

5-2017

LET IT IN AND LET IT GO

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LET IT IN AND LET IT GO

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of English

of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts, with University High Honors

and Honors in English

by

Sarah Warner

May 2017

Acknowledgement

I would first like to thank Mr. Reggie Poché for agreeing to work with me on this project, despite having never met me before at the time. It has been a very stressful, but very productive, few months, and this thesis would not be what it is today without his help and guidance.

I would also like to thank Dr. Daniel Doll for the advice and insight he has given as my second reader. Having a second perspective was invaluable. A second perspective allowed me to view this piece in another way, leading to improvements in areas that would have remained untouched without his help.

There were many times where I felt it would be easier to give up on this piece than push through and finish it. I want to extend a special thanks to those who stopped me from deleting every page of this manuscript before it could be completed. Thanks go out to Melissa Martinez for her constant encouragement, and for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself. I'd also like to thank Claudia Smith for her tough and desperately-needed love, as well as for the brainstorming sessions that helped me pick this story up off the ground. And thank you to my mother, who listened to me stress-rant on the phone more times than I can count.

Thank you all for not letting me give up on myself.

Foreword

Throughout my four years here at the University of New Orleans, I have taken countless English courses. All of these have challenged me to write. From a course on medieval literature to a seminar on Jane Austen, I have found myself writing many analytical papers that, while engaging and educational to write, could not quite capture my voice the way that creative fiction can.

The three creative writing courses I have taken here at UNO have given me invaluable insight into how to become a more effective writer of short fiction pieces. However, I found that I was still quite unsure how to write a larger piece of fiction, something that I have always aspired to do. It was with this in mind that I set out to write this thesis.

Because this thesis is the beginning of a novel, I knew that I would have to come to a deeper understanding of how character and plot development, symbols, and pacing are employed in longer works of fiction. This has been a challenge for me over the past few months. Since I am used to writing shorter pieces, it was difficult for me to extend character development beyond the first ten pages. It was difficult for me to plan so far ahead, and learn how to plant seeds that would come back by the end of a novel that has not yet been written. It was difficult to make sure that certain images or symbols were stressed enough to be recognized as important, and yet not overemphasized. In short, it has been a difficult process to get this thesis to where it is today. I have learned a lot about how novels function, things that I knew as a reader but had yet to learn as a writer. Hopefully this growth is visible in the pages to follow.

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Abstract

The following ten chapters comprise the beginning of a larger novel, one which focuses on a young woman's journey to both accept the mistakes she has made and forgive herself for making them. Carson Cadwell returns to her small hometown after spending the last six months at college in the nearby big city. During this time her mother, who has struggled with breast cancer for years, has finally passed away. Carson, who cut off all contact with her family while she was at school, is now forced to face the reality of what she left behind.

Carson, who moves into her mother's old bedroom, comes across a journal that her mother wrote when she was a teenager. Through the reading of this journal, as well as various interactions with the people who live in the town, Carson comes to realize a side of her mother that she didn't know before. It is with the help of these journal entries, as well as various interactions with those who live in town and her own family, that Carson begins to confront the guilt she feels for leaving behind those she loved when they needed her most.

Keywords: creative writing, fiction, novel, death, grief, guilt, forgiveness, family

Chapter 1

Carson leaned her head back against the seat, turning her eyes away from the train window. The view didn't change; that was one thing she'd learned from several trips along this same track. Sometimes she wondered if the cows even moved.

The people, however, did. All too often, in fact. She glanced over at the man next to her as he shifted in his sleep, his head finding a comfortable resting place on his broad, suit-clad shoulder for only a moment. He soon turned the other way, searching for a comfortable position and shaking their seats each time he did. Carson turned her face back towards the window as he moved back and forth, back and forth, almost in time with the train's swaying.

A few more hours, and she would be home. 'Home' was a six hour train ride through empty grass, plowed fields, and fading farmhouses. As soon as the city fell away, it seemed as though there was nothing left for miles; the stretches of grass were punctuated only by small groups of trees, their bright green leaves a stark contrast against the setting sun. The freshly plowed fields appeared amidst the green, their neatly tilled lines seeming to stretch into infinity, beyond any line of sight from the train's cars. Occasionally a cow would lift its head from the grass, as though curious of the large metal beast passing by. The interest didn't last long, as the animal slowly lowered its head back down, hunger outweighing any lingering concern.

She pulled her phone from her pocket, her eyes narrowing slightly at the sudden brightness. It was only 6:35 P.M. One more hour and they would pull into

the train station, where her grandmother would be waiting to greet her. There would be no smiles, no pleasant exchange; Carson could already feel the change in the air from miles away. It felt thicker somehow, catching in her throat like smog. But of course that wasn't it; there was no smog where she was going. Only fresh air and fresh food, as her grandmother liked to say.

The train passed through a small stretch of woods, each branch reaching like fingers over the top of the car, blocking the sun. She closed her eyes in the sudden darkness, feeling each bump of the track as they passed over them. Three, four, five. She opened her eyes when the sunlight returned, fading even faster than only moments before. She turned her eyes back to the fields, counting the number of cattle until her eyes began to blur into a single stretch of color.

The sharp movements of the train car no longer seemed so jarring as she closed her eyes, letting the last six hours since she first opened the message finally catch up to her, despite the speed of the train.

The call had come at 10:07 A.M., followed by a single text message.

"You need to come home."

She'd been sitting in her biology class when her phone began to vibrate in her bag. She gripped her pencil tighter, forcing herself to focus on the words on the page, though they quickly lost meaning. 'Riboplasm' melted into 'centrosome,' which faded into 'metaphase.' The last three months were printed neatly onto seven sheets of paper, and she was expected to remember all of it, word for word.

Her phone vibrated again, insisting upon her attention. She shifted her weight, glancing over at the test proctor as they passed by, evidently oblivious to the noise that seemed so loud to her own ears. She looked back down at the paper, though the words no longer seemed real. She quickly circled an answer to each remaining question, her vision blurring as the vibration started again, stopped, and began again, all within the span of five minutes.

She took the phone from her backpack as soon as she handed off the test to her professor, who glanced noncommittally at the front, no doubt checking for her name and wondering who she was. Carson turned away quickly, glancing down at the last missed call from her grandmother, June, which had come ten minutes before.

She stepped outside, the goosebumps on her skin quickly dissipating in the early summer sun. She pulled up her contacts list, scrolling through her few contacts until she reached 'J,' and called her grandmother back.

"Carson." June's voice sounded thick, and Carson could picture her on the other end, her eyes red and nose running as she sat at in the hospital waiting room. "She's gone."

"I'm on my way home," Carson said, and hung up after a minute of silence, interspersed only with small, sharp intakes of breath coming from miles and miles away.

The sky looked the same as she walked back to her dorm room. There was no change, no sudden dark clouds or shading of the sun now that one person had left the world. A group of girls passed to her left, laughing about something, no

doubt planning their summers now that finals were over. They didn't know that her mother had just died in a hospital room, wondering why her daughter wasn't there to see her off. Carson wondered if that was her mother's last thought, if the final words she whispered to her own mother were: "Where is my daughter?" And what would June have said? "She's taking a biology final. Isn't that more important than you?"

'Ribosome: a minute particle consisting of RNA, found in the cytoplasm of living cells.'

The terms that had fled her mind only minutes before came rushing back, the answers clear and obvious.

'Gamete: a mature sexual reproductive cell, such as the sperm or the egg, that combines with another cell to create a new organism.'

She walked faster, gripping her phone tightly in her hand.

'Cancer: the disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body.'

It was in her breasts. Stage 2. The tumor had not expanded past her lymph nodes.

'Lymph nodes: each of a number of small swellings in the lymphatic system where bacteria is filtered from lymph fluid.'

It could metastasize in the future. A double mastectomy is your best option. We can schedule you as soon as possible.

'Metastasis: the spread of a disease-producing agency from the initial or primary site of disease to another part of the body.'

The surgery had gone well. Carson could remember sitting in a chair in the corner of the hospital room, waiting for someone to return with her mother. And they did; her skin was paler, and the blue veins in her eyelids were visible, but she was breathing.

Two years later, and it was back.

'Tumor: a mass formed when normal cells begin to change and grow uncontrollably.'

How do you get a tumor on your breast when they've already cut them off?

'Malignant: able to spread to other parts of the body.'

Radiation. Chemotherapy. Pump her full of drugs and poison to chase out the disease her body has produced.

'Remission: a temporary or permanent decrease of manifestations of a disease.'

It was temporary.

They'd moved back to her mother's childhood home once the cancer went into remission, when Carson was sixteen. She only held vague memories of her grandmother, since they'd moved away when she was six years old. Ten years was a long time to be gone, for other memories to take the place of those she'd begun with. Her mother said she was sick of big city life, that she missed the safety and security of a small town and those who lived there. Carson had put up a fight in typical teenage fashion, screaming and pouting and packing her things with more force than necessary, but she had gone.

Her mother told her over and over again how much she missed her hometown, and how much Carson would like it there. Don't you remember grandma and grandpa? What about the tire swing in the front yard? You used to love to catch fireflies in jars, and put them all over the house. Do you remember?

Carson did remember. As soon as they drove up in the van, all of their belongings stuffed into the trunk and the back seat, she remembered. The house, the mailbox, the driveway that she had ridden her tricycle down every hot summer morning. June had opened the door, drawing them both into a hug that lasted a few seconds too long. Carson remembered meeting her eyes from where she stood behind her mother, and she realized that they both knew the truth. No matter what her mother said about missing home and coming back to see her family, Carson knew, and so did June: she was here to say goodbye.

That goodbye had lasted six years. It was long and drawn out, filled with periods of the same prognosis, the same empty words that promised remission, hope, and healing. But it had finally come, and Carson had missed it.

How could she say goodbye to someone who was already gone?

Chapter 2

“Ma’am.”

Carson shifted slightly in her seat, turning her face away from the intruding voice. The voice sighed, and she felt the seat beside her move.

“Ma’am, we’re at the last stop.”

Carson opened her eyes, glancing over at the man in the business suit who had sat beside her the entire ride, unable to sit still. She couldn’t help but wonder what kind of business he had to attend to all the way out here.

“Thank you,” she muttered, her voice thick with the last remnants of a dreamless sleep. The man nodded, turning and taking his place behind the last of those who were exiting the train. She counted less than fifteen.

Her legs ached as soon as she put any weight on them, protesting the sudden movement after hours of being tucked away. She almost stumbled as she lifted her backpack out of the small compartment above her head, suddenly remembering why her back ached nearly every day at school. Her textbooks must have weighed thirty pounds on their own.

The warm summer air greeted her as she stepped down onto the platform. Despite the fact that the sun had mostly disappeared below the horizon, the mugginess in the air lingered. She closed her eyes, taking in the scent of wet earth, a unique mix of soil, fertilizer, and rain water that she’d been unable to find anywhere else.

“Carson!”

She quickly opened her eyes, turning towards the familiar voice. An older woman walked towards her, her steps and stride confident and long, despite the graying hair on top of her head. Before Carson had a chance to speak, she was pulled into an embrace.

“You look well,” her grandma said as she pulled away, placing her hands on Carson’s shoulders, as though to hold her in place. Carson looked back at her in silence, taking in the dark circles under her eyes, the way they seemed to make the crow’s feet at the corners of her eyes sharper, deeper. Her usually bright smile seemed to sag, as though the skin had grown tired of supporting it.

“So do you,” Carson said.

“Nonsense,” June said, releasing her grip on Carson’s shoulders. “But I’ll let that lie slide, just this once,” she added with a wink.

Carson felt the knot in her throat unravel itself slowly at the gesture. This, at least, was familiar.

“Now, let’s go get your bags,” June said, turning and making her way towards the back of the train, where a man was unloading suitcases. Carson watched the man in the business suit as he picked up a small, single suitcase before turning to look at the broad platform, as though looking for somebody. She followed his gaze, but the bench he was staring at was empty.

“Thank you, sir.”

Carson looked up as her grandmother took the suitcase from the porter, ignoring her attempts to help.

“I’m old, but I’m not weak,” she said, turning and pulling the bag behind her as she made her way towards the familiar rusted red truck that sat parked at a crooked angle

in the farthest spot from the station. Carson walked quickly to keep up with her, despite her long legs. She'd already tossed the suitcase into the truck bed before Carson could even offer to help.

“Well, now that that’s taken care of, let’s get on the road,” she said. The cheerful note in her voice was still there, Carson noticed, though it wasn’t as obvious as it had been before. It was buried beneath several layers of anxiety and sleepless nights, or so Carson imagined, and she felt her chest tighten as she pulled herself up into the truck. She nearly bumped her head on the ceiling as she slid into the seat. She could remember when she was younger and had to be lifted into the same seat. The image was laughable now as she pulled her legs closer to herself, struggling to fit them into the small space.

“Sorry, dear,” June said as she sat down in the driver’s seat. “I didn’t put the seat back enough for you, did I? You know I’m not used to driving with someone your height.” She looked at her, her eyes narrowing slightly. “Did you get taller?” she asked suddenly.

Carson reached down and pushed the seat back a few inches, shaking her head.

“No,” she said simply.

The ride was silent at first. The only sound was the soft whisper of gospel music on the radio, which June reached out to turn up after a few minutes. Carson touched the headphones in the pocket of her shorts, slowly lowering her hand back into her lap when June turned to look at her, taking her eyes off the large stretch of empty road ahead.

“I never even asked about your classes,” she said, frowning even as she tapped her fingers against the wheel to the tune of ‘Amazing Grace.’

“They’re fine,” Carson said, knowing even as the words left her mouth that they wouldn’t be enough to satisfy her grandmother.

“I had a great biology teacher,” she added, despite the fact that she could barely even remember what the man looked like, much less his personality. Her attendance had been sporadic, to say the last, and she could never seem to focus for long even when she did make it to class. Her mind swam with other questions, other definitions that she knew by heart and had heard at almost every doctor’s appointment with her mother. *Cancer. Malignant. Terminal.*

“Good, good,” June said, her fingers maintaining their rhythm on the wheel.

Carson turned away, her eyes falling on the scenery as it passed, significantly faster than the speed limit suggested it should. The same view that had greeted her from the train window appeared once more: fields, tilled and untilled, next to small homes with chipped paint and the occasional tractor in the yard. A sign on the side of the road quietly announced that it was twenty miles to the next gas station.

“Bailey is very excited to see you,” June said, pulling Carson back into the truck. She thought of her cousin, small and slight, and kept her eyes trained straight ahead.

“I’m excited to see her, too,” she said, the words barely audible over the soft hum of the radio. Her grandmother let silence fall once more, and didn’t interrupt it for several minutes.

Carson turned her face back to the window, watching as the houses grew slowly closer together, interspersed with faded white picket fences that served no purpose other than aesthetic.

The dirt road shifted briefly to concrete as they entered the center of town. The library, no bigger than a drug store in the city, passed on their right. A young girl, who looked no older than seven, pulled a wagon behind her, filled to the brim with what must have been half the library. Carson glanced around for the girl's parents as her grandmother slowed down, finally choosing to obey the speed limit, but she was alone. It wasn't a sight that she was used to after living in the big city. No child under the age of ten was ever alone there.

"Hey, June!"

Carson turned to look at her grandmother as her name was called. She had stopped the truck, the tires still spinning out dirt as she leaned out the window, waving to a man who emerged from the grocery store on the corner. He was short and stocky, his broad shoulders swinging the door open with ease. Carson recognized him from the few times she'd come into town to pick up a few things for her mother, whose stomach had refused to retain anything but chicken noodle soup.

"Hello, Lawrence," June said, her voice filled with a lightness that it had been missing since Carson had met her on the platform at the train station.

"Well, now. Is that Carson in there with you?" he asked, and Carson bit back a retort as her grandmother answered for her.

“Sure is,” she said. “Just picked her up from the train station, actually. She’s home for the summer.”

And there it was: the flash of pity that Carson had been dreading ever since she’d stepped onto the train. Poor girl. She’s lost her mother, his eyes seemed to say. Poor, selfish little girl. To Lawrence’s credit, he hid it quickly, passing it off as a cough into the crook of his elbow as he nodded.

“It’s good to have you back,” he said, peering through the window and around her grandmother to look at her. Carson knew that the nod she returned was short and curt, but she couldn’t find it within herself to care as she leaned back against the seat, making it clear to both of them that she was eager to leave. They took a few minutes to catch the hint, chatting about inconsequential things such as the weather, the likelihood of rain, and whether or not Mrs. Andrew’s apricots were ripe enough yet.

“We’d better get going, Lawrence,” June finally said. “I’m sure Carson is tired from the long trip.”

Carson kept her eyes trained steadily forward, though she could feel the grocer’s eyes on her even as he spoke to June.

“Hope I’ll see you soon,” he said, and Carson didn’t know if he was speaking to her or her grandmother as she finally shifted the truck back into gear, spinning dust into the air and starting at a leisurely crawl down the center of town. Carson had never found herself wishing so much that June would speed.

“Such a nice man,” June said as she continued down the paved road, passing a drug store and the only liquor store in town. “He asked about you while you were gone,” she added, glancing over at Carson, who only nodded noncommittally, keeping her gaze

trained straight ahead. Of course he had asked. Everyone had probably asked. Who was buying the chicken noodle soup while she was gone?

“He was surprised to not see you over Christmas break,” June added.

What a selfish little girl, she heard. The knot in her chest constricted a size tighter as she watched the road slowly shift back to dirt, each turn onto a new road caking the windows in a thin layer of dust.

The truck stopped in front of a faded blue house. Carson stared out the window for a moment, feeling her grandmother’s presence behind her, watching as she took in the house she hadn’t seen for the greater part of a year. It looked much the same; the gutter on the roof was still hanging precariously, and the bricks serving as stepping stones to the front door were still tilted and nearly overturned. The tire swing was still holding on, the rope only slightly frayed near the top where it curled around the largest branch of the oak tree by the fence.

“Are you ready?” June asked.

“Yes,” Carson said, but the word felt thick on her tongue as she hopped out of the truck, pulling the suitcase from the back before her grandmother had the chance.

The yard looked as though it hadn’t been mowed in months, the grass reaching up nearly to her calves as she tugged her suitcase behind herself, picking it up each time it caught on a root or rock. Her grandmother opened the door, holding it as Carson lifted the suitcase over the threshold.

The smell hit her first. It was a familiar mix of spices, mothballs, and laundry detergent, interspersed with cigarette smoke and fresh air from where her aunt was no doubt trying to fan out the scent before June came home.

“Theresa!”

The use of her aunt’s full name made Carson wince, as it was only used when her grandmother was getting into her full-on lecture mode. She heard the distant shuffling of slippers on hardwood floor as her aunt rounded the corner at the back of the kitchen, her full figure tucked securely into a robe.

“Yes, mama?” she asked, but stopped when her eyes fell on Carson. Carson looked back at her, unsure if she was imagining the accusation in her gaze as she walked closer, the smell of smoke poorly disguised beneath a cheap air freshener.

“Have you been smoking indoors again?” June demanded. Theresa turned her eyes away from Carson, shaking her head as she looked at June.

“Of course not,” she said, and Carson resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

“I told you time and time again, not in my house,” June said, her voice sharp as she gestured at a rusted metal cage sitting on the kitchen table, covered with a blanket. “You know it’s not good for him,” she said, walking over and pulling the blanket from the cage, revealing a snow-white cockatoo with a few feathers missing. The yellow feathers on the back of his head were just as bright as Carson remembered from years ago. She raised an eyebrow as Sugar squawked, a few feathers falling to the bottom of the cage as he shook out his wings.

“And how many times have I told you not to cover him while I’m not home?” she demanded, though she didn’t give Theresa a chance to answer before she continued. “You’ll mess up his sleeping cycle. Isn’t that right, Sugar?”

Sugar stared blankly back at her, his eyes blinking slowly as though adjusting to the light.

“He kept swearing at me,” Theresa said, and June shook her head.

“My Sugar doesn’t swear,” she said, poking a long finger into the cage. “Isn’t that right, baby?” she asked. Sugar shook out his wings, opening his beak and letting out a single four letter word that began with an ‘f’.

“Well, I have no idea where he’s learning such language,” June said, and Carson smiled slightly behind her hand as her aunt rolled her eyes.

She looked away from them as they continued back and forth, taking a step farther into the hallway, away from the entryway and the kitchen. The same photographs lined the hallway that had been there when she was just a little girl. There was one of her grandfather when he was in the military, a goofy grin on the face peeking out from a neatly pressed uniform, a gun slung almost carelessly over his shoulder. The next showed her grandparents on their wedding day, the stark whiteness of June’s dress almost blinding amongst the shades of gray and black. The next was a photograph of Carson’s aunt and her daughter, Bailey, when Bailey was only seven years old. Her front teeth were missing, having been lost to a baseball thrown by a boy in her class at school, or so Carson had been told after the fact. Still she smiled in the photograph, her mother’s hands resting loosely and yet securely on her shoulders.

The next photo showed herself, when she was four years old. She was sitting in front of the fireplace in the living room, surrounded by torn wrapping paper and empty boxes. It must have been Christmas. Carson held vague memories of that fireplace, the warmth it provided in the middle of winter when her nose turned red from even a single step outside. She shifted her gaze to the woman in the background, sitting in the rocking chair that had broken the next year. Her mother had sat in that chair with a smile on her lips, despite the fact that Carson had woken her up at four a.m. to open presents.

Carson stopped as she reached the next photograph. It was of a young woman in front of the very house she now stood inside. In the photograph the lawn was mowed, and the paint on the house looked almost new. The girl had dark brown hair, curled up around her shoulders, obviously suffering from the summer heat. She was leaning against the railing of the porch, her tanned legs stretched out in front of her. Freckles dotted the bridge of her nose, and Carson found herself touching her own nose as she looked at the photograph, knowing that the same would be mirrored there.

“I’ve always loved that picture.”

Carson turned to look at her grandmother, who had left the kitchen at some point to come up beside her.

“She was only 18 there, you know,” she added, a thin smile tugging up the corners of her lips. Carson stepped back as she moved closer, reaching out a hand to touch the glass covering the photograph. “She got married two years later, and then you came along not long after. It seems like yesterday.”

Carson looked away, finding herself staring at her aunt where she stood at the end of the hallway. Their eyes met, and Carson saw the way Theresa’s narrowed, as though

searching for some fault, some reason to place the blame for recent events onto her shoulders. Carson held her gaze for only a moment before she turned her face away, shifting the weight of her backpack onto her other shoulder.

“You can stay in your old room, if you’d like,” June said, finally tearing her eyes away from the photograph. “It’s just like you left it. I washed the sheets, too.” She paused, and Carson was already turning to the stairs when she spoke again.

“Your mother’s room is made up, too.”

Carson saw the surprise in her aunt’s eyes as June spoke. She turned to glance back at her grandmother, unsure if she’d heard her correctly. She looked back at her, the smile missing from her face. The offer hung between them, unspoken and yet clear, and Carson finally nodded, turning and pulling her suitcase towards the thinly carpeted stairs that led to the part of the house she remembered most clearly.

There were seventeen steps. She could remember pulling herself up them on hands and knees, finding it easier on her short legs than walking wobbly and upright. She took them two at a time now.

The first door on the right led to her old room. She turned the handle, finding herself face-to-face with herself two years prior. The walls were painted a soft orange, though Carson knew that behind that lay a bright pink, the color her mother had painted it when she was born twenty-two years before. The walls were mostly blank, interspersed with one or two posters of bands she’d enjoyed listening to before, ones who would never think of coming to a town like hers. A

bulletin board hung over an old oak desk in the corner, built by her grandfather. Many of the photos that had once hung there had been taken to school with her, but the few that remained were held up with a single push-pin, their edges worn and covered with fingerprints.

The shades on the window were pulled tightly closed, the same way she'd left them when she went back to school in the fall. A thin layer of dust coated the top of the desk, a sight which was unfamiliar to her. Coming home over Christmas break usually ensured that it didn't build up, but she'd opted to stay at school instead this year, burying her head in a book and ignoring the incoming calls on her cell phone.

She ran her fingers along the wall, searching for the light switch. The sudden brightness made her squint as she sat down on the edge of the bed, the springs creaking in protest beneath her sudden weight after months of freedom. She could hear her grandmother moving around below her, her voice soft and soothing as she no doubt talked to Sugar, reassuring her that the mean lady wouldn't cover his cage anymore.

The hardwood floor creaked beneath her feet as she stood up again, leaving her backpack and suitcase on the floor near the door as she ventured back into the hallway. The floorboards gave away her position, and she found herself pausing every few moments, holding her breath to listen, wondering if anyone below knew that she was moving. The offer had been made, but somehow accepting it felt wrong, shameful. She shouldn't be crossing the hallway.

After what felt like twenty minutes, but had probably only been two, she reached the door at the far end of the hall. She rested her hand on the doorknob, the metal cool beneath her sweating palms, something she passed off as a result of the summer sun

shining outside. Her heart beat hard against her chest, and she slowly lowered her hand back to her side, wondering what she thought she was doing. She had no business in that room; she hadn't entered it in nearly a year, even though it had been vacated several months before.

Carson closed her eyes, leaning her forehead against the wooden surface of the door. She could remember this position; she'd been in it many times since she'd moved back into this house, listening for something, some familiar voice or sound that would assure her that the skeleton lying in the bed was still her mother.

Only silence greeted her now, a sound that grew even louder somehow as she finally turned the doorknob, stepping into the darkened bedroom.

She turned on the light before she could change her mind, inching the door closed slowly behind herself. Her grandmother hadn't lied; she'd cleaned up well. The empty bowls and cups no longer lined the dresser, though the rings that they'd left behind remained, concentric circles curling into one another. The bed was freshly made with new sheets, yet the smell of sickness remained somehow. Carson imagined she could taste the bleach that had been used time and time again to clean up the vomit on the rug or the floor.

It was often her who cleaned up. Though June was always ready to help, and would deny it, the fact was she was old and tired. She would make a cup of tea, but Carson would bring it upstairs. She would wash the sheets, but Carson would help her mother out of bed, easing her carefully into a nearby chair while she changed them, making sure that every corner was creased and smoothed, a small semblance of order in a world that was thrown off-balance.

The room hadn't always been a sick room. For three years after their move, her mother was fine. Carson could remember coming home from school, spending an hour helping Bailey with her homework or sitting on the couch, taking hours to braid her cousin's long hair. She could remember when her mother came home, the jangling of her keys as she threw them onto the kitchen counter, sighing as she pulled off the high heels she'd always hated and collapsed onto the couch next to them, asking what they were watching.

Those days hardly felt real now.

Carson took a few steps inside, no longer conscious of the floorboards beneath her feet as she reached out, opening the double closet doors that lay opposite the door. The scent hit her first: the mix of perfume, sweat, and spice that was so uniquely her mother, even months after she'd vacated the room. She reached out, running her fingertips over a small black dress. Her mother had always insisted that it was her favorite, despite the fact that there was nothing remarkable about it. It had no shape, and the neckline was a simple scoop that did nothing to flatter her mother's fuller figure. Still, she had worn it on every possible occasion, whether it be a funeral or a trip to the local supermarket.

Carson pulled it from the closet, taking a few steps towards the stained full-length mirror that stood in the corner. She held the dress up against herself, smoothing the fabric down. Where her mother had boasted curves, she had angles, sharp and jutting out against the fabric of whatever she wore. Where her mother had long, curled hair, her own ended sharply at her chin, the curls less defined than her mother's had been. She had her father's hair. The dress itself fell above her knees, whereas on her mother it had nearly reached her calves. Her mother used to joke, back when she was a pre-teen, that if she

grew any faster, she would burst through the roof. The thought had brought a smile to her face then, but now it only brought a vague sense of discomfort.

She trailed her fingers over the fabric, letting her hand fall back to her side once she reached the bottom. She could remember grasping the hem of it when she was young, reaching up towards her mother and the affection that she promised. The image remained in her mind as she put the dress back on the hook, returning it to its place in the closet amongst the rest of the forgotten clothes that June had left behind. Part of her wondered if she'd done it on purpose, as a way to force Carson to relive memories that she would otherwise have left buried. The thought made her frown, a small pinprick of anger starting in her chest. She kept her hand resting on the dress for a moment, wondering if June was really that conniving, when heavy footsteps trounced up the stairs outside the room.

Carson pulled her hand back quickly, pushing the closet doors closed when she heard the door behind her creak open. She spun around, feeling her cheeks flush, as though she'd been doing something wrong. The look on her aunt's face seemed to confirm her fears, as she stared back at Carson with what appeared to be a disdain that Carson had only ever seen reserved for Theresa's husband after he'd abandoned her and her daughter years before.

"What are you doing in here?" she demanded. Carson shrunk back slightly, feeling suddenly like a child who had been caught in the candy drawer, rather than a 22 year old woman who was exploring her mother's old bedroom.

“I--” she began, but quickly fell silent. What could she say? The look on her aunt’s face was enough to twist the knot in her chest tighter still, despite the brief respite her grandmother had given her at the train station.

“You have no right to be in here,” Theresa said. Her pale cheeks flushed red, and Carson watched the vein in her temple as her voice rose to a higher pitch. “This is Cecilia’s room, not yours. You have your own.”

The sound of her mother’s name brought back the image of a woman in that same black dress, twirling around the house with Carson in her arms until her father came home.

Carson stood still with her palms pressed against her legs, willing them to be still. This was the confrontation she’d been dreading; this was the reunion she’d never wanted. She was silent, forcing herself to stare straight ahead, refusing to meet her aunt’s eyes as they bored into her own, as though searching for confirmation of the guilt that was choking the air from her lungs, taking away any words before she could think to speak them.

“Theresa Anne Cadwell.”

Despite the fact that her aunt was nearly 40 years old, the sound of her mother’s voice was enough to make her stiffen, tearing her eyes away. Carson looked at her grandmother, who stood with her hands on her hips in the hallway, looking angrier than Carson had seen her in years. She could only remember hearing the same tone in her voice when she had caught herself and Bailey trying to start her truck when she was 16 and Bailey was 10.

“This isn’t your house. If it weren’t for Bailey, you’d be out on your ass right now, you hear me?” she asked. “Carson can be wherever she damn well pleases, and if I hear you speak to her like that again, we’ll have a bigger problem. Do you hear me?” she asked. This time Theresa nodded. Carson kept her eyes straight ahead, feeling the warmth of her flushed cheeks radiate down to her palms, which began to sweat. Hearing her grandmother speak that way was unsettling, to say the least. It brought back memories of the times she’d snuck out of the house, her teenage rebellion amounting to little more than trips to the only liquor store in town with a few kids her own age. June had used that same tone of voice on her then, only it was her mother keeping her ass in the house, as it were.

“Yes, ma’am,” Theresa said simply, her voice cool and distant as she turned out of the room, making her way to the end of the hall. Carson stiffened when a door slammed a few moments later.

“Are you alright?” June asked. Carson looked at her, the knot moving lower into her stomach, where it sat like undigested food.

“Yes,” she said, though she could hear the hesitation in her voice, and knew that her grandmother could, too. June was silent for a moment, and Carson felt like the bugs under the magnifying glass she used to carry around the farm, small and insignificant beneath her gaze.

“Good,” June said finally, and suddenly Carson could breathe again. “I’m making cookies,” she added casually, and Carson imagined she could smell them wafting up the stairs, pulling her out of bed like they’d done when she was four,

before her parents had taken her away to the city. “Would you like to help?” she asked.

“Yes,” Carson said, eager to leave the room that had become a tomb. She followed her grandmother into the hallway, glancing back into the room as she pulled the door closed behind her. A picture frame, which contained a photograph of herself and her mother soon after they’d moved back in with June, stared at her from the top of the nightstand. It was taken when she was 16 years old, only a few months after her mother had been given the triumphant description of ‘in remission’ and announced that they were moving back in with June, whom neither of them had spoken with in over ten years, and who took them in with open arms and no questions asked, at least not to Carson’s ears.

“Are you coming?” June asked, and Carson let the door fall closed behind her.

Chapter 3

Carson carefully placed the last ball of dough in an even line on the pan, aligning it with the three other rows. She knelt down and slid the pan into the oven before standing back up and looking at her grandmother, who was washing a bowl in the sink. The dishwasher, apparently, had still not been fixed in the months she'd been gone.

"Where is Bailey?" Carson asked, settling herself into a chair, tucking her legs beneath herself, though they still poked out at odd angles.

"She's out with her boyfriend," June said, so casually that Carson was almost sure she'd misheard her.

"Her boyfriend?" she asked, and June nodded, not even turning around.

"A nice boy," she said simply. "Though he's a little too old for her, if you ask me. Which she didn't, of course. Typical teenager." Here she paused, sighing, as she scrubbed at the dough stuck to the side of the bowl.

Carson was silent, picking at the fringe falling off of the cushion she sat on. Last time she'd seen her, Bailey had still been all angles, her gait long and awkward, her teeth encased tightly in braces that she'd had for years. She had never once heard her cousin mention any interest in a boy, in her classes at school or otherwise. She frowned slightly, tugging out a piece of string and twirling it between her fingers as the timer on top of the oven ticked steadily away. What else had she missed?

“She should be home soon,” June said, turning off the water and drying her hands on her apron. “I told her you were coming in today. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see you.”

Carson glanced over at her, nodding slowly. She hadn’t allowed herself to give her cousin much thought in the past year. She hadn’t allowed herself to give anyone at home much thought. She glanced at the entrance to the kitchen when her aunt walked by, now dressed, despite the fact that it was nearly 8 o’clock at night. She didn’t even look her way as she grabbed her purse from the hook near the front door, letting it slam shut behind her as she left. Carson looked at June with a question written clearly on her features, but her grandmother simply shook her head.

“There are some things I think we should talk about,” June said, walking over and sitting in a chair next to her. Carson stiffened, yanking out another piece of string from the cushion beneath her.

“Relax, dear,” June said, a small smile tugging on her lips, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m not upset with you.”

The words did little to calm the harsh beating of Carson’s heart as she forced herself to meet her eyes, placing her hands palm-down onto her bare knees. The knot in her throat had tightened, making it impossible to speak, even if she’d had anything to say.

“The funeral will be on Friday,” June said. The word ‘funeral’ sounded harsher than the others to Carson’s ears, and she looked away again. “A lot of people will be there. Your mother has been the talk of the town since she came home,” she said, sounding almost wistful to Carson’s ears. And she was right; ever since the prodigal daughter returned, sans husband and toting a teenage daughter, the town had been talking. The word ‘privacy’ was foreign to them. She could already feel herself dreaming of

going back to school, where she could just be a face in a sea of them, standing out no more or no less than anyone else. No one would ask her how her mother was doing. No one would ask her how she was doing.

“I just want you to be prepared,” June continued. “People can be cruel. They might say some things to you that you don’t want to hear.” Carson stiffened when June reached out towards her, placing her pale hand on top of hers. The veins were lifted high above the skin, tracing a story of years of hard work and grief. Carson was silent, staring at their hands for what felt like hours, her ears ringing in the silence until it was cut by the timer going off.

“Okay, then,” June said, patting her hand once before standing up. The smell of freshly baked cookies reached Carson where she sat, and she closed her eyes as June opened the oven, pulling out the pan.

“Why don’t you take a few of these upstairs with you?” June asked. Carson opened her eyes, suddenly unsure how long they’d been closed. “You can say hello to Bailey in the morning, if she’s not home soon. You must be exhausted after that train ride.”

And she was; she hadn’t realized to what extent until June suggested it. Her mind still swam with the questions on her biology final, the answers glaringly obvious as an afterthought. That had only been that morning, she realized, a frown tugging on her lips.

She looked up as her grandmother pushed a plate of cookies into her hands. She knew already not to argue, not that she could have helped herself. Her

stomach growled in anticipation, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since breakfast that morning.

“Thank you,” she said, standing up. She waited until June had her back turned, feeding a small piece of a cookie to Sugar, before turning and walking back upstairs, careful not to spill any crumbs from her plate. She hesitated at the top of the stairs, glancing at the open bedroom door to her right, where her suitcase and backpack still sat, untouched. She walked inside, sitting on the edge of the bed with the plate on her lap, warming the bare skin beneath. She took a small bite of the cookie, though it tasted like chalk in her mouth, dry and tough and unappetizing. Her stomach churned as she swallowed quickly, slinging her backpack over her shoulder as she stood up. She placed the plate on her dresser as she walked by, grasping the handle of her suitcase with the other hand.

Part of her was surprised to find the other bedroom unlocked. She imagined Theresa sneaking back over after she'd gone downstairs, locking it and taking the key with her wherever she'd disappeared to. But the door swung open easily beneath her fingertips, the hinges squeaking quietly. She didn't bother to turn the light on as she set her things down in the corner, shutting the door behind her. A small amount of light seeped in through the blinds from the single streetlamp below, though she could have navigated the room without it. She remembered where every bump in the floor was, every floorboard that would creak if she dared to step on it, every corner that would stab into her side if she wasn't careful.

She sat down on the bed, the familiar springs creaking beneath her. Everything in this house made noise; she could hear her grandmother downstairs, her light footsteps

tracking across the kitchen, her soft voice no doubt talking to Sugar and feeding him another cookie. She could hear the soft ticking of the grandfather clock at the end of the hallway, the pendulum swinging back and forth, back and forth, a motion that she had found soothing on sleepless nights. She laid back on the bed, expecting the familiar smell of her mother to envelop her, but all she could smell was laundry detergent and bleach.

She stared up at the ceiling, though she could only make out a vague shape of darkness. The sound of her grandmother slowly died down, replaced by a croak of protest from Sugar as the blanket was placed over his cage. She knew June's ritual; she would be mixing a mug of tea now, taking small sips as she paced the kitchen. She never went to sleep until everyone was home. Carson could remember stumbling home at two a.m., only a few months after her mother had dragged her back, and finding June waiting for her by the lamplight in the living room, an empty mug of tea by her side and worry adding extra lines to her features.

Her heart skipped a beat when the patio door in the back slammed shut. She sat up in bed as a second pair of footsteps joined the first, and the sound of her cousin's voice drifted up the stairs.

"It's not even that late," Bailey said, her voice growing louder as Carson opened the bedroom door.

"It's past ten, Bailey," June said, and Carson wondered when, precisely, she'd drifted off, and how many mugs of tea her grandmother had gone through.

“Well, no one said you had to wait up for me,” Bailey grumbled, and Carson frowned from the bedroom doorway. She barely recognized the tone of voice, or the words that were coming out of her cousin’s mouth.

“You knew that I would,” June said. “You know that I always do. You were with that boy again, weren’t you?” she asked. Carson heard her cousin sigh, long and drawn-out.

“He has a name, you know,” she said, and Carson could almost imagine her hands on her hips, a pose she had taken up herself many times when she was sixteen.

“I’m well aware of his name, Bailey,” June said. “You’re also well aware that you were to be home at 9 o’clock, and no later.”

“I’m only an hour late, grandma,” Bailey said.

“An hour and twenty-seven minutes, actually,” June said. Carson frowned, taking a single step down the stairs, though she was still unable to see them.

“Whatever,” Bailey said. Carson took another step down the stairs until June’s back came into view. She was standing at the entrance to the kitchen, facing a young woman whom Carson barely recognized. Bailey’s hair, which had reached almost to her waist the last time Carson had seen her, was now chopped down to her shoulders, where it hung around a face that was paler than Carson recalled. Bright red lipstick stood out against her skin, and yet Carson couldn’t even remember her owning lip balm nine months ago when she’d gone back to college.

She noticed that the braces were gone when Bailey opened her mouth to respond to something June had said.

“I’m not ten, grandma,” she said, and there went her hands onto her hips, just like Carson remembered doing herself years before.

“Then why do you act like it?” June asked, her hands mirroring the same posture.

“You’re being unfair,” Bailey said. “There’s nothing to do in this damn town anyway. The least you could do is let me see my boyfriend!”

Carson stood in silence, taking in the jeans that were just a little bit too tight, the low-cut tank top, and the curves that had replaced the angles she remembered. Gone was the girl she had left when she went to school; a young woman stood in her place, testing the limits not only of their grandmother, but of the entire town. Carson could only imagine what people would say if they could see the way she was dressed right now.

Carson quickly stepped back onto the landing when she heard footsteps approaching, though they quickly stopped at the sound of June’s voice.

“We’ll talk about this in the morning,” she said. “And don’t stomp around so loud with those damn boots. Carson’s asleep upstairs.”

She heard a soft snort, and then the footsteps began again. Carson quickly turned, though she had only taken a single step towards her room when the footsteps took to the stairs. She glanced behind her with her hand already on the doorknob to the bedroom, though it fell back to her side as Bailey’s face appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Hi,” Carson said quietly. She wasn’t sure what she expected, but it wasn’t the complete lack of acknowledgement that she received. Bailey barely

glanced at her, instead walking past her and down to her own room at the end of the hallway. The sickly-sweet scent of alcohol trailed behind her like a perfume.

When they had met, Bailey was ten years old, and Carson was an angsty, angry sixteen-year-old girl who was just forced to move away from all of her friends to the middle of nowhere. It was easy to mope, to stay locked in her bedroom and ignore entreaties from her mother to please come out and get some fresh air or some food or anything. And yet when Bailey would catch her on her rare ventures to the kitchen or the bathroom, she always had something to show her. A cool bug she had found, her favorite toy, her favorite book. Carson could remember one sunny afternoon, about two months after she and her mother had moved back into town. Bailey had knocked on her door, her high-pitched voice echoing through the woods and into Carson's ears, even as she tried to drown her out.

"Carson!" she called. "Carson, I wanna show you something." Each word was punctuated by a knock on the door. Carson buried her face in her pillow, struggling to block out her cousin's voice, but it was no use. She knocked again and again, each time raising her voice slightly.

"Please?" Bailey asked. "It's really cool."

Carson sat up in bed, her muscles taut as she moved to open the door. The snappy retort died on the tip of her tongue when she saw her cousin standing there, looking up at her with wide eyes and her hands cupped.

"Look," she whispered, opening her palms just wide enough for Carson to see the butterfly on her palm. It was a Monarch, its orange wings dotted with black, like the

splatter from a paint brush. It didn't move even as Bailey opened her palms the rest of the way, though it fluttered its wings slightly, the movement catching Carson off guard.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Bailey whispered, and Carson had just nodded, looking at the nearly translucent wings.

"Yeah," she agreed, and looked back at her cousin. "Shouldn't you let it go, though?" she asked, and Bailey had frowned, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"But I wanna keep it," she said.

"Don't you think it misses its family?" Carson asked, wondering even as the words escaped her lips why she cared. It was only a butterfly, after all, and she had never been one to hold sympathy for bugs of any sort. Still, something about that butterfly sitting so passively in her cousin's hands made her want to see it fly again.

"Maybe," Bailey said, but her words were laced with a sadness disproportionate to the situation.

"Come with me," Carson said, and led her cousin downstairs. She held the front door open for her, the heat of the summer hitting them like a wave as they stepped outside.

"Say goodbye," Carson said, and watched as Bailey looked down at her cupped palms, biting down hard on her lower lip as she contemplated the insect's freedom.

“Goodbye,” Bailey said softly, and opened her palms. The butterfly fluttered its wings, pausing just long enough that even Carson could imagine it was saying goodbye back. Bailey watched it fly away with a faraway look in her eyes, one that remained for the rest of the night, evidenced as she stared off into the distance while they sat at the dinner table that evening, pretending to be a normal family who asked each other to pass the potatoes, please. It was obvious to Carson that she was lonely, and glad to have someone else around to play with, whether that someone else was a Monarch butterfly or Carson. And somehow, Carson found that it was harder to say no to her than it was to her mother, whether she was asking her to please do her makeup or come play outside. All she saw, when she looked at her young cousin, then a stranger, was herself at that age, an overly sheltered girl whose friends had given up inviting her anywhere because her mother always said no, it was too dangerous. A girl who wanted nothing else but a friend who could come home with her when she wasn’t allowed to leave her apartment. A girl who didn’t quite fit in, and wanted someone to see her for once.

And yet, Carson realized that she no longer saw her cousin. She stood in the hallway for what felt like hours, watching the bedroom door that Bailey had closed between them, waiting for it to open and her cousin to come back out, tell her she had missed her and she was glad she was home. The grandfather clock continued to tick, the pendulum the only movement she was granted. The doorknob never turned.

It was the same way Bailey had walked past her when Carson tried to say goodbye at the train station nine months before. She had spent almost the entire night before she left awake with her cousin, curled up on the bed in Bailey’s bedroom, talking

softly in the dark. It had almost been like a sleepover, one to make up for the many they'd never had when they were growing up miles apart.

“Can't you take a semester off?” she'd asked, and Carson didn't respond. They both knew the answer. She could, but she wouldn't. She wouldn't stay.

“I can't,” she'd said, and felt Bailey turn over in the bed to face her.

“Why couldn't you have gone to school somewhere closer?” Bailey asked. Carson frowned, shaking her head, despite the fact that Bailey couldn't see it. They'd had this conversation before, and they would have it again, Carson was sure.

“I wanted to go back to the city,” Carson said. “I missed it.”

“I missed you,” Bailey said, her voice soft enough that Carson wondered if she'd even spoken at all.

Despite the fact that Bailey was born after Carson and her parents had already moved to the city, Carson felt as though she'd known her for her whole life. For the six years since she'd come back, they had been close. Not in the first few months, but after Carson had accepted the fact that she wasn't going back to the city anytime soon, she'd allowed herself to talk to the energetic ten-year-old who followed her around like a lost puppy.

“I miss you when I'm gone, too, but I can't skip a semester,” Carson had said, looking up at the ceiling in Bailey's bedroom. She felt her cousin shift next to her, sitting up against the creaking springs of the mattress.

“What about your mom?” Bailey had asked, and Carson stiffened, sitting up in bed as well.

“What about her?” Carson asked. The cancer had been back for months now, with no sign of it getting any worse or better.

“I just mean---what if she gets worse while you’re gone?”

Carson stared at her cousin in the darkness, barely able to make out her features in the scant lighting that came in from under the hallway door.

“She won’t,” she said.

“But what if she does?” Bailey asked.

“She won’t,” Carson repeated, though her words sounded flat even to her own ears.

“But what--”

“She’s fine, Bailey!” Carson shouted. She could barely see her cousin’s eyes as they grew wider, her mouth as it slowly shut on any words she had been meaning to speak.

Carson could feel her heart beating hard against her chest as she disentangled herself from the blankets, standing up. Bailey reached out towards her, but Carson moved away, taking a step towards the door.

“I have more packing to do,” she said, despite the fact that Bailey had helped her finish earlier.

“Carson, I’m sorry--” Bailey began, but Carson had shut the door between them before she could finish. Her mother was fine. She would be fine. She always was.

Carson stood in the hallway now, her eyes blurring as she stared at the door handle that never moved. Bailey had called her a few times after she went to school, but after a few short and pointed conversations, Carson had stopped answering. It was hard to

forget about the possibility of sickness when every familiar voice conjured up images of it.

Carson knew that it was her own fault, that her eagerness to leave had pushed Bailey away, and yet she still felt a sharp sting in her chest at the silence that was ringing in her ears. And despite the fact that Bailey had changed so drastically between 15 and 16 while Carson was away, she hadn't expected her to look so different. She hadn't expected her to act so different. And she hadn't expected her to ignore her, despite the fact that Carson had been ignoring everyone in this house for the past nine months.

Carson tore her eyes away from the door, turning and slipping silently back into her mother's old bedroom. She closed the door behind her, sitting down on the edge of the bed while the clock in the hallway continued to count the seconds that passed. She laid back down, waiting until her grandmother's footsteps stopped at her own room downstairs before she closed her eyes and allowed herself to finally sleep.

Chapter 4

The church looked even worse for wear than Carson remembered. The wooden doors were chipped and faded, the white paint almost entirely gone, revealing the rough and uneven wood beneath. The grass on the lawn reached almost to her calves as she walked behind her grandmother, lifting the bottom of her mother's black dress to keep it from catching on any burrs hiding in the bushes near the doors.

She was six when her mother first bought the dress. She had been sitting outside the fitting room, swinging her legs beneath her while she waited with childish impatience for her mother to finish so they could move onto more entertaining things.

“What do you think, Carson?” her mother asked, stepping out of the dressing room. Carson looked up from her feet, turning her bright eyes towards her mother. The dress draped over her figure, accentuating the curves that Carson would never quite inherit. The buckle that wrapped around her center was bright and new, shining in the harsh fluorescent lights of the store. Carson squinted, hopping down from her perch to get a closer look.

She reached out her small, chubby fingers, brushing them over the hem of the dress that went down to her mother's calves. The material was thin and smooth beneath her touch, and she giggled, pulling a hand back and looking up at her mother. Her long, dark brown hair hung down past her shoulders, a length it had stayed until the chemo took it away years later. Her dark blue eyes looked into Carson's own, the same color, and she gave her mother a gap-toothed smile.

“Pretty,” she announced, and hopped back up onto her seat to wait.

Carson could hear their footsteps echoing in the empty building as they stepped inside. The air conditioning was still broken. Sweat stood out in beads on the back of her

neck, and she reached back to wipe it off, suddenly grateful for the short hair that Theresa had warned would make her look ‘like a boy.’ She glanced back at her aunt, who was fanning herself with a folded piece of paper that she’d pulled from her purse, staring at the front of the church where a coffin sat on a raised cart, a white cloth draping down over the edges and reaching towards the marbled floor.

They were allowed to view her first, the pastor had said. Carson sat in a pew near the back, watching as June walked slowly towards the open casket, Theresa on her arm. Carson wasn’t sure who was supporting whom. She couldn’t see into the coffin from where she sat; she could only see June as she leaned heavily on her daughter, the stress of the last few years suddenly showing. She wasn’t the light-hearted woman who had made jokes over the past few days while Carson unpacked her things. Rather, she was the sixty-eight-year-old woman who had spent the last year watching her daughter shrink into a corpse.

Carson didn’t stand up, even as more people began to file into the church. She couldn’t look at her mother. She didn’t want to see her lying in a coffin, all the color leached from her skin. She’d seen her look like death before, during one of the many bouts of radiation and chemotherapy. She didn’t need to see it again.

Many glanced her way as they walked into the church, and a few tried to speak to her, but she pretended not to hear them. The apologies and condolences were saved for June and Theresa, who stayed near the front, taking hugs and handshakes where appropriate. Bailey walked in with a larger group, her arm hooked into that of an older boy’s. Carson watched them as they walked towards the front, Bailey only letting go of his arm for a moment to hug her mother. She

didn't even glance in Carson's direction, instead taking a seat in the front row of pews, leaning her head on the broad shoulder of the boy Carson had never met.

Within twenty minutes the coffin was closed, and the church was full. Carson recognized Lawrence, the owner of the local grocery store. He was sitting next to June in the front, one hand clasped firmly on her shoulder. Carson could remember sitting in these same pews as a girl, the wood cool beneath her bare legs, which she swung beneath her as the pastor read on and on from the thick book on the lectern. Her grandmother had sat in front of her then, too, though it was another man's hand on her shoulder, one with a ring on its finger.

Carson had spent many Sundays sitting with her shoulder pressed against her mother's side, her forehead buried into her mother's shoulder when the sermon went on too long and she wanted nothing more than to go to sleep. Her mother had often been wearing her black dress, a long, thin string of pearls draped around her neck. Carson dug her fingers into the thin, worn material of the same dress, now draped across her own body. It barely reached her knees, whereas on her mother it had reached well towards her calves. Their height difference had been staggering, especially right before she left, when her mother had begun the process of shrinking into herself until she nearly disappeared.

Carson looked down at her hands, folded together tightly in her lap. She had thrown the dress on on a whim, pulling it from the hanger in the closet before her mind could object. It slid on easily, the once smooth fabric worn thinner over the years. The buckle no longer shone; rather, the thin layer of silver paint was chipped and worn, revealing the dark metal underneath. She had run her fingers over it as she looked at herself in the mirror, imagining her mother standing in this same room, in this same

dress, looking at herself in the same mirror. She suddenly felt like an imposter. Who was she, to come home after so long and even entertain the idea that she could be like her mother? She had begun taking the dress off when June called up the stairs that it was time to go. She felt as though Theresa's eyes bored into her skin as she passed her on the stairs. She recognized the dress, and she did not want Carson wearing it. Carson was sure of it.

The pastor's voice broke into her thoughts, pulling her back into the overheated church. The heat of dozens of bodies pressed into her from all sides, despite the fact that no one had taken the empty space next to her. She looked towards the front of the church, wiping the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand.

"We are gathered here to celebrate the life of Cecilia Marie Cadwell," he said. Carson shifted in her seat, her thighs sticking to the wood beneath her. "No words can express the loss we've experienced, as a community and as a family," he continued. Carson glanced at a woman in the row in front of her, who was openly weeping into a handkerchief she'd pulled from her purse. Carson didn't even know who she was.

"Cecilia was our prodigal daughter," the pastor continued, a phrase that brought a smile to the lips of many of those who sat nearby. Carson hated it. "Gone for so long, and then returned home, with her own daughter." Carson gripped the pew so tightly that she was sure her knuckles had turned white as nearly every head in the church turned to look at her. Her cheeks flushed under

the supervision of so many eyes, some red with tears, some under brows that were lowered in what she felt to be disapproval.

“If anyone would like to say a few words, whether it be to share a fond memory or a story, please feel free to come forward at this time,” the pastor said. Carson met June’s eyes for a moment before she turned back to face the front, and the sadness in them was enough to make Carson turn her gaze to her lap for several moments.

It didn’t take long for someone to decide that they had something worth sharing. Carson could hear the ‘click’ of high heels on the tile floor, as a woman who had been sitting across the aisle from her stood up. Carson didn’t recognize her from behind; all she could see was a small, thin woman dressed in black, her dark brown hair graying at the roots.

The woman stopped at the podium, and Carson watched as her eyes swept briefly over the casket before turning them towards the larger crowd. She was wearing thin, wire-framed glasses that balanced precariously on the tip of her nose as she read from a piece of paper in her hands.

“Cecilia and I were good friends when we were just girls,” she began. Carson frowned, leaning forward slightly in her seat to get a better look at the woman who claimed to have known her mother. “We did everything together. We shared lunches at school, and always played together at recess. I had my first sleepover at her house.” Here the woman paused, looking at June, whom Carson imagined was drying her tears with her late husband’s handkerchief.

“She was always such a troublemaker,” she continued. “She loved playing pranks on the teachers and the other students, even when we were in high school.” Carson leaned

forward further, struggling to meet the eyes of the speaker. She could not picture her mother as a troublemaker. She'd been so strict, always watching her like a hawk, worried that her chick might fall out of the nest. She could remember sneaking out of their apartment in the city just to meet with some friends from school to study. Even that was too much of a venture for her mother, who preferred the safety of their small, cramped apartment to anything that the city had to offer.

Carson looked up as the woman continued to speak, and realized that she'd missed a good portion of her speech.

“When she moved away with Thomas and Carson, I never thought I'd see her again. It was a blessing to have her home, even for such a short period of time.” Carson was unable to quell the pinprick of anger that stuck in her chest. This woman, whoever she was, had never even bothered to come visit her mother since they'd moved back seven years before. And yet here she was, spouting off fond memories and regrets? She wrung her hands together in her lap, twisting her fingers until the pain distracted her from her anger. This woman, whoever she was, was not the only one who had abandoned her mother in her time of need. Maybe she couldn't handle the sight, either.

“Thank you, Annabelle,” the pastor said, as the woman stepped down from the raised stage, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. Carson met her eyes as she made her way back towards the pew, where a man, no doubt her husband, was waiting for her with open arms. Annabelle smiled at her, though it was a smile laced with pity. Carson looked away.

“Would anyone else like to say anything?” the pastor asked. Carson glanced around. Many of those present, nearly the entire town, seemed to be somewhere else entirely. Many were staring off into space or at their laps. A few whispered to the person sitting next to them. Carson thought she even caught the hint of a smile on an older man’s face at something his companion whispered in his ear.

“I would.”

June’s voice pulled Carson back into the moment. She looked up as her grandmother stood, waving off the arm offered by both Theresa and Lawrence. Instead, she took a few steps towards the stage, which she hopped up onto with ease, taking her place behind the lectern.

“My daughter,” she began, and paused, letting out a long breath. “My daughter,” she began again, “spent most of her life lost. I don’t think she knew it herself, but I could see it. I could see the way she was always searching for something, from the time she was a toddler to when she showed back up on my front porch with a teenage girl in tow.” Here their eyes met, and Carson didn’t look away, intrigued despite herself.

“I tried to help her,” June continued. “I tried to lead her in the right direction, but it had to be something that she wanted herself. When she moved away with Thomas, she thought she found it. I told her she was wrong, but she didn’t listen.”

The name ‘Thomas’ held little meaning to Carson. She could vaguely picture a tall man with broad shoulders and an unshaven face, one which had rarely smiled. She could picture him standing behind her mother, taller and wider than her, and leaning down towards her. But beyond that, not much. It had almost always just been her and her mother. She had never needed a father.

“That thing she was looking for was happiness,” June said. “I don’t think she ever did find it in the city. I could see it in her eyes when she came home, that same wanderlust that had led her away in the first place.” Carson frowned, shifting her weight in the pew. She looked at her hands once more, struggling to remember the few things that her mother had told her about her father, on the few occasions she deigned to ask. He left us, was all she would tell her when she asked when he would be home. He’s not coming home. But Carson’s questions of ‘why’ were always met with silence, with a downturned glance and a new question to change the subject. Thomas’ face hadn’t entered Carson’s mind in years, and yet it was there now, a presence that remained even when June moved past it.

“But she did find her happiness,” June continued. “She took it with her when she left, and she brought it back with her when she came home. I think that, with the stress of her diagnosis, she forgot that it had always been right next to her, feeding her soup on the nights when she could barely lift her head.” Carson could feel her grandmother’s eyes staring, even after she looked away. Her palms had begun to sweat, and the heat of every body in the room seemed to wash over her at once, like the humidity of the summer days that were only beginning.

“My daughter is no longer suffering,” June continued, calling the attention of those who had shifted their eyes towards Carson away, back towards the coffin and the woman standing in front of it. “I know that she’s gone home, and I have no doubt that she is looking down on us all right now, happy to see everyone gathered together. I think she would have wanted all of us to find that same

happiness, in whatever form it may take,” she said, and again Carson could feel her eyes. She kept her own trained on the ground, on her dust-covered sandals that barely covered her tanned toes. She counted the number of breaths she took until her grandmother stepped down from the podium, taking her seat between Lawrence and Theresa, and then she kept counting. Six. Seven. Eight.

“Would anyone else like to say a few words?” the pastor asked. The church fell silent; all Carson could hear was the slight creak of the pews as people shifted their weight, glancing around for someone else to speak. Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

“Very well,” the pastor said, looking down at papers he’d placed on the podium. “Let us pray.”

Fifteen.

“Dear Lord, we ask for your presence in this time of need.”

Sixteen.

“Cover Cecilia’s family, and our entire community, in your healing presence.”

Seventeen.

“Let us remember the good, and forgive the bad.”

Eighteen.

“Give her family strength in her absence.”

Nineteen.

“We ask this in Jesus’ name,”

Twenty.

“Amen.”

Carson stood abruptly. She turned towards the doors, ignoring the few looks of surprise as she pushed them open, the sudden sunlight making her squint. A slow breeze wafted by, drying the sweat on her brow. The doors behind her remained closed, even as she walked through the tall grass and towards the gravel road. June's dusty red truck was parked on the curb, but Carson walked past it, wiping her sweaty palms on the sides of her mother's dress. It was only a thirty-minute walk back to the house, and somehow, the humid air was easier to breathe when she was alone.

Twenty-one.

Chapter 5

Carson saw no one as she walked back to June's house. Nearly the entire town had gone to her mother's funeral. The grocery store was shut down, the lights inside turned off and a sign on the door announcing that they would open again tomorrow. The library parking lot was empty save for a single car, and Carson could almost imagine the lonely librarian sitting inside at her desk with no one to help or yell at.

The black dress stuck to her skin as she walked, the sun beating down on the top of her head. She took deep breaths in through her mouth as she turned from gravel to dirt roads. The thin fabric of the dress suddenly felt thick, clinging to every harsh angle of her body as sweat dripped down the back of her neck. She couldn't breathe. Wearing it had been a mistake. She realized now that she had hoped, in some way, to bring her mother with her. The thought was morbid and twisted as she came to it. Who wore their mother's dress to her funeral?

She walked faster, kicking up dust beneath her feet. She began to count her breaths again, but the distraction did nothing for her this time. She stopped, kneeling down and unbuckling the sandals on her feet with trembling fingers. Sweat dripped from her forehead onto the tip of her toe, leaving a small circle of skin amidst the dirt that had caked her feet. She stood up, the shoes dangling from one hand, and began to run.

Her breaths came faster as she pushed her legs, each stride taking her closer and closer to the house at the end of the road. She would be okay once she was inside. She would be able to take off the dress, to relieve the burning sensation that it produced on every inch of covered skin. She closed her eyes against the dust that was scattered by her feet, and yet she still found she knew where she was going. She had run this same path

before, when she was a little girl and when she was a teenager, upset that she'd had to give up her life in the city to come back to a town with less people than her high school.

She remembered when she was just a little girl, taking off down the street ahead of her mother on their way home from the store or the park. She would laugh, turning to face her mother who stood at the end of the road.

“Slow down, Carson,” she would say, and laugh as Carson sped up. She could hear her mother's voice in her head now, calling for her to slow down, to wait for her. The voice rang in her ears as she opened her eyes, pushing her feet faster until she turned up the gravel driveway of the house with the faded yellow mailbox. The front door opened easily beneath her fingertips, and she took the stairs two at a time, ducking into the bedroom and closing the door behind her, her mother's voice still loud in her ears. Slow down, Carson. Wait for me. Why won't you wait for me?

Carson wasted no time in ripping the dress off, her short, bitten nails scratching rivulets into her skin as she pulled it over her head, tossing it into the closet where it hit the wall with a dull 'thud.' She closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the wall as her lungs slowly became accustomed to her sudden change in pace. Her skin still felt heavy, but the offending garment was gone, and the voice was silent.

She opened her eyes slowly. Thin streams of sunlight filtered in through the sheer blue curtains on the window, and a slight breeze stirred them. The single light bulb that lit the room flickered as she turned it on, taking a few moments

before lighting the room with no complaints. Her breaths came easier now, and she could feel her heart slowing its beating as she turned towards the closet. She shoved aside the last few garments that had belonged to her mother, revealing the dresser behind them in which she had put her own clothes a few days before.

Only three months, she whispered to herself as she opened the drawers. Only three more months and she could go back to school. She wouldn't have to listen to June pace and boil water for tea until Bailey decided to come home. She wouldn't have to see Theresa look at her out of the corner of her eyes every time Carson left her mother's old bedroom. She wouldn't have to smile at dinner and ask Bailey to please pass the salt.

Carson took out a tank top and pair of shorts, pulling them on quickly in the small space of the closet. She had to duck down, the ceiling being lower than the rest of the bedroom. She was in this awkward position, buttoning her shorts, when the front door creaked open. She listened as Bailey's light footsteps entered, followed by the heavier ones of Theresa and June. Their voices were muffled, but Carson could still make out the words.

"It was a nice service," June was saying. Her voice echoed in the entryway.

"It was," Theresa agreed. Bailey was silent.

And then there was silence. Carson could hear June make her way into the kitchen, the clatter of dishes as she no doubt pulled out a tea pot and filled it with water.

Carson closed her eyes and waited. She expected to hear Theresa's voice come back, louder than the others, demanding that Carson provide an explanation for her sudden departure, but there was nothing but the sound of footsteps moving through the kitchen and towards the back porch, where they faded completely.

She knew what they were thinking, what the entire town must be thinking, even if they wouldn't say it aloud: that she didn't care. And it wasn't like she'd given them a reason to think otherwise. What kind of daughter didn't come home when her mother was terminally ill? What kind of daughter used finals and the upcoming semester as an excuse to avoid seeing the woman who had given her life as her own faded away?

She opened her eyes, turning to duck back out of the closet. Her forehead connected with the top of the closet. The sudden impact caused her to stumble back a step, her foot entangling itself in the dress and sending her falling onto her back. Her head bumped against the wall, a loud 'thud' echoing in the small space around her. She lay on the ground for a moment, pressing the back of her hand against the reddening skin of her forehead as the back of her head pulsed in time with the beat of her heart.

She sat up, throwing the dress away from her with as much force as she could muster. Frustration welled inside her chest, the resulting pressure burning in the back of her throat as she turned to look at the wall where she'd bumped her head. The plaster was slightly dented, and she bit back a curse as she ran her fingers along the surface. No wonder it hurt.

Her nail caught on the edge of the dent, and she paused, squinting to see in the dim light from the bulb in the main room. She dug her nail into the small crack, a small noise of surprise escaping her lips as the piece of wall pulled out easily from the rest. White flakes of plaster showered down onto her bare legs as she stared at the dark hole in the wall that she'd just uncovered.

She paused, reaching for her phone in her pocket. She was unable to bite back the curse this time as she realized it had been in the pocket of the dress she'd thrown twice now. She turned around, fumbling with the bundle of black fabric until she pulled her phone from its midst. A small crack ran the length of the screen. She ignored it, turning it on and using the resulting light to peer into the hole.

There was a small bundle lying about half a foot back into the wall. She frowned, leaning closer to get a better look, but it was impossible to tell what it was. She didn't think before reaching into the hole, her fingers grasping a smooth, cool surface. She pulled out the object quickly, dropping a large, leather-bound journal into her lap. She brushed dust and plaster from the cover, somehow still cool to the touch despite the warm summer heat that seemed to soak through the walls. She left the dress on the ground as she ducked out of the closet, being careful to avoid the ceiling until she was back in the main bedroom.

The lighting afforded her a closer look at the journal. Its cover was plain and brown, the only splash of color coming from a fraying red bookmark that stuck out somewhere in the last few pages. Carson sat down on the edge of the bed, setting the journal onto her knees as her mind raced. Whose was this? And why was it hidden away?

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, staring at the cover of the journal. It felt wrong, somehow, to open it, even if whoever it belonged to was no longer here. She set it next to her on the bed, brushing the remains of the plaster from her lap onto the floor of the nearly empty room. Most of her mother's things had been moved to the attic, June had said. The only things left were some of her clothes in the closet, and a few pairs of shoes that Carson would never be able to squeeze her feet into.

The back screen door creaked open, and Carson listened as several pairs of footsteps made their way back into the kitchen. The pot on the stove was whistling, and she heard the clatter of mugs as June dug around for the right one. The sound of heavy footsteps echoed outside her door, and she could almost picture Theresa as she lumbered up the stairs. The footsteps paused for a moment outside her door, and Carson held her breath until they continued on to the end of the hallway.

She picked the journal back up and brushed her fingers over it, letting them linger for a moment on the tattered bookmark. What was in here, that someone had felt the need to hide so badly? She opened the cover, looking at the faded yellow page that read ‘This journal belongs to ____.’ The blank was scribbled over with black ink, angry strokes marring the page and the few beyond it, but she knew from the first word she read whose journal this was. She would recognize her mother’s handwriting anywhere.

She carefully turned the page, looking down at the faded handwriting that lined the pages beyond their capacity. Words spilled over into the margins, some crossed out several times over and others circled, as though they held more importance than others. The voice that she had heard in her head as she ran back from the funeral was back, only this time it was speaking words she had never heard before.

I went to the abandoned farmhouse out by Jack’s house today. No one knows I went, not even Anna. It’s not like she would have tried to talk me out of it or anything, but I didn’t need the added pressure. It’s nerve wracking enough to

meet a boy somewhere secluded without your best friend reminding you that he could get any girl he wanted, and he chose you.

Carson stared harder at the handwriting, wondering if she'd made a mistake. This was not her mother. She wouldn't even let Carson leave the house to run errands or go to a friend's house, and yet here she was, admitting a midnight rendezvous with a boy? Sure, people changed, but Carson's mind could not reconcile the mother she knew with the one being presented to her in words.

Why did he choose me? I'm not as pretty as many of the girls in our class. I have too many freckles, and my nose is too big. Carson conjured her mother's image in her mind, the way she had looked before her first diagnosis, her rounded cheeks, bright eyes, and perfectly proportioned nose.

He's different. Handsome, but not perfect. His eyes are too far apart, and there's a gap between his teeth. But somehow they make him more charming, rather than awkward. I love the way his brown hair curls on the sides, but only slightly, only if you're close enough to see.

And then there's me.

And then there she was. Smiling at Carson from across the room, encouraging her with only a single look that it was alright, that she had left this journal here for her to find, even before she knew she would exist someday. Carson blinked, and the image was gone.

The barn smelled like moldy hay, but the candles that Jack had lit helped a little bit. He took my hand, leading me to the back, where the candles were set out on a blanket. He'd prepared for this.

I told him he was going to set a fire, but he told me I worried too much. He let go of my hand and sat down, patting the ground next to him. The image was ridiculous: an attractive boy with a goofy smile sitting in the middle of an old, dimly-lit barn on a checkered picnic tablecloth. I sat next to him, scooting closer to the candles.

He told me I looked beautiful. I didn't believe him, but it didn't matter, because he said it. And when he kissed me...I didn't know what to do. I'd never kissed a boy before. But he told me it was okay and that I wasn't going to mess up the entire night, and I chose to believe him.

We didn't leave for hours.

I'm hiding this journal where mom will never find it. She would send me straight to church, and they would send me straight to hell, if they knew what I've been doing. Good girls don't meet boys in barns in the middle of the night two days before Christmas. Good girls stay home and pray.

I'm not a good girl, though. Mom knows that. She's had to pick me up from school at least once a month for a stupid prank or something. And she can pretend all she wants, but I know she thinks they're funny.

Carson stared at the pages long after her mother's voice had faded from her mind. She couldn't picture it. She tried, but her mind refused to conjure an image of the woman she had known as a teenager, sneaking around and rebelling against June. The thought was almost laughable, and yet here it was, written in her mother's handwriting on her lap. She turned the page.

I hate this town sometimes. No one can mind their own damn business. Why should the woman at the grocery store know about rumors spreading around at a high school? And why should she care? Lawrence just stood there and let her tell me off for 'sleeping around,' as though I were her daughter or something. I'd never even met this woman before.

Jack told everyone that we slept together. He never even got past second base, but he told all of his friends that we did it on a picnic blanket in a dirty barn. Not only am I a slut, but apparently, I'm also not picky about where I have sex.

Anna is the only one who doesn't believe him or his friends. She told me we'll get back at them, but I'm not sure. She seems like she has something bigger in mind than a whoopee cushion under his seat. He deserves everything she could throw at him, but I don't want her to get caught up in anything.

I guess I'll see what she has in mind.

Carson could feel her hands clenching into fists, surprising herself with the intensity of the anger she felt towards this 'Jack.' Who did he think he was? It didn't matter that the events of this journal had taken place over two decades ago. The words were new to Carson, and so was the resulting anger. At least this 'Anna' was her mother's friend. She paused, remembering the woman with graying hair who had taken the lectern at the funeral earlier that day. Her name had been Annabelle, and she had claimed to be her mother's friend when they were girls. Maybe she was telling the truth after all.

Carson turned the page, her eyes moving quickly over the words that were written in a shaky hand, the ink smudged in several places.

No one will even look me in the eyes anymore.

I just want to disappear. I feel like such a joke. I hate that I went out with Jack that night. I hate that I trusted him. I hate myself for letting him say such awful things about me.

I hate Jack. He keeps spreading the same rumor, but he gets more vulgar every time. He told his stupid friends that I begged him for it. He's begging for a kick in the balls.

Anna told me that we would find a way to get him back, but that was weeks ago. I'm sick of being stared at like the town whore. I should just wear a big red 'A' like that girl in the Scarlet Letter. Not like they wouldn't be able to figure out who I am anyway. I feel like I have a sign that says 'slut' on my forehead.

I'm going out with Anna tonight. One of the boys is having a party. I know he only invited me because he thinks I put out, but that's his fault. I'm just going for the beer and because Anna wants to. Everyone else can just leave me the hell alone.

Carson glanced over at the clock on the wall, still ticking despite the months that no one had set eyes on it. What revenge had Anna and her mother had on this boy? She glanced back at the start of the entry, a frown tugging on her lips. She had met her fair share of those women who didn't understand where to draw the line. They abounded in this town. That was part of the reason she'd been so apt to go back to the city when the opportunity presented itself in the form of college. Ever since she and her mother had moved back six years ago, it felt like

their entire lives were on display. She heard the whispers, the turned heads, when they first came back. Everyone was wondering why her mother had left so suddenly, and what had suddenly brought her back. No one asked directly, at least not that she knew of, but the question was always there in their eyes, on their lips, waiting for an opportunity to present itself.

Her mother had known that these people lived here. She had experienced them herself, and yet she had still brought Carson back into this environment.

She looked back down at the journal, turning the page.

My sister caught me sneaking out last night. Of course, she told mom. She is such a bitch sometimes. She thinks that just because she's older than me, she can tell me what to do. Well, she can't. And neither can mom, or dad. It's not like he's ever home anyway, but he thinks he can tell me what to do. Mom said that 'he will hear about this.' What a joke. It's not my fault Theresa doesn't have a life outside of homework and college prep. I don't—

Carson jumped when someone knocked on the door. She quickly shoved the journal under the pillow, her fingers trembling. She didn't want anyone else to see the journal. They might want to read it, might take it away from her. It was full of her mother's words, her life before Carson, and Carson would not give it up. Her mother's words swam through her mind as a voice called out from the other side of the door.

"Carson? Are you awake?"

June's voice broke through her mother's, which faded away slowly as Carson let out a long breath, folding her hands together in her lap in an attempt to still their shaking.

“Yes,” she said, and wondered if her voice sounded as unsure to June as it did to her own ears.

June opened the door, taking a single step into the room. She was still dressed from the funeral, in a black skirt and blazer. Carson wondered if June could hear her heart beating out of her chest. Her mother’s words sat only a foot away, and she didn’t understand how June didn’t hear them screaming as loudly as she did.

“I made dinner,” June said. “Would you like to come have some?”

“No, thank you,” Carson said, her fingers itching to turn the pages of the journal. “I’m not hungry.”

“You’ve barely left this room since you got here,” June said, folding her thin arms across her chest. “It’s not healthy, Carson. You’ve got to come out.” She paused, a familiar glint in her eye. “Besides, I made spaghetti and meatballs.”

When she was just a child, Carson had lived for her grandmother's homemade meatballs. She used to sit in the kitchen and watch her mix the meat and the spices, always without a recipe. Carson could remember asking her many times where she kept her recipe, but June always said the same thing: that she had it written down in her mind. Sometimes she’d let her help round them out, her small hands barely covering the large balls that she attempted to roll out, always claiming the largest ones for herself and never finishing them all.

Her stomach growled, but all she could think about was her mother and the words that she’d never gotten to hear her speak.

“I’m not feeling well,” Carson said, turning her face away at the hurt that June couldn’t hide. She always tried, but the past year had clearly taken its toll on her.

“Well, if you change your mind, come on down,” June said, turning back towards the door. She paused in the entryway, glancing back at Carson, whose eyes had shifted to the pillow and what lay beneath.

“Carson?” she asked. Carson stiffened, tearing her eyes away from the pillow and looking at her grandmother.

“Yeah?” she asked.

“I love you,” June said simply, stepping into the hallway. “Don’t forget that,” she said, before closing the door between them.

Carson tasted the tears before she felt them. She reached a hand up to her cheek, staring at the offending droplets on the tips of her fingers. She shook her head, digging her nails into the palms of her hands. Tears fixed nothing. She knew that, and yet she felt like she was choking, swallowing back the sobs that threatened to bubble past her lips.

Her mother had never cried.

Even when she came home and sat Carson down to tell her the diagnosis, she didn’t shed a single tear. Her eyes were not red or puffy, as though she’d cried on the way home; rather, she was calm, unnervingly so, smoothing back loose strands of hair from Carson’s forehead as she cried for her.

“It’s stage 2, sweetheart,” she’d said, wiping a tear from her daughter’s cheek.

“It’s not terminal. We can get through this.”

We. It had always been *we*. Thomas was gone before she hit seven years old. Her mother hadn't cried then, either, even when Carson asked her where he was and when he was coming home.

"He's not," she'd said, and left it at that, despite Carson's constant questions.

Why had she never cried?

Carson sat back on the bed, wrapping her arms tightly around herself. She could feel her body shaking as she struggled to suppress the cries, pressing her face into her knees to muffle any sound that escaped. She didn't deserve to cry. She didn't deserve to grieve. She'd left her mother alone in her last months, drowning herself in schoolwork to avoid the reality that her mother was dying, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She'd wanted to study medicine because of her. She'd held some illusion that she could learn about diseases and treat those who fell ill, those like her own mother. She imagined herself as a doctor, standing at the bedside of someone who had lost all semblance of hope, and giving it back to them through science and medicine. It sounded like a joke now. Medicine hadn't been able to save her mother. It poisoned her from the inside out, sapping the color from her skin and tearing the hair from her head. She didn't need to learn about cancer in her biology classes; she'd already seen what it could do. She didn't need to go home and see her mother, see everything she'd learned in class put into stark reality. Her mother's cells were destroying her from the inside out, and nothing could stop them.

She wondered if her mother had cried in the last year. She wondered if she cried when she lay in a hospital bed for the sixth time in six months, knowing that it might be her last. She wondered if she cried when the doctors told her there was nothing more they could do, that it was time to stop treatments. She wondered if she cried as she died, her daughter miles and miles away, ignoring phone calls that would have been their last conversation together.

Carson shook her head, the bruise that had already begun to form on the back of her head aching at the movement. No wonder Theresa hated her. She'd had to deal with the pieces of her mother that Carson had left behind. She was the one who was there for her in her last days. She was the one who'd had to watch her die.

'We can get through this.'

Carson could hear her mother's voice, louder than the quiet gasps of air that she took. Her mother wasn't often wrong. Her advice almost always worked. Her ways of cheering Carson up had never failed. But she had been wrong that day six years ago, as they sat on the couch in their apartment, the TV playing softly in the background. They wouldn't get through it. They didn't.

And Carson never would.

Chapter 6

I'm so sick of this town. I want to live somewhere else. Somewhere big. Somewhere where no one knows me and I can make a new name for myself. I don't want to be Cecilia, June's daughter, or Cecilia, Therese's sister. I just want to be Cecilia. Just me. And I can never be that here, not where everyone knows me, or think they know me.

Maybe someday I'll go to the big city. Maybe I'll be famous. Or maybe I'll just be me. Either way, I don't want to be here.

Anna says we can live in the city someday. We'll share an apartment and learn how to live on our own, without our parents constantly breathing down our necks. I can't wait. I love Mama, but sometimes she's just too much. She won't let me live my own life. She'll have to let go someday.

Carson closed the journal, leaning back against the headboard of her mother's bed. It had been two days since her silent breakdown, and the tears showed no signs of returning. She wouldn't let them. She started and ended each day with an excerpt from her mother's journal. Seeing the pages that remained growing thinner and thinner made her stomach drop, her fingers pausing as they went to turn to the next page. She didn't want this brief interlude with her mother to end. Though she wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and read the entire thing, it would be gone forever. There would be no more of her mother's voice in her head, speaking words that were never meant for her to hear. There would be no more exploration of this strange other side that Carson had never known.

Had she not recognized the handwriting, she never would have believed that this journal belonged to her mother. Her mother, who wouldn't let Carson

cross the street by herself until she was thirteen, who wouldn't let her take the bus to school in the morning with the other kids and instead insisting on driving her herself, often making her late for work in the mornings and costing her at least one promotion. Her mother, who refused to leave the apartment after dark because it 'wasn't safe' couldn't be the same one who lay within these pages. This girl snuck out. She partied, she drank, she was *happy*, despite the interference of her classmates into her life. And though Carson liked to believe that her mother was happy in the small amount of time that she'd known her, seeing what she used to be made her wonder what had changed.

The rebellious spirit her mother had apparently once exhibited was one that Carson recognized all too well. It was one she had taken on when she was fourteen and treated like she was eight. It was one that had lasted until she went away to college, and even then it simply took on a different form. She took the fear that her mother had spent years instilling in her, fear of the man on the corner of the street, fear of the statistics that she could become part of, fear of everything outside the four walls of their small apartment in the city, and turned it into anger. Why should she have to fear everything, just because her mother did? Why should she have to give up being a normal teenager, one who hung out with friends at places other than their apartment? Sneaking out had been nearly impossible, but she'd managed, on occasion, to slip out the front door without waking her mother, who had taken to sleeping on the couch after the last time she'd caught her. It had become much easier to sneak out when her mother was too sick to get out of the bed. Carson's stomach turned in on itself at the thought.

What had caused her mother to go from a teenager who longed for her own freedom to a mother who actively took that freedom away from her own daughter? The

idea that her mother had once been a typical teenager struck Carson as odd, especially considering the behavior she'd constantly modeled towards her daughter. Where was this teenage girl who longed for a taste of freedom? Carson couldn't reconcile her with the woman who feared the brightly-lit gas station at 7 PM. Something had changed, something that Carson hadn't even known about until she'd found this journal and uncovered this earlier version of her mother, before she was molded into something else.

Maybe the answer is in here, Carson thought, running a finger with a bitten nail across the small entry she had just read.

"Carson!" June's voice broke into the room, pulling Carson from her thoughts. She quickly slid the journal into the pillowcase of the pillow she'd been using, turning it around so that nothing was visible. The thought of June finding the journal made her slide quickly from bed, her bare toes curling on the cool wooden floor beneath her feet. If June knew there were words from her daughter waiting to be read, she would want to see them. She would want to analyze them, break them down into their parts and reconstruct the woman she had lost, and Carson couldn't do that. She didn't want to share this piece of her mother that she had found by chance, that she was reminded of every time she checked the time on her phone and saw the cracked screen staring back at her. If she shared these insights, June would want to spend time reminiscing, and the thought made Carson's stomach clench. She quickly changed, exchanging her pajama bottoms for jean shorts and her T-shirt for a thin tank top. She paused at the full-length

mirror near the door, her eyes glancing quickly over her deeply-freckled shoulders and awkwardly-long legs before turning towards the door.

“Carson!” June called again, and Carson opened the door. She took the stairs two at a time, more out of convenience than any sense of urgency, turning at the bottom and stepping into the kitchen just as June opened her mouth to call again.

“Yes?” Carson asked, and June jumped, turning to look at her with a hand holding a wooden spoon placed over her heart.

“Goodness, you scared me,” she said, and Carson couldn't help but smile at the mild exclamation. She knew that her grandmother was capable of much worse. As if on cue, Sugar piped up from his cage on the table, letting out a long squawk and a single word.

“Shit!”

“Sugar!” June exclaimed, turning to look at the offending bird, who stared back at her with his small, beady black eyes. “No treats for you today,” she said, pointing the spoon at him. He ruffled his feathers.

“Fuck,” he said simply, and Carson laughed. She quickly closed her mouth when June turned to look at her, a surprised expression on her face. Had she not laughed at all since she came back?

“I hope I didn't wake you,” June said, and Carson shook her head, glancing at the clock over the stove. It was 9:30 in the morning.

“I've been up for a while,” Carson said, and rather than asking questions, June nodded and looked at the ingredients strewn over the kitchen counter.

“I was trying to make stew for dinner and put it in the slow cooker, but we’re out of potatoes and carrots. I’d go get them myself, but I’ve already started cooking, and you know how Sugar gets when I leave him alone too long,” June said. Carson glanced over at the bird, who was busy plucking at his own feathers.

“I can get them,” Carson said, turning to look back at her grandmother. She hadn’t left the house since the funeral. She hadn’t felt the desire to, hoping instead to pass the summer indoors, without any chance of recognition from those who had known her before her mother’s passing. Still, she couldn’t exactly say no to June. She’d been nothing but nice to her since she’d come back.

“Oh, thank you, dear,” June said, digging in the pocket of her worn-out apron until she fished out a twenty. Carson took it from her, shoving it into her shorts pocket. “I’d offer you the truck, but Theresa took it to work this morning. Hers has been in the shop for a few days.” Here she paused, looking at Carson directly. “No need to rush,” she added. “If you want to stop at the library or somewhere else, or see any old friends, feel free.”

Carson just nodded, though she already knew it would be a quick trip. She slipped on a pair of tennis shoes, glancing at the time on her phone. The cracked screen blinked back ‘9:40.’ She stepped outside, the summer heat settling over her like a blanket almost immediately. Though the humidity was low, the heat still beat down on the top of her head and the back of her neck as she stepped out of the gate and onto the sidewalk. It was a twenty-minute walk to the center of town, and she started off at a steady pace, keeping her eyes straight ahead.

June knew she didn't have any 'old friends' here. The few friends she'd had in high school had gone away to college, and while they might be home for the summer, it wasn't a reunion she would seek out on her own. She had barely known them, despite the fact that she called them her friends whenever her mother or June asked her where she was going so late or why she couldn't make it to some family function or another. Her mother's overbearing protection throughout much of her teenage years had caused her to seek out someone, anyone, her own age. She wanted to do what all typical teenagers did: spend time with each other. Her mother had only allowed her to spend time with others her own age if they came over to their apartment, and even then it was only during the daytime, as it was too dangerous to have them go home in the dark. Her mother had always acted as though there were monsters around every corner, waiting to pounce on the first teenager who forgot to check in the closet before they went to bed.

The 'friends' that June referred to were barely acquaintances, and even then, they were mainly distractions from the chaos unfolding within the four walls of her home as she traversed through high school. The fewer reminders of that time, the better.

At the end of the road she turned to the left, soon leaving the small clusters of houses behind, finding herself on a desolate gravel road that led towards the center of town. A few signs pointed those who were unfortunate enough to find themselves here by mistake back to the highway. She walked past them, shoving her hands into her pockets as she kicked up small clouds of dust with her tennis shoes. The road led to a few more homes, separated by large fields that were tilled and planted. Potato plants were already sprouted and flourishing, while corn stalks had just broken through the soil in many places. Tomatoes were already being harvested, and Carson watched as a truck drove by,

the back filled with a fresh harvest and heading towards town. She followed behind it, her eyes trailing over the tire tracks left behind as they turned from rough to smoother gravel.

She glanced up, her eyes falling on the small town square that was, in fact, not shaped like a square at all. It was two roads, both filled with small shops and markets. On Tuesdays, many of the local farmers, of which there was no shortage, would set up their own stands on one of the streets, selling their wares in one location for a few hours. On other days of the week they either sold from their own stands on their property or to Lawrence at the grocery store. He proudly proclaimed that almost all of his produce was locally grown; it was a big selling point for him.

Carson stepped from the dirt onto the cracked sidewalk, which began at the edge of the street near the first store. She passed a few people she didn't recognize, though she kept her head down anyway, silently wishing that they wouldn't look too hard at her, lest they recognize her. Though their town was small, there were still many that she didn't recognize, either from her and her mother's decade-long absence, or her general lack of interaction. Still, that didn't mean they wouldn't recognize her if she let them.

She looked up when she nearly bumped into a couple walking the other way. She looked up quickly, meeting their eyes as she opened her mouth to apologize, only to find herself looking at Bailey and the boy she had taken to her mother's funeral. Carson stopped, removing her hands from her pockets and

looking from her cousin to her boyfriend, searching for words, any words, to say. Bailey stared at her, her lips pursed down slightly into a frown.

They still hadn't spoken. Carson had tried the morning before, when they passed each other briefly on the staircase, but Bailey had just nodded and walked past her, their shoulders brushing with a stir of frigid air that cooled the sweat that seemed to permanently sit on Carson's brow. The same look met her now as she finally found something to say.

"Hey," Carson said. Bailey continued to stare, and Carson found it difficult to hold her gaze. She glanced briefly at the boy, opening her mouth to introduce herself, when Bailey tugged on his arm, leading him around her without another word. Carson caught a glimpse of the boy's confused face before they passed, but she was silent.

Carson felt her cheeks burn as they passed. Of course Bailey wanted nothing to do with her. She'd given her no reason to want to speak to her by ignoring her for months. Still, she found herself wishing that she could rebuild the bridge that she had burned, but Bailey's stony stare and silence told her that it was a useless endeavor.

She shook her head, walking past the one local liquor store and into the cool air-conditioning of the grocery store that sat next door. She closed her eyes as she stepped inside, the relief of the cool air making her realize just how hot it was outside. She opened her eyes to find an elderly couple staring at her from the nearby checkout lane. They were speaking to each other, and yet their eyes continually moved up and over towards her. Carson found herself unable to look away, staring back at them while her mind raced.

Perhaps they had known her mother. Her mother, always so charismatic and genuine, willing to help anyone with anything, despite her own sickness and troubles. Her mother, who had only ever wanted the best for Carson, even if she didn't know how to show it except by shielding her from any harm the world had to offer. Her mother, whom she had left to die sick and alone while she drowned herself in research papers and homework assignments.

The elderly couple paid for their groceries and began walking towards her. If they had known her mother, what did they see when they looked at her? Carson pressed her palms against her jeans to still their trembling, willing her legs to move, to step away and not look back even if they called out after her. She only managed a single step before they walked past her, waving at a younger woman who stood outside, evidently waiting for them. They didn't look at her again.

Carson let out a long breath as she turned away from the automatic doors, picking up a plastic green basket and stepping further into the store. She could remember being knee-high to her mother and running through the store, dodging her mother's attempts to stuff her back into the shopping cart. Her father had been there too, she realized as she walked towards the produce section, her feet moving without her mind directing them where to go. He had stayed with the shopping cart, a stony and stoic presence. She pictured him with rough grey skin, a statue rather than a living, breathing human being.

Carson stopped next to the small display of potatoes, picking out two and placing them in her basket. She only had to take a few steps to find the carrots, where she picked out three and put them in the basket next to the potatoes. She

ignored the few other shoppers, and yet she still imagined she could feel their eyes on her as she made her way towards the checkout lanes. A cart suddenly veered in front of her, sending her stumbling back a step, the potatoes and carrots falling out of her basket and spilling across the polished tile floor.

“I’m so sorry,” a voice said. Carson looked up to see a man in a crisp business suit offering her a hand, while two children held onto the cart, looking sheepishly her way while they argued with one another about whose fault it was that they had nearly mowed her down. She slowly stood on her own, ignoring the outstretched hand as she collected the vegetables from the floor.

“It’s fine,” she said, turning to look back at him once the produce was safely back in her basket.

“Hey. You’re Cecilia’s daughter, aren’t you?” he asked, and Carson stiffened, gripping the basket handle tightly.

“Yes,” she said flatly. A wave of sadness passed over his eyes as he looked at her. It was one that she recognized from the funeral, and one she had seen in passing many times since she’d come back into town.

“I thought so. You look just like her, you know,” he said. Carson could tell that he meant this to comfort her somehow, and yet all it did was make her feel like a ghost.

“Taller than her, of course, but you have her eyes. And her hair.”

Carson looked at the man standing in front of her. He was tall, with dark brown hair that curled slightly at his temples. It was run through with streaks of gray that he didn’t try to hide.

“Jack, dear,” a female voice called from a nearby isle. “I found the canned beans. I swear Lawrence moves things around just to mess with me. I don’t--”

The woman continued to speak, but Carson didn’t hear her. Jack. Carson stared at his dark eyes, at the hair that curled just slightly under his temples, the slightly crooked nose and barely noticeable gap between his teeth. This was the man who her mother had described so painstakingly in her journal. The one who had made her life miserable with a rumor of her indiscretions. Carson could feel a silent anger stirring inside her, starting in the pit of her stomach and working its way upwards towards her chest. His wife, a stout middle-aged woman in a dress, was still talking about roaming canned goods, while his two kids argued with one another in the background. He was oblivious to Carson now, turning instead to his wife, adding unnecessary comments to her complaints.

He had never left town. He had stayed, found a wife, and had children. They were the picture-perfect family, Carson thought, the ones whose pictures you’d find on the front of a magazine or in a Thanksgiving ad on TV. He eventually turned back to Carson, who hadn’t moved, and smiled, the gap in his teeth suddenly glaringly obvious.

“Hannah, dear, this is Cecilia’s daughter. Do you remember Cecilia, from high school? She came back a few years ago?” he asked, glancing from Carson to his wife, and then back again. Jack looked back at Carson, smiling slightly at her.

“Your mother and I used to date,” he said, so nonchalantly that Carson almost didn’t realize what he had said. She felt her cheeks begin to burn as she noted the way that Hannah’s eyebrows furrowed together, the lines between them

deepening. No doubt she was thinking of the rumors that had circled, and Carson could almost hear her thinking ‘No wonder she ended up with a child.’

“What’s your name, sweetheart?” Hannah asked, and Carson just looked at her, the anger slowly trailing up, up, past her chest and into her throat, where it burned like stomach acid.

“Carson,” she said flatly. She could hear her mother’s voice in her mind, the words she’d read that morning ringing clearly in her ears. ‘I hate myself.’ And though the events she’d read had taken place over twenty years ago, they were new to Carson. The anger and betrayal she felt on behalf of her mother were fresh wounds, not scarred over with time and distance as they had been for her mother. ‘I just want to disappear.’

“How are you holding up?” Jack asked, and Carson snapped.

“Why would you care?” she asked. The children immediately stopped fighting, instead perking up at the words that came out of her mouth.

“Excuse me?” Jack asked, raising his eyebrows. Carson gripped the shopping basket tightly in her hands, feeling the cool metal dig into the palm of her hand.

“I said, why the hell would you care how I’m ‘holding up’? I don’t know you. You don’t know me, and I know you don’t give a damn about me. So why should you care how I’m doing?” She could hear her voice rising with every syllable uttered. Hannah was looking at her warily, her hands on the shopping cart where her kids were still standing, staring wide-eyed at Carson.

“I didn’t mean any offense,” Jack said, and somehow the words only made Carson angrier. “But I’d appreciate it if you didn’t use that type of language in front of my children.”

“I know what you did to my mom,” Carson said suddenly, the words escaping her lips before she could stop them. She could feel the eyes of several customers on her as they walked past, many lingering to watch the confrontation that was brewing.

“What?” Jack asked, and the genuine confusion in his face sent her over the edge.

“I know that you told the entire school you had sex with her when you didn’t,” she said. “I know you ruined her life for a good period of time, and that you didn’t care because your friends thought you were ‘cool.’” All Carson could see in her mind was her mother, the one in the photograph in the hallway only a few years younger, her dark hair pulled into a ponytail and blue eyes soft and cast down in shame from the looks of those who didn’t know the whole story.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jack said, and Carson shook her head.

“Bullshit,” she said. The kids looked at one another, their eyes wide, but Carson ignored them.

“Listen here, young lady--” Jack began, but was cut off by another voice.

“Carson,” Lawrence said, placing a hand on her shoulder. She shrugged him off, narrowing her eyes at Jack instead.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” Lawrence said, placing his hand on Carson’s shoulder once more when she made a move to leave. “She’s just having a difficult time. I hope you understand.”

The anger still sat heavily in Carson's throat, and she knew that it would come spilling out again if she opened her mouth. She could no longer feel her fingers, curled so tightly around the handle of the basket, but she didn't care. All she could think of was how this man was allowed to live happily with his family, and her mother was dead. It wasn't fair.

"Yes, well," Jack said, glancing at his wife and children, "I suppose so."

"Thank you, Jack," Lawrence said, his hand still resting on Carson's shoulder, despite her attempts to shrug it off again. Jack mumbled something and turned away, and Carson watched as his wife whispered to him under her breath, throwing a glance back in her direction before the four of them disappeared down the nearby aisles.

Carson allowed herself to be led to the checkout, her nerves still vibrating with the recent confrontation. She felt like she'd spoken more in the past ten minutes than she had since arriving in town. Her chest felt heavy, as though those words had taken all of the energy from her bones and replaced them with lead. Her muscles were coiled tightly beneath her skin, and she had to consciously force her fingers to release their grip on the basket while Lawrence took out the few vegetables and rang them up for her.

"I know that this is hard for you," he said as he pressed a button on the register, sliding the potato onto the scale. "But you can't take it out on random people in the grocery store."

"He wasn't random," Carson said, hearing her mother's voice in her head once more, lamenting the recent turn of events caused by the man who had just walked away. I hate myself.

“Carson...” Lawrence said, and Carson looked up, a frown tugging on her lips. She could remember being very small and clinging to her grandmother’s hand while she pushed her cart around the store. Lawrence had been here even then, already running the store that had once belonged to his father. He was a good friend of her grandfather’s, who had passed away not long after her mother and father had taken her to the city when she was five. She had vague memories of barbeques in the summer heat, Lawrence and her grandfather standing at the grill, while her grandmother set the table with plastic silverware and snuck her small pieces of cookies when no one else was looking. Lawrence was a constant backdrop in the memories of her childhood, and in her more recent memories since she and her mother moved back to town when she was sixteen. He was often at their house for dinner, bringing fresh produce for June to cook with and candy bars that he pretended to leave by mistake and Carson pretended not to like.

She looked away and shook her head.

“I don’t need your pity,” she said quietly. She hated that look. It somehow said ‘poor child’ and ‘selfish child’ at the same time, and she hated both of them, despite the truth behind the words.

“You’re right,” Lawrence said, ringing up the last carrot and displaying the total on the screen. Carson looked up, her brows lifted in surprise, as he bagged the few items and handed them to her. “What you need is a distraction. Something to keep yourself busy. And I know just the thing.”

Carson eyed him warily as he glanced around at the three other checkout lanes. Only one was staffed, by a man who looked to be in his late twenties, chewing gum and bored out of his mind.

“I happen to be in need of another cashier,” Lawrence said. “You have the friendly face for it.” The words made Carson smile slightly in spite of herself.

“I don’t know,” she said, taking out the twenty from her grandmother and handing it to him. He took it, pausing as he looked her in the eyes. He was one of the first to do that since she came home.

“Look, Carson,” he said. “I know that this summer is going to be hard. People are going to look at you. But what better way to show them that it doesn’t bother you than by working here? You don’t have to just passively receive their stares. Stare back.” He grinned, handing her back the twenty. “I’ll take care of the bill. But don’t tell June. Keep the money.” He winked at her, and Carson suddenly wondered if that was where her grandmother had picked up the habit.

“Just think about it, alright?” Lawrence asked, and Carson could only nod as he handed her the plastic bag. “You’ll get out of the house, and make a little money doing it. I hear student loans are hell. At least this way you can get a start at paying them back.”

Carson took the bag from Lawrence without a word, nodding at him as she turned towards the exit, shoving the twenty back into her pocket. She knew he was right. She hated being in the house all the time. It was almost more suffocating than the summer heat outside. But the thought of standing in one place all day and exchanging pleasantries with the local townsfolk made her stomach clench in a way that threatened to bring up last night’s dinner.

She stepped outside, her eyes falling on Jack and his wife as they loaded up their car with groceries. She paused on the sidewalk, watching as he gestured angrily towards his wife, shouting something that she responded to in an equally loud voice. Carson couldn't make out their words, but suddenly the image of the man in his business suit sitting alone at the train station, waiting for someone to pick him up, made more sense. Maybe they didn't belong on those Thanksgiving commercials after all.

She waited until the car had driven out of the parking lot before making her way down the sidewalk and back towards the main road leading out of the town square and towards the sparsely-populated houses that lined the streets. By the time she turned onto her own street, the cracked screen in her pocket blinked '11:07.' She picked up her pace slightly, eventually turning into the cracked driveway of her grandmother's home.

She opened the door, a blast of air conditioning hitting her head-on. The sweat on her brow began to dry almost immediately as she slid her shoes off, turning into the kitchen and setting the plastic bag on the counter next to where her grandmother stood, feeding Sugar small pieces of a crushed-up cracker.

"Oh, thank you, Carson," June said, standing up straight and turning towards the counter, ignoring Sugar's squawk of protest. Carson picked up the cracker pieces she had left behind, offering one to the bird through the thick bars of his cage. Sugar poked at her fingertips, forcing her to drop the cracker, where he happily picked it up.

“Damn bird,” she muttered, pulling her fingers from the cage and looking at the single bead of blood collecting on her fingertip.

“Sugar,” June scolded, leaning down so that she was eye-to-eye with the bird. “Naughty bird. We don’t peck family.”

Carson wiped her finger on the side of her shorts as June stood up again, pulling the vegetables from the plastic bag.

“Do you need any help?” Carson asked, before she could stop herself. She frowned at the look of surprise on her grandmother’s face as she turned to look at her, shaking her head.

“That’s alright,” she said, setting the carrots on the counter and pulling the peeler from a nearby drawer.

“Okay,” Carson said, and turned to go upstairs when June’s voice stopped her.

“I hear you had a job offer today,” she said casually, peeling the outer layer of the carrots away into a small pile on the counter. Carson frowned.

“And where did you hear that?” she asked. She had left the grocery store less than half an hour ago. Was that really enough time for Lawrence to call June and fill her in on what he’d done?

“Oh, a little bird told me,” June said, winking at Carson as she peeled the carrots. “Are you going to accept?” she asked.

Carson waited for June to mention the fight with Jack, to reprimand her for taking out her frustrations on a man whom she would see as an innocent bystander, but she didn’t. Carson realized slowly that Lawrence must not have told June about the confrontation. Why wouldn’t he tell? What did he gain from keeping her secret? Nothing,

as far as she could tell. Just as he gained very little from offering her a job in the first place. The store seemed to be doing fine; he didn't need another cashier. The thought of him doing something for her out of pity made her uncomfortable, but the possibility that he genuinely cared somehow troubled her even more.

Carson felt the frown on her lips deepen the longer she stood in the entryway to the kitchen, her legs itching to take the stairs two at a time and leave this conversation behind. Lawrence and June talked more than even she had realized. She remembered his hand on June's shoulder during the funeral, his constant presence in their home ever since she'd come back to town, his name coming up in almost every conversation, the way that Lawrence had said June's name, his features softening and voice lilting just slightly...it seemed obvious now that they loved each other. And yet the thought wasn't troubling; in fact, it felt natural. Even her own parents hadn't had a rapport quite like June and Lawrence. In fact, she couldn't remember her parents ever sitting in silence, simply taking in each other's company, and yet this was an image that she could conjure of June and Lawrence on several occasions. The thought was troubling, and so she pushed it away, choosing instead to focus on the moment.

"I don't know," Carson said. "I might."

June nodded, chopping the carrots into small pieces.

"Bailey's home," June said, and Carson could hear the forced nonchalance in her voice. "I think she's out in the back."

Carson nodded, turning back to the stairs. Bailey had made it obvious that she didn't want to speak to her earlier, when they'd passed each other on the

sidewalk. Why bother her now? Carson shook her head, pushing away the self-pity that she could feel closing in on her. She deserved this. She was the one who had ignored the calls, the text messages, the countless attempts to contact her. She was the one who had isolated herself on a college campus hundreds of miles away, choosing the four walls of her dorm bedroom over any form of contact with her family. She didn't get to change her mind now.

She stepped into her mother's old bedroom, closing the door behind her. She had chosen isolation for months now, and here she was, choosing it again. It was the easier choice. It always had been. She could face her mother's illness head on, or she could duck out and avoid it. It was what her father had done. She woke up one day when she was six years old and he was gone, just like that. No trace that he ever even existed in the first place, beyond the one or two photographs that June had managed to take of him before they moved away. He was able to leave everything behind, every burden, every responsibility, everything that had troubled him, for whatever reason. Carson had imagined that she would be able to do the same, somehow. And yet things didn't work out quite the same for her as they had for him.

She wondered if he was sitting somewhere, either nearby or far away, having similar thoughts or regrets. She sat down on the edge of the bed, staring at the dark wooden floorboards beneath her bare feet. She had chosen isolation before because it was safer. It was safer to confine herself to school, because nothing that reminded her of her mother could slip in. Yet even that had failed, she realized, as the biology terms from her final swam around in her head until she felt dizzy. Metastasis. Lymph nodes. Cancer.

When her mother had gotten sick again, Carson had begun to sneak out of the house more frequently. She knew that her mother was unable to stop her when she could barely move her own body, and so she slipped out of her window nearly every night, making her way to an overgrown field or decrepit house to meet the ‘friends’ that she had made when she moved back to town. Her mother knew what she was doing; Carson could see it in her eyes every time she snuck past her bedroom door. Their eyes would meet occasionally, only for a moment, though that was all it took for her mother to communicate everything to her: that she knew what she was doing, and that it broke her heart.

Carson reached into the pillow case, grasping the worn leather journal and pulling it onto her lap. She didn’t have to see that look if she was hundreds of miles away. She didn’t have to hear the pain, both physical and otherwise, in her mother’s voice if she didn’t answer the phone. She didn’t have to pretend to be okay if she pressed ‘ignore’ every time Bailey’s name popped up on her screen. Isolation meant peace, or at least the illusion of it. It meant a brief respite from the grief that threatened to consume her every time she gave it even an inch of leeway. It meant a chance at assuaging the tightness in her chest when she remembered how unabashedly she had taken advantage of her mother’s sickness, going against every wish for safety that her mother had ever wanted for her as she left the house in the dark of night, taunting every evil force that her mother had ever warned her about to come and get her. Isolation meant safety, at least in theory. It meant forgetting her mother.

And yet now, isolation meant time with her mother. It meant time to read the words that were never meant for her eyes, and yet made her feel closer to her than before. She shook her head, running her fingers over the leather cover. She had chosen isolation before to avoid her mother, and now she was choosing it to bring herself closer to her. Funny how it was easier now that she was dead.

She glanced at the thick bundle of pages remaining to be read, a frown tugging on her lips as she realized that, at this rate it wouldn't take her more than two weeks to get through the rest. She had months to go before she would return to school. A distraction might be exactly what she needed, she realized, as she opened the journal to where she had left off only a few hours before. And some extra money wouldn't hurt.

We went to that spot in the woods that the adults pretend not to know about. It's a little clearing with fallen logs that we use for seats, and a big pit in the middle for bonfires. Jack was there, but he didn't try to talk to me, thank God.

There was this one boy there. He's a senior. I've seen him around. He's quiet, and he doesn't really have many friends, I don't think. I never really paid attention to him, but he's kind of cute. He talked to me for a little while, but I don't even remember what about. The weird thing was, he didn't even try to hit on me. He just seemed bored with the whole night, and wanted someone to talk to. It was actually kind of nice. Maybe I'll talk to him again. His name is Thomas Anderson, I think.

Carson felt a flush creep up her neck as she read the name. That was her father. She had rarely seen his name written in full, only on official documents that she'd found as she helped her mother move their things when they came back to town. Her mother had kept her maiden name when they married, and given it to Carson as well: Cadwell. It

felt odd to see her father's full name in her mother's handwriting. She could picture him vaguely, a blur of tan skin, dark hair, and darker eyes. She realized now that she'd never seen a picture of him from when he was the age that her mother described in her journal. The thought was vaguely troubling as her eyes glanced briefly over the rest of the entry.

Anne told me she got Jack drunk and led him into the woods under the pretense of sleeping with him, and then left him there with his pants around his ankles, lost. He stumbled back into the party a while later with his belt undone, and landed on his face in the dirt. It was hilarious.

Carson smirked slightly as she closed the journal, sliding it back into place in the pillowcase. Though she wanted to know more, to hear more about her mother and her father, she knew that she would run out of material quickly if she didn't pace herself. She glanced at the cracked screen of her phone, the numbers '11:56' blinking back at her.

Maybe a job wouldn't be the worst way to pass the time.

Chapter 7

“Here’s your uniform,” Lawrence said, handing Carson a neatly folded pile that consisted of khaki pants, a white polo shirt, and a green apron with the name of the store proudly emblazoned on the front: *Stone’s Throw Grocery*. It was a joke that Lawrence often liked to make. His last name was Stone, and he claimed that his store was no more than a stone’s throw away from any other place in town.

Carson accepted the bundle, holding it to her chest as he took her around the store, showing her where everything was located.

“I’m sure you already know most of this,” he said, glancing back at her as they walked past a display of fresh, locally-grown tomatoes. She did know most of it; she had spent so much time in this store after she’d come back, when her mother was got sick again after only a year of remission, picking up anything that her mother expressed even the smallest desire to eat. It was so hard for her to keep food down that any little thing she commented on, whether it be chicken noodle soup or stir-fry and rice, Carson would come to the store and get the ingredients. She’d learned to cook more in the past five years than she had known for the ten years spent in the city, which consisted mainly of takeout and frozen pizzas.

Lawrence led her back to the checkout lanes, walking to the lane with a large number 3 displayed on the sign that stretched above it.

“This will be your lane,” he said, patting the register as he led her around to the other side. “Allen is on one,” he said, nodding towards the twenty-something that Carson had seen the day before when she was offered the job. “And Abigail is on two,” he said, gesturing towards the empty register next to hers. “She should be here soon,” he added, a frown on his lips. Carson wondered if her tardiness was a common occurrence.

“As much as I’d like to train you myself, I have to organize our new deliveries,” Lawrence said, and Carson looked over at him. “So when Abby gets here, she’ll be in charge of you. She’s about your age, so you two should get along just fine,” he said, and suddenly Carson was regretting getting out of bed that morning. She didn’t mind being around Lawrence, but the thought of spending eight hours with a stranger was less than appealing.

“Alright,” she said, looking over at the register. She hadn’t had a job until she went to college the year before, when she worked as a barista at the coffee shop on campus. Her mother had refused to let her take a job at the gas station near their apartment in the city, claiming that it was far too dangerous, despite the relatively low crime of the area and the fact that she’d only be working days.

“She should be here soon,” Lawrence said. “In the meantime, you can change into your uniform in the employee restroom. It’s in the back, where I showed you the overstock.”

Carson nodded, turning away from Lawrence as he hurried to meet someone at the side door, who stood with several boxes by their feet and a clipboard in their hands. Allen smiled at Carson as she walked by, but she ducked her head down and continued on through the aisles, pushing through the swinging door at the back with her shoulder and walking into the employee restroom.

She stared at herself in the mirror once she’d pulled on the khaki pants and polo shirt, shaking her head at her reflection. Somehow the creases in the pants made her legs look even longer. The pants only went down to slightly above her ankles, showing small patches of skin that she knew were not part of the intended

uniform. She slid her tennis shoes back on, pulling her socks up in an attempt to cover the tan stripe of skin that peeked through. This was a problem she was used to, at least.

She stood up, tucking the shirt into the pants and typing the apron behind herself. The look was completed with a green visor on the top of her head, which refused to hold her hair down. The dark, wavy strands, that only reached her chin, refused to be tamed by the visor, instead poking out at odd angles below and above the strap. She frowned, tugging it off her head and setting it on the sink. She'd just tell Lawrence he forgot to give her one if he asked.

Carson glanced at the cracked phone screen in her pocket, which blinked back '11:32.' Eight hours and she could leave. She'd woken up late this morning, and was unable to read the next entry in her mother's journal. The last time she'd left her, she'd just met her father on the log in the woods. She could picture it in her mind as she walked back towards the front of the store, her hands shoved deep into the pockets of the khaki pants. Her mother, sixteen and fresh-faced, her long hair tied behind her head and a slight flush on her cheeks as she talked to the man she would later marry and have a child with. The image brought a strange sense of warmth to her chest as she walked past Allen again, nodding at his smile this time, glancing around for anyone who could be Abigail.

"She's late," Allen said, pulling Carson from her daydream. She looked over at him, frowning as he smiled at her once more. "Lawrence gives her too much credit. I can show you a few things until she gets here, if you want," he said. Something about the way he spoke set her on edge, though she passed it off as the lack of interaction she'd had for months. If Lawrence trusted him enough to hire him, then he had to be fine.

“Sure,” Carson said, the sound of her voice somehow startling even herself as she walked over to him, stopping a few feet away and glancing at the register. It felt odd to stand close to one again. She’d lost her job at the coffee shop near the start of the spring semester for missing too many shifts. She hadn’t even tried to argue, or tell her manager why she didn’t show up. She had no real reason to not want to get out of bed in the mornings, or to be physically exhausted after speaking to customers for only two hours per shift. She just was.

“If the coupon is expired, we typically don’t take it,” Allen said, and Carson only now realized that he had been speaking this whole time. “But if they throw a fit, it’s easier to just do it than have to get Lawrence over here. Some of the old-timers in this town really want their 10% off, you know?” he said, and Carson realized she was meant to answer when he looked at her, an expectant look on his face.

“Yeah,” was all she could think to say as he turned back to the screen, pointing out the function of several other buttons, cracking small jokes here and there and glancing at her to make sure she smiled. She kept her eyes on the time, which somehow continued to tick away even as her legs began to tingle from standing still so long. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, watching as the clock turned from 11:59 to noon. Allen had only checked out a handful of customers, and Abigail was nowhere to be seen.

“Where the hell is she?” he asked. Carson looked up when she heard a loud ‘pop,’ just in time to see a young woman walking towards them, small pieces of gum still stuck on her lips. She licked them off, walking towards them.

“Yo,” she said, nodding at Carson. “You’re the new girl, right?”

Carson opened her mouth to respond, but Abigail didn’t give her a chance.

“I hope Allen here didn’t hit on you too much,” she said, gesturing towards Allen, whose cheeks flushed a soft shade of pink. Was that what he’d been doing? Carson wasn’t even sure.

“Come on,” Abigail said, leading Carson to the register next to Allen’s. “I don’t know why Lawrence insisted I show you how to work this thing, but he did.” She sighed, blowing another bubble of gum, which popped loudly in Carson’s ear as Abigail continued to speak.

“There’s really nothing to it,” Abigail said, gesturing at the register. “You scan the items, read their total, and swipe their cards or take their cash. Give out change, have them sign a receipt, blah blah blah, repeat for eight hours until you’re ready to smash your head in the cash drawer. Simple.”

Carson could feel a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. She willed it away as Abigail looked back at her, her eyes falling onto her nametag, proudly displayed underneath the *Stone’s Throw Grocery* logo on her apron.

“Carson, huh?” she asked, and Carson stiffened. She could already hear the condolences, the ‘*I’m sorrys*’ and ‘*How are you doings?*’. And yet all Abigail did was nod, turning back to the register and pointing out a few of the buttons.

“If the screen freezes, just smack it around a few times. Usually gets it working again pretty quickly,” she said. Carson looked at her, though nothing in Abigail’s expression revealed if she was joking or not. Carson just shook her head, turning her eyes

back to the screen and trying to pay attention while Abigail showed her the rest of the basic mechanics of the register.

The rest of the day passed slowly. Abigail would take care of a few customers, and then Carson would take a few. There were times when a line began to form, but it was quickly taken care of. Carson recognized many of the customers, either from the funeral, the church services she'd been dragged to almost every Sunday by her grandmother, or just from passing. Each time she made eye contact with one of them, she could feel her palms grow warm, the flush spreading up her back and onto her neck and cheeks. She waited for them to make a comment, either on her six-month absence or on how difficult it must be for her to have lost her mother, but no one brought it up. It took a few hours, but Carson eventually found herself relaxing and falling back into the rhythm of working at a register. It was almost relaxing, in a way, and Abigail's offhanded comments after nearly every transaction brought a level of amusement to the situation that Carson hadn't expected. She wouldn't have used the word 'fun,' but she wasn't miserable, which was more than she expected.

It was nearly 6:30, and nearing the end of her shift at 7, when Annabelle pushed her cart through the line. Carson didn't recognize her at first; and why would she? Annabelle was more familiar from her mother's journal entries than from any real interaction. Despite their obvious closeness in the past, evidenced through her mother's own words and Annabelle's at her funeral, Carson had never officially met this woman since returning to town six years ago. For being such good friends, she found it odd that her mother had never met up with her old

friend. Or was it Annabelle who didn't want to meet with her mother? Regardless, it felt almost surreal to see her standing there, in dirt-caked boots and faded denim overalls, her skin tanned by the sun, rather than in a black dress with a somber look on her face.

Carson glanced at Abigail, hoping she would offer to take the next customer, but she was staring at her cell phone, her fingers dancing over the keys and a smirk tugging the corner of her lips. Carson turned slowly back towards Annabelle, who was staring at her with a look on her face that Carson couldn't quite place. Carson gripped the counter on her side of the register tightly, her palms sticking to the marbled surface as Annabelle placed her items onto the belt, flashing her a smile that seemed so genuine it made Carson's heart rate almost double in speed. Why was she smiling?

Carson rang up her items in silence. After every 'beep,' she expected to hear Annabelle's voice, but she was silent, waiting with that same smile on her lips after placing her last item on the belt. Carson didn't meet her eyes as she read out her total, taking the bundle of bills from her hand. She quickly counted out the change, handing back a handful of coins. Their fingers brushed briefly, and Carson pulled away quickly, sending the pile of quarters and dimes tumbling to the ground, where they spun around and away in every direction.

"I'm sorry," Carson said, but Annabelle shook her head while Abigail smirked.

"Smooth," Abigail said. Carson ignored her, coming around the counter and kneeling down next to Annabelle, helping her pick up the runaway coins. They both reached for a penny at the same time, and Carson quickly withdrew her fingers.

"I won't bite, you know," Annabelle said. Carson still refused to meet her eyes. All she could picture was Annabelle over two decades ago, her hair a light brown with no

visible streaks of gray, the lines on her face smoothed out, standing next to her mother and laughing in the hallways of the high school.

Carson didn't respond, instead standing up and handing her the rest of her change.

"Thank you for coming," she said simply. The smile on Annabelle's face faded for a split second, and then returned as she gathered her items into bags and pushed her cart towards the doors.

"Awk-ward," Abigail said, and Carson realized that she had put her phone away at some point, for the first time in at least an hour. "You know her?" she asked, and Carson shook her head.

"Not really," she said, and it wasn't a lie. She didn't know her in any way that mattered. And though she clung to her mother's journal for the insight it could give her, she didn't feel that same desire with Annabelle. In fact, she wanted nothing to do with her. It was easier to read her mother's words and picture her in her mind, but something about having a living, breathing person standing in front of her who could give her the same, and perhaps even more, insight into her mother's life, made her palms sweat and heart race. It was too much, at least for now.

"Listen," Abigail said, and Carson glanced over at her. "There's a party tonight. Mostly college kids, but us common folk are welcome, too." The way that Abigail said the word 'common folk,' with a hint of bitterness and a full note of sarcasm, made Carson wonder if there was a hierarchy in town that she was

unaware of. She didn't feel the desire to tell her that she was one of those 'college kids.'

"You should come," Abigail said. "You seem alright. And this day was a lot more entertaining, watching you fumble around like that, so maybe I owe you." Carson frowned, though she couldn't find it within herself to be upset at the comment. It almost seemed like it was Abigail's way of being kind.

"I probably shouldn't," Carson said. She wanted nothing more at that moment than to be back in her bedroom, her mother's old bedroom, curled up on the bed with her mother's handwriting in the palm of her hands.

"You could just come for an hour or so, and then ditch," Abigail said. "That's probably what I'll do, anyway. The clearing is always full of mosquitos at this time of year, anyway."

Carson frowned, remembering her mother's words in her journal entry from the night before. 'The clearing' was what she had called the place where students went to party. It was where she'd met her father. The thought of seeing the same place, maybe even the same fallen log, where her parents had first met, brought a strange thrill to Carson's chest. Still, she found herself saying the words that Abigail no doubt expected.

"No, thank you," she said.

Abigail shrugged, turning back to the register.

"Suit yourself," was all she said.

Carson glanced at the clock on the register, which told her it was 6:50. 10 more minutes, and no customers in sight. It almost seemed like the grocery store was completely abandoned.

“We don’t get many people after 6:30, but Lawrence insists on staying open until 9. He usually only keeps one register open then, and runs it himself, mostly,” Abigail said, as though sensing her questions. Carson glanced over at Allen, who was picking at his nails with a bored expression his face.

“Someone will come in and take the last two-hour shift,” Abigail said, following her gaze. “Something tells me I’ll be seeing Allen at the party. He likes the high school girls.” The odd vibe Carson was getting earlier suddenly made sense, and she frowned, looking at the older man.

“That’s disgusting,” she said, and Abigail laughed.

“That’s the most emotion I’ve heard out of you all day,” she said, and looked over at Allen, who had looked up at the sound of laughter.

“Get back to work, Allen,” Abigail said, and Allen flipped her off, muttering something as he turned back to the register. Carson looked between the two of them, raising an eyebrow at Abigail.

“He’s pissed because I told the last girl he tried to hook up with that he’s twenty-six, still lives with his mom, and works at the grocery store,” she said simply. “Not that he had a chance anyway,” she added, raising her voice just enough for Allen to hear. Carson looked away when he turned back towards them, suddenly wishing she was anywhere else.

Abigail reached over and flipped the switch that lit up the lane number, untying her apron in one swift motion with the other hand.

“Let’s go,” she said, reaching over and punching out on the register. Carson followed suit, despite the fact that it was only 6:52, picking up her bag

from underneath the register, where her shorts and tank top were still packed away, and followed Abigail towards the sliding glass doors.

“How was the first day?” Lawrence asked. Carson jumped, turning to look back at him from where he’d emerged from his office. She hadn’t even seen him come out.

“Fine,” she said. He looked past her to Abigail, who was unwrapping a new stick of gum.

“I hope you haven’t been chewing gum on the job again,” he said, and Abigail flashed him a smile.

“Of course not,” she said sweetly, and Carson couldn’t help but smile at the sudden and obvious change in behavior. Lawrence obviously wasn’t fooled, either.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then?” he asked, looking back at Carson. She hesitated, glancing back at the register before meeting Lawrence’s eye.

“Yes,” she said, and he smiled at her, reaching out and placing a hand on her arm that she didn’t immediately shrug off.

“Good,” he said. He looked back at Abigail, who was still standing just outside, now engrossed in her phone again. “On time!” he called, and Abigail smiled at him as she walked backwards towards the parking lot.

“Always,” she said, and Carson quickly followed her out. The sun had nearly set. The heat of the day was starting to fade, and she took a deep breath of the summer air as Abigail turned to look at her.

“See you tomorrow,” she said, and Carson nodded, watching for a moment as Abigail walked towards the back of the parking lot, eventually stepping into a faded blue truck with dirt caked on its tires.

The walk back to June's house felt longer than it had that morning, despite the cool breezes that began to flow more frequently with the setting of the sun. Carson walked slowly, keeping her eyes straight ahead as Abigail's truck drove by, its tires spinning up dirt.

As she turned onto June's street, her eyes fell on the bushes that lined the front of the yard closest to the main road. A butterfly sat on one of the leaves, its deep orange wings dotted sporadically with black. Carson paused, remembering the look on Bailey's face as she'd passed her silently on the sidewalk earlier that day, and wondered where she was now.

The path she walked was familiar to her feet, which followed it as though of their own accord, stepping over every pothole, every small divot, without her notice. She could remember being eighteen and racing Bailey down this same street, her obnoxiously long legs giving her an obvious advantage over the twelve-year-old who trailed behind.

"Wait for me!" Bailey shouted, and Carson, who was barely even jogging, glanced back at her, a grin spreading across her features.

"It wouldn't be much of a race, then would it?" she asked. Bailey's face as red with exertion as she pushed herself faster, struggling to catch up to her long-legged older cousin. Carson continued to walk backwards, keeping her eyes on Bailey. This gave her a perfect view when Bailey's foot caught in one of those potholes, sending her tumbling head-first into the gravel. The impact was sudden and the noise loud, as she slid a few feet, her knees and nose taking the brunt of the damage.

“Bailey??” Carson asked, hurrying back over to her cousin. She reached her in three strides, and was picking her up within four. Her knees were red and bloody, as was the skin on her chin and nose. Bailey looked at her, her eye welling up with tears as Carson carefully slung her over her shoulder and onto her back.

“Put your arms around my neck,” Carson said. Once Bailey was securely in place, she began jogging back towards June’s house. She barely noticed the weight on her back, even as the summer heat sent sweat trickling down her forehead and the back of her neck. She remembered being so impressed that Bailey had barely cried, though she realized later, when her cousin opened her mouth to speak to her, that one of her front teeth was completely gone, while those next to it were cracked or damaged. Thankfully a few of them were baby teeth; still, the dentist had ended up putting her in braces, much to Bailey’s dismay.

“I look ridiculous,” Bailey said, staring at herself in the mirror on her closet door. Carson sat on Bailey’s bed, her long legs stretched out in front of her, and shook her head.

“You look fine,” she said, though she could quickly see that Bailey wasn’t buying it.

“I’m going to be the laughing stock of the school,” she groaned, turning away from the mirror and burying her face in her hands. Strands of light brown hair fell over her face, further hiding her from view. Carson frowned, standing up and quickly closing the distance between them. She knelt down on the carpet in front of her cousin, laying a hand gently on her knee.

“Look at me,” she said. Bailey shook her head.

“Come on, Bales,” Carson said. “I want to tell you something.”

Bailey glanced up slowly, her eyes red with tears. Carson reached out and wiped them away, offering her a small smile.

“Do you still like butterflies?” she asked. Bailey blinked, sending another tear tumbling down her cheek and onto her chin, where it clung to her skin for a moment before joining the rest in her lap.

“Yes,” Bailey said quietly.

“Then tell me. What do they start out as?” Carson asked. Bailey gave her a skeptical look.

“Caterpillars,” she said. “Everyone knows that.”

“Does the butterfly know that?” Carson asked. Bailey frowned, a crease appearing in the middle of her forehead that made her look much older than twelve.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Neither do I,” Carson said. “But you know it. And the butterflies figure it out eventually, don’t they?” She didn’t wait for a response, instead pressing on before Bailey could argue.

“I think you look fine,” she said. “But I know you don’t believe me. And I don’t think I would have at your age, either. So instead, I’ll just remind you that these braces won’t last forever. Just like a caterpillar doesn’t remain a caterpillar forever. And when you come out the other side, with perfectly straight teeth and a brand new smile, you won’t even remember what it felt like to be a caterpillar.”

Bailey stared at her for a moment, then shook her head.

“That’s so stupid,” she said. But Carson caught the hint of a smile on her face as she turned back towards the mirror.

As Carson let herself into June’s house, she realized again that she hadn’t seen the braces come off. That had happened over Christmas break, while she was drowning herself in research papers and vocabulary lists. And as she answered June’s inquiries about her first day of work, Carson wondered if Bailey had remembered her words while she sat in the dentist’s chair, waiting to see herself with new teeth and a new smile. She wondered if she felt more like a butterfly than a caterpillar when she was able to speak without the small pieces of metal between her teeth.

But she couldn’t ask her. The light under Bailey’s door was on, and Carson could hear her voice as she walked upstairs, towards her mother’s old bedroom. Her words were muffled, but Carson could hear the happiness in her voice, in the laugh that followed a long silence. She walked into her mother’s bedroom, closing the door behind her. She could still hear her cousin’s laughter, despite the distance between them, and wondered if it would ever be directed towards her again.

Chapter 8

The next week passed in much the same manner. Each day, Carson woke up, read from her mother's journal, and went to work. The long days began to feel shorter. Something about Abigail's quips and the monotony of ringing up groceries brought a calmness to her mind that had been missing for years. Routine was comfortable, if not exciting.

The harsh fluorescent lights of the store had become almost soothing, in a way, as had the seemingly endless aisles of canned foods, paper goods, and organic, locally-grown produce. She began to recognize the scuff marks on the tan tiled floor, as well as the people who came into the store nearly every day, always leaving with one or two items that they had forgotten the previous day. There was the older woman with a dark wooden cane who Carson thought was far too forgetful to be allowed to drive, and yet always peeled out of the parking lot with the sound of spinning tires and the smell of burning rubber. There was the group of teenagers who snickered behind their hands at something the others had said, only quieting down when Abigail shot them a look that reminded Carson of her high school science teacher, who was always trying to make the students shut up and sit down. There was the young father with dark circles under his eyes, constantly dragging his young son around the store, sighing with every new tantrum.

And then there was Jack and his family.

Carson saw them a few times during that week, either together or separately. Jack somehow always managed to get into Allen or Abigail's lines rather than her own, something that both relieved and disappointed her. She

wanted to force him to look her in the eyes while she rang up his groceries, to see the discomfort on his face while she smiled and asked him to sign here, please. And then Thursday, a week from their first encounter, he came to her line.

Allen was out sick and Abigail was helping her bag groceries, as many of their patrons were too old to do so in a timely manner. Carson stiffened when she saw Jack fall into the end of her line, and Abigail raised an eyebrow at her, silently asking a question that Carson didn't know how to answer. Carson watched her out of the corner of her eye as she silently rang up Jack's few groceries. Jack didn't speak for a few moments, though he finally broke the silence with a cough and a few words.

“It was nice of Lawrence to give you a job,” he said. Carson just nodded, passing barcode after barcode over the scanner. Bread. Milk. Eggs. Cheese. Canned soup. Jack fell silent again, but Carson imagined she could feel the anger he held back in the way that he tapped his fingers on the counter and occasionally let out a sigh, as though she was taking up too much of his time. She could remember how it had felt to let him know everything she thought of him, every ounce of frustration and anger that her mother's words had brought upon her due to his actions. The same feeling was welling up inside her chest once more as she scanned the last of his items. She read his total, and opened her mouth to say something else, something harsh and angry that would release the tension that had built up inside her, when she saw Abigail from the corner of her eyes. She placed the eggs at the bottom of a bag, casually dropping the large jug of milk on top, covering the sound of the ‘crack’ with a cough that she didn't shield with her arm. Jack glanced at her, his nose crinkling in what Carson could only assume to be disgust, while

Abigail grinned at him, popping another bubble of the gum that she had been chewing for the past two hours.

“Sorry,” she said simply. Carson bit back a laugh as she handed Jack his receipt.

“Have a wonderful day,” she said, and waited until he was out the door before she let herself laugh with Abigail.

“Will you pass the peas?” Carson asked. Bailey ignored her, her eyes remaining trained on her phone, which she was very obviously looking at under the table. June furrowed her eyebrows.

“No phones at the dinner table, Bailey,” June said. Bailey only glanced up long enough to shove the bowl of peas closer to Carson.

“Listen to your grandmother, Bailey,” Therese said from her spot at the far end of the table. Bailey rolled her eyes, slipping her phone back into her pocket before looking down at the half-eaten food on her plate.

“May I be excused?” she asked, and June frowned.

“You haven’t eaten much,” she said. Carson could hear the worry that laced her words. She was sure Bailey could, too, but she didn’t react to it, instead simply shrugging.

“I’m not hungry,” she said. “Can I go now?”

June looked down at her own plate, barely touched, and nodded. Carson watched as Bailey pushed her chair back, scraping the food from her plate and

into the trashcan before setting the empty plate down on the counter. Carson heard her bedroom door close upstairs a few moments later.

“Thank you for dinner,” Therese said. She was already standing up, her plate nearly empty. “I have to run to work. I’ll talk to Bailey later,” she added, though Carson knew that was a lie. She rarely saw Therese interact with her daughter, unless it was to reprimand her for something. For her, ‘talking’ usually meant ‘yelling.’

“Of course, dear,” June said. Therese put her plate in the sink and walked towards the front door, her non-slip uniform shoes squeaking on the tile floor. Therese had been a waitress for as long as Carson could remember, a job which had brought in enough money when her husband was still around. Now that they were divorced, however, Therese was barely home. Between work and the bar down the street, Carson barely saw her aunt. She didn’t exactly miss her.

June was silent until the front door closed a few moments later. Even then she only let out a quiet sigh, taking another bite of the pot roast that she had been cooking for hours. Carson looked down at her own plate, barely touched, and brought a forkful to her mouth. She knew that it tasted good, and yet all she could think of was how much she longed to be upstairs, buried under the covers that she still imagined smelled like her mother and reading the words she had penned so long ago.

“You don’t have to stay just for me, dear,” June said. Carson glanced up, shaking her head.

“I’m still eating,” she said. June offered her a thin smile and nodded. The rest of dinner was silent. Carson could remember sitting in this same chair over a decade ago. Her mother had sat on her left, and her father next to her. She could almost see her

mother's smile, always lingering on her lips; she could almost smell the scent of her perfume, somehow strong enough to overpower June's cooking. Her father, the stony presence sitting two seats away, was silent. He was always silent, a thought which Carson found just troubling enough to ignore.

Her grandfather had sat at the head of the table where June now resided, while June took the seat next to him. When she was almost seven years old, Therese and an infant joined the makeshift family at the table, sans husband. The only memory that Carson held of Bailey during that brief period of time before her father moved her and her mother to the City was a red-faced infant, always screaming, crying, or sleeping, even at the dinner table.

"Are you finished?" June asked. Carson pulled herself back to the present, looking at the only other person who still sat at the table. She realized she had been eating even as she sat in silence, the process just mechanical enough to occur on its own. She nodded, allowing June to take her plate and add it to her own before moving over to the sink.

"Do you want some help?" Carson asked. June glanced over at her, smiling slightly, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"That's alright, dear," she said. "You can go on upstairs. I'm sure you're tired from working."

And though she knew she should insist, or at the very least put water on the stove and make a mug of tea, Carson couldn't help but nod. All she could think of was her mother's journal, waiting exactly where she had left it that morning.

“Thank you for dinner,” she said instead, and quickly turned to go upstairs.

The seventeen steps disappeared quickly beneath her feet as she hurried to the top. The light under Bailey’s door was off, yet it was only 6:30. Carson frowned as she imagined her cousin sneaking out the window, climbing down the same trellis that Carson had used when she was her age and living in the same house. She turned into her mother’s bedroom, closing the door behind her. She quickly pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, discarding her work uniform in a pile to be dealt with in the morning.

The now familiar weight of the journal soon rested on her lap, beckoning her to open it. She glanced at the faded red ribbon that marked her place and realized that she was already a third of the way through it. She felt like she had barely read anything, and yet the pages told a different story. She pushed away the question of what to do when she finally did reach the end, instead opening it to where she had left off early that morning.

Anna and I went to the movies tonight. And guess who was sitting next to us?

Thomas Anderson.

Carson paused, rereading the words on the page. Her father’s name had been meticulously absent ever since their first meeting in the clearing. She had wondered when he would show up again, and seeing his name made her heart pick up its pace, her finger already turning the corner of the page that she had yet to finish reading.

He remembered my name. We ended up whispering throughout most the movie, making comments on the stupid things that characters did. I know that Anna was annoyed with us, but she didn’t tell us to shut up. I think she was happy that he was there, too.

Happy for me, I mean. Thomas doesn't care about the rumors that Jack started. He even offered to kick his ass for me, but I said no. I don't want him to get in trouble.

Carson smiled slightly at the image of her parents in a darkened movie theater, whispering to one another and stifling laughs behind their hands. This was how it had started, then. One chance meeting followed by another. She wondered what her father would have said, if he'd kept his own journal. She couldn't form any words on the blank page, however. The silence made her uncomfortable, and so she turned the page, expecting to find more about her father, but instead found a hastily scribbled page. The handwriting was barely legible, though Carson was still able to recognize it as belonging to her mother.

I snuck out to meet Anna and Thomas. Thomas said he had a friend who wanted to meet us, and Anna was really excited. I think she was hoping to hit it off with him. We were supposed to meet at Anna's house. Her parents drink a lot, and sleep like the dead, and would never hear us if we stayed outside. Mama takes forever to fall asleep sometimes, so by the time I managed to get out of the house, it was almost midnight.

Thomas was already there by the time I arrived. His friend, Greg, was flirting with Anna. He didn't even try to hide it. We hid out in the barn behind Anna's house. Even though I barely knew Thomas, I felt like I did. I know that's something that every teenager says about the guy they like, but it seemed true for once.

Anna had stolen some of her parent's liquor, and brought it to the barn. I'd had a few beers before, but never anything this hard. By the time I'd taken two shots, I felt off. Thomas laughed and called me a lightweight. He wasn't even phased.

Thomas told me that he was eighteen. He'd been held back a few times, and only stayed in school because his dad made him. He told me a lot of things. About his dad (a jerk), his mom (who had died when he was just a baby), and how he had met Greg (in detention).

After a while, Greg took out a cigarette. I hate smokers, but I didn't tell him not to, mostly because Anna gave me a look from across the barn. I remember thinking that the smoke smelled weird, but when I asked about it, Thomas just laughed and shook his head.

I asked him what was so funny, but he wouldn't tell me. Greg offered me a drag of his cigarette. I don't know why I took it. I guess because Thomas was still laughing at me, and even Anna looked like she knew something I didn't. And even though I'd never had a cigarette before, I knew that this wasn't what they were supposed to taste like. It was too sweet, and the smell reminded me of the one that always lingered at the clearing. Thomas told me to hold the smoke in, and I did it until I felt so light-headed I thought I was going to pass out. Then I started coughing, and I felt so light and airy and everything just felt right.

I don't remember a lot of the rest of the night. Anna told me I spent it giggling and drinking and telling Thomas how much I hated Jack and school and my overprotective mother.

I have no idea how I got home without Mama noticing. Anna was too drunk to help me upstairs, so Thomas had to do it. I barely remember his arm around me as he practically carried me up the stairs. I remember hearing the floorboards creak, and him putting his finger to his lips while I held my breath until Therese was safely back in her room from the bathroom. I think I almost passed out, I held my breath so long.

He sat me on the bed and told me goodnight. The last thing I remember was him sneaking back into the hallway. My head is killing me. I have no idea how I got away with this, but one thing is for sure: Mama can never find out.

Carson stared at the journal in silence. She re-read the pages, but they said the same thing the second time around. She could remember sneaking out one night after a particularly explosive argument with her own mother over curfew. It was a year after her mother had undergone the double mastectomy. Carson was fifteen years old, and in her second year of high school in the city.

Carson had slipped outside, the cold October wind biting through the thin material of her jacket and nipping at her skin. It was nearly midnight as she made her way towards the end of the street, where the old abandoned park still stood. It had been shut down over a decade ago, due to parental complaints of drug deals, violence, or a general lack of safety for their children.

Carson walked over to a girl who sat next to her in math class. Her name, which Carson only remembered because she'd copied her algebra homework the week before, was standing with a small group of boys, a few of whom looked too old to be in high school.

“Carson,” Mia said, nodding at the boy who stood closest to her. “This is my boyfriend, Anthony.”

Carson nodded at him, and he grinned at her.

“Want a hit?” he asked. Carson looked at the blunt hanging from his fingertips and shook her head.

“No thanks,” she said. Her mother would be able to smell weed from a mile away, even if she never touched it; it was best not to tempt fate, however appealing it sounded.

“Suit yourself,” he said.

Carson sat down on the grass, stretching her legs out in front of her. Even at age fifteen they were too long. She was already taller than many of the boys in her grade, a feature that was not looked on kindly by many of the other students her own age. Out here in the dark, though, no one seemed to care. They were all there for a reason, whether it be to get drunk, high, or just to get out. It was something to connect them, even if that something would be severed first thing in the morning.

Anthony and Mia sat down to her left. The smell of marijuana was thick in the air as Carson leaned back on her elbows in the grass, looking up at the stars. They were barely visible.

“You can see them much better out in the country,” Mia said.

“I know,” Carson said. She had spent many nights laying on June’s front lawn, her head resting in her mother’s lap, watching the stars until her eyes couldn’t keep open any longer. She hadn’t remembered it in years.

“Want one?” Mia asked. Carson lifted herself back up into a sitting position, taking the beer that Mia was holding out towards her. This smell was easier to hide, assuming she didn’t have too much.

“Thanks,” she said, using the bottom of her shirt to twist the top open. The bitter taste was welcome on her tongue.

“You sure you don’t want some?” Anthony asked, as the blunt was passed from Mia back to him. Carson paused, the effects of the alcohol making the rolled up paper look more and more appealing.

“Just one hit,” she said, taking it from his hands. She didn’t smoke weed often. She only had a few drags when she was with others in a setting like this, and even then only on occasion. She didn’t want to risk letting the smell tip off her mother. Still, just once wouldn’t hurt. She held her breath for a few moments, letting it out slowly and passing the joint off to Drew again.

“Thanks,” she said, leaning back on her elbows again and looking back up at the faded stars, further clouded by smoke.

Now, Carson looked back down at the journal in her lap, rereading the last lines once more.

I have no idea how I got away with this, but one thing is for sure: Mama can never find out.

It was the same thought that Carson had had that night, as she slipped in the front door, buzzed and reeking of weed and alcohol. She had held her breath, waiting to see if her mother would stir from her spot on the couch. Somehow, she

remained still, and Carson was able to slip down the hallway and into her room, where she quickly changed and got into bed.

Carson sat back against the headboard, carefully closing the journal. This was the bed her mother had sat in that night, filled with relief after fooling June. The irony wasn't lost on Carson. She had done the exact same thing, more than once, both while they lived in the city and once they'd come back here. She wondered what her mother would say to her if she knew how many times she'd snuck out, how many times she'd put herself in the same situation that her mother had found herself in so many years ago. The image of her mother, sitting on her bed the morning after her father had taken her home, slowly faded away, replaced by Carson instead, sitting in the same bed with the journal lying closed in her lap. She could almost hear her mother's voice in her head, saying the same words that Carson had heard so many times before.

"It's too dangerous."

"You don't know them well enough to go anywhere with them."

"Something could happen."

"What time will you be home?"

"That's too late."

"I heard a girl was mugged there a few years ago."

"What if something happens?"

Had June said the same things to her mother? Had her mother disregarded them just as easily as Carson had learned to do? Did her mother take advantage of June's older age in order to slip out of the house, just as Carson had done with her own mother's sickness? It was easier to take control of her life when the person who had taken that

control away from her was too tired to repeat those same warnings again and again, the ones that Carson had already memorized from years of repeated use.

Her mother had been just like her at one point. The passage she'd just read had proved that. But then what had changed her? What had happened, that led her to completely turn her behavior and become the same overbearing presence that she had so clearly resented? Maybe something had happened when she snuck out. Maybe she drank too much, and someone got hurt. Maybe she wandered into the wrong part of town, and was mugged, or worse. Carson felt her stomach twist in on itself at the thought. Her mind raced with possible scenarios, each one more gruesome than the last, until she finally shoved the journal back into the pillowcase, silencing the violent images, at least for tonight. In their place she saw herself, lying on the grass in the front yard, her head resting in her mother's lap as the constellations shone brightly above them.

How was it possible to feel closer to someone after they were dead than when they had been alive?

Chapter 9

The next day after work, Abigail turned to Carson.

“I heard about a party tonight,” she said. “At the clearing again. You can come, if you want. I’m heading over for a bit.”

Carson opened her mouth to respond, already feeling the letter ‘n’ forming on her tongue, when she thought of her parents: sitting together in the barn, laughing over everything and nothing at all. Sitting on the log in the middle of the grassy clearing, learning each other’s names for the first time. She could say no. She could go on her own, when no teenagers were milling around and there was no one to distract her from the words her mother had written down years ago. And yet, for some reason, she found herself saying:

“Alright. Just for a little while.”

Abigail didn’t answer, instead narrowing her eyes at Carson, as though examining her. Carson suddenly felt like the bugs under the magnifying glass she used to own as a child, and shifted uncomfortably beneath Abigail’s gaze.

“You could probably fit in my clothes,” she said. “They’ll just be shorter on you. But you’re probably used to that,” she added, glancing down at Carson’s exposed ankles. “Jesus, what are you, 6 feet tall?”

6 foot 1, but Carson didn’t tell her that.

“Why do I need to wear your clothes?” Carson asked. Abigail gave her a look.

“Because you’re not wearing that uniform, and something tells me you didn’t show up to work this morning in something appropriate for a party.”

Carson just nodded, unable to argue. She clocked out, following Abigail out the door and towards the same beat-up truck that she had seen her drive past in a few days before.

“We can stop by my place first,” Abigail said, sliding into the driver's seat of the truck. “We can change there, and then head over to the clearing.”

Carson nodded, stepping up and into the passenger side door. She pulled her legs close to herself, already feeling her muscles cramp in the tight space, especially after spending an entire day on them.

“You can put the seat back,” Abigail said, turning the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered, but didn't turn on. “Come on,” Abigail muttered through gritted teeth, smacking the wheel. The engine groaned, sputtering to life with another turn of the key. Abigail grinned, adjusting the rearview mirror with one hand and putting the car into drive with the other.

“Works every time,” she said. Carson glanced outside as they began to drive, leaving the town's business district behind, the tires catching on dirt and rocks as they passed fields illuminated by the setting sun. Abigail kept driving, past the streets where the houses were lined up in rows with rickety fences separating them, past the street where Carson knew her grandmother was sitting in the kitchen with a mug of tea, waiting to hear about her day, past farmhouses and fields and barren roads.

“I thought we were stopping by your house first,” Carson said, and Abigail nodded.

“We are,” she said, tapping her fingers on the wheel. “My parents own a plot of land on the edge of town,” she said. “I didn’t know it was possible to live in the middle of nowhere in the middle of nowhere, but apparently it is.”

Carson felt a smirk tug on the corner of her lips as she watched the sun slowly fall behind the horizon, the houses becoming fewer and farther between until Abigail pulled onto a long, winding dirt road that led to an old wooden house in severe need of a new paint job.

“Home sweet home,” Abigail said, her voice flat. Carson waited until she had opened the door before getting out herself, stretching her legs for the first time in twenty minutes. The warm night air surrounded her like a blanket as she followed Abigail towards the front door of the house, catching up to her in a few strides.

“Ignore my mom,” Abigail said, and before Carson could ask her what she meant Abigail had opened the door, stepping inside and wiping the mud from her boots on a mat that had probably once said ‘welcome,’ but now only said ‘wel.’

“Abby??” a voice called.

Carson stood in the doorway, looking over at a woman with graying hair who sat on a reclining chair in front of an old TV in a living room that looked like it had seen better days. The walls were stained yellow, though they had probably started out white. There were a few framed pictures on the walls, though most of them were off-center or tilted. One of them featured a young girl that Carson could only assume was Abigail, her hair braided into pigtails.

“Is that you?” the woman called out.

Carson thought again of her grandmother sitting in the kitchen, her mug of tea growing cold, and felt her stomach turn into itself.

“Who else would it be?” Abigail asked, rolling her eyes. The woman on the chair didn’t take her eyes off the TV as she responded.

“Don’t take that attitude with me, young lady,” she shouted, loud enough to echo in the small entryway where Carson still stood, watching.

“Whatever,” Abigail said, and walked down the hallway to the left. Carson stood in the doorway for a moment, her eyes darting between the woman in the living room and the door at the end of the hall where Abigail had just disappeared, before ducking away after her coworker. She could hear the woman in the living room muttering expletives under her breath, something about ungrateful children, even as she turned into what she presumed to be Abigail’s bedroom.

“Shut the door,” Abigail said, and Carson obeyed as she glanced around the room. The walls were covered in sheets of paper with half-finished sketches or drawings. The one closest to the door was a realistic portrait of a man that Carson didn’t recognize.

“That’s my dad,” Abigail said. Carson looked up, then quickly away again as she saw Abigail standing in the middle of the room in nothing but her bra and underwear. “He died when I was four. I drew that based on a photograph my mom doesn’t know that I know she keeps in her room.”

The image, still and lifelike as it was, reminded Carson of her own father somehow. She knew that they looked almost nothing alike. Whereas the man in this drawing had a narrow jaw and defined cheekbones, her own father had had a

broad jaw and angular face. The man in this drawing had hair that trailed down past his ears in short waves, whereas Carson's father had always had his hair cut short, never even reaching the tips of his ears. But both were stony and silent, their lips pressed together tightly to prevent any words from escaping.

Carson felt something soft hit the side of her leg, and looked down at a piece of black fabric by her feet.

"Try that on," Abigail said, and Carson was relieved to see that she was fully dressed now. Her long black hair had been freed from the bun it had been in at work, and fell down nearly to her lower back in soft waves. She was wearing a dark purple dress that dipped lower over her chest than anything Carson had ever worn. She looked down at the dress in her hands, and felt a wave of relief wash over her at the more modest neckline.

"It won't bite," Abigail said, turning to look in a small mirror that sat on a dresser covered in makeup, pencils, and balled up pieces of paper.

"Is there somewhere I can change?" Carson asked, and Abigail glanced over at her, a stick of mascara in her hand.

"Afraid I'll look?" she asked. "No offense, but I'm not into girls."

Carson felt her cheeks flush and looked away, staring down at the dress in her hands. She glanced over at Abigail, who was engrossed in applying the mascara, and quickly took off the uniform. The dress slid easily over her head, but it only fell to her mid-thighs. She pulled it down, but it just pulled itself right back up, refusing to budge anywhere closer to her knees. Her legs, long and skinny and awkward, trailed far past the

dress until they ended what felt like miles away. Carson shook her head, looking over at Abigail.

“It’s way too short,” she said. Abigail glanced over at her.

“No it’s not,” she said. Carson wondered if they were looking at the same dress. Abigail sighed, setting down the lipstick she was applying.

“It is shorter on you than it is on me, but it looks fine,” she said. “You have long legs. So what? Most guys are into that. You should show them off.”

Carson looked down at her legs. She had no interest in ‘showing them off.’ She hated them. Even the shorts she wore were longer than this dress. Besides, the last thing she wanted tonight was any guy staring at her legs. She wanted to see the place where her parents had met. That was it.

Carson finally nodded, looking back over at Abigail. She would only be there for a few minutes, anyway. Just long enough to see the place her mother had sat years ago, speaking to her father. Just long enough to finalize that picture in her mind that the journal had created.

“Great,” Abigail said, shutting the tube of lipstick in her hands. “You have any shoes?” she asked. “Mine definitely won’t fit you.”

Carson looked down at the tennis shoes on the carpet by her bare feet and nodded.

“Besides those?” Abigail asked, and Carson shook her head. Abigail sighed, shaking her head.

“I guess it’ll have to do,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Carson picked up the shoes and her uniform, following Abigail back down the hallway.

“Where are you going?” the woman in the living room called. Abigail ignored her, turning towards the door. The woman still hadn't taken her eyes off the TV.

“Answer me when I'm talking to you!” the woman shouted, but Abigail was already out the door. Carson quickly followed, letting the door slam shut behind her. The grass was rough beneath her bare feet as she hurried to the truck, slipping into the passenger seat and setting the uniform down by her feet. Abigail got in next to her, struggling with the engine a few more times before the truck came back to life.

Carson was unsure how far away the clearing was. Even though she had spent a lot of time in high school outside of the house, hiding from the shadow of her mother with kids her own age, it was never with people she was very close to. They had never gone to parties or get-togethers. She'd gravitated towards the quieter kids, the ones who sat in empty barns and drank beer until the sun came up. She considered asking how far away it was, but decided against it, settling instead into the silence that had fallen over them.

“I haven't seen you around before,” Abigail said after a few minutes. Carson glanced over at her. She remembered her comment about college students, and hesitated before responding.

“I go to school in the city,” she said. “I've been gone since last summer.”

Abigail didn't respond right away. She tapped her fingers on the wheel, along to some song that Carson couldn't hear.

“What brought you back?” Abigail asked. Carson turned her gaze back towards the window.

“Family,” was all she said. The rest of the ride passed in silence. Abigail continued to tap her fingers on the wheel, while Carson pretended not to be annoyed with the sound. The houses came fewer and farther between, until all Carson could see was open fields. Abigail eventually pulled the truck to the side of the road, pulling into the grass and parking in the dirt. A few other cars were scattered around the field, and Carson could see the smoke from a bonfire curling upwards through the branches of the trees in the nearby woods.

Carson stepped out of the truck, her tennis shoes in hand. She set them down and stepped into them, suddenly overly aware of the breeze on her bare legs. Abigail was already walking towards the woods, and Carson caught up to her in a few steps, though she didn't say anything.

“Can you take care of yourself?” Abigail asked suddenly, as they stood on the edge of the woods.

“Excuse me?” Carson asked. Abigail turned to look at her.

“I'm looking for someone here,” she said. “If I leave you alone, are you going to freak out or something?”

Carson frowned, shaking her head.

“Why would I freak out?” she asked.

“I don't know,” Abigail said, stepping into the path that years of teenage shoes had forged. “You just seem the type. It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?”

Carson didn't smile, despite the fact that she was pretty sure Abigail was trying to make a joke. She followed behind her on the narrow path, stepping over tree roots and wishing that she had worn something besides sandals to work that morning. Her bare feet were already covered in a thin layer of dust by the time they broke out into a clearing in the dense woods, the voices that she had heard murmuring from the car suddenly growing louder. There was a large bonfire in the middle of the grassy area, contained in a pit. Several teenage girls huddled around it, holding their hands out so close that Carson was almost surprised they didn't catch on fire. A larger group stood near what looked like a keg, sat on the back of a truck that looked like it hadn't run in years. It was rusted over on every front, and two of the four tires were missing.

Carson watched as Abigail headed straight towards a group of guys, tapping one on the arm. He turned towards her, though Carson could barely see his face underneath the long, curly hair that fell over his forehead. She watched as Abigail took his hand, leading him away from the others and towards another path that led farther into the woods.

Carson stood where she was, folding her arms across her chest to ward off the chill that the night air had brought along. She could feel goosebumps forming on her bare legs. Her eyes trailed slowly over those assembled. There had to have been at least thirty people, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty-six, if you counted Allen, who was standing to the side and trying to offer a beer to a girl who looked like she could only barely pass as fifteen.

And then she saw it. Off to the side, nearly hidden among overgrown weeds and grass, was a fallen log. No one was sitting on it, and Carson wondered if they even saw it.

She walked over to it, remembering her mother's words in the journal she'd held in her hands only the night before. *'There was this one boy there. He's a senior. I've seen him around. He's quiet, and he doesn't really have many friends, I don't think. I never really paid attention to him, but he's kind of cute.'*

Carson sat down on the edge of the log, stretching her long legs out in front of her, watching as they almost disappeared in the tall grass. She closed her eyes, picturing her mother sitting in the same place she was, back when she was fifteen or sixteen, a sophomore in high school. Maybe she had been dragged out by Annabelle. Or maybe she had wanted to come, and found herself sitting on the edge of the party, watching everyone else talk until an older man had come to talk to her.

It was still hard to picture her father. She imagined him sitting next to her mother, sweeping her off her feet with witty remarks and casual flirtations, but it didn't fit with the few images she had from before he had left. She saw only a man with tanned skin and dark eyes that watched every move her mother ever made. But how reliable was a six year old's memory? Her parents could have had that romance, one that began right where she was sitting, decades ago. They could have been happy, in love, and unaware that someday, years in the future, their daughter would sit in the same place and try to piece together their meeting.

She opened her eyes, and half of her expected to see her father standing in front of her, younger and just as tall as she remembered, but there was no one there. She glanced around for Abigail, but she was nowhere to be seen. As she watched the rest of the people, she caught sight of a familiar head of hair. Carson

frowned, squinting to see in the dim lighting, but whoever it was had disappeared. She stood up, taking a few steps towards the larger group, when Bailey nearly ran into her, spilling a red plastic cup filled with beer all over Abigail's borrowed dress.

"Oops!" Bailey giggled, looking up at her. "Sorry--" and Carson could see the change come over her face as her cousin realized who it was she had bumped into. The smile faded, and the bright eyes began to dull.

"What are you doing here?" Bailey asked. Her voice was flat, listless, and if Carson couldn't smell the alcohol on her breath, she would have believed her to be sober.

"I came with a fr---" Carson cut herself off, thinking of the girl that she had met only a week or so before. They weren't friends. Abigail was still nowhere to be seen, no doubt off in the woods somewhere with the man she'd come here to meet.

"A friend?" Bailey asked. "You don't have any friends, Carson. Wasn't that kind of the point of cutting off all contact or something?"

And despite the alcohol that fueled them, the words stung. Even more than if she had been sober, because if Bailey had been sober, she wouldn't have even bothered talking to her at all. Carson looked over Bailey's shoulder, searching for the boy she'd seen with her before.

"Where's your boyfriend?" she asked, realizing then that she didn't even know his name.

"He's getting the car," Bailey said, finishing what was left in her cup that hadn't already soaked into Carson's borrowed dress. "He says we have to go home. He's a party pooper."

"Has he been drinking, too?" Carson asked, and Bailey giggled.

“Not as much as me,” she said. “You should stay. See if someone can get that stick out of your ass. It’s gotta be uncomfortable by now.”

Carson ignored her, taking her by the wrist instead and starting towards the path that led back to the clearing. She could feel her cousin struggling against her grip, and lost her hold on her when she twisted out and tumbled back onto the dirt.

“Don’t touch me!” Bailey screamed. A few other party-goers had paused, turning to look at the scene unfolding. When Carson didn’t move to help her up, many lost interest, turning back to their friends or their drinks or their conversations. Carson stared down at her cousin, her chest tightening at the sight of tears in her eyes. Bailey stood back up, brushing the dirt off her clothes and taking off towards the path before Carson could react and grab her again.

“Bailey, wait!” Carson shouted, and took off after her before she could get far. Bailey was fast, even when intoxicated. She ducked around tree branches and over roots with ease, while Carson struggle to keep up with her, feeling the sharp sting of branches as they scratched her bare legs and arms when she pushed her way through them. By the time she broke out into the clearing, Bailey was already pulling herself into a truck, slamming the door behind her.

“Stop!” She shouted. Bailey said something to her boyfriend, and he started the engine. Carson ran over to them, spreading her arms out in front of the truck, blocking their exit. Bailey cursed, loud enough for Carson to hear, and her boyfriend put the truck in reverse, attempting to go around her. Carson ran to the other side, blocking them once more.

“Get out of the car, now,” she said. She couldn’t remember the last time she had used a voice like this on her cousin. Probably not since she was seventeen and Bailey refused to let her sneak out of the house to meet a boy from her class. She had screamed at her then, too, despite the fact that her cousin had only been eleven at the time, and trying to stop her from doing something that would hurt her mother, a woman that they both cared for.

“You don’t get to come back into my life and tell me what to do!” Bailey shouted. Carson looked at her, her head sticking out of the window, her hair and eyes wild and bright. Carson looked away, at the man sitting next to Bailey, who had a sheepish grin on his face.

“If you don’t stop this truck right now, I’m going to make sure that the only time you’ll be able to drink again is through a tube.” The words escaped her lips before her mind could catch up, but they had the desired effect. Somewhere between her anger and frustration and fear, the image of a wrecked car on the side of the road etched into her mind, she had scared him. He turned the engine off, and Carson walked over to his side of the truck, her legs trembling as she realized how close she had come to letting them drive away.

“Get out,” Carson said, looking at him. He hopped down out of the truck, stumbling as he hit the ground and falling into the dirt. His muffled voice reached her ears from the dirt, but she didn’t wait for him to see if he was okay. She pulled herself into the driver’s seat, waiting until he had struggled into the seat behind her before pushing the seat back to make room for her legs. She heard a muffled ‘oof’ as she pushed the seat into his knees.

“Get buckled,” she said flatly. Bailey ignored her.

“Now,” she said, and heard the click of two seatbelts sliding into place.

The ride was silent. Carson could feel her hands tremble, and she gripped the wheel tighter, staring at the road ahead. The smell of beer was overwhelming. She could feel it on her skin, having soaked through the thin material of the dress moments after it had been spilled. Her nerves still vibrated from the confrontation. She could hear a low ringing in her ears as she pulled off the grass and onto the main road. It was almost exhilarating, to take control like that. It was the same feeling she'd had when she yelled at Jack in the grocery store a few days prior: the rush of blood, the tensed nerves, the feeling of finally, for once in her life, being in control of something, even if that something was just her own words. She'd lost control of her life the first time her mother was diagnosed, and with each subsequent remission and re-diagnosis, more of that control slipped away. She had thought that going away to school, that choosing to ignore phone calls and imagined pleas from her mother was a way to regain some of that control. It was what her father had done, after all. He'd taken control of his life by disappearing from hers. Yet it didn't quite work out that way for her.

She glanced at Bailey at a stoplight, but her cousin wasn't looking at her. She was staring out of the window, her shoulders stiff.

“Where do you live?” Carson asked. Bailey's boyfriend didn't respond, having passed out in the back seat. Carson sighed, looking at Bailey instead.

“Where does he live?” she asked. Bailey remained silent, keeping her back to Carson. Carson pulled the car over to the side of the road, and waited until Bailey turned to look at her.

“What’s his name, anyway?” she asked. Bailey glared at her.

“Like you care,” she mumbled. Carson gripped the wheel tighter.

“You’re right,” she said. “I don’t. But I need to know where to drop him off. I have no problem leaving him here, but I don’t think you’d like that.”

Bailey stared at her for a moment longer before muttering an address, a few streets down. Carson pulled back onto the road, and silence fell once more, until she pulled into his driveway.

“I’ll take him in,” Bailey said, and Carson shook her head.

“No, you won’t,” she said, “You’ll wait here.”

“I’m not a child, Carson,” Bailey said. Carson ignored her, opening her door and hopping out. She opened the back door, and the man slid out, only waking up when his face hit the pavement. He groaned, spitting out gravel as he sat up.

“Dominic!” Bailey gasped, going to get out of the car. Carson stood back as Bailey ran over to him, helping him up. She let him put an arm around her shoulder, but Carson could see how hard it was for her small cousin to hold up someone so much larger than her.

“Let me get him,” she said, and Bailey glared at her.

“You’ve done enough,” she said. Carson stepped back, watching as the two of them made their way towards the front door. She wondered if his parents were home, if they would wake up and demand to know where he had been, but the only light she saw

turn on in the house was ten minutes later, at the end of the hallway. She could see the outlines of two people as they stumbled into the room.

Carson wrapped her arms around herself, goosebumps raising once more on her skin. The cool night air did little to dispel the scent of alcohol that she imagined she could feel sinking into her skin with every moment that passed. She could only imagine how June would react when she finally showed up with Bailey.

Bailey. She'd said the most words to her today than she had since she'd arrived home, and yet the tension had only grown thicker. Carson had tried to speak to her before, but gave up quickly, realizing that this was a bridge that she had burned, and one that she couldn't rebuild. She had imagined the moment when Bailey would speak to her again, but it never ended like this: with alcohol and tears and harsh words that didn't even sound like her own.

Carson glanced at her phone, the cracked screen glowing back at her: 10:05 PM. June would be livid, and probably on her fifth mug of tea. Carson looked up at the sound of the front door slamming, and watched as Bailey walked towards her, surprisingly stable for someone who had acted so intoxicated only half an hour before. Carson opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out as Bailey sat back in the truck, slamming that door as well. Carson slid into the driver's seat

"I'll return his truck in the morning," she said, and Bailey didn't respond, nor did she speak for the short ride back to their own house.

The kitchen light was on, and Carson imagined she could hear the screaming of the teapot as June poured another round. She turned the engine off, but locked the doors as Bailey started to get out.

“We need to talk,” she said. Bailey snorted.

“Unlikely,” she said, and went to unlock the door.

“You need to tell June what happened,” Carson said. Bailey paused with her hand on the door handle, her back facing Carson. “If you don’t, I will.”

Carson expected some sort of response, whether it be more yelling, harsh words, or a slammed door, but Bailey was silent. After a few minutes, Carson unlocked the doors and stepped down onto the gravel driveway, walking behind Bailey towards the front door. Before Bailey had even fully opened the door, June had come out of the kitchen, a forgotten mug of tea in her hands that she spilled all over the rug near the archway of the kitchen, leading to the entryway.

“Where have you girls been??” She demanded, and Carson could hear the concern underneath the anger that laced her words. Carson looked at Bailey, who was already walking towards the stairs.

“Bailey Maryanne Cadwell, you come back here right now,” June said, but Bailey ignored her, walking up the stairs. June turned her eyes towards Carson, who shrunk back slightly under her gaze. She watched as her grandmother took in her bare legs and beer-soaked dress, the creases in her forehead gaining depth even as Carson watched.

“What happened?” June asked. Carson glanced at the top of the stairs, where Bailey had stopped. Carson couldn’t decipher the look on her face. It was somehow pleading, and yet the anger remained. She knew that Bailey was asking her not to tell, to

make up some story, but all Carson could see when she looked at her cousin was that truck wrapped around a tree with Dominic passed out at the wheel.

“I went to the clearing with a coworker,” Carson said slowly, and saw Bailey’s features shift, all signs of pleading gone. A cold, calculating anger remained in its place. “This is her dress. I ran into Bailey. She was drunk.” Carson paused, glancing back up at her cousin, but the look on her face hadn’t changed. The adrenaline that had coursed through her veins when she forced Dominic from the car had begun to run cold, leaving a heaviness that she hadn’t felt in years in its place. It had felt good to take control, to finally have a small piece of her life that she could manipulate rather than be manipulated by. She could still picture the look on Jack’s face as she threw her mother’s words back at him, pulling them from the journal that they were never meant to vacate and turning them into poison-tipped arrows. Silence was powerful, as she’d learned in the past six months. But words were powerful, too.

“She tried to get in the car with Dominic. He was hammered, too. So I drove them both home,” Carson said. She felt the bridge that had once connected her so closely with her cousin give way entirely to ashes, severing the connection between them for good.

“Thank you for bringing her home safely,” June said. She glanced up the stairs, but Bailey had turned to go to her room. “I’ll talk to Therese when she gets home, and address this with Bailey in the morning.” June turned to look at her, her features softening slightly as she placed a hand on Carson’s arm.

“She’ll come around,” was all she said, but Carson wasn’t so sure. And as she stood in the shower later that night, long after the water had run cold and the smell had been scrubbed from her skin, all she could think of was that same bridge, collapsing into rubble.

Chapter 10

Carson washed the dress and brought it to work the next day. Abigail smirked as she took it from her, shoving it into her purse.

“I was wondering where you’d gone,” she said, handing Carson the bag that held her uniform. “You left this in my truck when you ran off,” she added. Carson took the bag from her, and quickly went to change in the employee restroom before Abigail could ask where she had ‘run off’ to.

The day passed slowly. There was no sign of Annabelle, and Carson was somehow both grateful and disappointed. If anyone knew about her mother and the reasons that she had shifted from rebellious teenager to overprotective mother, it was Annabelle. And while she longed to know what had caused this change, the thought of discussing her mother with anyone else, particularly a stranger, was unappealing.

Around two P.M., Dominic walked towards the register. Carson stiffened, her eyes falling on the busted lip that was swollen to twice its regular size. His eyes met hers, and Carson waited for a reaction, either of anger or disgust, but all she got was a sheepish grin as he hurried towards Allen’s register instead. Bailey was nowhere in sight.

Bailey was rarely in sight anymore. Before, Carson had run into her at least a few times, either in town or in the hallways of the house, but it was as if she had simply disappeared. On the third day after the incident at the clearing, as Carson dropped her house keys into her pocket and slid her shoes off in the entryway, she heard muffled voices coming from the living room. She hesitated,

glancing through the kitchen and into the living room, though she couldn't see anyone through the crack in the door.

“Shit!” Sugar squawked, as soon as Carson set one foot on the kitchen tile. She jumped, glaring at the bird who stared at her from his metal cage. The voices hadn't even paused. In fact, they seemed to have grown louder.

“I wasn't the one driving, mom!” That was Bailey's voice. Carson paused in the middle of the kitchen, knowing that she should turn around and go upstairs, yet somehow unable to move.

“That's not the point, Bailey!” Therese shouted. There was something ironic about hearing her aunt yell at her daughter. Therese was a background figure in many of Carson's memories, someone that she knew was there but rarely saw. The image of the two of them, mother and daughter, in the same room, was oddly foreign to her. She could barely picture it, despite the voices still seeping into the kitchen from under the door. “You could have been killed. And to have to find out from my mother? And then to find out that you were out with him again?? You're not to see him anymore!”

Carson felt a flush creep up the back of her neck, spreading slowly over her cheeks. That was why Dominic was alone. It wasn't that Bailey was avoiding her, as she'd originally thought. It was because she couldn't be seen with her boyfriend anymore. Because of what Carson had done.

The back screen door slammed, and Carson held her breath, listening for voices. All she heard was muffled cries from the living room. She turned slowly back towards the stairs, just as the door opened behind her and footsteps fell on the tiled floor.

“You.” The shame that Carson had felt washed over her once more as she turned to face her cousin. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy, and her nose was pink. Carson looked away from her, towards the precariously piled mugs in the kitchen sink, and was silent.

“I hope you’re happy,” Bailey said. Her voice was thick, and yet Carson knew that she wouldn’t cry again. Not in front of her, anyway.

“What?” Bailey asked. “Nothing to say? What a surprise.” The words hit their mark. Carson pressed her palms against her khaki uniform pants, unsure what else to do with them. She was silent as Bailey slid down into the kitchen chair, letting out a long breath that stirred the damp pieces of hair that stuck to her forehead. Sugar squawked, but was otherwise silent.

“He was there for me, you know,” Bailey said. Carson turned to look at her, still standing in the same place she had been when she’d first heard her voice. Part of her felt that if she moved, whatever this spell was would be broken. Bailey would fall silent, or storm off, and Carson wouldn’t see her for even longer now.

“After you left, and your mom couldn’t get out of bed, he was there,” Bailey said. Carson saw her mother’s thin frame lying in bed, wasting away while she studied for midterms, and stayed silent.

“Do you know how messy death is, Carson?” Bailey asked suddenly. Carson found herself unable to look away, though suddenly all she wanted was to turn and run up the stairs and never look back. “Your mom cried for you. She was worried about you, even though she was the one dying.” Carson could feel her muscles aching, as every bit of pent-up energy urged her to run away from this

conversation and pretend it had never occurred. Shutting her mother out as supposed to prevent this image from ever entering her mind. It was supposed to give her control, that same control that had consistently been taken away from her. It was being taken again now as Bailey continued to speak.

“And you got out clean and free. We had to deal with it, not you. You weren’t the one who had to stay up late and clean up after her when she couldn’t get to the bathroom anymore. You weren’t the one who had to tell her that everything was okay, even when you knew it wasn’t. You got to go off to school and live your own life, while the rest of us were stuck dealing with what you left behind.” Bailey’s voice had risen with each word, until she was nearly yelling. Carson had seen her mother at some of her worst moments, but she had never seen her at the end. There were no photographs, no videos, to commemorate the end of her mother’s life. All she had was Bailey’s words, and they painted an ugly picture.

“He helped me,” Bailey continued. “He was there. God knows my mother wasn’t.” Bailey laughed, shaking her head. “She’s a lot like you. She didn’t want to deal with it, so I did. I stayed up with your mom and told her that you were fine, that you were probably just busy, and that maybe you would call tomorrow. He always waited up for me, even if she didn’t fall asleep until three in the morning.”

“Bailey,” Carson began, but her cousin glared up at her, cutting off the rest of her words.

“No,” she said. “Don’t pretend like you cared. You didn’t, or you would have called me back. “Six months without a word from you, Carson!” she shouted. Six months. That was a long time, wasn’t it, Carson thought. Six months of hiding from her

classmates, her family, her problems. Six months of hurt that she had convinced herself, somehow, that she didn't pass along to anyone else.

But she had. She may not have been able to see it, but she had passed the baton to Bailey and June, maybe even Therese. It was a hard pill to swallow. She had known, on some level, that what she was doing was wrong, but if she couldn't see its effects, somehow it wasn't as bad. But now, with each word from Bailey's lips, a violent and messy picture was painted. The thought that she was anything like her aunt, who had shown nothing but disapproval to her own daughter for as long as Carson could remember, made her chest tighten.

"Say something," Bailey said suddenly. The anger was back, all traces of sadness gone, and Carson remained silent. She knew that there was nothing she could say to fix this. There was no way to rebuild a bridge that had been completely destroyed.

Bailey stood up, her eyes flashing. "Say something!" she shouted. "You've been doing nothing but locking yourself in her room since you got back, except when you're meddling in my life. You don't get to do that anymore, Carson! You pushed me out. You don't get to come back in. So say something! Tell me why. Tell me why you ignored me. Tell me why you told on me a few nights ago. Tell me something!"

Carson couldn't remember ever hearing her cousin speak this way. The anger, the frustration, and the hurt were all clearly heard in everything she said. And yet her own mouth still refused to open. She didn't want Bailey to hear those same emotions in her own voice. She didn't want to hear them herself.

“Of course,” Bailey muttered. She stood up, pushing past Carson, who stumbled back a step. She watched as Bailey walked towards the stairs, feeling something clawing its way out of her throat, even as she tried to hold it back.

“I didn’t want you to die,” Carson said. Her words sounded soft even to her own ears, and yet Bailey turned around, narrowing her eyes at her.

“What?” she asked, and Carson took a step forward, closing a good deal of the distance between them with that single stride.

“When you were in the truck with Dominic, all I could see was his truck wrapped around a pole somewhere. I didn’t want you to die, Bailey. I don’t want another death in this family.”

And there they were. The words she had tried so hard to swallow, and which pushed their way out without her consent. Bailey was silent for what felt like hours. Carson forced herself to hold her gaze, despite the way her palms trembled. She pressed them tightly against her legs to hide them.

“You lost your mother,” Bailey said. Carson shifted uncomfortably, struggling to push back the image of her mother that emerged once more in her mind. “And I lost my aunt. But you know what, Carson?” she asked. “I lost you, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Carson said. She had expected the words to relieve some of the burden that she felt, to give her some sense of relief, of closure, some evidence that she had at least tried to fix things, but she felt nothing but the same heaviness as before.

Bailey nodded, turning back towards the stairs.

“Me, too,” she said quietly.

Conclusion

This novel will continue to follow Carson's journey as she rediscovers her mother's past, and how the events of this past came to form the woman that she knew as her mother. The mentions of her father, which have been laced with confusion and uneasiness, will continue to grow more disconnected and unnerving. After a journal entry that mentions her father's temper, leading to him putting his fist through a wall, Carson stops reading her mother's journal entries. Though she wants to know more about her mother, the thought of her father's violence stops her from picking the journal back up.

This uneasiness will be clarified through a conversation with Annabelle, her mother's childhood friend. Lawrence will request that Carson help Annabelle with her crops, which she plans to sell to the grocery store. This day of hard labor will turn into a conversation, during which Annabelle reveals that Carson's father, Thomas, was both physically and emotionally abusive towards her mother, Cecilia. Carson objects to this idea at first, but comes to realize that it would explain the uneasiness she feels whenever she remembers her father, as well as the fact that he is nothing but a stoic and threatening presence in her memories. The two spend the day talking, and Carson learns more about her mother in a few hours than she has from weeks reading the journal.

Carson will pick the journal back up, and delve back into her mother's world. She will learn more about the relationship between Therese and her mother, and draw connections between it and the relationship between herself and Bailey. The relationship that Carson has with Bailey has not yet been repaired, despite the apologies exchanged at the end of Chapter 10. They speak, but they do not share things like they

used to. Carson, who is still stubborn and selfish, though beginning to acknowledge it, does not reach out to her cousin like she wants to.

Meanwhile, Carson and Abigail will continue to grow as friends. Carson will learn to look at Abigail as a role model of sorts, as someone who speaks her mind, no matter what the consequences, and has no regrets. Abigail will be the spark that allows Carson to spend more time outside of June's house, meeting more people from town and breaking further and further out of her self-imposed isolation. It will be Abigail who eventually says what Carson knows to be true: that she is being incredibly selfish and self-pitying, and needs to get her act together before it's too late. This interaction is what will eventually lead Carson to a full acknowledgement of her mistakes, and acceptance of the fact that she cannot change the past, but she can change the present and, consequently, the future.

The relationship between Bailey and Carson will never be as it was, but it will be repaired as much as it can be. Carson will go back to school to finish her degree, but she will come home at every opportunity, including long weekends. She will answer her phone. She will learn to accept the guilt that she feels and move on, perhaps all the way to med school someday.

Works Consulted

Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Viking, 1960. Print.

This novel, which takes place in a small town, gave me a clearer picture of what life in a small town may be like. I myself have not lived in a small town, but have always been fascinated by their dynamics. Reading this novel allowed me to delve deeper into this world that I strived to create on my own pages.

Dessen, Sarah. *Along for the Ride: A Novel*. New York, N.Y.: Viking, 2009.

This novel focuses on a young female protagonist who visits her father and step-mother for the summer. She finds herself in a small, beachside town, where she makes new friends and changes as a person. These elements are all ones that I wanted to incorporate into my own novel.

Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York: Viking, 2002. Print.

This novel was one of the most helpful in terms of writing my thesis. This story focuses on a young girl following her mother's memory, while her abusive father follows close behind. The journey that the protagonist undertakes is harrowing, emotional, and filled with interesting and heartfelt characters. I only hope that I was able to accomplish a few of these things in my own writing.

Strout, Elizabeth. *Amy and Isabelle: A Novel*. New York: Random House, 1998. Print.

This novel focuses on a mother-daughter relationship, one which is strained by a daughter's lies and secrets. This novel was invaluable in the insight it gave into the dynamics of a complicated relationship, one which is filled with love, hate, anger, and fondness, sometimes all at once. This relationship, between mother and daughter, also stands at the center of my own novel.