You lied, Alice. You lied. You never wanted to be friends with me, you just felt sorry for me,” I said, out of breath. The faster I walked, the more my leg hurt, but the less I thought about it because the more I talked to Alice, the angrier I grew.

“That’s not true! That’s not true at all.” Alice’s voice got loud.

“It is so,” I said, the volume of my voice rising to meet hers. “It is so—because I’m pathetic, right? I don’t have any friends, my mother is crazy, and I’m crazy too! You thought it’d just be a—a—nice gesture or something, poor little Sal needs—”

“You know what? Fine. You’re right. I never would have been friends with you if mine hadn’t totally ditched me and you wouldn’t have showed up in that bathroom that day. I used to be something! Do you know what that’s like? I used to be someone and have best friends and then all the sudden they disappeared—for months—and then you showed up. You were the first one to care in a long time—and yeah, I took advantage of that. Can you blame me?”

I stopped walking, and Alice stood in front of me. Her hands were on her hips. I could see a patch of bare skin where her shirt had lifted from the waist of her jeans.

I felt the plastic bag with the colored pencils swing from my fingers.

“You know, I never meant for any of this to happen,” Alice said, finally breaking the silence.

I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn’t sure that I was ready to trust her again

“Sal, I wish you’d let this go. I admit that I never was going to be friends with you—that I felt like I owed you because you helped me—but you know, right after that first lunch I sat with you, I found out that there was a lot more to you than what everyone sees.”

“I don’t know, Alice, I just...Did you really say all that stuff Hallie said?” I looked at her.

Her eyes told me “yes” when they quickly dropped to the ground.

“I’m not going to lie to you. I didn’t say all of it, but yeah, some of those things. I used to be a different kind of person before...” Alice’s voice trailed off.

I nodded.

We started walking, side by side, down the sidewalk. We left the square and walked pass the clusters of rundown houses right outside of town.

“So, how’d all this go down with Billy?” Alice asked.

“I don’t even really know,” I said, “I went into Albert’s to see the time and he caught me when I was checking out.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, I was short some money and he was behind me—I didn’t even know he came in—and he gave me the change. Well, he made me take it from him. Then when I got outside, he started following me and he got mad.”

“Weird, he just got mad for nothing?” Alice said.

“Yeah,” I said, remembering what he had said to me.

“Does it hurt?” Alice asked, pointing at my leg.

“It’s not that bad,” I said.

“Are you busy right now?” Alice asked.

I looked at her and made a face.

“Me? Busy?” I laughed.

“Hey, I don’t know what you do,” Alice said, “You’re pretty mysterious actually, you know?”

“Are you sure you don’t mean ‘boring’?” I half-smiled because I was only half-joking. I wasn’t one hundred percent positive that Alice really meant everything she had just said to me. It was funny, just a few minutes before I had been completely sure that I didn’t want anything to do with Alice—that we were never going to be friends ever again—and suddenly I was looking for her approval.

“No, I meant mysterious. Really. I can tell there’s a lot of stuff you don’t tell me. I don’t really know too much about you except that you don’t like pickles, and that you would rather drink your milk warm than cold. I’m pretty sure there’s more to you than that.”

“Thanks,” I said.

We walked to the edge of town and Alice slowed.

“So...”

“What?” I asked.

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

I was so absorbed in our conversation that I had forgotten that when you move, you usually have a destination in mind.

“Uh, no, that’s—I—it’s okay.” I scratched an imagined itch on my arm. “But, um, I guess. I can’t really...”

“What?” Alice asked.

I took a deep breath. If we were going to be friends, real, true, friends, I was going to have to let Alice in more.

“I told my mom me and you and the others were going to the Dairy Freeze this afternoon to hang out.”

“Oh...so?”

“Well—wait—what time is it?” I asked her.

“I left the house around 11:00 and went straight to the square—Mom asked me to get some milk—when my ex-friends found me. I ended up at the corner store and they said they wanted to talk to me—we saw you just a few minutes after that.”

I didn't want her to know, but I was relieved that Alice hadn't gone downtown with the intentions of seeing her former friends.

"Yeah, see, um, my mom will ask me a bunch of questions if I get home earlier than dinner time. She thinks I have friends now."

I knew I wasn't doing the best explaining my situation, but I hadn't shared my personal life with anyone before now and wasn't sure how much you were supposed to tell anyway—or how much anyone would want to hear.

"Well, you know, my mom has been asking all day if you enjoyed yourself at the party last night," Alice shrugged and I smiled. "I know, right? She missed the part when you left. But, you know if you want, you could come over for lunch and we could hang out for a while?"

I felt hesitant. I wasn't sure that I was ready for this, but I knew we had to move forward.

"Okay," I said, "I mean, as long as it's okay with you and your parents and stuff."

Alice laughed, and said "Trust me, my mom will be thrilled."

We walked a few blocks in silence. I wondered what Alice was thinking about. I was thinking about what to say to Alice's mom when we got to her house. I wondered if I should call her "Mrs. Rayburn" or "Debbie," like she told me to call her yesterday. It would just be weird to call her Debbie, but what if that was really what she wanted me to call her? She might be irritated if I didn't call her what she wanted. In the end, I decided that I would just avoid calling Alice's mom anything.

I hadn't been paying attention to where we were, so when Alice asked me if we were about to approach Billy's house, I was surprised.

“Yeah, um, that’s the one right there,” I said, pointing a finger in the direction of the sagging porch and hanging front door I had passed through earlier.

“Creepy.” Alice’s voice was soft.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“I wonder what it’s like.”

“What do you mean?”

“In there, you know, I wonder what’s in his room, what his mom’s like, what’s in their refrigerator,” Alice said, wrapping her arms around herself.

I shrugged as a shiver passed through me. How could Alice be so flippant about the person who nearly ruined her life? Why would she want to know what’s in his room or what his mother was like? Then again, I thought, he was the father of her child, so maybe it was natural for her to be curious about Billy.

Alice chattered for the rest of the walk to her house. As we walked up the long driveway, I mentioned that I liked the bushes.

“It was such a disaster when Mom decided we needed to put them in. The middle of the summer and there was dirt just like all over the first day when they came to plant them. Mom was so pissed off—she didn’t want the ones they first put in there. I just remember her screaming on the phone about how the shrubs they brought over were too short, and if she had wanted half a bush she would have gone to the Wal-Mart garden center and not paid hundreds and hundreds of dollars.”

I smiled, still thinking about Billy and what to call Alice’s mom when we walked in the door.

“So they end up bringing over full-sized bushes to replace the ones they just planted. The guys out there were so mad,” Alice says laughing.

“I bet,” I said, only halfway paying attention.

“She made them dig up the ones they finished and plant the new ones right away.”

“Sounds like a mess,” I said un-enthusiastically.

Alice knocked on the stately wooden doors on the front of the house.

“Why are you knocking?” I was puzzled.

“My dad’s kind of crazy. A long time ago, after we first moved here, he decided to get this security system and has since demanded that whenever any of us are in the house alone, we have to turn the system on.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” I said.

“Yeah, except we live in Elmwood,” Alice rolled her eyes.

I shrugged.

The door opened and one of the housekeepers from the party answered. She ushered us into the house.

“You want me to take coats?” Teresa asked.

Alice handed Teresa her jean jacket.

Teresa stretched her hand out to me. I felt silly when I showed her I had nothing to hang.

Alice grabbed my arm and pulled me into the room off the kitchen.

“Mom!” she yelled, her face tipped to the upstairs of the house. “Sal’s here for lunch!”

“Are you sure it’s okay?” I asked Alice, feeling a little uncomfortable.

She didn't even ask if it was okay that I was here, just said I was here for lunch. My mother always got angry when people showed up uninvited. Sometimes, a long time ago, when Daddy used to go bowling on Thursday nights, he'd bring his friends home and they'd sit down at the dining room table, expecting to eat. Later, through the walls that separated us from each other's lives, I could hear my mother yelling at him. She'd be mad about the dinner guests—said she hadn't expected them to come and if she had, she would have cooked a real dinner and not just Sloppy Joes. After a while, Daddy quit bringing his friends home. I missed their laughs and the sounds of shuffling cards and the radio playing in the living room.

The friends Daddy brought over were always nice to me—ruffled my hair, brought me toys—a tiny toy car, a piece of candy—and I didn't really know how Daddy knew them. But one night, after they had been over and my mother was really angry, I heard him say, "You know, you used to be just fine with them. You used to pour them coffee, talk late into the night—you sang while Art played his guitar—what happened?" My mother's response was muffled. It was hard for me to remember my mother as Daddy had described her.

"Mom!" Alice yelled again.

Alice's mother appeared at the top of the staircase.

"Hi, honey," she called, excitedly, and started down the stairs. I wondered if it was comfortable to wear such expensive clothes daily. I couldn't imagine wearing that pink dress more than a few hours at a time, but there was Mrs. Rayburn, at 1:00 on a Sunday, wearing full make-up and a black sequined jacket and skirt. The green stones in her necklace glinted as she stepped off the stairs to gather Alice into a hug.

“Hello, Sal,” she said as she stepped away from Alice and toward me. She picked up my hand and smiled. “I’m so glad you’re here!”

“I hope it’s okay, I, um, didn’t know—you—I—”

“—Oh, of course! I’ve been telling Alice you need to stop by and spend some time here. She talks about you all the time and I think we should be as lucky as her and get just some of your time!”

It was hard for me to hold Mrs. Rayburn’s gaze—I wasn’t used to people focusing so intently on me.

“Aw, Mom, shut up,” Alice said. “When’s lunch?”

“Teresa is preparing it, so it’s going to be in a half hour.” Mrs. Rayburn turned to me. “Sal, do you like tilapia?”

“Um...” I didn’t know what to say. I had never heard of tilapia.

“You’ll love it,” Mrs. Rayburn said, “Teresa is the best cook.”

I wondered if Mrs. Rayburn ever cooked.

“Would you girls like a snack while you wait?”

“Mom, go back and do whatever you were doing. We don’t need to be entertained.”

“Well, I do have a conference call to make.” Mrs. Rayburn turned and walked back up the stairs.

“Her office’s up there,” Alice said.

“Oh,” I said. “What does she do?”

“It’s a big long story, but at the end of it she ended up owning a chain of stores—you know those beauty palaces?”

“Yeah,” I said. Everyone knew those. A lot of girls talked about them all the time—supposedly the sales were great for hair and make-up supplies. I’d never set foot in one. I’d also never imagined Alice’s Mom owned them all. It gave me a good idea of why she never had to cook.

Alice took me on a tour of the house when I asked her where the bathroom was. It turned out that there were six of them—two main ones on each floor of the house, two hidden ones on each floor in case the main ones were busy, and two attached to the two main bedrooms. I bit my lip to keep my mouth from dropping open at the mere sight of each room we walked through. There were chandeliers, rare plants, plush carpets, lush red walls, couches with pull out foot rests, and, in the finished basement, another fish tank like the one in the formal living room I marveled at yesterday. Except this one was a hundred gallon fish tank with tropical fish from countries whose names I couldn’t remember two seconds after Alice said them.

“That one’s my favorite,” Alice said, pointing at a big gray fish in the back of the tank as we stood in front of it. At first I thought it was strange to have a fish tank in the basement, but after I pried my eyes from the tank, I realized it made perfect sense to put the tank in the basement. It wasn’t a real basement, but another, bigger, living room.

“Why?” I asked, puzzled. It was the most unremarkable fish in the whole tank. Fish with whole rainbows on their bodies swam in there, but Alice’s favorite was the one that looked like it could just swim around in Mr. Fenster’s creek.

“It’s a bottom-feeder. He eats all the dirt and stuff in there and keeps the tank clean.”

I waited for more explanation, deciding that my favorite fish in the tank was the bright red one. I always imagined myself in a bright red dress one day, standing on stage and accepting an award. For what, I hadn't quite puzzled that out just yet, but that's what I pictured. It was important to me then that I was worth some kind of award.

"It takes a lot to clean up after everyone else—you know? He doesn't get the fresh food. All the other ones run up to the surface the second we pour the food in there—he just waits to eat the scummy stuff on the glass—so the rest of them can go on living."

"Yeah, but doesn't he have to eat it to live?"

"I guess," Alice said, "but if he didn't eat and he died, then the rest of them would die too."

Alice had her face so close to where the bottom-feeder was that her breath made fog on the glass.

Teresa called us, and Alice led me down a hall. It occurred to me that I had never seen a basement that had a hallway, but this one did. We entered a white-walled room with a sparkling chandelier attached to its ceiling. A long, dark-wooded table, stretched across the length of the room and red-cushioned chairs surrounded it. I couldn't imagine eating here ever, let alone every day.

Alice went and plopped down into a chair at the center of the right side of the table and looked at me.

"Well?"

"Huh?"

"Aren't you going to sit down?" Alice asked.

I walked to where she sat, and pulled out the chair beside her. Before sitting, I ran my hand across the fabric covering the seat. Alice noticed.

“I didn’t like them at first,” Alice said.

“What?” I asked.

“The chairs. Mom got them when we moved here. We used to use my grandma’s chairs and her dining room table in our other house, but Mom said they didn’t go with the house. I didn’t want the new ones—I was a little kid though and didn’t get it—I cried. But now it makes sense—that old set really didn’t go with this house at all.”

“When’d you come here again?” I asked Alice.

“Eighth grade. My dad got transferred—and a big raise—and we moved here.”

I nodded.

Footsteps fell on the cushioned carpet in the hall and in walked a tall man with pale skin and sea blue eyes like Alice’s.

“Hello,” he said to me, and walked to Alice planting a kiss on top of her head.

I noticed his shirt matched the cushions on the chairs.

“Who’s your friend, honey?” he asked Alice, still looking at me.

“Oh, yeah, Sal, this is my dad. Dad, this is Sal.”

Alice’s father straightened and extended a hand to me. I shook it and tried to grasp his fingers tightly. Daddy always told me if you had a weak handshake, no one would take you seriously.

“Pleased to meet you, Sal. Is it short for something?”

“Um, what?” I asked.

“Your name.”

Mr. Rayburn stood over me, and I looked at his socks. And then I felt weird for looking at his socks. They matched his shirt. I didn't know much, but I was pretty sure you were only supposed to wear black socks with black pants.

"Oh, yeah, Salma," I muttered.

"Beautiful," he said, and sat down at the far end of the table. "I'm sorry I didn't meet you at the party last night. I had an emergency call and had to leave before anyone arrived." Mr. Rayburn shook his head. "The life of a doctor."

I smiled.

"So, Alice, what did you do today?"

"Went to the square and..." Alice looked at me and smirked a little. "...ran into Sal at the library. How was your day, Dad?"

"Well, I had to go into the office this morning for an emergency hysterectomy."

"Gross," Alice said.

"There's nothing gross about the human body, Alice, but it certainly wasn't pleasant," Mr. Rayburn said. "But then I came home and your mother and I went to the club and played some tennis. We missed you."

"Yeah, well, I hate tennis. And I hate the country club."

"You know, if you knew how much talent you were wasting, maybe you'd like it a bit more."

Alice rolled her eyes, and her dad shook his head.

"You know, Sal, Alice doesn't tell many of her friends this, but before we got here, Alice took tennis lessons twice a week. And she won quite a few matches."

"Really?" I asked, curious.

“Yes, and—”

“—Dad, stop,” Alice said sternly.

“All right, all right,” he said smiling, “but I just thought your friend might be interested to know you can do a lot more than eat chewing gum and talk on the phone.”

Alice shook her head and when I looked at her face, she was embarrassed.

The smell of food wafted into the room and was shortly followed by Teresa and Mrs. Rayburn.

Teresa was carrying a tray with a big fish on it. The fish was a browned white and his head was gone. I wasn’t quite sure what to make of this. All I knew of eating fish really was the catfish Daddy sometimes caught at the lake a few hours south of us. And I only ever ate it fried—not like this.

Mrs. Rayburn’s sequined black jacket glittered with every movement she made as she walked to her husband and kissed his cheek.

Teresa served the fish onto each of our plates. I lifted my fork and put a piece in my mouth.

“Alice, you do the honors tonight,” her father said.

“No.”

I realized they were talking about praying and immediately set my fork back down on the plate and stopped chewing.

“We’ll wait until you’re ready,” Alice’s dad told her.

Alice sighed and folded her hands in her lap and bowed her head. I followed her lead and did the same.

“Dear Lord, We thank you for this food on the table and this day in general. It was decent—mediocre at best. Amen.”

Alice smirked and I tried not to laugh.

Mrs. Rayburn shook her head and said, “I raised you better than that.”

“Hey,” Mr. Rayburn said, “I’d like to think I had a hand in our daughter’s upbringing as well.”

“At this moment, you are more than welcome to take all the responsibility for her.”

Alice shot an irritated at her parents at either side of the table and picked up her fork.

I wasn’t sure I liked the fish. Something about the texture was disturbing, but it didn’t taste as bad as the fish sticks my mother sometimes made for dinner. I hated fish sticks.

“So, Sal, have you picked out a college yet?” Alice’s dad asked me.

“Well,” I said slowly, “um, no.”

I had never thought about going to college. I had thought about my future in only one way: I always pictured myself somewhere else. It wasn’t that I disliked Elmwood; I just didn’t really have anything holding me back.

“What schools have you considered?” Alice asked casually, poking a leaf of lettuce.

“Um, maybe, um,” I stumbled and decided just to tell the truth, “I don’t know.”

“Alice, stop playing with your food,” Mrs. Rayburn snapped, and then said to me, “It’s not something you have to know right away. I didn’t decide what I was doing after high school until three months before graduation.”

“Yes, dear, but you were lucky. A job fell into your lap. These wonderful ladies may not have the same kind of luck. Planning is important,” Mr. Rayburn said.

I knew he was speaking the truth for me, but I wasn’t so sure about Alice. No matter what she had or hadn’t planned, by the looks of things, Alice would be okay. There wasn’t any way her parents wouldn’t provide for her. If I ever had as much money as them, I probably would never leave my kid to fend for herself either. But I was a different story in a different situation. It wasn’t that I thought my parents would leave me with nothing, but they didn’t have much. I wasn’t sure what they expected out of me when I graduated.

The rest of the meal was eaten with the absence of conversation, except for the occasional clink of a fork against a plate. I wondered if the Rayburns always ate like this.

“Well,” Alice’s mom said, moving her chair away from the table, “I have some paperwork I have to finish for the payroll this week. Sal, don’t let Alice forget to offer you a ride home.”

“I can drive your car, right Dad?”

“Let’s wait until you show me you can go a while without hitting the bushes.”

“Oh, come on, Sal should ride in style, shouldn’t she?”

Alice’s parents laughed her off and left us in the dining room. Dirty dishes remained on the table. My mother always made a huge deal about how I had to help out

and wash the dishes after we ate. “This is not a castle, Salma; you’re not a princess,” she’d say.

I never thought I was a princess. And being in Alice’s house, the closest thing I’d ever seen to a modern day castle, reminded me of just how far from royalty I was. Alice, however, seemed to live as close to it as was possible in Elmwood.

XI

We left the table, and I followed Alice upstairs to her bedroom.

She pushed open her door and sat down on her bed. I sat beside her.

“So,” Alice said.

“So,” I said in reply.

“Am I forgiven?” Alice’s voice quieted.

I didn’t know what to say. The memory of yesterday still stung, but I knew she was sorry.

“Yes,” I said slowly.

“But?”

“What do you mean, ‘but’?” I asked.

“It sounded like there was a ‘but’ after your ‘yes,’” Alice said, her eyes questioning.

“Just don’t do it again, okay?” I said quickly, the words tumbling out of my mouth in a rush.

“I won’t,” Alice said without a smile. “So you don’t know where you’re going to college?” she asked, changing the subject.

“No,” I said, “I really haven’t thought about it.” I ran my hand across the comforter.

“Not at all? I mean, haven’t you been to those mandatory counseling appointments with Miss Parker?”

“Sure,” I said, shrugging, “but she doesn’t think I’m going to do anything else. No one does.” I let myself lay back onto the bed. Alice lay next to me.

“Well, maybe if you want to go with us to the college visits coming up you can.”

I nodded. I couldn’t really picture myself going on college visits. I couldn’t picture myself in college either.

Alice and I were still for a few minutes, and then she asked, “Do you ever feel like you’re just here?”

“What?”

“You know, that we’re just here. In school and stuff. And then we’ll go get jobs or whatever, get married, have a family, and then die. And that’s it.”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I never really thought about it before.”

“Sometimes it makes me feel better about stuff. At the end, you’re dead—and grades and what you did during your living days doesn’t really matter because you’re dead.”

“Um, yeah, I guess I get what you’re saying,” I said to Alice, puzzled as to where this was coming from.

“But then, I mean, now, it’s different. I just used that a lot to make myself feel less guilty. I’m starting to think it might matter what you do when you’re here—but not for you, you know, just other people.”

“Yeah,” I said, “that makes sense.”

I wondered for a minute, if I died, how many people would even remember who I was.

Alice sat up and hung over the edge of her bed on her stomach and reached underneath. When she flipped herself upright, she was holding a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. I was shocked, and my face must have showed it.

“What?” Alice asked, opening the box and extracting a cigarette. She got up from the bed, lighter in hand, and crossed the room to open her window,

“Um, I just didn’t know...I mean...”

“You didn’t think I did, did you?” she asked.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know Alice smoked. Not that I thought she was bad for doing it. My parents had always told me it wasn’t something I wanted to do. And I never did. Of course, I never hung around with anyone who would have offered cigarettes to me anyway. And, regardless of that, the idea of inhaling anything into my lungs freaked me out. I was the only kid at the Green twins’ birthday party in second grade that didn’t suck helium from a balloon so I could talk like a chipmunk.

Alice took a drag off the cigarette, and smoke flowed from her lips outside the window.

“It was hard, you know, with the baby and all.”

I nodded. You couldn’t smoke when you were pregnant; I knew that, but it didn’t seem like that was what Alice was talking about.

“How long—when did you start that?” I asked, pointing at the pack still lying on the bed.

“You know,” she said turning to me while leaving her hand out the window, “I don’t remember.” She laughed a little, and then, moving her eyes from me to the ceiling, “It must have been freshman year.”

“Oh,” I said.

The sight of Alice with a cigarette was unnerving. It changed the way she looked, and I didn’t like it. Made her dark—different from the Alice I knew. She didn’t notice my unease and continued speaking.

“I can remember being in the girls’ bathroom at school during our freshman homecoming, smoking in a bathroom stall during the slow dances. So I guess I probably started it then.”

“You didn’t have anyone to dance with?” I said, trying to imagine Alice by herself at a school dance.

“I didn’t want to be serious so I smoked while Hallie and them cuddled with guys. The only girls in the bathroom then were the ones crying because no guy asked them to dance—they didn’t care about the smell.”

I wondered why Alice didn’t care about the smell herself. Even though she was blowing the smoke out the window, the breeze carried the scent inside and was starting to make me feel sick to my stomach.

“Did you go to the dances then?” Alice asked me, turning back to face the trees and grass outside her open window.

“No, not really.” I said, my face growing red.

I didn't know why she asked in the first place. But it was likely that Alice didn't remember me like I remembered her the years we went to school together. Maybe she thought that because she changed, I did too. But I was always the same.

"You didn't really miss much, they were just excuses to rub up against each other and make out when no one was looking," Alice continued.

"Is that why you went?" I said with a half-smile, surprised at my quick comeback.

"Of course."

Somewhere underneath the sarcasm, I suspected Alice Rayburn was telling me some of the truth. She took one last drag on her cigarette and stubbed it out on the window sill. I wrinkled my nose at the smoke that flowed across me in a thin sheet as a breeze blew in my direction.

"How many of those things do you smoke a day?" I asked Alice.

"Just two or three now," she replied.

"Do they...make you feel better or something?" I asked.

"Sometimes," Alice said, "They used to make me feel relaxed. I think because they took my mind off everything. I could just stare at the glowing red end of one and wonder about its heat and color. Now, it's more of a habit really—I don't notice so much the way I feel, just something to do I guess."

"So why don't you quit?" I asked Alice.

"I don't want to," she said simply.

"Think you ever will?"

"Probably. Sometime."

I wanted to tell her she should quit, that she'd die of lung cancer if she didn't, but I was sure she already knew that.

"Don't your parents notice?" I asked. I figured, with the way I could smell the smoke on my hair just from being in the same room with her, that Alice's parents must have noticed by now. They didn't seem like the kind of parents that would be okay with it either.

"No," Alice said, standing up and walking to her dresser. She fingered the edge of a picture taped to her mirror before she uncapped a bottle she pulled from a drawer she opened and sprayed herself in the light pink liquid. I watched as she placed the bottle back in its drawer and picked up another. She squeezed gel onto her hand and quickly ran it through the strands of her blonde hair with her fingers and then tossed me the bottle.

I caught it and squeezed gel into my hand and sat and looked at it in the palm of my hand.

"You don't like it?" Alice asked.

"No, it's just," I took a breath, feeling silly and said, "I never used it before. Gel, I mean."

"Oh, right, well, you saw what I did with it?"

"Yeah."

"Well, just do that then."

Alice watched as I smoothed the gel across the palms of both of my hands and then patted them on my head.

Looking perplexed at my incompetence, Alice sat down beside me and mimicked what I should be doing with my hands.

“You can’t just leave it in one big spot like that, or it’ll just be greasy. You have to rub it through.”

Alice reached over me and picked up a mirror from her night stand and held up to my face after she finished instructing me.

“What do you think?” she asked.

The hair around my face was wavy and alive. I had never seen myself like that before, and while it was disconcerting to look at someone I didn’t recognize as myself but was me, I wasn’t exactly opposed to this new look.

“It’s not bad,” I said.

“It’d look better if you got a haircut,” Alice said without hesitation.

I wondered how much time Alice had spent thinking about how to improve my looks. I hadn’t had a haircut outside of my house since I could remember. My mother used to cut my hair when I was little, and when she refused to do it any longer because she said I should go get it professionally cut and styled by the girls at her salon, I asked Daddy to do it for me. I remember, he looked me in the eye and said, “All I can make are straight lines—and if you’re okay with that, then so am I.”

Daddy cut my hair since I was ten or eleven years old. It was the same cut each time: straight across the bottom. Until Alice helped me style it, I didn’t realize that my hair didn’t exactly look like everyone else’s. Then again, maybe that’s not quite the truth. At that time, it wasn’t that I didn’t look like most of the kids I went to school with,

or that I didn't want to, it was that I just didn't believe I could, so I didn't try. I wasn't sure, even though I didn't dislike the new hair, that I wanted a change.

Alice picked up the pack of cigarettes that was still lying on her striped comforter. She pulled out another and resumed her earlier position: sitting on the window sill, hand with the lit cigarette out the window, and the other on the ledge to keep her balance.

The sight was still foreign to me, and my face must have shown it.

"Haven't you done anything bad before?" Alice asked, blowing smoke out the window. She turned to the window again, and the room was silent. A cloud of smoke rose outside the glass. "Well?" she said, still facing the other direction.

"Um, I don't know. I mean...I guess once."

"What?"

I didn't want to tell Alice the worst thing I'd ever done. It wasn't because I was overly ashamed or guilty of it, but because I was worried she wouldn't think it was bad enough. I wanted to measure up to her, but I knew I couldn't.

"You don't have to say if you don't want to," Alice said, turning to face me, her hand still out the window.

"No, um, my mother and I don't get along too well. She used to be really big around here, I guess, and she wants me to be like her. But I'm not."

I paused to gauge Alice's reaction but couldn't. Her face was unchanged.

"Anyway, a few years ago on my birthday, she gave me this crown."

"She got you a crown?" I could hear the disbelief in Alice's voice.

"Yeah—not like one for little kids or anything, but it used to be hers. She won it in a beauty pageant. She told me she hoped I would wear it someday. I broke it."

“You what?” Alice said, her eyes widening.

“I broke the crown she gave me.”

“Right then—in front of her?”

“No. Later that day when she told me I needed to quit acting like a boy.”

“Whoa,” Alice breathed.

I shrugged and ran my fingers through my stiffening hair absentmindedly. It felt good to tell Alice about my mother.

“Pretty bad?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Alice nodded. “The stuff I did was a different kind of bad. You know, I partied a lot—the first time I got drunk was after the first home football game freshman year. Some guys invited me to a party, and I went. I never drank anything before so I was pretty tipsy after just a beer.”

“What’s it like?” I asked, curious.

“I don’t know, I guess, it’s kind of blurry. I mean, when you’re drunk, at least, it is. The world, I mean.” Alice scratched her arm in thought. “When you’re tipsy, things are just easier to say.”

“Oh,” I said. I wondered what Alice said when she was tipsy.

Alice finished her cigarette, got up to slide the carton and lighter back under her bed, and returned to the window sill.

“That first night I drank, I threw up. I don’t remember too much about it either—just some guy I didn’t know was holding my hair when I was leaning over the toilet. And when I stood up, he held my shoulders and asked if I needed water.” She paused, and

then continued, “I wonder where he went. I never did see him again. Guess he wasn’t from Elmwood.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond, so I didn’t.

Alice kept talking.

“I met my first boyfriend that night. You remember Aaron?” Alice didn’t wait for me to answer. “He was there after the guy helped me in the bathroom. I walked down the stairs and he was at the bottom. He kissed me. I didn’t know his name.”

“Did you kiss back?” I asked. I felt weird talking about this.

“Yeah. I was drunk.”

“So?”

“So when you’re drunk, some things that aren’t usually okay in your world end up being fine—at least at the moment. Luckily, it was okay when I was sober too. With Aaron, I mean”

“And then you were just boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Alice said. “He asked me to go out with him the next morning.”

“The next morning?”

I didn’t know why she was telling me this stuff. But if given the chance to leave, I don’t think I would have. I didn’t want Alice’s life to be less than perfect, and I didn’t want to see the scars she had accumulated during the life I didn’t want to think of her having. But, at that moment, I knew I would remain Alice’s friend despite anything she confessed.

“Yeah. I passed out next to him that night after doing a shot or two and woke up next to him in the morning.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I didn’t sleep with him, Sal, not that night.”

“So sex is the next bad thing?” I asked Alice. I don’t think I had ever said the word “sex” out loud—and was surprised that it wasn’t as hard to say as I thought.

“No, sex is the third bad thing. The second is pot.”

“You smoked pot?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from sounding shocked.

I could reconcile with cigarettes, maybe even sex, but I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about Alice doing drugs.

“Yeah. It was kind of like the cigarette thing. Except I don’t do it anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I liked the way it felt. I smoked almost every weekend. And sometimes more when I was with Aaron.”

“Didn’t you have a lot of boyfriends?” I remembered Alice always dating someone with a different face.

“Not like a ton.”

“I don’t know, Alice,” I said, “I remember there were a lot.”

“Not everyone I dated was my boyfriend.” Alice rolled her eyes.

“What’s the difference then?”

“You really don’t know, Sal?”

“No,” I said.

“You can date more than one guy at once—if you’re going out, then you can’t.”

“Oh, I get it,” I said sarcastically. “What happened to Aaron?” I asked.

Alice smoothed her jeans across her thighs and started to tap her fingers on the window sill.

“We broke up after a month. He wanted to be with some other girl—so he could see her more. He lived an hour from here and got tired of coming to see me and hanging out only on the weekends.”

“Oh. Where’d he go?”

“Some school in Clinton. After him, I dated for a while, then I started seeing Brad.”

“Everyone said he was really nice,” I said.

“That was kind of the problem. I didn’t like nice guys,” Alice said.

Clearly, she didn’t like nice guys, I thought to myself, picturing Billy.

“Why do girls always say that?” I asked.

Alice thought for a minute, then said “It’s kind of like deciding between a ham sandwich and a piece of cake with fresh strawberries and whipped cream. Ham sandwiches are boring. The cake’s got more calories, but it’s a lot more exciting to eat.”

“I get it,” I said, thinking about the fact that cake often made my stomach upset.

“You ever have a boyfriend?” Alice turned to me.

I rolled my eyes.

“Okay, okay. Sorry.” Alice looked around her room for a minute and then said, “So I guess you’ve never done it then either, have you?”

I didn’t even bother answering the question.

“Have you?” I asked.

I felt stupid when I realized my mistake.

“Sorry,” I muttered to the floor, pulling on a strand of hair that fell into my face.

“Yes, in fact, I have had sex, Sal. More than once, too.”

“Was it like the first time you drank?” I surprised myself when I said it, but smiled.

“You’re real funny. No, it wasn’t, actually. The difference was that I didn’t throw up after.”

“Probably a good thing,” I said, trying not to think too seriously about what we were saying.

“I probably should have the last time it happened though.”

I thought of the cracked skin of Billy’s finger against my cheek and shivered.

XII

“I didn’t really...” Alice let her voice grow quiet. Her words hung in the air, and she shook her head. “I didn’t really want it to happen.”

My heart beat a little faster and I felt nervous— but not for me.

“Did he...make you?” I asked.

Alice took a minute before she nodded.

“I mean, I was pretty drunk so...so I might have said something that made him think I wanted to.”

“But you didn’t?”

“No,” Alice said, wiping her palms on her jeans. She adjusted her yellow shirt across her chest. I’d never seen her fidget so much.

“So, I mean, what’d you do?”

“Nothing,” Alice said with a blank look on her face. Her eyes were still—almost as if she wasn’t behind them anymore.

“Nothing at all?”

“No. He pushed me down, and I went somewhere else. I thought about the stuff I was going to do the next day, the paper I had to write for Ms. Belden’s class, the outfit I wanted to get at the mall.” Alice picked at the skin around her nails.

I wasn't sure what to say. I thought first that I should tell her I was sorry, but then I didn't know if that's what she would want to hear. And I wanted to ask her questions, but I didn't know what was okay to ask.

"Wow," I said quietly.

"Yeah, it wasn't the best night ever."

"Doesn't sound like it," I said, wondering what Alice did after it happened. I wondered if she lay there next to him, if she got up and ran out, if she let him do it again. I noticed she was quiet.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Most of the time," she said, bringing her eyes to mine. "It wasn't easy to forget for a while." Alice shifted her weight on the window sill from one hand to the other and crossed her legs. She leaned her elbows on her knee and set her head in her hands, pointing her chin to the floor.

"But it is now?"

"Well, it's easier, you know, since I'm not carrying the reminder around anymore."

The moment was charged similarly to the moments when I first encountered Alice sitting on the floor of the bathroom. I tried to process all the information she had just given me. She had sex with Billy. But she didn't want to. So I guess it wasn't actually sex. Billy Thorburn raped Alice. But that's not what she said. She didn't try to stop him. She got pregnant.

"You mean...the baby right?"

I just wanted to make sure I understood her.

“Yeah. I found out a month later. I had been scared before, but I never actually felt sick like that. I took a test.”

“At Dr. Wilbur’s?” I asked, shocked, because Dr. Wilbur was known to tell everyone everything. One time, he called the parents of the entire freshman class to tell them that they should have their children tested for STDs because someone tested positive for Herpes.

“No, Sal, the kind you buy in the store. When you’re not eighteen, you can’t do stuff like that without your parents knowing.”

“Oh, I thought you could.”

“Well, I don’t know, I just wanted to make sure they didn’t know though.” Alice said.

But she had to tell them, I thought, remembering how round her stomach was, how it couldn’t be hidden underneath even a sweatshirt after a while.

“What’d you do?” I asked. Even though she wasn’t looking at me, it didn’t feel like Alice was ready to quit talking. Everything she was saying, every comment, each word, begged me to ask more questions.

“Sat there,” Alice said, “until I could get up.”

“Where?”

“Where do you think? In the bathroom, Sal, where the hell else.”

“I know that,” I said, “I meant, where were you? At school? Here?”

“The gas station,” Alice said.

I drew in a breath.

“With Margaret there?” I raised my eyebrows.

“Yeah,” Alice said, still facing the carpet. “It wasn’t like I bought the tests there you know.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I bought them in Grant.”

“Grant?” I asked, surprised. Grant was two hours away from Elmwood. “What were you doing in Grant?” People never went to Grant. It had a lot of places to shop, but so did Clinton, and Clinton was a lot closer to Elmwood.

“I made some friends at a party who wanted me to visit them, so I did. I was worried, and I bought the tests there and brought them home. I was going to take them here, you know, but then I realized I would have nowhere to throw them away after so I thought it’d be okay at Hane’s,” Alice said, coughing as she spoke. When she lifted her hand to cover her mouth, I noticed she was shaking.

“I can’t believe you took it there,” I said. “It’s so gross in that bathroom.”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” Alice snapped.

I guessed she didn’t.

“Weren’t you scared someone would see you?” I asked.

Alice nodded.

“So you took the test and then you sat there? In the Hane’s gas station bathroom?” I asked, feeling a little more comfortable with our discussion.

“I took the test, it was positive, and then I took another one. And then I sat there,” Alice said, correcting me. She rubbed her hands over her arms as if she was cold. She noticed me looking at her and lifted herself off the window seat for a minute to tuck her hands underneath her.

A breeze blew through the window. The air felt heavy against my face. It weighed down on the room, and Alice closed her eyes.

“Sometimes I wonder what it would have been like,” Alice said, her eyes still closed. “You know, what having that baby would have changed. How things might have been different.”

I waited for her to go on, but she didn’t. She leaned against the wall, shoulders slumped, shirt wrinkled. When the breeze left the room, it left with Alice’s spirit. I wasn’t sure who I was looking at sitting in that window. In just minutes, it was as if Alice was a completely different Alice from the one I usually sat with at lunch. But, actually, she was probably the same pale-faced girl with the round belly I met sitting on the bathroom floor, I was just seeing all of her for the first time.

She looked small, sitting there in the window. I was used to Alice’s large presence, her filling laugh and confident smile. Even though she might have stood close to a foot taller than I did, in some sense Alice wasn’t any bigger than I was. I got up and leaned against the wall next to the window and snuck glances at Alice. Her eyes were shut, she was pulling the skin around her nails, and her face remained blank—as if she were somewhere else.

“Alice, I, um, don’t know much about this kind of stuff, but I think if you were supposed to have the baby, it would have made it.”

Alice sat up and her eyelids fluttered open as I was saying this. Her blue eyes found mine and hung on—even after I looked away from her.

“I don’t know.” Alice’s voice was quiet and even. I wondered how she was so steady on the inside while so shaky out. “Sometimes I think it was my fault.”

“You think the baby died because of you?” I ran my hands against the wall behind me. I was surprised to feel flaws in the Rayburn house; the paint was uneven and bumps and cracks slid underneath the tips of my fingers.

I looked sideways at Alice. The back of her head rested against the glass of the window. She had closed her eyes again, but it looked like it was taking everything she had in her to keep them shut.

I pushed myself off the wall and hesitated. I wanted to comfort her, but I wasn’t sure that’s what she needed. As long as she kept her eyes shut, I wouldn’t know what to do.

“Sometimes I just think I kind of deserved it.” Alice opened her eyes and turned to face me.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She looked like a doll. That’s what she looked like. A lifeless doll. One with long legs, pretty blues eyes, but who was empty inside. Like the kind my mother used to buy me—the kind on stands I wasn’t allowed to touch. And even if I could touch them, I wouldn’t want to anyway because there was nothing comforting about them—nothing to hold onto but cold, unyielding porcelain.

“I did so much stuff wrong for so long, Sal.” Alice’s voice quivered. “And I didn’t care. I didn’t care at all. So when everything happened, and then when the baby died, I figure it’s kind of like I deserved it.”

I watched as her eyes welled up with tears and she looked straight at me.

“I was bad,” Alice said, her voice dropping to a whisper, “I hurt a lot of people. And I deserve it.”

I moved toward Alice and she scooted over so I could sit beside her. There wasn't a lot of room for the two of us to crowd in the window, and I could feel the heat of Alice's arm against mine.

"You didn't deserve it," I said. I felt like I should say more than that, but I didn't know where else to go. I looked at the floor.

Alice shook her head.

"You don't understand," she said, "I talked about people behind their backs. I stole girls' boyfriends. I cheated on tests. I cheated on my boyfriends. I snuck out of the house at night. I drank, smoked pot, slept with guys the same day I met them. I liked to my parents—all the time—about everything. And I didn't care. And the worst part is that sometimes I still don't."

This all sort of came out in a rush of crying and talking. Alice's voice had finally lost the calm it had carried for probably a lot longer than I had known her.

I wrapped my arms awkwardly around Alice's narrow shoulders.

"But you did care, Alice," I said, "you cared a lot. Otherwise everything that happened wouldn't have changed you."

Alice lifted her head. Her face was red—but only in spots—and she didn't look anything like a doll anymore. Her eyes asked me for reassurance, to keep telling her she was an okay person.

"Just because you made some mistakes doesn't mean you deserve what happened." I said.

I let my arms drop from Alice's shoulders and she wiped her eyes. She looked at my wet shirt.

“Sorry about that,” she said, pointing at the wet spot on my arm.

“It’s okay.”

Alice bit her lip for a minute and let her eyes dart around the room before they landed on me.

“You’re the only one.”

“What?” I asked, even though I knew exactly what she meant. Alice hadn’t told anyone else about the rape.

“That knows,” Alice said, tapping my arm with one long finger.

At that moment, I wished I wasn’t the only one. I wished Alice had told anyone else but me. And even as I wished this, I knew that I was the best person for Alice to confess to. No matter what, I wouldn’t have told anyone her secret. Alice trusted me, and I would do anything to keep it that way.

I stood up from the window and stretched my legs. We had been talking for hours.

“Why didn’t you tell your parents?” I asked, thinking it probably would have been easier to tell them that she was pregnant when she had the option of saying it wasn’t her fault.

“I don’t know.”

Alice picked up the cigarette butts lying on the sill and put them in a sandwich bag she had pulled from her jeans pocket. She held the bag in her hands a moment before pushing it back inside her pocket. I wondered where she threw it away.

“I guess I just...I mean, I don’t know. I didn’t think they’d believe me.” Alice stood up and rubbed her hands up and down her arms. She sat down on her bed.

I didn't think Alice believed what she had just said.

"Oh," I said.

"I mean, they tried and tried to get me to tell them who the father was, but I wouldn't say. I just basically said that I didn't know—that it could have been any of the guys I had slept with then—and they didn't want to make our lives a big mess or anything, so we decided together that it would be best not to involve the father and deal with the baby ourselves. Plus they didn't want people to find out I had slept with so many guys."

I didn't press Alice for the real reason she didn't tell her parents the truth. I knew that it was because, no matter what I said, she believed she deserved what had happened to her—that it was her sole responsibility to deal with what she considered to be the consequences of her actions. There was no possibility in my mind that Alice's parents wouldn't have held her in their arms and comforted her if she had told them she was pregnant because Billy made her have sex with him. I couldn't imagine, not for a split second, Alice's mother shaking her head and leaving the room if Alice offered her the truth. After all, they supported her when they thought the baby was her fault.

Alice pulled at a loose thread on her comforter, and I sat down beside her. She sniffed, and I looked at her face to check and see if she was crying again. She wasn't. Her eyes were clear and the red on her cheeks had dimmed to a light pink. It must have hurt when Hallie and the others left her alone with her secret. But she had been alone because she chose to be.

I looked down at my legs, my feet, noticed the rips and stains of dirt on my shoes next to Alice's bare feet. Even after all Alice had just told me, I still wondered why I was here next to her.

"Alice?" I asked, sitting back down beside her.

I smelled the gel in her hair when she turned her head to look at me.

"Huh?"

"How'd it even happen?" I asked.

Alice took a deep breath that made her shoulders rise and her body sink further into the bed when she let it out. It reminded me of the shuddered breaths old people take—the kind that are work.

"You don't have to say if you—I mean, it's okay. You don't have to tell me."

Alice shook her head.

"No," she said slowly, "I want to. I went to a party. It was actually at Ryan Water's parents' house. You know him?" Alice paused.

"I know who he is." I could picture Ryan: tall and thin, girls talked about him all the time and how cute the scattering of freckles across his nose were.

"Okay, well, I was there one weekend before school ended last year."

"Right," I said, realizing that everything Alice had told me and everything she was about to tell me would bind us forever to each other. Like an invisible thread that would always tie me to her and her to me.

"There were a lot of people there. Ryan's parents were gone so they've got this big house and a lot of room and everyone packed into their basement—it's got carpet and a big TV and this crazy sound system." She made a big box with her hands.

Alice was talking faster and faster, racing through the story. It felt desperate. A rush to relief.

“So someone made Jungle Juice, a whole baby pool full—you know, those pools kids swim in, the cheap kinds you can get anywhere. The thing was full to the top of that stuff with the fruit and the juice and all. I don’t like the juice part really—I’d had it before—and so that night, I just ate the fruit.”

Alice looked at me and waited for a reaction.

“Oh,” I said flatly, unsure of what she wanted me to do.

“When you put alcohol with fruit, the fruit absorbs it and has more alcohol in it than the juice stuff.”

I nodded.

“So, anyway, I got really drunk, like I told you earlier, and I was dancing and just being crazy and whatever. And I’m dancing on the stairs of Ryan’s basement, with some other girls, and I get cheered on. So I keep dancing and then I noticed no one was smiling anymore. I turned around and, um,” Alice cleared her throat, “he was behind me.”

I still couldn’t believe Billy had done it, that he was the one who got her pregnant. The one whose child she had carried inside of her, alone and scared, letting everyone think she just had some careless sex like any other slutty girl, and she carried that baby, blaming herself for Billy’s sick desires, and held inside her a tiny bundle of DNA that was made up of not only hers, but Billy’s too.

Alice continued.

“No one knew why he showed up at the party—it wasn’t like he was invited, but I didn’t really have a problem with him—I mean, I knew he wasn’t nice and that a lot of people didn’t like him, but he never bothered me, you know? So when he put his hands on my shoulders, I danced with him. And everyone eventually stopped watching and went back to their drinks and whatever. I told Billy I was going to get more fruit. He just kind of nodded and took his hands off my shoulders. I never danced with someone like that before.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He just...I don’t know. It was like even though he was behind me, I could almost see his eyes, they were staring into me so hard. And his hands were always on my shoulders. You ever danced, like, at a club or something before?”

“No,” I said, “only once at a wedding two years ago.”

I thought back to that wedding, my cousin’s, dancing with a boy my mother pushed up to me. He was nice looking—and polite—but his eyes were on a girl in a navy blue, strapless dress the whole time we swayed together.

“Well, anyway,” Alice continued, “when I knew that Billy was behind me, I waited the whole time for him to pull me back against him. It’s what they all do. But he didn’t. He just kept his heavy hands on my shoulders.”

It was hard for me to picture the scene in my mind. Alice’s voice had softened

“I went to go get the fruit and Billy just kind of stood there, on the stairs still, and watched me. I didn’t look at him, but I still feel his eyes on me. Even when he got up and left the room.”

Alice’s eye twitched and she rubbed it with her fist. I felt my skin bristle.

“Hallie was talking to me and she kept asking me about Billy, why I danced with him.” Alice looked as if she was back at that party, talking with her former best friend. “God, she’s so annoying sometimes. She kept saying how he was a freak, and sleazy, and that I should watch myself or I would get a reputation. I don’t know for sure, but I bet I already had one then.”

I looked out the window and watched the leaves of the tree outside the window move in the breeze. Alice was right; she did already have a reputation last spring. She had one the minute she walked in the doors to Elmwood.

“I asked her if she wanted a cigarette and she said no, so I went upstairs and outside to the back porch of the house to smoke. I didn’t like to be alone much then—I think it was because I always felt alone no matter what. So at least if someone was with me on the outside, it was better than being all the way alone. But I was so drunk then that I didn’t even think about finding anyone else to go with. Renee and Jessica weren’t there—they had some cheerleading thing or something. You know, I don’t know how I even made it up the stairs. I don’t remember walking out really—but I do remember smoking. The glow of a cigarette is something I always remember. It’s warm.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. And I did know what Alice meant. I thought of the sun burning from Mr. Fenster’s side of the creek, remembered sitting on the bank, the heat from the ground and the sky running through my body in the beginning of spring the day I broke my mother’s beauty crown. The tension I had felt in the house, that had built and swelled to a huge cloud so thick I couldn’t escape it, dissipated with the rays of light outside. Maybe it wasn’t the same kind heat and glow Alice was talking about, but the release was the same.

“He came up behind me and took the cigarette out of my fingers. He put it in his mouth. I had never really looked at Billy before. You know, he’s really kind of attractive,” Alice said.

I didn’t know how to respond. I didn’t understand how you could find the guy who raped you attractive. He hadn’t done that to me, that’s for sure, but the things Billy had done to me were things that I knew didn’t come from a person who was attractive—in any way at all. I couldn’t picture that somewhere underneath that hard exterior was a heart that was anything but black.

“He didn’t say anything, and I waited for what seemed like forever for him to talk. He smoked my whole cigarette—right down to the end, to the part where it burns your fingers if you keep going—and flicked it into the dirt.”

Alice’s eyes were closed and her body began to shake intermittently.

“You don’t have to tell me this if you don’t want to,” I said quickly.

She continued, ignoring me.

“Then he turned to me, and I just remember his eyes. They were black. But even in the dark on the porch, I could see that he wasn’t just scary—you know? I could see that he was hurt. And then he grabbed my wrist and pulled me in the door. No one else was upstairs—they were all still in the basement.”

Alice thought for a moment, tying the loose thread from the comforter on her bed in knots, and said “You know, even if anyone had been upstairs, I don’t know if that would have helped anything.”

“What do you mean?” I asked her.

“I mean that when Billy grabbed onto my wrist, I didn’t try to get away from him or anything. I just went along with it. I don’t remember feeling scared, but I wasn’t really thinking straight either.”

I nodded, pretending to understand what Alice was telling me. I could feel Billy’s fingers around my own wrist, and I flinched involuntarily. I couldn’t imagine letting him pull me anywhere without fighting it.

“He had to pull me up the stairs—I couldn’t really walk straight, or even lift my feet very well. I remember just looking at each step and feeling just...oh, I don’t know, blank, I guess. I don’t think I was really thinking about anything. I probably would have passed out if I hadn’t gone outside.”

Alice took a breath and ran her shaky fingers through her hair again.

“He pulled me into a bedroom at the top of the stairs and shut the door behind us. I remember waiting to hear the lock click, but I never did. Everything was fuzzy, hazy—I mean, I knew what he wanted, but it just...I don’t know.”

I noticed how black her eyelashes were—and that the roots didn’t match—and figured she must have been wearing that waterproof mascara my mother was always talking about. As a new tear formed in her eye and rolled down the cheek facing me, it didn’t leave a hint of black on her skin.

She was quiet for a while. I waited for her to go on, to tell me the rest, but she just sat there with her hands in her lap, shoulders sagging.

“W—what happened after, you know, I mean, when he shut the door?” I asked Alice.

She shook her head as a steady stream of tears started down her face. I watched as her lips trembled, trying to keep from crumbling but not fully succeeding.

“I just,” she said slowly to keep her words from coming out in sobs “let him.”

I didn’t know what she meant. In my mind, it wasn’t feasible that I ever could have just let Billy do whatever he wanted with me. For a second, I felt angry with her. I looked at her bony shoulder and found myself wanting to reach over and shake her.

“He pushed me into the side of the bed, and I fell onto the floor. He pulled me up and the carpet burned my legs. When I woke up in the morning to throw up, I saw the rug burns and that’s what made me remember what had happened with him. He pushed me onto the bed and that’s when I just,” she paused to take a big breath, “left.”

“What do you mean, ‘left’?” I asked her.

Alice shook her head before she said, “He pushed me down and I said ‘no’, or at least I tried to. He covered my mouth as I said it—his hands were rough and his palm was sour, and I just knew I shouldn’t say anything else.”

I touched Alice’s shoulder.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She turned and looked at me.

“I just knew I couldn’t do anything to stop him anyway so I didn’t try.”

Alice’s tears had stopped and her eyes held mine without effort—but they also held something so fierce and sad that I had to look away. I let my hand drop into my own lap and turned and faced forward, my legs still hanging over the edge of her bed. I was confused about what I should say. I could imagine her telling Hallie the same thing and

knew that Hallie wouldn't have wasted a second to throw her arms around Alice and tell her how rotten Billy Thorburn was.

"Sal, y-you don't think I..." Alice's voice grew quiet and I could feel her gaze on me, the slight push of her breath against my face.

I turned to Alice and looked at her. She looked scared. I wasn't sure why. She'd been really brave so far—she'd probably been through the worst of the repercussions from everything she had just told me already—she didn't need anything from me. Alice was stronger than I could ever be. But when I caught her eyes, fluttering and delicate blue, she was looking for reassurance again—and maybe more than that.

"I think," I said, careful to keep my voice even because a knot had formed in my throat, "I—I think that what happened to you was just that. What happened. And—and now you're someone else who's somewhere else."

Alice nodded and wiped her hands across her cheeks. She got up and retrieved a tissue from her dresser and carefully dabbed it around her eyes. If it was me, I would have just rubbed it right across my face.

"Alice!" A muffled voice filtered through the bedroom door.

"Alice, honey, can I come in?" Alice's mother's voice broke into whatever it was that Alice and I just shared.

"Yeah," Alice said, quickly fluffing her hair and smoothing wrinkles in her shirt. She turned to the bedroom door and opened it.

"Oh!" Alice's mom jumped. "I didn't realize you were right there."

"Sorry," Alice said, walking back over to the bed where I was still sitting and joining me.

“Hi Sal,” Mrs. Rayburn said to me and then continued without waiting for my reply, “I was just thinking I’d come up and tell you both that, Sal, you are more than welcome to stay the night tonight. Daddy and I are going to go to a benefit so we are leaving in a few hours and I wanted to see if Sal needed a ride home or if she’d like to stay.”

Both Alice and Mrs. Rayburn turned to look at me. I felt my cheeks grow red.

“I—I, um, didn’t bring any clothes,” I heard myself saying.

But that really wasn’t my main concern. I had spent more than one day in the same set of clothes more than a few times so that didn’t bother me. However, I wasn’t quite sure what the rest of the evening would hold if I stayed at the Rayburns’ house.

Alice and her mom laughed.

“It’s okay,” Alice said, “you can borrow some of mine.”

I smiled at Alice weakly. An image of Billy locking the door as he held onto Alice was in my mind.

“Now, Sal, if you need to go home to your family, that’s quite alright. I’ll give Alice the keys to one the cars, or Raymond and I can drop you off on our way to the dinner,” Mrs. Rayburn said.

I looked at Alice and the corners of her mouth turned into a smile and she mouthed the word, “Please.”

XIII

After Mr. and Mrs. Rayburn's Lexus pulled out of the driveway, Alice led me into the kitchen. She opened the door of the stainless steel refrigerator and we stood there, peering into a wide assortment of neatly labeled containers and packages.

"There's nothing in here," Alice said, still holding onto the refrigerator door handle.

"Um," I said, squinting at Alice.

She laughed.

"Okay, okay, there's a lot in here, just nothing I want to make really."

I shrugged.

"You like shrimp?" Alice asked.

"I guess," I said, thinking of the crawfish Daddy used to catch for me when he took me fishing. Their pinchers would clamp the air from his hand as he'd bend to show me their wiggling bodies.

"Me neither," Alice said, laughing. "Let's just order Chinese."

"Okay," I said.

As Alice picked up a phone from the shiny marbled counter next to the fridge, I looked around. There was a double sink in the counter left of the refrigerator. It was

absent of the hard water stains that my mother was always trying to scrub from our sink in the kitchen.

Alice chattered to the Chinese takeout place in the background. Looking at this kitchen sent me back to my parents' house and the outdated 1970s kitchen my mother was still proud of.

"They were the best appliances, Sal, the best. Your father told me he would buy me a house with only the best things in it." She'd smile and then look at Daddy and say, "And if it didn't have them in it, then he'd put them in it."

"Okay, so, the Chinese should be here in an hour, what do you want to do?" Alice broke into my thoughts.

"Oh, um, I don't know. What do you want to do?"

"You're the guest," Alice said in a sing-song voice.

"Okay...well...um...", I said, stalling, looking out the huge window of the kitchen to the patio. "It's still sunny."

"Yeah, it is," Alice said slowly, as if to say, "So?" And then, excitedly, she said, "Let's lie out!"

I had never tanned in my life. I had lines from tee-shirts and shorts in the summer, but I never made it a goal to get them.

"Of course, you don't even need a tan," Alice said, envy in her voice, "you're way darker than me already."

Alice held her arm next to mine to compare the color of our skin. I hadn't noticed before that my skin was, as she said, darker than hers, but it was.

"So, you want to?"

“What?” I asked.

Alice dropped her arm and, with an exasperated sigh, “Tan. On the porch.”

“Um, I—”

“—I know,” Alice interrupted me, “you don’t have any clothes. You can borrow a suit of mine.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“I have like ten of them,” Alice scoffed, walking out of the kitchen and bouncing up the stairs.

I walked into the sitting area off the kitchen with the mahogany-colored leather couches. I started to sit down and before I settled into the rich material, swimsuits fell onto my head and into my lap.

Well, not swimsuits. Bikinis, to be precise.

I looked up and Alice’s face hung over the banister above me.

“Just try them on and wear whichever one you want,” she said, pointing to a hallway on the other side of the sitting room I was in.

“Bathroom’s on the right.”

I walked down the hall. Framed pictures lined the left wall making me stop in my own footsteps. The first few frames were easy to glance over, but the last framed photo on the wall caught my eye and made my heart jump. Alice knelt on the beach in a pale blue dress that looked to be caught in the wind as the lines of the sides of her thighs and stomach were clearly visible through the thin material. The ocean, deep and dark, crashed behind Alice and the sun looked as if it was descending into the water. But it wasn’t the storm-like setting that made me stop. It was the look on Alice’s face. The

same look I had seen from Alice earlier that day when she was telling me about Billy, the moment when she stopped using words but her eyes kept going, asking me to tell her she wasn't guilty. Alice's eyes in the picture matched the ocean—dark and sad, that fierce strength was still visible.

When I opened the door to the bathroom, which resembled something like a sitting room, I realized that I couldn't even hear Alice moving around upstairs. I remembered my grandparents' house, Daddy's parents' house, and how when you walked upstairs, the floorboards creaked. The few times I spent the night there, I remember not being able to sneak out of my bedroom without my grandmother showing up and telling me to go back to bed. Here, though, had I not been with Alice moments earlier, I never would have believed anyone else was even in the house.

I slipped off my clothes and looked at the swimsuits I had set on the counter by the sink. They were small. Alice had shot down three different suits—and none of them were the kind I had ever worn. Growing up, I didn't spend too much time at the beach or poolside. I played in the creek a lot—but mostly in the clothes I was wearing. I'd happily let the water lap at my jean shorts until they were soaked straight through, dripping down my legs as I walked home after hours of trying to catch minnows with my bare hands.

While slipping a pair of red and white polka dot bikini bottoms up my legs, I thought of my faded green one piece sitting in a drawer in my bedroom. I always felt sporty in the suit; Daddy and I had gone shopping together when I got it. It made me feel confident to a degree—but as I tied the top of the bikini across my back, I knew it shouldn't have.

I looked at myself in the mirror and grimaced at the sight of myself with very little clothing on my body. It wasn't so much the sight of me in such minimal amounts of clothing that made me recoil from my reflection, but it was the thought of wearing the bikini in front of someone else that started my nerves tingling. I crossed my arms over my chest and fought the urge to look at the floor. Instead, I stared at myself in the mirror, I made myself look at me. I was taken aback at the initial sight of my hair, not used to seeing it in any other way besides limp and stringy—I leaned close to the mirror and touched my hair with my hand. It was slightly sticky, but it was definitely mine still. Just with more to it—like how a dog looks after he's had a bath and dried out. I pulled back from the mirror and looked at my face and was slightly disturbed in that with just that change of hairstyle, I didn't quite recognize myself. I could almost pass as one of Alice's old friends.

A moment later, I shook my head at my reflection and smirked. I didn't know what had come over me; there was no way I'd ever look right positioned next to Alice Rayburn. I could never be like Hallie, Jessica, or Renee. I stared at myself in the mirror—my face—and wondered how just one change, my hair, could make me not recognize myself. How one change could make me think, even if for just a few seconds, that I could be what Alice used to have.

Finally, I took a step back from the mirror and shut one eye and glanced down to look at the bikini. The top was on crooked, but that detail was insignificant. I felt naked. I looked naked. I couldn't imagine wearing the suit out of the bathroom, much less wearing it on the Rayburn's porch, risking someone coming to the house and witnessing

me and my bare skin. Before I could pull the suit off and return to my clothes, Alice knocked on the door.

“Sal, God, you take longer than anybody I know—and I know you’re not putting on make-up!” Alice yelled through the door. I opened it and almost hit her.

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s—” Alice stopped in mid-sentence and just stared at me.

I wanted to melt into the ground.

“You’re still wearing your socks,” she said, eyes still fixated on my torso.

“Oh. Yeah,” I said reaching down to pull them off. “I, um, don’t think it fits right so, uh, I think I’ll just, you know, sit with you.” I stumbled over my words.

“Are you kidding?” Alice squeaked.

“What?” I asked.

“You think it doesn’t fit!” Alice exclaimed.

I nodded.

“Well, let me be the one to tell you,” Alice said dramatically, “that you are completely, insanely wrong. It looks better on you than me. In fact, you can keep it. I don’t think I can ever put it on again knowing what you look like in it.”

I was embarrassed. I turned and picked up my clothes from the floor of the bathroom and held them in front of me. Alice pulled them out of my hands and tossed them onto the floor in the hallway.

“Are you crazy, Sal?” Alice said loudly. “If I looked like that, I’d wear a bikini everywhere I went. Even when it snowed.”

I looked at Alice and was puzzled by what she was saying to me. Did she mean that as a joke?

“Seriously, Sal,” her voice quieted, “don’t you see that you’re gorgeous?”

I felt my cheeks redden, and the red spread to my whole face, and reached to my neck.

“I mean, it’s okay,” Alice continued, “if you don’t feel comfortable, you know, wearing a bikini, but you should at least try it before you decide it’s not for you. You should show off what you have.” Alice flicked her hair from her shoulders and straightened her spine. “That’s what my mom always says. It’s the only time in life we can, anyway. You might as well have fun with it before everything gets all old and wrinkly...” Alice looked down and set her hands over her stomach. “Before you have this stuff.”

When we sat down on the smooth wood of the Rayburns’ back porch, the sun beating down on our hair, I noticed the white lines across Alice’s small, rounded, stomach. As she lay back on the towel she had set on the wood, I thought that if those were her only physical imperfection, she was doing pretty good.

I had never spent much time thinking about my physical appearance. I wasn’t comfortable with the way I looked and had never bothered trying to change that; it didn’t occur to me that it was possible

“So how many crunches do you do a day?” Alice asked, cupping a hand over her eyes as she turned to squint at me.

“Um, none?” I answered.

“You’re lying,” Alice said, “There’s no way you’re that flat without doing anything.” She gestured at my stomach. I looked down at it and covered it with my hands.

“No, I really don’t,” I said.

“Wow,” Alice said, looking at my hands covering my stomach. “I kind of hate you.”

I was taken aback. I wasn’t used to having things other people wanted. And I wasn’t sure why Alice, of all people, would ever want anything I had for herself. I wasn’t sure what she saw in me that could possibly be better than what she had already. When I looked at Alice, skin reddening in the sun, thin body easily curving when she flipped from lying on her back to her stomach, I didn’t see her imperfections.

Alice propped herself up on her elbows. “You should flip now, or you’re going to get uneven,” she told me.

“What?”

Alice sighed, “Your front is going to be darker than your back if you don’t lie on your stomach for a while now. You’ll look like a backwards penguin.”

I laughed and rolled over onto my elbows. My shoulder brushed Alice’s and she looked at me a moment before saying, “You know this gives you cancer, right?”

I shrugged. I knew.

“So do cigarettes,” I said.

Alice nodded but didn’t smile. I wondered what was on her mind and why she was suddenly serious.

“What?” I asked her.

“Nothing,” Alice said.

I didn’t believe her.

“Something,” I said back, not looking at her face.

“I heard from my mom that Billy’s dad died from cancer. That’s why his mom’s so messed up.”

For a few moments, I didn’t say anything. I remembered overhearing phone calls my mother had with Deena Thorburn: the hushed tones that hushed more when Daddy or I walked into the room. Maybe it was true. Maybe Billy’s father did die from cancer. But why would that mean anything? As far as I knew, the story that was repeated over and over again amongst the community members of Elmwood, was that Billy’s father disappeared, leaving him and his mom alone. I hadn’t heard about the cancer thing.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, he left them, you know, Billy and his mom, when he was a little kid, and my mom said it wasn’t because he was all that terrible—not the shitty dad like a lot of people said—but because he didn’t want them to know that he was sick—and he didn’t want them to watch him die. So he left.”

“Wow,” I said, imagining how hard it must have been to make that decision.

“I don’t think I could ever do it,” Alice said, reaching for a pair of sunglasses that she had set next to her towel.

“What?” I asked, letting my elbows slip from underneath me and laying my face on the towel.

“Leave and die alone. Just the thought makes me feel sick.” Alice slid the sunglasses on her face while she was saying this to me. “You know, I thought I was going to.”

“To what?” I asked.

“Die,” Alice said, “when I had to deliver the baby. In a way, after he came out, I wished I had.”

I nodded, not knowing how to respond to this. I didn’t know if the baby had died before or after she delivered him. I wasn’t sure if the blood Alice had left on the floor of the bathroom that day I met her was hers or the baby’s. I didn’t think I could ask her.

“Don’t have sex,” Alice said seriously, turning to me. “Okay?” The corner of her eye twitched—I could see it even underneath the dark, purple-framed sunglasses. I read somewhere that those twitches can be caused by stress. I wondered if they could be caused by sadness, too.

“I don’t think we have anything to worry about,” I said.

Alice smiled.

“Flip,” Alice said, and we both turned from our stomachs to our backs. The sunlight made me close my eyes involuntarily, but I forced them open to look at the trees surrounding the porch, the bright blue sky covering their tops and surrounding the sun. It always put me in awe the way it could be so colorful and charming when so many bad things were happening. I lay there on my back, next to Alice, and wondered if everything—anything—was real.

The Chinese food arrived and Alice ran back into the house from the porch to answer the front door. She set up the take out boxes on the island in the center of the kitchen, pulled up chairs from the dining room table, and we ate.

“So now what?” Alice asked me.

“I don’t know; it’s your house. And I don’t do stuff like this really.”

“Yeah. Is there anything you want to do?”

“Not really,” I said with a forkful of noodles in my mouth, “this is good here.”

“Okay,” Alice said, drawing out the second syllable, “but we’re not going to sit here and eat Chinese food all night long, so we need to do something else.”

I nodded and hoped she didn’t see the noodle that slipped from my mouth and fell onto the bright white tiled floor. I bent to pick it up and put it into my napkin. Alice got up and opened a cabinet. As she stood on the tips of her toes, her hair caught the light of the setting sun and burned a shade of orange that reminded me of the glow of shreds of burning wood that fly through the air, the ash that catches fire only to burn black a moment later.

“We’ve got some rum and vodka. And I’m sure there’s some kind of juice in the refrigerator. Mom’s on some kind of crazy cleanse thing right now.”

I was surprised at Alice’s suggestion for entertainment but asked instead about this cleanse thing.

“Oh, you don’t know what that is?” Alice asked me.

I shook my head.

Alice seemed to be continually surprised at my ignorance of the most current social workings of the world. I wondered how long it would be until she stopped being shocked at my lack of knowledge.

“Well, from what I get, I don’t really know all the details, your body is full of harmful toxins from the air we breathe in and the stuff we eat that’s processed and packaged, so some people think it’s a good idea to get all that stuff out of your system and start fresh every once in a while. They drink a bunch of juice and fast and then they eat again.”

I wasn’t quite sure how juice cleaned you out; I always thought that prunes did that kind of thing.

“So we’ve got a lot of that stuff in the house right now because Mom’s doing it right now. It’s actually kind of annoying. She’s been whining about how hungry she is the past day or two now. But you know when she can eat, we’ll go back to all that health food tofu stuff—we only eat pizza and that kind of thing when we’ve got company—so it’s also kinda nice right now because Dad’s in charge of meals. He doesn’t care about health so much. Me neither.”

I laughed.

“Although, that’s one of the reasons why I have to do a hundred crunches a day. And I’ll never look like you.”

I looked down at the empty plate of Chinese food and wondered if my stomach was as flat as Alice claimed it was.

Alice opened another cabinet and set two glasses on the counter.

“So, what are we having?” She asked me.

“Um, I—I don’t—I mean, you pick,” I said, my stomach knotting. I wasn’t sure about this. I didn’t really want to drink anything. I never had before, and I didn’t find the idea appealing. I hadn’t really spent much time thinking about drinking either. Some people did, some people didn’t; it was as simple as that in my mind. I fit into the latter group, but I couldn’t think of how to tell Alice that. I imagined, at that moment, telling Alice that I didn’t want anything to drink. Then I imagined her asking me why, and I couldn’t come up with an answer to that question. It puzzled me that she’d even want to drink anything, considering what happened to her when she did.

“Okay, then, vodka it is.” Alice pulled a glass bottle with a silver label from the cabinet, set it on the counter next to the glasses, and then walked to the stainless steel refrigerator and opened it.

“Okay, we can mix it with cranberry or orange. Preference?”

Suddenly, Alice was all business. I don’t think I had seen her so quick to act and reach a goal before. I wasn’t altogether sure what the goal of this was, but I had an idea.

“I’ll take your silence as an opportunity and just tell you we’re drinking vodka mixed with cranberry juice.”

“Doesn’t matter to me,” I said.

“Okay then,” Alice said, pulling the juice bottle from the refrigerator.

Alice poured the drinks and I waited at the table, feeling myself start to sweat anxiously. I didn’t want to do what we were about to do—I was scared. And I didn’t understand why Alice would want to return to the state of being that had gotten her into so much trouble to begin with. Why would she ever want to go back there? I couldn’t understand why anyone would want to lose control. Or why anyone would want to open

themselves up to making decisions that could leave them scarred for the rest of their lives. I heard Daddy say before that his father was a drinker. When I asked him why, he said, “Some people drink to have fun, and others, like my father, drink to forget.” I never asked what it was that he wanted to forget, but I always kind of wondered.

“Here you are, madam,” Alice said in a fake accent as she slid a glass underneath my face on the table. I wrinkled my nose as I smelled the mixture.

Alice slid into the chair beside me and held up her glass, waiting for me to do the same. I lifted the glass and felt silly as it met Alice’s and she smiled at me. I felt like a faker, like I was just pretending to be the person I was at that moment. The glass was heavy in my hand and as Alice brought hers to her lips and the drink flowed into her mouth, I looked down at mine and contemplated the decision I was about to make.

“Well?” Alice said.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you going to drink it or what?” she asked.

I picked up the glass, raised it to my lips, took a deep breath and tried to swallow as much as I could before the taste of the drink actually hit my tongue.

“Are you sure you’ve never drank before?” Alice said. “You sure had a lot for the first time already.”

“I’m sure,” I choked out as I felt the vodka burn my throat. It felt like it made a trail through my whole digestive system. I could feel its heat as it slid down my throat and into my stomach, where it rested. Alice raised her glass to her lips and the drink, for her, went down smoothly. She didn’t even flinch.

It was quiet in the kitchen, with the exception of the hum of the refrigerator. Alice reached for the bottle of juice and vodka again and filled her glass. She tipped the vodka bottle toward me and I shook my head. Alice shrugged and downed the glass she just poured. I looked down at my own glass, still half full, and took another drink of it.

“Feel anything?” Alice asked.

“Warm,” I said.

Alice laughed and replied, “One of the best things. It used to take me forever to get warm unless I drank.”

I nodded, but I didn’t know what Alice was talking about. My insides felt warm—like I was still sitting on Alice’s deck, sun shining on my bare skin. But I didn’t think that was what Alice was talking about. I thought that maybe she didn’t mean that she only felt warm when she drank, but maybe Alice meant that she only felt happy—or not lonely—when she drank.

We made small talk as she finished glass after glass of the drink. I sipped on my first glass until the last drop was gone. Alice tipped her head back and drank the end of a glass and stood.

“All right, I’m going to pee, and then we’ll have some fun.”

Alice wobbled to the bathroom at the end of the hall where I had changed, and I watched her disappear behind a heavy wood door. I pushed my chair back from the table and stood. Things were smoother than usual. Less pointy, more fluid. I worried, at first, that I was drunk. But I wasn’t drunk, I didn’t think. Maybe I was buzzed. At that point, though, I didn’t know the difference. I carried the bottle of juice from the table to the refrigerator, and I noticed that I wasn’t teetering on my feet like Alice was when she went

to the bathroom, so I figured I must not be that bad. The memory of Alice's unbalanced walk to the bathroom reminded me that she had been gone for a few minutes, but I didn't think much of it. I picked up our glasses and opened cabinets looking for the disguised dishwasher that I guessed was probably somewhere in the kitchen. I set the glasses in the dishwasher when I found it and then looked to the sink for a dishrag.

There was no dishrag. I figured the cooks probably washed dishes and cleaned the kitchen—but wouldn't a person want a dishrag in case of something like this? An unplanned meal that dripped some sticky juice on the smooth surface of the table? I opened a drawer underneath the sink to reveal a pile of dishrags and smiled. I was pleased that my guessing skills were worth something. I wet the dishrag, was almost blinded by how shiny the silver sink basin was, and wiped the table. As I let my hands pass over the table with the rag, I heard a muffled cough from the bathroom. I had forgotten Alice was still in there.

Setting the dishrag down, I walked across the kitchen, through the sitting room, and down to the end of the hall where I paused at the door separating Alice from me. I pressed my ear to the door and heard a gasp and a cry. I hesitated before I said anything. I wondered why she was upset. I wondered if anyone else knew how imperfect Alice was besides me. At the sound of another cry and a muffled bump against the door, I knocked on the wood.

"Alice?" I said quietly, knocking on the door.

There was no response.

"Alice, are you okay?"

A moan replied.

I turned the doorknob and the door opened, abruptly stopping when it hit against something.

Alice sat on the floor in front of her toilet, her face hung over the toilet bowl, tears dripping into the water.

“Alice?”

At the sound of my voice, she turned her head to face me. Blonde hair had fallen into her eyes and she gave me half a smile.

“I think I had too much,” Alice whispered.

“Oh. Um, are you—are you sick?” I asked her.

Alice nodded and let her forehead fall and rest against the toilet seat. I winced at the sound of her head connecting with the porcelain. Standing in the doorway, I felt helpless. I didn’t know what people did in these situations. I thought about trying to get her to walk all the way upstairs and couldn’t quite picture that going successfully when I remembered her unsure steps to the bathroom fifteen minutes earlier. Now that more time had passed, I figured there was more alcohol in her system than before, and it would probably be even more difficult for her to walk.

Alice’s head snapped up and took me out of my thoughts and before I could ask if she needed anything, her body lurched forward and, hair hanging into the toilet bowl, Alice threw up. I was never one to get grossed out over squished flies or rotting road kill, I was always interested in studying it. But the smell that quickly filled the bathroom was overwhelming, and I felt my stomach turn when it hit my nose. Alice’s body convulsed again. I knew her hair was getting covered in a mixture of throw up and toilet water and I wanted to go pull it back for her, but I couldn’t make myself walk any further into the

bathroom. I took a step backward as her body relaxed and she set her elbows on the seat and cradled her head.

“I’ll go get you a washcloth, okay?” I said from the doorway.

Alice’s head moved a little and I took it to be a nod. I turned and quickly walked into the kitchen. When I got there, I stood in front of the sink and took deep breaths, trying to clear my mind of the image of every piece of food or drink that sat in it in fear that any kind of image linked to smell would put me in the position Alice sat in now. Just not for the same reason.

I opened the drawer under the sink where I had taken the dishrag from earlier and then shut it. What was the point of getting a clean one when Alice’s face was already touching the toilet? The surface of the table couldn’t have been any dirtier than that anyway. I rinsed the rag in the sink with soap and walked back to the bathroom.

“Here,” I said, extending the cloth with my hand to Alice. I thought she moved at the sound of my voice, but she didn’t look up when I offered her the rag.

“Alice?” I said loudly. “Alice?”

Alice’s legs slid out from underneath her, and she fell forward onto the floor.

I took a deep breath and did what I knew was right. I abandoned all worries of throwing up myself, ignored the overpowering odor of vomit in the room, and sat myself down by my friend. I shifted her body to rest on her side instead of her stomach and pushed her sticky hair out of her face.

“Alice,” I said without expecting a reply.

I had never drunk before and hadn't spent much time in the drinking world, but I felt an enormous sense of calm in this situation. Somehow, I knew that Alice was okay—and I knew I could do what I needed to do to get her upstairs to sleep.

Once I settled Alice on the floor, I stood and wet the dishrag again and ran it across her face. Her cheeks, which were the color of chalk, turned red from the friction of the rag. I rinsed the rag again and ran it through her hair. I set it on the floor beside me, and Alice raised her head and looked at me before she dropped it into my lap. I was stunned at first, but let Alice settle her body across my legs. Her eyes turned upward but didn't meet mine. I wondered where she was as her eyes closed. I ran my hand across Alice's hair and hoped that someone somewhere would make sure she was going to be okay. Because underneath all that pretty, there was a constant darkness that had settled inside of her. And I wasn't sure how to change that. I didn't know if I was supposed to.

I let Alice sleep past the point when my legs felt pins and needles and had started to go numb. When I couldn't take it anymore, I shifted her into a sitting position and woke her enough to get her to sit up so I could clean her up better. I found a stack of washcloths under the bathroom sink and covered one in hand soap. I rubbed it thoroughly through Alice's hair and over her face and neck. I took a clean washcloth and rinsed it in water and cleaned the soap from Alice. Her cheeks began to turn pink—I wasn't sure if it was from the washcloth or because some of the alcohol was dissipating—but I felt confident enough to help her stand and get her up to bed. I held at least half Alice's weight on my shoulder as we slowly climbed the stairs. When I got her to her bedroom and told her she should probably change her clothes, she just looked at

me. Clearly not registering exactly what I said, Alice swallowed and said, “Sal, I’m sorry.”

“What for?” I asked, helping Alice to her bed when I realized she wasn’t going to change her clothes because she probably couldn’t.

“Everything,” she said, sighing heavily.

I let her sit on her bed and went to her dresser and searched through its drawers until I found a plain, blue tee-shirt and some flannel pants. Alice didn’t fight me when I removed her thin shirt and shorts. The top of her bathing suit sat crooked on her chest. I pulled the blue shirt over her head and then helped her stand and put the shorts on. Alice sat back down when I got her dressed.

I pulled down the comforter while she sat, drooped, on the corner of the bed.

“You didn’t do anything,” I said, slightly puzzled. I had heard people talked nonsense when drunk. Maybe this was what they meant.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Alice said, “I did. I didn’t like you.” Alice shook her head.

“Well,” I said carefully, “to tell you the truth, I didn’t really like you either. Before, I mean.”

Alice shook her head. “No, it was different. I said things. And, and, I meant them. And I wish I hadn’t. Because now.”

I nodded and said, “It’s okay. Okay? It doesn’t matter what happened.”

“Yeah,” Alice said, turning and crawling to the head of her bed and sticking her legs underneath the covers. “I—just—I just feel bad. Because I didn’t even know who you were.” Alice’s eyes caught mine and somewhere in that drunken stupor was raw truth that hurt to see.

After Alice drifted off to sleep, I headed back downstairs, carrying Alice's dirty clothes, and found my own. I changed into them and gathered the washcloths from the bathroom floor along with the dirty clothes and the swimsuit Alice lent me, and I carried it all back upstairs and left it in a basket sitting in Alice's closet. I figured she wouldn't want me to put any of the dirtied laundry in the laundry room where her parents may have found it. As I piled the cloths and clothes in the basket, I could hear deep breaths coming from Alice's bed. She was asleep. I went back downstairs.

More time passed than I thought when I finally checked the microwave clock in the kitchen, and I decided to go home. It was 10:00 at night already, and I didn't have extra clothes. And I had to go to school in the morning anyway. I thought maybe I should leave a note or something, but I couldn't find a pen, so I just left the house as it was. I worried, for a moment, about leaving the door unlocked but figured that Alice's parents would return soon.

And then I thought of Billy. How he made Alice have sex with him. How, earlier that day, he told me I better not tell anyone anything, as if he knew she confessed everything to me. Alice had said his eyes were black but not empty. But when I saw them, there was nothing. There couldn't have been anything behind them when he dragged her into that bedroom. I couldn't leave Alice without locking her safely inside the house.

I went back inside.

"Alice, hey, I'm gonna go home, but I need you to turn on the alarms before I leave." I set my hand on Alice's shoulder and gently shook her. She didn't stir.

"Alice, come on, you have to get up."

She rolled over and sighed.

“You can come right back to bed,” I said, shaking her again.

“What?” Alice asked, waking.

“You have to lock the doors,” I repeated myself. “I can’t leave before you lock the doors.”

Without asking why, Alice got out of bed, stumbled through the house and down the stairs, and waited for me to walk out the front door, her finger hovering over the buttons of the alarm system mounted to the wall of the entrance of the house.

“See you tomorrow,” I told Alice.

“Yeah,” she said heavily, “see you at school.”

I opened the sturdy door and walked outside. Alice followed me and grabbed my arm before I got all the way down the cement stairs. Wordlessly, she hugged me. I hugged her back. Alice walked back inside and closed the door behind her. I waited until I heard a click of locks and then started down the Rayburn’s driveway in the dark.

As the cool night air hit my face, I felt a sense of relief. I hoped leaving didn’t mean I was a bad friend. Alice’s parents were probably already on their way home, and she probably wouldn’t even remember that I had left her alone. My concerns, as I started out of the driveway, turned to my own parents. More so, my mother. I knew that Daddy would be covering for me—that she’d have started worrying hours ago about when I was going to come home—and that Daddy would say something like, “Oh, I’m sure she just got lost reading a book somewhere and didn’t look at the time.” But inside, he’d probably be worried too. Thinking about this, my steps quickened from a slow, thoughtful walk, then to a brisk walk, then to a jog.

I felt almost as if I had done something wrong—like I had a curfew and was breaking it. I wondered why I didn't feel like this when I stayed out alone, reading on the steps of the library and then in the park or just sitting and thinking somewhere. Maybe this was what it was like to be a real, normal teenager, but I didn't like feeling guilty. I did, however, like being with Alice. The deep hoot of an owl interrupted my worries. The owl repeated its call a few times before silence folded into the air. I wondered if it was calling another owl.

When I got home, I tried to slip into my room unnoticed through the back door of the house. I failed. When I shut the door, it stuck in its frame and creaked before I could get it shut all the way.

"Is that you?" my mother's voice floated to me from the living room.

I walked down the hall, looking back longingly at my bedroom door, and found my mother sitting, her face anxious, on the couch in the living room.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked her.

Ignoring me, my mother said, "I didn't expect you to be gone so long. You know you have school tomorrow." She was irritated.

"Sorry," I said, "we were talking, and I lost track of time." I turned and walked into the kitchen and took a glass from the cupboard above the oven. My mother followed behind me. It always irritated me when she did that. She couldn't take a hint. Or she could, and just couldn't handle the fact that I wanted to get away from her. I didn't know why she was angry that I was late anyway. She was always pushing me to get together with people and make friends, but now that I was doing it, she changed her mind.

"Anything juicy?" she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“What?” I said.

“You know,” my mother said, getting a funny look on her face, “were you talking about boys?”

I wished I could disappear.

“Yeah, sure, I mean, yeah,” I said, thinking about everything Alice had told me.

“We talked about boys.” I remembered Billy’s black eyes.

“Anyone I’d know?” my mother asked.

I felt like she was prying. I wanted nothing more than to get out of the conversation.

“No, Mom, no one you’d know,” I said, finishing my glass of water.

“Did you have a good time?” she asked.

“Yeah, fabulous,” I said sarcastically.

“You know, Salma, you need to think about your attitude if you are ever going to turn into a proper young lady and if you ever want to date a boy.” My mother’s lips were a light shade of pink, instead of the bright red lipstick she usually wore. I wondered what made her change.

“Who says I want to date a boy?” I shot back, daring my mother to push the conversation further.

She shook her head and said, “I’m going to bed. You had better do the same, or you’re going to be very tired and disagreeable tomorrow.” She walked down the hall and I heard the bedroom door close.

I stood in front of the sink and rinsed the glass, setting it on the dish drainer, and walked to the other side of the kitchen. I stared out the window into the dark night and

pictured Alice sleeping in her bed. Her parents would be home soon, walking into the house, going up to her bedroom. Her mother would sit down on the edge of her bed and pull the comforter tight around her daughter. She'd smooth her hair away from her face and kiss her on the cheek. And before she retired to her own room with her husband for the night, she'd lean to Alice's ear and tell her she loved her. I wondered if she'd smell the vodka.

XIV

Daddy was quiet when I slipped into the car, five minutes late, to go to school the next morning. He usually chatted with me about any old thing he was thinking on our rides together, but his eyebrows knitted together in the middle with a knot of worry.

“Sorry I was late,” I said, warming my fingers over the heat vent.

Daddy grunted as he backed the truck out of the driveway.

I took a sideways look at his face and caught his eye accidentally.

It’s funny how when you catch someone’s eye it almost always means the conversation you are trying to avoid then has to start.

“Where were you?”

“I went to the Dairy Freeze and then to Alice’s house.”

“You like that girl, huh?”

“Sure, she’s nice—I—well—she’s my friend.”

Daddy lifted his hand from the steering wheel when we caught a red light. He dragged his palm over his dark hair, and I noticed the wrinkles around his eyes, the ones that grew longer when he smiled.

“I’m happy you’re making friends, but I want you to be careful. Not everyone is as nice as they seem.” He looked at me, his eyes darting from mine to the road and back again as the light turned green.

“I know,” I said as we started forward.

“I’m not so sure you do. I’m sure Alice is a nice girl. She’s the Rayburn girl, isn’t she?”

I nodded, surprised at Daddy’s warning. I wondered what he knew about Alice that he thought I didn’t.

“Well, you just be careful. Don’t do anything stupid.” The clipped tone in his voice told me that this conversation was almost over.

“I won’t,” I said, pulling my fingers away from the heat that was starting to turn them red.

We rode the rest of the way to school in silence, and, when Daddy stopped the car for me to get out, he looked at me for a minute before he unlocked the doors.

“See you tonight,” I said, my hand resting on the door handle.

“Yep, have a good day at school,” he said, and I got out of the car, slamming the door behind me. I watched as the exhaust from the engine puffed as Daddy pressed on the gas and the old car disappeared from the school parking lot.

It was cold at Elmwood in the morning; the building was old and it took hours for the heating system to warm up. As I walked to my locker, I expected to see the moisture from my breath hanging in the air. I reached my locker, entered in my combination, and opened it, hanging my backpack inside after depositing a stack of books on its floor. I put one hand in my pocket as I crouched to the floor to gather the books I’d need for the first few classes of the day.

After a few minutes of arranging my locker, the hallway began to buzz with voices and the heat that belonged to them. Daddy brought me to school every day on his

way to work, and he had to be at work earlier than school started. I got to school before the bells rang, before my classmates littered the halls, and sometimes before some of the teachers, too. I liked the time when the school was silent, when I could hear the creaks and groans of the old building settling into the dirt beneath it.

I stood up after creating a small stack of books to carry for the morning and shut my locker door. I turned and started to make my way through the crowding hallway, heading to my first class—history.

“Sal, hey,” Alice said breathlessly as she fell into step beside me.

“Hey,” I said, “are you okay?”

“Sure,” Alice said with a smile.

I noticed her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen.

“My head kind of hurts, actually,” Alice said, rethinking my question.

I nodded.

“Sorry I left, I just figured since it was so late and all,” I said, bumping into Alice’s shoulder as the crowd of students thickened near the main entrance of the school.

“It’s fine, don’t worry,” Alice said, “I just had too much too fast. I forgot I haven’t had any in a long time; it hits pretty hard when my tolerance is down.”

I thought of antibodies and how the body builds immunity to sickness when it’s exposed to it.

The floor passed under our feet and as we approached the door to the geometry classroom, Alice stopped and said, “See you at lunch, right?”

“Yeah, see you. Hope your head feels better,” I replied.

Alice smiled and disappeared into the room, and I walked a few doors down to history. I wondered how many people noticed Alice and I were hanging around together, that I was at her house and she told me things no one else knew. I felt silly, but I still kind of wanted to know what other people were thinking. If they were thinking anything at all.

History was never my strong point. I memorized what I needed to know for the tests, but once I took them, I could never remember the information again, no matter how long I had spent studying. Of course, it wasn't the most interesting class either. Sometimes I wondered if Mr. Fredrickson liked history any better than we did, or if he just taught the class because he had to. I slid into my desk at the back of the room near the window. I opened my assignment book and realized I had forgotten to complete my homework. I was supposed to have read an entire chapter on World War I. Mr. Fredrickson, in addition to having a boring class, was the kind of teacher who asked questions and called on you when he could see that you didn't have the answers.

I pulled out my text book. It was missing pages here and there. Elmwood didn't pass too many school levies, so when it came down to what to spend money on, there were more important things than books. I liked the old books, though. I liked to read the names of the students from years ago on the index card taped inside the back covers. And, more often than not, I'd run into the name of someone from town I knew. It was weird to think of Mrs. Potter, whose husband died just two years ago, without her thick, bifocal glasses and gray hair, or Joe Herman, the mailman, not being a mailman.

I skimmed through the chapter while the rest of the class entered the room. The usual morning chatter threatened to distract me from my scramble to gain some sense of

what the missed reading was about. The nasal voice of Jessica, one of Alice's old friends, found its way to my ears. Her desk was a few rows over from mine, but she didn't care what other people heard her say and was sure to prove it repeatedly by talking extra loud.

"She's just so...different, you know? Like she used to be someone else," Jessica said. I didn't turn to look at her, but could easily see her twisting her brown hair in her fingers as she spoke.

"No, like, she totally was. You're so right. I don't know what's wrong with her," said another voice.

I couldn't recognize the second girl's shrill tone, but figured it was one of the group's outliers. When in classes without each other, Hallie, Jessica, and Renee had a group of girls who wanted to be included but who weren't accepted. They used these extra girls only as needed, supplying the hopefuls with a false sense of belonging.

"Seriously, she just, like, lost it at the party."

"Really?"

"Yeah, all Hallie said was that we missed her. I mean, we do, you know? Alice was one of my best friends. It's been weird without her."

I could picture Jessica putting her hand over her heart for emphasis.

"Oh, I know," said the hopeful.

"And now she's got, you know, her, now." Jessica's voice got quieter as she said this, causing me to look across the room at her.

When my eyes met Jessica's, she rolled them and turned away. I was used to being ignored, but not used to being met with blatant dislike. The voice of the hopeful

girl belonged to a redhead named Amber. She always worked hard to be liked by Alice's old crowd, but they would never expand their exclusive group to include someone who was slightly overweight with freckles. I'd never talked to her—or Jessica for that matter.

"Which, I don't even understand that," Jessica continued, "I mean, you know what I'm saying?"

"Definitely," said Amber.

I didn't know what she was saying. Well, maybe that's not quite right. I knew exactly what Jessica was saying—that I wasn't good enough to be friends with Alice. I just didn't want to hear it—because there was part of me that still believed it.

"I mean, it's like, you can be friends with us, or her—you can't have both. Allie just doesn't seem to get that. If she thinks she can just get right back in with us when she realizes that her new friend is boring, she's completely wrong."

The words stung. I wasn't that boring. A little, sure, but not as boring as those girls were with their fake nails and empty brains.

"Do you think she'll come back?"

"Um, what?"

"You know, Alice, um, do you think she'll want to be friends with you again?"

Hopeful Amber didn't understand the error she made here; this question never should have been asked. Because, clearly, in Jessica's mind, Alice would need to return to her old friends sooner or later—there was no question in her mind.

"Uh, yeah, it's just like—what her and Sal have can't be anything close to what we had with her so of course she'll want us back," Jessica said with a hint of condescension.

“Yeah, but, didn’t you say that when she left the party, Alice left, too? If she wanted to be friends again—”

Jessica cut Amber off, saying “I don’t think you get it,” and turned around in her seat, her long, straightened, hair flipping across the front of Amber’s desk. She flashed a smile at Danny Boyd sitting across from her.

Mr. Fredrickson entered the room and quieted my classmates. I remembered the unread chapter in the book under my fingers and hoped I had some luck on my side today.

“Pull out your books and review the chapter; in ten minutes, we’re going to have a quiz.”

I thumbed through the pages of the book again, trying to see if any key words would jump out at me, but all I could think about was Alice leaving her party.

Mr. Fredrickson told us to put our books away and passed out the quizzes. When I looked at the sheet, I knew I couldn’t answer any of the questions. I usually scored perfects on the quizzes, so when I handed my sheet in blank, Mr. Fredrickson looked at me expecting some kind of excuse. I shrugged and walked back to my seat.

The morning wore on and the idea of Alice leaving the party on Friday wouldn’t leave my mind. When the bell for lunch rang, I left my book in my locker, gathered up my plastic-bagged lunch (we ran out of paper at my house), and walked quickly to the cafeteria. I never understood why people weren’t in a hurry to get to lunch like I was. My classmates were as eager as I was to escape the stiff desks and droning lectures; I didn’t get why they moved so slowly out of the classrooms to the lunch line. As I moved

quickly through the hall, I was blocked by Billy. Each time I tried to go around him, he moved in the same direction. Finally, I looked up at him and said, “What.”

“Still got your colored pencils?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I didn’t, though. I had forgotten all about them. They were probably at Alice’s.

“Good,” Billy said, “because I want my money back. You owe me.”

He gave me the change, I thought, but I wasn’t about to argue with him.

“I don’t have anything right now,” I said, “I’ll bring it for you tomorrow.”

Students were continuously walking around us, no one stopping to see what was going on.

“What if I want it now, Mosquito, what’ll you do?”

“I don’t know,” I said, slipping the handle of the shopping bag containing my lunch around my wrist and shoving my hands into my pockets. Billy mimicked me.

“What do you know, that’s the real question, ain’t it?” Billy said, leaning his face close to mine.

I backed away, but he placed his hand on my shoulder, curling his fingers around my bones. I turned to see if any teachers were close by, one that I might make eye contact with so that they’d step in between us and save me.

“What do you know?” Billy said again, his eyes deep and dark. As he leaned closer, I could make out the individual stubble of hairs across his chin.

“Nothing,” I said quietly.

“What?” Billy demanded.

“Nothing,” I said louder.

“Right,” Billy replied, letting go of my shoulder abruptly. Before he turned and walked away, he studied my face.

I wasn’t sure how Billy could know what Alice had told me, but it sure seemed like he was aware that I knew more than he wanted me to. I watched his wide shoulders covered in a faded, black tee-shirt disappear into the crowd of classmates, standing still in the center of the hallway where he had left me.

When I reached the cafeteria, I sat down at a table and noticed that a crowd of girls, Alice’s friends, were standing across the lunchroom, at their usual table, talking to each other and glaring at me. I opened my lunch bag and suddenly felt self-conscious over the fact that it was bright blue and plastic in a sea of faded yellow trays and paper bags. The feeling of eyes on me made me nervous as I pulled out an egg salad sandwich, hoping Alice would arrive soon. I bit into the sandwich and was careful not to take my vision off the food in front of me.

Alice breezed into the cafeteria and sat down beside me with a tray of food.

“Hey,” she said, breathlessly.

“Hi,” I said.

“God, my head hurts so bad right now.”

I smiled.

“Seriously, I haven’t had a hangover like this in a really long time.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have had so much,” I said.

“Duh,” Alice said. “You seem to be feeling good.”

I nodded and said, “I am.”

“Well, lucky you.”

It was weird to think that only fourteen or fifteen hours ago, I was drinking alcohol for the first time with Alice Rayburn. Had anyone told me that ahead of time, I never would have believed it. Of course, I never would have believed Alice and I would be friends either.

Alice wrestled with a carton of milk for a few seconds before sliding it over to me. Really, though, if you just follow the directions and push where the carton says “push,” it’s pretty simple to open. I pushed the carton back over to Alice and watched as she un-wrapped a yellow straw, inserted it into the carton, and sipped.

“Hey,” I said, unable to shake Jessica’s words from first period out of my mind.

“Yeah?” Alice said, raising an eyebrow expectantly but not looking at me.

Instead, she had set to work peeling the orange on her tray.

“Um, when I left your house the other day—I mean—from—when I left from the party there?”

“Yeah?”

“What’d you do?”

She didn’t answer at first, letting her nails dig into the dimpled skin of the orange peel again and again.

“Tried to find you.”

“But, um, I didn’t see you.”

“Yeah, uh, I finished telling Hallie off and then ran down the driveway. I ran a while down the road, but then I realized I wasn’t sure where you lived, so I stopped.”

“Oh,” I said quietly.

Alice had gone looking for me.

“You ready for that geometry test?” I asked Alice.

She shook her head.

“When is it again?”

“Monday,” I said, reaching for a small bag of chips.

“Why don’t you come over Friday and you can help me out.”

“Okay,” I said, “as long as you didn’t have other plans already. I mean, I know Friday night’s usually pretty busy and all and I could just come by on Sunday or something...”

“Quit worrying about my social life,” Alice said, rolling her eyes at me, “I do what I want to do.”

I smiled, thinking of Alice running down her driveway to look for me. I wondered if she kicked off her heels first.

XV

Weeks passed and the autumn air grew harsh and gray, bringing with it snowflakes and Christmas decorations. I helped Alice study for geometry, and she was able to move grade from a D to a C. The kids at school, two weeks before Christmas, were sending each other “Jingle-bell-o-grams,” construction paper cut into the shapes of Christmas trees with glitter and holiday messages written on them, a little silver bell and piece of candy attached to it. The student council sold the jingle-bell-o-grams and hand-delivered them in the middle of classes to their recipients while singing Christmas carols. People’s faces turned red out of happiness and embarrassment. I’d never received one, so I was surprised when Gwen, the student council president, set a Christmas tree shaped paper on my desk in front of me.

Mrs. Klein ushered the council members out of the room quickly and shut the door behind them. We were in the middle of discussing Jane Eyre and she hated being interrupted. While Mrs. Klein continued the discussion alone, the students, including myself, were looking at their special deliveries and trying to peer over one another’s shoulders to see who got what. I was a little scared to look at my tree to see what it said. When I was in middle school, I got a heart for Valentine’s Day. It read, “To Sal, Love Joey. Meet me behind the oak tree after school.” I was excited, as I’d never had any boy

give me attention before. I waited after the oak tree for a few minutes until Billy appeared, laughing. I wouldn't let myself be fooled like that again.

I reached for the green construction paper, slid it across my desk and flipped it over. Mrs. Klein was speaking about the connection between Jayne and Mr. Rochester, how it couldn't be broken—even if they wanted it to fade, it wouldn't. On the haphazardly formed Christmas tree were the words, "Merry Christmas!" written in the center in glitter glue. Underneath the red, sparkling words, was a message in black, uneven scrawl. "Silence is golden." Goosebumps spread across my arms like pinpricks.

I was a little more than nervous to run into Billy. It seemed like if I just kept my mouth shut about Alice's confessions, he would leave me alone. Really, it wasn't hard to do. Alice and I didn't talk about that stuff much. And I didn't know why I would tell anyone anything anyway. Alice seemed fine to me. It was up to her to tell people about what happened, not me. She'd survived. And it never seemed like, when we talked about the lost baby, she wanted or needed help. Alice was dealing with it all on her own in her own way, which is the only way I ever dealt with anything myself, so it didn't seem out of the ordinary. I knew Billy's secrets, but I had no intentions of telling them.

The friendship I had with Alice became comfortable as winter began. I was at Alice's house once or twice a week; we watched TV, ate weird things Mrs. Rayburn kept in their stainless steel refrigerator, Alice worked on my make-up, and we spent a lot of time getting to really know and understand one another. We became inseparable. Alice's old friends stopped caring that she was no longer a part of their group, and they quit glaring at me when I ended up in their lines of vision. Alice and I started to plan our futures together. She helped me put together application materials for college as we'd be

graduating in just a few months. After we got into the same schools, we planned on getting an apartment together. I was excited to think about a fresh start somewhere—especially because the start wouldn't be made alone.

As close as Alice and I grew, however, there was always a piece of her that I couldn't touch. Every once in a while, she'd float away from me during conversation, or walk out of the room when we were watching TV together, only to return a few minutes later as the same person before she disappeared. It was that return that made me second-guess my concern for Alice's well-being. I knew that if I had been through even just a fraction of what Alice had experienced in her life so far, I'd sometimes fade from the world, too. But I carried a nagging doubt, a doubt and a worry, that dated back to when Alice told me she thought she deserved what happened to her. At the time, I thought she meant the death of the baby. But the longer I knew Alice, the more I began to think that she didn't just mean the death of her child, but that she meant she deserved what Billy had done to her.

The day the first snow was predicted, Alice and I sat at lunch, huddled together over a comic book. I was starting to learn how to let her into my life, so when we had a conversation about the comics in the newspaper, I let it out that Daddy bought me *Calvin and Hobbes* comic books every chance he got. I owned them all, and when I couldn't sleep at night, I'd take them out and read under my blankets. At Alice's request, I brought one to school for her to see. As we read the book together at the table and ate our lunches, snowflakes began to fall outside.

We shut the book as some of our classmates gathered near our table to look out the window. You wouldn't think snow would be any big occasion in the Midwest as we'd seen snow every winter we were born, but there's just some excitement that accompanies those first white flakes falling to the ground. Maybe it's the anticipation of the holiday season's arrival that made us cluster at the sight of the familiar entrance of winter, but, for me, it was something much more that year. Alice and I rose and stood at the windows with our classmates.

"I love snow," I said to Alice.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I hate the cold."

"Yeah, I don't know, it's not so bad," I said, leaning closer to the glass separating us from the real world.

"I guess, I just can't get warm. So now I'll be cold until the sun comes out again. And you know that's going to be a while."

"Yeah, but, don't you ever just like it anyway?" I asked, thinking about sledding down the hills in Mr. Fenster's woods.

"Not really," Alice said.

"What about sledding?"

"I haven't gone in forever," Alice said, rubbing her arms with her hands.

The old, single-pane windows on our old school were no match for the dipping temperatures outside, and my own arms bristled from the drop.

"I go every year," I said.

Alice turned from the window and looked at me.

"By yourself?" she asked.

“Um, yeah.” I said, with little hesitation. I was learning that Alice would not make fun of me for telling her the truth about myself.

“So you know where to sled then?” Alice asked.

I was taken aback, but replied, “Yeah.”

“So we should go,” Alice said, “we should go sledding.”

“Oh, um, I don’t know,” I said, “There’s not going to be enough snow to go for a while.”

“So we’ll go when there is,” Alice said, turning away from the window and walking back to our table. I followed her. “Did you want to do anything tonight?” Alice continued.

“Sure,” I said. “Should I bring pajamas?”

“No, um, I was thinking we should go to your house this weekend. Actually, my mom is hoping we will so that the carpet cleaners can just work and not worry about who will be walking in and dirtying up their jobs some more.”

I started feeling anxious, and I hadn’t even said okay yet. I knew my mother would be positively thrilled to hear that Alice was going to come over to the house. She’d probably whip up some impressive dinner, wear a stylish outfit, and be completely charming. Alice would meet the mother who only wanted what was best for me, the one who smiled and laughed and used her pleasant telephone voice during conversation throughout the visit. Alice wouldn’t meet the mother I knew, the one that dreamt of a girl like Alice for a daughter.

“I know you’ve got stuff with your mom,” Alice said, “but everyone does. I’m just bored with my house right now, you know?”

I understood what she was saying. It wasn't fair that we were always at Alice's house, looking to entertain ourselves on her turf all the time, when she had never even seen my bedroom, much less met my mother.

"Yeah, um, okay," I said, "I'll tell my parents tonight."

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch again, and Alice and I stood up and threw our trash away.

"Should I meet you after and then we can walk together?" Alice asked as we exited the cafeteria. Her cheeks were peach-colored.

"Uh, no, I mean, I should probably tell my mother before you arrive so she isn't surprised," I said, thinking of her reaction years ago to Daddy's unplanned visits from his friends.

"Okay, well, I'll see you later then," Alice said, and I nodded.

I spent the rest of the day in anticipation of telling my mother that Alice would be coming over. I tried to rehearse the conversation in my head, attempting to think of all the responses my mother might have and create effective replies to succinctly express to her that I didn't want her to hang out with us or talk about our lives or boys with us, but that what I wanted most was what I usually wanted from her: nothing.

When I walked in the door to the house that afternoon, I was greeted by the sounds of "The Nutcracker Suite." I groaned inwardly as I knew exactly what my mother was doing before I even walked out of the entryway to see her sitting in the middle of the living room, surrounded by the branches of our fake Christmas tree strewn all over the

carpet and boxes, opened and half-emptied already, as she planned the décor of the house for the holiday season.

“Salma, I’m so glad you’re home,” my mother exclaimed as she heard the door shut and I walked to where she was sitting. “I can’t decide what color scheme to go with this year. I was originally thinking red and green, but I think that’s what we did the year before last—and I don’t like the idea of blue too much these days—it’s sad. What about white, hmm? What do you think—a nice white, Christmas?”

“Like snow?” I said.

“Don’t be smart,” my mother replied.

“I’m not.”

“Well, what do you think? We could put white lights on the tree, and I’ll iron that white tablecloth in the basement and put it on the table, and we can get out those candles with batteries and put them in all the windows. Well?”

“Sure, Mom,” I said. “Whatever you want. White’s a winter kind of color so I guess it’d work fine.”

“Wonderful,” my mother said, clapping her hands. “We’ll start after dinner.” She rose from the middle of the pile of green branches, ornaments, lights, and boxes.

“Um, I think Alice is coming over tonight,” I said quickly.

“Hmm?” my mother murmured as she stared at the collection of boxes, taking a mental inventory of what was present and what was not and what would have to return to the basement.

“Alice is coming over tonight, if that’s okay. Her mom’s getting their carpets cleaned and doesn’t want us in the house.”

“That’s wonderful! I have been dying to meet her.”

“Yeah, well, we have finals to study for so we’ll probably just be in my room doing that the whole time,” I said.

“Sal, you know I’m planning on us decorating tonight. I’m not doing it alone.”

Then don’t do it at all, I thought. “Well, we have to study,” I said.

My mother nodded, though there was a frown on her face. “At least tell me you girls will sit with Daddy and me at dinner.”

It was the worst thing I could think of, me and Alice sitting down to dinner with my mother, but I had no choice besides to nod my head and agree.

“So,” my mother said, drawing in a deep breath, “when will Alice arrive?”

I shrugged.

I walked through the living room, leaving my mother standing in the middle of her Christmas decorations, and went into my bedroom, shutting the door behind me. I stood in the doorway for a few minutes, trying to see the room as Alice would see it. It was small and dark. The carpet was brown, the walls were a sun-bleached tan, and the green and white quilt on my bed looked as if it was in the wrong house. It was one of the few things my mother had made by hand and its edges were crooked and tearing after a lifetime of use.

I pulled the quilt down to examine the blanket underneath, a faded pink, pilled throw, and decided it wasn’t any better than the quilt so I left both of them on the bed. The walls were bare, unlike Alice’s photo-covered bedroom, and in the entire room there were only two pictures. One of me and Daddy at the Dairy Freeze on my tenth birthday, and a picture of me on Mom’s lap, book in hand. A small, bedside table offset the washed

out colors on the quilt as its wood was deep and dark. The dresser on the wall opposite the bed clashed with the table as its wood was a light shade of maple. My parents furnished the room with hand-me-downs from their parents' houses when I was born.

I was worried Alice would be bored when she arrived. There wasn't much to look at in our house like there was in hers. I had never noticed the peeling paint near my dresser, the stains from the hard water in the tub and toilet, or the way the plaid couch in the living room sagged in the center. I was sure Hallie's house looked a lot like Alice's—and the rest of her former friends probably all lived in similar places as well. Alice had probably never been in a house like mine, and I was uneasy thinking about her sitting in our kitchen that still had appliances from the 1970s.

I picked up the clothes from the floor in my bedroom, slid the shower curtain across the tub so it wouldn't show, and straightened out the chairs at the table in the kitchen. When I walked into the living room, I tried to look at it as if I had never seen it before. It was a mess, quite simply, with the tree still in pieces and boxes and ornaments strewn about. I started pushing the boxes to one side of the room and, for a moment, considered hauling it all into the basement.

"Salma, what are you doing?" I jumped at the sound of my mother's voice.

"Picking this stuff up," I said, irritated, "It's a mess around here."

"I had all that just the way I wanted it! We will decorate after dinner—don't move anything else," my mother said, stalking into the room and pushing the boxes out from the wall again. "I had these here because they go in the kitchen, this is all here because I think it's white but I don't know for sure, and this is where all the—"

“Mom! Okay! Sorry I’m trying to clean this place up for once.” The minute I said it, I knew I shouldn’t have. My mother was sensitive to complaints about the way she took care of the house. I think it was mostly because she didn’t do it very well. Daddy was often cleaning up after her. She left pieces of food on plates when she washed dishes, didn’t vacuum behind the sofa or under the coffee table, always forgot to pull her hair out of the shower, and she certainly never took the trash out.

She was silent, but her face started to turn red. I didn’t think it was from embarrassment.

“Mom,” I started, “I’m sorry—”

“—Salma, just don’t say anything else. I already know what you think and that’s fine. But until you take care of your own house, you don’t get to complain about mine,” she said quietly.

I felt bad for what I’d said, but it was true. I wasn’t going to apologize for being honest. I put my hands in my pockets and went in the kitchen to call Alice.

When Alice arrived an hour later, my mother was all smiles and grace as expected. Alice nearly fell in the door as the floor wasn’t level between the porch and entryway.

“Well, hello,” my mother said, scurrying to the door before I could get there.

“Hi, you must be Mrs. Porter,” Alice said, sticking out her hand. “I’m Alice Rayburn.”

My mother looked taken aback at Alice’s confident manners, but accepted her hand in her own.

“It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Alice; I was starting to wonder if you were made-up!” My mother gave a little laugh, and I looked at the floor.

“Nope,” Alice said, “I’m here in the flesh.”

“Please, come in, come in, you can just slip your shoes off right there if you like. But you don’t have to.”

Alice bent over and unzipped her tall boots, leaning them next to my father’s work boots, and walked toward the kitchen. I noticed she was carrying a round, red-lidded container.

“Mrs. Porter, where should I put this? My mother sent it, she said to tell you ‘Happy Holidays,’” Alice called over her shoulder. I continued into the kitchen as she paused to speak to my mother.

“Oh, how lovely, tell your mother ‘thank you’ for us. Just bring it into the kitchen here, we’ll open it up and set it on the counter.” My mother’s cheeks were rosy and she was clearly thrilled to have some company in the house, especially since the guest was mine, and was—at least by appearance—the kind of friend she had imagined for me for so long.

Together, my mother and Alice opened the sealed container. The scent of apples and cinnamon filled the kitchen and my stomach growled. It dawned on me that dinner was right around the corner and I had no idea what my mother was cooking. Nothing was even in the oven yet.

“Goodness,” my mother said, “this pie is just beautiful. Look how delicate the lattice-work on the crust is,” she said, turning to me.

I nodded, not completely sure how a pie couldn't be delicate. It seemed to me that anything which could fall on the floor and be ruined was delicate to some degree.

"Teresa, our cook, made it," Alice said, "she's so good with holiday baking."

My mother's lips spread into a tight smile, and she placed the lid back on the pie.

"Well, dinner should be ready in an hour or so," my mother said. "You girls go on and do whatever it is you need to do; I'll call you when it's ready."

"Okay," I said.

"Mrs. Porter," Alice said, "Thank you for letting me join you this evening on such short notice."

"Oh, it's a pleasure, Alice," my mother said beaming, forgetting all about the fact that Mrs. Rayburn sent Alice with a pie made by their cook.

I started walking down the hall, waiting for Alice to follow. When we reached my room, I looked at the floor. I walked to the foot of my bed and sat. Alice entered the door and paused. She walked all around the perimeter, gazing at each piece of furniture for a few moments, then moving to the next. When she reached my bedside table, she stopped and ran the palm of her hand and fingers across its surface.

"It's pretty," Alice said, "is it cherry?"

"What?" I asked, surprised that Alice knew wood.

"Is it cherry? You know, like made from a cherry tree?"

"Um, yeah, I mean, how do you know that?"

"What?" Alice asked. "I shouldn't know that?"

"No, I mean, yes, I just—" I stumbled over my words.

Alice shrugged. "I just remember the different shades and grains."

“Oh,” I said.

“It’s so quiet here,” Alice said, walking to the single window in the room. She leaned her forehead against the glass. “Snowing.”

“Still?” I asked.

“Yep,” she shivered. “Hey, you didn’t give me a tour.”

“Oh, the house?” I asked.

“Yeah, I want to see it. I gave you one.”

“Yeah, but there’s not much to see here,” I said, pulling on a loose thread on the quilt.

“Come on, Sal, I just want to see where you live.”

“Okay,” I said, reluctantly. I stood and Alice followed me as I walked out of the room. I walked her through the house quickly with little commentary. We stopped at the door through which Alice had entered the house earlier. “That’s it,” I said.

“There’s stairs, though.” Alice gestured toward the basement.

“Yeah, it’s the basement. You don’t want to see it.”

“Yeah I do, come on Sal, you saw my basement.”

I snickered. Alice looked hurt. “Your basement has carpet, Alice. It has rooms. Ours, compared to yours, is a dungeon.”

Silence fell between us for a moment, and I was worried that I’d said the wrong thing, then a smile spread across Alice’s face and she opened her arms.

“Well, show me the dungeon then!”

I laughed and led her downstairs.

“This is so cool,” Alice said as our socked feet hit the cement floor. “It’s like a different world down here.”

“Haven’t you ever seen a basement like this before?” I asked, surprised by Alice’s delight.

“Yeah, but it’s been a long time. What’s this stuff?” she asked, gesturing at the shelves of jars.

“Food,” I said.

“Yeah, I see, but why?”

“Well, in the summer we have a garden. Then at the end of the season, my mother cans everything we have left. Then you can use it throughout the year.”

“Cool,” Alice said.

“Yeah, it’s cheaper than buying it at Giant Eagle, you know, and healthier, I guess.”

Alice arched her left eyebrow as she picked up a jar of tomatoes.

“Think it’s healthier than the stuff from the health food store?” she asked.

“Oh, um, I don’t know, but I think they still have preservatives in their stuff a lot of the time. We don’t use anything so…” I stopped talking, worried that I’d offend Alice. Her parents didn’t have a garden.

“So you know how to plant stuff and keep it alive?” Alice asked.

“Yeah, um, it’s not that hard,” I replied.

“Well, you should teach me some time then. I’ve killed every plant I’ve ever owned. Even a cactus one time.”

“How in the world did you do that? Cactuses are really easy.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Alice said with a laugh.

She was still holding the jar of tomatoes in her hand, her fingers splayed against the glass, the red creeping toward her fingers when I heard the sound of Daddy’s truck coming up the driveway.

“My dad’s home,” I said to her, “let’s go upstairs.”

Alice nodded, setting the jar back on its shelf, and we headed out of the dungeon basement and up into the light. Daddy was already in the door when we reached the top of the stairs.

“Hey honey,” he said to me, patting the top of my head with his rough hand.

“Hi, this is Alice,” I said as Alice stepped out from behind me and offered her hand to my dad.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Porter,” she said.

My father’s eyes were soft and brown. The lines around his mouth shortened as he smiled at Alice and shook her hand.

“You as well,” he said, bending down to take off his work boots.

My mother walked to the edge of the living room and stopped where the linoleum and carpet met.

“Dan, how was work?”

“Oh fine, John and Ginny stopped by today.”

“That’s nice,” my mother said.

“They said to tell you hello,” he said.

Daddy finished slipping off his shoes and walked into the living room where the mess of boxes and ornaments were still covering the floor.

“What’s all this?” he asked.

Alice and I were still standing in front of the door. My mother walked after my father.

“I thought it would be nice to decorate the house today for Christmas,” my mother said.

“Sure,” Daddy said, a smile that looked forced on his face. My mother smiled back.

Alice was looking at me; I could feel her eyes on my face, but I didn’t turn to her. I didn’t want to know what she was thinking about this strained exchange between my parents. And then my mother placed her hand on my father’s shoulder. His body tensed at first and then relaxed as he wrapped his arm around my mother’s waist, drawing her to his side.

“You want to wait until after dinner to start decorating?” he asked her quietly.

“Yes. Oh no. Oh. I forgot. I forgot dinner,” my mother exclaimed. She moved out of Daddy’s arm and put her hand over her mouth.

I couldn’t believe her. The house was still a mess, even though she knew I was going to have company, she didn’t wear a silk blouse like Alice’s mother, and she didn’t even remember to fix her family and guest dinner.

“Margaret, it’s okay,” Daddy said, “We’ll just order pizza.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. We could not just order pizza; Alice would think we were the kind of people who never cooked or took care of themselves. She’d think we were the kind of people who ate their dinners from microwaves in front of the

television. And even though that was who we were sometimes, I didn't want Alice to know it.

"Daddy, I'll just cook. Some spaghetti," I said, turning to go back down to the basement for a jar of tomatoes.

"Sal, you have company," he said.

I wasn't close enough to see it happen, but I was certain my mother's lips trembled as I tried to save this disaster of a visit.

"Yeah, Sal, it's okay," Alice said turning to my parents, "I love pizza. We don't order it much in my house, either, so it'd be great to have it like that again."

My stomach rumbled thinking of the wood-grilled pizzas at Alice's party earlier in the school year. I shrugged and my father walked to the end table by the couch and picked up the phone.

My mother remained in the center of the room, an obelisk in the midst of the scattered Christmas bulbs and garland. Her eyes searched for mine, but I wouldn't meet them; I didn't want her to tell me she was sorry.

As my father started talking to the pizza place, he noticed my mother was still standing, frozen, in the middle of the room and placed his hand on her back. She leaned into him. I walked from the entryway, past my parents, and back to my bedroom. Alice followed.

"Sorry," I said.

"For what?" Alice asked.

"My mother. I can't believe she didn't make dinner."

“It’s really not a big deal,” Alice said, “I really have been craving some pizza delivery.”

I walked to look out my window. Snowflakes were flying through the air sideways. The sky was almost as white as the flakes it was sending to Earth.

“Sal, Alice, pizza will be here in a half hour,” my dad’s voice called across the house.

“Okay,” I yelled back.

“So,” Alice said, “what now?”

“I don’t know. There’s nothing to do here,” I said.

I almost wished I had never brought Alice over to my house. It didn’t feel unreal having her there, not like I originally believed it would, but it didn’t feel good. I wasn’t sure what Alice thought of me, even though it was pretty obvious she thought more of me than I did of myself, but I didn’t want her to see the part of me that wasn’t with her at her house or at school lunches. I was embarrassed.

“What do you do when you’re here?” Alice asked, absentmindedly running her fingers through her hair.

“I don’t know, I mean, whatever. Read, watch TV, eat, you know.”

“So, not much different from when we’re at my house,” she said casually, her eyes on her nails.

“I guess,” I said.

“When you’re not reading or watching TV or whatever, what are you doing?”

Alice looked up, her eyes met mine, and when I turned away and then back, she was still holding me in her gaze.

“Well,” I said, “it’s kind of stupid.”

“What?”

“I’m usually outside.”

Alice looked at me, waiting for further explanation.

“In the woods, off to the side of here,” I said, pointing at the northern wall of my room.

“You guys have woods?” Alice’s eyebrows rose.

“Um, yeah, just four acres—but I don’t like to stay on our side.”

“Four acres?” Alice said excitedly. “That’s a ton.”

“I guess,” I said.

“What do you do in the woods?”

“Oh, um, I don’t know, just walk around and stuff. I told you it’s stupid.”

“It doesn’t sound very stupid.” Alice rolled her eyes.

I stretched my legs and the crack of my knees sounded in the room.

“Wow, what the hell?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. It’s been happening for a few years now,” I said.

“You ought to go to the doctor for it, you know, and make sure you’re okay. I don’t think you’re supposed to sound like that.” Alice said this with a sideways smile.

I knew my knees probably weren’t supposed to crack every time I got up or stretched, but I also knew I wasn’t going to go to a doctor to check them out. My knees, their cracking, were comforting to me.

“Pizza!” Daddy yelled from the kitchen.

Alice and I stood and she took the lead in the walk to the kitchen. It felt natural for me to be following Alice through my own house. As I walked behind her down the hall, I could see the outline of her vertebrae beneath her thin sweater. They looked delicate in spite of Alice's quick and confident steps.

"Have a seat," my mother said when we reached the kitchen. I slid out a chair and noticed a hole in the vinyl cushion of the chair beside me. I switched seats before Alice could sit in it. She gave me a strange look and sat down where I had just been sitting.

"Alice, you didn't seem like a very picky young lady so we just ordered as we normally would, but if there's something on the pizza that you don't like, you're more than welcome to pull it off," my dad said, smiling as he slid into the chair next to my mother. He opened the cardboard box in the center of the table and took a piece of the pizza and set it on a paper plate.

I could tell Daddy liked Alice, despite his warning to me. I still wondered what he knew about her that he thought I didn't. The more I thought about it though, the more I understood his words to me. Maybe he didn't know anything specifically about Alice, but he knew the kind of girl she used to be. She used to be the kind of girl my mother was. And Daddy fell in love with that girl, but he expected her to be more than just a pretty face. But Alice wasn't like my mother anymore.

Pizza was passed around the table and Alice's slice disappeared before I even had four bites out of my own. She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin and noticed my mother looking at her.

“Oh, um, sorry, like I said earlier, I really haven’t had pizza like this in a long time.” Alice smiled sheepishly, her cheeks growing pink.

My mother smiled tightly and I celebrated. I didn’t want her to like Alice. And I didn’t want her to think I would hang around with someone who was anything like my mother when she was my age.

I turned my attention toward my father. His mustache twitched as he lifted a can of beer to his lips and drank. He leaned back in his chair as he set the can back on the table, putting himself in position to start a conversation.

“So, Alice, what’s fun for you?” My father ran his hands along the table, piling crumbs along its edge and sweeping them into the palm of his hand.

Alice raised her eyebrows at the clouded question, but didn’t hesitate in her answer.

“Well, Mr. Porter, if you asked my own dad that question, he’d tell you I love to play tennis.”

“And do you?”

“No. In fact, I hate tennis. I just happen to be good at it. What I really like to do is swim.”

I had just figured Alice’s large collection of swimwear was for tanning on the porch. I never imagined it had a real purpose.

“And are you good at that?” Daddy asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” Alice said, still with a smile on her face. “Luck of the draw, I guess.”

My father nodded. "I know what you mean. My dream was to be a professor. I'm a mechanic."

Alice laughed and my father smiled and I felt good that the two people most important to me were getting along. My mother seemed to sit on an island alone at the table. She was quiet, pulling pepperonis off her pizza, wiping her hands on her napkin with each removed piece.

I knew Daddy's dream was to be a teacher, but I didn't know that he wanted to teach college students. It was hard to think about how his dreams never became his reality. He got a wife who was unsure of herself and depended on him to make a living, a kid who didn't look or act pretty like his wife, and a job he had to take to support us all. Sometimes I felt guilty for popping into his life at such an inopportune time.

Alice reached for another slice of pizza and finished it more slowly this time. I finished my own slice. Daddy got up and rinsed out his empty beer can in the sink.

"You ladies will have to excuse me," he said as he left the kitchen. Seconds later, the bathroom door clicked shut.

"So, Mrs. Porter, you went to school with my mom right?" Alice turned to my mother.

"Yes, Barb Smalley then," my mother said, rearranging her paper napkin across her lap.

It never made sense to me, how seriously my mother took manners and etiquette while eating on paper plates and sitting at a table with a broken leg. I imagined that she wasn't the woman she wanted to be. She wasn't living in the big white house with the rich husband or a daughter getting ready for cotillion.

“She said you were one of the prettiest girls around here then,” Alice continued.

“And you used to sing?”

“Yes, I did,” my mother answered. Surprise registered on her face.

“I always wished I could sing. I couldn’t carry a tune if it would save my life,”

Alice laughed.

My mother’s body softened in her chair; her rigidity smoothed.

“I was just lucky, I suppose, to have some talent. I sang ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ at every sporting event once people found out I had a nice voice.”

Alice smiled, and my mother’s mind floated back to a time when she knew who she was.

“Wow,” Alice breathed. If I hadn’t known her so well at this point, I would have assumed she was feigning her interest and awe, but she wasn’t. She was sincerely admiring my mother, something I didn’t let myself do any longer.

I watched Mom’s face, the way her eyes were lit from the inside, looked at her carefully planned outfit—earrings matched to her shirt—and I knew what she was thinking. She was wondering why she couldn’t have a daughter like Alice.

“Hey, uh, we should go study,” I said. My mother’s face fell and she resumed her stiff position in her chair.

“Sorry,” I said apologetically.

“Oh no, go get ready for those finals,” she said. “Would you girls like me to bring you a snack in an hour or two?” she asked with her eyes on Alice.

Alice turned to me, but I kept my eyes on my mother.

“Um, sure,” Alice said slowly. There was doubt in her voice, as if she wasn’t sure what the right answer was.

My mother smiled and said, “Well, then, you girls get to studying!” She clapped her hands together on the last word, and I quickly turned and headed to my bedroom.

“What was that?” Alice asked.

“What?”

“We have to study?”

“What about it?”

“Uh, last time I checked, we don’t.”

“Well, I do,” I said shortly.

“Okay,” Alice said questioningly. “Maybe I should go then?”

“No, look, I just—if I didn’t tell her that, we would have been stuck there all night. Once my mother gets talking, she doesn’t stop,” I said.

“Oh, okay, well whatever. I wasn’t annoyed, but I guess you know better.”

I kicked the toe of my sock against the threadbare patch on the carpet near my dresser and crossed the room to look out the window again. I was angry with Alice. She had no right to stick her nose into the relationship I had with my mother.

Alice joined me after a few minutes of silence. She pressed her nose and cheeks against the cold glass, fogging the surface of the window with moistened breaths.

“Wow,” she said, “it hasn’t stopped. We’re going to be buried by morning.”

I nodded.

“If you were by yourself right now, would you be out there?” she asked me, face still pushed up to the window.

“Probably,” I said, leaning my own forehead against the glass.

“Want to go out then?” Alice asked.

I had never invited anyone out into the woods with me; it was my place—the only place where I felt like I could do anything I wanted to do and not have to worry about other people’s reactions.

“No, I mean, you’re here, so we’ll stay in. Maybe watch TV or something...bake cookies?”

“Really, Sal? Bake cookies? Have you ever baked cookies?” Alice chortled, turning to face me.

“No, but maybe I might want to now,” I said defiantly.

“Yeah, okay,” Alice mocked me.

I could hear the wind howling through the house, the walls shuddering against the invisible force as it picked up speed.

“Look, I mean, I get it if you don’t want to share, I just thought—”

“—What?” I interrupted. I wasn’t sure what Alice meant about sharing.

“I mean, if outside is a private kind of deal for you, then I won’t bother you there. I know that can change things.” Alice stepped back from the window and pulled her shirt down over the waist of her jeans.

“No—I mean—I didn’t think you’d want to go.” I stepped away from the window, closer to Alice. The heat from her presence radiated outward, warming the space where I stood.

“Why not?” she asked with a grin.

“Okay, then, let’s go,” I said, unsure that I was ready to unveil my only place of refuge to her completely, but sure that I was going to do it regardless of my inhibitions.

“We’re sledding, right?” Alice asked.

“Sure, but you hate the cold?”

“It’s okay, just get me some clothes to wear—I didn’t bring anything for this.”

I led Alice back through the house and ran into my mother in the living room before we could get to the basement.

“Study break?” she asked over the top of the glasses perched on her nose and a magazine.

“Yeah, Mrs. Porter, you know how awful geometry is?” Alice coolly replied. I couldn’t have come up with an intelligible sentence let alone one that gave us a good excuse.

My mother laughed. “Oh, I remember very well,” she said. “Salma, I assume you girls are going outside—just make sure Alice wears enough so she doesn’t catch cold. They’re saying the temperature’s going to hit record lows. Don’t stay out too long.”

“Okay,” I said, continuing to the stairs and descending. Alice’s soft footsteps followed mine.

XVI

I led Alice past the shelves of canning jars on the basement wall into the back section of the musty room and stopped at a big box. I opened it, and started digging through the winter clothes it contained.

“You’re going to need a coat and pants...probably a hat, too,” I murmured as I searched through the box for the least offensive winter gear. The clothes were old, collected by my parents over the years. The box held yellow and brown sweaters, long, blue and red scarves, thick, woolly hats, and puffy, old down coats. A number of thick, canvas-type material, tan pants were in there as well. As I dug through the clothes, I handed Alice items as I found them. At the bottom of the box were the gloves. I knew Alice’s hands were smaller than mine, certainly smaller than my father’s, and that they wouldn’t be warm in a pair of gloves that were too big. After adding a scarf to the pile Alice was holding, I stood and walked to the canning shelves. I stepped carefully on the first shelf, then the second, to reach to the top one where a white box, yellowed with age, rested.

“Um, Sal? I think I have enough already?” Alice’s voice was muffled by the stack of clothes in her arms.

“You need gloves.”

“There’s already some in here.”

“Yeah, for me, those won’t fit you.”

“Oh,” Alice said from behind the clothes.

“You can put those down you know,” I said, climbing back down the shelves, box in hand.

“I didn’t want to get them dirty.”

I turned and shook my head. “You think they aren’t dirty already?”

Alice shrugged.

It was different, this situation, the one where I was in my element and she wasn’t. It felt nice to be telling Alice things, even though they weren’t smart things or brave things like she told me about. It was nice to be the one who knew something for once.

I blew the dust off the top of the box, opened it and set the lid on the cement floor. Inside it were just gloves—nothing special, really. Not that anyone could see anyway. They were all my mother’s. When they were young, my parents used to celebrate their anniversaries still. Daddy used to give my mother a pair of gloves for each year they’d been together. When I was little, I used to beg her to take the box off the closet shelf in their bedroom so I could try on the gloves myself. They were all beautiful—lined with smooth, slippery materials, with brightly-colored leather exteriors. I’d slip my hands inside them and pretend I was my mother, in her younger years, wearing gloves at a fancy winter dinner, or a pageant. One year, when I started to grow taller than her, I got the box of gloves out. My hands no longer fit inside them. All I could do was pet the silky linings with the tips of my fingers.

“Those are gorgeous,” Alice breathed.

“Pick a pair.”

“Oh, no, Sal, I can’t. These aren’t the kind of gloves you touch the ground with.”

“It’s okay, Alice, she doesn’t wear them. Ever. She probably doesn’t even remember they exist.”

“I don’t know about this,” Alice said, as she reached for a pair of green gloves. She slipped her hands inside and flexed her fingers.

“It’s okay.”

“But they’re not supposed to get wet,” Alice said with the gloves still on her hands.

“Trust me, you don’t know my dad. They’re functional, too.”

I wasn’t one hundred percent confident of this, but it convinced Alice and that was what I wanted. Daddy was almost always practical. Only “almost,” because when it came to my mother, his practicality often disappeared. I didn’t understand what made him stay with my mother for all this time; I could see, even when I was standing shorter than his shoulders, that he was unhappy. As much as I had wanted him to come home the time he left us, I wouldn’t have blamed him if he hadn’t.

“Those the ones you want?” I asked Alice.

She nodded.

I picked up the lid of the box, set it back on top, and climbed to put it back on its shelf. I returned to Alice and directed her as to which pieces of clothing were hers to wear and in what order to put on all the pieces. Once we were both completely clothed, our voices muffled by scarves and hoods, we climbed the stairs and headed out into the snowstorm.

As we trudged around the house, I could hear Alice's muffled voice saying something behind me. I turned around and walked to her.

"What?"

"Don't walk so fast, I can barely move in all this stuff."

"Sorry," I said, slowing my pace. I was excited to be outside, excited for the first big snow of the winter.

"Are you sure we need to wear all of it?" Alice asked.

"Yeah, you'll be glad in a little while."

"Well, I'm hot now."

I started to jog backwards, feeling the weight of the three pairs of pants and boots on my legs, and yelled back to Alice, "Get over it!" before I turned and started running. I knew Alice couldn't keep up. The thought of her struggling to follow me made me run faster. It was hard to move under all the clothes, but I had a lot of years perfecting movement under layers and once I got started running, I forgot about the extra weight and restriction. I felt freed.

As I ran for the blanket of trees, I was aware of the crunch of Alice's heavy footsteps fading into the background. My own footsteps cracked into the silence of the falling snow, the still world of the winter night, as my feet forced their way through the top layer of frozen snow into the powdery fluff underneath. The sound always reminded me of the way a squeaky tennis shoe disrupts the silence of an empty building—abruptly and pleasantly.

When I reached the tree line, I stopped and turned around. The sky was growing dark. I couldn't see Alice for a few moments and panicked. What if she lost sight of me

in the snowflakes? I shouldn't have been so horrible and run ahead knowing that she couldn't keep up with me. The wind had picked up while I was running and it was difficult to see too far in front of me. It was stupid to worry, I quickly realized. If Alice was lost, she'd just be lost in our yard. As I waited, her shapeless form appeared in the blowing snow.

"God, how the hell do you move so fast in all this? I'm seriously dying," Alice said breathlessly.

"You get used to it," I said, walking again. "Come on."

"Aren't we there yet?"

"No, shut up, come on," I said, starting to laugh. "Aren't you supposed to be the athlete here?"

"It's cheerleading. And I haven't done it in months. Remember? They don't let pregnant girls jump off pyramids. And, I told you, I hate tennis. And I like to swim, but I'm not good and I don't do it very much," Alice called after me.

"Maybe you should do it more then," I said.

The wind picked up and ripped right through the first layer of clothing I was wearing.

Alice grew quiet the longer we walked. Her pace slowed while she tilted her chin to look at the sky clouded by the boughs of the trees. It was getting darker by the minute; sunset hadn't happened so early yet that winter. The path we followed twisted and turned; I never would have known where it was had I not taken it so many times before. Everything started to blend together when the sky was dark—the trees, the ground, and the sky melted into one to form a large, cold darkness. Only the white flakes that escaped

through tree limbs were distinctively separate from the rest of the environment. As Alice caught up to me, I slowed my steps to see her face.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, “Why’d you ever think this was stupid?”

“I didn’t,” I said, honestly. “I just was worried you’d think it was.”

“You know,” Alice said, stopping and standing in front of me, “sometimes I think you really don’t get it.”

The whites of Alice’s eyes shone against the deep blue and black of the background.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You seem to think there isn’t much to me. I know things like you know, too. And, despite the fact that I live in a house that’s bigger than yours and that my parents have jobs that gave us that big house, I still like you. That stuff doesn’t matter.” Alice crossed her arms over her chest and stood looking at me.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No, I just don’t get why you’re always surprised with me when I know things.”

“I don’t know, Alice, girls like you—they—I mean—” My voice faltered as I realized I would upset her no matter how I phrased what I had been thinking.

“What? I don’t care. Just say it.”

“Girls like you, the way you used to be, there isn’t much more to them than clothes and parties.”

“And that’s why you’re surprised that I’m smart?”

I shook my head.

“Well, listen,” Alice said, “you should know some things about girls like me.”

“Alice, not you—the girls you hung out with—

“—Just stop,” Alice interrupted, “I know what you mean.” She kicked the toe of her boot—my boot---through the top of a snow drift near her feet. “Did you know Hallie’s mother died when she was in third grade? Or that Renee cares so much about what she looks like that she starves herself? And that more than anything in the world, Jessica wants to meet her real dad? But she won’t do it because she’s scared he won’t want her?”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, no one does,” Alice said. “Just because they’re all mostly concerned with their appearances and what other people think about them doesn’t mean they aren’t real, you know.”

“I know,” I said.

“I don’t think you do. You think that just because I’ve changed that I’m better than my old friends. But I’m not.” Alice’s voice was quick and biting and unapologetic in tone.

I didn’t believe her, but I stayed quiet. I understood that Alice’s old friends were people too, that they had problems like everyone else, but I couldn’t believe that she wasn’t any better than them. I had seen her and them, compared them, and they weren’t the same.

Alice turned and started walking again, ahead of me. I shoved my gloved hands into the pockets of the old ski jacket, and followed her. I jogged to catch up with her and fell into step beside her.

“You don’t know where we’re going, you know.”

“Tell me then,” Alice said, still walking a step ahead of me.

“Can you tell where the path is?”

“No.” Alice stepped aside for me to lead the way again.

I was taking her to the top of the hill in the middle of the woods—it was probably a half mile past where my parents’ property met Mr. Fentster’s. The sky had grown completely dark and the cold finally started to cut into my layers of clothes. And of Alice’s too, I guessed, as I turned and noticed her slouched walk with arms tightened around herself. I remembered my mother saying not to be gone too long. And now that it was dark, she would probably start to worry. I didn’t mind the dark—or my mother worrying. She didn’t mind me worrying about where Daddy went when she made him so mad he left us. We walked the rest of the way in silence. The trees began to clear so the sky was visible and separate from our surroundings. The white of snow covering the ground shone bright as the moon appeared intermittently from behind the clouds.

“Is that it?” Alice asked, pointing her finger at the top of the hill we were climbing.

“Yeah” I said, starting to feel out of breath.

As we approached the base of the hill, Alice’s pace quickened until she was running. Before I could warn her, she ran over the ice-covered creek and slipped as she hit it. I watched as her legs kicked out from beneath her, and she landed on her back. Before I could ask her if she was okay, she ran to the top of the hill, a blur of gray in the black and white, and waited as I pushed myself up the steep terrain and ended up beside her.

“This is the place,” I said.

“I figured as much. How the heck do you sled down this without hitting the trees?” Alice asked.

“You just have to watch and steer. Or jump off.”

“Huh, okay, but here’s the thing, Sal, where’s the sleds?”

“Behind this hill,” I said.

“Let’s go, then,” Alice said, starting down the back of the hill. I ran a few feet behind Alice, jumped, and slid down the hill on my bottom on the snow.

The trees started almost immediately at the bottom of the back of the hill and were denser than the other side. On this side of the hill, Mr. Fenster’s woods had no paths. But in my years of nature exploration, I managed to discover what seemed to be an abandoned shed. In the years when I wanted to become a spy, I spent a lot of time sneaking out to the shed and putting items like books, or pencils, and once an empty paint can inside to see if they were moved. They never were, and I figured the shed would be a good place to store the things I wanted when I was in the woods. It was convenient for the sleds; I didn’t have to haul them from the house all the way through the woods to the hill. But some of the things I chose to keep in the shed didn’t make it more convenient. For example, I had a collection of shells and rocks in a metal box I liked to sort through some times, and when I wanted to see them, it wasn’t all that close to walk all the way through the woods, up and down the hill, through the other side of the woods, just to get to my collection. But it felt safer that way.

I searched for the pieces of red rope I had tied around tree branches to mark the way a while ago. If it wasn’t for the moon that night, we never would have found the shed. It was surrounded by a thick patchwork of trees and moss on its walls camouflaged

the structure in the woodland environment. I reached for the handle and turned the rusted bolt to open the shed door. Cold air and the scent of mold and dirt came rushing out.

“Wait—you’re going in there?” Alice asked, biting her bottom lip with bright white teeth.

“Yeah, why?” I asked.

“Anybody could be in there.”

“But nobody is,” I said, stepping one foot through the shed’s threshold, teasing Alice.

She caught the back of my jacket with her gloved fingers and pulled me back.

“At least say something into there before you go in,” Alice whispered.

“What’s that going to do?” I said, laughing. “If there’s someone in there and they want to hurt us, they’ll do it whether I warn them we’re here or not.”

“Please?” Alice said, her face worried. “Just do it.”

“Hello? Hello, murderer? I’m coming in now!” I said loudly into the shed as I stepped inside the dark building, pulling away from Alice’s grip on my coat.

The shed wasn’t big by any means; it was the size of a larger walk-in closet. If I had been thinking ahead, I would have remembered to bring a flashlight so I could see inside the building.

I turned back as I disappeared into the black interior when I noticed I didn’t hear Alice behind me. She was standing, deathly still, a few feet from the doorway.

“Come on,” I said.

“No,” Alice said, shaking her head.

“I’ve got a flashlight in here somewhere,” I said, “you’ll come in when I find it, right?”

“I don’t think so,” said Alice. “The woods are dark enough for me without trapping myself in there.”

“Fine,” I said, irritated, and turned back around. My hands were splayed out in front of me, combing the air for the walls of the shed, the sleds, and anything else I left inside. I stopped abruptly when I ran into a chair I had forgotten I had put inside the shed last summer. It was a long walk carrying the chair from the house, through the woods, and up and over the hill just to get it in the shed, but it was nice when I wanted to read outside and not sit in the grass or dirt. As my body connected with the chair with a thump, Alice shrieked.

“It’s the killer,” I said.

“Shut up,” Alice said quietly.

I maneuvered my way around the chair, using it to steady my balance as I felt across the floor with my feet to find the wall. I knew that the sleds were on the back wall, but that there were a few things in front of them. I hadn’t cleaned the place up as I hadn’t planned on visiting in the dark. The flashlight would be the best option to find the sleds, I knew, so, still holding onto the chair, I lowered myself to my knees and crawled along the wall, my hand on the floor in front of me searching for the flashlight. I stopped for a moment, removed my gloves, and slipped them into the pockets of my coat. The cold in the air bit at my fingers, quickly making them ache but my bare hands enabled me to find the metal of the flashlight faster. When I hit its unmistakable barrel with my

fingertips, I grabbed it and switched the light on. A weak beam shone through the shed and as I stood, I shone it on Alice's face outside the door.

"Found it," I said.

"I see that," Alice said, squinting.

With flashlight in hand, I easily located the sleds at the back of the shed, handed one to Alice, and shut the door, sliding the rusted latch back in place.

"It's freezing," Alice said, half-heartedly dragging the sled behind her.

"Oh please, it'll be warmer now that you're moving around. I even gave you the lighter sled," I said, gesturing at the thin, blue plastic mat trailing behind Alice's footprints.

As we reached the summit of the hill, I noticed our footprints, just created minutes earlier, were gone—covered in a fresh, white, floury powder. It was as if we had never even been there. I wondered if Daddy was putting the plow on the truck as we readied our sleds side by side at the top of the hill. He helped everyone around town out of their driveways early in the mornings after big snows and liked to prepare the night before.

"How long's it been since you've done this?" I asked Alice, digging my boot into the snow as I sat myself in the sled.

"Probably since...oh, I don't know, fourth or fifth grade I guess?" Alice said, copying me and digging her boot into the snow to steady herself and anchor the thin sled to the hill.

The sled I was riding was the same one Daddy had given me on Christmas when I was seven years old. My mother made a face when I un-wrapped it, patting its sharp red runners and running my hands along the smooth, waxy wood of its seat. She kept saying I

could use it in a few years when I was big enough. Daddy took me out later that afternoon and showed me how to steer the sled. By the end of the day, I was confident enough to ride down the hill in our back yard by myself, with Daddy only watching and laughing at my joy as the snow sprayed back in my face while the sled flew down the small hill in the yard.

“Ready?” I asked, looking at Alice. Even against the dark sky, I could see her cheeks were red. Even underneath three layers and a hat and scarf that framed her face so tightly that I wasn’t sure there was anything but stuffing under all those clothes, Alice was beautiful. She was also unsure. She looked warily down the hill. It was so big that at night, the bottom was left a dark, dark mystery.

“You’ve done this before, right?” Alice said, still staring at the bottom of the hill.

“Yeah, plenty of times—trust me, you’ll be able to see once you get down there.”

“Yeah, I’m just worried about the trees, you know?”

“Don’t be,” I said, “like I told you before, if you get close, steer around them or just bail.”

I felt a little bad knowing that I had the sled you could steer and Alice didn’t, but I knew she’d figure it out. The rudders on the plastic sled she had dug into the snow too deeply to change course without the throw of body weight. I would have given her the sled I was riding, but it took a lot of time and practice to understand how to ride it right; the plastic one, I figured, would be simpler, especially since Alice was worried about it already. And, anyway, it was slower.

“Okay, on the count of three,” I said before Alice could change her mind.

On her face, fear registered. It made me want to go that much more.

“One, two, three!” We counted together, our voices in tune and echoing in the dark.

On three, we both lifted our feet and shoved ourselves forward down the hill. My sled shot out across the snow quickly. I could feel the blades catch the icy layer underneath all the fluff and tear across it. I turned to see Alice behind me and then watched as she flew past. She screamed as she descended into the dark.

I had lied. You couldn’t really see the trees until the last minute—but I knew she’d figure it out for herself when she got there. I didn’t want her not to go. As I turned my sled and let it pick up speed, I could still hear Alice shrieking far in front of me. And when she stopped, I let myself go as fast I could.

I didn’t let go easily—not in real life anyway. But when it came to physical speed, I couldn’t help but take risks. I guess it’s that rush of adrenaline people are always talking about. As my sled sped down the hill, I felt a thrill as I shot through the air, the wind whipping me around like a little ping pong ball thrown over the ocean. Even if I had wanted to stop, I couldn’t have.

As I reached the bottom, I hastily steered my sled around a crowd of trees into a clear spot as it began to slow. I searched for Alice in the dark and jumped off the sled before it stopped when a black mass in the white on the left caught my eye. My footsteps cracked through the snow as an icy layer had formed on top of it since we had come out. I ran across the snow and as I approached the mass, I could tell it was breathing and knew it was Alice.

I knelt down next to her, her legs tangled around the sled, and said softly, “Alice? Are you hurt?”

When Alice heard my voice, she turned her head to me and there was a pause before she responded.

“Yeah, I’m great. I was just thinking.”

“Oh,” I said, “I see you steered clear of the trees okay.”

“Yeah, I just bailed—like you said. Do you know you can see all the stars out here?”

“Uh huh,” I said, lying down beside Alice. Damp cold began to slowly sink through my clothes and I knew we’d have to head back to the house soon. Sometimes it seemed like a waste to walk all the way out here for only one ride down the hill, but sometimes once was enough.

“I’ve never had anyone look at the stars with me except for my dad,” Alice said. “I’ve always wanted that, you know?”

“I guess—one of those romantic things, right?” I asked. The only person I had looked at the stars with was Daddy, too.

“Yeah, I guess—I just want to find someone one day who notices little things. Like flowers or sunsets or the way the wind is fresh after winter.”

I nodded, still looking at the sky. The stars were out—like Alice said—I could see every one of them. Daddy could tell me all about the constellations when we looked at them together, but I couldn’t make out the shapes for the life of me. All I saw were the white dots—and that was fine with me. It was pretty whether or not I knew the names.

“What do you want?” Alice asked, breaking my concentration.

“What?”

“In a guy.”

“Oh, um, I don’t know, I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Really?” Alice sounded surprised. She rolled over onto her stomach to look at me. I kept my eyes on the bright dots in the sky.

“Yeah, I mean, I just...” I let my voice trail.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s weird.”

“No, what?” Alice pushed.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, “what else do you want in a guy?”

“No, Sal, I’ve told you all kinds of stuff.” Alice molded a snowball with her gloves.

I shivered as the cold filtered through my entire body, from head to toe.

“It’s like you owe me now,” Alice continued,” with all the stuff I’ve told you already.”

“Fine,” I said, moving my arms under the snow, making angel wings.

“Well?”

“I just don’t see myself with anyone,” I said, still moving my arms.

“No one at all?” Alice asked, her voice steady.

“Nope,” I said, lying still. “I know it’s weird, that most girls want to get married and have a family, and it’s not that I don’t want that someday, I just can’t picture it happening to me.”

“Do you ever think that if you don’t think it’s going to, then it won’t? That maybe you should start thinking that it will so you’re open to it?”

“Yeah,” I said, wiping my glove across my nose that had started to run. “I mean, it’d be nice, but I can’t picture it.”

“You can’t see yourself at your wedding? Or giving your kids Christmas presents with your husband? Not even if their faces are just a blur?”

I shook my hooded head slowly, the packed snow creaking beneath it. “I just can’t.”

“You know, some people would say you’re choosing to be alone.”

The cold was getting to be too much for me, so I rolled over onto my stomach. My shoulder touched Alice’s, and I began to mold snowballs as she was doing, adding the finished ones to the line she already had formed.

“Do you think that?” I said quietly, eyes on the snowballs.

“No,” Alice said slowly, “I think whatever is supposed to happen in life does. Whether you can see it in your future or not.”

I nodded and said, “Me too.”

“It’s getting really cold. Should we go up one more time?” Alice asked.

“Sure.”

We both stood and looked at the line of snowballs, and then at each other. Alice reached for one, and I did the same. We stood up and were still for a few moments, poised with our arms behind our heads to throw the snowballs. We released and the powder of the packed snow swirled around us. We laughed and grabbed the sleds and headed back up the hill.

Alice stopped at the top, but didn’t set her sled down. “You know, we’re going to have to carry them back up here again,” she said in between breaths.

“Yeah,” I said, well aware of the arduous trip we’d have to make again to put the sleds away if we took another ride.

“Can we maybe just go back?” Alice asked.

“Sure,” I said, “I do that a lot. Sometimes once is enough.”

Alice smiled at me, and we walked the sleds down the hill, back to the shed, and began our trek back to my house. The snow grew deeper and deeper and my boots were heavy on my feet by the time we reached the half of the creek on my parents’ property. Alice slipped periodically and finally permanently attached herself to the back of my coat to prevent any further falls.

“Can you guess what I want to do when we get to college?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t know, clothes designer or something?” I said, looking over my shoulder.

“I’m flattered, since I know nothing about clothes or fashion,” Alice said laughing.

“Well, you know more than me,” I said.

“Right, no that’s not it. Guess again.”

“Okay,” I said breathlessly, “doctor?”

“Close,” Alice replied as she caught up to me, the tension between my coat and her glove lessening. I could feel her breath on my cheek. “I think I want to be a nurse.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“Well, I mean, during all that with the baby and everything, they were the ones who really spent the most time with me talking about it. I think my parents were afraid to—and they were busy trying to decide what to do about everything. And, well, you

know what happened with Hallie and them. But the nurses talked to me. If it weren't for them, I never would have come back to school."

"That's good. I mean that you had someone to talk to you."

"Yeah," Alice continued, "I really didn't want to go back to school after everything. I knew everyone was talking about me—and knew it'd be even worse after, um, he died, so I just...wanted to sort of disappear."

"I don't blame you," I said, reaching for a tree to steady my balance on a patch of slippery ground untouched by snow, "but I'm glad you came back."

I couldn't imagine a number of things, but I could easily imagine my last year of high school without Alice. I could imagine life without her because I had lived it before, but I didn't want it back

Alice kept talking. "It wasn't like I wanted to die or anything, you know? I just wanted to go away and start over somewhere without the stories or labels."

I kept walking, with my mouth shut, because it seemed like Alice needed to talk and needed me to listen.

"I thought about it though."

"What?"

"Dying. You know?"

Alice didn't mean dying, she meant killing herself. And at this, my ears really perked up. I'd thought of it, too. Not seriously—I'd never been ready to take a blade and slit my wrists or anything, but sometimes, when things got really rough, like when my mother and I were alone together that week Daddy left, I didn't care if I died. I wasn't going to kill myself, but if I did die, it wouldn't have mattered to me.

“It just seemed like it would be easier than living sometimes,” Alice said.

I wished I wasn’t Alice’s anchor at the moment so I could see her face, but I could only listen to the tone of her voice and push forward to the house. The trees had finally started to thin. We were at the edge of the woods.

“I know what you mean,” I said.

“I knew people would be sad and stuff, you know? But sometimes I didn’t care. It’d be easier for me to go and not have to deal with anything. I wished I died with him.”

“But you didn’t.” I said.

“No. It hurt so bad I thought I was dying,” Alice said, with a laugh.

“So you said,” I smiled.

“But, um, why didn’t you?” I asked, curious as to Alice’s reasoning for carrying on in a life that was clearly going to be extremely painful.

I could feel her release my jacket. My ears made out the sound of a snuffle, and then the pressure of her hand returned to my back.

“I just, well, like I told you before. I deserved it. To live with everything I’d done. I didn’t want to let myself hurt people any more than I already had, so I promised myself I’d go on and I’d change.”

“That’s a pretty big thing,” I said, awed by my friend’s commitment and the success she’d achieved so soon.

“I owe it,” Alice said.

“To who?”

“To everyone.”

As we reached the end of the woods, the familiar sight of my house finally came into view between the gusts of wind. Alice's steps quickened, pushing me home faster.

I wished I was Alice. She had done many things I had never even considered, but she was so different now. She really did what she promised herself she would do. I wished I had something to promise myself. When we reached the house, Alice stopped as I opened the door.

"What?" I asked her.

"Can we just stay out for a few more minutes?"

"I don't care," I said, "you're the one who wanted to go in fast."

"I know. It's just... I'm not ready to go back to real life."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know, out here it's safe. It's away from everything and we don't have to think about anything we don't want to think about. But once we go inside all that changes."

"It doesn't have to," I said, "it's the weekend."

Alice turned and smiled at me and said, "You know what I mean."

"Yeah," I said.

We looked at the sky a few minutes until Alice's eyes met mine and I reached for the door. I opened it slowly, and waved her through. After she crossed the threshold, Alice stopped and said, "Thank you, kind sir," and curtsied theatrically.

"It's my pleasure," I said, tipping an invisible top hat.

I shut the door and realized the meltdown had quickly begun with the heat of the old furnace in the house. My pants and boots made a puddle on the hall floor and snow from my coat was falling off in clumps to add to that puddle.

“Just take everything off here or my mother will have a fit.”

“That’s what moms do,” Alice said, pulling off her coat and dropping it on the floor.

Once we removed all the winter clothes, Alice laughed.

“What?”

“Your hair,” she said, still laughing.

“So?” I said, turning red. “Look at yours.”

Alice’s fine blonde strands were matted into a nest at the base of her neck. Static helped the hair on her crown stick straight out and cling to the wall. Alice laughed again.

“Shh,” I said, “my mother.”

“Sorry,” Alice whispered. “You think she’s sleeping or something?”

“She might be—if she wasn’t, she would have met us at the door.” I ran my fingers through my hair only to find they wouldn’t go very far before they got stuck in knots. Removing my hand I said, “Listen, I’ll run all this to the basement and you can change if your clothes are wet.”

“Don’t we need to clean the floor?” Alice whispered, “Where’s the stuff to do that? I can do it while you’re downstairs.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I whispered back.

“Okay,” Alice replied, moving to the bathroom doorway as I gathered the clothes and headed to the basement.

As I hung the clothes on the rope line attached to the ceiling in the dungeon, I thought of what Alice had said. That she decided to stay on the earth because she didn't want to hurt any more people. It made sense to me. I didn't know why I stayed though, I thought while I arranged the clothes on the line. I was scared to hurt myself. I could never go through with it. But, other than my parents, I wasn't really sure who would have been sad if I disappeared. That was one of the reasons I was pretty sure I wanted to leave Elmwood after I graduated. There wasn't anything tying me to the place. While I didn't believe I'd ever find a group of friends or a place where I felt I belonged, I didn't have one so leaving had never scared me.

Until Alice entered the picture, I hadn't thought of my future. I lived day to day, trying to avoid attention and Billy Thorburn, rarely thinking about what I was getting out of life. But once Alice arrived, I wanted to be someone. I just wasn't sure how to do that yet. The sound of water running through pipes in the basement startled me, and I walked back upstairs.

I found the hallway clean of puddles and mud. I smiled to myself and walked inside my room. On the nightstand was a tray with a plate of cookies and two glasses of milk on it along with a note that read, "Girls, Enjoy the snack and good luck with that geometry. I've got a headache. Going to bed. It was a pleasure meeting you, Alice. Mom." I was taken aback.

It was hard to communicate with her. My mother. It just seemed like the older I got, the more I noticed her imperfections. The more I saw how she hurt my father. The more I resented her and what I believed she wanted me to be. I heard the bathroom door creak open and Alice's loud whisper.

“Sal, I forgot my clothes. Can you get them for me?”

I walked in the hallway and was met by Alice’s reddened face hanging around the door. I nodded and went and found Alice’s backpack and searched through it for pajamas. Gathering the clothes, I returned to the hall and handed them to Alice.

“Thanks,” she said, slipping back into the bathroom and shutting the door behind herself.

Returning to my room, Alice’s backpack was still sitting, opened, on the floor. The house was silent. I knew Alice took a long time to get dressed—even for bed. I sat down on my bedroom floor and pulled Alice’s bag to me. I wasn’t looking for anything in particular; I just wanted to see what she had inside there. It wasn’t as if I didn’t know all her secrets already anyway. There were clothes for the next day, some pens and pencils, a receipt from the gas station, and a pack of gum. When I zipped the bag shut, I noticed another pocket that wasn’t as visible as the one I had already gone through. Listening for the bathroom door and hearing nothing, I unzipped the hidden pocket. Inside, it was empty except for a small package taped into wrapping paper. When I pulled the box out and saw it had my name on it, I shoved it quickly back into Alice’s bag and zipped it shut.

Alice had bought me a Christmas gift—but before I could even process this, I heard the door down the hall click open and she entered my bedroom. She set her dirty clothes on her bag and walked to my nightstand.

“Oh, how cute,” Alice said as she saw the plate of cookies.

“Yeah,” I said walking back into the room.

“I love your mom,” Alice said as she bit into a cookie. “You don’t?”

“No—I mean yes—it’s not that,” I said. “She just gets on my nerves, you know?”

It was so much more than that.

Alice nodded. “Oh, I know. My mom drives me nuts. But you know, I love her to death. She’s really one of the only people I could always count on. Even when I was a horrible brat to her, when I used to lie and stuff and say things I don’t even want to repeat to you, she’d always hug me when I cried and come and get me from parties when I wanted to leave.”

“Yeah,” I said. Alice continued talking but my mind went to my mother. Alice felt like she had support—even when she was being horrible to her mother—and that’s what I wanted from my own mother. But she could never understand me.

“Oh my God, these cookies are amazing; did your mom make them?”

“Give me one and I’ll tell you,” I said, reaching out an empty hand to Alice. She handed me a cookie and I took a bite. “Yep, she made them.”

“When?”

“I don’t really know,” I said, chewing a chunk of the chocolate chip masterpiece.

“God, seriously, this is amazing. Now I am kind of disappointed she forgot to cook dinner.” Alice laughed.

“Yeah, she’s pretty talented in the kitchen,” I said, feeling a surprising sense of pride inside myself. Alice’s mother didn’t cook.

“Has she ever tried to do anything with it?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, like sell her recipes or something,” Alice said, reaching for another cookie.

“I don’t think so.” I picked up a glass of milk and dipped the remaining half of my cookie in it.

“She should,” Alice said, still chewing, “I’ve never had a cookie like this before. And Teresa makes all kinds of stuff—but this is just...wow. I know!”

“What?” I asked.

“Your mom should write a recipe book.” Alice was excited. She set down her cookie and stood up, explaining her idea to me with animated hands. “My father knows some publishers so when it’s finished, he could probably help her find one.”

“Why do you care so much about my mother?” I asked Alice.

Alice shrugged.

I looked at the floor and pulled at the carpet.

“I won’t say anything,” Alice said, “if that’s what you want. But if she’s interested, I’m sure my dad wouldn’t mind.”

“Okay,” I said, knowing I wouldn’t say anything to my mother about the book and Alice’s dad.

I glanced at the clock on my dresser. It was midnight. Far later than what I had realized. I felt my brain slowing down, and I felt tired. Not just tired, though, I was exhausted. When I looked at Alice, she looked wide awake.

“Let’s go to bed,” I said.

“Okay,” Alice said.

I went to the bathroom cabinets for extra blankets and grabbed a pillow from the couch.

When I walked back into the room, Alice was lying on the floor. I shut the door behind me.

“Get in the bed, dummy,” I said.

“No, I hate to kick you out of it,” Alice said, “Besides, when do I ever get to sleep on the floor anyway?”

“That’s what I mean; it’s not a luxury or something,” I said, “Get up.”

Alice rose and sat on my bed as I spread a blanket on the floor and climbed on top of it, covering myself with another. Alice lifted the quilt on my bed and wiggled her way underneath it. She lay still for a moment, and then hung her face over the side of the bed and said, “Goodnight.”

“Night,” I replied.

The wind howled against the window, and I shut my eyes.

“The wind’s creepy,” Alice said.

I looked over at the bed, and she was huddled against the wall.

“The floor’s hard,” I said.

Alice laughed.

“Is this what it’s like to have a sleepover?” I asked.

“Kind of. There wasn’t any sleeping, though. Lots of,” Alice yawned, “jokes and games and—oh—” she said, pulling the quilt up snug around her head so I could only see her eyes, “lots of ‘Truth or Dare.’”

The wind picked up and there was a thud on the roof above us.

“Truth or dare?” I asked.

“Truth,” Alice said.

“Do you think the murderer from the shed is on the roof right now?” I smiled to myself.

“Shut up,” Alice said, rolling over.

The wind died down and the roof was silent. Alice’s breaths grew loud and even, and I thought about how, years ago, I would have convinced myself that the earlier thud was from an early Christmas visit from Santa and his reindeer. I closed my eyes. The noise was probably just a fallen branch from a tree or a loose gutter hitting against the top of the house. I tried to explain the thud away as rationally as possible, but I couldn’t shake the image of a dark and sneering Billy Thorburn standing on the old shingles and staring through the roof into my bedroom.

XVII

The next morning, the scent of coffee and pancakes dragged me out of dreamland.

I looked to Alice, and she was still asleep. She was sprawled across the bed, her foot sticking out from the covers. Her face was on the very edge of the bed facing me, and I could see her eyelashes flutter as I stretched under my blankets on the floor. Alice sat up.

“Breakfast?” Alice’s hair was flat on one side and arranged into a nest on the other side of her head. I thought bed-head was one of those things people made up or were only afflicted with on television shows.

“Yeah,” I said.

When we got to the kitchen, my parents were both stationed at the table. A pile of pancakes on a plate sat in its center. Daddy held the newspaper, and my mother was looking out the window.

“Morning,” Alice said brightly.

“Good morning,” my parents echoed. Daddy folded the paper in half and set it on the table; my mother’s eyes moved from the window to us.

“Have a seat,” Daddy said, pushing out two chairs with his foot.

“And some pancakes,” my mother said, passing us plates.

“Thank you,” Alice said, helping herself to three pancakes and then handing the plate to me.

I took two, and set the plate back in the center of the table.

“You girls get your studying done?” my mother asked, running a table knife through a pancake.

“Mmhmm,” I murmured as I cut my pancake with a fork.

“You were gone for quite a while last night,” Daddy said, looking expectantly at me.

I shrugged.

“I haven’t been sledding since middle school,” Alice said sweetly, “We got carried away.”

My mother nodded. “I can understand that.”

“But we’re ready for the exam,” Alice followed quickly.

Daddy’s eyes were on me. “And you, Sal?”

“I’m ready,” I said. He knew we were lying.

My mother rose and took her plate and Daddy’s plate to the sink.

“Orange juice?” she asked as she opened the refrigerator.

“Please,” Alice and I responded.

“So, girls, what’s your plan for the day?” she asked as she poured us glasses of juice.

Alice looked at me.

“Oh, um, we hadn’t really planned anything yet.”

“Well,” my mother said, “if you’re not busy, maybe you can both help your father and I decorate the tree.”

“Sure,” Alice smiled.

“Didn’t you do it last night?” I asked.

“No, honey, I had a migraine and your father and I went to sleep early,” my mother said. “If you don’t want to help, you don’t have to, but I just thought it might be nice.”

Without looking at me, Alice responded. “Sure, we’d love to help.”

My mother smiled and Daddy looked at me.

We finished our breakfasts and went back to my bedroom to get dressed for the day.

“Why’d you say we’d help?” I asked Alice as I dug through a dresser drawer for a shirt.

“I don’t know, I didn’t think it’d be a big deal,” Alice said.

I shut the drawer with a slam. I didn’t want to help my mother decorate.

“Sorry, Sal, I just—I mean, come on, it’s Christmas. You can’t stand her for just an hour or two for Christmas?” Alice asked.

“No. I can’t. You might have thought of that before you said we’d do it.”

I slipped off my tee-shirt and flung it into my closet.

“You wear bras to bed?” Alice asked.

“Yeah,” I said, not wanting to discuss it. It didn’t matter. I couldn’t believe Alice thought she could just make plans with my mother without asking me first. Especially since we were supposed to be the friends, not her and my mother. I reached for a pair of

jeans from the floor and snapped them in the air before I set them on my bed to pull off my sweat pants.

“What’s the big deal?” Alice asked.

“Whatever,” I said to Alice as I zipped up my jeans and reached for a tee-shirt from a stack of clean clothes in the corner of the room. I put it on quickly and walked out of the room. Alice followed a few minutes later, with hair brushed and make-up on. I sat down hard on the couch in the living room and crossed my arms. My mother emerged from her bedroom behind Alice, and Daddy walked into the house from outside.

“Snowed in,” he said as he rubbed his hands together. “Truck’s stuck. I even plowed last night.”

“It just kept coming down the whole time we were out,” Alice said, “It never stopped.”

“I believe it,” Daddy said, entering the living room, “It’s almost up to my knees. And it must have rained at some point. Everything’s frozen.”

“It’s a perfect day to get the tree up,” my mother said. She wore a red sweater for the occasion.

“Where should we start?” Alice asked, moving to stand by my mother. Daddy walked across the room and joined them. His eyes caught mine, and I looked away. He wanted me to get over there with the three of them.

“Well, I was telling Sal and her dad last night that I thought we’d theme it all white this year. Do you think that’s too much with the snow?”

Alice thought for a moment and shook her head.

I swung my legs back and forth over the edge of the seat of the couch.

“No, I think it’s good since the snow’s outside.”

“Hopefully that’s where it stays, too,” my mother laughed. She lowered herself to the carpet and began doling out boxes. “Dan, this is all outside. I tried to get only the white lights, so if they’re colored, don’t hang them. Get the eaves of the house and the trees in front. Outline the windows. Then hang the wreaths and the red ribbons under each front window.”

“Aye aye,” Daddy said, looking through his box.

“Salma, you get the kitchen and the windows on the inside. You know what to do in the kitchen, but this year, with the windows, I was thinking we would put the candles I have in the box—the battery ones—in each window. Then we’ll light them at night. You’re good with these things so you can be creative about what else to do with the items in the box. Just remember: white is the color.” My mother slid a filled box toward the couch where I sat. I leaned out from my seat and grabbed a flap with my hands and pulled it toward me.

My mother continued with her directions. “Alice, you and I will do the tree and the living room here. It will take a while, so, Sal, and Dan, when you finish, you can help us out.”

My mother picked Alice for her team. I wasn’t surprised.

I got off the couch and picked up my box and followed my dad out of the room. He put back on his boots and coat and headed outside, while I continued around the house to the kitchen. I emptied the box on the table and looked at its contents for a few minutes, thinking about what to put where. Laughter floated from the living room into the

kitchen, and, for a second, I considered leaving all the decorations all over the table and locking myself in my bedroom.

On the table were a whole pile of fake candles, some green-leaved garland, mistletoe, sticks, red and green cups, a tablecloth, and a few other odds and ends. I set to work on the kitchen. Alice and my mother could laugh all they wanted to in the living room. I hung a banner wishing all who entered “Merry Christmas” across the tops of the cabinets. A white tablecloth covered the table, and in the basement, I found some old, white sheets that I was able to cut and cover each of the aging chairs with as well. A centerpiece of garland and twigs and red berries with a large, white candle in the middle of it was the center of attention. I set to work on the windows in the house and once I finished, I went outside where I ran into Daddy who was finishing hanging the lights.

“You done with your project?” he asked me.

“Uh huh, I just wanted to see how it all looks from out here.”

Side by side, Daddy and I walked down the driveway and stood in the street to see the house. My mother always said you couldn’t get a good idea of how it was until you drove by in your car, but I knew we’d be doing that as soon as she finished her part of the project, so for the moment, standing as far away from it as we could would have to do.

“It’ll look better once it’s dark,” Daddy said.

I nodded. Despite the fact that the sky was clear and lit, I was pleased with the defined appearance of the candles in the windows. At the last minute, after I thought I was finished, I decided to add red bows to each candle. The little dash of red was visible from the street.

“Not bad,” Daddy said, slipping his arm around my shoulders. “What do you think?”

“Not bad,” I echoed.

“You know, your mother is very happy right now, with you and Alice helping her.” Daddy squeezed my shoulder.

“More with Alice,” I said.

“She loves you, Sal.” I could hear Daddy planning this line out in his head, carefully saying it out loud. “And you don’t make it easy on her.”

“She doesn’t make it easy on us,” I shot back.

Daddy took a deep breath and turned me toward him. With his hands on my shoulders, he said, “She’s your mother. You’re not always going to like her. Nobody’s perfect, and we’re lucky to have her. Suck it up. You know how much this means to her.” Daddy never asked me to do anything.

I nodded, locked to my father’s eyes. I could be nice for him. Daddy pulled me into a strong hug. I stiffened and then forced myself to relax. It had been a long time since we hugged; so long that I was surprised to see over Daddy’s shoulder. The snow behind him sparkled in the afternoon light, untouched.

“I bet they’re just about finished with the tree,” Daddy said as we walked back up the driveway. “Your mother could have finished it herself in an hour.”

I smiled as we walked up the stairs and into the house. The heat hit me quickly, made me realize I had been cold. The house smelled of hot chocolate and my mother appeared with coffee cups for each of us the second she heard the door open.

“I thought you might be cold,” she said as I accepted the mug from her and sipped.

“Thanks,” I said as the hot chocolate burned down my throat and warmed my stomach.

My mother beamed. She handed a cup to my father, and he bent and kissed her on the cheek.

“We’re finished,” Alice said with a smile, appearing behind my mother. “Of course, no thanks to me since I have no idea what I’m doing with any of this.”

“Oh please,” my mother said, “I couldn’t have finished without you to hand me the decorations.” She smirked at Alice and they both laughed. “Next time, I’ll have Sal and you switch places.” My mother turned to me.

I looked at the tree and said, “Looks a little off-center still—the bulbs, I mean. They’re too heavy on the left.”

“That’s why you’re switching next time,” my mother said, hurrying to the tree.

“I tried,” Alice said, not looking at me.

My mother started moving the ornaments, left to right, and rearranging them. Once she finished, she looked at me for approval.

I nodded and approached the tree to move a few of the bulbs myself. Once I finished, we all stood back to look and agreed the tree was even finally.

The day passed quickly with sandwiches for lunch and cookies for a snack and “It’s a Wonderful Life” in between. Alice, my mother, and I sat awkwardly on the couch. Daddy pulled a kitchen chair into the room and watched from there. The movie wasn’t one I was crazy about, but I liked black and white films in general. In a way, the

emotions of the actors seemed forced—but their tears, I thought, were real. Once the movie finished, Daddy cleared his throat and stood. He stretched his arms over his head.

“Looks like it’s about dinner time. It’s six,” Daddy said.

“Oh, wow,” Alice said, “I should go home and let you guys get on with your weekend. I’m sure my mom is worried.”

“Nonsense, you’re not disturbing us. There’s a phone in the kitchen,” My mother said, folding the blanket that had been covering her lap.

“When you talk with your mother, you make sure you tell her you’re more than welcome here, and there’s no way we’re letting you out that door to drive home in this. The road’s solid ice,” Daddy said after looking out the front window.

“Okay,” Alice said, sheepishly.

I followed her into the kitchen.

“Are you sure it’s okay that I stay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know, you seemed kind of mad,” Alice said, pushing her hair behind her ear and biting her lower lip.

“I’m not,” I said, feeling slightly embarrassed.

“Good, because I really don’t feel like driving.”

My mother made dinner—potato soup—and we ate late. After we finished, we sat around the kitchen table, my father leaned back in his chair with his hands over his stomach.

“That, my darling,” he said looking at my mother, “was wonderful. Thank you.”

“It was great,” Alice said.

Daddy looked at me.

“Thanks,” I said quickly.

“Let’s go look at the house,” my mother said, standing up from the table.

“Shouldn’t we clean the table?” I asked.

“Oh, we can do it when we get back, let’s go see what we did. Dan, you’ll drive?”

“Of course,” Daddy said.

I started to the basement for jackets and hats, but my mother stopped me.

“Let’s just go—no preparation. The truck will be warm after a minute or two.”

She was smiling ear to ear.

We left the house without locking the door. The air was so cold it burned my cheeks. Alice and I sat in the cab of the truck on the floor. Daddy had removed the seats because he needed extra space to haul work materials. My mother turned the dial for the heat up to five and let the cold air blast through the truck.

“You know,” Daddy said, “if you wait and let it warm up before you turn it on, it doesn’t take as long.” He reached to turn the heat back down, but my mother’s hand found its way to his, and she stopped him.

“No, it’s not the same. You push the cold air out faster this way. Then it’s warmer quicker.”

Daddy just shook his head, but he didn’t change the heat.

Alice’s knees rested against my own as we tried to make ourselves comfortable in the small space. It made me smile when I thought of what a production this was still turning out to be without winter clothes—and we were just driving in front of the house.

Daddy pulled the truck out of the drive, and started forward in front of the house. But before he could get very far on the snow-covered road, my mother stopped him.

“Oh, now Dan, you can’t see it right unless you drive around and come from the other direction.”

“Honey, it’s just the same.”

“No, it’s not.”

They sounded like children.

Daddy shook his head again, and started around the block. The roads were slippery, and he gritted his teeth as the truck slid a few times. I braced my hand against the side of the truck and looked at Alice. She was busy trying to look out the window as we were jarred back and forth. As we turned the corner to the road our house was on, Alice looked at me and smiled.

“I can’t wait to see it,” she said out loud.

My mother nodded from the front seat, eyes glued to the window.

As we crept up the hill, I was surprised to feel a burst of excitement rise inside me. It had been a long time since this had been a fun tradition. The house twinkled in the black that surrounded it. The trees in front were lined with white lights, the eaves of the roof were, too. The outline of the house would be visible to anyone who passed it, putting us on the map, making our mark in Elmsville. Each window on the front of the house was lit by a white dot, and a spot of red was visible underneath it. The twinkle of Christmas tree lights shone through the front window. My mother was right about using all white. There was just something about it that made it seem like our house couldn’t be touched by any other color.

“It’s beautiful,” my mother breathed.

“Winter wonderland,” Daddy said.

Alice just stared at the house, with no words.

“Sal,” my mother said, “where did you find those red bows?”

“In the drawer by the refrigerator,” I said.

The truck idled and the heat filled the cab.

“Crooked at the top there,” Daddy said, pointing to the lights at the top of the house.

“Looks straight to me,” Alice offered.

When Daddy pulled the truck back into the driveway and we all got out, I stopped before going inside. Everything was dark. Out where we lived, there were no street lights like there were where Alice’s house was. No security lights either. The only light was the light from the house. I looked up into the sky, across the horizon, down at the ground. There was no visible separation. The only way I knew they were different was because my feet were firmly planted to the ground.

The snow stopped falling.

“Do you think I can get my car out?” Alice asked me as my parents went into the house.

I looked over at Alice’s car in the driveway in front of the truck. It was shiny and black, a Mercedes. Its tires were buried in snow. Probably ice, too, I thought, as I listened to my footsteps crunch while walking closer.

“I don’t think so,” I said, “that’s not even snow from yesterday anymore.” I pointed to the garage where the snowfall had built without removal. “That’s how much

we actually got since yesterday,” I told Alice. “It’s up to our knees. It looks like Daddy tried to shovel you out some, but look how high it is already on your tires.”

Alice nodded, brushing snow off the trunk of her car.

I shivered.

“I feel bad,” Alice said, without looking at me.

“What for?” I asked.

“Well, I mean, I don’t want to have to stay over again. I feel like I’m crowding you.”

“It’s not a big deal; I don’t mind.”

Alice didn’t say anything.

“Neither do my parents,” I added quickly.

“I just feel like I’m interrupting your family stuff—your holiday stuff, you know what I mean?”

“Not really,” I said. “Don’t worry. My parents clearly love you. More than me, I think.” I smiled at Alice.

She turned her head finally from her car to meet my eyes. Her hair streamed across her face as a gust of wind blew.

I shivered.

“All your mom did was talk about you while we decorated,” Alice said.

I shook my head. “Yeah, probably about how much she can’t stand me,” I tried to smile, but I couldn’t. I had meant it to sound like a joke.

“No, Sal, she loves you more than anything.”

“Did she say that?”

“She didn’t have to,” Alice said, moving closer to me, “I could see it. I think she misses you.”

“She doesn’t act like it.”

“I don’t know, don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t think you let her in. It seems like she’s trying to connect, but you won’t let her.”

“It doesn’t feel like that,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Alice asked, her voice getting loud. “She’s reaching out to you and you’re pushing her away. She just spent two hours telling me about all the things you can cook, how nicely you decorate the house for holidays, how when you were in second grade you made her a macaroni necklace and she wore it—not just because you made it, but because she truly thought it was a work of art. You can’t tell me she doesn’t care.”

“Why the hell do you care so much, Alice? Why does it matter what me and my mother are like?”

Alice kicked the toe of her boot into a pile of snow and watched as it flew through the air.

“Because. You’re lucky and you don’t even know it.”

“Oh, whatever, do you remember your own mom?” I snapped at Alice.

“It’s not as great as you think,” she said.

Before we could continue, I heard the sound of the screened door open and my father’s voice blew through the air with another gust of wind.

“Sal! Alice! Hot chocolate!”

Alice shrugged and started inside without me.

I thought about what she had said. I didn't know what she meant about the relationship between her and her mother not being great. But I knew the way my mother looked to Alice, and how her appearance was different to me. I walked slowly, though goose-bumps freckled all of my skin, and when I got to the door, Alice was holding it open for me.

Our eyes met. I couldn't be angry with her.

I smiled as I walked past her and through the door and tipped my invisible hat. I heard her laugh. We removed our shoes together and entered the living room and then the kitchen where mugs of hot chocolate were waiting.

The evening passed with a few games of cards and when we woke the next morning, the snow had stopped. Before I had a chance to sit up, Alice was out of bed and dressed already.

"Leaving?" I asked, my voice garbled.

"It stopped snowing—I figured I should get out of here while it's okay."

"Yeah. Are you going to stay for breakfast?" I sat up and cleared my throat.

"I don't think so; I'll just grab a cup of juice and head out." Alice ran a brush through her hair and looked into the mirror on my closet door. She dropped the brush on the floor and ran the tip of her index finger underneath her lower eyelashes. "Hey," she said, turning quickly to me, "I have something for you."

I was quiet and thought of the little, wrapped box in Alice's bag.

Alice reached for her backpack and unzipped the outside pocket and extracted the small, wrapped present. The green paper glittered in the sunlight that streamed through the window.

“Here,” Alice said as she handed me the box. “I know we didn’t talk about getting each other presents or whatever for Christmas, so it’s not a big deal or anything.”

I nodded as I accepted the weight of the box onto my palm. I slipped my finger underneath a corner of the paper and pulled it apart. The box was black and cardboard and most definitely a jewelry box. I hoped it didn’t hold earrings. I refused to get my ears pierced when I was little.

“It’s stupid,” Alice said, shaking her head.

“Well, it can’t be more stupid than what I got you.”

Alice looked up, questioningly, and I smiled.

“Which is?” she asked

“Nothing,” I said.

We laughed.

I finished un-wrapping the box and slowly slid off its lid. Inside was a rock. I lifted it out and let it sit on the palm of my hand. It was striped green and gray, and pieces of it sparkled. It looked like the woods, but it didn’t belong there; it wasn’t that kind of rock. When I spun it around in my fingers, I could see the trees and the sparkle of the creek. I could feel the calm the woods always brought over me when I first met the tree-line. The cold surface of the rock drew heat from my skin.

“I told you it was stupid,” Alice said, shaking her head. “But I saw a lot of things that I’d get someone else—a necklace, earrings, a stuffed dog, socks—but none of it would work for you.”

“Did you find it?” I asked.

“No, I bought them. I always thought people who bought rocks were stupid, but...it just reminded me of you.”

“Like me if I were a rock?” I asked.

“Something like that,” Alice laughed.

The weight of the rock in my hand felt heavier than it really was. I meant something to Alice.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, still looking at the glittering weight in my hand.

Alice nodded and said, “I better go.”

“Okay.”

Alice lifted her bag onto her back and I followed her as she walked into the kitchen.

“Ladies,” Daddy said, “breakfast waits.” He motioned for us to pull out chairs, but Alice shook her head.

“I have to go; my mom will want me home.”

“Understandable,” he replied. “Would you like a bite for the road?”

A stack of waffles sat in the middle of the table.

“No thank you,” Alice said. “My dad always makes us big brunches on Sundays so I’ll just eat there.”

“Juice?” my mother asked from her chair.

“No, that’s okay,” Alice said. “Thank you so much for having me, Mr. and Mrs. Porter.”

“Any time,” my mother said with a smile.

“Your car should be ready to go,” Daddy said. “I plowed us out this morning. The roads don’t look too bad. If they are, though, you just turn around and come back.”

“Thank you,” Alice said.

We walked out of the kitchen and through the living room to the door. Alice slipped on her boots and coat and I followed her outside. The air was still and cold and the absence of snowflakes signaled the end of the weekend.

“See you tomorrow,” Alice said as she descended the stairs and walked to her car.

“See you,” I said as I stood on the stoop with my arms crossed still in my pajamas.

I watched as Alice opened the back door of her car and tossed her bag inside. She slammed the door shut and then opened the driver’s side.

“Alice!” I called.

“What?”

“Wait,” I called out the door.

She wrinkle her nose, but stopped in the driveway as I ran back to my bedroom and brought out a paper bag from the top shelf of my closet that I had for Alice long before Christmas. I hadn’t intended on giving it to her; I wasn’t even sure if she’d want it. But, with the rock and all, I felt as if I needed to show her I was thinking of her, too. I slipped on a pair of boots by the door and ran out of the house, bag in hand.

“Sorry,” I said breathlessly, “I just—um—here.” I shoved the bag into Alice’s hands, and she looked at me, confused.

“I thought you said—”

“I know, it’s not really a Christmas present, I mean—no, I guess it is now—but—just open it.” I cut myself off.

Alice opened the shoe box and dug through the tissue paper inside. Out of the box, she lifted a small, wallet-sized photo in a solid wooden frame. She stared at the picture.

“Um, you said sometimes it hurts because it’s like he never existed. I just thought maybe you might want to carry this around—to remind yourself that he did. Exist, I mean.”

Alice bit her lip, still staring at the photo.

I had taken the small photo the hospital takes of newborns from Alice’s album one day while she had left her room to answer the phone, and I scanned it into a computer at school to clean it up. And then I took it to the drugstore and got it printed a little smaller so Alice could slip it into her wallet. I was going to just slip it into a book of hers at school, but then I worried that it would get bent up and wrinkled, so I used some spare wood Daddy had laying around and constructed a tiny frame with a solid back that the photo could be slipped into. I painted the frame blue, and, at the last minute, glued a piece of magnet on the back in case she decided to put it in her locker next to all the other pictures she had decorating its inside.

Alice held the picture in her hands gently, as if she were afraid she’d break it.

“It’s heavy-duty, so if you put it in your purse or something, it won’t get broken,” I said. “That part there’s just a piece of plastic,” I said, pointing to the thin film covering the photo, “so it’ll probably scratch in a while, but I can get you another.”

I started to worry that I had done something wrong when Alice turned and hugged me tightly.

“Thank you,” she said into my ear.

“You don’t have to keep it if you don’t want to, I understand,” I said as we pulled away from each other.

“No, it’s just what I needed,” Alice said as she slipped the picture into her wallet inside her purse. Alice smiled at me and I returned her happiness, but I worried that I hurt her.

Alice moved towards her car.

“Thanks for the rock. I love it,” I called as I walked back to the house.

“I know,” she called back as she climbed inside her car. I stood on the steps as she backed slowly down our driveway. When the car disappeared over the hill, a speck of black in the white, I went back in the house.

“Waffles?” Daddy asked when I returned to the table.

“Yes,” I said sitting down and sliding my plate toward my father.

He placed three waffles on it, slid it back to me, and handed me the syrup. As I poured it, my mother started talking.

“Alice is lovely,” my mother said as she settled a napkin in her lap.

“She’s certainly something special,” Daddy said.

I nodded.

“A little light in the blizzard,” my mother said quietly as she took a bite of her waffle.

“Make sure you call her house to see that she got home okay,” Daddy said, looking at me.

“I will,” I said.

“Oh,” my mother said in a surprised voice, “I forgot to tell you both, Deena is coming by this afternoon for a bit. I want to exchange some recipes with her.”

Before I could open my mouth to ask why in the world my mother kept her friendship with that crazy woman, Daddy shot me a look and I stayed silent.

“Will you want the living room?” Daddy asked.

“If it’s possible, yes, so we can spread everything out on the floor.”

Daddy nodded.

“We’ll stay out of your way,” he said, looking at me. I could feel his eyes on my face, waiting for me to comply.

“Yeah, I have homework,” I said, taking my last bite of waffle and leaving the table.

I worked on homework for a few hours until I heard the door open and Deena Thorburn’s voice. I cringed at the raspy sound of it and walked to shut my door. But before I could do it, my mother called me.

“Salma, please come out here for a moment.”

I walked down the hall and into the living room where Mrs. Thorburn and my mother stood. Mrs. Thorburn’s hair was limp and greasy and gray roots were beginning to show under the black dye. Even from across the room, I could see her eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles under them.

“Where’s Daddy?” I asked approaching my mother.

“They called him at the shop.”

“On Sunday?”

“Special job,” my mother said. “Sal, Billy’s outside. I thought it might be nice for you to keep him company for a little while.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so,” I said.

“She don’t need to go out there, he’s fine by himself,” Deena rasped and coughed.

I turned to leave the room and my mother stopped me.

“Sal, go out and keep Billy company. It will do him good.”

“He ain’t been out of his room in days,” Mrs. Thorburn said, rearranging her hair with her long nails. “Don’t do good during the holidays, you know. With his father being gone and all.”

“Fine,” I said and walked to the door. I put on a pair of Daddy’s work-boots to avoid any effort and slipped on one of his flannel shirts hanging by the door. I didn’t want anything to do with Billy, but I knew my mother wasn’t going to leave me alone about it until I at least looked like I was doing what she wanted. I opened the door with no intentions of going to talk to him. He could talk to himself if he was lonely, I figured, or the demons that ran around in his head. I wasn’t going to say a word.

I walked across the driveway to the back of the house without looking at the Thorburns' car where Billy was surely sitting inside. Just knowing that he was there, at my parents’ house, darkened the otherwise blindingly white world. Around the corner of the house, the snow had drifted from the wind into a pile that passed the tops of my knees. I wished, momentarily, that I had put on more clothes. Daddy’s wool shirt was warm, but when the wind kicked up, the rough fibers couldn’t keep the cold out.

However, the thought of Billy in the driveway was enough to keep me from returning to the house. If I went back inside, my mother would want to know why I hadn't invited Billy in with me and would make me go back out and get him.

I headed to the woods. The snow crunched beneath the oversized boots. Thankfully, the sun was peeking out from behind the heavy, ever-hanging clouds. They never seemed to go away in the winter. When I entered the tree-line, where the trees began to grow thick and the sky was only spottily seen through the thick canopy of their branches, I felt a sense of relief. Like the way a deep breath feels after you don't realize you've been holding it.

I slipped my hands into the sleeves of Daddy's shirt and I felt comforted, as if he was right beside me, holding my hand like he used to do when he took me for walks. I suppose that's why I started running to the woods when I needed quiet. I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my jeans and my fingers curled around the rock Alice had given me.

When I reached the creek, I stopped and sat on the bank in the snow. It quickly soaked through my jeans and hit my skin. I shivered but remained on the ground. My body slowly sunk through the layers of ice and snow and rested on the frozen dirt. The ice on the creek was covered in snow, and I leaned over the bank and slipped my fingers out of my shirt to dust the blanket of flakes from the ice. The heat of my skin melted the ice clear, and underneath I could see the movement of water. I couldn't see the fish, but I knew they were there. Under the water somewhere, hibernating or something. I remembered fish were cold-blooded, but I wondered if they ever felt cold they couldn't shake, the kind that was able to penetrate their scaled skin so deeply that they felt the

chill all the way through their thin bones to their small, fish hearts. I wondered if they ever felt warm before the sun returned in the spring.

As I sat, a small bit of light shone onto the creek and I watched as it slowly moved across the ice and disappeared. A chill ran through me. My heart started to beat hard. Fear didn't find me often; I was unhealthily unafraid of many things most people should fear. It never occurred to me to be scared of the dark or the things that might happen when the sun went down. I didn't think about axe murderers or rapists or people who might want to hit me with bricks when I ran alone outside. I turned around and looked for whatever it was that was making me feel panicked, but there was nothing out of place. The trees were undisturbed, and the fish hung suspended in water under the ice of the creek.

I stood and turned in the direction of the house. My feet carried me forward slowly, but my mind told me to stop. I kept walking, ignoring the fight-or-flight feeling that was starting to creep into my muscles. The ground was steady and dependable under my boots, the air was fresh and cold pouring into my lungs. The snow sat on the ground with a deceptive permanence.

Daddy always told me, if I got lost, to look forward as far as I could. To notice where the sun was positioned and I'd be able to tell what direction I was going and find my way home. I let my eyes drift ahead, looking out from my position in the woods. As I let my vision locate the house, a bright blackness filled my mind, and through the trees, off to the left, I saw two eyes. Dark and round. And as fast as they were there, they were gone. I looked around me frantically, trying to find him, to find Billy, but he was nowhere to be seen. I ran.

My steps were careless and uncalculated. I just wanted to go home. I didn't feel safe. A sharp pain started in my side and every breath I gasped hurt while a burn evenly lit the muscles in my legs, but I couldn't stop. I had to get away from him. I tried to reason with myself, to tell myself I was just seeing things, that the eyes were only a manifestation of the worries that had been in my head, that there was no way Billy could have been there in the woods with me for one second and then manage to disappear the next, but I couldn't convince myself any longer that there was no reason to be afraid of him.

When I reached the house, I ran to the side door and jiggled the knob only to find it locked. I ran behind the house and I closed my eyes so I wouldn't be tempted to look at the driveway and see if the Thorburns' car was gone or not. I ran inside without taking my wet and muddy boots off, straight through the living room, past my mother who was sitting on the couch surrounded by sheets of paper, and back to my bedroom. I shut the door, turned the lock on the knob, and sat on my bed in Daddy's flannel shirt and boots. I pulled my knees to my chin, and rocked back and forth to try and settle myself.

"Salma? Salma?"

My mother's voice was muffled through the door.

"Salma? Honey? Are you all right?"

I didn't say anything. My father's voice broke into my mother's.

"What's wrong with her?" I could hear him asking. His voice was loud and fast.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Dan, I don't know—she just came running in, didn't take her shoes off, now she won't answer me." My mother's voice began to sound teary.

“Salma!” Daddy called through the door, pounding on it with his fist. Between my fingers, I could see the doorknob jiggle. “Salma! Open this door!”

I wanted to, I wanted to open the door, but I couldn’t make myself get off the bed. Once my feet hit the floor, I wouldn’t be safe anymore. I was frozen.

The pounding and yelling continued on the other side of the door.

“Sal, open this door right now. I need you to tell me what’s wrong. Are you hurt?” His voice started to shake. “Is she hurt?” he yelled at my mother, who sounded as if she was right beside him.

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“How do you not know, Margaret? You saw her.”

“She ran, Dan, I didn’t see—”

“Damn it! Why didn’t you stop her? Hold onto her? Damn it.”

Daddy swore and hit the door again. There were a few moments of silence. I could see my mother on the other side of the door, wringing her hands with worry. I wrapped my arms around my knees tighter, buried my head between them, and kept thinking things would be okay. But there was darkness in my mind that wasn’t going away, even as my body began to relax. I could still see those eyes.

My mother’s voice broke the silence again.

“Dan, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t know what to do, she just came in so fast and she never wants me,” my mother’s voice was trembling now.

There were bumps against the door and clicks in the doorknob.

“Dan, I’m sorry.”

The clicks paused and in my mind I could see Daddy look at her for a second. “Don’t be sorry,” he said, returning to the door, “I’m not angry with you. I just want this goddamned door open.”

A final click sounded and the doorknob turned and I buried my head further between my knees and in my arms. I could feel both my parents surround me. The fear was still there.

“Salma, baby, what is it?” my mother asked.

I could feel Daddy’s rough hand run up and down the length of my back.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

I shook my head underneath my arms and slowly lifted it, avoiding both my parents’ eyes. I looked straight at the door.

“I’ll fix you some hot chocolate, okay? You’re soaked through,” my mother said.

I nodded and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. I hadn’t realized I was crying. Daddy still rubbed my back. My mother left the room.

“I’m going to give you a minute or two, here, but then, Sal, you have to talk to me.”

I nodded my head and wiped my eyes again.

“Breathe,” Daddy said.

I did.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I was out in the woods,” I said shakily.

Daddy watched my face, I could see him searching for answers to all the questions he wanted to ask me, but he stayed quiet, and I was thankful for his silence.

“I just, um, I got scared.”

“Of what?”

“Nothing. I don’t know.”

Daddy took his hand from my back and dragged his palm across his cheek. He took a deep breath. “Happens sometime, being scared,” he said.

I shook my head. “Not to me.”

“I know.” Daddy cleared his throat. “So why don’t you tell me what you’re scared of then.”

I saw the eyes again.

“Um, I don’t think I can,” I said slowly, pulling on the ties of the boots and looking at the wet spot they’d made on the bed.

“Well,” my father said, his face red, “I can’t make you. But I don’t like you coming home like this.”

“I know,” I said quietly.

My mother’s voice broke into our exchange as she entered the room.

“Honey, I’ve got your hot chocolate,” she said, handing me a coffee mug. “Put it in that cup you liked so much when you were little.

I tried to smile.

On the cup was a giraffe and his neck made the handle.

“I was thinking I’d make some spaghetti,” my mother said and left.

Daddy sat still, looking at me. His eyes were worried.

“I was scared,” I whispered. I pictured Alice’s face.

He nodded.

“Of him. Mom, she wanted me to go talk to him. But I—I didn’t go. I went to the woods.”

“Who?” Daddy asked.

“Billy,” I said. “He probably wasn’t even out there, but I could just feel him.”

“Sal, you’re going to have to tell me more than that. Did he do something to you?” Daddy’s jaw was tight and his muscles tensed.

I felt tears well in my eyes again and cleared my throat to try and keep them from falling.

“No, um, not me,” I said.

XVIII

I took a deep breath and I told Daddy how Billy knocked me down at the library and how he threatened me at school. I tried not to tell him everything, but once I started talking, I couldn't stop. I told him about how Billy teased Alice at school, how he thought she told me some secret about him. I didn't tell Daddy that Billy was the father of Alice's child by force, or that Billy was right to suspect that I knew. But, even just with the things I did tell Daddy, I felt a sense of relief.

Daddy didn't say much, just rubbed his hand over my hair and looked at me. He reached for my feet and stretched my legs out across the bed. He unlaced the boots and slipped them off, dropping them on the floor. I tucked my feet underneath me.

"Don't you ever think you can't tell me what's going on with you, especially something like this," Daddy said, running his hand over my hair again.

I nodded, grabbing onto his fingers as they passed over my ear. I could feel my nose begin to drip down my upper lip and on any typical day, I would have been embarrassed, but I just ignored it. There was a pain in my chest, not the kind that a heart attack or indigestion makes, but the kind that is made by a hole. Not the kind of hole you can see, just the kind you can feel.

"Alice hasn't told her parents about the threats either?" Daddy said, holding onto my hand.

“No, um, I didn’t want her to worry so...” I choked on my own words.

“You didn’t tell her.” Daddy finished. “They don’t know about any of this? Him tripping her when she was pregnant—any of that?”

I shook my head.

“You need to tell me immediately if anything else happens. Do you understand?”
Daddy’s voice was firm.

“Yes,” I said, swallowing.

My mother entered the room, looking concerned.

“Dinner’s ready,” she said, her eyes glued to my face.

I gave her a weak smile.

“Chicken and mashed potatoes—the garlic kind like you like.” She held a dishrag in her hands and clenched it tightly. She turned to the door.

“Wait,” I said, starting to cry again. I reached out my hand to her and I don’t think I’d ever seen her move so fast. I wasn’t sure what came over me, but I wanted my mother. She wrapped herself around me before I even realized what was happening. I sobbed into my mother’s shoulder as she cradled me like a baby.

“I’ll set the table,” Daddy said, removing himself from the bed and heading to the kitchen. He left us alone.

“It’s okay, whatever it is, Salma, it’s okay. You don’t have to tell me what happened, but you should know that sometimes life can get really bad, but it always gets good again. Without fail.”

I emerged from my mother’s embrace and wiped my eyes again.

“Shall we eat?”

I nodded. She stood, unbuttoned, and slipped Daddy's shirt off my shoulders. Holding the shirt and dishcloth in one hand, my mother grabbed my hand with her free one, and led me into the kitchen.

I slumped in a chair at the table and the silence in the room felt awkward and stiff. I didn't want to make things like this. I didn't know how to go back to normal when my parents knew that normal wasn't a part of my life for a while now. I didn't even realize how scared I was of Billy, or how much of a hold he had over me, until I spilled everything to Daddy.

My parents filled my plate with food, and I was surprised at how hungry I was when I took a bite of the mashed potatoes. I cleaned my plate quickly and my parents looked relieved, as if consumption was a sign of normalcy.

"Think we'll have school tomorrow?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes," my mother said, "it hasn't snowed all day."

"Plows'll be out early in the morning. They won't cancel," Daddy said.

"I wish they would," I said, thinking of how I'd feel if I ran into Billy. I wasn't sure, not now that it seemed he was following me. Even though I knew he wasn't there, I could still feel him.

The roads were icy in the morning, but not icy enough for Elmsville High to cancel classes. We usually got the privilege of having at least five to six snow days a year, so they liked to save those days for the times when the roads were completely impassable, as the instance was inevitable every winter. If the plows could get down the road, then we'd have school. Daddy warmed up the car while I got dressed and ate a

waffle my mother had fixed. She usually didn't wake up with us and it was a bit disorienting to have her busy in the kitchen when Daddy was trying to make our lunches and I was trying to remember where I had set my books. But the breakfast was welcomed. She patted my shoulder as I sat to put my shoes on and handed me my coat when I stood.

"Have a good day," she said, with a concerned look.

I could tell she wanted to say more, but was holding back.

"I'll be fine," I said quickly.

Relief flooded her face and she smiled at me. I walked outside to the car. When I got in and shut the door, Daddy took my bag from me and set it in the backseat.

I reached for the knobs on the radio and jumped when I turned it on and the volume was all the way up. The sound of static filled the truck momentarily.

Daddy smiled and said, "You used to do that on purpose when you were little—turn the volume all the way up."

"I don't remember," I said.

"Can't remember everything," Daddy said. "Listen, you call me if you need anything today. Or tomorrow or any day. All right?" Daddy's hands were steady on the steering wheel, but his eyes were on me.

"Okay," I said.

As we pulled up to the school, I could feel my heart beat quicken. Daddy reached across me when he stopped the truck and opened my door.

"See you tonight," he said as I climbed out and he handed me my bag.

"See you," I said and shut the door.

Since my mother had made breakfast, I arrived later than usual at school, and the hall was already filled with my classmates. For once, however, I was relieved to have people running into me. I felt like I needed the distraction. I wasn't sure I quite understood what happened over the weekend—it felt a lot longer than just a few days.

I unpacked my bag into my locker and gathered the books I'd need for the morning. Down the hall, I saw Alice at her locker and headed in that direction after locking mine back up.

“Hey,” I said.

Alice didn't look up. Her hair was stringy and her hands were shaky as she pulled a book from the top shelf of her locker.

For a second, I wondered if she'd seen Billy, too.

“Hey,” she replied, finally turning to me. Her eyes were red and swollen.

“What's wrong?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Couldn't sleep all night. Just kept tossing and turning.”

“What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking, ‘Why the hell can't I sleep’ is what I was thinking.” She laughed.

I smiled. I thought about telling her what happened after she left yesterday but didn't.

“It was weird—I can sleep through anything,” Alice continued, “but every time I started to float away, I just got this horrible feeling.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Alice shut her locked door and I fell into step beside her.

“Just like—I don't know—something bad was going to happen. Who knows.”

The rest of the week passed quickly and when Friday arrived, I was ready for another weekend, but one that was quiet and uneventful, unlike the last. Friday was the beginning of our Christmas vacation—off for a week and a half only to return to the second to last batch of high school finals we’d ever take. Snow had become a permanent fixture in our lives; it was like we had never been without it. Winter was always like that in Elmsville: gray, cold, and unending. It was hard to picture the sun after a while, and it was a strange occurrence when its rays emerged from behind the perpetual clouds. At lunch on Friday, Alice chewed on a stick of celery, while I ate a peanut butter sandwich.

“So, what do you want to do tonight?” I asked Alice.

“Oh, right, I forgot. My parents and I are going to visit my grandmother in Maine for a few days.”

“Oh,” I said, disappointed. “When will you be back?”

“Tuesday,” she said, “but that’s Christmas Eve and for Christmas we always are with my other grandparents here the night before and day of. So I won’t be able to hang out until Thursday or Friday.”

I nodded and finished my sandwich.

“I don’t know about you,” Alice said with another stick of celery in her mouth, “but I’m going to start studying for those finals. The one for Ms. McLellan is going to be awful.”

Ms. McLellan was the science teacher and she believed all her students entered her course with much prior knowledge of biology and chemistry, even though everyone knew our science teachers before her were pretty deficient in the knowledge of the

subjects themselves. Or maybe it wasn't that they were deficient, it was just that they didn't know how to teach.

Lunch ended and we went our separate ways. After school, I hugged Alice before she drove away, and I walked home alone. In between classes, Alice caught up with me to let me know that her parents had changed their tickets for their trip because of a snowstorm up north, so she would have to leave right after school for the airport. I was afraid of walking home alone, but I didn't have much of a choice. The truck was with Daddy at the shop. If I called, I'd worry him and I didn't want to do that. I'd put him through enough already. Besides, I thought, I needed to get my courage back. If Billy was going to get me, he'd find a way to do it whether or not I walked home by myself.

I wanted to enjoy the walk, enjoy the quiet like I used to, but it was so cold that I had a hard time ignoring my body's refusal to embrace the temperature. A nagging sense of fear was tugging at me, but I ignored it. I had been ignoring it all week. Billy was only in my vision from a distance; I convinced myself as best I could that there was nothing to worry about with him. He paid no attention to me the whole week. I even ran into him in the hallway by accident, dropped my books and everything. His eyes met mine for a second—and then he was gone.

As I approached the center of town, a chill spread through my body that I rid. It gripped me tightly, icy fingers around my wrists, sucking the usual rational intelligence I had inside my mind out. I kept walking, but I could feel the presence of Billy following me. As I approached our house, it took all I had in me to not shoot straight into the house to the comfort of my bedroom. But I started to realize that whether or not Billy was physically there, I couldn't keep running from him or pretending his presence wasn't

haunting me or that he wasn't at least plotting some kind of plan to get back at me. For what, though, I wasn't quite sure.

Alice didn't tell me everything; I knew that. I could see it on her face when she spoke about Billy and the child she had lost. There were pieces of Alice I would never see, pieces of her that Billy had seen—and maybe he wanted to see them again. And I was taking that from him. I had Alice now, not him, I thought, and he'd just have to get over it. I walked faster up the driveway with a burst of confidence. Alice had found her way to me, and I wasn't about to let him take her back. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that this was why I felt him following me. Billy wanted Alice back, and I was in his way.

Days passed slowly with Alice gone. I spent the weekend like I used to. Mostly alone, with a card game or two and limited conversation between me and my parents. On Sunday, I went to the shop with Daddy for a special call. The wealthy people of the town often got special privileges, so when a high-paying client made a call about getting a car fixed when the shop was closed, Daddy had to work. He could have chosen not to, we weren't tight on money anymore, but it was out of habit that he never said no. In the back of his head, he was always thinking that it never hurt to have extra money because you never know when you might need it.

When we arrived at the shop, the car was waiting outside—a car with a huge dent in its hood. But it wasn't any car that I had pictured being here. It was nothing special. Some blue, four-door Ford that was probably seven or eight years old. As Daddy parked the car, I looked at him for answers.

“She said she needed to get out of here as fast as she could—something about being pursued.”

Around the corner of the shop, walked Mrs. Thorburn, her crow-black hair making a halo around her head. Big, dark sunglasses covered most of her face. She waved as Daddy shut the truck off.

I snorted. “She probably doesn’t even have the money to pay for it.”

Daddy reached for the handle of the door and then paused to look at me.

“No, she doesn’t. But she needs help. And no one in this town is willing to give it to her, not the kind she needs. This is all I can offer her, and I’m happy to do it.”

Without waiting for a response from me, Daddy climbed out of the truck and I watched as he walked over to Mrs. Thorburn and shook her head. They talked and I could easily imagine what they were saying. He was telling her he was happy to help her any way he could, and she was apologizing, in her scratchy, uneven voice, because she had nothing to offer Daddy in return for his work. It was difficult for me to look at Deena Thorburn, let alone think of my father helping her for no charge. She had never done anything to me, I guess that was true, but she raised Billy. That was enough for me not to trust her. In my head, parents were responsible for their children. Later, I knew parents were responsible for their children—but only to a certain extent.

When Daddy and Mrs. Thorburn started into the shop, I got out of the truck to follow. When I entered, I could see Mrs. Thorburn was shaking.

“Hey, hon,” she said to me as she tried to take a box of cigarettes from the pocket of her thin ski jacket.

I nodded at her in greeting.

“Sal, can you get the garage open so I can back the car in?”

I walked over to the garage and pressed a few buttons and the garage door rose as my father walked underneath it with Mrs. Thorburn’s keys in hand. I stood at the door as Daddy backed the banged-up car inside. Mrs. Thorburn walked over and stood beside me as she tapped a cigarette out of its package.

“You got a lighter?” she asked.

“No,” I said.

She shook her head. “Swear I had one on me, can’t find it now.” Mrs. Thorburn’s fingers trembled as she tried to hang onto the cigarette and search her pockets at the same time. She was shaking all over. I wondered what she was nervous about. The cigarette fell to the floor and as she bent to pick it up, the contents of her pockets on the loose sweatshirt she was wearing emptied themselves.

“Shit,” Deena said, her voice wavering.

I bent to help her collect her things. In the contents of the pile was a tube of lipstick, the lighter she had been looking for, a toothpick, some buttons, a wad of cash and a wrinkled picture. I let my fingers walk their way to the picture, curious as to what Deena Thorburn would possibly have a picture of in her pocket, and I picked it up when I noticed she was busy with the lighter. I picked up the picture with its badly wrinkled corners and was surprised to see Billy’s face in between his mother’s and father’s looking back at me. It was a Billy I had never known, along with a Deena Thorburn I had never known, beside Billy’s father who I had never met. Their faces were rounder and redder, eyes were brighter. Billy’s hair was lighter as were his eyes. They weren’t cold. He

looked happy. And Deena was almost unrecognizable to me. Her face wasn't so severely pointy and her cheeks were rounder.

I looked away from the picture to find Deena looking over my shoulder. As she bent closer to me, the strong scent of cigarettes invaded my senses and I coughed. Her sunglasses slid off her nose and clattered on the floor as I picked up the rest of the items from the floor and handed everything to her. She left the picture in my hand until she had put everything back in her pockets. When she reached for her glasses, I was startled to see the yellow and blue of a fresh bruise across her left eye and over the bridge of her nose. Deena didn't notice and was instead focused on the picture she took from me. Her expression had softened.

"That's a long time ago," she said, staring at her own face. I wondered if she saw someone different than who she saw in the mirror now.

I nodded.

"He ain't like that anymore." She inhaled the tobacco and nicotine mix from her cigarette and let the smoke come out through her nose and mouth and touched her face noticing the absence of the glasses. She hurriedly picked them up and put them back on her head.

Before she could say more, Daddy walked into the shop from the garage to discuss the problems with the car. I walked back into the shop to look for a bottle of water. Being around the smoke and in the cold had made me thirsty. I found a sealed bottle in the shop refrigerator and left some odd change from my pocket in the jar on the counter in the shop kitchen. When the jar was filled with money, one of the guys working would take an hour or two and go shop for groceries so they didn't have to leave

for lunch. Daddy always said it was easier that way, to eat while on the job and when there were gaps, it allowed for more business and less interference with keeping track of breaks and who was where. Sipping on my water, I walked back out of the kitchen and into the work area where my father and Billy's mother were standing.

"I got to get out of here, Dan, today. It's got to be drivable today." Mrs. Thorburn's voice was frantic and shaky but uncompromising.

"Well, Deena, I'll do what I can, but this isn't safe to drive. I can't get the parts in until next week. And maybe not even then."

"Do whatever you can, I have to go today."

Daddy shook his head and I could tell he was frustrated. But he couldn't control what Mrs. Thorburn did, so he agreed to work on the car while she stood by and waited.

"It'll only be temporary," he said, "It'll hold up for a while, but after so many miles, the car's going to die completely and you're going to have to get another instead of being able to fix this one."

"That's fine," Deena said, flicking ash onto the cement floor. "I just got to get out of here today."

Daddy set to work on the car, asking me for tools every once in a while. But after he got in deep, he quit talking and I was left with Billy's mother. When Daddy got absorbed in work, his mind went to another world, one in which he was separate from the one we lived.

"School good?" Deena asked me as I took a rag and wiped off one of the work benches.

"Yeah," I replied.

“Billy don’t tell me anything about it. They smart there? Used to be when I was a kid, but things change.”

“I don’t know if I’d say they’re all smart, some of the teachers don’t really know how to teach us, but they all know a lot of stuff,” I said, wishing I was at school instead of talking with Billy’s mother.

“That’s good then. I’m leaving. Today.” Deena took another drag on her cigarette and looked straight out the garage. I wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or not, but there was no one else listening.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Moving. Outta here. Town’s too small. I been thinking about it for years, and finally, just yesterday, I realized there’s nothing here for us. Not nothing. I got to find a job and I got some friends up north who said they’ll help so I’ll stay with them a little while before we can save up enough to get our own place.”

I wondered what Billy thought of all this. I knew that if my parents would have told me we were moving out of the blue, I would have been angry. But not before I had Alice around, before her, I wouldn’t have cared if we were to move—I might have even been excited at the change. Billy didn’t have friends; maybe he didn’t care that they were moving. Then I realized that she hadn’t said anything about Billy going with her.

“Is Billy going too?” I asked.

“You think I’d leave my kid behind?” Mrs. Thorburn’s voice shook, but she didn’t sound convincingly angry like her word implied. “Still gotta pack. We do.”

“How are you going to get all your stuff in the car?” I asked as I headed to the kitchen to rinse the rag.

“We ain’t. Not now anyway. We’ll come back for it once we get settled. Maybe I’ll find a job that’ll make us enough to send for the rest of the stuff.” Mrs. Thorburn laughed.

I smiled politely and shut the water off at the sink. I wrung the rag out in my hands until it almost felt dry, spread it on the counter and went to see where Daddy was in his process of patching the Thorburns’ car. His legs were sticking out from underneath the hood.

“How’s it going?” I said, kneeling on the cold floor and putting my face near the car’s front tire.

“Eh, okay, honey, hand me that wrench,” he said, reaching his hand out to me.

The wrench sat on the floor next to a toolbox. I picked it up and set it in my father’s outstretched hand.

“Thanks,” he said, lowering his voice. “I can’t believe she’s going to drive it like this. I wouldn’t drive it like this, and I’ve been in some pretty bad cars, but this isn’t even close to being safe. Like driving a bomb.”

“She says they’re moving,” I told Daddy, “today. That she just realized there’s nothing for them here so they’re moving. I don’t know why they have to go today.”

“Well, sweetheart,” my father grunted from under the car, “sometimes a person just gets a feeling they can’t ignore. Maybe that’s what she’s feeling. Maybe something else.”

“If she leaves, what’s Mom going to do?” I asked Daddy. The thought hadn’t struck me until then, that my mother would be alone without Deena Thorburn.

“I suppose she’ll be sad and then she’ll move on. Not much else she can do.”

“Probably kind of a good thing, in a way, huh? Her leaving?” I said, imagining my mother becoming close friends with Alice’s mother.

“I don’t really know,” Daddy said.

Daddy finished the car and walked over to Mrs. Thorburn while I cleaned off the windshield. It was streaked with dirt and dust from months of driving. The body was no cleaner, but at least she’d be able to see where she was going for the move now. As I wiped the glass clean, I could hear Daddy giving Mrs. Thorburn instructions on what to do when the car started to smoke or make screeching noises or both. I looked around the corner of the car and could see her listening intently, nodding at every few words Daddy said. I wondered if she heard him at all, or if all she could think about was leaving.

“That’s it then,” Daddy said, wiping his sooty hands across his thighs. “Good luck.”

“Thank, Dan,” Deena said, reaching into her pocket and offering him some of the bills she had bundled together.

Daddy shook his head. “Keep it. For your move. And your boy.”

Mrs. Thorburn nodded. She looked at me, and then she turned to get into the car.

“Take care of your mama,” she said to me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“She knows I ain’t good at goodbyes, so you all tell her for me. Tell her I’m happy, too,” she said, smiling weakly.

“Sure will, Deena, be careful,” Daddy said.

Daddy winced as the engine struggled to turn over and the car was put into drive and jerked forward quickly, disappearing from the shop and down the road to go back to her home near town and leave Elmsville. Come Monday, Billy would be gone.

My mother didn't have the reaction I expected to Deena's move. She didn't react at all. Daddy told her that night over dinner and she nodded and said, "She always said she was going to leave," and that was it.

XIX

I spent Christmas watching movies the local television stations were broadcasting with my mother and Daddy and eating more sugar than I had all year. When I crawled into bed that night, I realized I hadn't thought of Alice all day and that led me to think of her. I wondered if she was in bed yet, what she had gotten for Christmas, if hers was like mine in any way at all. I could picture her in the midst of all the chaos that big families surely bring, and could see her smile, calm and earnest, in the middle of everything. But in her smile, there was hurt, too.

Even if it wasn't visible to anyone there, or even if she wasn't smiling at all, I knew Alice couldn't be enjoying Christmas completely. She'd be thinking of her dead son and how this would have been his first Christmas. He would have gotten all kinds of presents, I imagined. She would have held him under the mistletoe and kissed his forehead. But as her cousins and aunts and uncles opened their presents and she opened her own, there was no sign of her dead baby anywhere. No proof that he had ever existed.

Really, when I thought about it, there wasn't proof that Alice had ever been a mother. Maybe it was a good thing that others weren't thinking of the child Alice almost had all the time. But maybe it was hard for her because she had to remember—was forced to. There were stretch-marks and scars on her body that proved his short existence

inside of her. But maybe that was precisely why it was hard for her not to see other evidence of her baby. To everyone else, it was like he never even existed, but she could never forget. Then again, she didn't have to look at the white and red trails across her belly. She could cover them all. The only thing Alice couldn't cover was Billy. Even though no one knew he was the father of her child, she couldn't forget it when she looked at him. The baby in those pictures she showed me so long ago was the same baby she saw when she looked at Billy's face. I wondered what it would mean for her to know that Billy was gone. I wondered if it would make her past any less real than it already was.

I knew I had to be the one to tell Alice that Billy had left. I didn't want her to find out through the rumors that would surely go around at school. Her reaction to his departure wasn't one I could predict; I had no idea what to expect from her. The day before school started again, I invited her over to the house for leftover Christmas cookies and milk. Alice arrived with new clothes and shorter hair. She hugged me and we headed to the kitchen. My parents had gone out to dinner to celebrate their anniversary—something they hadn't done in years.

“Oh wow,” Alice said, grabbing a pistachio log, “it's green.”

I smiled. “Those are my favorite,” I said, taking one for myself.

“Oh my god, this is amazing,” Alice gushed over the cookie while chewing. “Did you make them?”

I shook my head. “Mom,” I said, after chewing.

“How was Christmas?” Alice asked, reaching for a chocolate chip cookie.

“Good, we just stayed here—we don’t really do anything special for it. Just watch movies and stuff.”

“That sounds nice—not like mine,” Alice said shaking her head.

“What do you mean?”

She sighed. “It’s seriously just too many people. I mean, I don’t even remember some of their names sometimes. And then you’ve got to try and be polite and act like you like all the gifts you get from people who think you’re still twelve years old or the people who know stuff.”

“What do you mean ‘know stuff’?” I asked.

“Oh, you know what I mean. Like, my aunt, okay? She got me this book about grief. And I had to open it in front of everyone and thank her.” Alice wiped her mouth on her sleeve and reached for her glass of milk. “All I really wanted to do was throw it at her head.”

“Right,” I said, laughing.

“It’s like I’m not there or something or can’t manage my grief on my own,” she continued, her voice angry. “As if they’ve been there to help me along the way. Nobody has, you know? Nobody even knows what really happened besides you.”

“I know, but people just want to help.”

“Yeah, well, they should just stay out of it,” Alice said tipping the glass of milk to her lips.

“I like your hair,” I said, thinking that a change of subject was a good idea based on the heat coming from Alice’s voice. I didn’t want to make her angry.

“Oh., thanks,” she said, “I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“I told the lady two inches and she took off like a foot.”

“It’ll grow back,” I said, trying to be helpful.

“That’s not the point.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, sensing something had happened that Alice wasn’t telling me about.

She shook her head. “It just sucked, being there, with all those little kids around.” Alice looked into her glass of milk and then reached for another cookie.

I didn’t know what to say.

“I never wanted a kid, you know. But after it’s inside you, you kind of grow to love it.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling useless.

“It didn’t matter that it was Billy’s, just that it was mine. And somehow, even though I had never seen him, I loved him. It was like I finally had a reason to change. You know?”

“Not really,” I said carefully, “but I get what you’re saying.”

Alice dipped a cookie into her milk and it slipped from her fingers into the glass. She watched as it sunk to the bottom of the cup, as the thick, white liquid, covered it and made it disappear.

“I was finally ready for him when he died. I finally really wanted him, wanted my baby, wanted to be a mom. And then, just like that,” Alice snapped her fingers, “he was gone. And I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Because I didn’t have to quit school or be a single mom or worry about Billy or any of that stuff anymore. It was like

all the worries I had were taken from me in just one day. And I've been trying to tell myself that it's for the best, but I can't help feel kind of..." Alice's voice trailed off as she ran the tip of her index finger around the rim of the glass. She picked it up and looked through the side of the cup, twirled it around and around until the milk sloshed to the side from the movement, exposing the cookie.

"Kind of what?" I asked, watching Alice closely.

"I don't know," she said, "I feel like there's something missing. Which is stupid because it was never there to begin with."

I waited for tears to start down her face, but they never did. Alice's eyes remained dry, and I found myself with no helpful words to offer her. She set the milk back on the table and looked at me, waiting for me to say something. But I didn't know how to respond. I hadn't been in her position before, I didn't know what it felt like to reconcile giving up one's entire future in return for unplanned parenthood only to return months later to the life that had been previously led and find that there was no possible way to return to it. I cleared my throat.

"Billy's gone." The words hung between us like honey on a spoon, slowly rolling down the surface and dripping into a puddle.

"Gone?" Alice asked, her eyes meeting my own.

"Yep," I nodded. "His mother had Daddy fix her car and she said they were moving because there wasn't anything for them here. They left last week. I didn't believe her really, but my mother has been calling over there just to see if anyone would answer and the number was finally disconnected yesterday. The house is all boarded up, too. They're gone."

“Oh,” Alice said. “That’s good, I guess.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I thought you’d be happy about it. Anyway, I just thought I’d tell you before people start making stuff up at school tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Alice said.

I wondered if she was imagining Billy’s face in her head. If when his dark eyes had first locked onto hers, he took something from her that he still had—something that she couldn’t get back.

School returned with a blur of finals and class changes. Winter passed, and Alice and I continued spending weekends together. She didn’t talk about Billy or the baby much, but I noticed her eyes were always wandering, as if she was searching for someone. But Billy was gone. The snow began to melt when spring finally permanently arrived in April and the birds returned to sing as the sun rose in the morning. Alice and I had been planning for college. I applied to the same schools she did with the exception of one. I didn’t tell Alice, but I looked into an art school in Chicago. The art teacher, Mr. Miles, handed me a brochure during class one day, and it sounded interesting enough. I didn’t know what exactly I would do at an art school, but the more I considered the option, the more I liked it. I liked to see the quick results of pen against paper. I liked being able to fill emptiness, to make blankness vibrant and alive. The only problem I found was that the application required a portfolio. I wasn’t even sure what that meant, and I knew that I didn’t have one.

Mr. Miles became an integral part of my life for a few months, helping me to prepare the portfolio to submit to the school. It was hard for me to ask him for help, but

once I did, it was obvious that I couldn't do it without him. It also became apparent that he believed I had a fighting chance at getting accepted.

"Do you think it's going to be bad that I didn't take the sculpture class?" I asked Mr. Miles one day after school. He had been staying late with me two or three times a week to help me prepare what he kept calling a "solid collection of pieces."

"Well, I don't know," Mr. Miles said, running his hand through his gray, thinning hair. "I don't think it will look good, but you have a good sense of form and structure from what I've seen so far."

I nodded and picked up my pen again and continued filling out one of the forms for the application. I had to stop every line or so to ask Mr. Miles questions about terms I didn't understand. By the time I finished the first page of the application, half of it being my name and address, an hour had passed and I was feeling discouraged. The applications I filled out with Alice were a lot easier. I was able to quickly list my GPA and write an essay about an event that changed my life, but I couldn't easily talk about artists who influenced my work or with what medium I preferred to work.

After filling out the last line on the page, I lay my pen down and looked at Mr. Miles.

"There's no way I'll get in, everyone's going to know more than me," I said. "Maybe I should just wait a year and work on stuff and then apply."

"You could, but look at your work, Sal, it's good. It's got attitude and emotion," he said as he let his fingers run along a painting I had done of the creek. "It's real—unaffected by the basic art lessons that sometimes change a student's style for the rest of their career."

“Yeah, but I don’t even know this stuff—”

Mr. Miles broke into my self-deprecation.

“You do, you just don’t have the words for it yet—you’re doing everything already on your own, though. That’s what really makes you stand apart.” Mr. Miles leaned into the painting to study a corner of it that I had painted black. It was the section of the woods where I had seen the eyes.

I trusted Mr. Miles and his instinct that I wasn’t just okay at art, and, with his help, I completed the application and put together my portfolio. Near the end of our after school meetings, when they became more frequent as the deadline for applying grew closer, it was hard to explain to Alice where I was so many days after school and why I didn’t need rides home. Every time I told her I had to stay after to tutor other students in math, I wanted to confess that I hadn’t been doing math at all, but I worried what that would mean for us. And as much as I was afraid of walking home alone, I started getting used to it again. And some days, I even forgot about Billy all together.

Alice was very determined to build her future with mine, not any other way. And, in a sense, I was, too. I could see myself being her roommate, going for pizza and coffee late at night, making identities for us based on our friendship, maybe even going to parties together. I didn’t know what I’d do at a school that wasn’t based on art, but it hadn’t mattered before, so I wasn’t concerned. It wasn’t as if art school was a dream of mine—I didn’t even believe I had a chance at getting in and kept myself convinced I wouldn’t, so when I got an acceptance letter with scholarships and financial aid, I didn’t know what to do.

Time with Alice became something I didn't look forward to because of the secret I was harboring. The only person who knew was Mr. Miles, and, of course, he was excited for me. Even though I told him I wanted to wait and see what happened with the other schools before I made a decision, I knew there wasn't anywhere else I wanted to go. The longer I had the idea in my head about going to art school, the more I wanted to see it through. But prolonging the decision gave me more time to decide how to tell Alice—and my parents. At dinner one evening, two weeks after my acceptance letter came, my mother forced me into telling her and Daddy what I had been up to.

“Salma, I know we haven't really talked about your future plans with you, but it'd be nice if you told us what was going on. I have noticed a few big envelopes in the mail for you,” she said with a nervous smile.

Neither of my parents went to college on account of me, and they didn't know much about how to get there. Both were aware that I had been applying to schools and encouraged me to follow through with what I wanted, but it was no secret that I couldn't ask them for help with tuition or any other bills that would accumulate. I could see that they were worried.

I pushed peas around my plate with a fork before I answered. I didn't know how to tell them what I had decided. But, I thought, technically, I hadn't decided yet. The letter I was to return to accept my admission was still sitting in my dresser drawer.

“We will support you in whatever you decide to do,” Daddy said, leaning back in his chair, “and we'll help you as much as we can, but we don't have a whole lot other than hugs right now.” His voice sounded tired and sad—almost as if he was disappointed in himself.

“I, um, I got in to most of the schools. But I think I know which one I want to go to,” I said slowly.

“All of them?” my mother asked excitedly.

“Yeah, I didn’t think I would either.”

“We’re so proud of you,” Daddy said looking at me seriously.

“So where?” my mother asked.

“Um, there’s—this is going to be kind of weird. But I thought for a long time now about it and—um—it’s the only place I am excited about. Well—hold on—” I said, sliding my chair out from the table and standing. I ran from the kitchen to my bedroom where I opened my dresser drawer and retrieved the admission letter. When I returned to the kitchen, I set it on the table and slid it to my father.

He shot me a look that said he wasn’t sure what he should expect to find inside the envelope, but he opened it anyway and pulled out the enclosed letter. He held the paper far from his eyes—he wouldn’t get the reading glasses he needed—and read over the letter. My mother got up from her chair and stood behind Daddy, reading over his shoulder. I wanted to watch their reactions, but I felt embarrassed. Like I had done something wrong. I watched anyway. As my mother read, she clapped her hand over her mouth and her eyes began to fill with tears. I couldn’t tell what Daddy thought.

When he finished reading, he folded the letter and slid it into its envelope and looked at me for a moment before he said anything. I looked back at him—at them. Daddy had always seemed so strong and so much bigger than me—there was nothing he couldn’t do. But here, he seemed to be drowning in his wide flannel shirt. The brown plaid matched his eyes and highlighted only the wrong pieces of him. The hollows in his

cheeks. The deep, dark tiredness under his eyes. The stains of oil and dirt on his hands. He didn't look like I remembered him looking when he was teaching me to use my sled. I wondered when that changed, and how it changed without me noticing sooner.

My mother, with tears falling over the hand still covering her mouth, was firmly planted behind my father—where she had always been. Her shirt magnified her delicate frame—drew my eyes to it. The two of them reminded me of a statue I had once seen in a park on a field trip for school. It was a man and a woman carved out of stone. The woman was standing behind the man, her hand on his shoulder, the man had his hands folded in his lap and was sitting on a bench. And even though he wasn't touching her, there was softness in his eyes that told me he was thinking of her, the woman standing behind him. And the woman was thinking of him, too.

“Art school.” Daddy's voice was quiet.

I nodded. “I know it's crazy, and I probably won't make any money, and I don't even have the right training to go, but I...I don't know.” I couldn't bring myself to say I wanted to go, not until I had their approval.

Daddy shook his head and grabbed my mother's hand from his shoulder.

“You'll be great,” Daddy said. My mother quickly nodded her head and mopped up some of her tears with the back of her hand. “Every since you were little you were always scribbling away or making something with clay.”

I felt relieved.

“So, um, it's okay if I go?” I asked, shifting my weight from one foot to the other, back and forth.

“You have to,” my mother said in a nasally tone, her nosed stuffy from crying, “Sometimes life has a way of putting exactly what you need in front of you, all you have to do is look.”

I smiled.

“And I wouldn’t look twice,” Daddy said, “or wait a whole lot longer. When someone offers to write you a check for something that’s going to change the rest of your life, you can’t say no. Even if you find out that you aren’t cut out for this, it will be a good experience.”

And so it was decided. I would go to art school in Chicago in the fall. My mother was excited to help me shop to decorate my dorm room and Daddy started a list of the things he felt were important for me to take along with me. At the top of the list was a can of mace. When I saw it, I laughed.

“You never know, Sal,” he said with a straight face. “Chicago isn’t like Elmsville—it’s big. People don’t want to always be nice or do the right thing. You’re going to have to be ready to defend yourself.”

Daddy was right; Chicago wasn’t like Elmsville. But I had never felt as if all the people of Elmsville were always nice or trying to do the right thing.

“Okay,” I said.

I spent much of February preparing myself for the move I would make at the end of the summer and enjoyed spending time shopping for it with both of my parents. But I also was still trying to figure out how to tell Alice. She had asked me about my

applications, since she had already been accepted to her number one school, and I kept telling her I hadn't heard back yet. Part of me thought I might just tell her I didn't get in to any schools except the art school, but I knew I couldn't lie to her—so I kept avoiding really answering her questions.

I wanted everything to stay the same between us.

"Hey," Alice said at lunch one day, "you good to hang out Friday night? Mom wants to take us to that new movie about that couple—you know the one I mean? I can't remember the title."

"Yeah, um, I think I can come," I said.

"Where've you been anyway?" Alice's voice was accusatory.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh come on, I never see you anymore. Not like we used to anyway. I know you're getting helping people with math and all, but you can't be working on it every weekend, too."

Alice wasn't looking at me. Her face was red and she was stabbing at her ravioli on her lunch tray with her fork.

"Okay, please don't be mad," I said.

"I can't promise."

"Please?" I asked pitifully.

"Fine," she said, still stabbing ravioli.

"I, um, have been getting ready for school."

"Okay? Me too?" Alice was puzzled.

I took a bite of carrot stick.

“School in Chicago,” I said, feeling my stomach turn over and reject the carrot. I hadn’t pictured telling Alice this way—I wanted it to be happy.

“Columbia?” Alice asked, as it was one of the schools we applied to. I had gotten in there and she hadn’t.

I shook my head. “No, the art institute.”

Alice turned to face me and her eyes were round.

“Why didn’t you tell me you applied there?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I wasn’t going to. I didn’t even know what it was. But Mr. Miles showed me the brochure and I looked at it and thought maybe I’d like it.”

“And that’s where you’ve been after school, huh? Working on that stuff?”

“Yeah, my art portfolio,” I said, crumbling up the plastic bag from the carrots in the palm of my hand. I held it tightly, as if it would anchor me to the ground in case everything started to fly.

“I didn’t know you were into art,” Alice said. She kept her voice even and calm, but I could see from the wrinkles on her forehead that she wasn’t feeling that way inside.

“I didn’t really either—I mean, I did, but I just never thought about making a future out of it. It was just as much of a surprise to me as it is to you.”

“Not quite,” Alice said, “You’ve known for, what, at least a few months now? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.”

“I’m sorry, I just—I knew you were planning on all this and us—”

“Yeah, Sal, I was and that’s why this sucks. I just turned in my housing form with no roommate listed because I thought I would have you. Now I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“I’m sorry, Alice, I just didn’t know how to tell you.”

Alice shook her head. “It’s fine, okay? Can we not do this again though?”

I looked at Alice, confused. I wasn’t quite sure what she meant.

“Keep secrets from each other.”

“Okay,” I agreed and bent over the side of the table to pick up the plastic bag I had dropped. I felt as if a balloon was inside my chest, swelling, and almost ready to burst of excitement and happiness, but I knew Alice wasn’t finished being angry with me over this. When I looked up, Alice’s eyes were glassy.

“It’s just—I don’t know what to do without you,” she said to me.

“You’ll be fine—you always were before—and things were a lot worse then, right?”

“Yeah, but they got better.”

I smiled so hard my dry lips felt as if they would crack at any moment—but it was better than crying.

“We’ll call each other,” I said quickly.

Alice rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

“And I’ll come visit you on weekends, and there’ll be breaks we come back here for.”

Alice nodded, but she didn’t smile. And even though I knew she would be upset for a while, I was confident that things between us didn’t have to change just because our geographic location was going to. Everything would remain the way it was.

XX

The week before graduation, a wave of heat ran rampant through Elmsville. Out of the forty and fifty degree days, an eighty degree blaze rose and lasted four days. Alice and I sat out on her porch in her bathing suits, drank Pepsis, and talked about tan lines and what they would look like by the fall. Daddy was able to operate the shop with the garage door open, and my mother decided to plant a garden in our backyard. In the back of my mind, the threat of college interrupting the comfortable routine I enjoyed was ever present even though I was still months away from having it disrupted.

The windows at Elmsville High were dusted off and opened wide for our last week of classes before summer vacation. The heat was so thick in the school I swear I could see it steam from the backs of my classmates in their chairs. The sudden change of temperature confused our bodies and the building. It was as if spring forgot to warn us of summer, didn't ease us into it at all, just dropped us right into the season without introductions.

I sat in math on Tuesday that week, dazed. It was hot. It was hard to think of anything else but the sudden heat. I wore jeans year round and had rarely found myself uncomfortable, but I was wishing my bare legs were sticking to the seat of my chair like Hallie's in front of me. I could feel my hair grow damp as I tried to fan myself with a sheet of paper. Mr. Harris fanned himself with his hand as he wrote on the chalkboard.

No one was paying attention. I looked down at the floor and noticed the sole of my sneaker was ripping apart from the canvas. I made a mental note to get some shoes before I left.

Mr. Harris passed a worksheet down each row of desks and when I got it, I looked over the numbers and symbols on the page and they seemed to scatter. I tried to focus my eyes, but I couldn't make them stay still. My stomach flipped over, and I stood and pointed to the hall when I caught Mr. Harris's eye and headed to the bathroom. Despite the summer sun's strong presence, the hallway was dark. A lot of the lights in the school were off to cool the building. As I walked down the empty hallway, my left shoe began to squeak. But instead of encouraging it to continue and become louder, I tried to quiet it. I didn't want it to make noise at all because I suddenly felt as if someone else was in the hall, waiting for a noise to signal my presence. I tiptoed in a run down the rest of the hall to the bathroom and when I entered, I sunk to the floor against the wall to catch my breath. I hadn't realized I had stopped breathing.

My heart pounded through my ribs, shaking my chest. A dark, black cloud ran through my mind and I saw the eyes again. The eyes I saw in the woods months ago. I hadn't seen them in a while. I had hoped it was over.

But it wasn't.

As I slowed my erratic breathing and reclaimed my normal heartbeat, I heard the door squeak open only to start my panic once again. I looked at the ceiling and crossed my fingers. For what, I don't know, I just felt better that way. The brick partition that separated the entrance of the bathroom from the sinks hid whoever it was that had entered the bathroom. I could hear them breathing. It was quiet and even. But I could hear it.

Soft footsteps started again and started to move beside the partition and around the corner walked Alice.

“Oh my God, Sal, you scared the shit out of me!”

“Sorry,” I said breathlessly, as I willed my body to settle.

“Are you okay?” Alice moved quickly and knelt beside me.

“I’m just feeling sick,” I said.

“You look sick.”

“Thanks,” I said, still managing sarcasm in my terrified state.

Alice laughed and sat down beside me. She kept talking and I was thankful not to have to explain anything more than what I had told her.

“I had to get out of English. It’s so boring today—seriously. I hate Dickens.”

I nodded.

Alice continued. “He’s so boring. I can’t even understand the book. And anyway, we graduate next week, so what’s the point of even having school right now?” Alice stood up and looked at her face in the mirror over the sinks and then back at me on the floor.

“Did I look like you when you found me?” Alice asked.

“I don’t know.” Alice offered her hand to me and I grabbed onto it and let her pull me to my feet. She turned me by my shoulders to face the mirrors and stood behind me.

My face was pale and eyes were red. I was concentrating hard on not letting myself shake.

“What do you think now?” Alice brought her face right next to mine. Our hair mingled.

“Yeah,” I said, “except I think I look worse.”

“You can’t,” Alice said.

“How would you know? I’m the one who was looking at you,” I said, turning to face Alice. Her breath hit my nose. It was sweet.

“Sure, but I was going into pre-term labor—you’re just sick. Big difference.”

“Oh, fine,” I said with a weak smile, “You win.”

Alice leaned away from me and patted my shoulder.

“You probably ought to go home,” she said, “Can you make it to the office?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll go get your stuff. You’re in math now, right?”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured, starting out of the bathroom. The floor felt like it was rubber.

Alice held the door for me and watched as I walked down the hall to the office. I concentrated on each step I took, making my gait as steady as possible, but I was still holding my breath, feeling the same fear I had felt in the woods months ago. I went home soon after I got to the office; my mother walked and got the truck from Daddy and came and got me. She took my temperature when we got home, made me a bed up on the couch, put in a movie, and placed cold washcloths on my head. I let myself relax into my mother’s care, let her happily bustle around the kitchen making soup and feeding me popsicles, but I knew I wasn’t the kind of sick she believed I was.

The next morning, I didn't feel any better but I made myself go to school. I got through the rest of the week and when Friday arrived, Alice and I had plans to spend the weekend at her house. When we arrived, her mother was running up the stairs.

"Oh, Alice," she shouted as she ran, "your uncle John died. I tried to get you at school, but they said you were already gone. Our flight leaves in an hour. The funeral's tomorrow."

"Oh," Alice said, surprised.

"I'm sorry," I said to Alice's surprised face.

"Mom, you're leaving now?" she said, ignoring me.

Apparently, Uncle John was no big deal—at least not to Alice. And it didn't seem like his death was a great loss to her mother either as her eyes were bright and clear of any tears. She just looked busy.

"Yeah, honey, oh, I told Teresa to take the weekend off," Alice's mother's voice grew quieter as she disappeared from sight upstairs. "You girls are welcome to stay here, but I didn't send anyone for groceries, so there's not much to eat."

"Okay," Alice said, walking into the kitchen and opening the refrigerator. "You know, I don't really feel like staying here anyway right now—let's go to your house."

"Uh, sure," I said.

The sound of heavy footsteps coming quickly down the stairs made me turn and look at Alice's mother as she trotted into the sitting area. She didn't seem to be upset at all about this death, just a little frazzled and busy. She quickly walked into the kitchen and stood beside Alice who was still peering into the refrigerator. It looked like it always did—full of containers and boxes—but I, too, knew by now that all those special

containers didn't hold foods fit for a meal, but foods for special occasions. Mrs. Rayburn liked to be prepared for unexpected guests at all times. It was important for her to impress on a moment's notice—and that she could do. But fix a meal, she did not—that was up to Teresa.

“Alice, your father just called. His car won't start—we don't have time to wait to get it fixed—we'll need yours.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Alice said.

“Help me get the suitcases from upstairs. We're just going to go get your dad from work and then we'll drop you girls at Sal's and head to the airport.” Mrs. Rayburn stalked quickly out of the kitchen to return to the staircase and Alice followed behind her.

“Why don't I just drive you?” Alice asked, as she followed her mother upstairs.

“Because we need to get there quickly.”

“I can drive fast, too, you know,” Alice said as they reached the top of the stairs and started down the hall.

“Alice, honey, I love you, but I don't have time to argue.”

“Fine,” I heard Alice say as their voices disappeared, and I could only hear murmurs.

I walked to the stairs and helped Alice and her mother heave three, large suitcases through the hall and down the stairs.

“Mom, why do you even need all this? It's just a funeral.”

Mrs. Rayburn's cheeks were red as she hoisted a large, black suitcase off the stairs and across the room.

I set my own suitcase down and picked up half of hers and we carried it over to the door.

“Why didn’t you just use the wheels?” I asked.

“Oh,” she laughed, “that must seem silly to you. They’ll scratch the floors.”

I nodded.

“No, they won’t,” Alice interrupted, panting and carrying a white, leather bag over to the other suitcase and setting it on the floor.

Mrs. Rayburn ignored Alice and stood with her hand on her hip, her brow wrinkled in thought.

“I hope that’s everything,” she said.

“Well, maybe some bowling balls.” Alice’s sarcasm felt a bit inappropriate, but her mother just laughed it off.

“Yes, yes,” Mrs. Rayburn said, “just don’t forget this when you pack for our next vacation.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to a funeral, not on a vacation.” Alice wouldn’t let it go.

“I think we have everything—get your coats,” Mrs. Rayburn said.

“Do you need five?” Alice asked, heading to the closet.

“Ha ha, hurry up; we’re going to be late. We can’t miss this flight.”

The three of us slipped on our coats and climbed into Alice’s car. Alice and I sat in the backseat, like children. Sitting behind Mrs. Rayburn, I remembered that there were many times when it wasn’t me who was sitting behind her in the car, but Hallie—or Jessica—or Renee. I tried to push the thought from my mind, but couldn’t quite get around the feeling that I had missed out on all the fun, childhood memories Alice and I

could have had. Instead, I was alone and she remembered sleepovers with her old friends. I just couldn't forget that I hadn't always been the one she told her secrets to.

The car moved quickly along the highway. I wondered why Alice and her mother weren't upset by this death in the family, and why Alice wasn't accompanying her parents to the funeral of her uncle. She didn't seem to be upset about the death at all, nor the fact that she seemed uninvited to the event. Uncle John, if I remembered right, was the uncle who wanted to save Alice. The weird one from her parents' party when I first visited her house, the one she had told me had a drinking problem. I guessed it made sense why Alice wasn't upset, but I wasn't sure about her mother.

When we got to Alice's dad, he looked unemotional as well. He set his dark, leather briefcase in the car and quickly sat down on the passenger side.

"When's the flight?" he asked, leaning over and kissing his wife on the cheek.

"It leaves in forty minutes," Mrs. Rayburn said, keeping her eyes glued to the road as she quickly moved Alice's car out of the parking lot.

"Going to be close," Alice's father said.

"Mmhhh," Mrs. Rayburn replied as we took off on the highway again—this time to my house. "We're dropping the girls off at Sal's for the weekend. They decided to go to the Porters' while we're gone."

"Better hurry," Mr. Rayburn said, reaching his hand across the console in the center of the seats separating himself from his wife.

"I'm well aware of that," Mrs. Rayburn said.

I had never seen the side of Alice and her family that liked to hide when guests were around. I felt awkward at first, hearing Alice taunt her mother about the amount of

clothing she packed for such a short trip, and it seemed like Mr. Rayburn was nagging Mrs. Rayburn. I had to remind myself that my family did the same exact things and that when we did them, it didn't throw me off or make me uncomfortable. It was just the way it was.

Mr. Rayburn turned a knob on the dashboard and music blasted into our ears. He and Mrs. Rayburn jumped, and he quickly turned the dial to lower the volume. Rap filled the car. Mr. Rayburn shook his head and turned around so he could look into the backseat.

“What is this crap, Alice?”

“Music, Dad.”

“No. Haven't I told you this isn't going to help you at all? Listen to this: all babes, money, and thugs. Negativity. You want to get a grip on life and move forward, you need to be incorporating positivity in every way you can, including your musical selections.”

“Just because you don't like it doesn't mean I'm not allowed to,” Alice said looking out the window.

Mr. Rayburn stayed turned toward us and when Alice turned away from him, he directed his at me.

“Sal, do you listen to this crap?”

I shrugged, not wanting to insult Alice's music choices.

“Not really,” I said.

“See? Alice—” Mr. Rayburn turned to Alice who was still looking out the window.

“I mean, I don’t listen to this, but I don’t really listen to anything,” I interrupted not wanting to look like I was trying to suck up.

Mr. Rayburn’s head snapped back in my direction and I let his eyes meet mine. I blushed.

“No music?” he asked incredulously.

I shook my head.

“The human brain thrives on music, it can foster great growth in the mind and spiritually as well. Don’t you feel something missing?”

“Not really,” I said, feeling my face heat.

“Dad, stop,” Alice said, turning from the window and looking at me. “Ignore him.”

“Sal, what would you listen to if you had to pick something?”

“I don’t know,” I said, considering Mr. Rayburn’s question.

“I know you girls, you have great knowledge—what would you pick? What would be your favorite kind of music if you had one?”

I closed my eyes and could hear the birds in the trees in the woods. That was what I liked. But I couldn’t say that. It would sound ridiculous. Before I had a chance to respond, Alice’s mother cut in.

“Really, dear, that’s enough. If Sal doesn’t listen to music, then she doesn’t.”

The car pulled up my driveway and I was relieved to not have to continue in the conversation or, at the least, fight against it. I opened the door.

“Thanks for dropping us off,” I said.

Alice’s mother smiled at me and her dad waved.

“Oh, um, sorry about your loss,” I added.

“Thank you,” Mr. Rayburn said. He wasn’t smiling, but he didn’t seem sad either.

Alice leaned over the front seat and kissed her parents each on the cheek.

“Have a good trip,” she said, “tell Mimi and Papa I love them.”

“We will, sweetheart, behave yourself.”

Alice picked up her backpack, got out of the car, and slammed the door shut. The second she moved out of the way, Mrs. Rayburn backed the car out of the drive and it was gone before we even got in the door.

I opened the door and Alice and I walked into the house. My mother approached us when she heard the bang of the screened door slamming shut.

“Oh, hello, I didn’t know you girls were coming here today.”

“We didn’t either,” I said, “Alice’s uncle died so her parents had to go to...” I looked at Alice.

“Boston. For the funeral,” she finished.

My mother’s eyes rounded at the word ‘died’ and held tight to Alice’s face, searching her for signs of distress and requirements of comfort.

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. Would you like a cup of tea?”

Alice shook her head.

“It’s okay Mrs. Porter, I didn’t really know him at all. I’m fine,” Alice said smiling and reaching out to pat my mother on the shoulder.

It amused me that Alice had the dead uncle, but my mother was the one who needed comforted.

“Oh,” my mother said, standing straighter and relaxing her face, “well then, we can just make it a pleasant little weekend.”

“Sure, Mom,” I nodded.

Alice smiled.

“It’s getting late,” my mother said, her eyes rounding again. She was worried about dinner, I could tell.

“Can we go get some Chinese?” I asked quickly, before she could think too hard about cooking.

“That actually sounds great,” Alice said, catching on to my plan.

“Well,” my mother said slowly, “I suppose I can call Dad at work and ask him to pick it up on his way home.” She smiled hesitantly, as if she were disappointing us by not offering to make a feast at 6:00 in the evening.

My mother called Daddy while Alice and I traipsed into my bedroom. She set her bag of clothes on my desk and sat on my bed. I stood near the closet.

“So, why’s no one sad about your uncle?”

“You remember him, right? The one from the party?”

“Yeah?” I said.

“Well, he drinks, remember I told you that?”

I nodded.

“When my parents finally decided it was okay to tell the family I was pregnant, he came over the very day he found out. Drunk, of course. He demanded to know why he wasn’t called immediately when I found out I was pregnant. He told my parents that they raised a slut and asked me if I even knew who the father was. He said he always knew I

had no future, since the minute I was born. Just like my mother,” Alice said this as if she had repeated it so many times it had no affect over her.

“Wow.” I put my hands in my pockets.

“Yeah, so, after that, things haven’t been all that great with him. I mean, he’s my dad’s brother and all, but he’s weird and rude and we never spent that much time with him anyway so they’re going out of obligation.” Alice tucked her legs underneath her.

“Isn’t your dad sad though?”

Alice shook her head. “Like I said, we’ve never spent much time with him.” She un-tucked her feet from underneath her bottom and let them slip to the floor. “You seem like you’re finally feeling better.”

“Yeah, kind of,” I said, not sure that I should share with Alice the hanging sense of fear that had been following me for weeks now.

“Finals make me tired, too,” Alice said sounding sympathetic.

I nodded.

My mother appeared at the door of my room. Her hair was freshly brushed and lay neatly across her shoulders.

“Your dad had to work late so he’ll be home in about an hour. I’m going to call and order—is there anything that you like specifically, Alice—or don’t like?”

“No, ma’am.” Alice’s voice was sweet and drippy.

My mother smiled at both of us before she walked away.

“Let’s go,” Alice said.

“Where?”

“Outside. It’s warm finally. We should take advantage of it while we can before it randomly decides to snow again. You don’t want to go?”

I didn’t.

“I think we should eat first,” I said.

“It’ll be dark by the time we leave then.” Alice eyed me with suspicion.

I didn’t want to go in the woods at all. I hadn’t been back since winter.

Somehow, I was able to keep Alice’s attention with other conversation until dinner.

Daddy got home with the boxes of Chinese, still warm, and we sat at the table and ate.

My mother chattered on about a new recipe she was going to try for some kind of garlic mashed potatoes and Alice listened to her intently. Daddy was quiet and shoveled noodles into his mouth faster than usual.

“What’s the rush?” I asked him.

“Gotta go back,” he said.

“To the shop? Tonight?”

He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin and reached for a carton of sweet and sour chicken.

“Yep, got a big job right now, few cars in just as we closed.”

My mother shook her head. Her hair floated as her head moved. “You should just tell them you have obligations.”

“We could use the extra cash.” Daddy spooned more food into his mouth and stood, plate in hand. He rinsed his dishes and kissed the top of my head as he walked past and into the living room.

“You girls behave,” he called.

“We always do, Mr. Porter.” Alice laughed.

“I have my doubts.”

I could hear Daddy slip on his work boots and open the door to leave. Before he did, the heavy sound of his footsteps came back through the living room and he appeared at the kitchen where he walked to my mother and kissed her cheek.

“Thanks for dinner,” he said and turned to leave again.

My mother’s cheeks turned red and she got up and began collecting the half-empty cartons of Chinese food and emptying them into containers to store in the refrigerator.

“Oh,” Daddy called as he opened the door, “you girls ought to make sure you go out to the woods tonight. There’s going to be a meteor shower. Ten o’clock.” The door slammed, and I heard the rumble of the truck start.

Alice looked excitedly at me and said, “We have to go now.” She got up and collected my plate along with her own and set them both on the counter.

“Do you need help with the dishes?” she asked my mother.

“Oh, honey, thank you, Sal usually gets them actually—but there aren’t many tonight so I don’t mind.” There was a speck of green on my mother’s front tooth that showed when she smiled.

“I can get them,” I said, rising from the table.

“No, you girls go and spend some time together. I just want to get these finished quick and then lie down. The day just got away from me—it’s already getting late.” My mother moved the entire time she spoke, wringing out a dishcloth, wiping the table, setting bowls in the sink, collecting trash.

Alice and I left my mother at the sink. I wanted to go back to my bedroom and settle in for the night, but I knew Alice hadn't forgotten about how I'd told her about the sunsets in the woods in the spring—and she definitely wouldn't forget about the meteor shower Daddy just mentioned. As much as I wanted to jump at the chance to see sunset over the creek and then watch a meteor shower after the long winter, I couldn't convince myself it was a good idea. Unfortunately, I knew I was going to go no matter how I felt because Alice wanted to—and because I didn't want to tell her what I could barely admit to myself: Billy was back.

XXI

I didn't understand how or when it happened—the Thorburns' house had been empty for months—but the more I thought about it, the more I realized I wasn't making everything up. My mind might have been playing tricks on me when I saw Billy's empty eyes in the dark curtain of the pine trees that night, but since then I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. I felt it everywhere I went. At first, I tried to ignore it. I let Daddy comfort me; telling him what had been going on put my mind at ease for a few days. Daddy wouldn't let anything happen to me or anyone else he cared about. But after the comfort wore off, I still found myself conscious of every move I made. I had to find out if my feelings were just feelings, or if they were something I shouldn't ignore.

I considered telling Alice, but I decided that she had enough days of Billy and his torture and they were worse than mine ever were. Knowing that the father of her dead baby had returned wasn't going to help the healing she seemed to be doing. Alice always put a strong face on in front of other people, but I understood that when she was alone, it disintegrated like sugar in water. It took most of the courage I had to let Alice inside my very isolated world, and I was glad I had, but this was something I wanted to keep to myself.

There weren't many ways to see if Billy was back. I looked for him at school, but I never saw him. I could always feel him, though. Similar to the way the sky hangs solid

with gray clouds during winter, Billy's presence stuck to mine. Most of the time, I had myself convinced that my mind was playing tricks on me and that there was no possible way Billy would come back to Elmsville. Like Deena Thorburn had said, there wasn't anything for them there, no point in staying any longer. But when I had purposely walked home from school the long way and passed the Thorburns' old house, there was nothing I was capable of telling myself that would let me believe anything besides the fact that Billy had come back home. And it was possible that he had never even left.

One night, after a session of art lessons with Mr. Miles, I had been feeling light and airy—as if nothing could pull me down. He had told me he thought my art was unique, and I was beginning to think so, too. I walked around the center of town and down the side street where Billy and his mother used to live. The house was boarded up a few days after their departure. I knew because my mother dragged me along one afternoon just to make sure Deena was gone. But when I approached the house from the cracked sidewalk, something had changed. I couldn't quite tell what, I just knew it didn't seem the same as the last time I had been there.

The dented mailbox, which was hanging from its post, a drive-by baseball-bat victim, still read "Thorburn" haphazardly across its side in white paint. When the rubber soles of my shoes hit the sagging, wooden porch, it creaked under my weight and I froze in place. I waited to hear the sound of a person inside the house, but I heard nothing. I smiled to myself, relatively certain that no one could possibly be inside the house. I was obviously just freaking myself out for no reason. The creaking continued with a few more steps toward the door and I winced. As I positioned my hand to knock, I realized

the screened door was gone. There was a board across it when I had driven by with my mother, but the board was gone now, too. Unless, of course, I had just forgotten what I had seen. That, I figured, was very possible. I took a breath and knocked softly against the door. Pieces of chipped paint fell at my feet from the small amount of pressure I exerted against its surface. There was no sound from inside the house.

I just wanted to make sure, to prove to myself that I was just making myself sick with worry, so I knocked on the door again—harder this time. More flecks of paint fell at my feet. I waited for a few moments, counting to sixty, making myself stay in that spot just in case anyone was inside Billy Thorburn's old house. But nothing happened. I turned to leave but noticed the curtain on one of the front windows beside the door was hanging at an odd angle, leaving enough room for me to see inside the house. I walked back towards the door and approached the window, the porch groaning under my weight. Leaning in to look through the dirty glass, I cupped my hands around my face. The house was dirty—that I could tell just from the window. Boxes were everywhere. Empty pop cans and ashtrays littered the entryway sitting room, the one I used to be confined to when Deena watched me as a little kid. Balled-up newspaper was strewn about the floor. There was a cigarette on an ashtray near the window, and, for a second, it looked like it glowed red.

It was almost like someone had been searching for something inside that room—but it was probably like that because Deena and Billy decided not to pack everything when they moved. They just took what they needed and left. I tried to see into the hall that led to the kitchen, but only the far edge of the sitting room was in my view. I felt better. The Thorburns were gone. Some of their stuff was still at their old house---the

white carpet, the old sofa—but they weren't. I felt relieved, but I couldn't get over that cigarette glowing.

And then I noticed the photo on the window sill.

It was wedged up under the frame, but it caught my eye as I started to turn away. If I had turned to my right, I never would have seen it. A combination of the light hitting its shiny surface and my eyes just catching its presence created the perfect opportunity for it to present itself. I leaned in close to the glass of the window, so close that when I breathed, I could taste the dirt streaked across it. At first, I couldn't believe what I was seeing, and after a few seconds, it became very clear to me that I hadn't been afraid for no reason. Inside of Billy Thorburn's house on the window sill was the picture of Alice's baby I had framed for her. And if there was any doubt that the baby in the picture was Alice's or that the photo was the one I had given her, my eyes quickly noticed the frame I had carefully crafted crushed into pieces on the floor nearby, and all my doubts disappeared like cigarette smoke into a thick, morning fog.

XXII

I hesitated as we left the kitchen. I took my time moving down the hall, past my bedroom, and to the back door. Alice followed close behind me.

I just wanted to get it over with.

“I need my shoes,” Alice said, realizing that we were going out to the woods now.

“Right,” I said, “so do I.” I walked back through the house to the other door and we both slipped on our shoes.

“Oh, hold on, I better not wear these ones in case it’s muddy,” Alice said. “I have another pair in my bag.”

I slipped my shoes off, and we went back to my bedroom. I sat on the corner of my bed, trying to figure out how I could make us stay at the house without giving away what I had learned. I didn’t want Alice to worry or to be afraid. I watched as she rummaged through her bag and produced an old pair of athletic shoes and slid her feet into them.

“I don’t want to get the other ones all dirty because I got them for school,” she said as she tied the laces.

“Yeah, I still have to get new ones,” I said. “Want to come shopping?”

Alice looked at me. College was still a sore subject for us, so we hadn’t really talked about it much since I first told her I was going to Chicago.

“No,” she said, “I think you made it pretty clear that you don’t want me involved in your college stuff.”

“What?”

“Yeah, don’t act surprised. I got it when you told me. You’re tired of me. That’s why we haven’t been hanging out—not just because of your art school stuff.”

“That’s not true, Alice, and you know it.”

“How do I know it? Please tell me. You hid it from me for months and months and then just happily announced your decision out of nowhere. And you’re not even sorry—you’re always rubbing it in my face that you’re going to be somewhere without me.”

I was surprised at Alice’s anger. I thought I had been very careful to avoid talking about college, but I couldn’t help but be a little excited for such a big change in my life.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to rub it in your face—I didn’t think I was.”

“Oh yeah?” Alice went on, “What was all that the other day about how great it is that you got a scholarship and all your supplies are paid for and you’re going to live in a first-year community?”

I shrugged.

“Yeah, you don’t even have anything to say.”

“Alice, Listen, I didn’t mean it to be like that, I was just excited and I wanted to tell you.”

“Well, did it occur to you that I don’t want to hear about how excited you are to make new friends and live with them like you were supposed to do with me?”

I shook my head, but I didn't say anything. Alice irritated me. I couldn't believe she didn't want to be happy for me.

"Okay, so, are we going or what?" Alice said, standing up.

Without saying anything, I stood up, too, passed Alice and walked out of my room to the screened door. I opened it, and I could feel Alice following close behind me.

Before I could get down the cement steps, my mother opened the door.

"Girls, just be quiet on your way back inside—I have a huge headache and I'm going to bed early."

"Okay," I said.

"Feel better." Alice tapped her head.

I walked quickly around the side of the house and toward the woods. The sun cast orange all over the blue sky and turned flashes of it purple. I walked as fast as I could; I wanted Alice to feel bad about what she had said to me. I walked faster and faster and finally I heard her voice behind me.

"Sal, I know you like to walk fast and all, but we're almost running." Alice said all this between breaths as she jogged to keep up with me.

"Hurry up, then," I said, making my strides as wide as possible.

Alice didn't say anything, and I felt a little bad about making her run, so I added, "We're going to miss it if we don't move."

"What?" Alice breathed, "Miss what?"

"Sunset," I said, "over the creek. There's nothing like it."

There wasn't.

Alice stopped whining, and we continued through the woods. Now that there was no snow covering the trails, I was able to quickly navigate my way through the thick cover of the trees and off the paths to arrive at the bank of the creek quicker. When we reached the water, the sun was lazily dipping into the clouds, just beginning its descent to the ground. Alice stood beside me when we reached the creek, a few yards from the edge of the bank. There was a distance between Alice and me now, and it made me angry that she put it there.

Most people liked to go to the top of the hill in Elmsville Park to watch the sunset, where there was a clear view of the changing of days. I had seen the light glow in clear view, at the beach on a family trip, but it didn't compare, in my mind, to the way the light went dark over the creek. Sunsets were never the same there. Always pretty, but not always beautiful. It just depended on the day.

As we waited in silence and the birds started to quiet, the creek caught the sunlight as it dipped between the trees and held it on its surface. The water began to stir. Alice looked at me to make sure I was seeing the same things she was. The creek wasn't blue. I never could figure out why people always told kids to color lakes and oceans blue—they aren't. The creek was never blue—green, brown, and black—and, really, those weren't even the colors of the water, but the color of what was underneath. Really, the water had no color—the stuff inside it made it change. Alice and I stood side by side, watching the sun move down to the earth. The creek started to blaze orange. It only lasted a few minutes, the quiet fire on the water, but in those few minutes, I felt more alive than I had in weeks. It was invigorating to share this rare event with someone

besides the birds and crickets. The light in the woods dimmed, and the orange on the water grew yellow, then gray, and then Alice and I were left in the darkness.

“Is it always like that?” Alice’s voice was controlled, as if she was trying not to interrupt the earth settling to rest.

“No,” I said, “it’s rarely like that. Always really cool to watch, but not always like that. I think I’ve only seen it two or three times.”

“Wow, I’m lucky then, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Goosebumps raised on my arms. We hadn’t worn much—the early heat wave had tricked our bodies, making us think the hot air would last into the night as it did during the summer, but the nights in spring sucked the warmth away and the sun let shadows cover the ground.

I walked to the edge of the bank of the creek and bent over, letting my fingers search for a stone. I picked it up and tossed it into the creek. It was too dark to see where it landed, but I was satisfied with the sound of the splash it created, making a break in the chorus of crickets and the other whirring of insects that started at dark. Alice came and stood to my right, her arms were crossed.

“It’s colder than I thought,” she said.

“We can go in now.” I reached for another rock. Before I could fully wind my arm up to toss it, it slipped into the creek from my fingers, and I felt drops of water hit my arms.

“I don’t really want to go back yet,” Alice said, fidgeting.

“I’ll race you to the shed.” I felt a sudden burst of energy, and it wasn’t the kind that would let me stay still.

“I don’t know the way in the dark,” Alice said.

I started walking to the part of the creek that was shallower, with rocks to cross it without getting too wet.

“Sure you do,” I said, knowing that Alice’s sense of direction was weak.

Alice followed me across the creek. In the middle, she slipped on a rock and nearly ended up soaked. But she caught herself with her hands before she landed in the water and crossed the creek and stopped where I stood.

“Just go straight from here,” I said. “Not hard at all. There’s a path you can actually see now.” I indicated the path with my finger.

“Okay, come on, I can’t see anything. You can because you’re some kind of super nature girl or whatever, but I can’t.” Alice had her hand on her hip.

“Just go straight, seriously, you’ll feel under your feet when you’re on the path and not. If you’re running on dirt, you’re good. If not, move to one side or the other and you’ll find it again.”

It wasn’t that dark out—there wasn’t a whole lot of moonlight, but the sky wasn’t completely black. It was the kind of night where the air grows cold but the sky’s still lit with an iridescent kind of glow as if thin sheets had been hung in front of the moon. Billy’s face entered my mind, but I pushed him out. He wouldn’t be in the woods when he had a whole house to himself.

“Ready?” I asked Alice.

Even in the dark, I could see she was up for the challenge despite her doubts. Her cheeks and forehead grew tight with concentration. The way I figured, Alice had gotten herself through a lot worse things than a race in the dark.

“On the count of three, okay?”

“Yes, go already,” Alice said, annoyed.

“Okay, one.”

Alice bent forward, her hand on her knee, and I did the same. I hadn’t expected her to be this serious.

“Two.”

I took a deep breath and could hear Alice doing the same.

“Three!” I yelled the number and let my legs push me forward with ease.

Alice fell behind quickly, but not far. I could hear her steps, feel the vibrations from the movement of her weight as I moved my own. Once it seemed as if Alice was keeping up and staying on the path okay, I shot forward. I was never good at sprints in gym class, just long runs. However, I liked to test myself mid-run to see just how fast I could go. I liked to feel the speed of my limbs gather and climax.

I reached the hill and started up the steep climb. I couldn’t keep my pace steady and fell to a jog that gave me time enough to turn and see Alice at the bottom of the hill. Just the sight of her and the possibility of her perhaps beating me was enough for my legs and feet and arms to push harder and reach the top only to almost tumble down the other side. My legs had started to rebel, not used to the running after a winter of inactivity. I let gravity carry me down the hill and then remembered that Alice probably wouldn’t be

able to find the shed in the dark, so I walked a few yards away from the base of the hill and stopped to wait for her.

The noise of the crickets stayed in the woods. I could hear them, if I listened hard, back in the safety of the trees. But in the field of brush between the trees where the shed was and the thick woods behind me, I felt as if I was safely tucked between the unknown that surrounded me. I was in a sanctuary, and Alice, at the moment, was out.

I listened carefully for Alice's labored breathing, for the sound of feet against grass and dirt, looked for her form at the top of the hill, but she didn't appear. I didn't think she could have fallen that far behind me just over the hill, but I guessed it might have been possible. A light wind sent my hair across my face and I brushed it back. And when another breeze lifted it into my mouth, I searched my pockets and found a rubber band and made a ponytail.

I counted to sixty, making sure time wasn't just passing in my mind. She should have been here by now, I thought, and started walking back up the hill, away from the shed. I was annoyed. Why was she so slow? Weren't cheerleaders supposed to be quick on their feet? As I trudged through the grass, I heard a faint slam. I stopped and listened for more noise, but I heard nothing. Loud noises were the norm out in this section of Elmsville—even though it was late. I wondered what time it was—we had left the house around eight, so it was probably nine or nine-thirty, if not later. If she didn't get up here soon, we would miss the meteor shower.

I got to the bottom of the other side of the hill and stopped to listen for Alice again, and again, all I was met with was silence and the far-off chirping of crickets. I started to wander into the woods, but thought better of it and stopped at the edge. If Alice

had gotten lost, I'd need to find her and, being that I couldn't really see, I'd also need to hear her and follow the sound.

"Alice?" I said into the crowd of trees. "Alice?"

The hoot of an owl startled me.

I called again. "Alice?"

She didn't answer. She must have lost the path. I should have listened to her when she said she couldn't do it—but she looked like she could. A picture of Alice, cold and wet, floated into my mind and I shook it off as quickly as it appeared. I didn't want to think anything like that—not yet—she hadn't been missing that long. And, anyway, she wasn't really missing—just lost. She probably knew exactly where she was—just not where I was.

I put my hands in my pockets as another wind blew across me.

"Alice!" I yelled it this time. "Alice!"

It felt stupid at first, calling for her into the darkness of bugs and birds and other various creatures. But the more I called her name, the louder I yelled it to, apparently, no one, the less silly it felt. This was my fault.

"Alice!" I yelled as loud as I could, as hard as I could.

"Alice!" I screamed into the trees, but there was no response. My heart began to pound and I started into the woods, even though something in my chest tugged at my heart and told me not to go back into the trees. I couldn't help it. That's where I had left her. A chill ran through me, and I shivered, pushing Billy's face out of my mind.

I walked quickly, stumbling over loose sticks and dirt and rocks from time to time, screaming Alice's name.

And then I heard it. Or so I thought. The sound of Alice's voice, quiet, controlled, but scared—"Sal." My erratic footsteps stopped and glued me to the ground. "Alice!"

There was no answer; I had probably just had some kind of mirage of the ear. I heard Alice because I wanted to hear her, not because she was actually there. She must have gone back to the house—that's all I could figure. But she wouldn't have gone back to the house. She wanted to see the meteor shower like I did. And she wouldn't have just given up on a race to the top of the hill with me, especially not with the tension that had been building between us the past few weeks. I started walking back in the direction of the house. I didn't know how far off the path I was. I had a strong sense of direction, but the woods were difficult in the dark—even for me. Even though I couldn't find the path again, I had a general idea of what direction I had come from and the one I was going in.

Before I got very far, probably near the center of the woods, I turned all the way around and screamed Alice's name one more time and then quickly resumed my walk. What if Billy had—a sharp slam sounded again, interrupting my anxious thoughts. It was the same noise I had heard back at the base of the hill on the other side of the woods. I turned back around and scanned as far as I could see in the trees. The eyes, the ones I had seen a few weeks ago, flashed in my head. I tried to force them out of my mind. I tried to keep walking, but the farther I got, the more the eyes burned in my brain. I turned around.

Alice was the other way.

I ran back through the woods, through branches and brambles. I could feel thorns sticking into my jeans and piercing my skin through the thick material. I ran without thinking, while the words “I have to find her” punctuated my steps. I had to find her; it was my fault she was lost. I should have told Alice I was considering a future that didn’t include her before I had chosen it. I ran through the trees until they thinned at the base of the hill and then I ran up the hill. I’m sure my legs were burning, but I didn’t feel the twinge of my heated muscles. Instead, I felt a burn in my chest that drove me further and faster to the top of the hill and then to the bottom on the other side. This time, a combination of gravity and physical exertion carried me swiftly down the hill. When I got to the bottom, I kept flying into the next section of trees. My hair caught in a branch and I felt it tear from my scalp. I tried to remember the shed’s exact location, but the light that had dimly lit the paths in the other section of the woods seemed to have disappeared. The weeds and trees grew thicker and thicker and I had to slow down to keep moving. I couldn’t remember where it was. I couldn’t remember where the shed was. My heart was climbing out my ribcage.

It’s weird how quickly the familiar can become strange. I had been going to the woods and the shed for most of the years of my life, but I couldn’t figure out where I was. I had to stop. I knew I was wasting time, that Alice was here somewhere—that she had been going to the shed and that the shed was what I needed to find—but I had to stop and think. I stood, in knee-high weeds and brush, and held my breath. Wind ruffled my shirt and I shivered and noticed I was damp with sweat. I walked a little further and let my fingers brush against the trunks of trees. When I felt a bit of rope tied against a tree’s bark, my senses heightened and I knew I was on the right path.

I walked a few minutes more and noticed a dark mass loom up in front of me and knew I had finally reached the shed. I stopped and waited. For what, I didn't know. I looked at my hands in the dark. I could barely make out my fingers. I heard a noise—a rustle in the weeds—and I could feel my eyes widen.

“Alice?” I asked softly.

There was another rustle. I couldn't tell where it was coming from.

“Alice?” I asked a little louder.

Another rustle—this time, behind me. I turned around—searching for a mouse or rat or stray cat. I turned all the way around but I didn't see anything.

“Alice!” I yelled, walking closer to the shed. “Alice!”

A rough hand gripped my face and I was lifted from the ground. I don't remember if I struggled or not. I remember looking at the ground as it passed underneath my head, only feet away from my chin. For a brief second, I saw the white flashes of meteors cross the sky, and then the world slipped away from me in a haze, the way a television picture gets fuzzy and turns black.

XXIII

The sun had started to rise. The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a dirty, boarded floor. I let my eyes follow the grain of the wood across the boards. Where the walls met, my eyes landed on my sleds. I tried to raise my head and found that it was heavy and aching. I looked to the other side of me, to my left, and Alice was slumped in a chair. Her hair hung limply across her back. There was tape around her hands and the chair and across her face. I went to touch my face and realized I was also taped to the chair in which I sat. As I stared at Alice, hoping to see her move, I thought it strange that I never thought about just how free I was before this.

I tried to talk through the tape covering my mouth. Duct tape. I could taste the glue, like envelope glue with rubber. I couldn't make words, only noises. My throat hurt as I tried to get Alice's attention by moaning, and I sucked in tape as I coughed involuntarily. Alice's fingers twitched from behind her and slowly she moved her head to face me. Again, I tried to talk and choked on tape. Alice seemed to do the same and rolled her eyes at me. Her eyes crinkled at the corners; she was smiling at me—I smiled back weakly, as the glue of the tape caught on my lips.

I couldn't tell her that I didn't know what to do, that I was scared, that we had to come up with some kind of plan to get out of here, that I was sorry I put us here in the first place. I wanted to ask Alice who had done this to us, but I remembered the rough

hand clamped on my mouth. The real question was whether or not Billy was coming back. If we were left in here, someone would start looking for us and, eventually, we'd be found. Maybe in a few days. I thought of Daddy appearing at the door and my stomach growled. I wished I had told him about the shed; no one knew it was here except for me and Mr. Fenster. And Mr. Fenster probably had no idea who I was. My stomach growled again. I was hungry now; I couldn't imagine how hungry I'd be in two or three days. But I could stand being hungry if Billy didn't come back; we'd be okay. My mind raced.

I took an inventory of everything in the shed: two sleds, a tin can of nails, a flashlight with no batteries, a shovel, and the chairs and us. I started to plan, all while looking at Alice, trying to communicate my thoughts. I could see her wiggling her fingers and I moved my own back at her. We gave up quickly. Alice's legs were bound across her knees and ankles, separate from the rope that also attached them to the chair. Billy must have been tired when he got to me because I was only taped around my knees, and my feet could touch the floor. I tested my movement and found that I could make the chair jump. Alice watched as I jumped myself over to her, positioning myself so that our fingers could touch. We couldn't talk, but at least we could comfort each other.

I worked out a plan in my head. As much as I wanted to quickly move myself through the shed, cut us free, and run, I knew I couldn't do anything until I had really thought through each movement; I couldn't afford to waste any energy. Alice wrapped her finger around my pinky, and I planned. I would need to get myself from the front of the shed to the back to the sleds. Unfortunately, when Alice and I had left the sleds last, we put the one I rode, the one with the runners, behind the plastic one. I would need to

get myself over there and make the sleds topple over so that the sled with runners landed on top and on its back. Then, somehow, I'd have to rub the tape connecting me to the chair across the runner. I puzzled through my plan and felt Alice let go of the waking world. I could hear the soft breaths of stale air she took through her nose. Maybe it was the comfort of having her beside me or the fact that my mind had been racing for hours, but whatever made me fall asleep left me in a fog when the two of us were jolted awake by the opening of the shed door.

The light of the rising sun blinded me momentarily as the door flew open and Billy's large frame hovered in the entrance of the shed. He looked at us without saying anything and shut the door behind him. I could see that Alice's eyes followed his every movement, while mine were still searching for a way to escape. There wasn't one. All we could do was sit and wait. Billy walked to the side of the shed and looked out the small, dusty window. It had never occurred to me that it was odd that Mr. Fenster thought to install a plexi-glass window in his storage shed. Maybe it wasn't always a storage shed, but a play place for his kids or something. I let the thought drift away as Billy moved from the window to look at Alice and me.

He leaned against the wall. Above his head was a cobweb with a spider hanging onto it. "Your dad," he said focusing on my face, his dark eyes angry and filling the same space the ones I saw in the woods occupied in my head, "said something to my mother."

I felt my cheeks flame and wondered what Daddy had said. I told him not to say anything, but I should have known better. If he was worried about my safety, he'd ignore my warnings and install one of his own.

“Told her she better watch me close,” Billy continued. “Said if she didn’t, he would.”

Billy turned to Alice. “And I told you, little bitch, not to say nothing to anyone. Now everyone knows, huh?” Billy stood in front of Alice and leaned in close to her face. I could see she wanted to turn away from him, but she held his stare and didn’t flinch when his nose was only an inch from her own. She shook her head.

“How come people been looking at me? You didn’t tell nobody right, you didn’t tell her?” Billy’s voice was loud and filled the small shed. He pointed at me. When Alice didn’t respond to him, he turned his attention to me.

“You know? You know she had my kid?”

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know if I should admit it or lie. I tried to look at Alice for some kind of cue, but when Billy followed my eyes to her, he moved her chair away from mine. He turned her around so I could only see her back. And then he stood in front of me.

“Fucking answer me, Mosquito.”

I nodded.

“But you didn’t tell no one either I bet, huh?”

I closed my eyes.

“More people start finding out and they’ll put me in jail.” Billy started pacing across the cabin. From me to Alice then Alice to me as he talked. His words weren’t to us; he seemed to be talking to himself more than for anyone listening.

“Fucking prison.” Billy stopped at my chair and stared at me. But it felt like he was seeing someone else. “I can’t go there.”

He started pacing again, and this time stopped at the can of nails. He picked it up and shook it in his hand as he resumed walking. With every step he took, the weight of his large body shook the shed and vibrated the chair underneath me. The clink of the nails in the can marked his movements.

“Can’t do that,” Billy repeated himself. He went to Alice, and I could see him standing behind her. He dropped the nails and took his hands and tipped her head up to look at him.

“Everyone knows now and they’ll make me go to jail.”

Alice shook her head.

Alice shook her head again. Billy pushed his fingers hard into the skin of her chin and she winced.

“It shouldn’t even matter since you’re a slut,” Billy hissed into Alice’s face. I could see her head start to tremble and I wasn’t sure if it was because of the strain from being held at an awkward angle or because she was afraid.

“But people don’t care about what people did before, just what they do after. Especially a girl. Won’t even matter that you’re a slut.” Billy pulled hard on Alice’s head.

I grunted through the tape without thinking about the repercussions of my actions. Billy turned to me, still gripping the sides of Alice’s face, and then he let go of her. The chair hit hard on the floor with Alice’s body still in it. I couldn’t see her face any longer.

“You didn’t have nothing to do with this till you had to shove your nose where it didn’t belong.” Long, black hairs colored Billy’s arms. “Why’d you tell your dad?”

Billy bent his face close to mine and I could feel his sour breath hit my skin. I resisted flinching, and instead held tightly to his dark eyes. I never understood what people meant by “bedroom eyes,” but I got what they meant by getting lost in them. When I focused on Billy’s, I disappeared.

“Why?” Billy yelled, taking his hands and shoving me by my shoulders. I felt the chair jump up on two legs and then land back on the floor.

I wondered if he had forgotten that I had tape over my mouth. As the thought crossed my mind, Billy reached over and grabbed the duct tape and ripped it from my lips. I tasted blood and started to cough.

“Why the fuck did you tell your daddy?”

“I,” I started, and then stopped. My voice cracked, and I started coughing again. Billy waited, arms crossed against his wide chest, leaning back against the side of the shed again.

“I didn’t,” I said.

“What do you mean ‘you didn’t’?” Billy asked, mimicking my dried out voice.

“I didn’t tell my dad about you and Alice.”

“So what’d he say that shit to my mom for?”

“I told him I felt you in the woods that day you and your mother came over—and—and—you stayed in the driveway. And that time you, uh, pushed me at the library and that you weren’t nice to me or Alice.”

“And?”

“And what?” I snapped, regretting my tone immediately.

“What else did you tell him?” Billy spit back at me, hitting his fist against the crown of my head.

“Nothing. That’s it,” I replied quickly and winced.

Billy rubbed the top of his head with his hands and walked to Alice.

“So you told,” he said behind her.

She shook her head, her face still against the floor.

“Somebody fucking told everyone—and it sure as hell wasn’t me. It was one of you. Which one was it?”

Neither of us made a sound.

“Which one?” Billy roared.

“Neither of us!” I yelled back. “I don’t know what you don’t get about that.”

“You’re gonna get mouthy now?” Billy yelled, and then pointed at Alice. “You know what happened, you want to try for it yourself?” Billy came back over to me and stood beside me; he bent over and put his lips close to my ear. “Maybe that’s what you want.”

I shuddered at the thought of the story Alice had recounted to me, the way she was forced to sleep with Billy and then house his child only to have it taken away before the baby breathed his first breaths.

Billy reached into his pocket and pulled out the wrinkled picture I saw in his house. “Maybe,” Billy hissed, “this is what you want, huh? Like her? A dead fucking kid.”

My blood ran cold, and Alice was still.

Billy picked her chair back up. Before she slumped over, I caught a glimpse of her face and it was shining with sweat and tears.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have screwed so many guys so that you wouldn’t have screwed up the baby.” Billy sneered at Alice, and I noticed she was trembling.

Billy had struck Alice right where it killed her.

“Stop!” My voice surprised me.

Billy was across the shed quicker than I could blink. He slammed his fist into the side of my head, and the chair—with me in it—fell to the floor.

A dull pain started to throb in my head, but having the floor hold my head up was relieving. My neck ached. Billy looked down at me, and on his face I saw surprise. I guessed he hadn’t meant to hit me that hard. I didn’t know if his strength or anger surprised him more.

“I can’t go to jail,” he said, returning to earlier musings as he stood over me. I closed my eyes to try and picture myself somewhere else and distract my mind from the pounding in my head.

“If you keep us here,” I said, “you will.”

“What? You know everything now?” Billy snapped at me and leaned over and turned my chair upright.

Blood rushed back into my limbs and I was dizzy from the sudden, jerky movement.

“No, but, think about it. When they start looking and find you here with us, you’ll go no matter what.”

I didn't know if this was true. Daddy liked to watch those crime dramas on television a lot, and I wished I had paid more attention. Billy's attention was focused on me. His mouth twitched as he listened.

"They won't even ask any questions," I continued, gaining confidence as I saw the wheels in Billy's head turning. "If they find you here and us like this, they'll take you first thing."

"I can't go there," Billy said again, his eyes in a place far from the shed in Mr. Fenster's woods.

"Why?" I asked. I knew it was dangerous to ask, or that the question had an obvious answer and Billy would explode, but I had to know, and I found myself unafraid of what he could do to me. It felt as if, though bound to a chair, I was starting to gain control of the situation. I glanced at Alice's still form and wished she would move.

"My dad's there." Billy spoke as if he were talking to someone other than me.

Billy's father wasn't dead.

"I ain't seen him in years. And I don't want to see him ever." Billy spit the last sentence into the air, sticking his chest out as if he was ready to fight.

My thighs started to sting. I looked at my lap and noticed blood seeping through my pants. I remembered my terrified run through needled bushes and thorns and weeds tearing at my legs.

I looked to Alice and could see her face had dried. Her eyes pleaded with me to keep talking to Billy, to pacify him as long as I could and hope that someone would find us before he decided to carry through whatever he had planned for us.

“I can’t go there.” Billy’s eyes grew round and their usual emptiness seemed to fill. His face softened and, for a moment, he didn’t look so scary or so big.

Maybe there was nothing in the world that Billy Thorburn cared for. Nothing that made him want to be a good person, nothing that inspired him to do the right thing. But there was someone who scared him. And maybe that was the one thing that would save us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Alice’s head fall to her chest, and Billy was deep in thought. Alice had slept this way before, we both had just a little while before Billy appeared in the shed, but I could tell she wasn’t sleeping. Something about the way her head was crushed to her chest and her hair hung limp over her face made my stomach flip over.

“Alice?”

Billy didn’t seem to hear me call her, so I tried again and louder.

“Alice!”

Billy’s head snapped to attention, first looking at me and then to Alice. He walked over to her and waved his hand in front of her face. She didn’t move. Billy cupped Alice’s shoulder in his hand and squeezed.

“Is she breathing?” I asked.

Billy looked at Alice for a second and then nodded.

“You’ve got to get her out of that chair,” I said.

“No way,” he said. “No way in hell either one of you is getting out.”

“Billy, listen, forget about what happened. You have to get her out of the chair—she’s passed out. If you don’t let her rest the right way, she could die. And if Alice dies,” I said, my voice trembling, “it’s on your hands. You’ll never get out of jail.”

Billy looked at me suspiciously and then untied Alice’s legs. He gently un-taped her mouth and hands and picked her up from the chair and carefully set her on the floor.

“Put her on her side,” I said.

Billy rolled Alice’s still body over on its side.

“She’s just sleeping,” he said, staring at Alice’s lifeless form.

“Not if we can’t wake her up,” I shook my head. My hands were beginning to go numb as the tape cut off my circulation.

“Uh, she is going to wake up right?” Billy looked panicked.

I wanted to lie and tell him no.

I nodded instead.

The sun had almost completely risen, but the shed was still dark inside with all the trees surrounding it. I could see the strong rays of light pouring through the thick foliage outside. I guessed it was seven or eight in the morning. My parents would be getting up soon, and when they noticed we were gone, they would freak out. Daddy had probably gotten home a little while after we left and had gone straight to bed where my mother had already fully-warmed her side of the sheets from her headache hours earlier. He had probably walked past my closed bedroom door, content in knowing that Alice and I lay soundly sleeping inside.

Billy picked up the picture of his and Alice's baby from where it had fallen on the floor. He rubbed its surface and stared at it, bringing it close to his face. He looked at Alice and then back at the picture.

"Looked like her," he said. "Not me though." He shoved the picture under my nose.

I shrugged. "Babies just look like babies to me."

Billy shoved the picture back into his pocket.

"How'd you know he was yours anyway?" I asked him. I had always wanted to ask Alice if she told Billy, but never found a way to do it.

"She wrote me a letter. Left it in my locker. Showed me the picture." Billy stopped talking and looked at Alice on the floor. A chunk of her hair lay across her face and he bent down and brushed it off.

I couldn't believe she wrote him a letter. I always just assumed Billy knew he was the father—but that was stupid. It was just that I couldn't imagine, after everything she had said to me about him, why in the world she would want Billy to know he was the father of her dead child.

"Did you believe her?"

"No," Billy said, "everyone knows she did everyone."

"But you know he's yours?"

"Yeah, he's mine," he said slowly, "thought a lot about it. She said she weren't with any guys for a few months before me. And she didn't tell anyone else he was theirs. And, uh," he said slowly, "probably if it was someone else, she wouldn't say it was me."

Pulling the picture back out of his pocket, he said, “He got my chin anyway.” He ran a dirty finger across the photo.

“Why’d you take it?”

“Wanted to look at it again. I knew she kept it in her locker; saw it on the door one day.”

“How’d you get it?”

“Watched her put in her combination a bunch of times.”

I wondered why Alice had never mentioned to me that the picture went missing. She probably thought she lost it and didn’t want to tell me it had disappeared. Maybe Alice hid the disappearance of the photo from me like I had hidden Billy’s return from her.

“Let me look again,” I said, nodding toward the photo still Billy’s fingers.

Billy put the picture again under my nose, and I looked at the face of Alice’s dead child and then at the face of Billy Thorburn. There was no doubt—Billy’s face was there in the picture, too. After I nodded, Billy took the picture away and tucked it back into his pocket. He walked to the far corner of the shed and dug out a roll of duct tape. He carried it to where I sat, my body aching and begging to be let loose, and knelt in front of me.

“You kicked too much for me to do it right the first time,” he said as he started wrapping more tape around my legs and the chair.

I looked over at Alice and could barely see the slow rise and fall of her body as she breathed. I wondered if she was just sleeping now or still passed out.

Billy finished with my legs and added to my arms.

“I can’t move already,” I said as he rolled the tape around my wrists.

Billy snorted and continued rolling tape. I felt my veins strain to pass blood to my limbs. He finished with my arms and stood over me, looking at the roll of tape and measuring my mouth.

“Please don’t,” I said quietly, “I think I’m getting sick.”

Billy shook his head. “Can’t have you saying nothing till I get back.”

Billy layered tape over my mouth all around my head. It pulled my hair and little sticks of pain dotted my scalp. He walked towards the door when he was satisfied with my restraints and stopped at Alice. She was lying in the same exact position he had lain her down. Billy squatted beside her and said, “Hey.”

Alice didn’t respond.

He took hold of her shoulder and shook her violently and when she didn’t react, he opened the door to the shed and I heard the sound of the bolt slide through its lock and his heavy footsteps faded into the grass.

I waited for what seemed like hours to have the door of the shed open again to reveal Billy blocking the light, but, in reality, it was probably only a few minutes.

“Alice,” I tried to say through the tape. I tried to scoot my chair to her. I had no strength to move across the floor any longer, not now that my feet couldn’t connect with the ground. My hands were taped so tightly behind me that I could feel my blood rush with each heartbeat. I moaned as loudly as I could, and Alice slowly sat up.

“Hey,” she rasped. “I was faking it.” Her mouth spread across her face in a wide grin.

I nodded, struggling to smile underneath all the tape.

Alice crossed the shed and bent over me. She started to remove the sticky mess muffling my voice, but when she began to pull, I yelped and she winced and put the tape back.

“Um, I—I don’t think I should do that. Probably need water and soap and stuff to get it off without really hurting you.” Her voice was pained with sympathy.

I nodded, closing my eyes.

Alice sunk, shaking, to the floor and tried the tape around my ankles. Once she got it off, we were faced with something neither of us expected. I don’t know how I hadn’t felt the cold metal digging into my skin, but I hadn’t. The links of the chain were tight against my leg and there was no way Alice would be able to get it off me. The chain was held together by a combination lock. Alice looked at me helplessly.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, reaching for my arms. Underneath the tape across my wrists was a thick rope tied with a series of knots too complicated for Alice’s worn out fingers to deal with. I stared hard at her, trying to tell her about the sled with its runners. I groaned.

“What?” she asked, bringing her face close to mine.

I tried hard to make words, but the glue of the tape caught my lips, and I cried in pain as I could feel my skin tear.

“I know, Sal, I know it hurts, I just—I don’t know what to do.”

I had never seen Alice frantic. She was shaking all over now, so hard that her teeth chattered. I wanted to touch her, to hold her hand and get us out of there, but all I could do was make awful guttural sounds and hope she understood what I was trying to

tell her with my eyes. Alice began to pull at the rope, as hard as she could, but it didn't give, and I could feel it rubbing my arms raw.

"Oh God," Alice said, "Oh God, Oh God, Oh God. I'm going to have to leave you." Her eyes met mine and we held each other's gaze.

There wasn't anything else she could have done. She was weak and tired and the one who was free. She had to go get help, and I had to wait. Alice knelt down in front of me, her bare knees against the rough shed floor, and looked at my face. She brushed the few strands of hair loose from the tape out of my eyes.

"I'll go as fast as I can."

I knew she would.

She put her hands on my knees and pushed herself up to stand. Before she walked away, Alice hovered over me. I could smell her sweat mixed with dirt and the scent of Billy. I didn't even know what happened to her before I got to the shed. Alice took my face in her shaking hands and kissed my cheek. And then she turned and pushed on the shed door. It opened a crack, but it was not wide enough for a body to pass through. Pushing again, Alice was able to reach through the gap between the shed and the door and slide the bolt out of the lock. The door fell open and Alice stumbled outside. A few moments passed, and I tried to picture Alice as she started her run for help, but there was a clunk against the plastic window. I looked up.

Alice's eyes bore into mine through the dirt-streaked plastic. Her face pressed up against the dusty surface, and her brow wrinkled. I attempted a weak smile, but my stomach made me feel sick. I was going to be alone when Billy returned. Alice put one

hand against the window and rubbed her cheeks with the other to wipe away tears that I couldn't quite see because of the glare from the sun.

My wrists were burning where Alice had tried to loosen the rope. I wondered if I would ever see her again. I closed my eyes, willing myself to obtain a fiery burst of adrenalin that would set me free from my bindings and allow me to press my face to the window where Alice stood, to place my hand against the same sheet of plastic that her palm now rested on, to run far away from this nightmare.

The adrenalin came, but it wasn't enough to break free. Instead of the miraculous escape I had in my mind, I twitched. My body was tired from the blind run through the woods and Billy's fists. Cuts and scrapes were burning my skin in so many places I had lost count, but the awareness of their presence shocked me into the reality that I was still alive.

My attention turned back to Alice as the movement of her lips against the glass caught my attention. She looked like she was doing a fish impression, and a laugh started in my throat involuntarily but ended quickly as I tried to gasp for air through the tape that didn't let me. I breathed deeply through my nose—the smell of dirt and rust filled my lungs—and I tried to understand what Alice was mouthing to me. The glare from the sun was growing stronger with each minute that passed; its intense light was making it difficult to see Alice's face. I concentrated on the movements, the shapes she formed with her mouth. She slowed down what she was trying to say to me, clearly understanding that I wasn't getting it.

And then I got it.

There was a rush of hot tears in my eyes, and I felt their descent begin down my face until they reached the tape. I had spent so much time trying to hide my emotions from Alice, but I needed her to know I loved her, too. She had never said it before, neither had I, but we both knew it was there. Seeing it on her face made me sure I had done the right thing in coming here. Alice lifted both her hands and curved them on either side of her forehead, as if she realized I couldn't see her face the way I wanted to. The light dimmed in the shadows of her fingers, and I could see her eyes, without the blurred blind spots from the sun. She stayed for only a moment more.

My wrists ached, my legs burned, and my head was pounding, but when I thought of Alice being the one taped and bound to the chair, my heart hurt worse than any of those things combined. She had already taken enough from Billy Thorburn, already suffered through something so big, something that would have left most people bitter and mistrusting, and I wanted to take the world off her shoulders finally. Alice deserved more than this. And it was then, looking into the glaring sun reflecting from Alice's blonde hair, her fingertips pushing against the shed window, the glare of light burning in my eyes, it was then that I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be and an almost overwhelming sense of calm found its way into me. It settled itself first into my mind, then into my chest, slowing my breath, easing my panic, and letting me rest in the chair in which I sat. Alice turned away from me, and I watched as she started to run. Maybe the only reason I found Alice in a pool of blood in the girls' bathroom was so that I could end up here in this shed.

As Alice neared the trees, I wanted to whisper into her ear that I was going to be okay, that she could leave me here without guilt or worry—because this was all going to

end exactly the way it was supposed to. As she disappeared into the trees, Alice's hair streamed across her back in the wind, the risen sun glowing behind her shoulders. I knew that the pure strength that kept her running would never falter. My eyelids began to feel heavy. I had been up all night, and I was exhausted.