

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Tanya Katz for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 20, 2011.

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This thesis contains the first portion of *Kingston Beach*, a redemptive novel about a horrific event. The book chronicles the aftermath of a tragic plane crash in which Jay and Margot lose two of their three children while vacationing at the beach. Jay is a pediatric heart surgeon already highly successful in his field. However, after this personal loss he turns his professional attention toward championing Donation after Cardiac Death, a new and highly controversial method of obtaining donor hearts for children. Margot is also a physician; she's spent her career working for hospice. After the loss of her own children, she finds herself unable to work for "a good death," and instead finds herself on an unexpected journey with an old friend who has experienced a similar loss. Inspired by an accident on the Oregon Coast in the summer of 2008, *Kingston Beach* is a fictional work that stares deeply into every parent's worst fear, and in the midst of that darkness finds that life is an indistinguishable force.

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Kingston Beach

by
Tanya Katz

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APPROVED:

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Chair of the Department of English

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Tanya Katz, Author

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Kingston Beach

Jalil Shirazi, a pediatric heart surgeon, wakes suddenly from a dream at 4:30 in the morning, throwing off the covers and moving with urgency to the windows on the far side of the room. He stands looking out into the fog, bouncing on the balls of his feet as if he might take off at a sprint, his heart pumping fast with the adrenaline of failure. Even though the dream is entirely imagined, the effects it has on his body are completely real. Only when his pulse begins to slow and he wills himself into stillness is he able to see the scene before him and realize it's not his own neighborhood. He sees the swath of trees across the road, and three cars parked beneath them—Margot's, Janie's, and Ben's. Jay puts both hands on the window and leans forward until his forehead bumps the damp glass, as if by gaining a few inches' proximity he might penetrate the fog. How foolish, he chides himself, yet he stays in that posture until he's able to come up with a plan. The full dawning knowledge of where he is—Kingston Beach—feels like a second body blow, yet another set of complications to contend with.

Jay has no patience for dreams. He does not believe the subconscious speaks, or if it does, that it has anything interesting to say. His own recurring dream, which he's had a few times a year for as long as he can remember, is the surgeon's version of Haydn's *Farewell Symphony*. In the middle of a long procedure, the members of his team slip out of the operating room one by one, leaving Jay to suture and protract and clear the field all at once. When only one nurse is left he asks for 7-0 prolene, a thread thinner than a

human hair, and she instead hands him a length of rope before removing her gloves with a snap and leaving him utterly alone.

Jay stands at the window staring at the cars down below, at the suggestions of cars wrapped up in fog, then lifts his hands to his face as if he had water, and could wash the whole mess clean. If they had been at home, Jay would have run to the neighborhood bakery and back, leaving the bag of pastries on the kitchen counter while he quickly showered and put on a pair of black pants, a pale oxford shirt, and one of many jackets of indistinguishable pattern. His closet was filled with these interchangeable parts, his uniform for nearly twenty years, one of Margot's ideas, so that he didn't waste thought on the mundane. If he'd been home he would have slipped on this uniform and said a quick good-bye to Margot in the kitchen, tapping the children lightly on the head with today's *Times* if they were sitting at the table, or simply slipping out the door if they were not.

If he were home he'd then hurry to the PICU to check on the patient in question, noting the tense stability, the artificial plateau where he and his colleagues had been forced to leave this young life, waiting, all of them tense, for the child's own gradual climb or the more likely freefall.

But he's not at home. He's at the beach, with his wife and three children and his wife's sister and her three children, in the house Margot's parents owned all their lives, in the house where Margot and Janie spent the summers of their youth, the house they've rented for two weeks every August for the past seventeen years, per the terms of the sale to the Meyersons. Jay enjoyed visiting Margot's parents in Kingston Beach when they were all much younger and his in-laws were still alive. Jay could still remember the thrill he'd

had that first summer, discovering that Margot had grown up in a place that felt like an Impressionist's version of his own lost home. Surely neither the Coast Range nor the Cascades could rival the stature of the Alborz, and the Caspian and the Pacific bore little resemblance on the face of it. But the two locations shared a certain compressed quality—forests, mountains, sea—that to the younger Jay felt a lot like coming home. That he and Margot shared his landscape seemed like something of a sign, even though he certainly didn't believe in such things. Now, twenty years later, Jay would rather stay home, but the continuity seems important to Margot, so they persist.

Jay turns from the windows toward the bed, looking for the time. It should be there, glowing green from twin bedside clocks, but even in this simplest need he is foiled. He will have to find the dresser, in the dark, and his watch. Jay begins to walk slowly away from the windows over the cold floor, careful not to stumble on a mislaid suitcase or unexpected bench. Where are his slippers, he wonders, and why in the world did the Meyersons not install carpeting? The floor is too hard, and too cold. He still doesn't have a plan, but before anything can be decided, he needs to know the time.

As Jay stands at the dresser, fumbling in the dark to find his watch, he lifts his foot behind him, to stretch it and warm it. The air in the room feels especially chilled, but they didn't think to put on the heat when they went to bed. Today is the second day of August, the only guaranteed month of summer at the beach.

He finds his watch and holds it close to his face until he can see the dials and confirm what his body already knows. 4:30. Since he usually rises at 5:00, he's happy that the dream has only stolen a half hour. He questions himself. Stolen? No, not

hardly. He can slip downstairs and phone Leila, the head nurse in the PICU, and she can read him Leo's numbers before any of the others wake up.

It's not a big house, this house he will always think of as the Silverstein's—in fact it's the smallest house on the block, a fact that used to delight Margot's father to no end. But the Meyersons knocked down some walls a few years after the sale, and instead of the three modest bedrooms and library that Margot and Janie knew as girls, now the house has three over-large bedroom suites and a small bunk room, presumably for spillover children. The Meyersons took the extra square feet from the spacious central hallway and generous landing, and Jay was sad to see them go, since he could so vividly remember Ben and Seth setting up their train layouts there as four-year-olds and leaving them for the duration of their stay, with still plenty of space to get around them. Climbing the stairs en route to the bathroom and stumbling across his young son and nephew at play was indescribably satisfying, equal parts thoughtfulness and recklessness as they fitted the wooden pieces carefully together and then used the speeding train cars to blast them apart. Such luxury in these wide open spaces made to accommodate them. A place had been prepared for them, and they did not have to ask or be asked. It was a picture of the perfect union of wish and fulfillment, and Jay found it lovely to behold, profound in its innocence and simplicity.

And now this space, these boys are all eaten up, gone, it seems. The bedrooms have plenty of room for king-sized beds and gas-burning fireplace inserts, but since the remodel he and Margot often occupy separate corners of the room, she on a sofa in the sitting area with a paperback or magazine, and he on the bed alone, flipping channels on

the television mounted over the faux mantelpiece. The luxury, then, of these new suites the Meyersons installed is that everyone can easily be alone while they vacation together.

The boys are another question altogether. Now both sixteen, they utterly fill the space wherever they are together. Partly it's their height, both over six feet, a gift from their mothers' father, but mostly it's how they speak to each other in an intimate code, the way all young people speak—an intimacy born not of closeness to each other, but rather their proximity to a shared experience. And what is that experience, the life that binds them? Jay would be hard pressed to define it, what it means to be a young person in America at the start of the twenty-first century. He was likely never a young person, but this is not, for Jay, anything to be pitied. Watching his own son struggle to grow up, spending all his precious energy fighting the rules and limits imposed by parents and school, Jay thinks it's a great disservice to the young to let them think their lives are their own. Jay has been trying to teach Ben that he'll know great freedom in restriction, that one can grow powerful inside boundaries, but Ben remains unconvinced. Instead of listening patiently to Jay's stories of his boyhood in Tehran or the hard lessons of surgical residency, as he once did, Ben now bristles at the hint of a moral to the story and leaves the room before his father can finish his sentence.

On his way to the kitchen Jay pauses at the front door to look for a hint of sunrise, but still sees only the black and the fog. Looking at Ben's car he's reminded of yesterday's fight over the camping trip, the one Ben and Seth want to take during the vacation, presumably to get away from their sisters, but which Jay knows is not the whole truth. No doubt they also plan to get plenty drunk or even high, and this was why Jay had said *absolutely not* when he came home yesterday afternoon and got wind of the plans. It

was not drugs per se that frightened him, but rather the ease with which his son would throw away a lifetime of careful planning with one goofy misstep in the hands of a frustrated cop.

When Jay said “no” Ben stormed out of the house, colliding with Mehra at the door, and Margot came over to Jay, sprawled in the living room, and pulled up a chair, deliberately, with the same careful presence he knew served her well in dealing with her patients with dementia. He respected the work she did, at a distance, but Jay himself bristled when he was on the receiving end of such treatment.

She cleared her throat and said, “I don’t think you’re fully appreciating the situation here,” and before she could fully launch into it, before he was trapped beneath the melodious rise and fall of her crushing mountain of observations, he waved a hand to cut her off.

“Delicate self esteem,” he said. “Good one, Margot. I’m sure that’ll work with the judge.”

In the kitchen Jay pours himself a glass of juice, still beset by the shadow of the dream. Leo’s procedure was flawless. About a third of the time Jay went into the operating room, he was there to fix another surgeon’s mistakes, and yesterday’s takedown of a bungled arterial switch was an especially risky example. Jay’s partner, Mark Mikkelsen, sometimes tried to talk Jay out of taking on these riskiest referrals—the stress on the team, false hope for the parents, their own stats to consider—but Jay knew there was always a surgical fix, and he was more likely than anyone else to execute it successfully.

In children like Leo Sullivan who were born with transposition of the great arteries, the aorta and pulmonary artery rose out of the wrong ventricles. With the aorta rising from the right ventricle and the pulmonary artery rising from the left, the heart and lungs formed two parallel but closed circuits, sending blue blood continuously to the body and back, and red blood only to the lungs, where the last thing it needed was to be enriched with more oxygen. Even though surgeons had been performing the switch since Jay was a fellow, twenty years before, it wasn't until Jay developed a technique for fixing the often intramural coronaries that the mortality rate for this procedure came down from around fifty percent to an astounding two-and-a-half or three. The coronary arteries that branch off the aorta and feed the heart muscle itself, the hungriest of organs, were often twisted and coiled, looping into the aorta and back out the other side, highly resistant to straightening. So even when the switch itself was a success and the patient's heart and lungs began working beautifully as a team, the patient would often die as the heart itself was deprived of oxygen, the intramural coronaries unnoticed.

Jay's innovation changed all this, so everyone else's mistakes came to him, but not without cost from the first bungled attempt. The infant's pericardium, once smooth and small and pink, would now be gristly and swollen, shades of purples and blacks.

Opening such a chest presented its own specific danger, since the pericardium would likely be fused by scar tissue to the sternum. Even the smallest nick would cause the patient to arrest. Add in the insult of a heart-lung machine on an infant's circulation not once but twice in his short life, and odds of success started to lengthen. The parents, though, were ready to try anything. When he told them the chance of survival was fifty or sixty or seventy percent—appalling statistics, compared to his usual rates—their eyes

flooded with what Jay assumed were tears of relief. They might actually get to take their child home.

Not so, Jay feared, for Leo Sullivan. Even though the repair had been perfect and the flow through the coronaries was now completely unobstructed, Leo's heart had forgotten how to work. Starved of oxygen for so long, the powerful left ventricle, the heart of the heart, had lost its bearings and strength. When Leo's output was so dismal on the table (they measured it twice, even though everyone knew the first reading was accurate), Jay installed a left ventricular assist device, a last ditch effort, and had to leave the baby on pump, his chest still open and covered with a large, sterile bandage. The parents asked about transplant, and Jay shook his head and spoke too soon: "I don't think he'll last that long." The parents were also quite upset to learn that Jay was leaving town the next day, and he explained that his partner, Dr. Mikkelsen, who had assisted in the procedure, would be there should anything arise. He also told them, firmly but gently, that the surgeon's work with Leo was done. It was up to his heart to remember what it needed to do. In the meantime, the intensivists in the PICU would care for Leo as if he were their own. Finally, he added, to quiet their fears, he would be checking in two or three times a day, and could be at the hospital in ninety minutes should anything extraordinary develop. He was glad they had not pressed him on what that might be, since there were no real options left.

In the darkened kitchen Jay rinses his juice glass and moves to the windows for better reception. With a few quick strokes he checks his emails and text messages, then dials the PICU, already looking forward to the sound of Leila's voice.

Margot wakes to see Jay at the window, leaning into it as if he sees someone on the street he recognizes. Of course he doesn't, Margot knows. There would be no one on the street at this hour, and hardly anyone on the street at any hour. Oh, sure, as the sun came up or went down, clusters of walkers and joggers or families with strollers took a foray to the bakery or grocery, or just out to get some exercise. But Kingston Beach was not the place to come if you had places to go. The great luxury of this sleepy beach town without even a single traffic light was the license to do nothing more than drink coffee at sunrise on the porch and red wine on the beach at night, watching as the children roasted marshmallows and took turns burying each other in the enormous hole they'd spent the entire afternoon digging.

When Margot sees Jay at the window, she wonders what has woken him. Has his beeper gone off, and she's not heard it? Has Leo taken a turn for the worse? Margot doesn't follow all of his cases anymore, there are so many (four or five hundred a year), but she does hear about the most troubling and unusual. Leo had his first surgery three months ago in Seattle, at a center with appalling statistics for the arterial switch, and then when he didn't recover the doctor recommended medication and patience, as if. After three months of watching him turn bluer and sicker, the mother pressed for *something to be done*, and Leo was referred to Jay. When Leo was born, no one in Seattle would have dared tell those parents that the center with the best outcomes for the arterial switch was only two hundred fifty miles away. Every children's hospital needs its congenital program to fund the less profitable diseases. Jay came home two nights ago strangely

agitated, railing at the system, and Margot knew he was nervous about this case, afraid no measure of skill or experience could fix what had already been botched.

She's about to speak, about to say, *What is it, Jay? What time is it?*, but she sees him turn and find his watch, then his jacket and phone. He's headed downstairs then, where he'll pace the deck for the magic spot with the best connection, his voice serious and steady at first, then relaxed and expansive if the news is good. Margot doesn't want to hear his laugh when he asks Leila if she's heard the one about the rabbi and the doctor, doesn't want to hear the way his voice rises and falls like music when he talks to her. Margot rolls on her side and pulls the quilt tight. What has woken him? Now it hardly seems to matter. Margot knows she won't be going back to sleep, but she stays in bed, comforted by warmth and solitude.

The vacation can't start like this. As Margot tries to put Leo and Leila out of her mind, she thinks instead of Elena and Mehra and the two weeks they've looked forward to all summer. They're still young enough to love being with the family, with their cousins. Yesterday morning as she set out her lists for packing, Janie called with a simple request: Could Ben drive the Subaru to the beach so the boys could take it camping? Seth's father, she reported, had taken away his license for reasons that were somewhat unclear.

As Margot stood at the kitchen counter listening to Janie, she crossed *chicken breasts* and *strawberry yogurt* off her list. Camping? Boys? She put down the pencil. So Ben had been lying to her. He'd said nothing about a camping trip, because he knew she would have said *no*, it's our *family* vacation, which we will spend *together*, as a *family*. But then he would ask when they were already there, as if the idea had occurred

to him and Seth only that day, and where Janie would be present to gently mock Margot and her notions about tradition. *Come on*, Janie would say. *It's the inflexible twig that snaps.*

Before she spoke, Margot picked up the pencil and wrote Subaru at the bottom of her shopping list, underlining it with such force the lead broke. She wished like hell Janie would stop referring to her recently-ex-husband, Gordon, as *Seth's father*, or *Megan's father*, or *Mallory's father*, or *my children's father*, as if she were speaking to strangers. Margot suspected Janie enjoyed the mystery of those designators, rather than the prosaic, *my ex-husband*, and Margot also suspected that Janie somehow imagined herself fundamentally different from other women who marry, have children, then divorce without ever finding a reliable career.

If she'd had more patience, Margot would have called her on it, would have said, *Could you please just call him Gordon! We did, after all, spend 17 years together as family!* Instead, Margot looked down at her list (sunscreen, lemon Calistoga, coconut sorbet, tofu hot dogs, chicken sausage, whole grain buns), and felt anxious to get to the store, and also not to let on to Janie that she knew nothing of their sons' plans.

"Yes, Janie," she said. "Subaru. No problem."

And then she called Ben down and presented him with the information she'd just learned, but not as a question that he could deny (because he would always deny everything), but rather as a statement, as a given.

"Janie just called and said Gordon took Seth's license." She watched his face twitch. Perhaps he knew more about this. A topic for later. "So you'll be driving the

Subaru, for your camping trip.” This explained why he’d packed his bags and set them out without reminding, why he’d gone out on a mysterious errand earlier in the day.

He sat on the barstool, absolutely still. Margot stopped pacing the kitchen and turned to him, two cartons of yogurt in one hand and the package of chicken breasts in the other. “You could have asked, Ben. I understand.” She bent over to pack the food in the cooler. “I was sixteen once, too.” She turned back to him and gave him a tight smile, and he began to protest, but she held up a hand to stop him. “It’s fine,” she said. “I’ll talk to daddy,” and turned back to the fridge to retrieve the can of whipped cream she bought once a year, so the girls could have hot chocolate at the beach.

Jay came home just as she was carrying the cooler out to the van, and even as he opened the door for her, she could see in the set of his shoulders that things had not gone well.

“Circling the drain,” he said, before she could ask. Jay then poured himself an inch of Scotch and sat down heavily in the corner of the living room, and Margot knew this meant he didn’t wish to discuss it further, which was perfectly fine with her. The house was already full of the sounds of leavetaking, the children’s feet pounding up and down the stairs, two or three voices at once, *where the hell did you put my shorts*, from Ben, and *I didn’t put them anywhere, and watch your mouth, my friend*, from Margot, who always felt like these moments turned her into her own mother, for better or worse. Even amidst the *hells* and the *holy shits* and the high-pitched screeches from the girls, this was all an essentially joyful mayhem, to Margot, who loved the sound of her family in motion. This was *not* the sound of slammed doors and scary teenage quietude, but rather

the cacophony of togetherness, the wonder of her children elbowing their way into the world.

Jay did not usually drink, but even more unusual than the sight of Jay with a Scotch was the sight of Jay in the corner of their living room, sprawled in the library chair as if it hadn't been built to hold all the parts of a human being. Margot took note of this sight many times as she went in and out, carting the duffle bags and pillows and laptops the children dropped at the foot of the stairs. It wasn't that she didn't have sympathy for Jay. She did. She absolutely did. But he had asked them so many times to carry on without him she was programmed to do exactly that.

Ten minutes after Jay slips out of the room, Margot gets up herself and goes to the window to see what he has seen. As her bare feet collide with the hard oak floor, she's grateful for its cold and unforgiving nature, grateful that it causes the smallest ache in her feet as they stretch. This is not home, with its woolen carpets and her slippers next to the bed, and Margot's thankful for this difference, for the rhythms of the beach that allow her to inhabit a slightly different skin.

Margot looks out at the inky tress and the off-black sky. She sees a faint spot of yellow coming from the Meehan's porch light across the vacant lot, and for a moment Margot is sixteen and Jacob Meehan is walking her home, his hands wandering furthest in the darkest middle of the woods where the two porch lights don't meet. Margot opens the window an inch and feels the blast of cold air—later she will learn it was 42 degrees that morning, even though it is the second of August—and she hears the unmistakable

sound of Jay's voice at work. This is what's woken him, Leo in the PICU with the open chest, Leo whose heart he could not make work even though he fixed it beautifully.

In a few minutes Margot will join Jay, knowing he won't go back to sleep at this hour. She'll ask him about Leo, and he'll tell her that the sats are seventy, which could be better, but also could be worse. So far good pressures. No sepsis. Yet. Margot hears this conversation so clearly it almost doesn't need to happen. Either Leo will survive these few days or weeks or he won't. Either there will be a call in the middle of the night, alerting Jay that there might be a heart out there tonight, or there will be a very different call, likely from Leila, telling Jay that the parents have decided to do a withdrawal. It could go either way so easily, turning on an infected line or another infant in another state who suddenly and mysteriously stops breathing, the team there able to save his heart but not his life.

Before their own children were born, Margot used to agonize for these parents, knowing better than they did what was ahead of them. Although she rarely met any of them, she listened to Jay's updates with rapt attention and often debated with him, late into the night, the best treatment to recommend for the most difficult and ambiguous cases. Jay was a surgeon. He liked to fix things. If a surgical repair was possible, he would definitely recommend it. But Margot liked to ask other kinds of questions about the family and their beliefs and the long-term outcomes of these so-called surgical fixes. Would this child be able to go to school? Join a soccer team? Survive long enough to experience his first kiss? Would he then die of heart failure just as he was applying to college? Was the family prepared to take care of these critically ill children? Margot was very good, early on, at showing Jay how to think of that family's world with as much

three-dimensional precision as he was able to visualize the walnut-sized heart upon which he was to operate. In those early years she was very good for him, and Margot and Jay were an excellent team.

And then, as soon as Margot finished her own residency in internal medicine, Ben was born with a perfect little heart, his chest smooth and unscarred, his own pulmonary arteries at work under the perfect amount of pressure. When Jay would come home late at night and begin narrating his toughest cases, as he'd always done, Margot would look down at the swaddled shape of Ben, nursing or sleeping in her lap, and she would ask Jay to stop, irrationally fearful that by the force of his words alone her own baby would suddenly grow a chest tube or mid-line incision.

Margot hears Jay's laugh through the open window, then hears him say good-bye to Leila. She imagines she can even hear the little taps as he now stands in the almost-dark checking his e-mail, looking at the headlines. There will be nothing urgent here; everything urgent for Jay comes in the form of a page or phone call, usually a nurse, but sometimes Mark Allison or George Jensen, the PICU attendings. Margot's used to these calls, and has long since made peace with a life that carries on with or without Jay, depending on the weather in the PICU.

In a few minutes Margot will go downstairs and they will talk briefly about Leo and she will begin to make this old-new house theirs again for even a few weeks. She will move the coffee maker back to the spot by the sink where it's been since she was a girl. She will pick up a broom just after the coffee begins to drip into the pot and sweep out the sand that's come in on their shoes and cuffs, just as her mother used to do every morning in the summers when she was a girl.

She wonders, for the first time in years, where is Jacob Meehan now? If she runs into his parents at the grocery, or the bakery, she'll make a point of asking. When she and Janie were both first married, they used to invite the Meehan's to a barbecue once each year, trading updates in their mother's absence. Pearl Meehan would make a fuss over the babies, Ben and Seth, wondering aloud if she would ever be a grandmother. First Jacob was building houses in Turkey, then roads in Afghanistan, then installing sewer lines below the perma-frost in Alaska. But by the time Elena was born the Meehan's younger son, Robert, had surprised them with a hasty marriage and a grandson soon after, and Pearl was almost giddy with happiness, bringing Margot a ruffled pink dress for Elena suitable only for a photographer's studio. Pearl's eyes misted over when Margot handed her the baby and told her the name, Elena. "For you mother," Pearl said, and held the baby close to her chest while her jaw clenched and the tears passed. Margot knew the tears weren't grief for Ellen, exactly, at that point gone eight years, but a sadness for joys unknown, a twinge of inevitable mortality. By the time Mehra came along the Meehan's were spending less time at the beach and more time with their grandson, and even though the annual tradition faded away, Margot still felt a closeness to Pearl that went far beyond her teenage summers with Jacob.

Where is Jacob Meehan now? Standing at the window looking into the woods between their houses, she remembers exactly what it felt like to sit down on an old, fallen log in the dark patch of pines where neither porch light could reach. Jacob would sit down behind her, and point up at the stars, pretending to know, and she would look up, pretending to listen, but that pretense would only last a minute before he was kissing her

neck and shoulders and pulling her T-shirt aside to get at more and more skin. There could never be enough skin.

Caught in the memory, Margot puts her hands out flat on the window glass, as if by mimicking the teenager's greedy posture she can also be part of the chase for something elusive and delicious. She hears Jay's murmurs again. For a second she sees herself running down the stairs on tiptoe to take him by the hand and lead him back up to their room. How surprised he'd be. She's usually so sensible. For a moment she enjoys imagining his pleasure as he bounces up the stairs behind her, his hands already stroking his favorite part of her body, the small, imperceptible curve from waist to hips that is not noticeable to look at Margot, who is not curvy, but that Jay knows well and loves, a dip in the flesh and then the solid mantle of bone. Margot is about to turn from the window, to move quietly through the sleeping house to retrieve her husband, when she catches a glimpse of her hands on the windows. Her breath catches in her throat, an audible sound. These are her mother's hands, pale and wrinkled. These are not the hands of a woman who goes chasing after sex. What is she thinking? Again she hears Jay's voice, and this time she closes the window, the room now cold, and crosses the hard floor to look in the closet for her sweater and slippers. If she were to walk out on the deck and pick up his free hand, kissing the back of it, he might hardly notice. If she then slipped a hand under his sweater and circled his waist, leaning in to kiss him, he might turn and embrace her, or he might say, *Leo's sats are falling. I should be there.* And then how foolish she would feel, her lips still brushing the valley between neck and shoulder. He might even say, *I should really call Leila.*

Margot finds a fleece jacket and zips it up, taking a moment to smooth her hair and clip it back before heading downstairs to start the work of the day. Only when she opens the door does she hear Janie's voice mixing with Jay's, and suddenly she is exhausted at a quarter to five in the morning.

When Margot enters the kitchen, Janie is making herself a single cup of coffee, standing next to the six-burner range and dripping water from a teakettle in small circles over an open filter of grounds.

"You're up," Margot says, heading straight for the sink to fill the carafe.

"I'm up," Janie says, dripping a little more water.

"Did you sleep?" Margot asks, as she pours the water into the coffeemaker. "I saw your light around midnight."

"You know I don't sleep," Janie says. "Why would today be any different?"

Margot pours the coffee beans into the grinder and presses the button, glad for a moment of distraction. Jay is sitting at the booth in front of the windows, intent on his phone, as she knew he would be. After she has emptied the coffee into the machine and pressed the button, she turns back and around to face Janie, to begin again.

"Were the girls up late?" Margot asks. "I could still hear them at twelve."

"I drifted off a little around three," Janie says, "but I could still hear giggling."

"Oh, God," Margot says. "They'll be asleep till noon. And cranky."

"That's why God invented vacation," Janie says. She turns to drip a little more water and Margot suddenly feels foolish and dismissed. The coffeemaker is wheezing and whining, but won't be done for several minutes, so she goes and sits across from Jay.

"How's Leo," she says, and he doesn't respond.

Finally he looks up. “Did you say something?”

“I said, ‘How’s Leo.’”

His face is still blank.

“Leo Sullivan,” Margot says slowly.

His face is flat. He gives away nothing. Is he hiding something, or merely distracted? “Not worse,” he finally says.

Margot stares at him a moment longer as he returns to the screen in his hand, then looks out instead. Because one wall of the kitchen is all windows and door, there’s a backdrop of swirly gray to the normally cheerful, pale gold room. Margot wonders if the fog itself has excused them from the rituals of polite interaction. She wonders if Janie and Jay would speak to her differently if the sun were up and they could all glimpse the tiny slice of ocean just beneath the horizon.

“I’m waiting for your commentary on the kitchen,” Margot says to Janie, smiling at her, an effort. Last night when Janie arrived, just a few minutes after Margot and Jay, she took a fat book out of her suitcase and headed straight up to her room (leaving the suitcase in the foyer), declaring that she was too tired to talk to anyone. It was up to Margot, then, to unload the coolers and grocery bags and make quesadillas at nine when the four girls descended from the bunk room under a cloud of perfume, their eyelids painted the colors of jelly beans. Mallory and Mehra, at eleven, are both enthralled with their older sisters, but it’s Megan who leads this tribe, older than Elena by a year and already as tall as Janie. The girls don’t see each other much at home (they live a half hour apart, more if there’s traffic), but Margot’s happy to see they still travel through the

house in a pack, their feet heavy but joyful on the stairs, possessing the hearts of children in bodies that have already begun to betray them.

Margot heard Janie venture down just before midnight, and sees now the dirty wine glass next to the sink, but this is the first time they've been in the new kitchen together, and Margot knows that Janie must hate it.

“What’s there to say?” Janie pours half and half into a miniature saucepan. It takes her a minute to read the diagram on the stove, to figure out which knob to turn. When the flame is successfully lit, she turns back to Margot and shrugs. “It’s a big old slab of granite.”

Finally the coffeemaker sighs and Margot is grateful to have something to do, to get up and pour two cups. She goes back and places one in front of Jay, then returns to the sink to wash out the dirty wine glass. She can see Janie out of the corner of her eye, stirring the cream just until it begins to steam. She pours it first into a little pitcher, and then from there into her coffee cup. Where is her sister with the acid tongue who literally fell out of her chair laughing (a prank, of course) when the *New York Times* reported that granite counters emitted an unhealthy amount of radon? Where is her sister who lectured about the rape of India when Margot remodeled her own kitchen? Margot was sure this would get a rise out of Janie, the kitchen they'd known for thirty years now looking like a tastefully done showroom.

Margot liked the remodel, not for what was new, but for what had stayed the same. The sink was still where it should be, on the far wall, the window still looking straight into the Barclays' kitchen. The cabinets and the stove were also exactly in place (the stove bigger, and the cabinets now extending full height to the ceiling), and the new

built-in booth sat under the bank of windows just as their mother's table had, with the view of the deck and the wisteria and the tiny strip of sea. In short, everything was different but everything remained the same, no new islands or peninsulas or wrought-iron pot racks in sight, much to Margot's relief.

Should she be worried about Janie, who has nothing to say? Yes, probably, but not today. Janie's sitting across from Jay, her feet propped on the bench beside him, stirring her coffee with meditative calm, taking a sip every third or fourth time around. Anyone who has the patience to devote this much attention to the perfect cup of coffee is doing okay for now.

Margot places the clean wine glass on a dish towel next to the sink. She can't help but notice how the counters glisten, how they are shot through with tiny veins of gold. Her mother religiously waxed and buffed the old linoleum counters, but they certainly never shone like this. Last night, when Margot was making quesadillas for the girls, it brought tears to her eyes, thinking about her mother polishing the counters and her father smoking cigars on the porch where her mother never ventured because she couldn't stand the smell. Last night Jay was waiting for her on the porch with two glasses of wine, and Margot cried at the stove waiting for the cheese to melt (turning her back to the girls to wipe her eyes with her sleeve) because she couldn't remember if she and Janie had ever giggled like this, had ever made their mother feel so lucky to preside over such a scene. Margot was also crying out of gratitude that Jay was sitting on the porch, expecting her. Had he been upstairs, flipping channels, (a real possibility, she had to admit to herself), she would have felt defeat instead, sensing that their marriage was just as ruined as her parents', the walls thick with the insulation of everything not said.

Small things do matter, she thought, as she delivered the girls' dinner and quickly slipped outside.

Standing at the sink, Margot dumps out the rest of her cold coffee and washes the mug. She walks over to Jay and puts her hands on his shoulders, kissing the top of his head. He didn't have to sit out with her last night. It's usually she and Janie on the porch, killing a bottle on their trips down memory lane. This year is different, though, their first without Gordon. It was kind of Jay to notice that she would have been alone, especially after the day he had. Margot chose to take it as a sign that he feels the same urgency she does. It's been months since they've really talked. This is not a time to take anything for granted. They sat together in the dark, listening to the girls on the other side of the window, listening to Ben and Seth stomping around above them. So much evidence of all they've shared. Margot reached out and took his hand and he smiled at her, the blunt edges of the children's commotion softened by the distant rolling of the waves.

"So," Margot says, her hands still on Jay's shoulders, "I was thinking of taking a walk."

"Mmmh," he says, still reading headlines. "Still too dark, don't you think?"

"In a half hour," she says. "When the light comes up." She is thinking of last night on the deck, of how nice it was to be alone together, if only for a few minutes. This almost never happens anymore, and it feels urgent, to stockpile this time while they're here.

“I was thinking of a run,” Janie says, and as soon as she speaks, Margot sees it so clearly: It’s Janie who’s making her feel urgent. Janie without Gordon. Janie who can’t sleep.

“You can go,” Margot says. “We’ll wait.”

Janie shakes her head. “No,” she says. “Go ahead. I might take an Ambien. Try to get some sleep.”

Margot nods and slides in next to her sister on the bench. She almost reaches out and picks up Janie’s hand, but she stops herself. It’s hard to know how this would be received.

“The Dow has finally crossed eleven hundred again,” Jay says. “And dead birds are mysteriously falling out of the sky in Louisiana and Sweden.”

“That’s nice,” Janie says. “Gordon’s getting married.”

Jay puts down the phone. “Anyone we know?”

“Jay,” Margot says, “that is not the point.”

“His colleague,” Janie says, raising both eyebrows. “His colleague who types and answers the phone.”

“He’s marrying his secretary?”

“Oh, Jay,” Janie says, raising her empty cup, “where have you been? They don’t call them secretaries any more.”

“Is she twenty-five?” Jay asks.

“Jay,” Margot hisses.

“I’m just getting the whole story,” he says. “You’re always asking for context. This is context.”

“The *context*,” says Margot, “is how *Janie* feels about it. How the kids are dealing with it. Wait. Do the kids know?”

“Excellent question. As it turns out, they’re the ones who told me,” Janie says. She pushes on Margot to let her out of the bench. “I need another cup of coffee.”

“That’s rather cowardly,” Jay says.

“I thought you were going to sleep,” Margot says.

Janie narrows her eyes at Jay. There is a tight, painful smile on her face. “That’s the Gordon we all know and love, now isn’t it.” Janie gets another coffee filter, moistens it, and puts on the kettle to begin the ritual again.

“He loses points on originality,” Jay says.

Janie speaks with her back to them, measuring beans again. “Major point deduction for lack of imagination.” Margot thinks she hears her voice break.

“I could use another cup, too,” Jay says, walking over to the coffee maker.

“I really don’t know how you can drink that crap.”

“Oh Janie,” Margot says, “haven’t we had enough about the coffee?”

Janie reaches for Jay’s mug. “Let me make you a cup. You’ll see.”

“I don’t care that much,” Jay says. “This is already made.”

“But it’s so bitter,” Janie says. “The grounds can’t breathe in a machine.”

“I’m going to take a shower,” Margot says. “And then Jay and I will head out for a walk, if that’s okay with you.”

“Leaving so soon?” Janie says. “I thought you’d want to hear about the Hawaiian wedding plans.”

Margot stops in the doorway and looks closely at Janie, her trembling lips, her eyes too bright. She takes a deep breath and goes back into the kitchen and puts a hand on her sister's shoulder. Janie closes her eyes and bites her lower lip and Margot feels her shoulders begin to shake.

They are both bad at moments like this, but Margot does the best she can. She puts her arms firmly on Janie's shoulders and they stand still, next to each other, while Janie cries.

A minute later the kettle chirps, and Margot drops her arms when Janie reaches toward the handle.

"The little shit," Margot says, and Janie nods, pouring water in precise little circles. "I'm so sorry."

Janie says nothing until the coffee is done. She hands Jay the new cup and pours the one he's drinking down the drain. "This, my friend," she says, her voice still wobbly, "will be the best fucking cup of coffee you have ever had."

After news of the Hawaiian wedding, Gordon's house shopping, the girls' reports of lacy lingerie drying in the bathroom, Margot excuses herself and heads upstairs. This is not the difficult territory. Janie excels at sarcasm and incredulity. Her shrill voice still rings in Margot's ears, all stridency and anger, and Margot needs a moment to collect herself. She intends only to make the bed and change her pants, but once the bed is made she can't help but stand at the window again, marveling at the fog and the fact that she can barely see their cars. Now that it's lighter, she can't see the Meehan's house at all.

Standing at the window for the second time that morning, Margot begins to cry in earnest. These are nothing like last night's tears, which were a mix of gratefulness (for what she has), longing (for the intimacy she and Jay seem to glimpse but not possess), and mourning (for her mother who never sat on the porch with her father, who never saw her kitchen glisten). No. These tears are utter exhaustion, even fright. She cannot imagine Jay leaving her, after so much history, but only a few years ago she would have said the same of Gordon. And then there's Janie, such a complicated creature. They all count on Margot to listen and absorb. They count on her to ask questions and keep her composure and make sure that everyone's eaten lunch. It's damned unfair, all these expectations they have, but it's even worse to imagine shedding this skin. What would be left? Margot shakes her head. She won't allow herself to venture there. Still, at the start of this day, Margot does not think she can handle one more person asking anything else of her.

When she regains her composure, Margot notices she's shaking and freezing, and so goes to the bathroom and turns on the hot water full force. She strips her clothes and stands naked while the bathroom fills with steam. She sees the walls of glass tile grow dull in the fog and shakes her head at the beauty and comfort. It seems like something of a waste, or a mockery. She knows she has nothing to complain about, yet the stress of *nothing* feels like it just might eat her alive.

Margot stands under the scalding spray thinking about how this happened to Gordon and Janie. She couldn't really say. Sure, she knows the outline of events (hard early years, Gordon's business struggling, Janie not so happy at home with the kids, then the truce of middle age, some easier if more distant years, a sort of plateau), but she

doesn't know the true story. Janie doesn't tell a lot of stories. She makes pronouncements. She analyzes and criticizes. She freely speculates about other people's inner lives (as she shampoos her hair Margot can hear Janie's voice in her head saying "what *kind* of a person"), but hardly ever divulges details about her own.

Margot luxuriates in the warmth, not caring if she drains the whole house of hot water. Janie is their mother all over again. Janie would scratch her eyes out if Margot ever said it, but it's true. It doesn't matter that Janie became a Unitarian (their mother was Hadassah president), or refused to cook (Ellen canned fruit in the summers, made a chicken dinner and a challah every Friday night), or that she goes everywhere dressed in sneakers and Lycra. This is all window dressing. It doesn't even matter that Janie takes pleasure in swearing, in being the loudest voice at a party, while their mother hardly even spoke. The essential sameness, Margot realizes, is that they're both a mystery to her. They withhold so much, and by doing so they ask Margot to do most of the work. To ask the questions. To build the bridges. How fucking selfish, Margot thinks, turning to the wall.

She is about to turn off the water, but stops herself. A minute longer. She can't go downstairs like this. She feels her throat constrict with the threat of more tears, but she takes many deep breaths and her balance returns. She cannot start this day so angry. She thinks the girls deserve to have a good time. Especially Megan and Mallory. It's been a hard week for them—a hard year—no doubt.

Haven't they had great times here before? Yes, of course. Margot has albums full of evidence to prove it.

It is a Monday. They will go to the beach today. The kids will jump in the freezing cold waves and then dig a hole big enough for all of them to fall into. They are all a little old for this, but the twin tugs of nostalgia and competition will lure them in. They will build a fire on the beach at sunset. They will roast hot dogs for dinner (well, chicken and tofu, but still in the spirit of things), and then they will roast marshmallows until the sky is black and they can only hear the ocean and no longer see it. None of this needs to be complicated.

When Margot comes out of the bathroom, Jay is in the bedroom tying his sneakers.

She smiles at him. “Good,” she says. “You’re almost ready.”

She gathers clean clothes from the dresser and goes back into the bathroom to dress. “I was thinking,” she yells from behind the door, “we should build a fire tonight. On the beach. Roast marshmallows.”

“Fine,” he says.

“I thought we should have some family time,” she continues, “before the boys take off. You know. Tradition and all that.”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Jay says.

Margot emerges, toweling her hair. “I’ll be ready in a minute.”

“No hurry.” He flops onto the bed and picks up the remote control.

“I just made that,” she says.

Jay gets up and smooths the comforter, then plants himself in a chair in the sitting area.

Margot comes out with her hair clipped neatly back. She sits down across from him to put on her socks and shoes. “Can you believe that,” she says, “about Gordon?” “Sounds like standard issue stuff to me.”

Margot stops with her left shoe mid-air. “What does that mean? Do you still talk to him?”

Jay frowns. “I haven’t talked to the guy in a year,” he says.

“Then what do you mean, ‘standard issue’?”

Jay shrugs. “All I mean is that men leave their wives if they want to be with other women, and women leave their husbands if they want to be alone. Gordon left Janie. This must have been the someone else.”

Margot props her heels on the edge of the chair and hugs her knees. This conversation is utterly surprising, unwelcome even, but she needs to chase it down. “Are you saying,” Margot begins, “that a man would never leave a marriage just because he was unhappy? That there always has to be another woman?”

Jay clicks off the TV and looks at her. “I don’t know what I’m saying. It doesn’t matter. I’m just not that surprised about Gordon.”

Margot gets up and puts on her fleece jacket. “Do you think this will be warm enough?” She’s contemplating whether to let the subject drop.

“Yes,” he says, “I do,” then comes over and kisses her forehead.

As he’s looking in the closet for his own jacket, she decides to try one more time. “Jay,” she says, “do you think—“

“Are you trying to ask me if I’m having an affair?” He looks her in the eye as he pushes his arms through the sleeves.

She’s a little shocked. “Am I?” she says.

“Foolishness,” he says. “Hogwash.” He is smiling playfully, reaching his arm around her waist. His phone rings from his back pocket. He reaches under her jacket and tickles her bare skin. She giggles in spite of herself.

He drops his arm and reaches for the phone. “After all,” he says, putting it up to his ear, “Where would I find the time?”

Chapter 2

Jay and Margot enter the kitchen, both dressed to go out for a walk. They're surprised to see Ben sitting at the table with Janie, and even more surprised to see him smiling.

"Seth snores," he says, before they can ask.

Jay puts his hand on Ben's shoulder. "Then come with us. We're going on a walk."

Margot winces. Not at all what she had in mind.

"Dad. Really. Not a chance. It's like—six in the morning. That's worse than school."

Jay sits across from Ben and leans in close. His voice is low, his face relaxed.

"Tell me, Ben," he says, "do you know where the moon is right now?"

Ben is still. Waiting.

"And do you know when we will next have a full moon, and when we should expect high tide today?"

Ben looks sideways at Janie. "Not off the top of my head."

"Then really," Jay says, "this is not worse than school. It's much better." Jay smiles. "You might actually learn something. Get your shoes," he says.

Margot hears this exchange with her back turned as she wipes coffee grounds off the counter. Poor Jay. He has no idea he's still talking to Ben as he did when their son was ten. Six years ago, Ben would have eagerly followed, happy to have his father's attention. Today, Margot is fairly certain Ben is swearing at them both. They are very

lucky, she thinks, that he has inherited a sense of decorum. His rebellions are quiet. They are not spared conflict, but thankfully they are spared outright ugliness.

“I was hoping to go for a run,” Janie says.

Margot turns to face them. “Do you want to go now? Ben still needs to get dressed.”

“I’m not going,” Ben says.

“I’m not ready yet either,” Janie says.

“You *are* going,” says Jay, still smiling.

“We won’t be long,” Margot says. “Half hour. Forty minutes.” She drops the sponge in the sink. “We’ll bring back pastries,” she says. “Ben, you love those almond croissants.”

“We always go for pancakes the first day,” he says, his voice low and flat. He looks out from under the hair directly at Margot. “Family tradition.”

“I know,” she says, “but the girls were up really late last night. Aunt Janie says they were up until three. We’ll all starve if we wait for them to wake up.”

Jay stands up and claps his hands. “Ben,” he says. “Shoes.”

In an instant the room is in motion, Ben walking noisily up the stairs, Janie going to the refrigerator for more coffee beans (this is obviously why she can’t sleep), and Jay pacing the kitchen a few times and then slipping out to the deck. Margot sees him put the phone to his ear, and for a second she almost wishes he would just leave. No, she doesn’t really mean it. She does want him here. But she also wants a simple day. Restorative. No phone calls.

Jay comes back in. “Leo’s at a hundred and one,” he says.

So now he wants to talk. “They could still catch it,” Margot replies.

“Not likely.”

“No.”

“This’ll be it, then,” Jay says, turning to face the windows.

“You gave them their best shot,” Margot says.

“But that doesn’t matter.” Jay turns back to her, suddenly angry. “This never should have happened. This didn’t *need* to happen.”

He’s right, but what can she say? The world is a highly imperfect place. Jay is used to controlling the variables, while Margot is used to adjusting. Leo is about to die because of hospital politics and a surgeon’s ego and the brutal economics of health care in this country. But they’ve been over this ground a hundred times, and she’s too tired to travel it again this morning. “You’re right,” is all she can manage.

“Where the hell is Ben?” he says. “Styling his *hair*?”

A moment later they hear the slam of the front door. “He heard you just now,” she says. “He’s on the front porch.”

“And?” Jay says.

“And you need to go out and make nice. He’s very sensitive about his hair.”

“He should have grown up with *my* father,” Jay says, slamming the back door.

“His head would have been shaved in his sleep.”

Out on the beach, the three of them walk in proximity, if not exactly together. Jay, still angry and frustrated about Leo, moves out in front, setting a vigorous pace. He's happy to be moving at all, even if it's not his usual neighborhood jog.

Were he there today, he would not be the principal player in Leo's case, but even so, the old routines would be useful. He would round in Leo's room with his retinue of at least a dozen. Because of the fever, the attending would be there (He hoped it was Jensen today, who had a better way with these things). There would be a quick discussion of what had been tried to arrest the fever, and what remained, and then someone would say, Have you talked to the parents about withdrawal. Jay could add nothing to this discussion except to confirm that there was not another surgical option.

Yesterday after the procedure, his partner Mark cornered him in his office while he was changing out of his scrubs. "I think we should list him," Mark said. "Oh, come on," Jay said. "You know he'll never last that long."

Mark stood in front of the door. "It doesn't hurt anybody to fill out some forms."

"The parents!" Jay practically screamed. "Haven't they been through enough?"

"I will make it very clear to them that finding a donor in time is an extremely unlikely possibility."

Jay shook his head. He was too exhausted to fight after six hours in the OR. "Do what you want, Mark. He's your patient now."

If Jay were there, he would say there were not any surgical options left, and Mark would say, We've listed him with UNOS, and Jay would say, Let me repeat myself. I do not see a viable surgical option left. The retinue would move silently out of the room, and Jay would be irritated for about a minute and a half. This was an old fight between

them. Mark did most of the transplants in the practice, and was always advocating for the impossible. Jay didn't like them because they were the simplest procedures to do, and because they only traded one kind of heart disease for another. Half of these transplanted infants died before age twelve. Many of those who didn't die required second transplants. The anti-rejection therapies were akin to having AIDS. It was not a life Jay liked to recommend.

If he were there, though, he would move the retinue into the next room, where Sierra Conklin was recovering beautifully from an arterial switch on Friday, two days before Leo, and would likely get moved out of the PICU today. He could show the fellows her labs and quiz them about pressures and outputs. They would continue around the fifteen beds in the unit, six of the patients his: three arterial switches (including Leo's), two atrial septal defects (the only procedure he might call routine), and one Norwood (the first of three grueling surgeries to repair hypoplastic left heart syndrome, a condition certainly fatal until about twenty years ago). A slow week, intentionally, preparing to be away. Not a bad showing, though. Five of the six were doing great.

Jay keeps his pace just ahead of Margot and Ben, appreciating the cloak of fog and the sound of the surf. The silence feels more natural this way. Margot and Ben remain a few steps behind, Ben burrowed in his sweatshirt, the hood up and his hands burrowed deeply in the pocket. She can barely see his face but she smiles at him all the same. She's glad Jay's absorbed in his own thoughts and has forgotten to lecture on the tides or the phases of the moon. (How could he not realize that he's delivered these same lectures for years, and no one has learned a thing? Their children are not slow. Jay's slow, not connecting the dots.)

They push forward for fifteen or twenty minutes, hardly a word between them. This is ground they all know well, each stand of grass or outcropping of rock telling them just how far they've come. The houses, too, are visible from the water's edge, and Margot could name who lives or has lived in most of them as they pass. It means nothing now, but when she was thirteen or fifteen the most important part of summers at the beach was this loose tribe of exiled children. Without their usual friends and neighborhood divisions, they formed intense summer bonds. Margot studies the houses, all of them nearly the same. Is that Olivia Fordham's old place? Looks like it. For a moment Margot is in Olivia's basement, fourteen years old, sipping vodka and orange juice while a boy (not Jacob Meehan) rests his hand on her breast. Margot manages half a smile and shakes her head. How excruciating to be fourteen (and fifteen and sixteen, she thinks of Jacob again, and the log in the forest between their houses), caught in the act of becoming. She feels all this as an uncomfortable flutter around the ribs, the tension between what was and what will be.

"Why did you shake your head just now?" Ben asks.

She looks up into his face, grateful the hood has pushed his hair out of his eyes. In spite of the faint stubble on his cheeks, he looks to her just as he did at seven years old. Thin and angular with big, trusting brown eyes, he is their child who looks most obviously like a cross between them. He has his father's expressive eyes and strong forehead, his mother's dark hair and high cheek bones. He's a beautiful boy, and Margot's relieved that it looks like he'll keep this beauty into adulthood. It's not everything, of course, but it never hurts.

“Shake my head?” Margot has already forgotten. “Oh,” she says. “A distant memory. Not important.”

“You had a really funny look on your face. Like you’re angry.”

“Oh, Ben. No.” Margot hooks her arm through Ben’s elbow and chuckles. “You used to do this when you were a kid,” she said. “Do you remember?”

“Do what?”

“The minute I thought about something or somebody else, you would quiz me about the expression on my face. You always thought I was angry.”

“You were always thinking about something else,” he says.

Margot walks a few steps, then slides her arm out of his. There’s something chilling in his tone, like he’s been waiting to deliver this line. Well, then.

“Just now,” she says, “I was looking at that house back there and thinking it was probably Olivia Fordham’s, a million years ago. One summer we sipped vodka and orange juice in the afternoons while her mother played golf.” She gives him a sly little smile. “Sometimes we made out with different boys.” Margot leans over to pick up a piece of shell. She decides to keep it for its beautiful purple stripe. She can add it to their collection on the fireplace mantel at home—twenty years of shells from Kingston Beach. “Do you find this shocking?”

Ben raises his eyebrows and looks at her sideways. A little laugh escapes. Good. She has disarmed him.

“Mom,” he says. “You and shocking do not even, like, live in the same universe.” She smiles at him, and he smiles back, broadly, his eyes alive. She’s tempted to ask him, playfully, if screwdrivers are still in fashion among the teenage set, and also what’s now

the proper term for “making out.” All in good fun, of course, to show him that she knows exactly what she is (hopelessly middle-aged and uncool, and happily so). She holds back, though, not wanting to ruin the lovely look on his face, not wanting to see his shoulders tense and hear deep sighs escape. “I’m going to choose to take that as a compliment,” she says instead, and they both laugh again. This is, without question, the very best moment of the day.

Jay feels better walking on the beach. There’s something about the ocean, how little they see coupled with how much is there, that always works its magic on Jay. He’s also buoyed by a half hour of silence. He hears Margot and Ben murmuring behind him. That’s fine. Let her treat him like a friend instead of a son. If damage has been done, surely it’s too late to reverse it now.

Margot starts to yell something about pancakes when his phone rings again. They all stop moving as he listens, Margot and Ben searching his face for clues. It feels invasive, though, this scrutiny, and so he turns his back to them, nodding and saying, “Uh huh, okay.” When he puts the phone away he hears Margot’s intake of breath, preparing to speak, but beats her to the punch.

“Pancakes,” he says too loudly, and too cheerfully. “Did someone say something about pancakes?”

“Jay,” Margot begins, and as her voice rings out, they feel the earth move beneath them. A gentle tremble that fixes each of them to their spots. They search each other’s faces, hoping perhaps that someone didn’t feel it, that it’s all imagined.

“Did you feel that?” Ben asks. “Was that an earthquake?”

His parents don’t answer. They are watching and waiting, Jay looking about in every direction. There’s always a reasonable explanation.

Finally he moves, putting the phone back in his pocket, turning to Ben. “I don’t think it’s an earthquake,” he says. “There’d be more.”

“It could’ve been way out in the ocean,” Ben offers. “Hey,” he says, his eyes lighting up again. “We could be in for a tsunami.”

They’re now walking back toward home, having turned around without discussing it.

“I was going to say,” Margot says, “it’s okay if you want to go. To the hospital, I mean.”

Jay shrugs. “Nothing I can do. They don’t need me to crowd the room.”

“You could tell them they did the right thing,” Margot says. “That might mean a lot.”

“Or it might really piss them off,” Jay says. “It’s pretty hard to say ‘right thing’ in a room with a dead kid.”

“Ouch, Dad,” Ben says.

“Oh, Christ, Ben,” Jay says.

“Hey,” Margot says. “Don’t take it out on him.”

Jay's pace quickens. He wouldn't mind a few minutes alone. Sometimes Margot goes too far in her presumptions about his cases. Sometimes she's just plain wrong, and this is one of those moments. Margot hasn't been in an OR since she was the intern and he was the resident. She's never cut through a layer of skin, never stared at a flaccid heart. She's an excellent doctor, but she knows hospice and dementia and morphine drips. Nothing in medicine could possibly be farther from what he does.

"Is he already gone?" Margot says. "Is that it?"

"No, but they're doing the withdrawal tonight, unless something changes."

"That was the call you just took."

He looks at her sideways, and waits a minute before answering. He doesn't want to get into anything. He notices the way the humidity curls the fine hairs at her temples. She looks almost girlish. It softens him. "Yes," he says. "That was that call."

"Leila," she says.

He looks at her again, but her face gives away nothing.

"The charge nurse," he says. He then looks out to sea, and sees the first thin stripe of blue on the horizon. "Leila."

They continue in silence and Jay measures their progress against the houses he can see from the water's edge. He doesn't know them as well as Margot, but surely he has covered this ground himself at least a hundred times in nineteen years. He guesses they have a half mile, at least, until the houses turn demure and historic and face each other, rather than this newer construction that faces the beach. How he wishes they were there already, out of the wind and fog. But what will he do once they're home? He doesn't have an answer. He could go back to Portland, as Margot has suggested, but this

wouldn't help. If he were to go to the hospital tonight there would be no waiting patients, no scheduled surgeries. There would only be George Jensen managing the withdrawal, and Margot's wrong about Jay's role in this. There's no place for him. Jay doesn't persevere. He's a pragmatist. He doesn't think about this choice again.

That leaves Kingston Beach then, with its bakery and miniature market and golf course. He hasn't played a round of golf in a year, since the last time they were here, but maybe he'll suggest it to Ben and Seth. Janie's usually willing to be a fourth. But only if the fog burns off, and only to mark time. Jay knows that only a full day in the OR will put the world right again. A coarcted arch, a simple atrial septal defect—even another TGA, but this time on a pink and glistening heart, he the first surgeon to cut and stitch. In these cases he has no fear, even when the heart begins to fibrillate. Jay calmly shocks it back into rhythm and explains to the fellow on his right, *always expect the atria to overflow when we remove the clamps*. Jay likes to teach, but with very few words. He expects his fellows to pay attention. His OR is silent unless he's the one to speak first, even in the cases that move like poetry. No chatter. No Bach and no Beatles. Just the beautiful, calm silence of the team at work over the tiny open chest, setting right what biology could not manage correctly the first time.

Jay thrives on making order out of chaos, at setting the course of these families as straight as he possibly can. He does not like to dwell with the parents, and he has perfected the art of bowing his head and deflecting their praise. But he does look forward to the moment when he can tell them (most of them), that the surgery has gone beautifully, that soon they can start the real business of living. A clear path. Unlimited choices. This is the reason Jay chose, long ago, not to operate on adults. Their choices

have been made. And most of them have even been the cause of their own trouble. Nothing makes Jay happier than a full morning in the OR and then the brief trip downstairs to the parents' lounge, where he likes to pull up a chair and draw the parents into a tight circle, almost touching at the knees. The news is almost always good, the future full. For a brief moment they're an intimate band of three, and Jay draws almost as much from these moments as from the beautiful stretches of concentrated poetry with the team upstairs. He loves his team, and what they are together able to accomplish. And he also loves most parents, even when they are people he would never meet or even like in a different situation. Even when they try to tell him he's an instrument of God.

Jay doesn't discuss religion with anyone, but he decided decades ago that there cannot be anything out there that resembles a benevolent God. As a younger surgeon in training, he only had to look into a dozen open chests, each heart malformed in its own unique way, to decide this was the worst sort of cruelty he could imagine. Most parents didn't know their children had these defects until they were born, or sometimes hours or days after the birth. Mothers would be showering and dressing to receive visitors when a nurse would come in and say, "There's something very wrong with the baby." If there were a God then these defects should have killed the embryo before it carved out a space at the center of their lives. At the eighth week of pregnancy, just about the time many women realized something was different, the two chambered tube twisted to form the four chambered heart, and in that moment of twisting, the variation of mistake was endless. If there were a God or even a logical force of nature at work, the embryo would die then, and no one's life would be altered. The parents would try again, and they would have a healthy baby. These defects were mostly not genetic.

But this was not the case. Because the atmosphere in the womb was so hospitable, and the heart and lungs were not subjected to the stresses of breathing real air, most babies developed just perfectly, except the heart. It was up to Jay and his team, then, and a few dozen others, to try to keep these babies alive. It was a breakthrough when the surgeons started to realize that they should not try to restore the heart to its intended shape, but rather just construct something that could pump and deliver blood, no matter how strange it might look. The surgeons became designers, then, shaking hands with the worst that nature could manage.

Walking on the beach, Margot and Ben keeping pace next to him, Jay has calmed himself just thinking about the usual order of his days. It's not as good as being there, but almost.

"Jay," Margot says. "I really think you should go."

He shakes his head. Margot doesn't know that Jay has moved on. It's not that Leo's case has lost its sting (that would never happen, the unnecessary loss of a child), but the injustice of it no longer threatens to topple him. For every Leo there are fifty or a hundred Connors and Ashleys and Rainas, all children he's discharged in the last week to a mostly uncomplicated future. He knows that statistically, there are failures. The failure, in Leo's case, is in a system far beyond his OR beyond his control. Yesterday this knowledge almost did him in, yet today it's almost comforting. He did all that he could. It was right to try. He'll spend time with his family and go back in two weeks and redouble his efforts. Jay puts his arm through Margot's and smiles at her. He looks

forward to a hot cup of coffee and his family gathered in the kitchen. Maybe he'll suggest a day trip, for old time's sake, Hug Point Beach. Early on they went there because it made the children snicker, to see such intimacy spelled out on green highway signs. Now they go because they have always gone, and the views are indeed spectacular. He can hardly wait to suggest it, to see Margot relax into a genuine smile. He feels like a snake that has successfully digested a mouse.

When they hear the first sirens, seven or eight minutes after the tremble, Jay thinks his supposition was correct. Likely an explosion. Patches of industrial buildings rim the north side of town. Could be a gas leak, or something electrical. The light's come up but the fog is still thick. They press forward, perhaps a little faster, eager to be home.

When the sirens continue, one after the other, Margot and Jay walk faster still, pulling in front of Ben and dropping hands. It's uncomfortable to hold on at this pace. They steal glances at one another but don't speak. Neither knows anything for certain, and it doesn't seem like a time for conjecture. Even if there were something to say, it would be difficult to hear, between the sirens and the waves.

As they walk Jay tries to count the sirens (six, seven, eight), his body knowing before his mind that there's something very wrong with these sounds. His own heartbeat pounds in his ears, part exertion and part adrenaline. They're not fading, these sirens. They get louder and louder and then stop abruptly, replaced by softer ones approaching from the distance. It's something in town, then. He turns to Margot to say this, but

before he can speak she takes off in a run. He turns to see what she's seen, and there they are, flashing lights moving toward them, pastels in the fog. He watches her back as she struggles through loose sand.

Jay doesn't run but keeps his eyes firmly on Margot, on the yellow-green square of her jacket as she bobs up and down like a buoy on the waves.

"Dad," Ben says. "What's happening?"

Jay doesn't respond. He has no answer. He needs to slow his pulse. He cannot think with this pounding in his ears and burning in his chest.

Margot's jacket disappears and Jay knows she's entered the path through the shoulder-high grasses. He reaches for Ben's hand and together they cross the sand in large, even strides.

Jay doesn't have time to speak, in this last moment of calm, but he does have time to think. It must be the turn onto the highway. Near a blind curve. He's warned Ben about it at least a dozen times. People come tearing down 101 at terrifying speeds when the traffic's not backed up, and it would make sense, at this time of day. A hotel maid or a waitress, late for her shift. An unsuspecting tourist headed for the Safeway to pick up a few things for breakfast. A collision with a tanker, headed north, the source of the explosion.

They move through the grasses, Jay grateful for firmer ground, and then suddenly they're on the street seeing people. Too many people. Far too many people for seven in the morning. For any time of the day. For all of Kingston Beach. Where is Margot? How could she have disappeared so quickly? Jay stops and scans each cluster for the yellow-green jacket and her dark hair, but he can't find her. Instead he sees people in

bathrobes standing on the sidewalk. He sees another police car turning in from the highway, six blocks away, and then the cluster of people in front of the bakery, clutching their coffee cups to their chests. He notices they're not drinking. Still standing at the entrance to the beach access, Jay follows the lights and sees what Margot has already seen. A slice of orange flames. A sheet of black smoke. A wall of flashing lights. Jay is not slow to see. He's careful to notice. He's taken in all of these things in the time it takes to turn his head from his right shoulder to his left. A second. Maybe two. But the time for seeing is over. It's time to move and they do, both of them running down the middle of the empty street, Ben quickly outpacing his father, the burning in Jay's chest moving to his gut and legs as he tries to push himself forward.

Another block, and then two, and he can make out their cars circled in yellow tape. The large tree above them looks sawed in half, a shower of branches and leaves in the street like a carpet for the ambulances (three of them), fire trucks (four of these, of different sizes, and one of them yellow), and the late arriving police cars, pulled up around the edges as if they could keep the destruction contained. The hoses, many of them, point toward the house like arrows. White arrows. So very white against the screen of smoke.

Jay runs toward the ambulances, his gaze fixed on the burning house. Nothing matters now, *nothing*, except glimpsing a patch of yellow uniform moving into or out of the house. But Jay sees no one's getting near the house. For a moment the arrows move forward, but then the wind shifts and the flames rise up, and the men with the arrows fall back.

As he gets closer, two blocks, and then one, he shifts his gaze to the backs of the ambulances, frantic now to see a scrap of pink pajama with dancing red cherries. Instead, he sees Ben and Seth sitting up next to each other, a paramedic cleaning a gash on Seth's leg. Jay runs behind a ring of bystanders to see into the second, and his heart takes a leap before realizing it's Megan who lies there, bagged and unconscious, wearing pink and white striped pajamas.

Jay pushes straight through the crowd, through the line of police. He sees into the third ambulance. Janie sits on a gurney, restrained by a terrified young man not much older than their sons. He tries to hold a mask to her face, but she's pushing it away, making a terrible noise. She screams Jay's name and lunges forward, but he turns and runs back through the crowd. He knows what she has to say. He refuses to hear it. Not yet. Not from her.

Jay's looking frantically for Margot. She's disappeared. He's about to plunge forward again to search each face at close range when he sees a flash of green at the edge of the woods. She's doubled over and throwing up behind the trunk of a tree. Jay runs to her and pulls her up by the arms. He wipes her face with the front of his shirt. He wants her to collapse into him, but instead she pulls away, her face contorting as if he were a stranger here to do her harm. She pulls free of him. She runs deeper into the woods, parallel to the street. She must be trying to approach the house from the other side. Jay follows her, and for a moment the two of them are alone in these woods, no sirens or lights, no impotent white arrows. If only he could catch her. If only he could turn her away so she wouldn't see. But he cannot catch her. She cuts deeper into the woods then turns out on the street. The crowds part and she runs straight for the house, much too

close to the flames. She almost makes it before two of the firemen put down their hoses and take hold of her, one of them lifting her over his shoulder and carrying her toward the ambulances. She looks like a child, draped over his shoulder like that, except she is beating his back, hard, for as long as Jay can see her.

Jay pushes his way through the spectators and the police and the EMT's. When he finds Margot she's hugging Janie, pounding her fists into Janie's back, letting Janie pull her hair and slam her chin into Margot's shoulder. *Mallory, Mallory, Mallory.* Two paramedics pull them apart and force a mask over Janie's face and a needle in her arm. Jay sees now how badly she's burned.

Now alone, Margot jumps straight up and down and pounds her fists into the air. The force of her body is so strong Jay almost believes she could propel herself straight up and into the house, a vaulter without a pole. Margot continues as the ambulance doors close, as the police ask people to move, as Jay comes forward crying her name. The second and third ambulances follow the first, and when they're gone there's nothing to see but what's left of the house, still ferociously burning. Even though Jay is as familiar with this house as any he has ever owned, he can almost not imagine where the house is supposed to be. He cannot picture where it was when they walked out the front door to take a simple walk on the beach. The angles don't make sense. There are things sticking up and out where things should not be.

Jay walks toward Margot, every step a great effort. He kneels next to where she has finally collapsed on the pavement.

Slowly, carefully, he puts a hand on her shoulder, then lets the weight of his arm rest on her back. She doesn't move.

He takes this as a positive sign and reaches out with his other arm, trying to turn her from this view. But she will not be moved. Jay remains draped across her for a terrible moment before she twists her shoulders the other way and forces him to let her go.

Jay looks for Ben and finds him sitting on the hood of the Subaru, yellow tape be damned. As far as Jay can see, there's nothing wrong with the cars. As he turns back to Margot, he feels his phone in his back pocket vibrate, but he doesn't reach for it. They sit like this for an hour or two or three. There are flames and more flames and then the flames are gone and there is only smoke. The fog burns off and the sun comes out but the sky remains stained with gray.

A stranger comes and drapes a quilt around their shoulders. Jay's phone continues to vibrate and ring, and when two of the fire engines have gone and it's quiet enough on the street for Margot to hear the ringing, she looks at him for the first time since she told him on the beach, *maybe you should just go*, and he reaches into his pocket and turns it off. They sit on the pavement until it's dry and warm. He wishes she would hear his call and let him take her hand and lead her into the woods, away from the smoke and the solemn-faced strangers and the remains of the house with its violent angles. They could spread the quilt on the ground and hold each other fiercely and if she wanted to beat him, as she'd been beating Janie, he would let her do it for the rest of their lives. Jay knew they were gone. He knew Elena and Mehra were gone the minute he'd first glimpsed the house, before he found Margot throwing up in the bushes. He knew they were gone when he couldn't slow his breathing or his pulse or properly feel his feet and have confidence they would take him there. He knew they were gone when not a single

firefighter could enter the house, when all they could do was watch as it fell. The evidence seems overwhelming and irrefutable, and surely Margot must know, too. But does she? Jay has no idea.

Chapter 3

At 6:44 a.m. Pacific Daylight Time, a Cessna C-172 took off from Ocean Side Airport, flying three minutes before hitting a tree and then crashing into a private residence at 247 North Cascade in Kingston Beach. At the time of the crash, there were five children and one adult in the residence. Three children as well as the pilot and passenger of the aircraft are presumed dead. The cause of the crash is unknown. The names of the victims have not yet been released.

Jay reads this on his phone in the late afternoon. He stands a few feet behind Margot and counts the news trucks (four of them), which now outnumber the ambulances (just two). This information is as much as he knows, from talking to the fire chief, but he wants to know what the world knows. If their names have entered the news. Just as he slips the phone in his pocket, Pearl Meehan walks up her driveway and stands in front of Margot, who hasn't moved from her spot on the pavement since the first ambulances pulled away carrying Janie and Megan and Seth. "Oh, honey," she says, then lifts Margot up in one swift motion. To Jay the observer, it seems she possesses more strength than all the firefighters combined. Pearl is neither fat nor thin, but solid. Unmovable. In her tennis skirt and sport sandals, she looks as if she'll be a vibrant sixty-eight for at least a hundred years. Jay can't remember the last time they've had dinner with the Meehans, but yet here's Margot clinging to her with a child's tenacity. Together their bodies form a wall, and Margot weeps in her arms, the first real weeping of this godforsaken day.

Pearl takes liberties with Margot that Jay would not take, for fear of rebuke. She smooths Margot's hair and whispers in her ear. She slides her hands between Margot's

jacket and T-shirt and rubs her back in quick, circular strokes. She puts her hands on Margot's cheeks, as if to collect the tears. As Jay watches, he's suddenly aware of Ben standing next to him, both of them spectators of this sudden intimacy.

"Who's that?" Ben asks, but Jay doesn't answer. He's making decisions. He refuses to be a bystander. He refuses to witness scenes he doesn't understand. He and Margot are a team. He will lead them through this.

Pearl says to Margot, "You'll come and stay with us tonight."

"No," Jay says, breaking in. "That's kind of you," he adds, to soften the edge he hears in his own voice, "but we need to be alone. Alone as a family."

"Then come over tomorrow," she says. "Early." Pearl zips up her jacket and rubs her own forearms. The sun's fading, a breeze picking up. "People aren't meant to be alone at a time like this."

Jay nods. "Tomorrow."

"That's why we sit shiva, you know," she says, already walking back down her driveway.

Instead of going to the Meehan's, Jay rents a room in the town's only motel. He endures the proprietor's pitying eyes and her leathery hand on his as she says, "God be with you, hon," and refuses to take his credit card. He then walks the block and a half to the market and hears the place fall silent as he lifts a wire basket and walks the perimeter of the store: wine, cheese, cream, coffee, two apples, some grapes, and a speckled banana. He walks two aisles looking for crackers, then keeps his head bowed as the cashier tallies his purchases. She says, "Our prayers are with you, Dr. Shirazi," as she

hands his credit card back, and he manages a “thank you” without having to meet her eyes.

And so while Margot and Ben stand and watch the procession of white boxes move from house to ambulance (they didn’t know this was coming, or Jay would surely have stayed), Jay unlocks the door of the motel room and is surprised to see it’s a comfortable and inviting suite, with a tiny kitchen and bistro table and a private bedroom in the back. Good, he thinks. Better than I expected. He puts the groceries away and sees the kitchenette is stocked with dishes, including two wine glasses and a corkscrew. How lucky. He hopes the wine will help them sleep. When he opens the refrigerator to put away the grapes, he feels his chest tighten, squeezed in a vise, and suddenly he can’t catch his breath. Jay looks up to the ceiling, at the historic tin tiles covered in starbursts, and as they swirl together, all spokes and tails, he’s certain he’s having a heart attack.

He stands with one hand on the refrigerator handle and one hand on the counter, forcing himself to focus on the orange box of baking soda on the fridge’s top shelf. Those glasses. That corkscrew. Such simple objects. What assumptions he’s made. He stares at the orange box, breathing and counting, closing his eyes only when he’s certain he won’t collapse. How lucky, indeed. What was he thinking, walking through that market? Did he think he was taking these things back to the house, back to the Meyersons’ shiny new kitchen? Did he think Margot had a headache, or wanted a little picnic on the beach? He’s done everything wrong.

But what could be right? Everything’s wrong, yet doing nothing seems like a deeper violation. She hasn’t eaten. They’ve barely slept. She’ll need her strength for the days to come.

Shaken, Jay stands in the kitchen thinking carefully through every small detail. Margot will need a shower to erase the stench of smoke. She will also need a change of clothes. He checks the bathroom and thankfully notes the soaps and shampoos, even the pair of plush robes on the back of the bathroom door.

He will stop at the Meehan's and ask for a change of clothes. A clean T-shirt and sweater will keep the smell away from her face. Still standing in the bathroom, he wishes there were a way to get hold of some sleeping pills to get through the night. I'll ask Janie, he thinks, only realizing his mistake in a slow motion sequence: Janie, ambulance, fire, girls. Jay's knees buckle. He grabs the sink to steady himself. Why can't she just go up to her room and retrieve the pills? And on her way downstairs, also wake the girls? Of course she could. Such a simple request.

Jay leans over the sink, choking and spitting. Acid stings his throat. His chest is still pounding from only moments ago, in the kitchen. He stands in this posture while he counts to ten, willing the room to stop spinning. When he does look up he sees a red, sweaty face, wearing clothing stained and rumpled.

He first washes the sink, then scrubs his hands twice with the lemon soap, then washes his face and straightens his jacket as best he can. He doesn't think about sleeping pills. He forces himself into the present. He thinks about the smell of lemon and the feel of thick cotton towels. He begins to rehearse what he will say to Pearl Meehan. A T-shirt. Maybe a sweater. I believe she's a medium. You look about the same size.

Jay walks out the door and checks the lock behind him. He hears his shoes crunch across the gravel parking lot. The sun's just setting. The sky has turned blue. He

can no longer see a distinct patch of smoke. He will promise Pearl Meehan they'll be over tomorrow. They won't be able to leave Kingston Beach until Wednesday, at least. He will get Margot a change of clothes, and encourage her to eat a few bites and drink down much of the wine, like medicine. He will lie next to her and rub her back until she turns and curls into him the way she did to Pearl Meehan. That memory stings like the bile in his throat. He shakes his head and turns down Jackson Street so as to approach the Meehan's from the back. When he sees Margot again, he wants to be able to say, *Come. I've taken care of everything.* As he passes a house with open windows, he hears the ringing of a phone, and suddenly remembers his own, his messages unchecked. He turns it on again. Seventeen voice mails. He continues to walk as he listens.

There is no information at this time about the cause of the crash, although the morning's unusually heavy fog may have been a factor. Nearby residents reported hearing a sound like a lawnmower just before the impact. Tricia Huber, a writer for Pacific Life Magazine, lives three blocks from the crash site, and reported hearing the plane as she lay in bed, thinking, It seems awfully early and awfully low." About thirty seconds later, she reported feeling a sizable tremor and then two smaller explosions. Residents closer to the site reported being knocked out of their beds.

In the motel room, Jay and Ben sit on the edge of the coffee table in an uneasy silence after the newscast. Jay holds the remote. He strains to hear if Margot's crying, beneath the sound of the shower, but he can't make it out. Jay looks at Ben, who's hunched and hooded. He's tempted to tell him, but decides against it. An unfair burden.

He also doesn't know if he can trust Ben. Instead, he hands over the remote. "Keep it low," he says. "And no more news."

Jay goes to the kitchen to make a plate for Margot, happy to escape the television and its doll-faced anchors with their calculated sobriety. How dare they? As Jay takes out the cheese he starts to feel his earlier panic, but forces himself to put it out of his field, next to those dark red lips that moved in such exaggerated shapes in order to enunciate *Cessna C-172*. Instead he finds a knife and sets himself the task of cutting bite-sized squares of Jarlsberg that will fit neatly on the crackers.

Suddenly Ben is in the doorway of the kitchen. "Dad," he says. "I'm starving." Jay looks up at his son, two inches taller but forty pounds lighter, all vertical lines and hollowed out spaces. The blueprint of a man. Of course Ben is starving. It's nearly eight o'clock and they haven't eaten all day. Jay curses himself. Why wasn't he thinking in that market?

Jay reaches into his wallet and hands Ben a twenty. "I'm sorry. I didn't buy enough. Here, have a few crackers to tide you over and go back and get a frozen pizza or something."

Ben stuffs a handful of crackers in his mouth. Jay would like him to go, but he doesn't. He stands there, watching his father pour an inch of wine into two glasses. He watches as Jay replaces the cork and puts the bottle in the refrigerator. He watches Jay close the top of the cracker box and put it neatly in a cupboard next to a box of kosher salt. Jay would like to have a moment alone before Margot comes out of the shower so he can think, carefully, about what he will or will not tell her, but instead Ben just stands there, the twenty in one hand, the remote control in the other.

“The store closes at eight,” Jay says. “You’d better hurry.”

“I keep thinking they’re going to come running in the door,” Ben says, his voice small and crackling, a distant radio station. “They’re supposed to fight me for the remote.” A jagged intake of breath. “Seth said he heard them screaming. But Aunt Janie was on the sidewalk, yelling at him to jump. He kept saying, *Why did I jump? Why did I jump?*” Ben sobs now in earnest, his efforts to breathe sounding like the barks of a seal.

Jay puts both hands on Ben’s shoulders. He shakes him, gently. “Ben.”

Ben doesn’t look up. His body trembles, the sounds getting louder and higher.

Jay marvels at this outpouring, even as he’s terrified that Margot will hear this from the bathroom. Ben was never an emotional child. Jay couldn’t name another time he’s seen Ben cry.

Jay shakes him again, and when Ben doesn’t stop, he leads him out the front door. They’re facing the parking lot, but Jay would rather risk being seen by strangers than overheard by Margot.

“Ben,” Jay says again, and this time Ben looks at him. “Under no circumstance, *ever*, do I want you to say to your mother what you just said to me.”

Jay watches Ben’s eyes go dim. It’s so familiar, this shuttering. He’s doing this all wrong. “Look,” he says, trying again. “For starters I don’t think that’s even possible. The crash. The fire. Those are very loud things.”

“I believe Seth. He was there and we weren’t.” Ben’s eyes have hardened further, full of blame. As if they had chosen to be absent.

Jay takes a deep breath. “Okay,” he says. “Fine. Believe Seth if you want to, but you cannot talk about this with your mother. *Cannot*. Do you hear me, Ben? Do you know how *serious* this is?”

Jay’s hands are still on Ben’s shoulders, and only when Ben pulls away does Jay realize how hard he was squeezing.

Ben takes a second step backwards, and Jay knows he’s failed again. He has no mode for talking to his son like an adult.

“*Jesus*, Dad. Can you *hear* yourself?”

It is the most disrespectful thing Ben has ever said to his father. Just as he’s about to respond, his phone rings. “Wait. I’ve gotta take this.”

Ben begins to walk away but Jay grabs his wrist. They stand like this as Jay says, *yep, okay, got it*, and puts the phone back into his pocket.

“Got what?” Ben says. “Who was that?”

“Nothing,” Jay says. “Ben,” he starts again, but falters. Jay knows this is his last chance with his son, certainly for today, but maybe for as long as it takes to walk through this unthinkable storm. Who can he be, if not the stern father?

Jay closes his eyes. He sees the hundreds of grieving, uncomprehending parents he’s counseled over two decades, and suddenly he has the right words. Jay opens his eyes. “These next few days will be the hardest of our lives,” he says, “but we’ll get through them.” Jay takes a breath and continues, his voice strong and level. “Our job,” he says, “is to take care of your mother, to take our cues from her. If she wants to talk, we talk, but not about things that might add to her pain.” Here he looks right at Ben and Ben is nodding slowly, his face a blank page. “If she wants to cry, we let her. We hold

her and console her, even cry with her, but we can't forget that we have a job." Ben's still nodding, not arguing, a good sign. "Your mother's spent her life taking care of us, and now it's time for us to take care of her."

Jay pulls Ben closer, finally embraces him, and he's glad to feel Ben relax against him. It occurs to him he should have started from here.

Jay hears his own words echoing in his head. He hates the sound of "your mother." It's *Margot*, he wants to wail. Margot with the flashing eyes set under the hollow face, a mix of ferocious intelligence and pain he recognized at once twenty years ago, plucking her out of the sea of students and claiming her as his own. Margot with the tangle of glistening curls who used to take off his gloves in the middle of winter when they walked along the Charles, kissing the tips of his knuckles one by one, for good luck, she said. He loved her when she did that because he never thought he'd have a serious, dark-haired wife who also believed in such a thing as luck. She was Margot who used to come to the hospital even when Ben was an infant strapped to her chest and pull Jay into his office and kiss him passionately, *because a day shouldn't go by without a kiss, at least*, she said, the two of them laughing that they had to be careful not to wake him, or crush him. Oh, Margot. Sweetheart. Look what's happened to us now.

Finally Jay releases Ben. He knows there are tears in his eyes. "You should really eat. I'm sorry I didn't think. Knock on the doors, if they've locked up. They're nice people. They'll recognize you."

As Ben starts across the parking lot the phone rings again, and it's Leila saying, *They're taking the heart in Spokane. Mike says it's a beautiful heart.* Ben walks away. Leila speaks. From inside, Margot wails.

She's naked and dripping in the bathroom door, finally crying, finally calling for him, finally letting him in. He wraps her in a towel and says *no, no, sshh, sshh*, his voice a quiet counterpoint to her wailing.

We left them, we left them.

He does everything he should do. He dries her body and wraps her dripping hair, coaxing her into a robe and tying the belt. He leads her to the bed and nearly lifts her into it, covering her in blankets and arranging pillows behind her until the wailing stops and she begins to breathe in and out, in and out.

"I see them," she finally says. "So clearly. They're walking on the street, looking for us."

He puts his hand on her face. *Sshh*, he whispers.

"They could be out there, right now."

Jay shakes his head *no*, all the while hearing Leila's voice. *They're taking the heart*. Maybe he's made a terrible mistake.

"It's not a dream, Jay. They're out there. They're so afraid." Margot's teeth begin to chatter. "Elena tries to take Mehra's hand, but Mehra won't let her. *I'm not a baby*, Mehra says."

"Dear God," he says.

"And then Elena calls out, *Mommy, Daddy, where are you*, still holding out her hand for Mehra. She's holding it out stiff. Wiggling her fingers. Just like I do."

Jay rocks and nods, *sshh, sshh*, all he can think to say.

"Please stop that," she says, sitting up, her voice now hard in a way he wouldn't have thought possible a minute ago. "Don't shush me." She falls back into the pillows.

“I’m sorry,” Jay says.

“You’re sorry,” she says.

Jay’s paralyzed. Every possible word he can think of is a step down a dangerous path. He glances at his watch. 8:15.

“Am I keeping you from something?” Her tone is utterly changed. This is not the same woman who was just wailing on the bathroom floor.

“No. Of course not.”

“They could be out there, Jay. They could. Nobody’s identified--”

“No,” he says quietly, “they’re not.”

He expected wailing and grief. He expected throwing and cursing, pounding and collapsing. But Margot’s such a realist. He never expected this.

“You should eat something,” he says. “I made a plate.”

He’s relieved when she nods, relieved when she accepts the small bites he hands her, even relieved when she slides over in the bed to make a space for him. She seems to understand when he hands her the wine and she drinks two glasses in quick succession, the weight of her body against him, her legs still shaking under the quilts. He sits an hour until he hears her breathing steady and feels the trembling stop, then slides out from under her and puts more pillows in his place. He turns off the bedside lamp and kisses her cheek.

When he comes out of the bedroom, Ben’s on the couch eating his pizza, his face aglow in the flicker of the muted television. Jay sits down next to Ben and puts a hand on his knee, telling him what needs to be told. He then calls Pearl Meehan and stands in the kitchen, eating the rest of the cheese while he waits for her. When she steps inside the

door he goes over to Ben and kisses him on the forehead, something he has done only to the girls for the last five years, at least. It's 9:25. He walks briskly the five blocks back to his car. It's not yet the black of night. The sky still reflects a memory of orange and red, a space between twilight and night. Jay looks down and puts one foot in front of the other, and before he knows it he's removing the yellow tape, then driving down the highway, then standing over Leo's open chest when the door whooshes open and Mike kneels down and pushes the red cooler across the threshold. "Sorry to ruin your vacation, doc," Mike says, "but you'll be glad to see this."

"Cross clamp?" asks Deb, the surgical nurse.

"21:10. It stopped on a dime."

"Excellent," says Jay. "Let's see it."

As the doors slide closed, Jay hears Mike's voice. "Even *you'll* have to agree. It's a beautiful heart."

Chapter 4

On the twenty-sixth of October, Margot gathers her courage, turns off the television, and leaves her apartment in the sky. She needs to buy groceries. Jay's coming home for dinner. This was his suggestion after eleven weeks of paralyzed grief. "Maybe you should make dinner." He added, "I'll be home by seven," as if that cinched the deal.

Since August they've eaten lasagna, mac and cheese, and kugels of every variety, all arranged by Pearl Meehan and deposited on their back doorstep between four and five in the afternoon, thoughtfully packaged in foil pans, so there would be no casserole dishes to return. She set up a website, sweet Pearl, where all the concerned could sign up for a night of the week to feed them, *that poor family*, those synagogue women rising early, no doubt, to mix their fat noodles and greasy sauces with heavy hearts, saying over and over, *There but for the grace of God*.

Margot *was* grateful, even though she hated them for their imagined pity and for the appointments they had to keep, before and after making their deliveries. For eleven weeks these noodles *sometimes* brought them to the table together where they sat mostly in silence, rearranging the food on their plates. It was good to practice, to remember how to sit with other people and say *please pass the salt* and *how was your day*. Other nights Margot went to bed at six, and so Ben was left alone to microwave big bowls for himself that he never tasted while he flipped through Facebook. The mission, then, served its purpose. They did not starve. Now the deliveries have dwindled, though, and Margot

must face down her terror of the supermarket. She does not believe she can eat a cream sauce ever again.

In the car she switches on her GPS and types in the address of a market on the other side of town. A market she's never been to where there better not be stacks of sculpted marzipan pumpkins by the door just like ones she bought last Halloween.

"Lamb kebabs," Jay said as he poured a cup of coffee. "Doesn't that sound good?"

Well, frankly, no, Margot wanted to say, Don't you remember? We grilled lamb kebabs just three days before, and they came home from the pool and went straight to the table in their matching pink paisley bathing suits with the maize-colored ruffle across the top, the one they both had to have, and ate ravenously, ate more than Ben.

Jay stared at her at few seconds, looking for a response to lamb kebabs. When he didn't get one, he turned his attention to the *Times*. "The Democrats are really in trouble."

"Define 'trouble'," Margot said.

As he described the vulnerable seats in the house and senate, missing her cue, intentionally or obtusely, Margot wasn't sure, she saw those golden ruffles bouncing as the girls jostled in the living room with the empty skewers. *It started almost as a fight, she wanted to tell him. They started to fight over who had hogged the raft and whose friend Shana Rosenthal really was, and then Elena picked up a skewer from her plate and poked Mehra in the side and said, "baby fat."*

Turning pages, Jay got to the Arts section. “We should see a movie,” he said. “When’s the last time we saw a movie?”

Mehra poked her back, Margot continued to her audience of one, and I was just about to go over and stop them when they got up from the table and started waving skewers at each other, and for a second it was real and almost cruel, Elena chanting “baby fat” and Mehra answering “big butt.” But then they got the idea to joust, and the insults stopped, and then it was all play, just a made up play of a fight. I watched them from the kitchen and the last sun was coming in and I’ve never seen them so long and agile and tan. Do you remember this, Jay? No. You don’t. You came home late and ate the lamb cold standing in front of the fridge.

“Maybe this weekend,” Jay said. He folded the paper back and then into thirds, so he could read the rest while he ate lunch. “I’ve got nothing scheduled on Sunday. We’ll see a comedy. It’ll feel good to laugh.” He squeezed her hand as he got up to leave, a prim smile on his face that looked to Margot like pity. He tapped her on the shoulder with the newspaper on his way out the door.

Margot pulls into a parking space and scans the lot for children. Finding none, she walks slowly through the rain to the entrance. She takes a bundle of tulips from the display by the door. It’s an effort. Jay will appreciate the effort. She’s always loved tulips. Standing there gazing into the centers of the deepest red ones she could find, she

thinks, *I suppose it's April in South America*. Her heart begins to race, and her body is suddenly weightless, released from the confines of this sidewalk. The electronic door opens and closes several times while she stands there, and it looks to her like the mouth of a bear, ready to swallow her into the market where it's defiantly and perversely October. She looks back at the tulips, at the deep yellow and black interiors. *If it's April I could go there, and August would not yet have happened*. For a moment she stands on the precipice between possibility and madness, and she yearns to free fall all the way to Brazil. She stands there gripping the tulips so hard she bruises their stems while she sees her girls running on a warm weather beach, still ruffled and tan and leaping higher, higher over every fire that erupts in their path. She could walk into the airport and buy a ticket right now. No one would believe her, but it wouldn't matter because just up ahead would be that delicious moment she could kiss Mehra's cheek, still round with baby fat indeed, and pull Elena's wise fingers to her face, already long and thin like hers, but not yet wrinkled or pale.

Margot brings Elena's hand close, to kiss it, and is startled by the cold, wet plastic wrap around the tulips. She quickly puts them back in the bucket. She's about to turn around and go back to the car when she hears Jay's voice from a week or so ago, a Sunday when she didn't get out of bed. *Please*, he said, his head temporarily on the pillow speaking into the back of her neck. *Ben needs you. I need you*.

She feels his warm breath, his thumbs massaging the tight places on either side of her spine. Shaken but determined, she enters the market.

Margot makes her way around the store, keeping her head bowed, crossing items off her list. She has chosen the lunch hour because the mothers with toddlers will be home already, spreading peanut butter for lunch and counting down until nap. The mothers with schoolchildren will not yet have arrived, and so if she is to see anyone it will be professionals grabbing lunch or a few things for dinner. She thinks she can handle adults.

As Margot picks up cilantro and onions, her resolve of only a few minutes before begins to erode. The meat will need to marinate, which means she'll have to go home after this. Ben won't come home until five, which leaves three long hours home alone. Since she bought the apartment, she hasn't been home alone for more than a few minutes, and when she is there, she restricts herself to the kitchen and master bedroom. The doors to the girls' rooms remain closed. Margot considers driving to the apartment and back, but with afternoon traffic she'd be there an hour at most. Not long enough to have the intended effect.

She pushes down a middle aisle looking for rice. There are Power Bars and Cheerios but no rice. She puts a box of Cheerios in her cart, takes a few more steps, then reverses and puts it back. Mehra was the only one who ate Cheerios, slathered with honey and sliced banana. She's suddenly engulfed in tears. *Goddamnit, Jay*, she almost says aloud, *look what you've done to me for your fucking kebabs*. Margot pushes ahead through the tears to the dairy case for the yogurt to marinate the meat. Crying so hard her shoulders shake, she reaches for the plain box, noting as she wheels forward the small pink and yellow cartons she used to put in the girls' lunch boxes.

Margot abandons the rest of her list. She's filled with a rage she knows is unfair (he was only trying to help), yet she's afraid she'll cry out and make a terrible scene if she sees an artichoke (Mehra's favorite) or a bag of chocolate chips (Elena had just learned to bake).

She gets in line and puts her chin to her chest, breathing deeply and counting backwards from one hundred. Slowly her shoulders relax. She looks up just enough to see out the market's front windows, trying to get a glimpse of her car. She wants to remind herself that she's almost home. She knew better than to attempt this, but she listened to Jay. When she reaches forty-seven the line advances, and it's her turn to put the items on the belt. She stands in front of the cart, her back to the man in front of her, and devises a pattern to keep her mind in check: right hand, left hand, belt. Right hand, left hand, belt. Once she picks up a lime with the left hand and puts it back, so the right hand can get it first.

Jay doesn't have to do this. Jay doesn't have to command his hands and feet to move. He gets to leave every day and enter the world of *before*, or *never was*, a parallel life where the girls never were, neither in body nor spirit, because the circumstances just didn't allow it. For their entire lives Jay went to work at six-thirty in the morning and left his family far behind when he pulled into the hospital parking lot. He couldn't be both surgeon and father at once. It is a monstrous necessity Margot has spent a decade coming to terms with. Wondering if it was such a wise decision to marry a man whose job depends on putting his family second. Now it seems it might just be the thing that saves him. He's always had another life.

When she reaches fourteen in her count she looks up far enough to see that the man in front of her is wearing a mustard colored jacket. It stands out in relief against the gray coming through the windows. She focuses on this, trying to calm her anger. Jay was only trying to help. He was the one who said, *Don't resign, you'll want to go back in a month or two.* After watching him these past few months, she knows it might be easier if she had something else to think about. But it's not that simple. She doesn't *want* it to be easier. She doesn't *want* to go to some idiot movie and laugh to prove to him that their lives can continue, that they are *stronger than this.* He doesn't understand that to be *stronger than this* means turning herself inside out and showing to the world that her daughters did not take occupy seven-tenths of every cell. Which isn't at all the truth. A lie, then. He wants her to lie.

Margot looks up and it's the second of August and the swirl of the yellow jacket she sees through clouded eyes is a flashing police light, a sun break behind fog, a pot of marigolds on a neighbor's porch. 245 North Cascade remained remarkably intact.

Margot stares at the yellow as the man punches his numbers into the machine. Only when he says thank you and turns to leave does she look up and see his face.

"Jacob," she says, before she can think. He's lost weight and grown a beard, but she would recognize him anywhere.

"Margot," he says. Immediately he's near. His voice is quiet, intimate. "I wanted to call, but I didn't want to intrude."

She nods, unable to speak without crying.

“My mother,” he starts, then falters.

The checker asks if she wants the meat wrapped in another layer of plastic.

“No,” Jacob says. “I’ll take it.” He unfolds a paper bag and begins loading the groceries, the leg of lamb hitting the bottom with a declarative thud. She watches him put the yogurt carton next to it, and the bag of rice, and then the onions and the eggs. He takes extra time to balance the cilantro and tomatoes, rearranging the rest so the delicate fruit is in no danger of being crushed. She stands there after the checker reads the total, tears streaming, staring at Jacob’s hands, marveling at how familiar they look from the distance of thirty years.

Jacob reaches over and runs his card through the machine. He picks up both their bags with one hand and uses the other to guide her to a booth in the café where she uses up a dozen napkins trying to dry her face.

“Thank you,” she’s finally able to say. “I’ll pay you back for the groceries.”

“No worries,” he says. “I know that look. Something in here got to you, didn’t it?”

“Cheerios. I put them in my cart without thinking.”

He nods slowly, fishing a bottle of water and a package of sushi out of his bag. “Mine was trucks. I’d be going down I-5 and I’d yell out ‘cement mixer’ to an empty car. Before I remembered. Like there was a part of my brain that just refused to assimilate.”

Margot leans forward on her elbows and shakes her head vehemently. “No,” she says. “I think there’s always part of you that knows it’s *not* true.”

Jacob settles back in the booth and holds the water bottle in both hands as if it were a precious object. In the look that follows Margot feels the closeness that just enabled her to get through that line begin to evaporate. She imagines he views her as an inhabitant of an island he’s just escaped from, swimming, swimming, finally washing up on the other shore, but nearly dead.

Margot slumps back, too. “How long has it been?” she says.

“Two years, eleven months, and two days.”

“Eighty five days,” she says.

“That’s not very long. I’m impressed you’re at the store.”

“When they were in kindergarten we had to send one hundred things on the hundredth day of school. You know, little things like paper clips or buttons or playing cards. They made crowns with big one hundreds on them and marched around the school. Elena refused to go to school the next day because she thought it was over. I remember her wailing, *then what was all of that for?* That’s exactly how I think of it. Will it mean something different when it’s two hundred or three hundred or a thousand days?” Margot looks out the window. “Will it feel any different?”

“Yes and no,” he says. “Asher would’ve been in kindergarten this year.”

“Oh, my God,” Margot says. “I’ve become one of *those* people. One of the awful people.”

“Margot,” he says, reaching out to touch her hand. “You will never be one of *those* people.”

“Isn’t it just *amazing* what people will say? What was your worst?”

“The nurse who showed us into the room the last time, after they took his organs, said ‘You haven’t lost a son, you’ve gained a guardian angel.’”

“She should be fired,” Margot says.

“There was also lots of, ‘Every day will get a little easier,’ which isn’t true at all. One day is tolerable and the next one you do some research into getting a gun license.”

Margot laughs at this, a deep throaty laugh that might be mistaken for crying. “Did you ever buy a gun?”

Jacob puts the water on the table and burrows his hands in his pockets. “No,” he says, “but I did fill out the paperwork.”

“Holy shit.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it,” he says.

Margot begins unwrapping the sushi. Her hands need something to do. She squeezes the soy sauce and wasabi into the lid of the box and mixes them together in a muddy puddle before she remembers it’s not her lunch at all. “What am I doing? God. I’m so sorry. It’s like my hands, my feet, the crying, nothing’s connected anymore.”

“Margot, stop,” he says, reaching across and holding both her wrists. He waits until she looks into his eyes. “I’ve been there. I know exactly how it is.” He lets go, smiles. “And I can never finish a whole box by myself. I would love it if you would join me for sushi.”

“Thank you,” she says quietly, looking down to arrange her sweater.

They eat a few pieces in silence and then Margot feels she can begin again.

“Your mother must have told you,” she says.

He nods.

“I mean, about that night.”

Another nod. “And she told you about us.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t know. I don’t know how I didn’t know. We haven’t seen your parents in years, I guess.”

He shrugs. “It’s okay. I suppose we’re trying to move on.”

Margot recoils a little at *move on*, but she wants to know more. “What does your wife do? Is it Cynthia?”

Jacob wipes his fingers and tosses the napkin on the table. “Cynthia’s a lawyer, and she runs marathons. I’m not sure which comes first for her. She never stops moving and she’s very good at earning money.”

Margot recoils at this, too. The description sounds like Jay, but the voice Jacob is now using also sounds like him. Cold reportage. Judgments firmly settled.

“I’m sorry if that sounds awful,” Jacob says, “but it’s the truth. It’s been a very hard three years. We don’t talk much any more.”

“Then why are you still married?” Once the words are out, Margot can’t believe she’s said them. Jacob looks unfazed.

“Because she’s the only other person who knew him as well as I did, and I can’t bear the thought of being separated from that. He’s with us when we’re together, even though we don’t speak of him.”

“You don’t speak of him?”

He shakes his head.

Margot sees this unfolding already. She and Jay haven’t said their names since that unhinged first week, since the service and burial. At most it’s just “the girls,” but this, too, is fading, as if with each passing day the reference becomes *more* dangerous rather than less so.

“You’ve thought a lot about this,” Margot says.

Jacob shrugs again. “I’ve had a lot of time alone to think.”

Margot eats the last piece of sushi, chilled by the clarity of his conclusions. His story is like a window into their future, and she doesn’t like what she sees.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I told you too much.”

“You only answered my questions.” But still, even though she doesn’t like what he says, she wants to ask more and more, to stare at the angles in his face all afternoon.

He didn't have these angles when she thought she loved him at sixteen. "When's the last time you were at the beach?" she asks. She expects he'll say years. She's trying to turn the conversation to the safety of childhood nostalgia.

"Last weekend," he says. "I go a lot in the winters. The days somehow seem shorter there."

Margot feels as if he's detonated an explosive in the orange café with the silver lights hovering over each booth like space ships. "You've seen, then," she says.

"Yes."

They sit silently a moment, both of them absorbing the other's meaning. "And?" Margot asks.

"You're sure you want to know?"

She nods.

"There's nothing left. The lot's been scrubbed clean. No stunted bushes. No scattered debris. Nothing out of place. If my mother didn't tell me, I wouldn't believe there'd been a fire there. In fact, I wouldn't believe there'd been a house there at all."

Margot's nodding, not surprised, but still stunned to hear the words. *Scrubbed clean.*

"Are you okay?" he asks. "Was that a mistake just now?"

She shakes her head. “I figured as much. The Meyersons told us they were planning to rebuild. It’s just, well.” The tears start streaming down her face. “Awfully fast.” Margot turns to look out the window so he doesn’t have to watch her cry.

“About three months after Asher died, my closest friend asked if Cynthia was pregnant yet. I haven’t spoken to him since.”

Margot turns her head enough to see that he’s scooted all the way over to the edge of the booth. His head is against the glass. He’s trying to catch her eye. “That’s right,” she says. “The world’s timetables no longer make sense.”

“Nothing makes sense. You get used to it.”

“Did your mother tell you?”

“Yes.”

“That my husband left me that night?” Margot has said this to no one, not even Janie. Ben knows, of course, but they haven’t spoken of that day, not a single part of it.

“He saved a child’s life.”

She nods. “That’s what I tell myself.”

“And it was a horrible thing to do.”

She nods again.

“Will you forgive me for saying that?”

“I could kiss you for saying that.” They both laugh, uncomfortably, then rush in with small talk to put the proper distance between them again.

“Let me go to the ATM and pay you back,” she says.

He’s already near the door. It has opened for him, and the sound of the pounding rain almost drowns out his reply. He’s waving, reflective and yellow. “Next time you can buy the sushi.”

Margot takes the lamb home, her head buzzing from the conversation. It’s the most she’s said in days. She dispatches with the lamb quickly, cutting down through the muscle and dividing it into cubes. She measures yogurt and herbs and grates an onion which brings on more tears, but these kind don’t slow her down.

She doesn’t quite understand her reaction. Jacob’s news was affirmation of her worst fears, and yet she feels strangely comforted. When she finishes assembling the marinade she stirs in the meat, watching the whole thing turn pink, then covers it with plastic wrap and slides it into the fridge.

As soon as the door is shut, though, she doesn’t know what to do. It’s 2:30. The house is bathed in gray light. Ben won’t be home until five.

Margot begins to panic standing in her own kitchen. Jacob’s words keep coming back—*moves fast and makes money, horrible thing to do, scrubbed clean*—and she grabs her purse and keys without putting the rest of the groceries away.

She never intended to lie about the apartment. It started so simply, an e-mail about a former patient's death and memorial service which she would have attended, *before*, but certainly not now. It was to be held at Mrs. Ossiander's apartment, this glass box in the sky that held all the evidence from a lifetime of travel. Margot marveled at the way she always felt buoyed after visiting Mrs. Ossiander, and knew part of this was the woman and the other part the apartment, a place whose rich dark woods and eclectic antiques should have clashed terribly with the soaring windows and stainless steel. Yet they didn't. Instead, the place seemed to wrap Margot in its comforting textures while still offering the extraordinary view, for perspective. Even when Mrs. Ossiander required a hospital bed in the living room, just before they left for the beach, the spirit of the place remained the same, not a hint of defeat in the necessary changes.

And so she bought it, furnishings included. Mrs. Ossiander's daughter kept a few mementos and thanked Margot for saving her the trouble of an estate sale. What Margot had really hoped to buy was the spirit of the place: not a hint of defeat. But even if that couldn't be purchased, at least she now had a neutral spot to pass the time.

She tried to tell Jay, but the week she drained her retirement fund, taxes be damned, and signed the one hundred forms, he didn't come home until well after she'd gone to bed. The next week he spent muttering about protocols and Cyrus's goddamned inflexibility, and after a month passed, it almost didn't seem relevant. He had the hospital. Ben had school. But what did Margot have? She had no job. She had no children to pick up from school. The apartment gave her a place to go, a place where she could sink into the deep couches and watch cooking shows on the food network, people

whipping up inedible looking dinners in the slow motion present tense. Sometimes she could go an entire hour without breaking into tears, and this was worth every penny.