

Posthumously Yours: A Kunderian Approach to Fiction

by
Dani Tellvik

A THESIS

submitted to
Oregon State University
Honors College

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Honors Baccalaureate of Arts in English
(Honors Associate)

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:_____

Eric Hill

In this piece of original work, I employ a Kunderian approach to fiction. The purpose of this novel is to examine how the causative element, a pivotal moment of change for a cast of characters, changes spatially and temporally. In *Posthumously Yours*, I explore themes of trauma, loss, and grief and their subsequent effects on relationships and identity formation. The reader sees crucial moments or traumas from the perspective and position of different characters, exploring how these events change with the new perspectives and how the event changes the position of each of the characters. Every character has equal weight in the overarching story, but each voice is distinct. The novel also explores events as they change in time. This is developed in the main character, Max's perspective as he reaches into the past to reexamine his relationship with his best friend from its beginning. As he looks back, he reshapes moments that we see in other characters' perspectives. Chapters directly following the event and characters' reflections years later to show how their lives have been shaped by pivotal moments and how their perception of these moments has changed as temporal distance from it has increased.

Key Words: Kundera, fiction, trauma, grief

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

Dani Tellvik, Author

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Prologue

*I want to remember this. The water. The silence. The light through my hair.
The soft breeze. The promise. The suspension. The disbelief and belief.*

In this quiet space, between moments, she sits above the water, looking out in the direction of the city. It's a city run through with water, shaping it, shaped by it. The air has the chill of early mornings as the season changes, but the weak sunlight spilling across the surface of the water holds a promise.

She pulls her legs up and crosses them, massaging her calves where last night's fever ache still lingers. All night, in a sweaty haze of mirage and panic, she counted the seconds until there was a shift. At ten thousand, she knew she wasn't going to make it. At eighteen thousand, she let go of everything she'd ever known and everything she'd ever hoped to know. At twenty-six thousand seven hundred eighty-four, she came up for air.

His sweatshirt, dark green, rumpled, inside out, one string much longer than the other, was still on the back of the chair when she untangled herself from the sheets. She couldn't tell how long he'd been gone, but she knew he wasn't coming back. She couldn't be sure that she'd seen the last of him, but she knew he wasn't out there waiting at their old rendezvous and certainly not back home.

The surface of the water glittered in the sunrise. She closed her eyes.

But this. I want to remember this. The water. The silence. The light.

God, I want to remember this.

Part I: Max

First Chapter

The sun was an orange glow on the horizon as he made his way to work. He picked up his usual order at the coffee shop down the street from his apartment, an Americano, extra shot, no room, and a toasted sesame bagel with cream cheese, and began the two-mile trek to the lab in Madrona. On the horizon, the orange faded into a pale yellow, lightened to a creamy white and then darkened again into blue. As he walked, he caught the smell of the seaside air and smiled.

After he'd unlocked the back door to the lab and christened the day's first pair of nitrile gloves, he noticed that one of his mice had died overnight. They usually died overnight as if they wanted to keep it a private affair, away from his prying eyes. He performed autopsies on the dead mice, but the cause of death was hard to determine even then. In the year he'd worked on this project, he'd never seen a mouse die except for the ones he'd had to kill himself. It frustrated him. The moment of death had to hold some precious data that they couldn't get otherwise.

"Rest in peace," he said, dropping the mouse into the Biohazard container.

He noted the death (Control Group-C1) and went about his routine, cleaning cages and making notes. He'd named all the mice after himself. He took care of them, he named them. His colleagues already thought he was nuts and largely avoided making conversation with him. It seemed pointless, even impolite, to contradict them. The recently deceased mouse was Max 6, one of the originals from the first study.

The last of his posse, Max 2, had died over the weekend. There'd been an outbreak the week before, wiping out almost all the Max twenties, except for 27.

His phone buzzed in his pocket and he ignored it, moving to check the next batch of mice, the unruly experiment group. The last mouse, Max 34, looked up at him with his paws up against the plastic of the cage. Beside his paws, the plastic was smudged. Max leaned in and saw that the smudge was really many tiny scratches, collected on top of each other.

Max made a note of the behavior on his clipboard and then rechecked the experiment group for similar markings. About half of them had it. This could be something. He spent an hour or two trying and failing to type up a report, but said nothing when his boss came down to check in.

He returned to Max 34 and put his finger up against the glass. He needed this discovery to be his. He needed something to put on his next round of medical school applications. If there was a next round.

"Defeatist," he could hear his best friend saying. To be honest, Cora's recent, rather aggressive optimism was wearing thin.

"Realist," he countered in a whisper to the mouse. Max 34 cocked its head and blinked, then turned and burrowed under his tiny nest of shredded cloth.

His phone buzzed again and he pulled it out of his pocket. "Jeremy, I'm gonna take fifteen," he called into the adjacent office on his way out of the building.

"Hello?"

"Max."

"Who is this?"

“It’s your sister.”

“Clem?”

“Emma.”

Max stopped short a few feet from the automated door to the lab. They slid open, waited a moment and then closed. A few seconds later, they opened and closed again.

“Max?”

“Where are you?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Emma said.

The doors slid open again. Static crackled on the other end of the phone. He heard Emma’s voice, distantly.

“Don’t hang up,” he said. He took a step forward. The doors closed half way and then gasped open. “I’ve got to get out of the lab. I don’t have cell service. Don’t hang up.”

He slid his phone back into his pocket and ran up two flights of stairs before he reached the lobby. “Emma?”

“Max, I’m sorry, I don’t have time to be gentle about this. It’s Cora.”

Max stopped again, just outside the building. “What?”

“We just picked her up. She was. . .in the water,” Emma said.

“What? Who’s we?”

“You need to go to Harrison Medical Center. I don’t know what her condition is now,” Emma said. “They’ll be able to give you more information when you get there. I’m sorry, Max, I’ve got to go.”

Max began walking. “Where are you?” he asked. “I’ll come get you, we can talk about this, we can—”

The line went dead.

Second Chapter

It killed him that he didn't know who'd suggested it first, the idea that rippled out from the moment of its birth and led them forward into darker, deeper water without a clue as to what they'd started. The edges of memory were sharp and clear, but the years had bled through the core so that little remained.

The edges: They were products of their routine. On days it rained, they ran along the river, past the tree house that had collapsed the year Cora moved to town, and looped around by way of an old maple riddled with holes where owls slept until dusk. The route was her idea (she could do anything she put her mind to, except sit still), but he enjoyed it. He liked to watch the river bleed further and further inland, liked the muffled wet sound of their feet striking the ground, and liked how the mud flicked up from their shoes and created elaborate patterns on their calves. His childhood was a composite of memories of the duck-tail slick of his best friend's hair bobbing up and down in front of him, her mud-flecked calves, and the gradual relaxation of her shoulders and then his.

On days it didn't rain, they loafed. After a sweet, slow easy run, the kind that melted your muscles and set your whole-body humming, they pitched camp in the park, seven blocks north of their middle school and eleven south of their high school, east of her house and west of his. She fidgeted and read for fifteen-minute increments, but always had to stop to report how it was going, which made it difficult for him to read, so mostly he wrote short adventure stories starring the two of them. They had grudgingly grown up together. Even when she'd been the new girl in town, she'd

saved his ass sixty-one ways to Sunday before he'd had and lost the chance to do the same for her. She was tougher than he was and they both knew it, so he made his character save her life time after time after time. From aliens, from dragon kings, from her mother, from evil ex-boyfriends (this plot line had almost come true at least once, but she beat him to it, as usual), from anything bigger and scarier and more fictional than their own lives.

It was a loafing day when the topic first came up. He could remember that, but not who brought life to it. They'd spread out a few beach towels from her garage. The grass was still damp from the morning, but the sun burned through the clouds, a silver spot amidst the gray. She was reading *Their Eyes were Watching God* a second time and the narration was minimal, though she did mouth lines from time to time. The habit annoyed him. He could hear the sound of her lips touching and then coming apart, like someone chewing very softly.

The day moved slowly above them. The sun couldn't escape the clouds entirely and the day was muggy. The drowsiness of the day made the conversation feel like something out of a dream, something that happened on the edges of consciousness. The memory had come unstuck from its context.

"What if we just left?" one of them had said.

The other had responded accordingly, with a measured and sufficient amount of shock and the appropriate emphasis on the obligatory swear word. And the speaker had said, "Jeez never mind." And the listener hadn't minded because it didn't seem that there was much to mind. It was another game of pretend, like when he said, "when I'm a famous novelist," or she said, "I bet my biological mom was nicer."

It was at least another year before the subject was raised again.

“Run away with me?” one of them suggested.

“You’re crazy,” the other countered and returned to what they were doing.

“Certifiable. Do it anyway.”

“Now?”

“Why not?”

“Tomorrow’s Taco Tuesday?”

This comment earned an eye roll. “You’re all talk.”

“I’m not the one talking. Why can’t this wait until graduation?”

“That’s too far away. I’ll just go alone.”

“You wouldn’t make it a day.”

Cora closed her book and looked at him. This is the only piece of the center he has left now. Whatever else he could or could not remember, that look was hard to forget.

“So, you’ll come with me, then?” It was the kind of look you followed into battle, which made him think she was the one who’d said it, who’d started it; it had to have been her, because the words never would have left his mouth.

But then she blinked. The look wavered, giving way to something he rarely saw, something uncalculated and unguarded.

He adjusted his grip on his pen and set the tip against the fresh page of notebook paper. When he spoke, he didn’t look at her. “Yeah, sure, but the day *after* graduation. The day after graduation, I’m all yours.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise. Can I go back to my story now?”

“Give me your pinkie.”

“Cora, come on. We’re too old for that.”

“If you break a promise, your conscience may twinge a little, but that’s it. I’m pretty sure the hounds of hell show up if you break a pinkie swear.”

“You’ve been watching too much *Supernatural*.”

“There are no pinkie swears on *Supernatural*.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

At least, that’s how Max rewrote the interaction for the one short fiction class he took in college and from which he ran in mortal terror of his own mind. No. That wasn’t quite right. Mortal terror, yes. Of his own mind, he was less sure. He had never tried to bind her to the page before. It felt wrong, as if he was diminishing her personality, taking away her choices, subjecting her to his memory which had always been the inferior of the two.

At the same time, it was oddly comforting, especially in those early days, to summon her up and bend some of their worst, most ambiguous conversations into something comical or kind. To attribute most of the confusion to her, to give her the words “run away with me,” or at least the implication.

Besides, the reimagined conversation suggested that they had gone, that something had happened, something bad maybe, but something. It opened the door for the biggest adventure they’d never had. It gave him more opportunity to play the

hero, to prove himself in the face of whatever threat his fictional retrospective narrator had already lived through. It precluded having to survive it.

It also forged an intimacy he wasn't sure they'd ever had. Emma, the third counterpart to their scheming, the one who had adventured in his stead, he left out. He left out Emma's footfalls behind them as they navigated muddy trails along the river, her mud-flecked calves and her laughter. They ran ahead of him, whispering feminine secrets he wouldn't understand, and he kept his distance.

Emma. His ghost of a sister. He didn't distrust her. He just had to see for himself first. She wrapped Cora's name in the same tone of voice as when she'd called to tell him that their father wasn't expected to leave the hospital this time. Calm, but punctured with pauses that revealed all the insidious details Emma herself couldn't say. She handled bad news poorly, delivering it misshapen or with pieces missing.

Neither of them were particularly well-versed in comfort. He had been surprised that she took the whole weekend off for their father's funeral. Business-like, quick and steady in a crisis, his sister thrived on situations that became tomorrow's bad news. Practical to a fault, their mother diagnosed when they were kids, shaking her head.

He turned a sharp corner and brushed elbows with someone going the opposite way. "Sorry," he muttered, keeping his head down.

He heard them stop behind him, their shoes scratching against the sidewalk.

"Max?" they called after him.

Max turned. "Clementine," he said. "Shit, sorry, I didn't see you. How are you?"

Clementine smiled, but continued to play nervously with the hem of her dress. "I'm great," she said. "You?"

"Fine," Max said. "I wish I could talk, but I've got to run."

"Were you on your way to Cora's?" Clementine asked as he began to turn away from her.

Max stopped. "Did Emma call you too?"

Clementine shook her head. "Emma?" she asked. "No, I was heading to see Cora too. Just to talk for a bit."

Max worried about how much time Clementine spent with Cora. Clementine was young, impressionable, and already in more trouble than she could handle most of the time. He hadn't been able to stop her from following Cora and Emma to Seattle nor had he been able to stop her from dropping out of college, and he remained the one tenuous link between his youngest sister and their mother. After Emma disappeared, he was the one who held their family together. Yet, when Clementine was in trouble, she always ran to Cora.

"Alright," he said. "She'll probably be happy to have the company." They set off together. Max felt disquieted by the silence. He couldn't remember the last time he'd called Clementine or even thought about calling her.

They stopped in front of the building and put his hand against the brick. The building was old, circa 1970s. She never called it that. Anything built within the last two hundred years was young. Anything built this century wouldn't last the decade,

she said with disdain. Her apartment was on the fourth floor, down the hall, in a studio tucked in the middle of a maze of two-bedrooms.

“What did you mean earlier,” Clementine asked. “When you asked if Emma had called me too?”

“I guess. . .” Max started and stopped. “Emma called maybe twenty minutes ago? She seems to think that Cora was in some kind of accident.”

“Do you believe her?”

“I don’t know,” Max said. “Not really. This is the first time I’ve heard from her in . . .”

“Three years?”

Max sighed. “Yeah that sounds about right.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” Clementine said, nodding to Cora’s front door.

“Guess so,” Max said. But no part of him believed that Cora was waiting for him on the other side of that door.

Third Chapter

“I told her a hundred times not to keep it in such an obvious spot,” Max said. He ran his hand along the top of the door frame, knocking the spare key to the floor.

Clementine bent to pick it up and reasoned that it was better than hiding it under the welcome mat. Max told her she gave people too much credit and she better not be keeping her key under the doormat.

“Of course not,” Clementine said. Max watched the brief look of panic cross her face and realized that she’d probably been hiding her key in the same place. He made a mental note to talk to her later. And another mental note to call her more often.

The key fit in the keyhole, but it wouldn’t turn. Max stared at it. “Rusted, do you think?” Clementine smiled and nudged him out of the way. She jimmied the key. It remained stuck for a moment more and then she finally succeeded in turning it.

“Ready?” she asked Max.

Max nodded and Clementine turned the door knob and pushed the door open.

They stepped over the threshold into the narrow entryway. “Cora?” Max called. There was no answer. Clementine ducked into the bathroom to their left as Max headed for the main room. He flipped the light switch, but the tall lamp in the corner didn’t react. The light from outside illuminated half the wall of the kitchenette; striped orange and green wallpaper and light green countertops. One of the legs was missing from the table and Cora had piled old magazines underneath the stump to prop it up. The laminate floor was beginning to bubble out from the center. Max looked up and saw a damp spot on the ceiling. He moved away, quickly.

Cora's bed was unmade in the corner, piled high with clothes. Her reading light was angled toward the bed, her imprint was on the pillow, but when he walked over to it, the sheets were cold.

"I don't think the electricity is on," Clementine called.

Max followed her voice to the bathroom. He watched Clementine unplug Cora's curling iron and set the cord on the countertop and then look up quickly to see if he'd noticed. He pretended he hadn't as he looked around the bathroom.

Hair products lined the top of the toilet. The cabinet above the toilet was open and a blow-dryer cord hung down from the bottom shelf. Several old prescription bottles occupied the top shelf, dwarfed by a tub of generic brand ibuprofen. Beside the toilet, the trash was overflowing and Q-tips littered the ground around it. There were thin water stains on the orange and floral wallpaper. Black mold was growing in the upper corner of the shower and the drain in the bathtub was hidden under a nest of red hair. Most of the shampoo and conditioner bottles were turned upside down. Max reached out to straighten one that was leaning against the wall and found it dry.

Clementine moved past him to inspect the rest of the house. Max's phone buzzed in his pocket and he silenced it without looking at the number.

Max wandered back out into the main room. "I don't think she's been here for a few days," he said.

"I think it's been more than a few days," Clementine said. "There's dust on the bookcase."

"That doesn't mean anything," Max said. "She was always complaining about how she didn't have time to read."

“There’s dust on the bed frame,” Clementine said.

“She’s hardly ever home.”

“Max, the electricity is off,” Clementine said. “The water’s off. There’s a dead router by the bed.”

Max sighed. “Alright,” he said. He followed Clementine out to the main room where they sat together on Cora’s bed.

“She didn’t take anything with her,” Clementine said. She picked up a pair of leggings and tossed them on the floor.

“Her laptop is gone,” Max said.

They sat in silence for a moment. “When’s the last time you talked to her?” Clementine asked.

“I don’t even remember,” Max said. “It’s probably been weeks.” He put his arm around her shoulders and she leaned into him, shivering.

“How did it happen?” she asked.

“Emma said it was an accident,” Max said.

“Yeah, but how?”

“It was the water,” Max said. The scene blossomed in his head before he could stop it. Cora, her red hair plastered to her face like that time in the winter when she’d fallen through the glass ice surface of the river. He’d waited, breathless on the shore, breathless like he’d gotten the wind knocked out of him, not breathless like he was now, when the very air around him felt hostile. That time, in the winter, when she should have died, she’d come up for air, she’d come up for air and come back to the shore where he waited.

“She drowned?”

Max shrugged. “Emma just said they found her in the water,” he said.

Fourth Chapter

“It never happens when you’re thinking about it,” Cora used to say.

But he’d been thinking about her every second of every day since she’d packed up her mother’s 1995 Jeep Wrangler and he’d boarded the next flight out. He’d landed on a different coast, not knowing when or how he’d ever see her again.

He sat clutching his phone, the echo of his sister’s words in his head. There’d been an accident. But nothing with Cora was ever a fucking accident. The girl dove into a reckless situation as if it were the smooth, clear, easy water of the community pool next to their old high school.

He believed he was keeping her safe, always thinking about her, always imagining the worst kinds of situations she could end up in. The logic was simple; it couldn’t happen if he’d already thought of it. Life just wasn’t that predictable.

He’d driven all the way to the airport, some fifty miles away, without thinking about it. Just got in the car and drove. He sat on the bench just inside the entrance, looking up at the board of arrivals and departures. The board flickered periodically as it updated, as planes landed, departed, battled storms and failed to arrive or depart on time. It was the turn of the season. Unlike back home where the year was oriented around a gradual departure or arrival of winter, seasons changed overnight. The first snow had already fallen, blanketed everything, and melted.

The next flight to Seattle was in two hours. Too much time and not enough.

It was only now that he realized he hadn’t been keeping her safe. He’d been preparing himself for this moment. The stomach acid dread of knowing she had gone

a step too far, wondering if it was because he wasn't there to stop her, and cursing himself for all the vast land between them.

She'll be alright, Emma had said. She's tough.

His twin sister, an EMT and a semi-professional liar.

It was a straight shot. Logan to SeaTac. The board flickered and the flight to Seattle disappeared. Max stopped fidgeting with his phone and stared up at the board as flight numbers and times filed back in.

"I want to go with you," Clementine said outside Cora's apartment. "I just have to call home and let Sylvie know what's going on."

"I'm not going to the hospital," Max said. "I-I have to get back to work."

Clementine glanced over at him, her cell phone pressed to her ear. "Max, you're not going back to work," she said. "You're not in any state—hello? Hello?" She walked away quickly.

Max watched her long blonde hair swinging across her back as she picked up speed. He put his head in his hands.

"Sorry," Clementine said a few minutes later. "Sylvie had to pick Alex up from school. I called work and told them I wouldn't be in. Let's go."

"I can't," Max said. "I don't have time for. . . Jesus, how many times is she going to do this to me?"

"Oh Max," Clementine said. "This isn't about you. She isn't *doing* anything to you."

"Then why is this so familiar?" Max said. "It seems like every few months, there's another crisis."

“Let’s just go and see what the situation is,” Clementine said. Clementine, always leading him back to Cora, leading him home.

“God, I’m glad you’re home.”

It was the first thing Cora said when he walked in to that hospital room. She meant to say here; he could see her realizing her mistake, but she pushed past it and onto the next order of business. “You’ve met Sam?”

“Not yet.” Clementine said they’d kept each other alive talking deep into the silence of their buried car until someone came to dig them out.

“I think he ducked out to get coffee,” Cora said. “And if he knows what’s good for him, he’ll bring me a cup.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Emma shaking her head. The remark was so familiar, so characteristic that everyone relaxed.

“So,” Cora said, casting around the room. “What are the odds of getting outside? I don’t want to miss the one day of sun we’re getting this winter.”

“Okay,” he said to Clementine. “Okay, let’s go.”

They caught the next ferry out. Clementine had never gotten her driver’s license. Cora had tried to teach her, but nothing came of it. As they were waiting for the ferry to leave, Max fished his phone out of his pocket.

“This number has called four times,” Max said. “And left no voicemail.”

“Is it Emma?”

“No, she called from a different number earlier,” he said. He showed Clementine the number. “I don’t suppose you recognize it?”

Clementine squinted at it. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

Clementine turned away from him to look at the receding city. “Um,” she said. “I think that’s Sam’s number.”

“Sam?” Max asked. “Who the fuck is—wait, you mean Cora’s Sam?”

Clementine flinched at his volume and nodded, still looking out across the water. “He’s the only person I know with an Oregon number.”

“Why the hell would he be calling me?”

Clementine shrugged. “Maybe Emma called him too?” she asked.

Max slipped his phone back in his pocket. “Did you guys stay in touch, after everything?” he asked.

Clementine picked at her fingernails. “We’ve talked,” she said. “Once or twice.”

Max didn’t like the way she wasn’t looking at him. “Clementine,” he said, trying for the stern tone his father had used on them when they were younger.

“It’s Sylvie’s fault,” Clementine said. “He came by the store and she said he looked lonely. You know how she is, always bringing home strays.”

“That’s a pretty complicated stray,” Max said.

“Cora knew,” Clementine said. “She was fine with it. The two of them. . .that’s what’s complicated.”

“Seems pretty simple to me,” Max said. “He broke her heart when he left. I’d never seen her that torn up about a guy. She wouldn’t let anyone talk about him for months.”

“She wouldn’t let *you* talk about him,” Clementine said. She finished her coffee and tossed it in a nearby wastebasket. “She wasn’t an idiot. She knew how much you hated him.”

“Isn’t,” Max said. “She isn’t an idiot. And I didn’t, I didn’t hate him. He was just—it didn’t seem like they were happy.”

“They weren’t, at the end,” Clementine said. “I don’t think you know the whole of what was going on.”

“I know she cheated on him,” Max said.

Clementine sighed. “No, she didn’t.”

“Yes,” Max said. “She did. I was there.”

Clementine shook her head. “I know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“But they weren’t together anymore, by that point.”

“Oh,” Max said.

A silence fell between them, filled by the rushing of the wind on the water. He leaned against the railing and looked out over the water. Cora had always been crazy for the water. During the brief stretch of time they’d lived together when Max moved to the city, Cora would get him up at the crack of Sunday dawn to take the first Ferry out. They’d get coffee and bagels at a sleepy cafe in Bremerton before they properly started their day.

This was the image he would always return to when he thought of her—Cora leaning against the railing of the Ferry, the sunlight spinning gold into her hair, her eyes closed and a slight smile on her face. Those quiet Sundays—some of the deepest, quietest moments of their friendship.

He didn't think of *that* morning often, the morning after the night he'd found her at the bar and carried her sixteen blocks to his new apartment. The night he settled her in his bed and she wouldn't let go of his hand and he lay down beside her and she snuggled into his side and he closed his eyes and held her close.

The next morning, he had coffee waiting for her as she stumbled out wrapped up in his sheet, wide-eyed and pale, missing the memory of how she'd gotten there. "Did we—?" she asked.

Taken off guard by her panic, he said quickly, "No."

"God, no," he'd added as revenge, rearranging his features to look disgusted or at least affronted by the suggestion.

Cora nodded, though the expression remained, and then turned back down the hall to throw up in his bathroom.

He rarely returned to *that* morning and she must not have either, because they never spoke of what may or may not have happened in the night.

"Did they stay in touch?" Max asked Clementine, who was pacing the stretch of rail in front of him.

"It's complicated, Max," she said with a shrug. "I don't think they talked frequently or anything, but I know they saw each other over the years."

"She never said anything," he said. "Why would she keep that from me?"

Clementine stopped and snorted. "You're not the most understanding," she said and resumed her pacing.

Max opened his mouth to protest and then swallowed it. "Did Cora tell you that?"

“She didn’t really have to,” Clementine said. “Look, I’m not saying you’re a bad friend or anything. I’m just saying that you have a tendency to jump to reaction before you try to understand something.”

“Well, if she’d explained,” he said, but Clementine was walking away.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Cora appeared in the doorway so suddenly that Max jumped. Her face was pale underneath her red hair.

"Ah-Sorry, I was just—" Max fumbled for the lid to the small box and as he did so, the plastic bag slipped from his other hand. It hit the carpet and a small cloud of ash dust rose from it. "Shit! I'm really sorry, I'll clean it up."

"Don't." Cora said flatly. She crossed the threshold and stooped down beside him. "Don't move."

He didn't. She lifted the bag and examined the small spot of soot on the white carpet, pinching some of it off between her fingers. Something solid had fallen out of the bag as well. Cora picked it up and cradled it gently in her palm, like she would a lady bug or a bird.

"What is that?" Max asked.

"My brother," Cora said.

Max's stomach dropped. "Your. . .brother?"

"Yes," Cora said, straightening to show him a small piece of bone. "Part of him anyway. Marie has the rest in her closet. They picked out a really nice urn."

"So, uh, why do you have him?"

"I wanted him," Cora said, as if this was the only explanation. "I didn't think

he should be shut up in a closet."

"This is really weird," Max said, handing her the box and watching her gently place the plastic bag, with the bone fragment nestled in the soft pillow of ash, back inside. She closed the lid and retied the ribbon. She did all of this slowly, delicately. Then she looked up at him in a sharp, almost jerky movement.

"I just mean," he said and then stopped because he didn't know what he meant. A draft had chilled the room. He felt clammy and sick. "It's just. It's a little weird."

"Why?" Cora asked in a tone that was not nearly as sharp as the look she'd given him.

"I don't know," Max whispered. "I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be," Cora said with a wry smile. "I always wanted the two of you to meet."

Max gave her a half-smile back, though he still felt nauseous. Without either of them having to say anything, they both straightened, Cora clutching the box with both hands, and sat down on the bed.

Cora doled the story out gradually. They'd both been sick, but her brother had a weak immune system. What should have been a winter cold had exploded viciously into pneumonia and then septic shock.

"I think my parents knew that he wasn't going to make it," Cora said. "But I didn't. Not until he was gone."

He was six. The last good memory she had of her brother was of walking him into his kindergarten classroom with a dozen pink-frosted cupcakes.

Then, Halloween. The first year they'd been cut loose. Cora feeling like an adult at eleven. It was a cold night. She pretended not to hear him when he said he was tired. "One more street," she promised.

These were the details she selected, but Max felt like he'd been there beside them, clutching a plastic pumpkin full of candy and waiting for Cora's directions. The first halloween he'd known Cora she'd told him that Halloween wasn't a holiday and he was dumb for wanting to trick-or-treat. He and Cora were half-way through the latest Supernatural when Clementine came downstairs in her pink princess dress and a crooked tiara, clutching Emma's old candy bag. She stood in front of the TV, crying because Emma had left with her friends while she was getting ready. Cora had straightened Clementine's tiara, taken her hand, and left without even pausing the movie.

At this point in her narrative, Cora faltered. Max put his hand over hers, his heart beating fast enough to make him short of breath. She'd never been this open with him in all their years of friendship. He wondered if she talked about this stuff with Emma when the two of them disappeared into her room at sleepovers. He hated watching Emma's door close, feeling as if they had a deeper friendship, a bond he couldn't form.

Cora shifted away from him, bringing his hopes crashing down, and slipped her hand out from his to wipe her eyes. "Sorry," she said, with a little laugh. "I haven't talked about it in... . well, probably ever actually. Marie never brings it up. It's like he never existed."

"Is that why your parents...?"

Cora shook her head. "They were broken before that," she said. "Dad had already moved out when Mattie got sick."

"Mattie," Max repeated.

"Matthew," Cora said and wrinkled her nose. "I was the one who started calling him Mattie, but everyone went back to calling him Matthew after he died. Me and my dad were the only ones who talked about him as if he'd been a person."

"What happened to your dad?"

"He left," Cora said. "Mattie being gone was hard. And Marie made it all about herself, not that she had to. People are just more sympathetic to the mother, which I think is a little unfair. He lost a kid too. The way Marie was playing it, he lost us both. She never let me visit. And then, eventually, we moved too. She said that being in Seattle was too hard."

As she continued, Max felt like the conversation was streaming by him and he couldn't catch up. Cora sounded like Clementine did when she got excited about something she was ready and had wanted to give him the whole plot summary.. Max wasn't sure what to say or how to relate to her; this was as open as he'd ever seen her.

"Hey Kenz?" Cora said, putting her hand over his.

"Yeah?" Max said, his heart rate picking up again. Was this his moment, returning after what seemed like a premature defeat?

"If you tell anyone that I keep my brother in a box in my room, I'll kill you dead, understand?"

Max smiled. "I understand."

But he didn't. Not really. He couldn't. If Emma or Clementine died, he was pretty sure he'd settle for a gravesite to visit and leave it at that.

"What do you want?" Emma said when he came up to her room later that night. "Did dad send you up here to check on me? I finished To Kill a Mockingbird and I'm learning about the fucked up American government now. Is that good enough for a progress report? Just don't tell him I said fuck or he'll make me read The Great Gatsby next."

Max waved her off. The words had been resting at the top of his tongue, but now he faltered, unsure. Emma wasn't easily shocked like he was. "People deal with shit the way they can," she often said with a shrug when he came to her with news of some fresh atrocity or injustice. He didn't want her to make fun of him or think he was being insensitive to Cora's grief. He could almost hear her saying, "Jesus Max, it's not like she's hiding a body under the floorboards."

He couldn't tell her. He rested his hand on the door knob, ready to walk back out and start on his own homework.

"Max, what is it?" Emma asked. He heard her book shut with a snap. "Are you sick?"

He turned back around. Everything felt strange and foreign. Even Emma looked like a different person than the sister who'd been almost identical to him when they were kids. They didn't look so alike now. After a few summers in the sun, volunteering for Search and Rescue, a plague of freckles had spread out over Emma's cheeks and collected densely at the bridge of her nose. She was fixing him with an

intent look, one eyebrow raised. She'd started shaping her eyebrows and as Max looked closer, he saw that she was wearing makeup.

"Cora has a box of her brother's ashes on her bookshelf," he blurted out.

Emma blinked. "This is about Mattie?"

"You knew?"

Her face softened. "Of course I knew," she said. "I thought you did too."

Max felt the air leave his lungs. "I didn't even know she had a brother."

Running a hand through her bangs, Emma sighed. "She doesn't like to talk about it," she said. "I think it really messed her up."

As he stared at the water, Clementine's words echoed in his head. When they were growing up, he'd just assumed he was the better friend and the better confidant. Emma could be stuck-up, flaky, and blunt when pressed. Her relationship with Cora certainly had more turbulence than his. Yet, Cora had trusted her with this secret. Emma and not him. Why had she not trusted him? What else had she kept from him?

Fifth Chapter

“Cora Connors? You’ll want the ICU. Second floor,” the man at the front desk told them when they walked up. “If you follow this corridor, you’ll see the stairs, it’s straight up and to the right.”

Clementine thanked the man and started off in the direction he’d pointed to. Max didn’t follow.

“How is she?” he asked.

The man looked around, uncomfortable. “The doctor will be able to tell you more once you go up there,” he said.

“Is she alive?” Max asked.

“Sir, you’ll really want to talk to the doctor on call. I don’t—”

“Max,” Clementine said sharply. She had returned to his side. “Let’s just go and see.”

Max let Clementine take him by the hand and lead him toward the stairs. He focused on the panels of light that rose and fell on Clementine’s back as they walked through the lobby.

“Do you think we should get her something?” Max asked when they reached the stairs. “Like a . . . bouquet of flowers or a stuffed animal. I saw a sign for a gift shop.”

“Let’s just see how she’s doing,” Clementine said. She sounded like a parent reasoning, not impatiently, with her child. Sometimes he forgot that she was a parent.

“Okay, yeah, that’s a good idea,” Max said. Clementine began to climb the stairs, but Max stayed at the first step.

“I think I need more coffee,” he called after her. “I’ll catch up with you.”

Clementine stopped, turned, and came back down the stairs. “Max,” she said, her voice even softer. “What’s going on?”

Max looked past her, to the closed double doors at the top of the stairs.

“Nothing, I just really want more coffee,” he said. “I was up super early for work and now we’re here and I just need some caffeine before I go up there and see what fucked up mess she’s gotten herself into this time, okay?”

When Clementine continued to stare at him, her expression softening past sympathy and into pity, he added, “It’s not like you need me to be there with you, holding your hand, so just, just go and if she’s awake, tell her I’ll be back, okay?”

“Okay,” Clementine said. She grabbed and squeezed his hand.

Max nodded and watched her climb the stairs and disappear through the double doors labeled I.C.U. Then he turned and half-ran out of the building. On the sidewalk outside, he stopped. He felt dizzy and disoriented in the weak late afternoon sunlight. He closed his eyes and stood still with his hands behind his head, breathing in the cold, damp sea air.

Eventually, the dizziness subsided and his heart rate came down. He picked a direction and began walking until he came across the first cafe that wasn’t advertising the world’s best clam-chowder.

Once inside, he realized it was a bar. They looked as if they were just opening. A young bartender was pulling stools off the table, another bartender was wiping down the bar. Max chose a table in the corner by the window and ordered a coffee

when asked. It came in a tiny mug that he wrapped his hands around, but couldn't bring himself to drink from.

She wasn't an idiot. Clementine had already and so easily slid her over into the past. She was already an absence. This was Cora's kind of place, he thought, looking around. Mostly dark, but with warm light emitting from the few lamps in the joint. The wood was stained dark brown, the bottles behind the bar strategically placed under the brightest light in the room. It didn't seem like it saw much business, but Cora would have been encouraged by the bartenders' low chatter. As he watched, the only female bartender shoved her coworker playfully as she swung around him to get something from the back. Cora always liked to sit at the bar, chattering innocently with the bartenders. She'd been a bartender herself, right out of high school when she'd first moved to the city.

They used to indulge dreams of grandeur (she called them, he realized now, in jest); she wanted to go to Europe, and he wanted to go to med school. But though he'd made it across the country, here he was right back where he started. Med school seemed like the punchline to a bad joke. And she had never made it out of Washington.

Maybe she never would.

"Max?"

Max started so badly he sent coffee sloshing over the sides of his mug. The only other patron of the bar was standing over his table, staring down at him in surprise. It took Max a moment to recognize him. He'd cut his hair short and grown a patchy beard.

“Can I sit?” Sam asked, nodding to the empty chair across from Max.

“Uh, sure,” Max said.

Sam set a half-empty glass of beer on the table and fell heavily into the chair.

He drained the last of his beer in a few swallows and then rubbed at his eyes.

“How are you?” Max asked. His tone sounded flat, even to him.

Sam continued to rub his eyes. “I’ve had better days,” he admitted with a little chuckle. “God. Damn. This is the first place I’ve seen in Port Orchard that doesn’t serve clam chowder for breakfast.”

“What’s wrong with clam chowder?”

“Besides the fact that someone looked at a clam and thought that it would be good in chowder? Nothing at all.”

Max stared into his coffee. Sam straightened and blinked hard a few times.

His eyes were fractured with red. “Did you get my calls?” he asked.

“Um, yeah, I was,” Max cast around. “I was at work and then—”

“Emma told you what happened?” Sam asked.

Max sighed. “Yeah,” he said.

Sam looked distressed. “She was supposed to update me, if anything changed,” he said, more to himself than Max. “She wouldn’t let me ride with them to the hospital. I—”

“Wait, you were there?”

Sam blinked at him. “Yeah,” he said. “I was the one who called it in.”

“Oh,” Max said. “I didn’t know that you and Cora. . .”

“We’re not,” Sam said. He rubbed his eyes again. “Not really. I was helping her fix up the house.”

“What house?”

“Her dad’s house,” Sam said, a question in his voice. “The one on the bay? She inherited it when her dad died last year.”

Max stared at him. He’d only heard Cora talk about her dad a handful of times over the years and couldn’t think of a single noteworthy thing she’d said.

“Is that how she ended up in the water?”

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t think so. I don’t know.” He was pinching his nose so tightly his skin was turning red. “She, uh, I know she liked to sit on this big rock that you can get to pretty easily during low tide. We were sitting up there last night, drinking and talking. I told her to be careful, because sometimes a big wave from one of those barges passing can knock you right off.”

Max could almost see it. Cora sitting cross legged atop a mountainous rock, backlit by the rising sun, eyes closed, facing away from the bay as a wave overtook her.

“I don’t know,” Sam said again. “I knew she wasn’t doing great last night. She gets into one of those moods, you know? But she told me she was okay. She told me to go.”

I wouldn’t have left her, Max thought, a little savagely. Out loud he said, “I’m glad you found her.”

Sam nodded. “Me too,” he said. “I wasn’t going to come back, but I left my wallet. I can’t imagine what would have happened if. . .” his voice trembled. “But I don’t know. I might have been too late anyway.”

“Have you been to see her?”

Sam shook his head. “I’m waiting for Emma’s call,” he said. “I don’t want to go up there until I knew for sure.”

“Good move,” Max said. Sam’s eyes were watering again. Max drummed his fingers against the table and pretended to check his phone. “I should get going.”

Sam caught his arm as he stood up and Max could feel him shaking. “It doesn’t look good,” he warned.

“She’ll be alright,” Max said. “She always is.”

Sam didn’t return his smile. “I’ve been worried about this day for a long time,” he said. “She keeps running headlong into shit like this.”

“She’s going to be fine,” Max said. “She keeps running headlong into dumb shit because she always turns out fine.” He tugged his arm out of Sam’s grip and began walking away.

“She’s got scars.”

“She was young,” he said, over his shoulder. He paused and turned around. Sam picked up his glass, realized it was empty, and let it fall back to the table with a thud. He buried his face in his hands.

“I’m going to head back to her apartment,” Max said. “To see if there’s anything I can bring her that will make her more comfortable. I’ll catch up with you later.” He took the last few steps to the door, wrenched it open, and walked out.

Sixth Chapter

Max was almost to Cora's front door when Clementine caught up with him. He stared at her contact picture on his screen, a picture from years ago that she knew she hated, and thought about swiping to ignore the call again. But the icon in the corner of his phone told him he'd already missed seven of her calls and experience told him that she wouldn't stop calling until he answered.

"Where are you?"

"I ran into Sam," Max said. "Apparently he's the one who called 9-1-1. He said—"

"Max, you need to get back down here," Clementine said. "It's—it's not good. They're calling Marie."

"Cora isn't going to appreciate that," Max said.

"Max—" he could hear her beginning to cry. "Max, please come back."

"No," Max said. "No, I don't—I can't take waiting around. I'll see her when she wakes up." Just once he'd like to skip this part, the unbearable pain of not knowing, of sitting or pacing, and most of all not knowing. It didn't feel like time had moved around these events. Instead these awful, paralyzing moments were the very thing shaping the time's path. These moments were life and everything else was the suspension in between.

He couldn't do it this time. She would just have to understand.

Clementine had begun talking again, but all he heard were her sobs. He hung up. She was a grown-up now—he didn't have it in him to take care of her and he couldn't imagine she still needed it. He couldn't imagine she'd ever needed it. She'd

had their father guiding her through the world from day one. Even when he betrayed her, he was still There.

Their father had asked for Clementine so often in those final weeks and she hadn't come. At the funeral, no one said her name, not Max or Emma, not their mother, and that kind of silence was contagious. It spread over the mourning and beyond until Clementine's name was all but erased from the family record.

Even the priest had caught it. "Michael is survived by a loving wife and two children. . ." And their mother, her face hidden behind a wad of tissues, hadn't corrected him.

Their mother. She sat on her perch not unhappily, but solemnly. Not silenced, but muted. In his last year of college, he'd taken an internship to avoid her, pissed it away on the beach in the evenings, left early, arrived later, received a dismal performance review and dismissed it as grief. So many lost days, just staring at the waves. The waves reminded him, not of his father, but of Cora, who loved the water more than anything else, who, once, on a dare, danced out across the frozen river, turned in the most graceful, uninterrupted movement and—the crack spread like a bullet and outran its own sound—fell straight down, disappearing without a splash. The water bubbled out from the hole where she'd been and he'd waited, breathless, until she resurfaced a full minute later, further down in the spreading crevice where the ice had split into two sheets that were slowly drifting apart. "Kenz—" He never forgot the way her voice sounded, almost a scream, as she bobbed back under again and he was still on the shore, powerless to save her. She resurfaced again at the river's edge. Her eyes were bright, her nose streaming, and her hair plastered to her

face as he hauled her out and onto dry land. She'd clung to him for a moment, a moment when he couldn't tell if he was warming her or she was freezing him, and then broke away laughing. "Your turn?" she'd asked.

New England was bitterly cold, but the water, when he waded out that day on the beach, warmed him. It had been the only time she'd ever asked him to save her and he'd been powerless at the water's edge. Never learned how to swim. A childhood of dry summers, Emma and Clementine calling him from the deep end of the pool, while he shook his head and burned under the sun.

Max sat down on Cora's bed. He felt around under her pillow until he found the wine-red journal she'd kept, off and on, since high school. It was actually a sketchbook, filled as much with Cora's drawings as it was with her writing. He traced the outline of a drawing they'd done together in class with his finger and then let the book fall open to a random entry.

March 12, 2012

I wanted to know him, not all at once, not even right in that moment, but I craved the years it would take for us to know each other, years of quiet moments and shared looks and little reveals. I knew it would take years and I wanted those years. I was so afraid I wouldn't get them. I was so afraid he'd made up his mind about me.

Scrawled in the margins in a different color, Cora had written: *We got those years, but they weren't enough.* He realized, with a jolt, that she'd been talking about Sam. Startled, he flipped ahead several pages, his hands shaking.

April 17, 2012

the look on his face. i may as well have killed clementine. i watched him go through shock, hurt, and then finally land on anger. Kenzie often lands on anger. his pride runs so close to his skin. we grew up, he forgets, bickering more often than not.

it began civil enough. mackenzie always needed a little time to really get going. he has manners. they are the least interesting part of him, yet the most endearing. we could be in a fight, and he'd still fucking tell me to have a pleasant evening.

he didn't believe me, when i said i could keep her safe, i could come up with a plan. 'what kind of plan could you come up with,' he said. he didn't mean it, but he can be so, so cruel. we both could. we always had. When you up that close to someone, you wear each other like a second skin, each thinking you are incapable of wounding the other person. But we were plenty capable. And, it turned out, plenty willing.

"I never wanted to hurt you," Max whispered to the empty apartment. He leaned against Cora's headboard and closed his eyes. This was too much. It was all too much. He could hear the writing in Cora's voice, could hear the pain and accusation. He wanted to tell her, "I was hurting too." He wanted to tell her, "You don't understand." He wanted to say, "I'm sorry."

Instead, he opened his eyes and straightened up, letting the edges of the pages slip against his thumb until he came to a longer one a few months later.

August 14, 2012

The sky fell. i know now that it was earth, not sky, but in the moment, there were strange flashes of light and large craters of dark and they swept in like the tide,

because that's what it felt like, a tide coming in too fast, sweeping us off the road and into the trees. Sam was yelling, but i was afraid to open my mouth. there was so much noise, all around us, so many hard sounds, cutting each other off. i didn't panic until it was silent again. Sam was unconscious and the car had stopped groaning and it hadn't been light for a while, so i didn't know how far out to sea we'd been pushed. i just knew that it was too quiet.

i tried to wake Sam, but he was unreachable in the darkness. As i stretched toward him, i felt something in my leg tear, a lightning strike of pain. my knee wasn't where it was supposed to be. i felt around in the dark for it. my leg seemed to end just above it, but i could feel the pain stretching into the space i couldn't reach. i could wiggle my toes and feel them curling against the bottom of my shoe. later, i remembered this as the doctor was telling me that the force of the crash had pinned it between my seat and the collapsed dashboard. My shin bone stuck out in two different places, though I never saw the reality of this, just the neat incisions where they closed it up. at the hours wore on and we became more frantic to get out, the moving and stretching had torn ligaments, destroyed my ACL.

the pain is a permanent resident. it settled in and got comfortable in all the places that should have held my leg together.

i don't know any of this in the moment. i know i have to wake sam. if he's dead. . .

i whimper and hear it in the dark, a small sad sound with no answer. my ears are ringing, but there is no other pain besides my leg. (if the dashboard hadn't come

to me, i would have come to it and would probably be dead. i am lucky, the doctors repeat. i am lucky.)

“Sam,” i whisper, stretching towards him in the dark. no answer.

minutes stretch into hours and curl back in to minutes. later the memory that overshadowed all other was the memory of the endless dark and the vertigo. more than once, i become convinced that the car is tipping or rocking. there is no time. the clock on the dash was on for a while—sam’s keys, still in the ignition. but time stopped. 10:27. time did not move past 10:27. i don’t know if it was morning or night. we are buried, i learned later, under 15 feet of rocks, mud and other debris. directly above us, against the sunroof, lay a piece of the guardrail.

that’s why they dont find us for almost two days. it feels like years, but then, later, my memory records it as moments.

it’s not emma who finds us, but she is my hero. she tells me that she will ride with sam to the hospital. they won’t let her work on me, because we are as close as sisters. but she can save him.

Cora had scribbled in the margins:

she saves him.

but later,

she takes him away.

August 15, 2012

When sam visits, he brings only good news. he tells me he’s healing well, shows off the scars where they took his spleen, appendix, and left pinkie.

they took nothing from me. I didn't lose anything, but i feel lost. no one will tell me when i can expect to go home. kenz is stalling going back to school, not because of me. because of his dad and because his internship is over anyway and because—kenzie is really good at answering the why questions. not so much the how or what.

clementine is in love. she doesn't visit as often and she's always on her phone. emma says its someone at work. kenz worries, but i don't see the harm. that's how i met sam, after all.

it feels like everyone moves forward without me. emma and sawyer—engaged. clementine in love and kenz in grief. they promise me that this is the last surgery. they said that last time.

Max remembered the year after the accident, a long string of excruciating surgeries and devastating setbacks, with more clarity than he would have wished on anyone. He remembered what he'd come for and flipped to the very back of the book.

September 18, 2017

Went back to good ol' Spokane't for the weekend to check in on mom. She was worked up over some suicide she saw on the news, a teenager diving headfirst off Monroe Bridge into the churning waterfall below. Build a bridge and people will jump from it. She forgets, sometimes, that i don't live here anymore. It took hours to calm her down.

She used to be afraid for me when i was growing up. Because of Mattie, because of Dad. and. because of that time with dad, the lost months before i met Kenz and Emma. all i remember now is the train ride, the strange shadows creeping in as i

stood on the platform waiting for dad. i have a feeling i wouldn't like to remember the rest. sometimes it feels like whatever brought me down then lives on inside, dormant for a moment, but rising without my knowledge or control.

When i was fifteen, Kenz and i watched someone we'd just passed on the bridge swan dive into the water. They disappear so fast. It hardly looks like a fall. The water reaches for them and they just. . .disappear.

One

The sand stretches for miles in either direction and the shells scattered across its surface look like slices of the outer planets, decorated with bands of orange, pink, green, and even black, like marbles, like storms, tiny, contained cataclysms that give no hint of their true scale. She fills her coat pockets until they are heavy. The first shells she chooses carefully, but her curiosity turns to anxiety turns to fear that she won't return to this place and soon its handfuls of shells and she scoops them blindly. Some crack and break before they are shuffled to the bottom of her pocket.

The fabric at the bottom of her right pocket rips, a small puncture at first and then a real tear that sends shells cascading down her leg. As she's bending to collect them, her other pocket rips. She looks around for something else to hold them, seaweed or kelp that she can tie together with the ribbon in her hair to make a bag, but the beach is empty except for the shells, the tiny galaxies that surround her. They seem to be multiplying, two or three shells deep so that she can't move anymore, though she tries, slowing her pace and picking her path as carefully as possible. But she's been walking for miles. Her feet are sore, swollen, and bleeding and night is falling. The sky is split open, the clouds soft wounds of orange, pink, and then a dusty purple as the sun sinks and disappears.

Weary, she stops. She doesn't sit down, but she sways on her feet, held in place by the multiplying shells. The swell of each wave becomes louder, so many voices overlapping. She closes her eyes and tries to find comfort in the sound. Her heart rate picks up. The waves seem to be getting closer; they're certainly getting louder. She forces her eyes to remain closed until a white-hot beam of light

illuminates the orange of her eyelids. She opens her eyes to the full dark, penetrated only by the lighthouse beam in the distance blinking on and off.

Part II: Emma

First Chapter

Later, Emma remembers it in moments she tries to piece together like an old song.

Bridge. Chorus. Refrain. Suspension. The final note left her cold. Sawyer taught her all the pieces and all the names—had she betrayed him? He said the medication chased the music and the colors away and he'd never gotten it back, he said, and he hadn't. The summer before was full of music, before the silent winter, but that summer, *that* summer had been something out of a dream. "You're so beautiful," Sawyer said as the rain fell hard and the beach, through the window, was a bad oil painting, all run down colors and the waves crashing behind Sawyer's words—already he looked like he hadn't slept in years. Just insomnia and nothing more, he assured her. She could admit now, she had extrapolated on these words, taken creative license and applied them to everything. Just insomnia, just bad dreams, just talk, talk, talk; he poured words into her ear while she slept. She couldn't be sure, but her head felt so full and ached in the morning, and he—already awake (she almost never saw him sleep) and watching her, smiled and said,

"Good morning starshine. The world says hello."

She met Sawyer on the first cold day in the city, when the sky threatened to snow all day, but didn't, when she and Cora were still sleeping under the same blankets because the apartment was small and the city not yet familiar, when she

hadn't built her life here, not yet, when the path in front of her was still open and exciting and frightening.

Their good days—manic. They tried to glut themselves on the pleasure of each other before it went sour.

The bad days—a well she tries not to fall into now that there are no days left for them to share.

On their wedding day, Sawyer met her in the hallway before the ceremony. He said something she can't remember now. She sees herself in her silver dress standing beside him, facing him, touching his arm. He's in his tux with his tie waiting to be tied.

"I'm nervous," she whispered. He pulled her to him, solid and sure. He smelled like gin, but the memory has grown distant so now she sees only a couple standing in the hallway of the church as if she is seeing it at the end of the hall, as if she is walking toward them and she will have to ask them to please move because she needed to get to the other end.

"Come home Em," he'd said and she still hears his voice sometimes when she is out. In the beginning, she sometimes stopped in the street, convinced of an unspeakable peril, convinced that she needed to run back home, no matter how far, to save herself or someone else from the peril which she could not name, and, more than once, she made it all the way back to the old apartment before she remembered. She heard his voice, but couldn't follow his command because the streets looked strange and oh, that hollow feeling of being too late, of making a decision, the wrong one, the one that couldn't be revoked, swallowed her for hours until she reached a familiar

landmark, something that came after their time together, the troubadour who had taken up the corner of Davis and 6th, a new coffee stand, a new display in the art gallery; only then could she guide herself, for he could guide her no longer, onward, back to the new apartment. But still he whispers,

Come home.

Second Chapter

“Do you promise?” she asked.

Cora laughed. “Of course,” she said.

“Because, he’s really nervous,” Emma said. “He already thinks that you don’t like him.”

“Well, he’s not wrong,” Cora said. “Any man you date is guilty until proven otherwise.”

“Just—be nice, will you?”

Cora sighed. “I promise,” she said. She held out her pinkie.

Emma hooked her pinkie around Cora’s and relaxed against her chair.

“Man, I’ve never seen the apartment this clean,” Cora said, looking around.

“You must really like this guy.”

Emma stood to get another beer. “He’s different,” she said. “Not like Chris—”

“Chris was a piece of shit.”

“—or Steven—”

“Oh my god, Steven. Pretentious asshole.”

“Yeah, because all of the guys you’ve dated have been winners,” Emma said, sitting back down.

“I don’t date,” Cora said. She wrinkled her nose. “So archaic. Men are good for one thing and one thing only.”

“Sex?”

Cora laughed. “Sometimes,” she said.

The doorbell rang. Or, it tried. The bell had never worked properly. They had to listen for the click of someone on the other side of the door pressing down on it. Shortly after they'd moved in, Cora had put a piece of tape over it, but the adhesive dried out and the tape kept falling off.

Emma gave Cora her best pleading smile and Cora mouthed, "I promise," as Emma backed away from her to answer the door.

Sawyer ducked in to kiss her as soon as she opened the door. "Hello love," he said. He called everyone love, but Emma felt her face heat up regardless.

"Come on in," she said.

"I brought booze," he said, holding up a six pack of beer and a bottle of vodka.

"You're off to a good start then," Emma said.

They got settled. Sawyer made himself comfortable on their bed in the corner and Emma felt she had to join him to make the decision seem more appropriate, which left Cora alone on the couch. Cora turned to face them, accepting the beer Sawyer offered. Emma, trying to be brave, took the vodka, unscrewed the lid, and held the bottle up to her lips. The alcohol seared its way down her throat and she only just managed to avoid coughing it back up. She closed her eyes and blindly handed the bottle off to whoever reached for it.

She opened her eyes in time to see Cora take a quick drink. Sawyer was saying something she'd missed the beginning of. She smiled and nodded and he smiled back, reaching over to brush some of her hair off her forehead and tuck it behind her ear.

For the rest of the night, she felt warm and happy, considerably drunker than she'd ever been before. Later, she couldn't remember very well if Cora had kept her promise.

"You wanna get out of here?" Sawyer asked at some point and she nodded. In that moment, she would have gone just about anywhere with him.

Sawyer snuck them into a club he'd performed at, the one downtown that Cora had been talking about forever. Cora disappeared into the crowd moments after the first round of drinks, leaving Emma and Sawyer alone on the dance floor. The night was theirs and they claimed it, she claimed it for both of them as one song slid into the next slid into the next, as they slid into each other. Sawyer beamed as he spun her around, moving quickly to catch her, instead of waiting for her to come back in. When they grew tired of dancing, they sat at the bar, Sawyer sneaking Emma drinks and Emma trying to look older than she was. When the bar closed, they stumbled to a 24-hour cafe where Sawyer ordered a stack of blueberry pancakes, pushed the plate across the table at her, and said grandly, "What's mine is yours!" They were half-deaf from the music and the drinks, and Sawyer's words boomed out, disrupting the hapless, hungover, and homeless. Emma knew she should have felt embarrassed, but the alcohol was still warming her insides and she adored the man beside her, for his charisma and energy and the way he was looking at her in that moment.

They stumbled home in the rosy hours, abandoning the attempts to sober up and fell into bed. When they made love, they laughed, intoxicated.

Third Chapter

A headache blossomed behind her eyes and she rubbed at them, realizing too late that there was still a fair amount of blood on her hands. She sat up, stretched, and made her way to the women's restroom where she cleaned blood and dirt off her hands, her face and even her hair. She stripped off her shirt and put on Sawyer's sweater.

She could still feel Cora's clammy grip on her wrist, still hear her desperate attempts to get air. It was something that was going to follow her for a while. It wasn't always the worst cases that did of even the strangest. The ones that followed you were just the ones that did.

Sawyer looked up from his phone when she walked back into the waiting room. "You don't have to go back out there, do you?" he asked. On the TV behind him, the local news was covering the landslide. So far, six dead and two homes destroyed completely. New first responder crews were relieving the ones who'd been out there all night. Her shift had ended six hours ago. Her next one was starting in twelve.

"Not yet," she said. "Has anyone been out to update you?"

Sawyer shook his head. "Cora's still in surgery," he said. "I don't know where they took Sam."

Emma sank into a seat beside him, covering her face with her hands. Sawyer wrapped both arms around her shoulders and squeezed. "It must have been awful out there," he said.

“Not so bad for me, I think,” she said, picking at the dirt underneath her fingernails. “They had the scene triaged and contained by the time my crew got there.”

She’d barely had two minutes to clock in before her partner was shoving a thermos of lukewarm coffee into her hand, directing her to their rig, and explaining that everyone was working doubles until they were sure they’d pulled out all the victims.

“We were mostly transport,” Emma said. “Since we’re the newest.” It was only luck, having stayed with one patient long enough to miss her ride back, that she was there when they’d unearthed Sam’s car.

Before she knew what she was doing, before the more experienced crew had ruled the area safe enough to approach, she’d jumped over what was left of the guardrail and climbed down to where the car was half uncovered. Someone had seen a piece of the guardrail catch a flashlight beam. Otherwise who knew how long they would have been out there.

She shivered and nestled deeper into Sawyer’s side. “It was awful,” she whispered. “It was so awful seeing them like that.” Cora’s face, bruised and bloody, her eyes wide with panic as she pressed her hand against the glass. Her other hand was interlinked with Sam’s. Sam was barely conscious. They’d had to shock him on the way in. Cora’s blood pressure had bottomed out as soon as they got her out of the car. Crush injuries—her leg caught between the dash and the seat. It had taken the better part of an hour to get her free and then they’d almost lost her.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” Sawyer said, squeezing her shoulders. Emma let herself relax into him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“Should we be calling anyone?” Sawyer asked.

Emma tensed. “Probably,” she said. “I don’t know how to get ahold of Sam’s family and Cora. . .I’m not sure who to call for Cora.”

She looked at her phone, thinking of her brother. It was ten-thirty, which meant it was one-thirty where Max was. In his most recent visit, he’d kept a cool distance from Cora, shrugging out of invitations to meet Sam or to spend time with the four of them.

Would he still be awake? She wondered if she should call him. She couldn’t convince herself that Cora would want her to call him. But she also didn’t know the full extent of Cora’s injuries. Two open tibia fractures and likely soft tissue damage to the ligaments and tendons around her left knee. And that was just her leg. They’d hit hard. If Sam had internal bleeding, Cora did too. By the time Sam’s ambulance had gotten to the hospital, they’d rushed Cora to surgery. She wondered if she should be preparing her brother for the worst-case scenario. Something told her that news of the accident might go a long way in repairing whatever damage the two of them had dealt each other.

Was that manipulative? Is that what she would want Max to do in her shoes. Her general rule of thumb was to wait until the immediate trauma had passed, until there was good news to report as a happy conclusion to the trauma itself.

If she waited, she’d have to leave it up to Cora herself. She’d never fully understood the bond between Max and Cora. Max was her twin, but they’d never

mastered the language twins were supposed to share. Sure, she could read Max pretty well, but that was merely a side effect of growing up with him. They'd shared interests, but their personalities had diverged as they got older. She knew she could come to him with anything just as surely as she knew she wouldn't hesitate to come to his aid, but they didn't often seek each other out. Cora, ironically, was the final tie that held them together or, at least, kept them from drifting too far apart. The three of them were a unit, but Emma knew that she could live without either of them, if it came to it. She wasn't so sure they could live without each other.

She tucked her phone back in her pocket. She'd call with good news and if there was no good news by tomorrow evening, she'd call anyway.

Several hours later, a nurse collected a clipboard from the nurse's station and made her way toward them. Emma had pushed a few chairs together beside Sam's bed and Sawyer was stretched across them, asleep with his head in her lap.

Sam was sitting up, his arm in a sling and a pink basin in his lap. They'd been able to patch him up in the ER, popping his shoulder back into place, tapping his ribs and administering a sedative to control his panic. They hadn't been able to reattach his pinkie, but had sewn up and bandaged his hand neatly. He'd only recently regained consciousness and seemed to be having a particularly bad reaction to whatever pain medication they'd given him. His face was pale and he was sweating, clenching the blanket with his bandaged hand. Every few minutes, his breathing became shallow and he closed his eyes. He hadn't thrown up yet, but Emma suspected he was close.

"How is she?" he asked, between shuddering gasps, when the nurse came in.

The nurse scanned the chart. “She’s in recovery,” she said. “The surgery went well and—”

“Her leg,” Sam said. “Did they have to. . .” his words disappeared into increasingly labored breathing.

“No,” the nurse said. “She has a fairly deep infection, but the surgeons were able to close and set the fractures. If she does well over the next couple days, they’ll begin assessing the soft tissue damage. They’ll be in to talk to you shortly.”

Sam nodded and Emma muttered a quiet thank you. As soon as the nurse left, Sam groaned and began retching into the basin in his lap. Emma reached across Sawyer’s sleeping form to rub Sam’s shoulder.

“You’re okay,” she said. “It’s going to be okay.”

He wasn’t though. His temperature climbed and, as the sedative wore off, he repeated panicky questions about his own whereabouts and Cora’s. He turned over on his side and curled into a tight ball, shaking, sweating and muttering things Emma could barely hear. She took his hand. “It’s going to be okay,” she repeated. It felt futile.

Sam grunted. She grabbed up another pink basin and held it under his chin, but he was shaking so hard that he vomited on the floor instead.

“Hey,” she barked at the next doctor who came into the room. “You need to run his labs again. I think the bleeding has gotten worse.”

The doctor, who looked only a little better than Sam, shook his head. “This is a normal reaction to trauma,” he said. “It will only make things worse if we start

running him around to do tests he may not even need.”

“Bull,” Emma said. “I’ve seen this before. Something’s not right.”

“We will run the labs again in the morning,” the doctor repeated. Emma watched his eyes move rapidly back and forth as he scanned Sam’s chart. “We can give him more morphine and something for the nausea.”

Sam’s grip on Emma’s hand tightened. Cora had trusted her with his life. They’d already brought him back from the brink once. “Who’s the surgeon on call?” Emma asked.

“Emma,” Sawyer said. He put his hand on her back. “Give them a little more time.”

Emma didn’t look at him. “Run the tests,” she repeated to the doctor. “Or get me your supervisor.”

They came for Sam in the middle of the night after Sawyer had left. Emma jerked awake to the sound of harried whispers. The lights came on. Sam was tossing about uneasily in his bed, his pillow soaked in sweat. “Where are you taking him?” she asked.

A different doctor, one Emma recognized, a regular on the nightshift, looked up from exchanging Sam’s IV bag. “His latest C/T showed an inflamed appendix and worsened bleeding in his upper quadrant,” she said. “We’re worried it’s his spleen.”

“So what are you doing with him?”

“We’re taking him in for an exploratory laparotomy,” she said. “We’ll

probably take his appendix out in the same surgery so we avoid opening him up twice. At this point, it's our priority to get the bleeding under control."

Sawyer returned to get her in the morning on his way to work. "How is he?" he asked, handing her a mug of coffee.

Emma stood and stretched, taking the coffee from him. "He's alright," she said. "The surgery went well. I mean, there was no saving his spleen, but he'll make a full recovery."

"That's great," Sawyer said. "I mean, the spleen thing isn't, but the rest of it. . .I'm tired, you know what I mean."

Emma laughed. She felt giddy with exhaustion. "I know what you mean," she said. "Mike just confirmed that Sam and Cora were the last ones."

"So you don't have to go back out there?"

"I don't have to go back out there."

Sawyer hugged her so hard she almost lost her grip on her coffee. "Thank God," he said into her hair.

"I asked about Cora at the front desk," he said, releasing her. "They moved her into her own room. She still unconscious, but they said the surgery went well. No lost spleens or anything."

"That's good," Emma said.

"Yeah," Sawyer said. "Everyone's taken care of. I think we should head home."

"We should stop in on her," Emma said.

"Don't you have to work in a few hours?" Sawyer asked. "You look

exhausted. Besides, I've got to get to work."

"I'm alright," Emma said. She stood and gathered up her jacket and bag. "I'll be quick, I promise.."

"Okay. I'm going to wait in the car," Sawyer said.

"I'll meet you down there," Emma said. She kissed his cheek and they went their separate ways.

The ICU nurse on call wouldn't let Emma into the room. Instead she escorted her to the sliding glass door and stood with her for a few minutes, going over a few of the surgeon's notes. The room was dark, but Emma was relieved to see that Cora was no longer intubated. She had a cannula in her nose, an IV, and a few simple heart monitor wires snaking out from underneath her hospital gown, but the rise and fall of her chest was her own.

"It's going to be okay," Emma whispered.

Fourth Chapter

Sam came back to them in stages. On the first day after his surgery, he slept. Emma brought Clementine to sit by his bedside and read from his favorite collection of Isaac Asimov's short stories because Clementine knew Sam the best out of all of them since they hadn't been able, yet, to get ahold of his family, and because she had the softest voice and because, most of all, Emma wasn't sure what else to do. Cora would have known, Cora always knew, but she hadn't regained consciousness after her second surgery and when they spoke about her, they kept their voices low and their tones carefully optimistic, in case any of what they said reached Sam.

On the second day, he was awake between doses of morphine, but in too much pain to do anything but motion for ice chips. Emma or Clementine smoothed them over his lips until they melted enough for the water to dribble into his mouth. He kept his eyes closed, but smiled when Clementine began reading. Emma felt most useful when she was delivering Clementine to Sam or to work or when she was at work herself.

It wasn't until the fourth day that, his post-op fever having broken the night before, Sam began to regain some sense of normalcy. He could handle short wheelchair rides around the ward, tolerate some solid food and only needed the morphine to sleep at night. He spoke in short sentences and became confused easily. Emma had to explain where he was and what had happened a dozen or so times when Sam became upset. The first time he'd asked, Clementine had been sitting at his bedside reading and had given Emma a frightened look.

“It’s okay,” Emma said, taking over. “You were in an accident, but you’re going to be okay.” This was usually enough to calm him down.

On the sixth day, when he was allowed to begin walking around if one or both of them went with him, he asked about Cora.

“She’s—” Clementine began and gave Emma a look of alarm.

“She’s alive,” Emma said. “The doctors did two surgeries—one for her leg and another for some internal bleeding that they were able to resolve pretty easily. It’s just a matter of wait and see.”

“Can I see her?”

“They’re not letting her have visitors yet,” Emma said. “We can take you up to her room later, but they won’t let anyone go in until she’s stronger.”

“Has anyone called her mother?”

Clementine actually laughed, but stopped abruptly when no one joined in.

“There’s really no point,” Emma said. “Cora wouldn’t want us to.”

“If she woke up and her mother was here,” Clementine said, a laugh still in her voice. “Man, we’d be in trouble.”

“You mean, if Marie actually showed up,” Emma said.

Sam didn’t smile. “Alright,” he said, nodding. “I think I’m going to go back to my room.”

Clementine made to follow him, but Emma put a hand on her arm. “Let’s go home and grab something to eat,” she said. “Sawyer will be off work soon. We could scoop him up on our way home.”

Clementine made a face at this. “Do we have to?” she asked. “You guys are so . . . weird when I’m around.”

“How do you know we’re not weird when you’re not around?”

“Because you don’t have the context of another person to tell you you’re being weird,” Clementine said. “You can’t be weird in a vacuum.”

Emma stared at her. “You read too much,” she said. “Come on. We can grab some more of Cora’s stuff for her too.”

“Is he okay?” Clementine asked, nodding at Sam. His slow shuffling walk hadn’t brought him very far, but Emma guessed that he was far enough out of earshot.

“He will be,” she said. “We just need to give him some space.”

“Cora really loves him,” Clementine said. “He’s not like the others.”

Emma shrugged. “We’ll see,” she said.

Sawyer was lounging on the couch by the time they got there. Clementine had taken her time picking out a few outfits she thought Cora might like to wear once she was awake. “It’s going to be a long hospital stay,” Emma warned and then regretted it because it provoked Clementine into debating over two more outfits.

Emma had talked her out of cleaning the apartment. She could tell Clementine wanted to stay at Cora’s, but felt hesitant to leave her alone.

“Hey babe,” Sawyer said when he saw her. He stood up to kiss her, but retreated when Clementine finished kicking off her shoes and came around the corner. “Clem.”

“It’s Clementine.”

“Sorry,” Sawyer said. Emma shrugged when he gave her a look.

“How’s Cora doing?” he asked.

“About the same,” Emma said.

“Sam’s getting better,” Clementine added.

“That’s good to hear,” Sawyer said.

The three of them stood in an awkward silence. “Em, could we talk for a second?” Sawyer said finally.

“Sure,” Emma said automatically. “Well, actually, Clem and I have to get going pretty quickly. We just, um, came to grab something to eat.”

“Oh,” Sawyer said. “Will you be home later? There was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“She’s staying with me,” Clementine said. She was typing something out on her phone and didn’t look up. “I have to work early and she promised she’d take me.”

“Okay,” Sawyer said. “You know, Clem, you’re—”

“Clementine.”

“Right sorry. You’re-uh-more than welcome to stay here. Anytime.”

“Thanks.” Clementine said, still not looking up.

Another silence stretched around them.

“Well,” Sawyer said. “I guess I’ll get out of your hair. Babe, I’ll see you later.”

Emma kissed him and whispered, “Sorry.”

“Bye,” Clementine said, after Sawyer had shut the door.

Emma grabbed Clementine’s phone out of her hands.

“You’re not even doing anything,” Emma said, tapping the blank screen.

Clementine shrugged. “I’ve never really liked the guy,” she said. “You’re the one who’s been dating him for three years and doesn’t want to be left alone with him.”

“That’s not—” Emma said. “I wasn’t—”

“Whatever,” Clementine said. “Can we go? I’m going to be late.”

“I was worried,” Sam said a few days later. “That she was dead and no one wanted to tell me.”

It was late afternoon a week after the accident. Sam was set to be released the following day. The doctors had reversed Cora’s pain medication and woken her briefly that morning to check her brain function and reflexes. Her gross motor skills were intact and there was no sign of traumatic brain injury, but the doctors hadn’t been able to keep her conscious for more than a few minutes.

The infection in her leg, they explained, wasn’t getting worse, but it wasn’t getting better either. It was just

“A game of wait and see,” Sam had interrupted.

Now Sam wasn’t looking at her, but instead focused intently on the cards in his hand.

“I was waiting,” Emma said. “Until I knew you were stronger or I had good news. It was really bad after the first surgery. We didn’t know if she was going to make it through the night.”

Sam didn’t look up from his cards. “Go fish,” he said.

Emma put her cards face up in her lap. “Sam,” she said, not sure how to say what she needed to say. “We’re playing crazy eights.” She nodded to the pile of cards on the bed between them. She tried to keep her voice level, not to betray her concern.

Sam stared at the pile of the cards for a long moment and then looked up at her with a grin. “Just making sure you’re paying attention,” he said.

Emma laughed. She could see why Cora liked Sam. Even in the dark days they’d shared, she could tell he was an easy person, calm, constant, relaxed. He sought to put others at ease.

He wasn’t the same type of guy Cora usually chose. Emma had watched guys come and go over the years, but couldn’t say she’d ever seen Cora in love. She wouldn’t have guess Sam was any different, except that Clementine had seemed to form a real attachment to him.

There was a knock at the door. Emma looked up and saw Sawyer standing outside the sliding glass door. He waved to Sam and then motioned to Emma.

Emma glanced at the clock. “Forgot we were grabbing dinner,” she said.

“It’s all good,” Sam said. “You were going to lose anyway.”

Emma laughed as she gathered up her coat and purse. “Well, maybe Clementine will have better luck,” she said.

Sawyer kissed her when she got into the hall. “I missed you,” he said.

“You could have hung out with us,” Emma said. “Sam would have liked the company I’m sure.”

Sawyer shook his head. “I had a lesson run long,” he said. “Besides, this isn’t exactly a fun place to hang out.”

“Sorry I’ve been here so much,” Emma said. “I’ve just been worried. I want to make sure he’s really alright. I promised Cora.”

“It’s alright,” Sawyer said. “I’m going to have to get used to you taking care of everyone else.”

Emma smiled, though the comment unsettled her. Was he trying to compliment her or tell her that he felt neglected? She looked for the answer in his face, but it was hard to see past his easy smile.

A gust of wind blasted them as they stepped out into the parking lot. Emma pulled her sweater more tightly around torso until Sawyer offered her his jacket.

“Chinese sound good?” he asked as they climbed into the truck. “I got paid today—my treat.”

“Yeah Chinese sounds great,” Emma said. She relaxed against the passenger’s seat and turned the vent so that it faced her. “It’s so cold for June.”

Sawyer turned the dial for the heat up. “Do you think we could move my stuff in the next few days?” he said. “There’s supposed to be a heat advisory out this weekend.”

“Can we talk about this when we’ve gotten some food?” Emma asked. Her stomach ached.

“Sure,” Sawyer said. He frowned as he said it and missed a gear turning on to the highway. “Do you want to go furniture shopping after dinner? I don’t have much to offer.”

Emma shrugged. “I’m sure whatever you have will be fine,” she said. “I’m a fan of the utilitarian look. Oh, can we go to Thai instead? There’s the place by the waterfront I’ve been wanting to try.”

“Sure,” Sawyer said easily. He took the next exit. Emma closed her eyes and let the heat wash over her.

“So, do you want to?” Sawyer asked after a few moments of silence.

“Want to what?”

“Go look at some furniture after dinner?”

“Oh,” Emma said. “I don’t know. I’m tired. I was hoping we could just settle in for a movie.”

“Okay,” Sawyer said, his tone a little less relaxed. “Can we at least grab dessert or drinks or something on the way home?”

Emma yawned. “I don’t know, babe,” she said. “It’s probably going to be an early night for me.”

“You don’t want to celebrate?”

“It doesn’t feel like the right time,” Emma said. “We don’t even know what Cora’s future looks like and Sam—”

“But this isn’t about them,” Sawyer said. He swung into a parking spot and shut off the ignition. “It’s about us. This is a big step forward. Do you even want me to move in?”

“Of course I do,” Emma said. “Of course. But it’s scary to watch Cora and Sam go through this.”

“Have you even told anyone? Max? Your mother?”

“Oh shit—I was going to call Max,” Emma said. “He doesn’t even know about Cora. Oh fuck, he’s going to be so mad.”

“Emma.”

“What?”

“Does anyone know we’re moving in together?”

“I was waiting.”

“Until what?”

“Until things are more stable.”

“We’re stable,” Sawyer said. “You and I. God, you spend so much time wrapped up in other people’s problems. You’re okay, Emma. And I’m okay. And I love you. I want to move forward.”

“I’m not saying I don’t want to celebrate,” Emma said. “I’m saying that—that things are on pause right now. Cora has been my best friend since junior high. I need to know that she’s okay. It’d be the same for Clementine or my mom or Max. Please, please don’t think it means anything more than that.”

Sawyer was quiet. “You’ve been gone a lot,” he said.

“I’ve been busy.”

“You’ve been at the hospital.”

“So?”

“You’ve been with Sam. A lot.”

Emma stared at the windshield. Two fat droplets or rain had fallen from an earlier shower. “So that’s what this is about?”

“Can you blame me for being concerned?”

Emma sighed. “No,” she said. “I’m sorry, okay? Can we please just forget it and get dinner.”

Sawyer pulled the key out of the ignition and sighed. “Fine.”

In the end, they went to the mall near the waterfront and get into a fight over the first couch Sawyer said he liked. When they got back to Emma’s place, they went to bed in an angry silence. Emma stayed awake listening to Sawyer’s snoring and replaying their fight in her head over and over. Just as she was drifting off to sleep, sometime around six in the morning, Sawyer jerked awake and sat up with a groan.

"Em," he muttered.

"I'm asleep."

"Em," he said more insistently. She opened her eyes and immediately narrowed them. “I want to tell you something,” he whispered

“What?” Emma said. She cracked an eye open as she felt the mattress shift. Sawyer was getting out of bed; he stood naked in the blue light of dawn streaming in through the slits in the blinds. The light carved a zebra pattern in to the shape of him. It was the blue of angels and of asphyxiation, of crisp morning rides, of nightclubs just before last call. Blue, the hottest color in the universe, the coldest color of the season.

She rubbed her eyes, but didn't get up. Instead she watched him stretch dayward through a haze of expired adrenaline, watched him move, the patterns of light moving up his back, turning with him as he turned toward her, and rising off him in his approach. His eyes were in shadow until he knelt beside her side of the bed.

"Emma," he said and she closed her eyes. He was close enough to make her

shiver. She loved the way her name sounded when he whispered it, like he was keeping a promise. A promise to return after the storm. Blue, the color of the clouds parting, the color of a calm ocean, the color of peace.

She expected his lips on hers, the warm exchange of their bodies, his asking, her answer. She expected him to roll himself into her, could already feel the weight of his body on top of hers, his hair between her fingers.

But.

Instead, he said, "Will you marry me?"

Fifth Chapter

“Alright, alright, ladies and gentleman, let’s clear the floor for the bride and her father to have this next dance.”

The string of fairy lights above her head glowed a deep, comforting yellow. The dance floor underneath her feet reflected only the halos, dappled white shimmers. They moved in and out of focus as the music carried them across the floor in grand sweeping movements that she wasn’t in complete control of.

At the unscripted words from the band, they stopped. The halos came into sharp focus as she stared at them over Sawyer’s shoulder. They hadn’t written this into the scene. One of the players was missing and no one was eager to pick up the part.

The band settled into a rhythm and Emma tensed in recognition. Her breath stopped. It was the song she had picked out with her father when she was fifteen, a rare Sunday afternoon between the two of them, listening to the radio. They’d been joking. What had he said to her? Something about not wanting to ever have to give her away. She didn’t think anyone else knew about this song.

The tempo picked up and she let out a breath. She’d been imagining it. A different song with a similar instrumental intro. Sawyer stood stiffly with his arms around her. He looked down at her with his eyes wide and she knew he was waiting on her for some kind of signal.

Over Sawyer’s shoulder, Emma saw Max walk up the steps to the stage. The lead singer faltered as Max gestured at him. The rest of the band stopped all at once

and in the sudden silence, Max's voice was loud enough to startle some of the guests in the back.

Emma took a sharp step away from Sawyer. Clementine, Cora and Sam stood directly to her left and, even in the glaring absence of music, Sam grabbed Clementine and pulled her out on to the dance floor where he gave a slight bow and offered his hand. Clementine giggled and then looked around, as if to make sure no one had noticed. Cora stayed where she was, braced on her crutches, watching with a strained smile on her face. Emma caught Sam's eyes and he winked. He spun Clementine so quickly the skirt of her dress made a sharp snapping sound as it twirled around her legs and fell back into form as Sam pulled her back in. They joined hands and tangoed through the space between Emma and Sawyer, who stepped out further to make room. Tears sparkled on Clementine's cheeks, but she was laughing. The guests in the immediate area began to clap.

Pulling her dress up, Emma climbed up onto the stage and hooked Max's arm with her own. She pulled him down the steps and through the small crowd to the tables they'd set up. The band, relieved of their antagonist, struck up a tune to match Sam and Clementine's gallivanting. Emma kept tugging on Max's arm until they'd reached one of the more distant tables where she sat him down. He was breathing heavily through his nose and wouldn't look at her, instead glaring at the tablecloth with his arms crossed.

"You don't get to make this about Dad," Emma said. "It's been about dad for almost two years. And it's especially been about you and Dad ever since he died."

"It has not."

“Just because you were too chicken-shit to come home when he was sick doesn’t mean you get to moan about never having the relationship you wanted with him now,” Emma said.

Max’s eyes widened. “Ouch,” he said.

“Am I wrong?” she asked, raising her eyebrow.

Max picked at the tablecloth. “You never gave a shit anyway,” he said. “You gave up on him before you were even out of the house.”

“You don’t understand anything about my relationship with Dad,” Emma said quietly. “We made our peace before he died. I miss him, but I’m not sitting here feeling guilty about what could have been.”

“You hated him.”

“You’re the one who never gave him a chance,” Emma said. “You tried so hard to impress him with the grades and the extracurriculars, and the scholarships, but you never just sat in a room with him.”

“You were always disappearing,” Max said. “You only wanted to spend time with us when you didn’t have a boyfriend or a party to go to.”

“Says the one who moved to the other side of the country,” Emma muttered.

“I am so tired of everyone ragging on me for that,” Max said sharply. “I wanted to build a life for myself, what the fuck is wrong with that?”

“What’s wrong is you never talk about anything else,” Emma said. “At least when I’m disappearing, it’s with another person. The only thing you’re disappearing into is yourself. You’re so concerned with your own self-discovery, the rest of us are just players on your stage.”

“You’re calling me self-absorbed?” Max said, incredulous. “How long was Clementine in Seattle before you even noticed?”

“That’s not fair,” Emma said. “Mom didn’t even tell me she’d left home.”

“Mom didn’t tell you because she doesn’t trust you,” Max said in a harsh undertone. “You’re out there living in the city, barely ever checking in to see how your family is doing, working all the time, getting engaged and not even telling anyone—”

“I’m happy, Mackenzie.” Emma raised her voice over his, loud enough to draw the attention of a couple on their way to the bathroom.

“Well, I’m drowning,” Max yelled.

Emma was startled to see the tears rising in his eyes. He wiped at them, impatiently. “Shit,” he muttered. “I lost my job at the lab. I blew the internship and they said it was because they were overstaffed, but. . .I’ve never been in trouble like this. I’ve always kept my shit together with school, and I thought I was coping, but I’m. . .lost. I don’t even know if I’m going back.”

“Of course you’re going back,” Emma said immediately.

“I don’t know,” Max said.

Emma looked back out over the dance floor where Sawyer had coaxed her mother out onto the dance floor. Sawyer looked up in time to catch her eye and winked, allowing her mother to correct his posture. He adopted a serious expression as he listened to whatever it is she was saying and then stepped away to show off some artful footwork. Emma couldn’t see her mother’s face, but could tell from her posture that she was laughing.

“Emma?”

She turned back to Max. “I hate being far away from you,” she said. “I’m out of my depth with Mom and. . .I know I need to be there for Clem, but I don’t know where to start. She talks to Cora. I don’t see the harm in it, really.”

“Yeah well,” Max said. “I may have misjudged that situation a little. I know you were doing your best.”

“I am,” Emma said. “And honestly, today, I couldn’t be sad if I tried. I hate that this is hard for you and hard for mom. But I’m not a monster for wanting to enjoy myself on my wedding day.”

“I never said you were.”

“I’m grateful for the people who are still here,” Emma said. “I am grateful for you and mom and Clem and Cora and Sawyer and Sam is just about my favorite person in the room right now. I loved that you walked me down the aisle today. I’m happy I still had someone to do that with. It doesn’t mean I don’t miss him though.”

“You never talk about it,” Max said.

“Do I have to? To prove that I miss him?”

“Emma, that’s not fair.”

“You haven’t been fair.”

He looked up at her and she fixed him with the same glare she used to when they were younger and he and Cora had been off doing something stupid without her again, like the time they hitchhiked to the outskirts of Spokane and tried to camp the night under a tree. She hadn’t understood back then, how they needed that time, and

how she needed that time apart or she never would have left home. “You need to trust me,” she said.

“I trust you,” Max said. “I don’t trust him. Dad wouldn’t have liked him. He never would have let you marry him.”

Emma half-smiled. “I know,” she said. “And I would have married him anyway.”

“Even if it turns out to be a mistake?”

“Especially then.”

“Why?”

“Mistakes aren’t fatal,” Emma said. It was something Cora had said to her when they first moved to Seattle. They were underemployed and overwhelmed, on the verge of being evicted and she’d called the move a mistake. They were stupid to have come all the way out there. Cora had smiled and the next week, they both had jobs and she’d been accepted into her first EMT cert course.

“He’s worth it,” she said, when Max raised an eyebrow.

“Mom’s a mess,” Max said. Their mother had removed herself from the dance floor and sat at a table across the room, both hands on the bottom of an empty wine glass. She hadn’t said more than a few words of congratulations to Emma and as far as Emma knew, she and Clementine hadn’t spoken at all.

“They were married forty years,” Max said. “I don’t know how you come back from that.”

“They had thirty-eight good years,” Emma said. “And two not-so-good ones. But he got to die in her arms. I think that was best for both of them. It’s what I’d want.”

“I don’t want her to be alone,” Max said. “Maybe I should stay.”

Emma punched him softly in the shoulder. “You want to avoid school,” she said. “Don’t use mom as an excuse.”

“You’ve gotten to be a bully,” Max said, rubbing his arm.

“I’m your older sister.”

“Three miserable minutes!”

“Might as well be three years. It’s my job to look out for you.”

“We look out for each other. And Clem. That’s all I was trying to do.”

“I appreciate it, but I’m okay. Sawyer and I will be okay. We’ll keep an eye on mom, but she’s tougher than you think. You need to go back and finish what you started.”

“Yeah, alright,” Max said. “Look, I’m sorry alright? I acted like a jerk. You should get back out there—I’ve wasted enough of your time.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “You’re never a waste of my time Max,” she said. She stood and let go of the weight of her dress.

Before rejoining Sawyer on the dance floor, Emma circled around by Cora’s table where Cora sat by herself, twirling a wine glass between her hands. “Hey,” she said when Emma sat down. “How’s Max after his little breakdown?”

“He’s alright, I think,” Emma said.

“Need me to talk to him?” Cora asked, smiling.

Emma shook her head. “He’ll be fine,” she said. “He’s just missing Dad.”

“He’s a sensitive one,” Cora muttered. She closed her eyes for a long moment, abandoning the wine glass to press her hand to her leg. “Then again, your dad. . . I still can’t believe he’s gone sometimes.”

Emma nodded. Her father had gotten along well with Cora. The two could and would talk for hours, if left alone. They shared mannerisms, movements, speech patterns even. More than anything, they had the same manic energy that compelled them to pace about the room, send objects flying with their wild gestures and change tracks at the speed of light. Emma had often got lost in her father’s tirades, but Cora track them with ease and grace, most probably because the tide of her own thoughts rose and fell in the same way.

“How are you doing with it?” Cora asked.

“I’m not the sensitive one,” Emma joked. “I don’t know. I feel like I should miss him more, but I don’t. Not any more than I usually do on any given day.”

Cora nodded. “That comes and goes,” she said.

Sam showed up a moment later with fresh drinks. He pulled out the chair on the other side of Cora and kissed the top of her head before sitting down. “I brought you crab cakes,” he said. He pulled a folded napkin out of his pocket. “I had to stalk the waiter forever. These were the last ones. Sorry, Emma.”

Emma laughed as Cora said, “My hero,” and kissed Sam’s cheek.

Four months after the accident, there was a closeness between the two of them that even Cora seemed to have trouble putting into words. Emma watched them move, each with an unconscious orientation to the other. Before Sam had even come

in to a room, Cora moved over to make space for him. They spoke little to each other, relying mostly on gesture and expression. Emma watched entire conversations take place in a look. Clementine teased that it was telepathy and Max called it “shared trauma,” but Emma suspected that it ran deeper. It was some potential that they’d already possessed and that the accident had merely made kinetic.

“Do you want to get out there?” Sam asked, nodding to the dance floor.

Cora laughed. “I don’t think it’s going to happen,” she said. “No matter how much I want it to.”

Sam shrugged. “You never know,” he said.

“Don’t try anything funny,” Cora said. “Emma won’t invite us to things anymore if you ruin her wedding.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sam said and winked at Emma.

Max rejoined the party almost an hour later, by which point Emma had lost track of how many champagne flutes she’d abandoned on random tables or handed off to waiters or surprised guests once or twice. At one point, she watched Sam lift Cora out of her seat and dance with her in his arms for a song or two before they said their congratulations and departed. Cora had protested feebly for a moment and then come to rest her head on Sam’s chest, closing her eyes and allowing him to bear her full weight as the song wound around them.

Later, Emma remembered only fragments. Max held her up through one slower song and then returned her to Sawyer. She remembered Sawyer leaning in to kiss her, just before they stumbled out to the car that would drive them to their hotel. All she could taste was the gin on his lips, but in that moment, it didn’t matter

because he was enfolding her in his arms and he was so sturdy and solid, his shoulders strong and muscled underneath her fingers. She remembered thinking it wouldn't always feel like this. His back would stoop and bend with age; they'd both become frail, but they'd get to do it together. He was the kind of guy who would always tell her she was beautiful, even as she became criss-crossed with visible blue veins and freckled with larger sunspots. They'd look out for each other, in the years that followed. She could feel the whole weight of their future in his embrace and it didn't scare her anymore; it ignited her.

Sixth Chapter

She looked up as Sawyer came into the kitchen, sucking on his knuckle where the skin had cracked and bled. He offered a tight smile when he noticed her looking, and then moved around her to pour himself a drink.

“Generator’s fried,” he announced. He knocked back his drink in one swallow and rubbed his eyes.

Emma turned back to the dishes with a frown. “We may have to head back,” she muttered. This whole vacation had been a mistake, her own stubbornness to make the first holiday season they were married special, to the point of ignoring multiple weather advisories and straight out bullying her siblings into coming.

Sawyer said nothing, using the other side of the sink to wash out the cut on his knuckle. He’d been stormy since their honeymoon, quiet at home and terse when they went out. In the course of the time they’d been together, almost five years, Sawyer had given her a road map to his pain. She knew where his triggers were, what landmarks propelled him back into painful memories; she knew what he could and couldn’t handle. It was only recently that he’d started to express his disappointment when she fumbled, got lost, or went the wrong way. More and more since the wedding, she felt that what she had to share wasn’t worth sharing.

“There’s a wood stove,” Clementine said from the couch. “We might be able to work with that.”

“How the hell is that going to keep the whole house warm?” Max complained. Since the generator had gone out, he’d put on two sweaters, a sweatshirt, and was now struggling into his winter coat.

“We could all sleep out in the living room,” Clementine suggested. “We could pull on the blankets from the bedrooms and make a giant nest and—”

“We are way too old for that,” Max snapped.

Clementine stared into her cocoa. “Alright, then we go,” she said softly.

“Let’s just see if the power comes back on,” Emma said. “We’ll give it an hour and then we’ll leave.”

“In that case,” Cora said. She’d been dozing on the couch, resting her head against Sam’s shoulder, but looked alert now. “I’m going to get more firewood.”

Sam reached forward to retrieve his beer from the coffee table, tipped the last of it into his mouth, and then stood to get Cora’s crutches. At the same time, Max jumped up. “I can get it,” he said, heading for the door.

“I got it,” Cora said, taking a crutch from Sam. She balanced herself on it, refused the other, and took an unsteady step forward. She had graduated to a bulky walking cast that went up mid-thigh and bent at the knee, but she hadn’t had much success walking on her own. They all watched her. Sam had a way of standing close that didn’t look like hovering, which they’d all been strictly forbidden to do. When Cora lost her balance a few steps later, Sam caught her easily, sliding his arm underneath her arms from behind and helping her straighten.

Max hovered more obviously as the pair made their way to the door, leaning forward as if perched on the edge of something. “I’m going to go make sure they’re alright,” he said once they’d gone outside.

Clementine stretched and stood. “I’m going to look for flashlights or something that will help in the car,” she said.

And then Sawyer and Emma were on their own. “I’m sorry,” Emma offered. “About the generator. It’s probably older than the house. We kept trying to get Gran to fix it, but . . .”

Sawyer put his hand on her back. “The dishes can wait,” he said. “Don’t you think?” He slid his hand up her back under her shirt as he took a step closer.

“Oh,” Emma said. She moved closer to the sink and felt water seep through his sweater. “They’ll be back any minute. We should help with the fire, don’t you think?”

“I helped with the generator and you’re helping with the dishes. That’s fair enough, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but with Cora’s leg and. . .someone has to keep Max and Sam from killing each other.”

Sawyer dropped his hand and moved away. “Okay, what is going on with you?” he asked. “You barely let me touch you lately.”

“That’s not true,” Emma said. She finished the plate she’d been washing and set it carefully on the drying rack.

“It’s been weeks,” Sawyer said.

“You’re being dramatic,” Emma said, rolling her eyes. She dried her hands and turned to face him. She put her hand on his cheek.

Sawyer closed his eyes and nuzzled his face against her hand. “I miss you,” he said.

“I’m right—”

“Here?” Sawyer finished. “You always say that, but you’ve been far away from me. Is it work? You’re putting in a lot of overtime.”

Emma shook her head. “It’s the holidays,” she said. “Work has been insane, but honestly, it’s been nice. I like it better when it’s busy. Things go by faster; it gets me back to you faster.”

“I wish you could be home more,” Sawyer said. “It’s lonely at the apartment without you.”

“I know baby, but it’ll calm down after New Year’s,” Emma said. “I have New Year’s day off. We could stay in, order pizza, watch old movies on TV?”

“Aren’t you starting that new program in January?”

“Yeah,” Emma admitted. “But not until the end of January and it might make my hours more regular.” He frowned. She moved around him and began pulling dishes from the rack. “I need the new certification. Paramedics get to do more on the job.” She could still feel Sam’s blood cooling on her hands and she was watching from the ambulance as her partners ran with the gurney inside the hospital. Only the other day, she’d watched a paramedic trach a woman whose throat had closed even as she fought him. She was so tired of watching.

Sawyer finally smiled. “That’s pretty cool,” he said. He leaned down and kissed her, putting his arms around her waist. He spun her around and lifted her up on the counter. She wrapped her legs around his waist and leaned in as he kissed her. His hand moved up her shirt again, but she pushed him away. He threw up his hands with a groan and turned away from her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We really need to get the fire situation sorted out and then we can—”

“Are you sure it’s just work?” Sawyer interrupted, breathing heavily. “That’s all that’s keeping you out of the apartment?”

“Yes!” Emma said, pulling her shirt down. “And. . . Look, it’s the first year without my dad. I thought we were all going to be together, but Max decided not to come home for Thanksgiving and now he and Mom going down to California over Christmas instead.”

“Why don’t you go with them?” Sawyer asked.

“I need to be at work,” Emma reminded him.

“You’re here aren’t you?”

“I took this time off months in advance,” Emma said.

“Couldn’t we go anyway? Even for part of the time?”

“Sawyer, no, it’s not—”

“You don’t think that maybe you’re avoiding things? With your mother?”

“What? No, mom and I are fine. Things are just hard for her, she’s not used to being alone. If she goes on this trip with Max, maybe it’ll make things easier. They can reconnect with Dad’s family, I don’t know.”

“Don’t you want to be part of that?”

“I’m not trying to be difficult here,” Emma reasoned. “I can’t get the time off. This is not a family issue; this is a work issue. My family understands that what I do is important and we will probably do something after Christmas to make up for the fact that we had to be apart.”

“If it was my mother,” Sawyer said, more quietly. “I’d do anything to spend the holidays with her.”

Emma closed her eyes. “Of course,” she said. “I wish I could have met her.”

“She would have liked you,” Sawyer said, smiling a little.

“I wish you could have met my dad before he got sick,” Emma said. “He would have loved you.” A lie, but at least she could pretend it might have been true.

A flash of anger or irritation appeared across Sawyer’s face for a moment, a brief creasing of his eyebrows and tightening of his jaw. Emma felt a familiar tightening in her stomach and knew this had been the wrong thing to say. A wave of exhaustion washed over her, but the tension in her stomach didn’t abate.

She felt helpless to explain that she hadn’t been trying to steal his moment or usurp his grief. Unlike her father’s quiet disappearance, Sawyer’s mother’s battle with addiction had culminated in a very public overdose in Manchester Park. Emma was the first to admit that this kind of trauma left scars, but Sawyer seemed intent on ripping out the stitches, reopening the wound to the point of bleeding, never letting it alone long enough to heal.

She didn’t want to take any attention away from him. It wasn’t the kind of attention she craved. When she thought of her father, she thought of how he’d already been gone for a long time before his passing. Her grief for him extended years before the absence of him in the world; he’d been absent from her world since Clementine was old enough to talk. She had made peace with that. It caught up with her from time to time, enough to take her breath away, but in those moments, she removed

herself from the world to be with him. It was as simple as that. She didn't require or desire an audience. She grieved alone or with Max.

Max. His howl of indignation, of pain, of loss—an absolute, pure, almost beautiful breakdown in the parking lot of the hospital. She was the only witness, the lone midnight guardian. They were the same age, but he was her little brother and her arms were around him before the sound had reached its peak. She eased him down on the wet asphalt, their father's truck on one side of them, a stranger's BMW on the other. Together, they sank into the space their father left, falling from their childhood and into something wholly new and unfamiliar. Born together for the second time.

Sawyer poured himself another drink, but when she reached out for the bottle, he pulled it out of her reach. “Don’t you think you’ve had enough?” he asked.

“You’re joking, right? I had one drink when the power first went out.”

“The bottle is light.”

Emma looked around. “There are five of us here. Of course the bottle’s light.”

“Cora’s not drinking, your sister’s underage and we both know Max can’t stomach anything harder than beer.”

“Since when are you the alcohol police?”

“I’m just looking out for you,” Sawyer said. “I don’t want you to fall asleep early and then feel crappy in the morning.”

“Okay, well, by that logic, you shouldn’t be having any either,” Emma said, grabbing at the bottle. “What is that? Your third?”

“Who’s the alcohol police now?”

“I’m just saying.”

“I’m bigger than you, I can handle my liquor.”

Emma laughed. “You can ‘handle your liquor’? You sound ridiculous,” she said. “Come on, we can get everyone settled and then we can take the bottle to bed.” She looked up at him, biting her lip, and reached for the bottle again.

In one quick, smooth motion, Sawyer tipped the bottle up to his lips and drained it in a few swallows. He swung his arm back down and Emma watched a single drop of rum roll down the inside and join the thin ring of liquid left at the bottom. Sawyer raised his arm again, intending, she thought, to put the bottle back, but it caught the corner of the counter and cracked. Sawyer looked at it and then let it fall to the floor.

It shattered and Emma, barefoot, jumped out of the way of the glass as it scattered. She stood still, surveying the tiny beads of glass catching the light around her. She looked up at Sawyer who looked back at her in alarm.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Shit, I didn’t mean to do that.”

"What’s going on?" she asked. She tried to keep her voice level.

"Nothing’s going on. It’s been a rough week, that’s all," Sawyer said. "I think I need to go home. I want to get back to my own bed, to my own city. Please."

"In an hour, if the power doesn’t come back on. Come on," she pressed.

"What happened?"

“They weren’t out of ice at the corner store,” Sawyer said. “I thought I had more money on my card, but it declined. So, I tried to use my credit card. But it’s maxed out.”

Emma found a spot on the floor the glass hadn't reached and jumped for it. Two more steps and she was safely on the carpet of the living room. Sawyer, safe in his thick boots, followed her out. "How is that possible?" she asked. "I thought you paid it off last month."

"I didn't."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't."

This stopped Emma up short. "Did they cut your hours again?"

Sawyer sank into one of the chairs. He rested his head on his hands and shook it violently.

"Sawyer," she said. "What aren't you telling me?"

"They let me go," he muttered. "I didn't pay off the credit card because I don't have any money and I don't have any money because I don't have a job!" His voice rose in volume until he was shouting. His head snapped up and she saw that his features were contorted with rage.

She flinched at the sudden increase in volume, but felt the rising anger in herself. She told herself she wasn't afraid of his temper. "How long have you been unemployed?" she asked, standing up. She kept her voice steady, quiet, in control.

"Two months," Sawyer said.

Emma closed her eyes, but then Sawyer was in her face, hands closing around her shoulders. "What the hell was I supposed to say?" he asked. "I didn't want you to worry, you were so stressed out at work."

"I could have helped you! We could have figured this out together!"

"I was embarrassed, Emma!" Sawyer shouted. "It's embarrassing to have to ask your wife for help."

"If you start going on about how it hurt your pride as a man or some similar garbage, so help me—"

"Hey!" Sawyer yelled, his grip tightening on her shoulders. "Don't you talk to me like that. I am doing the best I can."

She jerked away from him and started toward the door.

"Where are you going?" he called after her.

"I need some air," she said.

She heard him move behind her and the next moment felt his hand tight around her wrist. "Don't," he said.

She stopped and half-turned to look at him. The anger in his eyes didn't match his soft tone when he said, "You'll freeze out there."

They stared at each other. Emma could hear muffled voices outside and slow shuffling footsteps as the others made their way up the drive. She took a deep breath, trying to calm down. She tried to tug her arm out of Sawyer's grip, but succeeded only in bringing him closer.

"Are you telling me we have no money?" she whispered.

Sawyer closed his eyes in exasperation and took a deep breath, as if trying to calm himself. "I'm telling you *I* have no money," he said.

"*We*," Emma hissed. She was surprised by how angry she was. "We're married now."

"I'm sorry," Sawyer said, hanging his head. "I know. I'm awful."

Emma felt the anger deflating, pricked by the sight of his hung head. They'd been married two months and already she could recognize the tone of her parents' old fights, the resentment perfected and crystallized over four decades of practice. She felt the slump of her mother's shoulders in her own, heard the angry defeat of her father in Sawyer's voice. For years, she'd watched her mother define her father by what he wasn't and he'd wore the definition tighter than his own skin. She could see it taking place in front of her now, history repeating itself as Sawyer picked up her disappointment and held it in his hands, considering. She saw him bow his head to it, shrinking enough to fit the mold she was cutting out.

Sawyer let go of her arm and made his way back to the kitchen to clean up the broken glass. Emma moved to sit on the couch as the door swung open and Sam and Cora made their slow way inside, followed by Max.

Emma stared at her hands. It wasn't fair. She hadn't meant to hold out her disappointment like a gift she wanted him to accept. Did getting married mean they stopped being best friends?

But he had lied to her. The absurdity of it, even as it stood naked before her, came as a shock. She wanted to laugh. That he would lie to her? She'd never considered the possibility. They told each other everything. If anything, he overshared, but not this, not the thing that had the power to ripple out and overturn them both. This he kept for himself. In this, he betrayed her.

Betrayal? The thought came with an inherent question mark. It was too big, too heavy of a word to describe where they were. Did a marriage have room for secrets? Was he allowed to keep secrets?

Was she?

When she looked up, he was standing next to Max in the kitchen with the dustpan in one hand and the broom in the other. Max said something and they both laughed. Sawyer's smile disappeared as he caught her eye and shook his head when Max turned to grab something out of the fridge.

She had to make him trust her; he had to trust her or there would be more betrayals, deeper ones, and they'd be the couple grinning too widely in public as they hid their fights in the plain sight of a conversation with friends. They'd start referring to each other as *someone*. As in: "*Someone* forgot to pay the credit card bill on time this month." Or: "I'd remember better if I didn't have *someone* nagging at me to do five hundred things a day." She'd mock his musical aspirations; he'd resent her career, convince her to quit if she got pregnant. He'd flirt with the baristas in the coffee shop, proffering up his misery for their approval and sympathy after she'd run dry. She'd have an affair, probably with the first man who still found her exciting. They'd drift apart, take it out on the children, if there were children to take it out on, and then they'd be too old to make the separation permanent, so they'd just drift together toward oblivion, each thinking the company could have been worse. That was their romantic prognosis if she let this get out of hand. Just the small comfort that it could have been worse.

She felt dizzy. She stood up in a daze and made her way down the hall toward the bathroom. She hadn't made it very far before she heard the retching. She saw Cora through the open bathroom door, bent double over the sink, shoulders shaking.

Cora gasped as she came up for air and wiped her mouth on the back of her hand, catching sight of Emma in the mirror.

"Shit," she said. "Sorry. I had too much to drink."

"Are you okay?" Emma asked.

"Yeah," Cora said. She dabbed at her face with a wet paper towel. "Just need another minute or two to make sure." She was digging around in her pocket for something, bracing herself against the counter with her other hand. Emma picked up her crutch off the floor, but Cora waved her off.

Cora gave her a quick smile and extracted a sandwich bag full of small white pills from the pocket of her dress. "I know it looks sketchy," she said. "The lid to the prescription bottle broke, so I've been carrying them around like this."

"Has the pain been any better?" Emma asked.

"A little," Cora said. "I don't usually have to take this." She popped two pills in her mouth and swallowed them dry. "But I've been up and about more today, so. . ." She shrugged and splashed cold water on her face. "This ensures that I don't turn into a pumpkin before midnight." Emma laughed and tucked one of Cora's curls back into place.

"Are you okay?" Cora asked, peering at her. "You look a little shaken."

Emma nodded. "I'm good," she said. "Drank a little too much, freaked myself out over nothing."

Cora didn't look convinced. "You know you can talk to me," she said. "About anything. I worry that you don't anymore, because of everything's that happened."

Emma didn't know how to explain how far away she'd felt from everyone since the wedding, how she felt anxious away from Sawyer, but anxious when they were together too. "I know," she said to Cora. "Don't worry."

"Em," Cora said. "Are you sure?"

Emma nodded. Her chest suddenly felt tight and her throat closed around her next reassurance. "I—" she said and stopped. Cora leaned in.

Above them, the lights flickered back on.

Seventh Chapter

One year later...

"He won't do it," Cora said. She took a sip of her beer and stared, not at Emma, but across the room at Sam. They'd barely spoken a word to each other all night.

Emma unlaced the strings of her apron, tightened it, and retied them. "That's not the point," she said. "I know he won't do it. I just don't know what he wants from me when he says stuff like that, you know?" Or when he looked at her, his eyes wide with indignation and hurt, and accused her of abandoning him to the tides of his depression, tides she'd once kept tables of, a map she submerged until the roads blurred and become incomprehensible.

"He's doing it for attention," Cora said, waving her hand. "It's always for attention. As if they don't get enough of that."

"Right, but I have to take it seriously," Emma said. She glared hard at the front door. Sawyer hadn't been home since early this morning. She'd told him five. It was now seven. "Don't I? Just in case?"

"No," Cora said shortly. "Tell him to suck it up. Your lasagna is burning."

Emma pushed herself off the counter with a groan and pulled down the oven door. Steam billowed out at her, stinging her eyes. She felt her face flush. "Shit," she said. The edges of the pasta on top had hardened and cracked. "Maybe I can pick the top layer off?"

"Should have asked Sam to make it," Cora said. "Since he's the culinary wizard." She raised her voice for emphasis. Sam, in the middle of a conversation with

one of Emma's coworkers, didn't turn, but raised his middle finger in Cora's direction.

"Jesus Cora, I'll just order pizza," Emma hissed, taking the bottle from Cora's hand. She couldn't be short with Sawyer; Cora could take it.

For a moment, Cora looked surprised, but then she laughed and the tension of the moment fled. "Where the fuck are you going to get pizza?" She asked. "It's Christmas, nothing's open."

"Chinese then," Emma said. She laughed again, trying to fill the kitchen with the sound. "I can't serve this garbage."

"It's not that bad," Cora said, looking over Emma's shoulder. "Just keep the alcohol coming and no one will care. Besides, you have enough appetizers to feed the block."

Emma pulled the casserole dish out of the oven. Her face still felt too warm and her left eye had begun to run. She kicked the oven door closed as she turned to set the lasagna on the table.

"We'll give it a few minutes to cool while I get more wine," Emma said. "Do you want to come? The store on the corner should be open."

Cora finished her beer and grabbed her coat. As they headed for the door, Sam caught her by the waist close to him, kissing the top of her head. "Mistletoe," he said. Or maybe he said, "I miss you"? Emma was already moving past them, grabbing her keys from the hook by the door, and unlatching the deadbolt.

Cora caught up with her at the bottom of the stairs. "Men," she said. "The literal worst."

“What’s going on between you two anyway?” Emma asked, because Cora had given her too many openings not to ask.

“Nothing,” Cora said. She pulled a hat out of her pocket and settled it atop her head. Emma didn’t tell her that it was askew. The off-center pom made Cora look younger and it reminded Emma of their high school days. The two of them walking to the coffee shop between their houses to order milkshakes and daydream. They’d made it to the city, hadn’t they? So why was she still dreaming?

“I call bullshit,” Emma said. She shoved Cora’s arm, but gently. “What’s up?”

Cora was silent another minute. “Sam wants to go back to school,” she said. She pulled her jacket tighter. “He applied to the culinary arts program at the Art Institute.”

“Isn’t that good?” Emma said. “He loves cooking. He’s practically running the kitchen at the bar anyway, isn’t he?”

“It’s fantastic,” Cora said. They arrived at the corner store with its sign blinking ‘O EN.’ Emma pushed the door open and the blast of warm air assaulted her stinging eyes and face.

“So, what’s the problem?” Emma asked over Jingle Bell Rock. The woman behind the counter glared at them as they made their way to the boxed wine in the back.

“I want him to do it,” Cora said. “But it’s a lot of money and I’m still paying off the medical bills from last year. We’ve been pooling our resources since he moved in, but the money situation is still stressful. I’m working sixty, sixty-five hours a week and he thinks now is the time?”

Emma pulled a few boxes of wine off the shelf and held them up for Cora's approval. Cora made a face and walked over to the cooler. She pulled out a few six packs. Emma nodded and they walked up to the counter together.

"I think it's good," Emma said as they walked back into the night. "That he's moving forward, that he has goals and is pursuing them."

"Yeah, sure," Cora said. "It's just. . .not all of us get to, you know?"

Emma wasn't sure what to say. There was nothing easy or reassuring she could offer. Silence seemed the kindest option.

Cora let out a long breath. "How are things with Sawyer?" she asked,

"Fine, good," Emma said.

"I couldn't help but notice that he's very late to what seems to be his own party," Cora said.

"He's been stressed," Emma said. "I think it's his job. I told him there was no pressure."

"Why are you going to so much trouble anyway?" Cora said.

"I thought it might be nice, to get everyone together," Emma said. "We don't see each other enough anymore. Especially now that Clem's back in school."

"Right, it's school that's keeping Clementine away," Cora said. "Have you met Sylvie yet? I don't think I've ever seen Clementine so flustered. Or so happy."

Emma smiled. "I was a little surprised she didn't invite her," she said. "But I suppose she's wary of Max."

"Ten bucks says she's gone when we get back," Cora said. "Left some excuse with Sam."

Emma laughed. “I wouldn’t take that bet,” she said. “Sam’s probably ninety percent of the reason she even showed up.”

“Yeah,” Cora said. “He’s good for her.”

“You’re good for her too,” Emma said. “I never really thanked you for. . .before.”

“I was happy to take her in,” Cora said. She stopped to study the way the moonlight reflected on a patch of snow left over from the storm. “You really didn’t know?”

Emma shivered. “No,” she said. “I really didn’t.” She wanted to tell Cora that there were holes in her own memory she couldn’t explain, a high-pitched anxiety around an empty house, and the night terrors she had only grown out of once they moved to the city. That there were new shapes in the old memories, shadows moving where before there was only dark.

Cora resumed walking in the slow, ambling gait she had. “Call me crazy but I don’t think Clementine is the reason for the burnt lasagna,” she said. “I haven’t seen you try and cook since you set the fire alarm off at the old apartment.”

Emma shrugged. “I thought it would make the holidays feel more special,” she said. They had reached the apartment and she began climbing the stairs ahead of Cora, trying to shake the sudden dread she felt. Sawyer had probably come in while they were out; he’d be irritated that she’d left him alone with *her* friends, as he said. “Sawyer has a hard time with the holidays.” She fumbled with her keys. “I thought if I got everyone together, made a sort of welcoming environment, maybe it would cheer him up.”

Cora fixed her attention on Emma in a rare moment of sincerity. "You really love him, don't you?" she said.

Sawyer came home several hours later, after the last party guest had been tipsily packed into the back of a cab. Emma sat up in bed when she heard the key in the lock.

"Where were you?" she asked when Sawyer eased the door to the bedroom open.

"Oh Emma," he groaned. "Can we do this in the morning? I feel like shit as it is."

"No," Emma said. "No, we're doing this now."

Sawyer sat down heavily on the corner of the bed. "Fine," he said. "Go ahead, tell me everything I did wrong."

"Where were you?"

"I had a gig and then some guys wanted to go out after and I lost track of the time," Sawyer said. His tone was flat. "I tried to call you, but my phone died."

"You know, part of the reason I even had this party was for you," Emma said.

"Then why the hell did you tell me I didn't have to come?"

"I didn't tell you that you didn't have to come," Emma said. "I told you to take your time, to do what felt comfortable. I didn't really think you wouldn't show up at all."

"Fuck, Emma, I lost track of time," Sawyer said. "Say what you mean once in a while, would you? If you meant that I needed to be there why didn't you just say that?"

Emma felt tears in her eyes. “I didn’t think I had to,” she said. The lump in her throat was hot and rose in the space between breaths. “I thought you knew.”

Sawyer sighed. “It didn’t used to be like this,” he said. “You didn’t used to give a shit about the holidays or parties or . . .any of this.”

“I’ve been worried about you,” Emma said. “I wanted to do something to make you feel better, to make you happy.” She choked on the last word and began to cry, holding her hand over her mouth. In the darkness, she didn’t realize how close Sawyer was until he put his hand on her bare shoulder.

“Oh Emma, hon, please don’t,” he said. “Shit, I’m really sorry. I was having a hard night. I didn’t want to ruin your party, showing up all out of sorts.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Emma said, between sobs. “Everything feels so awful. You’re so far away.”

“I’m right here,” Sawyer said.

“No, you’re not,” Emma said. “You’re everywhere but here. You won’t even look at me.”

“I’m right here, Emma,” Sawyer said.

Then again, as if he didn’t quite believe it himself, “I’m here.”

Eighth Chapter

Emma stopped outside the apartment and rested her head against the door. She dropped her hand from the doorknob and let the tears fall. All she wanted was to come in, order pizza and take it to bed with beer and a movie. She wanted to avoid Sawyer's sigh when she came in and asked how his day was. She wanted to be allowed to cry without him seeing and becoming upset too.

Their marriage was a beast she couldn't wrangle. Their marriage. That's what she told herself. He wasn't a beast, just their marriage as if it had separated from the two of them and grown its own beating heart. She was aware and guilty of her own desires splitting from his.

She needed to give it more time, she told herself. The psychiatrist told her that it would take time before they'd be able to tell if the medication was improving things or worsening them. She'd wanted to scream. Sawyer had accepted this price with nothing more than a bowed head, but Emma couldn't stand the idea of more lost time.

Behind the door, she heard low voices and laughter. She wiped her eyes and pushed the door open, following the sounds to the kitchen where Sawyer sat at the table with a beer in hand and a relaxed smile on his face.

"Hey," Cora said from the stove. "I was showing Sawyer how to flip a pancake the pretentious way. You feel like having breakfast for dinner?"

"Uh, sure," Emma said. She let her bag fall to the floor and took a seat beside Sawyer who grabbed her hand immediately. She couldn't tell, but it felt like he was shaking.

“Sawyer was telling me that you guys are going to get away this summer, spend some time on the coast,” Cora said. “I think it’s a great idea. The city wears on you after a while. It’s good to get out.”

Sawyer responded with a similarly enthusiastic quip about beach houses. Emma watched them, feeling like something was off. Like they were acting out an improv scene that she couldn’t keep up with.

“I have to get going,” Sawyer said after a while. “I have a lesson. You kids have fun.”

“You’re missing out!” Cora said, angling the pan toward him so he could see the smudge of a pancake she was working on.

After Sawyer was gone, she didn’t waste any time. “This isn’t the answer,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Anti-depressants,” Cora said. “Not a good idea.”

“That’s not really any of your business,” Emma said.

Cora turned off the stove and picked up a pancake. She tossed it from hand to hand until it was cool enough to eat and then rolled it up and put the whole thing in her mouth. “No,” she agreed. “It’s not. So, I won’t spend very much time on it. It’s a bad idea. That’s all I want to say.”

“What do you even know about it?”

“It makes you a different person,” Cora said.

“I’ve heard that one before,” Emma muttered.

“Not like that,” Cora said. “It’s like, the whole rhythm of your life stops and the only reason you keep living your life is because you might someday return to it and you don’t want to have nothing to return to. You think the person you were might come back and you want them to be able to.”

“Just because it didn’t work for you, Cora,” Emma said.

“It did work for me,” Cora said. “When I was a teenager? It worked like nothing else did. But when Marie pulled the plug on the whole thing, it was like waking into a nightmare. There’s no coming back. You lose the rhythm and it’s lost for good.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Emma said, coolly. Trust Cora to make this about herself. It’s why they hadn’t lasted as roommates. Cora still blamed Sawyer, but Emma got tired of the drama. Cora knew how to spin just about anything into drama.

“I hope you do,” Cora said quietly. “Anyway, I’ll give you your space. Let me know if you want to talk more.”

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“I want to be the water you float in,” Sawyer said musingly a few weeks later. They were sitting on the couch, Emma’s feet in his lap as he tuned his guitar.

Emma smiled, but didn’t look up from her book. “What does that mean?”

“I want to keep you from sinking,” Sawyer said. “I want to keep you safe.”

“What about me?” she asked. “What am I doing for you?”

“You,” he said in a tone that made her put her book down. “You are giving me life.”

“What the hell do you want?” Sawyer yelled. As he turned, his hand caught the handle of a pan on the stove and sent the pan flying. It landed on the floor; the vegetables sizzled out onto the tile. Sawyer kicked the hot pan in her direction. She flinched away from it as he fled down the hall.

“Where are you going?” she asked, stepping around the pan. Her foot caught on a piece of onion and she fell on her hands and knees. She pushed herself up and followed Sawyer down the hall. He came tearing out of the bedroom with his jacket on and his keys in his hand. She blocked his path to the front door, throwing out both arms.

“I’m leaving,” he said.

“Sawyer, no.”

He took a step toward her and she’d had enough. She could feel a pattern of burns forming on her shins and her forearms were sore from the fall. She stepped forward and tilted her head up to meet his eyes. “Are you going to hit me?” she said, issuing the challenge.

He closed his eyes. “No,” he said. “Move.”

“Sawyer, please.”

But he shoved past her, his touch on her shoulders now remarkably gentle and disappeared out the front door.

Other times, he stayed and there were tears. He dissolved and disappeared into his own sorrow. Her body couldn’t satisfy him as much as his sorrow could. His self-righteous sorrow, deep and beautiful, something fundamental missing or broken. Her thoughts were falling apart.

The memories were perfunctory, like an old calendar of events, no emotional strings attached, not one. She can't remember the way their marriage fell together and came apart as it happened. In the moment, she didn't even see it for what it was; she just saw the anger and named herself, as he had named her, the cause.

Ninth Chapter

"You gotta give her a chance to get back on her feet before you go charging in to save her."

"I shouldn't have to," Max said. "She should never have been in this situation in the first place. If Sam was looking out for her the way he should be, the way she looks out for him—"

"Max," Emma said. She put her hand on his arm. "Let's just take it down a notch. She's going to be okay. That's the important part. We just need to focus—"

"Okay? They have her under suicide watch!" Max yelled.

"I'm just saying we don't have the full story."

"Fuck, Emma, whose side are you on?"

"Side? Since when is this about sides? I'm here for Cora, but I'm not going to demonize Sam for having a life outside of her," Emma shot back.

"If Sam has enough money to go to a university, then he probably has enough money to help her with this."

"Do you have any idea how long it took him to save up that money? He's been working since he was fifteen."

"Why didn't he go to college when he was younger? Like, right out of high school."

"He didn't have the money and he didn't want to take out a bunch of loans before he even knew what he wanted to do. Not everyone gets to go to college, Max."

"Oh, don't pull that card. You could have gone too, if you'd wanted to. Mom and Dad would have made it happen."

"This isn't about me! And I did go to college, moron, I have a degree. You just don't count it because I finished in less than two years and I didn't live in a fucking dorm. Not that anyone asks to see my diploma when *I'm saving their goddamn life.*" Emma lowered her voice. "And my point is that not everyone had parents who could make college a reality for them. Check your motherfucking privilege and shut up about Sam."

"Did you just. . .?"

"Yup."

"Are you going to. . .?"

"Nope."

They sat in a prickly silence. "I still think he's an ass," Max said into his cup of coffee.

"You're entitled to your opinion."

Max shot her a sidelong look. "Really?"

Emma smiled a little. "Can't we just be grateful that she's going to be okay?" she asked. "For now, anyway?"

Max looked like he was going to protest. "That's gonna be a hard one," he admitted.

"Sam can't be the only one you're mad at."

"No, he's not."

"I'm pissed too," Emma said, surprising herself. "I've been trained to look for this stuff and I didn't know she was still taking oxy. Her prescription should have run out months ago; I don't know where she's been getting it. But then I stop myself and

try to imagine the amount of pain she's been living with. Doctors make it hard to talk about. They're so worried about addiction and over-prescribing that people in Cora's shoes are afraid to tell them what's going on, afraid that their medication will be taken away and they won't have anything to help them cope."

"She has us," Max said. "She can lean on us."

Emma shook her head. "It's not enough," she said, thinking of Sawyer. "I wish it was, but pain can drive you out of your mind. There's nothing anyone can do or say that will be equivalent."

Cora was awake when they went to see her later. She was pale and groggy and remembered very little of what had happened. Emma took a seat beside her bed and explained as gently as she could.

"I was just taking them for my leg," Cora said, softly. "I must have taken one too many by accident."

"Cora, the amount you had in your system. . ." Max began.

"It was an accident." Cora said firmly.

"I know, but. . ."

Emma shot him a look and he quieted. "Okay," he said. "It was an accident."

"I've been having trouble reaching Sam," Emma said by way of changing the subject. "I've called his cell a couple of times, but it keeps going to voicemail and his mailbox is full."

"Good," Cora said. "I don't want him to come for this."

"Are you sure?" Emma said.

"More than sure," Cora said. "I don't need all the. . .he has finals coming up anyway."

"Okay, but you'll talk to him, later right?"

"There's nothing to talk about." Cora shifted around on the bed, trying to get comfortable. "Look, guys, I'm not feeling so great. I appreciate the fuck out of you for being here, but unless you want to see me lose my lunch, you should probably go home." She was fumbling around, reaching for something. Emma saw what she was reaching for and grabbed up the pink basin that sat on the bedside table. Cora held it under her chin and coughed uselessly, her whole body curled forward, so tense Emma could see the cords of her muscles in her shoulders through the thin hospital gown.

"I think you should tell him," she said quietly, taking the basin as Cora slumped back against the pillows, breathing heavily.

"No," she said sharply. "And you're not telling him either."

"I'm not sure that's the best idea."

"Good thing it's not your idea then," Cora said. She held out her hand for the basin and heaved over it uselessly for another few minutes before slumping back in defeat. "God this bites."

Max took her hand on the other side of the bed. "We won't tell him," he said.

"Promise?" Cora gasped.

"I promise."

"Emma?"

Emma hesitated, glaring at Max. "I promise," she said.

"Thank you," Cora whispered. "Now get outta here. This next part is not going to be pretty."

Emma obediently stood and gathered her things. Max didn't let go of Cora's hand. Cora groaned, going white again. "I'm not kidding Kenz," she warned.

"I'm going to stay," Max said. He took the basin from Emma and helped Cora sit up, holding it under her chin. She was visibly shaking. "I've seen you do a lot worse than lose your lunch."

Tenth Chapter

Emma was half-way through her shift, in a slow moment, when she thought to check her phone. There were two missed calls, both from Sawyer, both within the last hour. As she stared at it, wondering if she should take her lunch break now to investigate, her phone jumped to life.

“Hello?”

“Em, I really screwed up, Em, I screwed up so bad.” Sawyer was crying, his voice rough with emotion.

Emma felt her heart jump. “It’s okay,” she said. “I’m sure whatever it is, it’s not as big a deal as you think. Do you want to talk for a bit?”

“I need you to come home,” Sawyer said and then his voice disappeared into sobs. He was incoherent for several minutes. “I thought. . .but I changed my mind. I changed my mind and I don’t know what to do.”

“Changed your mind?” Emma repeated. “About what?”

“Please, just come,” Sawyer said. “I screwed up so bad, Emma, I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” she said, switching the phone to her other ear as she climbed out of her seat. “Okay, I’m on my way, just stay where you are. I’ll be there soon.”

She didn’t panic. Not immediately. Not even when she got home and saw the blood and saw him in the middle of it, his skin gray and clammy, his eyes unfocused. “I changed my mind,” he moaned when he saw her. Even as he said it, she was grabbing up dish towels and tightening them around his wrists, trying to assess how much blood he’d lost. She kept pressure on his wrists, warm blood soaking through the towels, as she tried to dial 9-1-1 with her pinkie.

They lost time, waiting at the end of the street for the ambulance. Sawyer's knees buckled as they slid the gurney out. Emma sat in the seat beside the gurney as the team worked around her. She held tight to her own wrists, covered from fingertips to forearm in blood, and murmured, not "I love you," but "No. No no no no no no no."

She'd gotten to him in time, she had to have, because this was her job, in this moment, before this moment, after this moment. She'd saved Cora, she'd saved Sam, she saved people every day, it was incomprehensible that she would not save him.

After, in the lobby of the hospital, clutching the bag of his personal belongings, the clothes he'd come in and no longer needed, his watch, wallet, and phone, his wedding ring too big on her thumb, she pulled out the prescription bottle she'd found beside him. The patient's name was Cora Connors.

Eleventh Chapter

"The world's gone from him," Cora had said, the one time Emma had ever heard her talk about Mattie. She'd found the phrasing odd at the time, hadn't understood it even when her father died. When her father died, she felt his absence from the world, felt it like someone was actually missing, like she was waiting for someone to return. Her father had been a constant in her life, even if he hadn't always been very involved. Even when there was distance between them, she felt his weight in her life.

Now she understood. Sawyer, always flighty, always transient, always on the verge of leaving. He was—there'd been no one like him in her life, ever before. She'd known, if not from the moment she met him then in the moments just after, that they were somehow necessary characters in each other's story, but that there would come a time when he would move on to somewhere she couldn't reach. He'd move past her and it was her job to be there for as long as she could. It didn't feel like he was gone from her life or gone from the world. It felt more like he'd been thrust out into an adjacent space, somewhere she couldn't reach him. He'd violated some kind of contract and the world had disappeared from him and he'd never find his way back.

It was all nonsense. She was thinking in nonsense now, but she was afraid to stop. And Cora, the one who might have understood best, was the one who had led them there. She'd tempted Sawyer to cross the great divide, to that place that she'd escaped twice, three times, now. She'd tempted him over, but couldn't lead him back. She'd taken his life into her hands and betrayed it.

There was that word again. Betrayal. She'd accused Sawyer of betrayal. And

now, he could have lied about anything, everything, and she still. . .

This was bargaining, wasn't it? Was that the second or third stage? How far had she progressed in the world without him? Every day, the world moved away from him, every day more disappeared from him. Tuesday. He'd missed each day of the week and now they were on doubles. Two Tuesdays he'd missed now. Two Tuesdays had missed him.

"You look beautiful," Clementine said on the day of his funeral. Max nodded in agreement, straightening his tie. They were dressed in the colors of their father's loss.

"Let's go," Emma said, moving through a haze toward the door to the hotel room. Max was leaving in two days and the thought filled her with indescribable dread. "Let's just go."

**

"You told me he wouldn't do it," Emma said after the funeral.

Cora put her hands up. "I did," she said. "I did and I'm sorry. I meant it. I didn't think he would do it and I didn't think it was fair for him to keep holding you the way he was."

"He wasn't holding me," Emma said.

"Okay," Cora said, looking at her shoes.

"He was not holding me," Emma repeated and Cora flinched. "I loved him."

"I know," Cora said. She glanced around nervously. Emma could hear Max in the other room talking softly with Clementine. "I can go, Em, if you want. I don't have to be here."

"Isn't that nice for you?" Emma said. Her heart hammered against her chest and she felt its heat rise in her face. "That you don't have to be here."

"Not what I meant," Cora said automatically.

Emma took a step closer. "He had your pills," she hissed.

Cora put her hands up, creating space between them. Emma stepped closer.

"Why the fuck did he have your pills Cora?"

Cora looked around the room; Emma was being just loud enough to attract the attention of the people in a five-foot radius. "We should talk about this later," she said to Emma. "When things have calmed down—"

"Things are calm," Emma said. "My husband is dead. Things are plenty calm. Start talking."

"What's going on here?" Sam came up beside Cora and put his hand on her elbow. He shot Emma an inquisitive look.

"Nothing. We're fine," Cora said.

The sight of the two of them, touching lightly, the worried look in Sam's eyes only served to remind Emma of everything she'd lost. She had, in that moment, nothing left to lose. "Sawyer was high," Emma said. "On oxy."

Sam stared at Cora not comprehending.

"Cora's pills," Emma said.

"They were old," Cora said, more to Sam than Emma.

"Did you know that Cora OD-ed last year?" Emma said.

Cora had gone very pale. Sam was looking at her as if he'd never seen her before.

"She made Max and I swear not to tell you and then she was supposed to get clean," Emma said.

"I did!" Cora said to Emma and then repeated it to Sam. "They were left over from before." Tears had sprung to her eyes, but Sam had switched his gaze to Emma.

"I'm so sorry for your loss Emma," he said, his tone kind, but detached. "We need to go home now."

"It's not what you think," Max said, later, when they were cleaning up.

"I don't care, Max," Emma said.

"It wasn't Cora's fault."

"Then why did he have her pills?"

"I don't know," Max said.

"You were supposed to get her clean."

"She was clean. She stopped taking them."

"When?"

"I don't know. After the overdose?"

"People relapse."

"Not Cora. I trust her. And if she did relapse, I'll, I'll talk to her, I'll—"

"He was euphoric," Emma said slowly. "God, I'm an idiot. I thought he was happy, but it was euphoria."

Max pondered this. "So, she made a mistake," he said. "She couldn't have known."

"She did know. He had threatened to do this before. We talked about it."

"That just means Sawyer had a history of this kind of behavior. Look, Emma, don't be mad at Cora for something Sawyer chose."

"He was sick! He had a mental illness," Emma yelled. "God, how blind are you? What else are you willing to overlook for her?"

"She's our best friend, Emma," Max said.

"No, she's your best friend," Emma said. "She's a stranger to me."

"Okay, it's been a long day and you're tired—"

"And if you keep siding with her on this, then you're a stranger to me too."

"Emma, just come back to the hotel with me. Clementine is waiting and we can all just crawl into bed and watch a movie."

For a second, Emma imagined it. Getting into Max's car, falling asleep on the drive over, letting herself crawl into bed with Clem and Max surrounding her, falling apart with their arms around her.

"No," she said. "Just get out."

Max's shoulders slumped. "I'll call you tomorrow, then," he said heavily.

"Don't bother."

"Emma."

"Fuck off Max. Get out of our apartment!"

He argued a little longer, but in the end, he went. And she hated him for that. She swept the remaining dishes off the table. It made a satisfying sound as it hit the

linoleum and Emma could feel shards of it biting into her skin as she sank down on the floor, in the same spot she'd found Sawyer, and wept.

Two

Another figure joins her in the darkness. It's a figure she recognizes, but she doesn't dare say anything. He moves closer in each flash of the lighthouse beam, not a day older than the last time she's seen him. Unable to move, she watches his approach and when he arrives in front of her, she opens her arms. She rests her head on the top of his head.

They don't speak. The lost years between them collapse so that it has always been this moment they've been moving toward. But the moment can't last. The fear that drove her frenetic shell-collecting is still settled heavily in the pit of her stomach. She holds him close, but the bottom falls out. The sound of the ocean recedes and suddenly they are caught in the inferno of the lighthouse beam, now a searchlight. They are found.

The life leaves his eyes and his arms drop to his sides. The roar of the ocean returns, closer than ever and more menacing. The lighthouse. It's their only haven. She gathers him up, returning to her normal height, but he is dead weight in her arms. The shells are up to her knees and she begins to wade through them, but someone kills the light and they are plunged into darkness.

Part III: Clementine

First Chapter

When Cora opened the door, Clementine darted in to her apartment without a word. She could tell Cora was on her way out. Her hair was up in high ponytail and she was wearing a lot of eye shadow. She looked just as breathless as she'd sounded when Clementine had called her from the last train station. "I'll be back at three, there's food in the kitchen, not much, check the pantry, there might just be Ramen? I'm so sorry, I couldn't get anyone to cover, don't answer the door, my laptop is on the couch, password is 042397, you could put on a movie? Sorry, I know it's a mess in here, love you, bye." And then she was gone, leaving behind a lingering scent of perfume against the cool night air.

Clementine shut the door and moved slowly over to Cora's bed where she dropped her bag and sat down. The last time she'd been here, Emma and Cora were living together in the cramped studio. Since Emma had moved out, Cora had pushed the bed to the corner by the sliding glass door. There was a half-wall separating the living room from the kitchen and two other doors to the side of the front door, one to the bathroom and the other to a closet. The apartment felt bigger without her sister, but maybe it was just that Cora had gotten the bed out of the center of the living room.

Clementine made her way to the bathroom and turned on the shower, stripping off her sweater, then her t-shirt, and finally peeling off the tank top and shorts. The imprint of the last train, cracked vinyl seats and no air conditioning, remained on the

underside of her thighs. She checked the shower carefully for spiders, found none, and set the water as hot as it would go. Then she sat in the bathtub and let the water beat down on her sore back, resting her head on her knees. She felt the water gradually seep into her hair, until it stuck to her face and rivulets of water ran into her eyes. She began to stand, slipped, caught herself with a small gasp, and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

Cora had a wire tower full of exotic sounding shampoos and conditioners and at least six different scents of body wash. Clementine took her time experimenting with different scent combinations until the hot water made her dizzy and the steam made it difficult to draw in a clean breath. She got out and put her dirty t-shirt and sweater back on, leaving her tank top and shorts wrinkled on the floor. Cora had some old patio furniture on the balcony and Clementine spent some hours laying on the couch in different configurations. Lila texted her twice, but Clementine switched her phone off before she was tempted to answer. She sat back down.

Switching it off wasn't enough. She popped the battery out and placed it in the freezer. She buried the phone in Cora's top drawer, amidst socks and bras and panties.

The apartment was small, only one carpeted room with a square of linoleum to imply a kitchen, within which there was a hot plate, a mini-fridge with a name tag that read, "Hello my name is Tag," and a standalone sink. Clementine understood the few shelves about the mini-fridge to be the aforementioned pantry. She reached up and grabbed herself a pop-tart before heading back out to the balcony.

Cora's apartment was on the fourth floor, above a city which sparkled with recent summer rain. It was warm until almost midnight when a wind swept in from the bay. Her hair was still damp and she retreated back inside when she began to shiver. Inside Tag, she found a bottle of hard cider. She crawled into Cora's bed and drank until she was tired enough to fall asleep.

When Cora came back, closer to four than three, Clementine was half-asleep. She'd left the lights on in every room. Cora didn't come up alone; Clementine could hear a male voice out in the hall and, without thinking, she leapt from the bed and darted into the closet. She climbed on top of the washer and pulled the accordion door shut, waiting.

The door gasped open and the voices from the hall jumped in volume. "I told you not tonight," Cora said firmly, but Clementine could hear the laugh in her voice. "I've got company."

"Your apartment looks empty to me."

"I will see you tomorrow."

"Just one drink?"

"Tomorrow."

The door shut and there were loud footsteps down the stairs. "Men," Cora called out. "The worst, right?"

Clementine didn't answer. She heard Cora move from the entryway to the bathroom. The shower turned on and then off a few minutes later. Through the slits in the door, Clementine watched Cora pad out in a towel to close the curtains to the sliding glass door. She went to the kitchen.

“Do your parents know you’re here?” she called, between bites of something crunchy.

“No.”

“Does Max know? Emma?”

“No.”

“So, no one knows where you are?”

“No.”

“Are you going back?”

“No.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“No.”

“Are you going to come out of the closet?”

Clementine closed her mouth around an automatic no. She slid the accordion door open and hopped off the washer. Cora was standing in the middle of the living room with a slice of pizza in her hand. “Maytag’s hidden feature,” she said, wryly. She held out a slice of cheese pizza, but Clementine shook her head.

Cora shrugged and took another bite. “So, you’re a fugitive then?”

Clementine nodded.

“No chance you’re going to change your mind?”

“I’d rather be on the streets,” Clementine said quietly.

Cora nodded. “Alright,” she said.

Second Chapter

Clementine spent a lot of time in the park down the street from Cora's apartment. It wasn't much, for a park, just a small lawn with some trees separating it from the busy streets on either side. She liked to go in the mornings, to see the mist rising off the grass, to hear the birds, to smile back at joggers who smiled at her. She liked it all, even when it was cold and there were no birds, only the sound of rain falling through the trees. Wandering through the park kept her from replaying the old scenes of those final nights at home, the surprise on her mother's face, the slump of her father's shoulders.

When she wasn't at the park, she was tucked up in the apartment, usually trying out new recipes she found in old cookbooks Cora had presumably taken from her mother, though it was difficult for Clementine to imagine Marie cooking. Cora liked to joke that she'd have been better off if she'd been raised by wolves. Clementine had only met the woman a handful of times, but the stories were legendary.

Maybe because of this, Cora wasn't a picky eater and ate anything Clementine put in front of her without complaint. For the first few weeks, Clementine was happy to be earning her keep, happy for a safe place to crash, happy that Cora hadn't brought up getting a job because she would, she was going to, tomorrow probably, or the next day she'd start looking. She just needed to recover the energy.

A few weeks turned into a month. Most days, Cora left mid-morning and didn't come back until three or four a.m. Besides the bar, she had another job that

Clementine didn't hear about much except that it was in the health field and allowed Cora to have partial medical-coverage.

"Who's the guy?" Clementine asked Cora one morning before she left for work.

Cora turned from the cabinet where she was reaching for a mug. "Which one?" she asked with a smile.

Clementine considered this. "Your favorite," she said.

Cora poured them each a cup of coffee. "It hardly seems fair to choose," she said. She took a sip from her coffee and accidentally smudged her lip gloss. For her mystery day job, she dressed business casual, slacks and a button-up or a sweater with minimal make-up. She came home from the bar in tight jeans and dark shirts, combat boots and heavy make-up. Clementine wondered if anyone from one job recognized her at the other. She wondered if Cora liked it better if they didn't.

"Is there really more than one?" Clementine asked.

Cora set down her mug. "You're curious this morning," she said, frowning.

Clementine shrugged. "I don't know anything about your life," she said. She didn't mention that she'd heard yelling in the stairwell and Cora crying a few nights before. When she was younger and her siblings still lived at home, she'd been certain Max and Cora would end up together. Max could be a jerk and Cora could be a little dramatic, but it was hard to imagine them with different people. And Cora had been careful not to let any of her dates into the apartment while Clementine was there.

"What do you want to know?" Cora said. She got up from the table and pulled a box of toaster strudel out of the fridge.

Clementine hesitated. “What happened between you and Max?” she asked.

Cora shut the fridge. “Didn’t he tell you?” she asked.

“No. You know Max, he’s private.”

Cora laughed. “Not in my experience,” she said. “Kenz is about the nosiest person I know.”

“So?”

“So, nothing, Clem,” Cora said. “We were really close in high school and now he’s across the country. People go in different directions.”

“You and Emma didn’t.”

“Emma and I had similar goals. You know your sister, she likes to go where the action is. It worked out that we got to go together. Kenz wanted something more stable.”

Cora dumped out the rest of her coffee in the sink. “Why didn’t you go to Emma’s?” she asked. “You know I love you and I’m happy to have you, but Emma could have helped you too.”

“She wouldn’t understand,” Clementine said.

“Bullshit,” Cora said. “Emma’s one of the most understanding people I know. If she puts up with my crap, she’d certainly put up with yours.”

“Not when it’s about dad,” Clementine said. “She doesn’t want to hear it. Mom didn’t either.”

Cora turned the faucet off. “What are you talking about?” she asked. “What’s going on with your dad?”

“He’s sick,” Clementine said. “Something with his heart.”

“Yeah, Emma mentioned something about that,” Cora said. “Is that why you left? Because he’s sick? Honey, he’s tough, he’ll get better.”

“That’s not why I left,” Clementine said.

“Then why?”

“You’re going to be late to work.”

Cora checked her phone. “Dammit,” she said. “We’re going to finish this tonight, alright? I’m off from the bar, so I’ll be home by 7.”

“You don’t want to hear it,” Clementine said. “Trust me.”

Cora grabbed her purse from the top of the fridge. “Try me,” she said. “I’ll see you later.”

It was near eight when there was a knock on the door. Clementine rolled her eyes and put her book down. “Did you forget your key again?” she called. “You should get a keyring. Or wear it around your neck.” She flipped the deadlock and pulled the door open. “Or keep a spare outside the— Shit.”

“Clementine?”

Clementine froze as Max took a step forward. “Thank god,” he said, but she could hear the hurt in his voice. “We were so worried about you. We thought. . .how did you. . .?”

Before she could answer, she heard someone on the stairs and the sound of Cora swinging her keys out on her lanyard and catching them as they hit her hand. As she crested the top of the stairs, Cora didn’t seem to notice Max right away, flipping through her mail and nodding her head to the music that played in her headphones. She looked up just as Max turned.

They stared at each other a moment. “Yeah,” Cora said finally. “I suppose I’ve got some explaining to do.”

“Please,” Max said calmly.

Cora met Clementine’s eyes over Max’s head. “Clem, can you run out and get us some tampons and something for dinner?”

Clementine felt her face flush. “I went to the store earlier,” she lied.

Cora moved around Max and forced a twenty into Clementine’s hand. “Give me fifteen minutes to sort it out,” she whispered. “The three of us can talk when you get back.” When Clementine hesitated, Cora rolled her eyes. “Just go, please,” she said. Louder, she said, “You want a beer Kenz?”

Max caught Clementine’s arm as she made her way toward the stairs. “You’ll come back, right?” he asked. “I won’t tell Mom and Dad, just please don’t run off.”

Clementine shrugged him off. “I have to go,” she said.

She walked to the first landing and waited until the door closed before taking off her shoes and sneaking back up. She got to the door just in time to hear Max complimenting the wallpaper. Cora batted back a comment about school, which Max declined to answer.

“I thought I was coming here to make amends.”

“I’m listening.”

Clementine heard the scraping of a chair. “Cora, you lied to me,” Max said. “What the fuck?”

“I was trying to help her,” Cora said. “And I didn’t lie.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I was giving her time.”

“You were giving my mother a heart attack.”

“Oh, just stop Kenz. You don’t even know what this is about.”

“I don’t care. You’re both being really irresponsible. You have no idea what my family is going through right now.”

Clementine moved away from the door and started down the stairs. She stopped half-way down, heart pounding, then slowly made her way back up.

“Clementine is old enough to make up her own mind,” she heard Cora saying.

“She’s eighteen! Do you remember the dumb shit we believed when we were eighteen?”

“I remember that you still believed we could make a difference in our own destinies.”

“What does that mean?”

“You’ve changed.”

“It’s called growing up. You should try it sometime.”

“Look around Mackenzie. I have grown up.”

“You live in the worst part of town. You work in a bar.”

“So?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call that a grown-up line of work.”

“Oh yeah? When have you had to work at all?”

“That’s not the point. I’m working toward something. You’re just here, screwing around. You’re the one who changed. You gave up our dream.” Clementine heard Max’s voice crack.

“Watch yourself, Kenzie.”

“You watch yourself.”

“I’m trying to help her,” Cora said. “I’m trying to give her a better start than I had. Sometimes the best thing you can do when things get tough is get the hell out.”

“You should talk,” Max said. “You never forgave me for going to school.”

“Come on, Kenz, get your head out of your ass, it wasn’t because you went to school. I never forgave you for breaking your promise!” Cora was shouting now.

“I never—”

“Oh yes you did. You broke it clean in two. You let me believe we were on the same page, that we were getting out of there. Fuck, I had the jeep packed and ready to go.”

“It’s because I was trying to avoid this! I knew you were going to flip out,” Max said. “You and your promises. Do I have to be held accountable to every stupid promise I made when we were kids?”

“That’s the general principle of promises,” Cora snapped. “And friendship,” she said more quietly.

“Oh yeah, and all those times you dragged me into stupid and dangerous situations—”

“Name one!”

“That concert junior year? Driving back on the wrong side of the road because, what? You could?”

“There was no one on the road that late.”

“You didn’t have your license!”

“What’s your point Mackenzie?”

“Stop. Calling me. That.”

“I may have been a little reckless sometimes, but I always had your back!”

“That’s not what this is about! I know you had my back, but you haven’t for the last two years. And now you’ve misled me again.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“You didn’t tell me where my little sister was! You had to know that I was out of my mind with worry.”

“How? How could I have known that?”

“It doesn’t matter. My family treated you like one of their own when we were kids. You should have told someone, Emma, my mother, anyone.”

“I was always going to tell them where she was. I just thought she needed more time—”

“She’s had enough time. When she gets back, she’s coming home with me.”

Clementine heard the scrape of a chair moving backwards as one of them stood up. “Kenz, just give us some more time, please.”

“No, you’ve had enough time.”

Clementine heard the other chair slide back. She slipped on her shoes and ran down the stairs and out into the street.

When Clementine returned to the apartment many hours later, Max had gone and Cora was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of something hot in front of her.

She was chasing the handle of the spoon with one finger in an idle, distracted manner.

She looked up when Clementine shut the door behind her.

“Did you get dinner?” she asked. Her voice was tight.

“No,” Clementine whispered.

Cora put her head in her hands. “Perfect,” she said.

“There’s a pack of Ramen in the pantry,” Clementine said.

Cora didn’t move. The only sound for several moments was the scraping sound of the metal spoon against the rim of the mug.

“I went out on a limb for you today,” Cora said finally.

“You didn’t have to,” Clementine said.

“I think it’s time you tell me what happened,” Cora said.

“No,” Clementine whispered.

“I don’t need a lot of details,” Cora said. “I just need the general outline. Your brother is coming back tomorrow and we need to be a united front.”

When Clementine was silent, Cora let out a long breath that hissed between her front teeth. “I’d like it if you stayed,” she said. “But this isn’t a free-for-all. You need to have some kind of plan. You need to get a job or go back to school, I don’t care which. You’re eighteen. You’re not a kid anymore.”

Tears came to her eyes. “I can get out of your hair tonight,” she said.

“Goddammit Clementine,” Cora said. “I’m not the bad guy. I’m trying to help you get what you want. But I have to know what that is. And I have to know what you’re running from. What’s so bad that you’d rather be on the streets than go home?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“Oh no, we’re way past that. If you don’t tell me what’s going on, I’m calling Kenzie and telling him he can take you home tonight.”

Clementine whispered, “Fuck you,” and Cora closed her eyes. “I didn’t mean that,” she said. “I just—I’m not good at this. I’m scared something really bad happened, that you’re in trouble, I’m scared of what you’re not telling me. I want to help, I want to protect you.” Clementine noticed the tears in Cora’s eyes and felt her face flush. A wave of anger rose up in her, not at Cora, but at herself. This wasn’t the plan. Her silence was her ticket out. She could leave home as long as she never spoke about it to anyone. Her mother hadn’t said this, but Clementine knew from the look on her face that last night. Her mother could have found her, if she’d been looking. Her parents had Cora’s address; it was the same address that she’d shared with Emma not too long ago. It must have crossed her mother’s mind. She understood why Max hadn’t thought of it. Cora only existed for him in hazy afterthought, once the dim light of memory had softened her features. The Cora he thought of couldn’t move through the present the way she moved in the past.

“Clem, please,” Cora whispered. She reached out her hand.

And at that, Clementine broke. “He never touched me,” she said with a sob.

Cora’s shoulders seemed to melt. “Who?” she said.

“Did you know?” Clementine asked Max the next day over coffee.

Max shook his head. “I thought the college let him go because he hadn’t published in a while,” he said. “That’s what mom said.”

“She covered him,” Clementine said. “Even as more women kept coming forward. He said the relationships had been consensual, but a few were under age.”

“Why would mom cover him?” Max asked. “He betrayed her.”

Clementine shrugged. “He’s covered her drinking for years,” she said.

“Maybe she felt like she owed him.”

“Shit,” Max said. He leaned back in Cora’s chair. Cora had left for work shortly after Max showed up at the apartment. “You need to listen to her,” she’d said. “I mean it.”

Max shifted in his chair and then sat back up. “Are you sure?” he asked.

“Positive,” Clementine said. “I saw some of the paperwork.”

“How did mom react when you found out?”

“She was angry,” Clementine said. The slap had come out of nowhere, burned across her face and down her neck until she couldn’t separate the physical pain from the shame of it. “She said I didn’t know what I was talking about. Especially when I told her all the other stuff.”

“Other stuff?”

Clementine stared into her coffee. She pretended to take a sip as her stomach clenched. “Dad would. . .make these comments. Suggestions,” she said. “When mom was at work and you and Emma were at school.”

Max’s eyebrows came together. “No,” he said. “Oh Clem, no.”

“He never acted on them,” Clementine said quickly. “I didn’t really understand why. . .or what. . .I thought maybe he was joking. He told me about experiences he’d had with women, but I thought he was talking about the past. He

wanted me to tell him about my boyfriend and what we did together and then he'd give me advice, you know, tell me about what men liked.. ." She trailed off and drew in a breath. "He called me a slut a few times," she whispered in a rush before her throat closed around the rest.

Max reached for her hand across the table. She snuck a quick glance at him and could see the revulsion on his face. "Why didn't you tell anyone?" he asked.

"It took me a long time to realize that it wasn't. . .normal," Clementine said. "I didn't have the frame of reference for that, I guess. And I was scared of what he would do if he knew I told someone. Sometimes it felt nice, like when he'd come and lay down with me when I was sick."

"I thought you said he didn't touch you?" Max whispered.

Clementine shook her head hard enough to make her dizzy. "He didn't," she said. "He would just lay there and watch me. Sometimes he'd put his hand on my forehead or shoulder, but never more than that."

"Did you tell mom all of this?" Max asked.

Clementine nodded. "She didn't believe me at first," she said. "And then she told me I should have known better, that I should have come to her sooner. And I asked her what she was going to do and she asked me what she was supposed to do, since he's sick and all, she can't just kick him out. And I said I couldn't live in the house with him anymore and she didn't say anything and I walked out to cool off, but then I just kept walking because I didn't want to be there when he got home. Lila drove me to the bus station and I couldn't think, so I called Cora and told her I needed some place safe to be and she told me to come and then I bought the ticket and. . .and.

..” Her chest was heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She hadn’t realized how fast she was speaking or that sobs had begun rippling through her.

“It’s okay,” Max said. “It’s okay. You’re safe.”

Clementine nodded. She heard Max stand and walk to the bathroom, heard him carefully rip off a strand of toilet paper and looked up in time to see him put it in front of her.

“Are you okay?” he said after she’d finished blowing her nose.

Clementine wiped the rest of the tears off her face and nodded. “I’m not going back,” she said. “I know he’s sick, but that just makes it worse. He’s so. . .angry. At me, at mom, at himself. We can’t give him what he wants and he can’t. . .” She thought of the small pulse in his forehead that tightened and bulged when he couldn’t find the phrase he was looking for or when his wife asked him if he’d taken his medication. “He can’t do things for himself anymore and that infuriates him.”

As Clementine spoke, she noticed Max sinking in his chair, hunching over to rest his chin in his hand. She watched his face fall into an expression others mistook for contemplation, but she knew, from years of living with him, was really Max stalling for time to formulate the appropriate response.

“I’m not going back,” she repeated.

“No one said you had to,” Max said. He paused, creasing his brows. “But Clem, he’s really sick. They—”

“I know they stopped treatment,” Clementine said. “I know that his prognosis isn’t good and I know that the more mental clarity he loses, the closer he is to the end. I know the end probably isn’t too far.”

“Okay,” Max said. His expression lightened and he straightened. “I know you don’t want to come back to live with them and that is completely understandable. I can’t imagine how tough this has been for you—”

“I’m not,” Clementine said over Max’s voice. She waited until he had quieted. “Going back.”

“Even just for a few days, to see him, to say your goodbyes,” Max said. “You might regret—”

“I’m not going back.” Clementine crossed her arms and stared at the chipped nail polish on the fingernails of her right hand.

“When you’ve calmed down about this, you might wish that you had,” Max said. “You don’t get this chance twice.”

Clementine leaned across the table. “I’m not going back,” she said. She felt stronger each time she said it, further away from those terrible moments sitting across the kitchen table from her mother, listening to the same pleas and feeling empty. She didn’t know what it would do to her to go back, if it was something she could handle, if it was something she wanted to find out. But she needed to make it clear to Max and herself that it was an option she could choose. Not choosing was a choice. Her choice to make.

Max was silent a moment longer than his hand came down hard on the table. “Dammit,” he said. He pinched the bridge of his nose. “He’s dying,” he whispered to his lap.

And Clementine, because she felt free from this scene, free from the outcome and free from whatever turmoil Max was experiencing and whatever turmoil Emma

might experience when she got the news, stood up and came around the table. She put her arms around Max's shoulders. Max didn't move at first. Then his shoulders slumped and he didn't lean into her, but he didn't lean away either. "It's going to be okay," she whispered.

Third Chapter

“That looks good. But you probably don’t want Macomber and Roberts on the same display. Totally different fan bases, trust me. Never suggest that a Macomber fan try a Roberts book. You will literally never hear the end of it.”

Clementine nodded and gathered up a few Nora Roberts mass markets to re-shelve. “What about mystery? Can I put different mystery authors together?”

Sylvie thought about it, chewing on the end of her pencil. “With mystery I’d say make sure not to put any authors that go hardcover to trade to mass market with any that are published in mass market only,” she said. “It’s like putting *Star Wars* with a straight-to-video. You just wouldn’t.”

Clementine nodded again. Sylvie pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose. “You didn’t volunteer to help with the display so you could get away from the front counter, did you?” she asked.

“No, I wanted to get to know the store a little better,” Clementine said.

“Okay,” Sylvie said. “But once you’re done with Macomber, you should really get up front. Patrick wants you trained on register.” She dropped her voice. “I know they’re a pack of assholes, but they’ll lighten up once they get to know you.”

“How come you’re never up there?” Clementine asked.

Sylvie looked around. “I got one of them fired,” she said. “Well, one of their friends. He turned out to be a creep. They didn’t want to accept it. Neither did Patrick, but my stepmom’s a lawyer.”

“Oh,” Clementine said.

“Even Kirsten hates me and he was doing it to her too,” Sylvie muttered.

“I’m sorry,” Clementine said.

“Don’t be,” Sylvie said. “It worked out great for me. Things got so hostile that Patrick had to give me an inventory job just to keep the peace. It came with a 25-cent raise.” She smiled. Clementine watched the dip of the steel barbell in Sylvie’s left eyebrow as Sylvie looked back at the inventory clipboard in puzzlement.

There were three things she knew about Sylvie, so far:

1. She never went anywhere without her purple travel mug filled with, usually lukewarm, coffee, which she drank without cream or sugar.
2. She always sported two or three band aids from where she cut herself scraping tags off books. Clementine had seen her do it—a jerky movement, too fast, a flash of silver. Sylvie lifted her finger to her mouth before the blood leaked out of the fresh wound. Her expression never changed.
3. She was the first to get there and the last to leave, but never, in all the time she worked there, became store manager. Despite this and everything she’d told Clementine about being at odds with the front staff, she was the first person anyone went to when there was a problem.

“You haven’t seen a new mass market of this one, have you?” Sylvie asked. She leaned in to show Clementine the title and Clementine could smell her skin underneath her perfume.

“Uh-no,” she said. “I haven’t. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Thanks,” Sylvie said. She eyed Clementine’s display one more time. “Finish this and then go up front, okay?”

“Okay,” Clementine said with a sigh. The whole situation reminded her of early elementary school, where she was often chastised for her lack of social grace by her teachers and mocked for being stuck up by her peers. Her parents had been called into several conferences with her teachers throughout her disastrous early schooling, but, as far as she knew, no resolution or agreement was ever reached. She was just encouraged to try to make friends.

It wasn't that she didn't like her peers. It was just that she had no idea what how to start a conversation and all of her classmates seemed absorbed in their own conversations and she was content, happy even, to continue watching them without joining in. She spent a lot of time reading or drawing or making up games to play by herself.

The summer before she got to sixth grade, her parents had pulled her from school and her dad had begun home-schooling her. At the time, her dad had told her she was special, “wasted in public school,” he'd said. The transition was much easier than the transition into school had been. To Clementine, it just meant she got to stay home and read more, which is what she liked doing anyway. Her dad mostly asked her questions about what she'd read and listened closely to her answers.

She hadn't realized until now that it was the same year her dad lost his job at the college. Since she'd been at school while he was teaching, it wasn't a noticeable shift. She didn't know how much time he usually spent at home.

She gave the romance section one last look before heading up to the front counter. Sylvie had retreated to the receiving room, ever on the hunt for more missing books than she could ever hope to find.

The other clerks called Clementine “trust fund” behind her back because the first month they’d been paid, she’d had the day off and hadn’t come in immediately to pick up her check. When they saw her coming up, they gave her wide smiles and asked her how her “project” was coming in loud, falsely cheery voices.

It confused her at first. She wondered if they really thought she couldn’t see past their passive aggressive posturing. Because that’s all it was. She might have never set foot in a public high school, but their behavior was so transparent it didn’t take much.

So far, Sylvie was the only person who’d taken an active interest in “showing her the ropes.” The rest of the “team” was content to let her struggle and fail. Their manager, Patrick, operated under a strict policy of delegation. Only the highest-level concerns reached him and even then, he passed a lot of them off to Sylvie.

“He likes the path of least resistance,” Sylvie told her. “God only knows what he does on my days off.”

The book store went by the name Durden’s Books after Tyler Durden from *Fight Club*. Patrick swore Chuck Palahniuk himself used to frequent the store when he spent more time in the Seattle area.

“I bet Patrick tripped over himself for a chance to suck his dick,” Sylvie said.

Sylvie had an opinion about everything and Clementine used her as her social reference point. It’s part of the reason she didn’t care much what the other clerks thought of her. None of them seemed like they’d been there long or planned to be there long. Clementine had already seen two leave in the short time she’d been there.

She started sorting through a stack of books behind the back-up register, thinking back to the summer she turned eleven. Her dad had seemed genuinely interested in her academic progress. He'd taught her almost everything she knew—everything she hadn't learned from a book, she supposed. But now she wondered if she had been a convenience. Emma and Max were too old to hold the same reverence for their father, both almost done with high school. Their father had told her that neither of them had the intelligence or the aptitude to progress as quickly as she did.

"Your brother has the dedication," he'd said. "And your sister certainly has the brains if she'd sit down and concentrate. But you, my darling, have the brains, the dedication, and the memory for it."

But she couldn't remember having shown much of an aptitude when she was in school. Had he fabricated the whole thing? Had she spent her childhood following a lie?

"Be careful," Cora said that night over dinner. "It's easy to discredit everything someone's ever said when we cut them from our lives."

"You sound like Max," Clementine said. "Do you think I should go back?"

Cora shook her head. "That's not what I'm saying at all," she said. "I'm just saying. . .don't throw out every single thing your father has told you about yourself as untrue. Be smart about it. Weed out the things that are false. Hold onto the things that are true and separate them from the person who said them."

Clementine fished around in her pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. "I went by the bank on the way home," she said. "That's half of rent."

Cora hesitated and then took the money from her. She counted out a few twenties and then handed the rest back to Clementine. “It isn’t costing me anything to have you here,” Cora said. “I’ll take some for utilities and food, but Clem, you should be putting this money to school.”

Clementine looked up sharply. They hadn’t discussed whether or not she’d be returning to school. Cora went back to her pasta without another word.

“Cora?” Clementine asked, later that night while they were doing dishes.

“Hm?”

“How do you know what to keep?” Clementine asked. “When it’s your parent? I mean, aren’t I who I am because of him?”

Cora shook her head and shut off the water. “I’ve thought about this a lot,” she said. “A lot. My dad ducked out when I was eleven and my mom was like a non-entity after my brother died, so I’m coming at this from a different angle, but I like to think I have enough life experience to know what I’m talking about.”

“Okay. . .”

“The thing is, our parents are the architects of our emotional world,” Cora said.

“That sounds like it belongs in a philosophy book from the 1800s.”

“Oh, shut it you overeducated bookworm,” Cora said. “I just mean that our parents give our lives context. We grow up living with their standards and rules and beliefs. That doesn’t mean they shape who we are. They’re like the water we swim in. We influence them as they influence us.”

Clementine wasn't really in the mood for Cora's weird metaphors. "Can you just tell me if I'm really smart?" she asked. "Smart like my dad thought I was smart?"

Thought. There it was, the past tense. The pre-past tense before he was a past-tense. He was past-tense to her. He may have been the water she'd grown up in, but she was on land now. It might be killing her, but it might also be saving her.

Cora was looking at her sadly, her hands dripping with soapy water as she held them slightly above the dishwater. "Honey," she said. "You are so, so smart and beautiful and kind. I can't tell you if that aligns with what your dad thought of you. All I can tell you is that you've amazed me from the day I met you."

Clementine tried to swallow the rising lump in her throat. "But everything I did is because of something he told me," she said.

"Listen," Cora said. "Our past is not our fault. But our future is our responsibility. Everything you do from here on out can be because of something *you* tell you. For better or worse, your life is yours now."

Fourth Chapter

The scraper against the linoleum sounded like crickets at night, a dull constant sound that Clementine could concentrate on.

Sylvie looked up at her. “Clem, I know you’re not going to just stand there and watch me clean this up,” she said.

Clementine started and put the book she’d been reading down. “Sorry,” she said. She got down on her knees beside Sylvie. “What was this?”

“Who knows?” Sylvie said, digging the scraper into a particularly stubborn piece of gunk. She straightened and doused the spot with lighter fluid a second time. She always smelled, at least a little bit, like lighter fluid. Said it was better than bleach for cleaning. “Coffee? Soda? Primordial ooze?”

When Clementine didn’t laugh, Sylvie stopped scraping and looked up. “I didn’t mean to snap,” she said. “I was teasing. And giving you an out. So, you don’t have to up front?”

Clementine shook her head and pushed harder at the gunk on the floor. The scraper lost traction and she barely managed to catch herself on her elbows.

“You alright?” Sylvie asked. She abandoned her scraping efforts to help Clementine to her feet. “You’ve been a little. . .off today.”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” Clementine said. She felt close to tears after the near miss.

“Okay,” Sylvie said. “You want to help me look for books after this? There are quite a few in Lit. I know that’s kind of your jam.”

Clementine smiled in spite of herself. “Yeah,” she said. “That’d be good.”

She spent the rest of her shift following Sylvie around the store, watching the pile of dreadlocks atop her head bob as Sylvie kept up a quick clip throughout the store.

Clementine took her time leaving that afternoon, wandering back to shipping and receiving where Sylvie sat atop a step-stool style ladder, stacking books carefully. She was pretty tall, almost Max's height, but the shelves in the makeshift shelving area dwarfed even Patrick who was well over six feet.

Cora was working late—a common enough occurrence lately, but Clementine didn't feel like going back to an empty apartment. She knew she relied on Cora too much. No matter what Cora said, more and more Clementine felt like a burden on her thin resources and she knew she crowded the apartment, even though she stripped her sheets off the couch and tucked them in the closet every morning. Cora would never say any of this, but Clementine knew. Cora had been picking up extra hours at her second job and there were a few times she sent Clementine out for things they didn't really need when Sam came over. Clementine had accidentally come across them in Cora's jeep once, trying to be stealthy.

"What's up?" Sylvie asked, around the pencil in her mouth.

"Just wanted to see if there was anything you needed help with," Clementine said, picking up a book from the sorting table and flipping through it.

"Weren't you off like twenty minutes ago?" Sylvie asked.

"Yeah," Clementine said. "But you were off two hours ago."

Sylvie waved her off. “They gave up telling me to go home ages ago,” she said. “They know I work too hard for how much they pay me just as much as they know half this shit wouldn’t get done without me.”

“Don’t you want to get home?” Clementine asked.

“Don’t you?” Sylvie shot back.

“No,” Clementine answered. “It’s not like anyone’s waiting for me.”

“Aren’t you in school?” Sylvie asked. “Don’t you have homework or something?”

“No,” Clementine said. “I mean, yes, technically, but it’ll get done.” She’d started an online program a few weeks ago.

Sylvie chewed on her pencil. “You can sort those books if you want,” she said, gesturing to a pile on the sorting table. “I’ve got a lot of processing to do, so you can shelve them too if you still don’t want to go home.”

Clementine nodded and began separating the books into piles by section. “My dad’s funeral was today,” she said into the silence a few minutes later.

Sylvie sighed. “Shit Clem,” she said. “You could have said something. Pat would have given you the day off.”

“I wanted to be busy,” Clementine said.

“I’m sorry,” Sylvie said. “Were you close?”

Clementine shook her head. “Not really,” she said. “I didn’t want to go. It just feels weird.”

“That comes and goes,” Cora had said. She’d taken Clementine to work with her the night Emma called and snuck her a few drinks. Clementine wanted to be at

home, but didn't want to be alone or hurt Cora's feelings so she stayed and got progressively drunker until Sam, who got off an hour earlier than Cora, offered to drive her home.

"It's alright," he said. He pulled her hair up and expertly tucked it into a loose bun as she heaved over the toilet. At some point, Cora took his place while Sam whipped up what he called a "pre-hangover" sandwich. The two of them talked in low voices as Clementine drifted off to sleep in Cora's bed. When she woke up, Sam was still there, curled around Cora, reading a book. Cora slept soundly in his arms.

Sylvie climbed down from the ladder. "Can I give you a hug?" she asked.

Clementine stiffened and Sylvie immediately backed off. "It's okay," she said before Clementine had the chance to speak. "Some people are huggers. I thought I'd ask, in case that might make you feel better."

Clementine nodded, looking at the ground, tears blurring her vision. "I'm going to run to the bathroom," she muttered. Once there, she wrapped her arms around herself and burst into tears.

Later, Sylvie insisted on walking her home. "I wish you could see more stars in the city," Sylvie said as they walked down the street. "Where I'm from, you can see more stars than sky."

"That sounds nice," Clementine said automatically.

"A lot of Montana's like that," Sylvie said. "It's so open and untamed. When I moved out here, I felt claustrophobic. So many trees."

Clementine listened as Sylvie told the story of how her mom died when she was fourteen and how her mom's partner didn't know what to do with Sylvie and her

older brother, so she'd taken them to Tacoma where her family was. In Tacoma, they exchanged a small, quiet, reserved family for a loud, boisterous clan of aunts and uncles and cousins whose names Sylvie still couldn't keep track of.

Sylvie had one of those voices you could listen to for days. Clementine didn't realize right away that they'd passed Cora's apartment. She tried to gracefully backtrack without Sylvie noticing and Sylvie gracefully didn't notice.

"Goodnight Clem," Sylvie said at the door to the apartment.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" Clementine said, a little anxiously.

Sylvie smiled. "Yeah," she said. "See you tomorrow."

Fifth Chapter

Clementine resisted the urge to check her phone again. It was bad enough that Sylvie had cancelled last minute, citing some sort of family emergency and apologizing profusely, but now Cora, who, though scatter-brained, never forgot anything, was almost two hours late for the movie night she'd offered to host. Sam hadn't shown either.

Clementine pulled out her textbook, read a few lines, and then put it away. If they didn't want to hang out with her, they could have just said so.

She stood up and paced for a while, trying to ignore the gnawing hunger. Cora had promised to bring pizza. They hadn't gone grocery shopping in almost three weeks.

Maybe she should just go down to the bar and see if they'd gotten their shifts mixed up or something. It was something to do at least, better than just sitting at home.

But they weren't at the bar. Clementine ordered a burger and fries and ate them slowly, thinking if she killed enough time, Cora and Sam were bound to come home in her absence.

They didn't. She fell asleep somewhere around three in the morning and woke up to an empty apartment.

Sylvie's eyes were red-rimmed and puffy the next day at work. "Everything okay?" Clementine asked.

"Fine," Sylvie replied.

"Missed you last night," Clementine said.

Sylvie set the inventory clipboard down on the counter, hard. “I’m sorry, okay?” she said. “I’ve got enough to deal with as it is. I don’t need you heaping the guilt on as well.”

“Sorry,” Clementine said, but Sylvie was already walking away.

The door was unlocked when Clementine got home, but there was no one inside the apartment. Clementine spent another night at the bar, ordering mocktails and baskets of fries she picked at and never finished. Neither Cora nor Sam ever showed.

She had the next day off and she spent most of the morning lying on the couch, wondering after Sylvie as she tried to fall back asleep. Sylvie had been so open about her past, it hadn’t occurred to Clementine that she might not have been as candid about what was going on in her life now.

Around noon, she heard the key in the lock and threw off the covers, ready to storm around the corner and demand an explanation from Cora. The door swung open and Emma walked in wearing her uniform, the crisp pants and the jacket reading Seattle Emergency Medical Technician across the back.

“Clementine?” Emma asked. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” Clementine echoed.

“I came to get some of Cora’s stuff.”

“Is she staying with you?” Clementine asked.

Emma’s face tightened. “Oh,” she said. She looked Clementine up and down as if noticing her pajamas for the first time. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?” Clementine said, ignoring the sinking feeling in her stomach.

“I’m going to put some tea on,” Emma said abruptly. “Or coffee? Do you like coffee better?”

“I don’t drink coffee,” Clementine said.

“Tea then.”

“I don’t drink tea.”

“Well I need caffeine,” Emma said.

“What happened?” Clementine asked.

“Have you had breakfast?” Emma asked. She moved past Clementine to the kitchenette.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Will you eat something if I make it?”

“Probably not,” Clementine said. “You’re a terrible cook.”

“I was thinking more like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.” Emma dumped the coffee that was in the coffee maker and filled the pitcher with water. She wouldn’t look at Clementine, instead focusing intently on pouring the coffee grounds into a filter and settling it gently in the basket. Clementine sighed, loud enough for Emma to hear.

“Coffee will be done in a second,” Emma said, still not looking up.

“Is Cora okay?” Clementine asked.

Emma was opening the fridge. “There’s nothing to eat in here,” she said.

“I know,” Clementine said. “I’ve been living on bar food. Where’s Cora?”

Emma shut the fridge. “Do you want to go somewhere—”

“Emma,” Clementine said. “Where’s Cora?”

“Okay,” Emma said. “Okay. Just, try to stay calm.” She took a deep breath.

“Cora was in an accident with Sam, her boy—”

“I know who Sam is,” Clementine cut in. “Are they alright?”

“How long has Cora been gone?”

“I haven’t seen her for a few days.”

“Shit,” Emma muttered. “There was a landslide. It took us a while to get to them.”

“But they’re okay?”

Emma rubbed her temples. “Sam had to have emergency surgery last night,” she said. “They think he’s going to be okay. And Cora. . .she was still in surgery when I went back to work. I haven’t heard anything. I was going to sleep for a few hours and then head back.”

Clementine sat down on the couch. “Can I come with you?”

“Of course,” Emma said. She pulled her hair away from her face, twisted it into a bun and then let it fall back around her face. She poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down on the bed.

“Missed you at the funeral,” she said after a while.

“I’m sorry,” Clementine whispered. “I just couldn’t.”

“Well,” Emma said. “If you ever want to talk about it, I’m here.”

“Really?” Clementine asked. “You’re not mad?”

Emma smiled. “Of course not,” she said. “I’m not Max.” Her smile faded. “I wish you could have been there though.”

“I just couldn’t.”

“I know.”

“I wish it had been—”

“It’s okay.”

Sixth Chapter

“It was my fault,” Clementine whispered. “I should have known something was wrong. I should have called someone.”

“Oh, don’t do that,” Sam said. “How were you supposed to know? You guys were on opposite schedules and Cora—”

“But maybe they would have found you sooner,” Clementine said.

“Sam’s right,” Emma said. “We had several crews out there looking. They were in a bad spot. We found them as soon as we could.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to say it like that,” Clementine paused. “I wasn’t trying to say it was your fault, Em.”

Emma shook her head. “Oh, I didn’t take it like that,” she said. “I’m just saying.”

“It’s no one’s fault,” Sam said, firmly. He turned Cora’s hand over in his own. She was awake in short bursts, but did little more than watch them move around her. Once Clementine thought she’d lifted the corner of her mouth in a slight smile, but no one else had seen it.

Cora was sleeping fitfully now, tangled in fevered dreams, Sam a lifeline from the world to which they hoped she would return. Emma had stopped in on her way to go ring shopping with Sawyer. Sawyer had stayed with the car; hospitals made him nervous; it wasn’t that he didn’t want to see her (they all suspected he didn’t want to see her), he’d just had his fill for the year, but Emma should take her time. Clementine had watched the whole exchange feeling a little sick. Emma pandered to Sawyer’s mood swings. For weeks now, he’d pressured her into making their engagement

official, ignoring Emma's protests and not caring that Clementine was their silent witness.

"That guy?" she'd whispered to Sam once. "She's gotta marry that guy?"

Sam had shrugged. "He's who she chose," he said. "You gotta accept that. Just like you accepted me as the person she chose." He nodded at Cora.

"Yeah, but you're," Clementine paused, unsure of the wording. "You're not a Patrick."

"A Patrick?"

Clementine nodded. "A spineless simpering buttmunch," she said. "Like Sylvie and I's manager."

"Oh, I don't think Sawyer's that bad," Sylvie had said. She'd taken to chauffeuring Clementine between the hospital and work and sometimes swung by to get Sam, whose car had been totaled and who wasn't supposed to be driving anyway.

"Your sister's too smart for a Patrick," Sylvie continued. "She'll outgrow him and move on. I wouldn't worry about it."

Now, Emma glanced down at her phone and Clementine watched the flash of anxiety that crossed her face. A text from Sawyer. Had to be.

"I'll see you guys later," Emma said.

"Send us pictures," Sam said, a little mockingly.

Emma rolled her eyes. "If he would just agree to city hall," she muttered as she gathered her things.

"You can go get some sleep," Clementine said gently after Emma left, watching Sam rub his eyes. "She's going to be fine."

"I don't want to her to wake up alone," Sam said. "I'll go when she's awake."

"Better to go now when she won't miss you," Clementine pointed out. "And I'll be here anyway."

Sam shook his head. "I don't want her to be alone," he said.

A few minutes later, as Clementine was getting ready to head to work, Cora groaned and opened her eyes, blinking rapidly. She fixed her gaze first on Clementine and then on Sam.

"Sam," she whispered. Tears rolled down her cheeks. "You're okay?"

Sam lifted her hand up to his face. "I'm okay," he said.

Cora laughed a little, more tears rolling down her cheeks. "I love you," she said.

Sam closed his eyes with a little sigh. "Me too," he said.

Seventh Chapter

“I bet you she bolted,” Clementine said, shaking her head.

“Give your sister some credit,” Cora said. She arranged the flowers in her bouquet so the baby’s breath was barely visible. “She probably just went to the bathroom. Do you know how hard it is to maneuver that thing? It weight like twenty pounds.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be helping her with that?” Clementine said with a raised eyebrow. “You are the maid of honor.”

Cora gestured to the thigh-high cast on her leg. “I think I’m off the hook,” she said. “You on the other hand. . .”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Clementine said. “She’s probably fine. I’ve never seen Emma get nervous about anything.”

“Except that rehearsal in ninth grade,” Cora pointed out.

“Oh my god,” Clementine said. “The front row probably wished they had umbrellas.”

“Or the winter formal in tenth grade,” Cora added.

“Her date probably wished he had an umbrella,” Clementine said, snickering.

“Or, did I ever tell you about the day she took her EMT exam?” Cora said.

“That was probably the worst.”

“Alright, alright, I get your point,” Clementine said. “I’ll go make sure she’s alright.”

Cora shrugged. “I’m just saying it would be pretty hard to get those stains out of that dress,” she said.

Clementine wandered down the hall toward the bathroom, without much expectation. Emma really hadn't seemed nervous. She'd gracefully handled their mother's blubbering, Max's brooding and Cora's teasing, "Your groom's old," when Emma said she was missing something old to go with her borrowed necklace, her blue veil, and her new ring. More than anything, she seemed like she wanted the ordeal over with. The church wedding hadn't been her idea, but that was the thing about Emma. She'd do just about anything if she realized it was important to another person.

Clementine turned another corner after hitting a dead end and saw Emma and Sawyer at the end of the new hallway.

"This wasn't completely serendipitous," Sawyer was saying. "I was looking for you so I could give you this." He held between his fingers a silver chain with a small prism pendant at its base. "I finally got around to fixing it last night. Sorry it took me so long."

Emma laughed. "There's my something old," she said, taking it from him and clasping it around her neck.

"Don't be nervous," he said.

"I'm not," she promised.

Clementine turned around as they kissed and made her way back to the dressing room.

"Did you find her?" Cora asked.

Clementine nodded. "She's alright," she said.

When Emma came back, Clementine took over doing her hair. As she gently wrapped Emma's hair around her curling iron, she asked, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Emma smiled and said, "Yes."

Later, after they'd packed Sawyer and Emma away in their getaway car and waved them off into their new future, Clementine walked back to Sylvie's apartment.

"Hey," she said when Sylvie opened the door.

"Hey," Sylvie said back.

"Invite me in," Clementine whispered.

Three

The sun is bleeding orange and deep red across the furthest waves she can see. The waves that roll up across the sand and brush her toes are in the shadow of the sunset; it is still light out there, but it gets darker on the shore with every passing minute. The wind is cold and salty. She can feel the damp salty moisture sticking her hair together in clumps. She tries and fails to smooth it back.

The sun slips below the horizon and the lighthouse beams takes over. It is a white light, hotter than the sun and closer. When it catches her in its path, she feels safe, but exposed at the same time. Turning a shell over in her hand, she imagines that she is home, by the wood stove. Someone has just added more wood and the flames climb, spilling through the gaps and jumping out of the grate. In her imagination, she is lying on the floor in front of the stove underneath a blanket that someone else has put over her shoulders. There is a warm hand on her back and she is falling asleep, her face burning pleasantly.

She opens her eyes at the sting of cold salt air and sees that the tide has come in while she has been elsewhere. She is up to her knees. She can see the familiar figure on the shore as she twists at the waist to look back. The crash of the waves is fainter now that she is further out, but she doesn't want to be alone. She begins wading back and the boy on the shore stretches his arms out in welcome or warning, she isn't sure.

"Oh, how I have missed you," she whispers into his hair when she reaches him, enfolding him in her arms. She knows the moment won't last, can't last, but she'll stretch it as long as she can. Pulling away from him, she takes his hand in hers—

small, warm, sweaty—and leads him down the beach toward the lighthouse. The sea is calm, the waves a soft hush across the sand.

As they near the lighthouse, he slows down. Slower and slower until she is practically dragging him along behind her. Then he stops altogether. She can hear the water receding, drawing power as it draws itself back. In the space between sounds, she is aware only of his hand in hers. The lighthouse beam swings around again and she forces herself to look. The wave towers over them, paused like a snake raising its head to strike. She gathers him up in her arms and begins sprinting, but she knows it's too late.

Part IV: Cora

First Chapter

The sun was a sinking glow on the horizon when Max got to the house. He eased the car into the carport and shut off the ignition with a soft click. He took a moment before swinging the door open and stepping out. The house looked battered underneath what appeared to be a fresh coat of yellow paint. As he stepped toward the front door, the gravel crunched underneath him.

He unlatched the screen and tried the front door. It swung open with a creak. Once inside, the door shut behind him, the sound of the bay lapping at the shore disappeared.

Max felt around for a light switch in the dark entry hall, following the dim light from deeper in the house as he ran his hand along the wood paneling. His fingers bumped up against a switch and he flicked it. A light jumped on around the corner, revealing the end of the hallway.

From the hall, the house split off into a kitchen and living room. The light was coming from a small lamp near across the living room, beside a large chair where the battery light on Cora's laptop blinked on and off, the cord disappearing behind the chair. Max took a step toward it and stumbled over something solid and soft. When he looked down, he noticed that someone, probably Cora, had made a nest of blankets and pillows on the floor. There were two pillows, one tipped perpendicular to the other as if one lover had lain on their side, watching the other sleep. A big comforter was spread out and rumpled, half-covered by two smaller, twisted sheets.

An empty bottle of red wine lay on its side by the chair, which was the only piece of furniture in the room. Max stepped around the makeshift bed on the floor to investigate the laptop. A sparkle of lights caught his eye and he turned, just then noticing the bay window that took up most of the wall that ran the length of the living room and kitchen. It exposed the yard, the small square of beach below it and the inlet beyond, where the last ferry of the day, its lights reflected in the dark water, was made its slow way to shore.

Max followed the window until it became a sliding glass door. Tugging it open, he stepped out onto the lawn. The lawn stopped abruptly at a hand-crafted rock wall. Max followed the slope of the grass until he came to its edge. From there, he saw a few feet of sand and the big rock Sam had been talking about. Only the top was exposed, a foot or so above the surface of the water.

He could see how Cora would have felt at peace here, sitting in the lawn, listening to the water, dreaming up ways to make this place her own. He could also see how she would have had a hard time settling into it. He'd never known her to stop moving, to find comfort in the quiet. To Cora, quiet was malignant. On the few occasions Max had been over to her mother's house, he'd been struck most by the deep, unbreakable silence. Even when Cora turned up the stereo, even when they talked up a storm of words, each trying to outpace or over talk the other, there was a strange muted feeling to the house that swallowed their voices.

He moved back into the house, sliding the glass door shut, and investigated the door in the corner of the living room. It opened to a bedroom, with a twin bed and

a small square window with the floral curtains pulled shut. The walls were covered in scraps of paper that fluttered lightly when he opened the door.

He turned the light on and moved to inspect the nearest wall. The first paper was a sketch of the house, with plans for a deck drawn in to overlook the beach. Next to it was a cluster of old polaroids from a few years ago. They'd been whitewashed with primer or paint so that Max could only make out a face or shape here and there. There were even old photographs above this cluster, a close of Cora, Max, and Emma huddled together, only Cora had painted over their hair and eyes so that the colors stood out vibrantly against the cloudy seaside background.

On the opposite wall, Cora had set up large sheets of butcher paper and had written words on top of words. Max ran a hand over them, feeling the grooves where Cora's pen had dug in. The words met in the center, where the corners of the four sheets of butcher paper joined. In the center of the center, a vortex of words spiraled out, almost an ink blot except that Max could see distinct circles and scribbles.

He took a step back. He caught a few sentences, nothing that made sense except an old line from a Walt Whitman poem that Cora had loved forever, "what you are picks its way." It was written a few times across the wall, the only truly distinguishable meaning out of the mess.

He sat down on the bed. There was a cup of coffee on the bedside table, cold to the touch and beside that, a prescription bottle on its side. Max reached for it and turned it over in his hand. It was made out to Cora's dad and there were no pills left inside.

"Dammit Cora," he whispered. "Dammit!"

He hurled the bottle across the room. It bounced against the butch papered wall with a dull thwack and fell to the carpet without another sound.

“Fuck,” he muttered. “God dammit. Fuck.”

He had been the one to find her. *When he stepped inside her apartment, she was flat on her back on the floor, eyes glazed and half open, muttering nonsense. He knelt beside her, grabbed her wrists and gave her a good shake. Her half-closed eyes met his for a moment before she slipped into unconsciousness.*

They told him in the ER that he’d gotten to her just in time, and he wondered if they said that to everyone. “De ja vu,” he said to Emma when she showed up. She squeezed his shoulder and then went to talk to the doctors while he looked on. After, she offered a reassuring smile and led him to the cafeteria.

“She’s going to be okay,” she said after a round of day old donuts and a cup of coffee. “They pumped her stomach. She’s just sleeping it off now.”

Max crumpled his coffee cup in one hand. “What was she taking?” he asked.

Emma sighed. “Oxycodone,” she said. “They think it was cut with something else.” She looked around, clearly uncomfortable. “One of her doctors seems to think that she might have a problem.”

“Like an addiction?”

Emma still wasn’t looking at him. “Something like that,” she muttered.

“So, you don’t think that this was. . .like a suicide thing?”

“Max, come on.”

“You were there before, in high school.”

“That was a long time ago.”

"Then tell me what's going on, tell me how this is different."

"I think she's . . .struggling," Emma said. "Sam started university and she's alone a lot."

"Alone?" Max blinked. "She's working all the time."

"Not as much since she got fired from the bar," Emma said.

"She was fired?"

"Well, no, not fired exactly. She was out for a long time and then even when she could work again, she had trouble standing for long periods of time and—"

"So, they didn't hold her job for her?"

"They tried—"

"And what did Sam do about it? Couldn't he have done something, fought for her job?"

"I think he tried, but—"

"He's unbelievable," Max said. "He's supposed to keep her safe and he can't even do that right. He was driving that night, wasn't he? The night they wrecked."

"Max!" Emma raised her voice over his. "It was a landslide, for chrissake! It was no one's fault."

"He couldn't even hold her job for her! I mean, what the fuck?" Max heard himself shouting, but he couldn't calm himself down. He could still feel the weight of Cora in his arms as he gathered her up off the ground. He could feel her trembling against him and he could hear her breath coming in short gasps. Max clenched his muscles as if he was still holding her, then he let out a breath and released the tension in his arms.

"She's okay," Emma said. She was looking at him in concern. "She got another job and she's been doing okay."

The anger returned in a hot flash. "Okay? They have her under 72-hour suicide watch!"

Emma continued talking, but he wasn't listening.

Cora insisted, later, that it was an accident. The pills were left over from her last surgery—she still took them on bad days. And Max believed her, because it still seemed impossible that she would lie to him.

Max jerked awake to the sound of the door slamming. Heavy, uneven footsteps moved from the front door to the kitchen, where they became sharper as the carpet faded into linoleum. He peeled his face from the damp couch cushion and sat up slowly, tasting the beer from the night before at the threshold of his mouth. It took him a moment to realize that he was not at his own apartment, but curled up on Cora's couch. As he sat, a thin blanket fell from his shoulders. He looked to his left to Cora's bed, but it was empty.

"Cora?" he called.

"Kitchen!" she shouted back. He heard the refrigerator gasp open and slam shut. Liquid sloshed up the neck of a bottle. Another thunk as it was placed on the table. His stomach turned. He opened and closed his mouth several times, trying to break down some of the cotton. When that didn't work, he went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth and rinsed his mouth several times. He looked at himself in the mirror, taking in the deep grooves under his eyes and the wild state of his hair. He smelled like the last bar they'd gone to, piss and sweat and beer.

He ventured out into the kitchen where Cora sat at the table with the bottle of rum that had been in the freezer, her left leg sticking out because she still couldn't bend it at the knee.

"What's with the booze?" he asked. "Isn't this a bit early? Even for you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, Jesus, you worked in a bar for four years, that's all it means." He studied her. Her nose was pink, eyes bloodshot and rimmed with red. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Cora."

"No, I'm not playing a game. I'm simply repeating the expert's opinion about what's wrong. His opinion is better than mine, he knows what he's talking about, so I'm giving you his professional opinion."

"Okay, back up, start at the beginning."

She rolled her eyes and took another swig of rum. "Jesus Kenz, you're like a kindergartner."

"Don't turn this around on me. You're the one who isn't making any sense."

Cora rubbed her forehead. "I went to that appointment with the specialist Emma got me in to see," she said. "The specialist spent maybe fifteen minutes with me, gave me a spiel on the normal recovery time for crush injuries and then suggested that I had made an appointment with the wrong kind of specialist."

"I don't understand. I thought he was an osteopath?"

"He was."

“So what other specialist would you go to? An orthopedic surgeon?”

“God you’re slow. He suggested I visit a goddamn shrink.”

Max blinked. “Well sure, anyone who meets you thinks you should see a shrink,” he said.

“Not funny,” Cora said.

“Not a joke,” Max muttered.

“I’m such an idiot,” Cora said. “Out of the blue, he just starts asking me these bizarre questions, about my family and if I’d been having trouble staying engaged in the things I liked and if I had anyone to talk to. He latched on to the dead brother thing real quick.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Max said. “He thinks the pain is psychosomatic?”

“I wish,” Cora said. She picked at her nails. “At least that would have had some connection to the actual problem. He suggested that the pain shouldn’t be a problem anymore, so there must be something “deeper” going on. His words, not mine. When I ask him what more could be going on, stupidly thinking he might be talking about nerve or tissue damage, thinking maybe this time I might actually get some goddamn answers, he starts talking about how trauma can cause attention-seeking behaviors in people who don’t have a lot of outlets.”

“Attention-seeking behaviors?”

“He thinks I’m making it up, Kenz,” Cora said, rolling her eyes.

“Munchhausen's or PTSD or something like that.”

“Oh.” Max sat back. “I guess that makes sense. You probably do have a little PTSD. You and Sam were out there a long time.”

“Last time I checked, PTSD doesn’t cause physical pain.”

“Actually, in some cases—”

“If I wanted a case study on PTSD, I’d look it up myself,” Cora said. “I can’t believe I missed work for this. They kept me waiting good and long too, about forty-five minutes past my appointment time. And I was patient, thinking ‘this guy’s a specialist, it’s worth it.’ Bullshit.”

“I don’t understand,” Max said. “You’re not even going to give it a try?”

Cora looked at him. “I don’t need my head shrunk,” she said. “I need someone to help me with pain management so I can get a decent night of sleep or work more than twenty hours a week. The accident was a year ago. It shouldn’t still be hurting like it is.”

“Yeah,” Max said.

“He wouldn’t even write me prescription for more painkillers. He acted like I was some kind of addict or something. I mean, Jesus, do I look like a drug addict?”

“Well, no,” Max said. “But. . .what about what happened a few months ago?”

Cora took another drink from the bottle of rum. “I told you that was an accident.”

“I know, but—”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Of course I do, but, Cor, you have to look at how it must seem from the outside.”

Cora was silent and Max rushed on, “And maybe, you know, maybe he was on to something. Maybe there is a psychological root to all this and if you just talked to someone—”

“You’re unbelievable,” Cora said, staring at him. “I’m not making this up. I shouldn’t have to tell you that.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re lying about it,” Max said. “Maybe you just haven’t tried everything—”

“Fuck you,” Cora said. She stood up. “God, Kenz, just, just fuck you, alright?”

“What?” Max said. “I don’t see why you’re so resistant to just having a conversation with someone who might be able to help you.”

“And I don’t see how you’re still allergic to common sense,” she said. She grabbed her keys off the counter and limped toward the door in the careening way she had adapted since the accident. “I’m late for work.”

“I thought you took the day off,” Max said, but Cora had already slammed the door behind her. He sat in the silence of the apartment for a few minutes. That was Cora, always storming in just to storm back out. He wished she hadn’t slammed the door. She could be so stubborn, always refusing the help that was right in front of her.

He lifted his head from his hands, half expecting to find himself back in her kitchen almost four years ago, watching the door and waiting for her to come careening back in to yell at him some more. She hadn’t of course. She’d given him the cold shoulder for a few weeks and then acted as if the whole fight had never taken

place. The next real conversation he had with her was when she'd come to his apartment the night Sawyer died.

When he opened the door, she was standing outside, water dripping off her short curls. "You have to help me," she said.

He moved aside to let her in, hoping this wouldn't take long. He was supposed to be at the theater in half an hour to meet a girl from work, and he still needed to shower.

"Sawyer's dead," Cora said. She hunched over in her jacket, shivering. "Fuck. I didn't mean to just blurt it out, but there it is."

"What? When? What happened?"

Cora shook her head. "Emma didn't give me any details," she said. She sat down on his couch and then stood back up again and paced across the room.

"Oh my god," Max said, sinking into the spot on the couch where she'd been. "Jesus. Where's Emma? Who's with her?"

"She's still at the hospital," Cora said. "I sent Sam and Clem to take her back to Clem's place. I told them we'd meet them there, but. . ."

"Okay," Max said. "Okay. Let me just grab a few things and I'll be ready."

Cora followed him into the kitchen. "Kenz," she said. "I fucked up."

"What?" Max said, only half listening. He grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair and ran his hand along the counter, looking for his keys.

"I . . . I think it might have been my fault," Cora whispered. She was biting her thumb, not the nail, but the whole finger. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly. He made his way over to her.

“Will you just please come with me?” Cora asked.

Max gave her a slow nod. “Of course,” he said.

Cora choked back a sob. “Okay,” she said. “Okay. Come on.”

When they got to Emma and Sawyer’s apartment, Cora waited for him to unlock the door and then she hurried inside, heading straight for the bedroom. Max followed, at a slower pace. From the doorway, he watched her dig under the mattress, extracting two Ziploc bags of white pills. “Look for anything that’s unmarked,” she called over her shoulder. “The pills look like this.” She tossed him a bag.

“Cora,” he began.

“Just do it, Kenzie,” she said, a sharp snap in her voice. “You said you would help me, so help me.”

Max backed away as she moved to the other side of the bed and began rooting around underneath the mattress again. He retreated to the bathroom down the hall, flipping on lights as he went. In the bathroom mirror, he saw the half-full tub, the pink water and the red rivulets on the white shower curtain. He scanned the medicine cabinet, trying to avoid the scene behind him. He found nothing. At the edge of the tub, there were two razor blades, one clean, the other slick with blood.

Outside the bathroom, the carpet was wet. Max followed the patches of water to the kitchen. There was a smudged red handprint on the wall. Smears of blood on the linoleum. A few stained dishtowels abandoned in the corner.

“Cora!” he shouted.

Cora came quickly down the hall. “Holy shit,” she said, taking in the kitchen.

“You didn’t know about this?”

“No,” Cora said. “No, I swear, no.”

“You were worried he overdosed,” Max said.

Cora didn’t reply. She stepped around the blood and began opening cabinets and rummaging around. “Cora,” Max said. “This is bad, this is really bad. We need to get to Emma.”

Cora shut the last cabinet with a snap. “Do you want her to find out that her husband was a drug addict?” she asked. “Especially now that we know it’s not what killed him?”

Max shook his head. “No, but we need to get out of here,” he said. “We need to make sure Emma is. . .” He stopped himself from saying okay.

“One more stop,” Cora said. She shoved the bags of pills in her pockets.

They pulled up in front of her apartment. “I’ll only be a minute,” she said.

“What are you going to do with all of it?” Max asked.

Cora stopped half way out of the jeep. “I don’t know,” she said. “I hadn’t gotten that far.”

“I’m coming up with you,” Max said.

Together, they combed Cora’s apartment. Once they’d collected all of the small bags of pills, Max held out his hand. “I’m flushing it all,” he said. “Tonight.”

Cora shook her head. “Can’t you just hold on to it?” she asked. “Until things calm down?”

“Are you nuts?”

“I’m not a drug addict,” Cora said, forcefully. “I just. . .”

"You just what?"

"I was using them for the pain," Cora said. "And it got a little. . .it went a little far when I started sharing with Sawyer. But I can control it. I can stop."

Max pocketed the pills and shook his head. "I don't think it's a good idea Cor," he said.

"The detox kills people," she said quietly. "I've seen it happen."

"Then let me help you," Max said. Impulsively, he grabbed her hand.

"Please. We can get through this together. You've already done the hardest part."

Cora tugged her hand out of his. "You have absolutely no idea what you're talking about," she said.

"I'll tell Emma," Max said. "If that's what it takes."

For a moment, they stared at each other, standing in the parking lot at midnight beside the jeep. And then Cora had shrugged to let Max know that, perhaps for the first time in their friendship, he had won.

Max sank down on to the floor and buried his head in his hands, his fingers clenched in his hair. Sawyer reached a point where couldn't take it anymore. Maybe Cora had hit the same point.

Come on Kenz. Me, suicide? Don't you think that's a bit dramatic?

"Yes," he said to the empty room. "No. I don't know. Is it?"

I'm not a kid anymore.

"You used to say death would solve a lot of problems," Max said.

I used to say a lot of things.

"Yeah."

It's going to drive you crazy, isn't it?

"What?"

That you'll never know for sure.

"No," Max said. "It's not that," although it was a little bit.

If he closed his eyes, he could picture her sitting across from him, her hair done up in a sloppy top knot, her legs crossed, tilting her head slightly like she used to when she was listening for something.

He imagined taking her hand, what it would feel like in his, small and cool and smooth. She smiled, closing her eyes. *Run away with me?* she asked.

The two of them, alone, no Emma in the backseat, waiting for them at their destination, or holding on to them from home. Driving down the highway in Cora's jeep, no doors, no cover, the wind roaring in their ears. Destinationless. Directionless.

"No," Max said. "No, I can't. I couldn't then and I can't now."

He opened his eyes and she wasn't there, of course. "You were always going," he said and wasn't sure what he meant. The thought felt incomplete. "Everything had to be just so. If I didn't do it just so, that was it. You were always so ready to walk."

A breeze from outside caught the edge of one of the drawings and the soft noise it made as it brushed against the wall startled him. Fear jumped to anger and he was on his feet. "Is that what this is?" he said, raising his voice from a whisper. "Except this time, it was the whole world? The whole world wasn't willing to kneel so you're just gonna leave?"

His words felt small and impotent in the enclosed space. He flung the bedroom door open and ran out onto the lawn. He shouted her name across the bay,

over and over again, the cold air searing his throat as he gasped for breath. He fell to his knees in the wet lawn, digging his hands into the dirt.

“Fine,” he said. “Okay. Fine.”

He walked down the concrete stairs with the loose metal railing, the stairs solid but built on a foundation of clay. He walked across the damp sand, feeling it shift underneath his feet, feeling water bubble up between his toes as he moved closer to the water. He waded into the water, feeling the sharp, sudden cold she must have felt, feeling the gentle waves become rougher as he neared the rock she had scaled. He climbed, feeling the jagged edges cut into the soft underbelly of first his right foot and then his left. He sat atop it until the tide went out and he could walk back across the path that opened up in its wake.

Four

She's walking along the unfamiliar coast line, following the disappearing sun. The sand has that sticky, gritty feeling and it's cold between her toes. After the sun has shrunk to a small disc on the horizon, she reaches the bed of shells, the earthbound constellation where she knows she must kneel until he comes to get her.

The lighthouse flickers to life, on the cliff side above her, illuminating the tiny planets scattered across the sand. She holds Jupiter in her palm, tracing the tiny, imperfect storms on its eggshell surface. When she looks up, Mattie is standing in front of her, holding out Mars, which was always his favorite. The dusky red is the only color on the beach. The rest she has imagined. The sun is taking the color with it below the horizon where they can't follow.

She takes Mattie's warm hand and they start toward the lighthouse. "I love you," she says to him and he smiles back at her, but doesn't say a word.

The lighthouse beam blinks steadily on, but they can't get any closer and Mattie seems to know this. He's slowing down, but she lets him be her guide. She won't stop until he does and he won't stop until. . .

The sound of the ocean fades out and Mattie stops. She lifts him into her arms and holds him close even as he becomes dead weight in her arms. "It's okay," she whispers. "We're going to be okay."

She turns around to face the storm. The ocean has risen in front of her, curling into a wave that blocks out the sky. It hangs, suspended, waiting for her next move. She rests her hand on the back of Mattie's head and slowly walks forward as the world falls down on top of them.

Second Chapter

Clementine was waiting for him in the lobby. She looked like she'd slept crumpled in one of the chairs against the window wall. "Hey," she said softly.

He held up a cup of coffee. "Hey," he said back.

Clementine took the coffee from him. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Max shrugged. "I'm ready to see her," he said.

"Max," Clementine said. "She—"

"I know," Max said. "I want to see her anyway."

That night, the night, he later found out, that Sam told her, "I don't know how to love you anymore," and finally walked away from her after three months of leaving her by degrees, he got to the bar just before it closed. He didn't carry her home. They stumbled home together after a few more rounds. He carried her up the stairs to his apartment. He kissed her as she was shaking off her coat. He couldn't remember if she kissed him back.

They lay down together, laughing, talking nonsense, kissing. More than kissing. He'd waiting for this moment so long.

Naked, he settled himself beside her, ready for her to open herself up to him, at last. She was slower getting her clothes off. She made it down to her bra and began to cry.

"No," she said with a hiccup.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I have to get home," she said.

“Stay here,” he said.

“I have to go.”

“You can’t go.”

“Please, Max, I have to go.”

He couldn’t let her go. He held onto her until she fell asleep. There were still tears on her cheeks as her breathing slowed and evened out.

In the morning, she didn’t remember.

Did she?

Clementine left him at the top of the stairs. He walked into Cora’s room without knocking. He crossed the room and sat beside her bed. She looked almost alive. Her skin was pale, almost grey, and her lips were purple, parted slightly like the opening of a flower. They had her intubated and hooked up to a ventilator that hissed and ticked as it moved the air in her lungs. She was buried from the neck down under warming blankets. Her hand in his, when he took his place at her bedside, was warm and dry.

“It’s not okay,” he whispered. “This isn’t the way you were supposed to go.”

There was no reaction.

“Cora, please,” he whispered. He squeezed her hand. She didn’t squeeze back. He released her hand and her arm dropped against the side of the bed. He bent to kiss her forehead. She was still so warm and so soft. Alive.

“The only thing you can do for someone on a path to self-destruct is get out of the way.” Who had said that to him? She had. But he couldn’t get out of the way—he

couldn't run fast enough. He was sixteen and they were in her mom's car, the old beater jeep Cora had inherited and they were driving against the tide on the freeway and he was gripping the latch to the door, ready to throw himself out as soon as another car came around the corner and she was laughing.

They were seventeen and she was reaching for something on the top shelf, her tank top riding up so that he could see the tick marks of her growth spreading up from her hipbones, overlapping in some places. Some were not yet scars, one was still bleeding.

"You wouldn't understand," she said when she saw him looking.

"I don't want to," he'd said back to spite her, but she underestimated him. He understood. He understood what it meant to stop belonging to your own body, to outgrow your narrative, but to be stuck living it. He understood finding the answers where you could.

He'd even understood with the drugs, but she refused to accept that. "Get out," she said again and again, even though he'd stayed with her for days, holding a cold washcloth to the back of her neck when she got sick, rubbing her back when she started shaking and moaning and begging, calling in for her when she was too sick to go to work, lying to Sam when he showed up.

"Always," he said. "I always had your back."

He could already hear her response; she'd hold it against him until the end of time, but he couldn't bear it anymore. "I am not responsible for your life," he said, again. "I did everything I could and you just let me go. Even after everything, you let go."

He straightened. "But I let you go too," he said. "We let each other go. We were supposed to have each other's back, to keep each other from turning into assholes, from feeling like the world was too much."

The ventilator ticked and hissed. Ticked and hissed.

"It is too much," Max said. "Without you."

He laid a hand on her forehead and smoothed back her hair. When they came for her, he kept holding onto her hand.

Third Chapter

Max didn't hold out hope that Emma would show for the memorial service and he gave her a good couple of weeks before reaching out. He hadn't heard from her since she'd called to tell him about Cora's accident, but she answered on the first ring and agreed to meet him and Clementine at his place one evening after work.

"I had a dream about Cora the other night," Max said when they'd all settled. "She seemed. Peaceful. Like she wanted me to know that she was okay."

Clementine gave him a questioning look from across the room and he shrugged. Emma smiled politely and took a sip of her coffee.

"What have you been up to?" Clementine asked.

Emma started when she realized Clementine was talking to her. "Oh," she said. "This and that. I got a job in Bremerton and moved to Port Orchard. It's quiet out there. Not a lot to do, but it's nice."

They sank into another awkward silence. "I heard from Sam the other day," Max said. "He's going to continue fixing up Cora's dad's house. I think she would have liked that."

"Oh," Emma said and smiled again.

It took about two more remarks about Cora accompanied by sharp looks from Clementine before Emma snapped.

"Just stop, Max," Emma said.

"What?"

"You're being ridiculous," Emma said. "Cora only exists in stories now! She's not sending you messages from beyond the grave, she's not trying to help you. She's dead and rotting in the earth."

"Marie had her cremated," Clementine muttered.

"Then she's less than nothing!" Emma said. "That's why they call it losing someone. She is lost."

"No," Max said quietly. "If she was lost, she could be found."

"The only place we can find her now is memories," Emma said. "She's a re-creation."

"Then why can't you let me keep recreating her? Why is that a threat to you?"

"Oh, come on Max, it's not a threat to me, it's a threat to you! You need to move on. I'm trying to protect you!"

"Oh, so you have a monopoly on grief?"

"That's not what I meant," Emma said, stonily.

"Which is it?" Clementine said suddenly.

"Which is what?" Emma spat.

"You said Cora lives on in stories," Clementine reminded her. "But then when Max said she could be found, you said she's in memories. Which is it?"

Emma and Max looked at each other. "Memories," Max said at the same time Emma said, "Stories."

"Memories are stories," Max said.

"No," Emma said. "Stories are what you rely on when your memory fails you."

"Technically," Clementine said. "There's no such thing as an accurate memory."

He stared at her and she shrugged. "Sylvie was a psych major in college."

"Is this about Sawyer?" Max asked after a pause.

Emma took a step back, pressing her hand into her face. "No," she said. "Yes. No."

"I'm tired of it being about him," she said. "I can't trust my memories anymore, if I ever could. I don't know what kind of person he was, anymore. I can't make up my mind whether he was good or bad."

Clementine shook her head. "No one is all good or all bad," she said.

"I need it to not be my fault," Emma whispered.

Max wasn't sure if it was the right move, but he stood and enfolded her in his arms. She'd been taller than him their entire childhood, but somehow, he towered over her now. "It's not your fault."

"I could have saved him," Emma said. "I could have saved her."

"If you'd gotten there in time?"

"Yeah."

"You already saved her twice," Max said. "I don't think there was any saving her."

"You're fearless," Max said. "You moved away from home when you were eighteen, with no plan, only dreams. And you made them happen. I always admired you for that, even when I couldn't admit it."

Emma stared at him. It hadn't been her decision at all; her bravery was borrowed momentum: Cora's. Cora didn't look before she leapt, but still landed on her feet. The only way to keep up with her was to pretend you weren't afraid either.

"You were brave too," Emma said. "You flew across the country to start a new life."

Max shrugged. "And ended up right back where I started," he said. "Give or take 300 miles."

"It doesn't really matter where you end up," Clementine said. "It matters how you get there. What you have to go through to get there."

"We've all been through a lot," Max said.

"Too much," Emma said. "This is too much. I'm sorry. I've got to go."

She shrugged out of Max's arms and gathered her things.

"What the hell was all that?" Max asked Clementine once she'd left.

"Me?" Clementine said. "You brought up your dream with Cora right off the bat."

"I was trying to ease the tension," Max said. "Get us on even footing."

"Well that worked out really well for you, didn't it?"

"She left after you started talking!"

"Okay, okay, this isn't helpful," Clementine said. "Maybe Emma was right. Maybe it was too soon."

"Yeah," Max said.

They stood in silence for a moment. "I didn't really have a dream about Cora," he said. "I made that up. I don't know why. I got nervous, I think."

“That’s a relief,” Clementine said. “I thought you were going to start talking about how you’d seen the light or something.”

Max bit back a chuckle. Clementine walked over to sit beside him. “We’ll get her back,” she said. “She just needs more time”

Final Chapter

One year later. . .

Max arrived at an event he never thought he'd attend. He spotted Sylvie in the crowd and made his way over.

"Did you get a chance to say hi?" he asked.

Sylvie shook her head. "I couldn't find her," she said. "We'll see her after, I suppose."

Alex let go of Sylvie's hand and looked up at Max. "Is Clemie a wizard?" he asked.

Max laughed. "No," he said.

"Oh," Alex said. He seemed disappointed.

"Couldn't find a babysitter," Sylvie said with a shrug.

Max felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around to face Sam. They considered each other for a moment and then Sam smiled. "It's good to see you," he said.

"You too," Max said, a little stiffly.

"Hey Sam," Sylvie said, leaning over to give his shoulder a squeeze. "Glad you could make it."

"Me too," Sam said. He pulled out his phone. "I-uh-have a few pictures of the house. You guys should come out sometime and check it out. It's really coming along."

"Great," Max said with a tight smile.

The music began and they turned to face the front. Across the lawn, Max spotted Clementine in her black robe, looking around for them. He waved, but she didn't see him.

After the ceremony, which proved to be more concise and efficient than Max had expected, Clementine ran up to them, her robes billowing. She hugged Sam first, probably more because she could see that Sam was anxious to get home, then Sylvie and Alex. When she got to Max, he saw that she had tears in her eyes.

"I'm proud of you Clem," he said and left it at that.

Clementine turned to talk to Sylvie and Max scanned the room. He hadn't really been expecting Emma to show. She hadn't come to Sylvie and Clementine's wedding, Thanksgiving, or Christmas. Why would she show now?

Maybe some wounds just ran too deep. It might be that he would have to accept her as another loss, another absence, another memory. That might be all he could do.

But, as he was turning away, he spotted a familiar figure walking quickly across the lawn in the direction of the parking lot. She turned when he called her name, already moving toward her. She didn't encourage his approach, but she didn't turn away from it either. He stopped several yards away and they stared at each other as people moved around them.

She raised her arm to wave, then she turned and was gone.

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