

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Jessica A. Baker for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 17, 2006.

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Winter Ocean

by

Jessica A. Baker

A THESIS

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Jessica A. Baker, Author

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Winter Ocean

Chapter One

The quart of week old milk had already soured and separated by the time Ryan took it from the refrigerator, its contents running clear as water and smoky as fouled snow, through a thick layer of aged glass. She inhaled, turned it upside down, and watched its thick, silty contents chug down the drain, smelling nauseatingly close to the odor of the sepia toner she used to stain her photographs with age. Even the natural went chemical in its last good hours. She rinsed it out with hot water and capped it with the loose plastic farmer's lid. Gladys, her land lady, would expect it back, washed and cleaned the next morning, as though it was never full.

The farmhouse had been Brendan's idea – fifteen minutes outside of Irasburg's village limits – enough space, he'd said, that they could live together for days and not know it. That was the sell: space to make up for the confines of their first few apartments, an environment free of clutter; room for her photography, for his writing, for Max, Ryan's Rottweiler who'd seemed to increase exponentially in size every time they moved: better real estate, smaller space. Even she had begun to feel large in their last apartment with its tiny cubic oven and cheap, pasteboard furniture – they'd left it all behind. In hindsight, Ryan saw the farmhouse as a bad omen – all those rooms empty of furniture and full of voids she and Brendan couldn't fill. Gone was the coziness of their city apartment, replaced by a basement with a fieldstone foundation, so old that between the gaps of crumbling masonry, she could watch the cold turn her breath to fog. She wanted him to see it

the way she had come to; their love had corners, and without those walls, tight pressed as they were, it didn't last. But he was gone. He'd left a little over seven months before with his suitcase of clothing, her dog, and their teapot.

That was all he wanted, he'd said, standing in the doorway to the kitchen on a warm afternoon in late November, when the last weak light was straining in behind him. He had no need for material possessions. They, like Ryan, had become an anchor, holding him to a life he didn't want anymore. She felt she should have said something, tried to change his mind, but there weren't any words. Arguing seemed futile – more excessive than the possessions she had squirreled away in meticulously labeled boxes. Max had liked him better, anyway, hers or no. She couldn't complete a sentence, so sharp was her sense of loss, her shock. The day before, they had discussed the purchase of silverware. Forks. Knives. Nothing, now.

She would have liked to say that they kept their life savings in that teapot, that what he had taken was something larger, more intangible. He would have liked to hear her say that, though the teapot was unexceptional – dark mottled blue to match the farmhouse kitchen. She hadn't used it any more or less than he did. It wasn't their first or last joint purchase, nor was it a family heirloom. It was a teapot. A vessel. Something that could stand empty. Still, it would have proven his claims: her melodramatic over-reactions, her need for material possessions in order to compensate for the loss of her mother at a young age, which he felt – not

incorrectly, though she'd never have admitted it to him – led to her tucking away of objects. Of the two of them, she'd always assumed she would be the one to run.

Down the road, a neighbor's dog barked, and Ryan turned, listening for the telltale crush of tires against gravel. Mud season had made the roads skirting the village all but impassable in some places, and the only person risking her slick strip of mud would be Gladys. Gladys, who would be out regardless of the snowless fields and the ripe, cold air; she had nothing to worry about, no late spring sap to chase from the trees.

Once a week, usually on Saturday, Gladys visited. She always said the same thing: "So, you've made it another week? Old Henry at the Grange certainly lost his hat when he bet against you." Other than that, Gladys could be depended on for her plate of Brendan's favorite peanut butter cookies, a bone for Max – who Ryan was too afraid to tell her had gone, too – and a quart of raw milk from her son's farm, "still warm." She thought Ryan was a waste from the vantage point her sixty years gave her; she'd raised eight children and a herd of dairy cows on the farm where Ryan lived alone.

Ryan turned off the faucet and slunk back from the window. In the past few weeks, Gladys' visits had become more difficult. She asked complicated questions about the rooms emptied of furniture and made awkward jokes about meth labs in big empty houses. The last time she was there, she'd looked in the refrigerator – not the freezer, thank God – and just shook her head at Ryan, who sat paralyzed by her own failure.

“Ryan!” Gladys called – the bellow of a farm wife long used to calling children, men, livestock. The front door clattered open, the screen still unlatched from an early trip to the Coventry post office.

“Hello,” Ryan said, as she stepped out into the living room and Gladys swept past her for the kitchen. The house was still very much Gladys’.

“The house looks good today,” she said – a rare moment of praise.

“What’s that I smell? Pine oil on the woodwork? I always used lemon, but I like that you’re paying attention to the wood.” Really, it was a candle that burned low in a jar on the mantle to cover the thick odor of the sepia toner Ryan had used earlier in the pantry. “I do miss the old butcher block,” Gladys said, hefting a stained canvas bag onto the table from Ryan’s childhood home, “It’s just not the same without it.”

“You’re here early,” Ryan said, “I usually only get to see you on Saturday.”

Gladys sat down and tugged at the stubborn hem of her cotton skirt which had snuck up to reveal thick, muscled legs and varicose veins dark as bruises, through a web of support hose. “I figured you might have a wedding tomorrow and I’d miss you if I didn’t stop today.”

“No,” Ryan said. Nobody wanted to get married in mud season, and she was looking forward to the weekend off after a hectic bout of winter weddings. She hadn’t started booking summer weddings yet, preferring a few weeks without

nagging mothers of the bride calling every five minutes to double check prices.

She'd received enough inquiries that she wasn't worried.

"Oh," Gladys said, raising her eyebrows and leaning in, "But you're okay?"

"Fine," Ryan said. She liked to cut Gladys off before questions of finances arose. Nothing was sacred with Gladys. Ryan would write a rent check the moment she left, put it out for the morning trip to the post office. Gladys dug into her bag and extracted a zip-lock bag of peanut butter cookies and a bone thick as Ryan's forearm for Max, which she dropped on the floor with a meaty thud.

"Where's Max?"

"Out running in the fields," Ryan said. "He was in just a bit ago."

"Good," she said. "I don't like to think of you out here all alone at night."

Ryan forced a smile. "Thank you for the cookies. You shouldn't trouble yourself."

"It's no trouble," Gladys said, "If one of my girls were in your position, I'd hope she'd have a neighbor looking in on her, too."

"How are your girls?"

"They're always busy, but good," Gladys said, "And they're so lucky to be settled down with families. Even Amy." Amy, Gladys' youngest daughter, had only settled down the fall before. Ryan had photographed the wedding in exchange for a month's free rent; it was only weeks later that Brendan left. "I

can't understand why she wanted to live alone for so long, scared me nearly to death thinking of her living in that city by herself."

"Didn't you ever want to live alone?" Ryan asked. The best thing to do was just let her talk.

"No. I never had such an inclination in my life. I married Tom right after we graduated from the union high school and gave him his first son ten months later – same year he inherited the farm from his folks. They moved into the cottage that used to stand down the road a bit, where that awful manufactured home is now, and we moved right in here and set up housekeeping. That was a good half century ago, this past January. Bought our first cows together right after Abram was born – three Jerseys and a Holstein that we added to the herd for an even forty milkers."

January. Brendan was already gone then – left more than a month before that. He and Ryan had made it a little over a year before his wanderlust pulled him from the farmhouse with all of its nooks and crevices. They'd had no cows together. It was his idea, if they every bought the place, to pull down all the old post and beam barns to give them a clear view of the distant mountain range that hedged the narrow valley from the dining room. Ryan had covertly vied for their survival, their need to remain in the landscape, even though they had been gutted, the milk line and bulk tank sent away to another farm.

"You still want children, don't you, Ryan? Brendan hasn't ruined you in that way, too?"

“No,” she said. “Yes and no. I don’t know.” Ryan didn’t know what question she was answering. She scraped back her chair and went to the sink to scour out the belly of the milk bottle with a wire brush. “I have no maternal instincts.”

“Dogs are very territorial. You’ve done a good job with Max. He would have caused more problems if he’d wanted to go with Brendan.” Gladys looked at Ryan, her eyes cool, challenging.

Did she notice the dog bowl still had the same amount of food in it that it did during her last visit? Ryan glanced over –the water evaporated and the kibbles were collecting dust; she’d have to fix that when Gladys left.

“But kids, you’ll never know unless you try,” Gladys said, shrugging and running her fingertips across the wedding ring that dangled from a chain around her neck. “All I ever wanted was a house, children, and the farm.”

“I’m happy, Gladys,” Ryan said. But what would it sound like to have someone else living in the farmhouse again – the thunder of children on the stairs, in the bedrooms above the living room?

Gladys screwed up her forehead in annoyance. She touched her belly, as a young woman might when carrying a child – a protective, offhand gesture. How would someone adjust after eight pregnancies and so many years, to the idea of never having another child? Did empty mean something different to her?

“I was just offering my advice,” she said. “Take it or leave it. I just think it’s a waste to live like this.” She stood up, tugging at her bunched support hose

with no embarrassment. She may have wanted to ask if Ryan blamed Brendan for leaving, but silence was her courtesy. She had finally stopped asking after him.

“I’m sorry, Gladys,” Ryan said. “I love the house. I’m just not ready to move on yet.”

“I only want you to be happy,” she said, “You without parents to talk to, a mother to listen.” She shook her head, touched a hand to Ryan’s cheek. Ryan felt hollow and set adrift; she wished she liked Gladys more. “I’ll drop off another quart of milk later this evening and leave it on your porch. Wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, Ryan –”

“Yeah?”

“There’s a young man who just moved to town, something Rutger – about your age and not all that frightening in daylight, either. He’s renting from Sue Peacham, down on River Road. I can let your phone number fall into his hands, if you’d like.”

“No, thank you, Gladys,” Ryan said. How did one let a phone number fall into someone’s hands? Ryan didn’t want to encourage her; she didn’t ask.

“A girl’s never going to find anyone if she isn’t keeping an eye on the field,” Gladys said, smiling at Ryan and patting her own ash white braid. “A hair cut could help, too.” Before Ryan could respond, Gladys walked out of the

kitchen. "I'll show myself out, dear," she called. "I'll let you get back to your work."

The front door clattered shut.

Ryan stepped into the bathroom to glance in the mirror. "I don't need a haircut," she said, looking at herself hard in the mirror. Brendan always liked her hair as it was now – overlong and "musty-penny" red. He used to run his fingers through it, trailing them like satin snakes down her back. "A brush run through it maybe, but not a haircut. Not yet." She pulled her hair on top of her head in a knot and fastened it with an elastic. Better. Almost okay. But what was she waiting for? She'd only had her hair cut once since she'd moved to Irasburg, and Brendan had hated it so much that she'd grown it out and never went back. Ridiculous, now. She leaned closer and examined the new, soft creases on her forehead. At twenty-eight, she was the exact age her mother had been when she abandoned Ryan. Did she, too, have soft creases and uncut hair?

Ryan spent more time in the darkroom than she'd anticipated. The organization of a set of black and white photographs had entered its tedious, time consuming stage. Tomorrow, Larson, the manager of the village market would pick up the crates and transfer them to a gallery in Stowe that exhibited her work once a year, usually netting enough sales for a few lavish Christmas presents. This year, presents were not a concern, and this freedom had altered her images. Gone were the smiling children of her earlier work, and in their place was a series of

autumn shots – the deaths of various plants juxtaposed against their live, spring bodies, and barren autumn landscapes. She had hand colored some of the autumn shots to increase the contrast – the only color inhabited death – and was pleased with the results. Her dealer in Newport, the owner of a popular gift shop, found them disturbing, though a few had sold – the woman still longed for Ryan’s ‘Summer Children’ – a fact she had reiterated to Ryan again that morning, when she’d caught her at the post office: “The photographs disturb your customers, Ryan. What’s wrong with you? I don’t know what to tell them.” Ryan had shrugged away any real response. She wasn’t bothered by specific criticism, but felt subject matter was her choice – it was her art.

She glanced down at the pile of mats she had just finished cutting. This work was deeply satisfying, with its straight, metered edges and exact proportions. Ryan placed them in the shipping crates and began to drag them out of the darkroom – she had to leave them in the kitchen for Larson, who would let himself in to get them in the afternoon.

Despite her earlier plans to shoot outside, the hollow clatter of the apple tree’s branches against the dining room window was enough to keep Ryan in the house. She had enough photographs of budding leaves. Enough images of birth. She walked back into the darkroom, turned off the overhead light, and set to work on a new project: double exposures of the live and dying plants. When the phone rang, she was hanging the last of her test strips, unfixed. She stood up, moved towards the door, hesitated. The white light of the kitchen would destroy her

prints. She inched through the curtain and when it stopped swinging, stepped out into the kitchen as the phone finished a last shrill ring that left the air dead in its absence. Mrs. Beal's phone was almost identical, but for the color. How many hours did she spend during her childhood, sitting below that phone in the afternoons while her father worked, waiting for her mother to change her mind, come back, call?

Outside on the porch, just as Gladys promised, was the quart of raw milk. She carried it inside and put it in the refrigerator – no need to break tradition. The peanut butter cookies took up the last cubic inches of the freezer, already stuffed with Ziploc bags of peanut butter cookies. She tossed the bone out the back door, where one of the neighbors' dogs would pick it up and bring it home – a prize. Max. If he were here, he'd have already enjoyed it and hidden it safely in the mauld earth of the garden. Ryan glanced at the dusty kibble – she knew better than to worry about him, Brendan was a better caretaker than she ever could have been.

Her stomach gurgled. She couldn't remember eating lunch and it felt too late to start cooking. Ryan picked up the phone and dialed.

“Great Flying Pizza,” said a young woman, “This is Holly. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Holly, it's Ryan.”

“Hey, Ryan. How are things at the farmhouse, tonight?”

“Good.” When had the Sheriff’s daughter started working weekends, or evenings, for that matter? “Can I get a large chef salad with two packets of house dressing on the side?”

“Sure, pick-up or deliv—”

“Delivery,” Ryan said. “You know the address?” Holly was silent on the other end. Was she fumbling with the cash register? She never could get it to work right.

“I’m sorry, Ryan. It looks like we don’t deliver there anymore.”

“You delivered here last week. Friday. Mitch drove it out. I didn’t forget to tip.”

“We’ve redistricted,” she said. “We can now only deliver to the Coventry diner off the highway. That’s as far as we’ll go. No back roads.”

Was she kidding?

“Since when does a pizza place redistrict?”

“Gas prices are going up,” she said coolly.

“But you’re the Great Flying – your motto is: ‘If we can find you on a map, we’ll deliver’.”

“Now it’s: ‘If you’re in village limits, twenty-nine minutes or the pizza’s on us.’ Calvin drew up a new logo with a delivery guy that looks like Young Henry with a late delivery pizza on his head. Do you still want to come in and pick that up?”

“I don’t know...”

“Look, Ryan. I’ve got someone waiting to order...”

“No thanks,” Ryan said. “Have a good night, Holly.” She set the phone back in its cradle and opened the refrigerator; there was only a limp carrot and an unopened jar of mayonnaise. The oatmeal in the cabinet had a hole gnawed out of the almost empty bag – hopefully a large mouse and not a rat. It was only fifteen minutes, a half hour both ways.

The headlights of Ryan’s van cast narrow circles of light at the brick wall of the pizza parlor. Seven months since Brendan left, and she was still occasionally paralyzed by the village, the way people’s eyes seemed to follow her, clinging to the gasp of air that Brendan should occupy, had occupied for so much of their first year in Irasburg. She opened the door and stepped out into the brisk air, dazzled by the light from the windows. The restaurant was deserted but for a few tables of teenagers that emptied her of fear – they couldn’t care enough to notice her, and they were all too old for Brendan to have encountered.

Holly wasn’t at the register. Instead, there stood an older young woman – perhaps a college student back from school. She had the look of returning – bored, annoyed, a thick piece of dark plastic shoved through her lower lip and hair that was spiky and magenta. She was not a summer child, and it was obvious from the stares of the high schoolers that perhaps she was not of this place at all, but visiting relatives, or a transplant that wasn’t thriving yet. She took directions for a delivery order, while Ryan waited, leaning against the counter and glancing at an old menu.

“Eight-fifty-nine Covered Bridge Road?” she asked. “Yeah, it’ll be there in thirty-nine minutes or it’s on us.” She hung up the phone. “Stupid, capitalistic... Hi!” She flashed a wary, fake smile at Ryan. “What can I do for you?”

“You don’t deliver to Covered Bridge Road.”

“Of course we do,” she said, rolling her eyes, her voice low and deadpan, elongated for humor: “We’re the Great Flying Pizza, if it’s on the map, we’ll get it there in thirty minutes, or it’s on us.” She raised her eyebrows at Ryan, sharp emaciated caterpillars. “Hey Henry,” she bellowed – definitely not from the village – “Where do we deliver?”

“If it’s on the map, we go there,” he called out from the back room.

“Unless it’s...” The owner, Old Henry, formerly of the Grange when there still was a grange, stepped out from behind the huge brick ovens, brushing flour from his hands onto the front of a stained apron. “Ryan,” he said, turning one brilliant shade of scarlet after another. It was not the heat of the ovens. “Why don’t you have a seat? Get her a chef salad, Annie. Don’t charge her.”

“I’m going to square with you,” he said, gesturing for Ryan to sit down. “I know you’re upset.” Obviously. “But you’re not the reason we’re not delivering to the farmhouse anymore. Gladys thinks—”

“What does Gladys have to do with this?”

“She and Harriet were at a DAR meeting last week, and Gladys suggested that you needed to get out more. I’m sorry, but it’s Harriet’s parents’ money that

got us the Great Flying, and she has control over the purse strings. Now, before you say anything, this won't last forever, just until she stops hawking the delivery slips. They want what's best for you. They're worried about you, all holed up in that farmhouse by yourself. And the pizza parlor is a great place to meet ..."

"Men?" Ryan asked, glancing at the scattering of teenagers and the girl at the register who was leaning against the counter reading "A Good Girl's Guide to Practical Witchcraft." Poor thing – Harriet wasn't going to like that.

"Something like that," he said, glancing down at Young Henry, who was older than Ryan and had a Henry of his own – little Hank – set a bag down next to her. Old Henry waited for him to go back to the kitchen.

"Two weeks at the most," he said.

Why two weeks? Was Harriet going on another of the bank's senior trips to Ireland or Southeast Asia? Was that how long it would take for Gladys to find another man to dangle in front of her like a dying bug? Ryan nodded. He patted her shoulder.

"You're a good girl, Ryan. You remind me of my Rachel." His daughter Rachel, the perfect child, lived a fortunate six hours away. By plane.

The fork in the road that marked a scant mile to the farmhouse was thickly veiled by a low mist that caressed the ground. In the sweep of headlights, Ryan made out a wall of white, glistening fur and slammed hard on the brakes. Her seatbelt bent before snapping back taut against her chest and the base of her throat.

The car stalled to a stop – an amateur’s mistake – and skidded on the loose gravel left over from the milk trucks. Through the flat windshield, she examined the broad flank of a cow, then let herself out of the van.

The night air was absolutely quiet, but for the occasional call of what she could only imagine were dying frogs – it was a night too cold for their survival – spring or not. There were at least a dozen cows in the road, moving softly through the mist like jellyfish through water. They were loping, their bags slack, and their pace lethargic. The fence was down, and when she walked over to get a good look at the rotted post, one of the animals nosed the skin where her shoulder met her neck and left a warm trickle of shivering drool. These animals were not going anywhere. They were fed, milked, and looking for a place to lie down for the night. She was merely a curiosity on their journey to slumber. One let out a low, glottal moo and another stepped past her, out of the fence.

Ryan wasn’t going to get around them – that was obvious. She climbed back inside her van and pulled it carefully off the road, keeping her eyes on the cows as they sleepwalked into the muted moonlight. She parked on the side of the road; the van would be fine. As Ryan pulled her salad from the passenger seat, an older beast with a time-wrinkled face settled with her bag just off the road, her front hooves on it. Ryan wove her way through the bodies, watching the warm mist that rose from their lips. If she hadn’t already taken so many photographs of them, she would return and do more, but there were already books of negatives in the farmhouse. Another animal sighed, loud and low, sinking to the ground, its

breath like a trail of bubbles escaping upward through water thick as mercury. The night air grew warm around them, sweet with the smell of silage and souring milk.

Ryan hesitated. She didn't want to leave them, as she stood, stroking the hide of the animal on the outermost edge of the herd. The cow was a small Jersey, with bony shoulder blades and a cold, clammy muzzle that felt like wet rubber against the palm of her hand. Maybe this was what she needed – a herd of voluptuous females to keep her company, out of trouble with Gladys – a reason for keeping the farm. But she was standing in the middle of a village road at night, surrounded by such a group of females who had broken loose, who would need to be herded into the barn at an hour long before she rose in the morning, milked, cleaned, fed and sent back out to pasture. She could hardly care for a dog. And cows clearly ranked somewhere near the top of the ladder of responsibility leading to a husband, children.

She pulled herself away from the herd, dragging the sleeves of her sweater down over her hands. Away from the cows, the air cooled and the wind picked up. She could still smell their sweet breath, hear their low, evening sounds, though they faded softer and softer until she heard nothing more than the wind and her own footsteps.

Hot air escaped from the mouth of the kettle, spewing water droplets and causing the blue flame underneath to sizzle orange and red. She was getting ready for bed, preparing, as she always did, for an evening of silence, an attempt to waste

the last few hours of dark before she could sleep and wake again to work. Ryan poured the water over a tea bag in a mug that Brendan had left. It was her favorite – a rough brown piece of pottery with the initials of another woman he had dated in college, before her. It was this woman’s last gift to him, and Ryan took great comfort in his ability to leave it, in the same way she mourned the presence of things she had given him during their years together.

She wrapped her hands around it, feeling the chill warm from her fingertips. Chamomile curled up in the tendrils of steam, and she breathed in, closing her eyes. If it got much colder, she’d have to start building fires again. Gladys viewed the natural gas oven as a treat, but remained unwilling to put in central heating. It would destroy what she called the “structural integrity” of the house which had relied on a wood stove in the kitchen and a fireplace in the living room since it was built. Ryan should enjoy her cool bedroom, but lacked the necessary stamina for that last part of Brendan’s dream.

She opened the door of the wood stove and peered in at the stained iron sides, the small torrents of ash that the suck of the door created. This had been Brendan’s chore, his great love, lighting and maintaining what he referred to as “the Great Stove” and fireplace. Max had shown his agreement by bouncing back and forth between the warmth of the hearth and the kitchen, depending on which room Brendan was in, refusing the murk of her darkroom for the first time in their years together.

Ryan sat up in bed. Icy air washed over her, and she ducked back under the blankets. The ringing that shattered her sleep didn't stop. Another two minutes passed, and she peeked out from under the ragged edge of the quilt, watching her breath rise in small clouds. The clock on the bedside table read 1:36. She glanced around the room for slippers, her bathrobe, but it was too dark to find them. They were probably in the closet. The phone stopped ringing. She sighed and slipped back under the blankets. It rang again – did it ever sound this urgent during the day?

“I'm coming,” she called, as though the phantom caller could hear her, and hoisted a sheet, two thin blankets, two duvets, a down comforter and the old quilt to the foot of the bed. This was what she'd regressed to. Ryan rubbed her hands over her arms, trying to get the goose bumps to sink back into her skin. She grabbed a robe from the closet – the first thing she could find – and started to fumble toward the stairs. Brendan. The smell overwhelmed her – something between aftershave and cologne – both possessions she had banished from the house after he left. She turned on the lights as she moved, one in the living room, another in the kitchen.

“What?” Ryan asked, pressing the cold plastic of the phone against her ear.

“Ry, is that you?” A familiar male voice on the other end of the line. Mike, her best friend from college – was he drunk? Stoned? He was talking so slowly that she felt like she was hearing him through a mile of water, each syllable elongated, stretched out. Maybe she was the one with the problem.

“What is it, Mike? She asked. Why was he calling? Better yet, why was he awake so early? In college, their policy was no calls before noon. He’d switched his major twice because he refused to take classes that started before one on weekdays.

“How are you?”

“Mike, it’s the middle of the night. Where are you?”

“Home. Maine. Where have you been? I’ve been calling all night. You haven’t answered.” She remembered the call in the darkroom. How long had it been since they’d last talked? A week? Maybe a bit more. How long had she been in town? Walking home?

“I went out,” she said, “You know me...”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice so dejected that she regretted her earlier elusiveness.

What would happen if he stopped calling, too?

“How’s the... weather there?”

She walked across the room and put the kettle on the stove. “It’s still cold,” she said. “I’m going to have to start using the wood stove again, or I’m going to freeze to death. It’s a miracle I made it through the winter alive.”

Ryan waited. The line was silent, except for brief moments, when Mike’s ragged breathing echoed through to her.

“Mike? Hun? Hello?”

“He’s dead, Ry.”

“Who’s dead?” she asked, feeling like an idiot, wrapping the phone cord slowly around her arm, winding it past her shoulder until it looked, reflected in the window, like curls of barbed wire. She felt terror settle heavy in her belly. She wanted to sit down, but the table was miles away.

“Brendan.”

She pressed her back against the wall and sank until the back of her legs met the cold tile of the kitchen floor.

“Brendan’s dead.”

“This isn’t funny, Mike,” she said, waiting, praying for a punch line, a practical joke. She wouldn’t get one; she knew it.

“No,” he said, his voice too low, too intimate. “No, it’s not.”

She breathed out, realizing she’d been holding her breath. “How?” she asked. She could hear his breath, moist, heavy gasps of air that mimicked her own; if he were here, with her, it would form small ghosts in her cold kitchen. She ran her hand over the floor, her palm soft against it. The night was black against the window. She hoped to see something, anything – even if it was the farmer coming to plough down the last stubble of his uncut hay in long sweeps that would make brown the fields. She wanted some proof that something was still living outside the narrow walls of her kitchen.

“He drowned.” Mike’s voice was quiet and far away.

“He can swim, Mike,” she replied. “He was a fucking Eagle Scout.” She pulled in a lungful of cold air, feeling it burn inside the cage of her chest.

“Everyone drowns, Ry. Maybe he was drinking. Maybe he lost control. I don’t know what the hell they were doing. It’s May. Who goes fishing in May? The other two guys he was with – buddies from high school – are okay, got pulled out by the Coast Guard, or a fishing boat, or some bullshit like that. I don’t know, I guess he wasn’t wearing a life jacket.”

“Stop saying I don’t know,” Ryan said. “It’s impossible.” She didn’t remember buddies from high school, his or anyone’s. They seemed ludicrous, a part of some invented childhood. He talked about a few guys he knew, but they were past tense. Nobody he knew, or kept in touch with, now. “You know what a tight ass he was about water safety,” she said. “He brought Max a life vest whenever he took his parents’ boat out on the water.” She’d forgotten about this, hadn’t thought about it in over a year. Max had chewed it off and Brendan hadn’t spoken to her for two days. What kind of mother would she make? She couldn’t even keep her own dog safe.

“Where’s Max?” she asked, looking at the two bowls across the room.

“What?”

“Max. Do you know where Max is? Brendan took him when he left. Was he in the boat, too?”

“I don’t know, Ry,” Mike said, sighing. “I’m going to drive up and get you. The funeral is in his hometown on Monday. I should be there in a few hours. I need you to pack.” He paused, a cold pool of silence on the line. “His Mom wants some of his things back.”

Ryan crawled across the floor and hoisted herself into a kitchen chair. Her hands shook. The kettle whistled and spewed water onto the stove – a hissing mess. Brendan wasn't coming back. There would be no one to mention the spewing tea kettle ever again. She couldn't hear Mike on the other line, only a muffling of something that obscured his voice. "Mike?" Her own voice was unrecognizable, a gasp, a plea, something that reminded her of the past. "What does she want?" Ryan asked, though she didn't want to. She wanted Brendan to still be alive, standing somewhere behind Mike, waiting for a big laugh.

"His mother, she called me earlier. She didn't want you to find out in the newspaper," he said. "She wanted me to drive up and tell you. I thought you'd want some time by yourself, though... Damn." He set down the phone, Ryan could tell that much, as she snuggled into the robe, breathing in the last traces of scent. Mike blew his nose. She peered out of the flannel at the slender sliver of moon, barely enough to light the sky.

"I can meet you," she said, as soon as his breathing returned. "I don't mind."

"No," he said. "You're on my way; I'll pick you up."

"Mike, I'm at least six hours out of the way." It seemed ridiculous, their argument, the distance, space. "You'll have to drive through the mountains and then go back over them."

"I'll be at your house by seven or eight. His mother wants – do you have a pen?"

Was there that much?

“Yes,” she said, fumbling open a notepad in the middle of the table, flipping past notes on the last few rolls of film she’d shot. She picked up a blue pen and scribbled until the ink ran free.

“Are you sure you’re up for this?” he asked. She nodded; waited, realized he couldn’t hear her.

“Just go,” she said. “Just give me the list.” Maybe if he told her quickly, it would hurt less.

“I’m sorry, Ry,” he said, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat.

“The list, Mike?” she asked. Her feet were numb, the cold resting somewhere near her knees, just under the skin.

“She wants a family photo album he left with you – it has a mahogany cover and a blue satin ribbon; his father’s cufflinks with the initials on them, his diplomas, his birth certificate, the title to his car, a photograph of his grandparents getting married in a pewter frame, and his grandmother’s wedding ring.”

“Why would he have his grandmother’s wedding ring?” she asked.

“I don’t know. She said he had it. Maybe he was planning on giving it to you, but never did. Maybe he just forgot it, and wasn’t ready to ask for it back yet.” Mike was trying to be kind. This wasn’t his fault.

Ryan covered her face with her hands and ran them briskly over it. The paper was covered with salty full moons. Album, cufflinks, diploma, certificate,

photograph, ring. She gasped a single, choked breath. “What else does she want?”

“That’s it.”

“Why didn’t she call me herself?”

“I don’t know, Ry,” he said.

But he knew. Brendan’s mother had never been one to mince words or delegate tasks.

“Why, Mike?”

“He told her you ended the relationship,” he said, blurring his words, spitting them out fast and hard. “He told everyone *you* made him leave.”

Chapter Two

Ryan was creating holes in her life, she reasoned, as she packed all of Brendan's belongings – not just what Kitty asked for – into two large boxes that she had not thrown away after their move. If she wanted her son back, she would have to receive him in the objects he rejected, a kind of inverted still life. The album had been easy enough to find – it was still on the bookshelf in the living room by itself. Brendan had asked Ryan on several occasions to make more, but she had so many photographs and no interest in documentation. Brendan had never understood that. And now, running her hands over the smooth wood of the cover, she couldn't stop shaking – tearless spasms that didn't seem to her like the right kind of grief. She packed his things, one object after another, trying to keep herself under control: his grandmother's quilt, her wedding ring that Ryan finally found in a small, parched velvet box in the bottom of his underwear drawer below a thick blanket of boxers, one cufflink, an entire folder full of his personal papers, his college yearbook, sweaters he left in the closet, a pair of wingtips without shoelaces, and the leather gloves he gave her for Christmas two years before that were always too big – maybe someone else could wear them.

In the middle of the floor was a photograph she wanted to send away, but kept: Brendan as she liked to think she knew him. He had been trying to see her through the lens of the camera, and the image was large enough, close enough, that she was reflected in the dark pools of his eyes. And there she was, camera in tow, the way she saw herself. The way she'd always hoped he had seen her. Brendan's

expression was kind and warm, dark hair falling into his eyes without a smile – all intensity and deep thought. The sharp contrast of black and white defined his nose – broken by a hockey puck in childhood – and the hooded contours of his eyes and cheekbones made her ache for him. It was too intimate to return to his parents. She wanted it, if only to have proof that they existed, that he wasn't as perfect as she imagined him – he had had flaws, though not many, three small scars, invisible here, a stain of ink. Still, he had loved her.

She used his death as an excuse to excavate the closets she had, before, left untouched, digging through, down past personal, into the objects he had been so intent on leaving – cheap ceramic coffee mugs, a Gideon Bible that he had once stolen from a hotel in Burlington – could he go to hell for that? – Christmas cards from his parents, framed photographs of his twin sisters, a hair brush with a few honeyed strands in its bristles that were clearly not hers. Everything went in. She topped off the boxes with his gifts from other women: a set of sunny island postcards *with love, from Claire*, the potter's rough hewn coffee mug that she loved so much, a small painting of the sea in a driftwood frame, and two mismatched earrings that she found inside the wingtips – neither of them hers. Finally, she picked up the one album they had kept together, filled with younger selves. In one picture, Brendan stood next to Ryan's father outside their sophomore dorm when they were only friends. Ryan was supposed to be in the photo, but she had set the timer wrong, and instead, she was merely a blur of yellow and green in the corner, streaking toward her father, trapped on film.

A knock on the back door.

“Ryan?”

She secured a piece of duct tape over the top of the second box to hold the flaps half shut – there were too many items gaping out for real closure. Dropping Brendan’s grandmother’s quilt on top of the box, she walked downstairs and through the house, dodging the junk scattered across the living room floor. On the stove in the kitchen, the once white enamel kettle was burnt black. Would Mike notice?

They looked at each other through the screen door. From five feet away, Ryan could smell cigarette smoke; see the stubble that had grown thick on Mike’s cheeks and chin, only increasing the blue intensity of his sleep-hooded eyes. He wore dirty jeans and a wife-beater under a flannel work shirt, and he was lankier than she remembered; his arms and legs took up all the space, the entire doorway. He looked stunning, raw, almost animal. “Open the door, sweetheart,” he said, “It’s okay.”

His voice was thick with sleep deprivation, hoarse, and soft. She stepped forward and unlatched the back door. He opened it, propping it with his hip.

“How can he be dead?” she asked, her first words to anyone since Mike had rattled her out of sleep before dawn.

“I don’t know Ry. I hadn’t heard from him in months, either. Not since he left you.” She stepped into his arms, feeling them close around her. It was the

first time she'd been held by a man since Brendan left, and it ached of comfort and guilt – was this what Brendan would have expected from her? “First he was missing, and now he's gone. When I was driving in, I expected him to come running out of the house in those stupid overalls he wore the last time I was here – what did he call them? His farmer imports?”

Ryan couldn't tell which of them was shaking. She remembered that visit; it had started out fine, and ended in accusations – Brendan's. How close had she and Mike been in college? Had they slept together? She had told a half truth – they had been good friends, and he saw through it, but didn't want to know more. She wasn't eager to tell him, even though they hadn't, in fact, slept together. Mike ran his fingers through the tangles in her hair, soothing it down her back, and rested his chin on the top of her head – he was the exact same height as Brendan, though this had always been a gesture particular to Mike.

“Why did he have to tell his family it was my fault?” she asked. “Why did he tell them anything? Or the truth?”

“I don't know. Maybe that's how he saw it.”

She nodded and stepped back, wrinkling her nose. “When did you start smoking again? I thought you said you'd quit months ago.”

“This morning,” he said. “I bought a pack in the White Mountains. I needed the caffeine.”

“Cigarettes don't have caffeine in them.”

“I stopped for the coffee. I don’t even remember buying them,” he said. “I must have started smoking after that. Christ, I’m losing my mind.”

There was no way to respond to that; she was worried about the same thing.

“C’mon in,” she said, walking into the house. Away from Mike, she was cold. “How soon do we have to leave?”

“We have an hour or so. You should take a shower, get some clothes on. It wouldn’t make sense for you to show up in a bathrobe.”

Ryan looked down at the bathrobe – Brendan’s – and pulled it more tightly around herself, as though cinching the waist might make it seem more her own.

“Does any of this make sense?”

“No,” he said. “Go take a shower. It will make you feel better.”

“I don’t want to feel better. I want to know why he’d tell his family that. I want to know what he was thinking, where he was planning on going, where Max is.”

“Max?” he asked. “Isn’t he here?” Ryan glanced at the bowls in the corner; she didn’t want to explain them. She stepped in front of them, drawing his attention more than she would have liked.

“No, Brendan took him when he left.”

Mike shook his head slowly, as if registering the absence for the first time. “Bastard,” he said.

Ryan watched his eyes scan the kitchen, landing on the bowls.

He raised his eyebrows.

“So Gladys wouldn’t know,” Ryan said.

Mike nodded. “Now I remember,” he said. “It’ll be easy enough to figure out, hun. Don’t worry. Rottweilers don’t disappear. Now, go shower and get some clothes on.”

“You’ll still be here?”

“Where would I go?”

Ryan walked back through the living room and up the stairs, passing a photograph of her and Brendan at their college graduation. Brendan had wrapped his arms around her shoulders in a bear hug, and she thought she looked slight, barely there, overcome by his enthusiasm and size. They were both smiling, but she had been angry at him that day. Over breakfast, he’d asked if she thought her mother would come – how would they explain it to his parents now that they both thought she was dead? – an action he had taken several months before when they had gone to his house to visit and she had been frustrated with her self pity. He had wanted her to make a good impression, and how was he supposed to explain her constant moping? – he had asked. She’d refused to help him look for her mother; didn’t that make Ryan just as guilty of abandonment? Something may have been wrong with Ryan if her mother had left her – and there was obviously, he had said, as though to reassure them both, nothing wrong with her.

“She won’t come,” Ryan had told him that morning, mashing her strawberries with a fork instead of eating them, their juice running thick.

“What kind of mother wouldn’t come to her child’s graduation?” Brendan had asked, “It’s not like you’d recognize her, unless she walked up to you. And I’m just saying... that could be a little... awkward.”

“She’s dead,” Ryan had said. “Remember? You killed her, Brendan.” She had meant it. His mother, Kitty – short for Katharine – had told Ryan she was sorry for the loss of her parents, plural. She had said Brendan told her about the deaths, one in early childhood and the second, more recent, and that they understood her sadness, wanted to help. Kitty had done this in her living room, over tea, while stroking the back of Ryan’s hand – eerie-soft fingertips and manicured nails with a mother-of-pearl sheen.

In the bedroom, Ryan balled up Brendan’s robe and forced it into the hamper by packing down her clothes underneath. When she got home, she reasoned, his scent would be gone, overwhelmed by the smell of the darkroom that lingered thick on her clothes and skin. Dektol – Brendan hated it; she’d spent hours every week scrubbing it out, covering it up, only to succumb to it in his absence. And while she had been careful at first, to cover her hands and use tongs – how Brendan had nagged her about her carelessness with chemicals – lately, when developing her own images, her art, she had gone without gloves and the chemicals, more specifically the Metol, had caused a rash that left the skin of her fingertips dry and cracked.

She glanced in the mirror – had she aged so much since yesterday? Her hair was slack, her eyes bloodshot, her skin – she didn’t want to think about her

skin. She traced the cool line of her firm, reflected cheek, leaving a streak on the glass. Had her mother had a similar moment, before she left, when disrobed before a mirror, she realized that even she couldn't control her actions in other people's discussions about her? Had Ryan's father tainted her mother in the same way Brendan had her – telling lies? Was that why only Brendan had wanted to look for her? Ryan turned on the shower and waited for the fog to cloud the mirror, to erase her image, though the swath of her finger remained – proof that nothing, even truth, could disappear entirely.

Mike shifted his old Saab into gear and ground it down the highway toward the southern part of the state. The boxes were in the trunk, as was Ryan's suitcase, filled with a meager collection of clothes that Mike had helped her assemble – things she hadn't worn in months: skirts, heels, nylons. They looked, to her, like the artifacts of another woman. They smelled clean and artificial. One pair of shoes, conservative black pumps that Kitty had given her as a birthday present, still had the shoe store forms and telltale tissue paper stuffed into the toes. Mike had reminded Ryan that she couldn't wear chemical laced jeans to the funeral, as he glanced at her wet hair and casual clothes.

“What are you wearing?” she'd asked.

“There's a suit in the trunk. I borrowed it from a friend; he works at a funeral home.”

“Death all year!” Ryan had proclaimed. They hadn’t talked for over an hour.

Ryan sat with her feet propped up on the heavy, plastic box that held her smallest camera. She knew it was inappropriate to bring a camera to the funeral; something she had learned after trying to take a photograph of her father at his viewing, so desperate was she to have one last image to cling to. The funeral director, after seeing it come out of her purse, had escorted her to his office, giving her camera to Mike for the remainder of the night. In the end, he’d taken the shot – blurry and slightly out of focus, but a gesture that made Ryan ache – he’d understood her. And now she felt herself desiring such documentation again, since she didn’t quite believe that this was a real funeral and not one of Brendan’s stunts, one of his misguided little jokes – though this would be by far the worst.

They would arrive, and he would thank them for returning his things, the last of the objects he left behind, because he was too proud to ask for them when he left the first time. And undeniably, she and Mike would be together and prove the last of his great suspicions. Ryan didn’t tell Mike. He knew why Brendan left, all the details that lurked around the house like sulking ghosts until she’d had to tell someone. And over the last few months, they had turned it into one of their stories, like their mutual childhood abandonment – though it was Mike’s father that left him with a sometimes alcoholic mother and a grandfather who had raised him from a boy. Brendan hated when Ryan discussed their relationship with anyone, he would be angry about this story, too.

“I’m hungry,” Mike said. “Do you mind if I stop?”

Ryan shook her head, no, unable to come up with the appropriate response. She watched the trees speed by, trying to keep track of individual trunks as they traveled from the front of her window to the back. It was making her carsick. She glanced down. In the door’s pockets was a pair of steel carabineers, one smooth and the other heavily spiked. Maybe she was hungry. She ran her finger against their cool edges. He pulled the car off the highway at the next exit and drove toward the end of the ramp.

“What do you feel like?” he asked.

“You’re hungry,” she said, “You choose.” She picked up the smooth carabineer and pushed open the latch, but before she could ask him about it, Mike parked in front of a log cabin that claimed to have the “Biggest Beef in the White Mountains,” a cabin she might have otherwise photographed if it had been a different day, a different situation – this was not a memory she wanted, and climbed out. She didn’t move. The cabin was not folksy, but un-hewn, something legitimately out of an older time – saws had been attached with pegs to the rugged exterior, a bear hide was stretched against one wall. Before Mike opened her door, she slid the carabineer back into place and picked up her camera.

“We should go inside and have a seat,” he said. “You need to eat something.”

She removed the lens cap in an easy swipe, quickly enough to capture him leaning in, his chin at such an angle that the viewer of the print would only be able

to look up at him, too – raw and quiet – a moment of compassion that didn't extend beyond the heavy line of his jaw. She nodded and stepped out of the car, handing him her camera.

Theirs was not the only car in the lot. Though it was early for lunch, really early, there were several older pickup trucks and a collection of small, American sedans. Mike put his hand on her shoulder, squeezed it. Ryan walked up to the door, opened it, and looked into the small, dim room with tables and a bar along the back wall. Two men were already drinking. Animal heads protruded over the tables, and an older woman in jeans and a flannel shirt led them to a table in the corner. She called Ryan 'honey' and offered to bring them both cups of coffee. They looked like they needed it.

Mike yawned and stretched his legs out under the table, kicking Ryan in the shin. "Sorry," he said, glancing at her, as though startled by her presence. If it were any other time, she'd kick him back.

"How much longer do we have?" she asked.

"A few more hours," he said, rushed on, "You've been to his parents' house before. It's right before the Mass border. His mom wants you to stay there. I didn't know how to say no to her; she just lost her son. I'm staying in a hotel a few miles away. It shouldn't be that bad." He didn't stop to breathe until he was done speaking, then gasped for air.

She nodded, remembering the large, crowded rooms of Brendan's parents' house two Christmases ago – the sleeping arrangements that landed her in a second

floor bedroom next to his parents' and Brendan in his childhood bedroom in the finished basement. They had been living together for six years at that point, but Kitty wouldn't have it any other way with her two youngest daughters still 'in the home,' even though the twins both had steady boyfriends through high school and were in their first year of college. They would be juniors now, home from college for a long weekend? She didn't know how it worked. Her father had also died at the end of the year, but she hadn't had an off campus apartment, as they did. Ryan had taken her finals at home and spent the summer packing up the house and putting things into storage where they were still boxed. This would be different, though.

"How's your work going?" Mike asked. He was trying to make conversation, say something that would take them away from the subject of Brendan, of boats, of drowning and possible death.

"It's good," Ryan said. She gasped, let air into her lungs so fast that it hurt – she had left the boxes in the kitchen for Larson, but was the door unlocked? Would he worry if he showed up and the door was locked? "How long are you planning to stay after the funeral?"

"A day or two, maybe... I don't have to be back at work until Wednesday, and I want you to feel like you can stay as long as you need." He didn't look at her. Ryan thought that Mike knew she'd reciprocate in a similar situation. She'd missed that trust. "I also don't know if his parents will need help taking care of things; it seems cruel to leave all those loose ends to them in their grief."

The waitress returned and put a large ceramic mug in front of each of them, filled to the brim with hot, bitter liquid. In the middle of the table, she placed a thermal carafe. “Help yourselves,” she said, then, “What can I get you?”

Ryan looked down at the menu for the first time.

“What would you recommend?” asked Mike.

“The restaurant next door,” she said. Ryan and Mike looked at each other and the waitress burst out with a big laugh. “Sorry, kids,” she said. “You looked like you could use a joke.”

They sat in silence, as she shifted back and forth, her sneakers sighing against the floor. Mike managed a small laugh, a broken smile.

“The hamburgers are good,” she said, “So’s the meatloaf and gravy.” It was too late for breakfast.

Mike ordered meatloaf and Ryan, a hamburger. She wanted to feel the grease on her hands, taste something Brendan would have hated to watch her eat. While they waited, Mike drank his coffee and she stirred cream and sugar cubes into hers one at a time until it was so sweet that it tasted almost like ice cream.

“That’s not a cup of coffee, Ry,” Mike said, leaning over the table until she could smell cigarettes, stale cologne, “it’s dessert.”

She tried to smile at him and shrug her shoulders. This was an old joke from the early morning trips they’d taken to a diner in college. They’d would work in the computer lab until dawn, go get coffee and fresh, hot doughnuts, and doze through what Mike called had their eight a.m. “Surviving the English Canon”

literature class. Ryan liked the sweaty warmth of the mug against her palms, the way the steam curled up under her chin.

“What did his mom sound like?” Maybe this would help her understand what his family thought they knew.

“Kitty? Pretty upset,” he said, splaying his fingers on the table. His nails were chewed so close to the skin that in a few places, his fingertips were dotted with dried blood. “What do you expect? She’s always been a bit of a drama queen. Don’t you remember when Brendan failed his first calc test and she wrote him a letter about how he was going to fail out of college and have to become an elementary school janitor like his Uncle Mort?”

“I guess she had a good reason this time,” Ryan said. But if Kitty had believed his lies then – the note from his “tutor” Mike, when all he’d really done was start going to class – did Ryan have any chance to get past this more recent one? In college, she loved how he’d handled his mother, dismantling her by using her own logic against her, protecting Ryan from her. “I think I miss him,” she said aloud, without realizing, bringing her hand to her mouth as though she could catch her words in the air before they could do any more damage. Or I did miss him, Ryan thought, her palm pressed to her lips, until she’d realized he had been dismantling her, too.

Mike looked up. “How long has he been gone? Six months?”

“Almost seven,” she said.

“Why did he leave?” Mike asked, refilling his coffee cup.

Ryan rested the mug against her lower lip. When she inhaled, steam filled her mouth, and when she exhaled, it warmed her upper lip like a kiss. It had been seven months. “I’ve told you this before, Mike.” Ryan had called him the day after Brendan left. They’d talked almost every week since.

“Why did he leave?” Mike asked, as if begging her to repeat a story he hadn’t yet heard, one in which Brendan changed his mind, decided to stay, lived – as if her story, her words, could have altered those events. They would be transported to her kitchen, where Brendan would be making a lunch of avocados and the last of the summer tomatoes, and Mike would snap fake photographs of them with Ryan’s SLR, pretending to document their lives together. But this was how Mike and Ryan had always formed their truths. If you told a story enough times, it would gain truth, weight, and even the unanswered questions would begin to have meaning. Ryan didn’t want to tell this story, though. She wanted to bury it deep, not treat it as she and Mike had done their parents; this couldn’t become part of her history – it was bad enough that a second story existed. That alone made it too unstable for such embellishment.

“He left because he was tired of me,” Ryan said. “I had become the epitome of material possessions. He wanted to simplify.” She realized that she sounded like she felt sorry for herself, viewed herself as another discarded object: Still Life of Grief. “I don’t want to tell this story, Mike. We both know how it ends. Let me tell another one.”

Ryan didn't start the second story until they were back in the car. Mike was tapping his fingertips against the steering wheel, jittery with caffeine. She warmed her hands against the dry heat forcing its way through the car's leaky veins.

"What about the story?" Mike asked.

"Do you want a happy one, or a sad one?" she asked.

"I want the one you were going to tell me in the restaurant: the antithesis of Brendan leaving."

She thought for a few minutes, grasping at the fleeting tail of memory.

"Brendan left in November," she said, listening as her voice rose, dry into the car, soft with the intimacy of compact space. "But it started in February, months before, a week or so after Valentine's Day. We hadn't done anything for the holiday, which he equated with everything akin to Hallmark, and thus wrong with the world. Maybe that should have been my first sign. I bought him a card and he tore it up in front of me. He thought I was the embodiment of capitalism. He actually said that." And she'd missed Mike in the moment that Brendan had said it, and she hadn't said anything back. "I expected things, because society told me to expect them: freedom, love, marriage, the long white dress." Ryan realized, as she said this, that she didn't know why he had the ring; she would never have been the recipient.

Mike glanced over at her while he drove, his brow knit. Perhaps he wanted to ask her how this was the antithesis of Brendan's leaving, but he was too polite.

Or maybe he talked to Brendan regularly, too. She paused. “I’m sorry,” she said. This was not the story she had intended to tell.

She remembered the night she was trying to explain to Mike: the steady weight of Max on her legs, as Brendan had woken her out of a thick sleep. Ryan had been cold, as he’d urged her up, out of bed. Not as cold as she had been since he left – there had been no cloud of air, no dead fire; but for those days, it had been cold.

“The sky is alive with light,” he’d said. And she had laughed at him, his heavy, overly-poetic words. It was something he must have thought about for a long time, she realized now. In that moment, though, she had not wanted to get up.

“I worked all day, Bren,” she’d said, pulling the pillow over her head. “C’mon. I have a wedding tomorrow and I have to be at the bride’s house at six-forty-five.”

“C’mon, Ryan,” he’d said. “This is what I’ve been telling my students about all week.”

She had rolled over and buried her nose into the thick, flannel sheets, waiting for feeling to return to it. She knew he’d wanted her to get up, to run out into the snow and share his enthusiasm, and she had eventually given in, got up – following his bounding steps down the stairs and out into the yard where the snow had been deep. But somehow, in that interval between his elation and her pulling on thermal underwear and a coat, the sky had darkened with clouds. He’d shaken

his head, disappointed, and disappeared back into the house, letting the door clatter shut behind him. The good memories had all streaked away in the dark.

She glanced out the window as they passed a “Welcome to Franconia Notch” sign. The highway had turned into a narrow, two lane racetrack with a slight divider keeping the traffic from colliding. She thought of night, high beams, and the way the small white reflectors would form domino rows of light, punctuated by the streaks of headlights, there and gone.

Ryan inhaled, wrinkled her nose. “Do you smell something?” she asked.

“It wasn’t me,” Mike said, waited. “But yeah.” The car died moments later. It just stopped, and when Ryan glanced over at Mike, he had his palm pressed to his forehead. She reached over and touched his shoulder. “It’s okay,” she said, “I wasn’t ready to get there yet.”

Mike stepped out onto the narrow shoulder and lifted the hood.

“Overheating,” he said when he returned to her. “We should push it to the shoulder and let it sit for a while. Slide over.”

What?

“Slide over into the driver’s seat and put the car in neutral,” he said after a few seconds. “I think I can roll her by myself.” Ryan slid over, feeling the car move in slow gasps toward the shoulder. Traffic whizzed by to her left. She slammed hard on the brakes. Mike’s shoulder hit the back window. Hard.

“Ryan!”

She cringed and turned toward him, feeling everything in her neck tighten, but he only laughed.

“Putz,” he said, opening the driver’s side door. “Let’s walk. There’s a tourist center half a mile from here. He pointed at the sign. She slid her camera under an old newspaper in the backseat and wondered what would happen if Brendan’s boxes were stolen while they were gone. What would she tell Kitty? Could you report objects belonging to the dead missing?”

Mike stopped a few feet ahead of her and waited. She tried to catch up, her sneakers skidding in the loose, mucky gravel. “So you can just leave it here, and it will fix itself?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I just need some fresh air. If it’s not alright when we get back, we’ll call a tow truck.”

“How’s work?” she asked, falling into step with him. She wanted to reach out and loop her arm through his like they would have in the days before Brendan, but she resisted the urge. That could lead to other things, the realization of Brendan’s suspicions. Would her arrival with Mike seem innocent at all? Had Kitty really demanded that he pick her up? She doubted it.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I love working for Greg – he’s the greatest guy in the world, but after a while, you begin to wonder if there isn’t something more to life than making furniture for the wealthy. I mean, right now I’m building a bassinet for this couple who want it carved with the husband’s ancestral family crest. Does that seem a bit much to you? It’s not always that way, we get a lot of

orders for what Greg calls “Nature’s Creatures” – fairy stories, basically – but I feel like I could do so much more.”

“You’re making people happy.”

“I’m making money,” he said, “And I might be the only person alive who misses, desperately misses, the physical labor I used to do with my grandfather.”

“You still get to work with him, though,” she said. And that’s what Mike loved about the job, if nothing else: his grandfather started the business, and he loved the old man. If he stayed for only one reason, it was that given his mother’s lack of dependability, Mike wanted to be there for him if something should happen.

“But we’re not building houses anymore,” he said. “It’s been months since I was on top of a roof, baking in the sun, but trying to get one more nail in. I can’t remember the last window I fitted. I feel like I’m wasting away in the workshop.”

“You can come shovel my roof anytime you want next winter,” she said.

“But you know what I mean, Ry. Don’t you ever feel that way?”

Everyday, she thought, when shooting weddings. But only then. She loved composing shots, the darkroom with its smell of Dektol – a sharp odor at first that lingered somewhere between warm liquid metal and sweet, rotting eggs but less sulfuric – and the way images could be delicately pulled into existence; she missed it already.

“No,” she said. “Sometimes. But I need it.”

“I don’t feel that way.”

“I wish you did,” she said, inhaling. The air was cool and fragrant, almost autumnal. When Brendan had first come home from teaching, he brimmed with energy. He’d loved working with kids. She wanted that satisfaction for Mike, too.

“Doesn’t it ever get boring?”

“No,” she said. “Tiresome, exhausting, painful, but not boring.”

They walked down a dirt path on a carpet of last year’s pine needles that were soft as wool under her sneakers. He put his arm around her and slid his hand from her shoulder to the base of her elbow. She wanted him. Ryan tucked her hand through his right arm.

“I get to watch people; they’re never boring,” she said, felt dumb.

He shook his head, chuckling at her, and reached into the breast pocket of his shirt to dig out a pack of Marlboros. She watched him pull out a lighter and fumble with it, as he tapped out a cigarette. He took a long drag and closed his eyes, savoring before exhaling. She brushed her cheek against his shoulder, focusing on the soft underbelly of his lower lip and the way it quivered as he drew air. IT was an intimate ritual, something she wished they could have had together.

“Can I have a drag?” she asked, finding the lingo as distasteful as the smoke. No, it wouldn’t work. He handed her the cigarette and she dropped it on the ground, extinguishing it. Before he could react, she turned and he stepped back against the rough bark of a fir tree. They were close for a moment, long enough to feel his breath on her forehead and the rough wool of his shirt, as she ran her fingers over his chest, teasing, until she could reach into his breast pocket,

pluck out the flimsy, almost empty pack. She ran. He hadn't been expecting this. He sputtered, shocked. Aroused? Did he remember the last time they'd argued about this, when his addiction was clove cigarettes – this behavior still desired, if not acceptable in the days before Brendan. He bounded after her, his boots crashing through branches and dead leaves.

Suddenly, she broke into a clearing and the ground dropped away into water in a slick tube of natural, softened rock. Ryan stopped, but Mike crashed into her, grabbing her hard by the shoulders to keep them both from falling. She didn't want him to let go.

“Imp,” he said, laughing, gasping for air.

“See what they do to you?” she asked, playing along as he breathed heavily. He pivoted and pressed her back against the rough bark of a tree that she could feel through the thin cotton of her sweater. “You can't even keep up with me anymore.”

He leaned in closer, cocked his head slightly to the right. She could only see his eyes, and feeling had tunneled down into the simple heat that radiated from his hands to her shoulders. This was exactly what Brendan would have expected, maybe why he told people what he did. She drew a shallow breath. She was the one that couldn't keep up.

“We can't do this,” she said. Yet, she thought.

He looked at himself reflected in her eyes, bit his lip and stepped back.

She pressed the pack of cigarettes into his hand. "I'm sorry," she said, wanting the moment back before she'd said anything, before she gave up what little she had left. He brushed a stray piece of hair out of her eyes, letting the warmth of his hand linger on her brow, and drew his first unhampered breath.

"Do what?"

Chapter Three

Brendan's house was lit from inside like a garish carnival horror— the garage gaping open, the suburban street studded with SUVs and mini vans, lawns forming neat carpets to identical, darkened manses. They were late. The car had needed a tow truck after all, and though the man who fixed it told Mike it would be good to run for a while, Ryan doubted him. There was something in the way he'd looked at Mike, looked down on him for his inability to explain what was wrong with his own vehicle, that he'd let things deteriorate to the point where it would stop running. Mechanics had always talked to Brendan like that, too, though his reaction was more aloof, less disheartening. Ryan could see people moving behind the sheer drapes of the house – if she didn't know, she'd assume Armand and Kitty were just having another of their parties, like Christmas, like New Years. She bent forward and picked up her camera case. She needed to document, to form a timeline of events, so later, if her memory became spotty – as it had around the time of her father's death – she could piece things back together, a tapestry of loss.

Mike squeezed her shoulder, took her hand. His calluses burrowed into the cracks on her palms that had formed after she'd destroyed her last pair of darkroom gloves, and wanting to work on her own images, went barehanded for a single weekend. She'd liked the nearness it gave her to her photographs so much that she'd continued to work bare-handed occasionally, on her own private images, the things she was loathe to even sell as artwork, the things she would hang herself

is she ever did hang her own photographs in her home. She made fewer mistakes bare-handed. And sometimes the raw, stinging pain felt good. “Not here,” he said, gesturing at the camera. He released her hand leaving her palm dry and cool. “We’ll get the stuff out of the trunk in a bit,” Mike said. Was it because he thought Armand didn’t know about it?

Ryan followed him out of the car. The lawn was a dark blue-green, pooled only in places by floodlights, where it was a deep, chemical green. “I don’t want to stay here,” she said, her voice low in her throat. Mike didn’t respond. He was several feet ahead of her, straining – she thought – to hear the voices of a group of men gathered in the garage, drinking from bottles in the dim light. She wanted to go in through the garage, to avoid the moment at the front door when Mike would ring the bell and Kitty would open it and conversation would come to a lull as they arrived. It was not their presence that would lull conversation, but the addition of new people, the need to once again reflect at their communal purpose of being in the house.

A stack of casserole dishes had been left on an Adirondack chair a few feet from the steps – gifts from those who wanted to help but were, perhaps, too unacquainted with the family to just enter. The door opened at the same moment that Mike raised his hand to knock, exposing them both in a blinding beam of artificial light. Kitty was smaller than Ryan remembered, overburdened by an immaculate wool suit and a soft, black blouse that looked like a bruise against her pale, translucent skin. Her eyes were rimmed with dark circles and there were thin

lines, cracks, where her mascara had run and been blotted away, covered over with powder. She pulled Ryan into a hug; Ryan could smell only alcohol, perfume.

“I expected you hours ago,” Kitty said, glancing down at the slim bone of her own bare wrist, as though expecting a watch. She worried, Ryan thought, and felt guilty about the hours they’d spent at a diner, waiting for the car to be fixed, a payphone just behind Mike’s right shoulder. Kitty glanced at Mike, but instead caught sight of the dishes, thick Pyrex covered in aluminum foil – at least four of them, and if they were anything like the casseroles Ryan had received, they had their owners’ names printed neatly on a piece of masking tape on the bottom that would smoke and burn if placed unknowingly in the oven. Kitty drew a shaky breath and Ryan ran her hand down the woman’s arm; she had no idea how to comfort her. Kitty’s lips curled slightly, as she mimicked the gesture, but overshot, ran her hand around the curve of Ryan’s cheek, stroking her hair to pluck out a small, rusty maple leaf. All of her softness disappeared. Glancing down at the leaf she met Ryan’s eyes and looked over at Mike. Ryan hoped she’d imagined the fleeting arc of Kitty’s brow.

“I’m so sorry, Kitty,” Ryan said. “We had car trouble. How’s your family doing?”

She shrugged, once again staring at the dishes. Her lower lip quivered and tears formed a new trail of inky brushstrokes. Mike stepped forward and put his arms around Brendan’s mother, and though she remained stiff, she accepted the

gesture, didn't step back. He was exactly Brendan's height – did Kitty feel that, too? When she finally pulled back, he went to collect the stack of dishes.

“Please, stay with us, Ryan,” she said, refusing to look away. She was still holding the leaf, clutching it to dust in her hand, letting it sprinkle down on the steps of the front porch. Ryan turned to look at Mike, but he was stacking the pans carefully his back to them.

“But I thought...” She'd hoped Mike would say something, though his attention was turned, she assumed deliberately, to a leaking Tupperware dish and the syrupy fluid it dribbled first on the chair and then on the grass. “I thought I might go to the hotel with –”

“That would be ridiculous,” Kitty said, twirling the naked stem between her fingertips before looking up at Ryan and flicking it off the porch with the edge of a manicured nail. “We have so much room and you *were* like family.”

Ryan nodded. *Were* – Brendan must have told them. “Come in out of the cold, get a drink,” Kitty said. Her attention had already shifted to an older couple – not Brendan's grandparents, though the woman looked familiar – picking their way across the lawn.

“When was the last time you were here?” Mike asked, after they'd stepped past Kitty and through the crowded living room. They were almost in the kitchen.

“The Christmas before last,” Ryan said. “You?”

“Graduation.”

The kitchen was empty. Ryan was glad to have a few moments. She'd recognized people in the living room – aunts and uncles, an elderly Nantucket grandmother, a gaggle of cousins and neighbors. People she'd been introduced to over the years, but who she couldn't attach names to; she may never have known them. Normally immaculate, the room was a carnage of food – more food than Ryan had seen since her own father's funeral: bottles of wine in various stages, lunchmeat, a handful of half eaten casseroles bloody with dried tomato sauce and spilling their innards into the pans where pieces had been extracted. In the middle of it, perched on the counter, was Brendan's sister's cat – a fluffy white beast – gnawing apart an uneaten turkey sandwich. Ryan picked her up and dumped the sandwich in the garbage before turning to Mike.

“Remember the party they had for him?” he asked.

She nodded, remembering the parade of family members and friends.

There hadn't been many people from college – just Mike and his girlfriend at the time, Kimberly or Katharine or something like that, Brendan's friends Skip and Jordan. His high school sweetheart – the daughter of one of his father's business partners – had been invited by Kitty, and when she wasn't attached to the tall, older man who she had come with, she was flashing a large, emerald cut diamond to anyone who would listen to her monologue on wedding plans. Kitty had kept reminding Ryan how lucky she was to have snagged Brendan. She actually used the word, *snagged*.

“I don't know what's worse,” he said, looking down at his empty hands.

They'd been there two hours. Ryan was tired. And though she'd seen Brendan's father a few times, she'd yet to get up the courage to approach him, find out what had really happened without Kitty in earshot. Just the mention of Brendan's name was enough to reduce his mother to tears, an almost epileptic shaking. She made Ryan nervous, and while Mike quietly circulated, talking to aunts and uncles and cousins, the neighbors – he had a fluency with people that Ryan knew she lacked – she'd gravitated to the fireplace for warmth, but had ended up focused on the new family portrait that hung above it. The old one – was it hiding just behind this one, pressed to the back of the frame? – had been a gift to his parents a few years before. She'd shot it outside, in front of the lilac bush in the backyard while the girls were seniors in high school. And now this: Brendan in the months after he'd left her – his hair longer than he'd ever worn it during their relationship, the twins sitting on either side of Kitty in this room, in front of the fireplace, though the brocade loveseat was nowhere to be seen and it offered a strange doubling of the fireplace, the mantle. It was as unsettling as their summer clothes – polo shirts and sundresses against pale, winter white skin. The twins' smiles were forced and Brendan's eyes were focused on something to the right of the camera. Ryan turned around and looked, tried to imagine what he'd been looking at, but there was only a cream colored wall, dark drapes, her own dim reflection in a dark window.

A hand on her shoulder. “Ryan?” She startled. Brendan’s father, Armand, stood behind her. His skin sagged with grief and age, stubble formed a thin shadow across his jaw line. She didn’t remember him as old, but could no longer recall the color of his hair before it had started graying – hadn’t it been dark, almost nut-colored? “How are you?” he asked. He touched her shoulder, a disembodied gesture that felt awkward but well-meant. She glanced over his shoulder, hoping there were other photos of Brendan, that this wasn’t their last one: the twins’ hands hung limp as dishrags, Kitty’s stocking had a run in it; they all looked so cold.

“I’m alright,” she said, trying to smile. She liked Armand. He’d always been kind to her. “Where are the twins?”

“On their way home,” he said. “We’d been hoping to get word from the Coast Guard earlier, but they issued a death certificate this morning. Nobody would survive three weeks of exposure. Of course,” he said, narrowing his eyes at Ryan, “We’d hoped for better news.”

Three weeks? Ryan reached back, hoping to meet something solid to lean on. Her hand hovered in the air. She tried to remember what she’d been doing three weeks ago. Shooting a wedding? No. Skiing. She’d done a promotion for one of the local ski areas – family photos on the spring slopes. They’d even given her a muscular, young member of the ski patrol to lug her equipment around. She looked up at Armand. He was staring down at the carpet – its dark burgundy swirls. Mike. She glanced over her shoulder and caught his eye. He was talking

to an older couple; he had a beer in one hand. Ryan wanted to walk over to him, to give Brendan's father space, but that seemed wrong, too. She waited until Mike walked over, counting long seconds in her head, watching Armand look up at his family, wishing she were somewhere else, that there was something she could offer him.

"Sir," Mike said. He held out his hand to Brendan's father, who took it, but pulled him into a hug instead. Mike didn't step back until the man released him. Yes, he was definitely better at this than she was.

"It's good to see you again, Mike," Armand said. They exchanged the usual small talk. The Saab breaking down suddenly became very important. As Mike led the way out, towards the backyard, they discussed hoses and pipes, fumes and liquids. Ryan glanced back over her shoulder at Kitty perched in a chair by the window. She had a photo album on her lap, a few neighbors around her. Why didn't someone call and find out where her daughters were? How soon they'd get home.

Ryan stepped down onto the carpet of soft, chemical grass, sliding the door shut behind her. Armand leaned back against what was once the kids' playhouse – a small, shake shingled structure with tiny, curtained windows that had, at one time, housed secret rendezvous between she and Brendan when they'd visited and were not allowed to share a room. Armand pulled a pair of cigars out of the pocket of his khakis, offered one to Mike before cutting off the ends and lighting them with a match. He talked about how it preserved the flavor in a way that a

lighter wouldn't. Castro, he told them, lit his with a curl of fragrant wood. Ryan walked over and sat on one of the swings to avoid the musky smoke and checkered curtains. They talked about smoking while she swung on rusted chains.

"I quit in December," Armand said.

"June of last year," Mike said. The nodded at each other and puffed out twin clouds.

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

Mike and Ryan shook their heads, though Ryan craved vodka – something citrus and chemical that could dull the image of Brendan spreading a sleeping bag on the dusty floor of the play house – he'd actually called it that with the ghost of a smirk. She pressed her eyes closed, drew breath until her chest ached.

"Can you talk about it?" Mike asked after another tangent about Dominican rolled cigars.

Armand looked at him, expanded his chest and blew out a long, silky trail of smoke. "Brendan got home in March," he said. He'd always called him Bren – the full name sounded awkward and overly formal. "We hadn't heard from him since Christmas." He looked up at Ryan, focused on her face, his eyes soft and wet. Did he wish Brendan had stayed with her? Or that they'd never met? She couldn't tell. "He showed up on the doorstep one afternoon with irises for Kitty – she took some convincing before she'd forgive him for being gone so long and for bringing that dog back with him. He'd planned it with the twins – the long weekend, the new photograph, the one you were looking at Ryan... She'd wanted

something where the girls looked less awkward, more mature... without..." Did he remember that she had taken the last one? "Their braces."

What had Ryan liked so much about that earlier photograph? The small, moonish faces of his sisters? Their concealed mirth? It had been casual – spring sweaters and jeans, the children's faces huddled together. They'd been happy, and she'd envied them that happiness, the soft curl of Kitty's hand on Vanessa's back.

"He and two friends had decided to do some traveling," Armand said. "He'd always wanted to travel, but settled down with Ryan right after college." He took a breath, glanced from Ryan to the grass, inhaled again. She tried not to think of their first apartment, the thrill of setting up housekeeping – a phrase Brendan had used and she'd loved while it lasted. "They left at the end of April, intending to fish in Alaska. By that time, Kitty was ready for him to leave – she was tired of the dog."

"The dog?" Ryan asked.

"He had Max with him. One of his friends had a Suburban and they took him along. Kitty wouldn't let him leave the dog here – you know how she is about *animals*." He and Ryan had to kennel Max every time they'd visited. She knew.

"Where had he been before that?"

"All over the place. He..." Armand glanced long a Mike. "They had a list. Bicycling. Ice climbing. Snowboarding. Skydiving. It was like they just needed a break for a while. He'd never taken one before; we thought he just needed some time. We never imagined that he wouldn't settle down."

Skydiving? Ryan tried to imagine Brendan jumping out of plane, but it wasn't an image that came easily. She could only picture his reading glasses, sweaters, geranium seedlings, briefcase, the sheaf of papers that had been a children's book manuscript – nothing that would have kept him from falling.

Armand talked about the trip across the country –a collection of postcards that Brendan had sent back to the family. She focused on the chains digging into her palms, wondering where Brendan used to put his hands. How close was she to finding the invisible grooves of his fingers? He'd had Max with him. Had they just packed him into the backseat? She could imagine that. But where was he now? Had he been with Brendan? Or was he waiting patiently in a kennel or with a friend, as he must have been during those other trips?

“We got a call three weeks ago,” Armand said.

“Three weeks ago.”

“Yes. The boys went out fishing in a boat they'd rented from a local man.”

“Where?”

“Ry, pay attention,” Mike said. He walked over and reached out, but instead of reaching for her, he plucked the swing's chains out of the air, suspending her silent, unmoving. She stepped down, off the swing, releasing the chains last.

“They were in Southeast Alaska. Wrangell,” Armand said. “They went fishing and got caught in a storm. They didn't know the water or the islands well

enough. The boat capsized, and by the time the Coast Guard found them... he was gone.”

“Gone?”

“The woman they were staying with called the Coast Guard when they didn’t come back.” He sank down to sit on the narrow ledge of windowsill where Brendan had once hidden cigarettes. He leaned forward onto his knees and rested his forehead in his hands. Mike rested his palms on Ryan’s shoulders. She wondered what that woman had looked like, how they’d found her. Would she have kept Max?

“Do you miss him?” Armand asked.

Mike was nodding.

“Everyday,” she said. She wasn’t sure it was the truth. Why now? Why did they wait to tell everyone? Why weren’t the twins home? Why didn’t his parents go out there? How could they sit in their comfortable suburban home and not know for sure what the water looked like?

“They were going to be home in time for the twins’ birthday in July,” he said, his voice ripe with disbelief, as though some great lie hung in the air. He began to cough, a deep rumbling. His hands gripped the windowsill tightly. Ryan could see the veins on the back of his hands, the bones of his wrists. He’d lost weight; it was the gauntness that made the skin on his face sag. She felt Mike’s hands move from her shoulders, watched him walk over to Brendan’s father. He

said something she couldn't hear. Armand nodded once, his shoulders convulsing, a sharp twitch.

"C'mon," Mike said to Ryan, reaching for her hand. She realized that they were going to leave his father outside, alone with his grief. She pulled away from Mike, turning to Armand, wanting to say something. He looked up at her, his eyes empty, a little desperate. She had nothing to offer him. She touched his arm, the same gesture he'd made earlier; he was shaking.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"We all are," he said, his voice a low crackle of vowels.

Mike was already ahead of her, propping the door open, his face shadowed by the light from the house. Kitty was standing in the dining room. How long had she been there? Did she know they were outside talking with Armand? That they hadn't just slipped off alone? Ryan wanted to tell her this.

"I think it's time for you to let Ryan get to sleep," she said to Mike, her voice low, straining. "She looks like she could use some rest."

"But—" Ryan said, stumbling for words. She didn't want to stay at Brendan's house.

"It's important to us that you stay," Kitty said, moving towards her. She touched Ryan's hair, a soft, shivering gesture.

Ryan nodded. Mike said nothing. She would want the same courtesy, Ryan thought, if she'd just lost a son. The family might say things about her if she were to spend the night with Mike.

“I’ll bring in your things,” Mike said, walking past Kitty.

“And the things we brought,” Ryan said.

“Put them in his room,” Kitty said. “Brendan’s things.” She looked down at the table, a dark mahogany slab and the light that reflected on its surface. Ryan wondered if she was thinking of family meals, how she and Armand sat at the head and foot with the twins on one side and Brendan, and Ryan if she was with him, on the other. How lopsided things were now, with the large vacant chairs.

“I’m glad you’re staying,” Kitty said. Ryan imagined Mike bringing in the boxes. He’d take them through the garage, down the stairs to the finished basement where Brendan’s room was – they wouldn’t be brought in through the living room. Nobody would see them or know about them. Part of her wanted that, the audience, the neighbors to realize that she had lost something, too – though that same desire left her stomach thick and heavy with guilt. What claim did she have to grief here?

“I put your suitcase in the living room,” Mike said, several minutes later. She and Kitty were still standing in the dining room, though Kitty had moved over to her china cabinet and was gazing in at her wedding dishes – flat, white plates and the long, dull planks of silverware that sat in a narrow drawer below.

“Thanks,” Ryan said. She followed him through the door into the living room. He’d pulled on a coat, green worsted wool, and had his hands tucked deep into the pockets. She knew no one in the living room, assumed them to be

neighbors – the family was probably elsewhere, the kitchen, upstairs, maybe out back with Armand. Mike opened the front door and Ryan followed him outside.

“I want to go with you,” she said.

“I’ll see you in the morning. Get a good night’s sleep.”

“It was good to see you.”

“It was good to be seen,” he said. She wrinkled her nose. He wouldn’t commit to anything.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said. She reached out, touched his arm, her movement lit by small pool of light from the doorway, he pulled it back.

“Not here,” he said. He shook his head. She pressed her hand against the door knob and watched him walk down the lawn towards his car. He’d wanted her earlier, she was convinced of that. And it wasn’t that she wanted him at that moment, so much as she didn’t want to stay with Kitty and Armand like some adopted child in their home. The car door slammed. The headlights came on before he swung a U-turn and the Saab’s taillights disappeared down the street. What had he seen in Brendan’s room?

Ryan walked back into the house, picking up her suitcase where Mike had left it. People were starting to put on their coats and tuck glasses on low tables. Did they think that Kitty would want to clean up after them in the morning? She glanced around for Brendan’s mother, finding her in the dining room, huddled into her usual seat.

“I think I’m going to go to bed,” she said, leaning forward and keeping her voice low. Kitty shot up out of her chair and Ryan took a few steps back.

“Let me find you a room,” she said.

“I can just go upstairs and look,” Ryan said. “It’s no trouble.” But no trouble would have been a hotel room with tightly tucked, iron-flat sheets and the drone of cable from the next room. No trouble would have been Mike carrying their suitcases upstairs to that hotel room at once then letting her take a shower until the burning throb behind her eyes melted in the hot water.

“No, no,” Kitty shushed her with a wave of her hand, a sparkle of jewelry. Ryan followed her up the back staircase. There were three bedrooms upstairs. The doors to both her’s and the twins’ were closed. In the guest room a suitcase was strewn across the bed. “No,” Kitty said, a whisper. “I’d forgotten Dick and Kathleen were already here.” She paused, thinking. “Janie is sleeping on the couch in the study with Oliver and I told Kristie she and her kids could sleep in the den when they get in tonight – she wanted a place where she could put up Micah’s crib. She touched her hand to her forehead. Her skin was white as ivory. Dark circles leaked from under her eyes; no one had helped her fix her makeup.

“Where should I sleep?” Ryan asked. She should have asked Mike where he was going, though she doubted that he knew.

“We’ll... we’ll put you in Brendan’s room,” Kitty said, shaking her head, as though horrified by the idea. Ryan followed her back down the stairs. At the

door to the basement Kitty stopped. She would move no further. “You know where it is?” she asked.

“Isn’t there a couch down there?” Ryan asked.

“Brent and Jacob are sleeping down there. Kathleen’s boys.” Couldn’t some of the family have stayed in a hotel? Ryan wondered if Kitty had insisted with them, too.

“So I’ll just... go down there,” Ryan said. She glanced at the dark flight of stairs. She could see the flicker of a television and hear muffled voices. How old were Kathleen’s boys? Twelve? Fifteen? She couldn’t remember.

“I’m sorry, I’m going to stay up here,” Kitty said. She glanced down the stairwell. “They won’t bother you. They’re good kids.” As though that was what worried Ryan.

Ryan walked down the stairs. The boys were both entranced by reruns of *Saturday Night Live*; they said nothing to her. Ryan used the light from the television to make her way to the doorway to Brendan’s childhood bedroom. The door was closed. She crept it open and flipped on the light. The air was stale and smelled slightly musty. On the bed were the two boxes Mike had carried down. Had he noticed the smell, too – damp, un-lived in? If Brendan had spent time there earlier in the year, there was no sign of him among the little league trophies and high school year books. Would Mike have opened the closet doors? Not in the time he had, she thought, though he might have run his fingers over the desk, the soft cotton of the comforter. At least it doesn’t smell like Brendan, Ryan thought,

though as she moved the first box off the bed, she worried that he'd waft out and she'd never sleep.

There were no mirrors to catch her reflection as she stripped and pulled on her pajamas. Ryan shut off the light. The bed was less comfortable than she thought it would be – starched and unscented as a hotel's. Kitty must have changed the sheets since he was last home, though she smelled the pillow, filling her nose with dust – still nothing. It was too dark. She got up and opened the blinds. With the lights off, a streetlight poured thin yellow pools onto the carpet. It was almost if a high school boy could walk in at any moment, turn on the lights, the computer and start doing homework for his eight a.m. English class. She turned on the reading lamp and let it burn off the darkness.

“You knock.” “No, you knock.”

Ryan opened her eyes and glanced around the room. She could hear Vanessa and Victoria, Brendan's twin sisters, talking outside the door. Their voices so similar that they sounded like a woman arguing with herself.

“What if she took off last night?” “It's Ryan, she's too chicken.” “You knock.”

Ryan stepped out of bed.

“No, you –”

She opened the door, stopping the second in mid-sentence. One moved forward to hug her, then the other, their limbs like a twin set of leggy vines.

“We just got home,” they said in unison. She’d forgotten that trait. Then one added, “Mom said you were already here.”

After knowing the twins for six years, Ryan still couldn’t tell them apart. They were identical, even now: straight dark hair, tiny, porcelain hands rouged with fire red nail polish, and dark, sleepy stares. Brendan used to tell her that Vanessa’s earlobes were a slightly different shape than Victoria’s but since she couldn’t remember what that was, they both just had ears.

“Will you talk to us?” asks the girl on the right. Ryan wanted to call her Vanessa, the more straightforward of the two. The one, who when she first came home with Brendan, cornered her and grilled her about their relationship: how had they met? Who else had she dated? What did she take pictures of with the camera she was never without? Did she have a fake ID?

“I’d like to sit down,” said the other. Maybe that was Vanessa. Ryan couldn’t tell. She followed them out into the family room, where a pair of empty sleeping stretched out toward the television. The twins both perched on the faded orange sofa, one on a thick arm and the other on the fleshy seat.

“Sure,” Ryan said, and noted their calm. The one who’d wanted to sit was paler; Ryan could see delicate blue veins moving under her skin, as though it were made of cellophane. She curled up in a chair across from them, glanced down to make sure her pajamas were buttoned properly.

“You’re fine,” said the one on the cushion. Her sister nodded, tracing her hand lightly over the back of the couch.

“We had to get away from Mom,” they said at the same second, looked at each other nervously, and began to examine the swirling grains of the navy blue carpet.

“It was Nessa’s idea to see if you were up yet,” said Victoria from her perch on the arm of the sofa. “We thought you might want some company.”

“What time is it?” Ryan asked.

“Eleven,” said Victoria.

Ryan nodded and listened to them talk about their car ride home with Victoria’s boyfriend. They’d just finished their final exams the week before, though the school had said they could leave and come back earlier. “We just wanted to be done.” Kitty turned Victoria’s boyfriend away at the door. “This is supposed to be *family* time,” she said bitterly, glancing at Ryan. “The guy drives eight hours and gets turned away on the front stoop like we didn’t have enough room for him.” Vanessa reached up and stroked her sister’s back, resting her head against the side of her calf.

“Not worth arguing,” she mumbled. “Craig’ll find a place in town. You know he’s not gonna take off on you.” Her sister nodded and they both looked at Ryan with quiet, unblinking stares. She remembered the first time she came home with Brendan. It had been a few months after her father died. They’d been dating and the twins were thirteen, new to high school gossip, makeup and boys. They were expecting a sage, older version of themselves, and for the weekend she and Brendan had spent there, they followed Ryan around, mimicking her twin braids,

jeans and clean scrubbed face. Kitty was thrilled by the effect Ryan had on her daughters, if not a little put off by Ryan's inability to please her. Ryan assumed that as Brendan's girlfriend, Kitty had hoped for more sparkle. "She's so quiet," Ryan had overheard her complain to Armand one night through the thin membrane of wall that separated the guest bedroom from theirs. "I just wish he'd found someone more like..." She never caught the rest of her phrase. She'd been secretly glad not to.

"How are you doing?" Vicky asked, frowning at Ryan. "You look okay."

"I'm confused," Ryan said, "I don't really know what happened."

"Alaska. Fishing accident," said Vanessa. "Boat capsized." Death in five words. Vicky nodded her head. "We cried a lot on the way home from school," she said, as though to explain. "It isn't real yet. They haven't found a body."

"The Coast Guard let them issue a death certificate yesterday," Vicky said. Ryan wanted to know who them was, but Vicky's voice was so sharp and desperate that she kept quiet. "Nobody could survive exposure to that water and three weeks in the wilderness. Not even Brendan. He's not coming back, Nessa."

"It's been three weeks?" Ryan asked.

Vanessa nodded, drawing a slow breath that Ryan watched rise in her chest. "At first it seemed unreal, like they were going to find him in a few hours."

"Dad called us at school," Vicky added. "He made it sound so routine; they just wanted us to stay put – we listened."

“Then it was too late,” Vanessa said. “I don’t know what we expected. We should have just gotten on a plane.”

“So you knew he was...”

“Missing,” Victoria said. “But they waited for the death certificate... they wanted try to find... him... his body... something.”

“God,” Ryan said, more a gasp, a syllable, than a word. “So they’re going to have the funeral...”

“Without the body,” Victoria said. She looked up at Ryan, narrowing her eyes. Ryan wondered if she wanted to blame her for this – if she could have kept Brendan safe, then they wouldn’t all be here. She closed her eyes, pushing the thought as far back as she could. The girls were acting normal; they weren’t acting as though she caused this, not really. But Brendan wasn’t safe, he was somewhere in the Pacific, missing and unsought after. She couldn’t change that.

The day dragged by in elongated minutes. Lunch was served at noon – nobody ate. At one, a minister came over to speak to the family, and Ryan sat in the corner listening. He was followed by a psychologist friend of Kitty’s – an attractive woman who wore too many bracelets and gave each of the twins a stuffed bear before droning on and on about loss. When she left, the twins turned on the television and watched old Warner Brothers cartoons until three, while Kitty paced the living room, back and forth, obscuring their view –consistent as a windshield wiper. Unable to escape, the twins finally convinced their mother to

take a sleeping pill and lured her into her bedroom to rest. Armand had long since gone to the funeral home to work on arrangements, so desperate was he to put something in the ground.

After almost an hour in the living room, Ryan went into the kitchen to try and clean things up. There was still food everywhere. Where was Mike? When she opened the refrigerator, it was packed tighter than her freezer had been the last time she'd tried to add another bag of Gladys' cookies: casseroles, lunchmeat and cheese plates – each labeled with the name of the provider like a calling card, a sympathy note. The counters were covered with used paper plates, grease spots scattered across them like loose change. On the table, a turkey carcass had been stripped and was being assaulted by a pair of flies. Ryan picked up the platter, hoping to dump the whole mess into the garbage can. The sink was full of glasses. It smelled like the night after a college frat party – stale alcohol and regret.

When her father died, it had been the same. Mike had gone home with her for two weeks, a move that cost him a girlfriend and an entire term of summer school, and helped her keep house. Sometime, during that hazy period, a pineapple had appeared. It became a joke between them – who gave the family of the deceased a pineapple? Ryan let it rot in the middle of the kitchen table after he left, until it sunk through the wood, staining it permanently. When she went to spend Christmas with Mike's family that year, she found a can of pineapple chunks in her stocking. "To mixed messages," he'd said with a sad little grin,

when she pulled it out. It was still sitting in her underwear drawer at home, aged and unopened.

Ryan cleaned. It was the only thing she could think of doing that didn't involve sitting in the living room with Brendan's family staring down at her from above the mantle. Mike arrived mid-way through, freshly showered and shaved. Without asking, he cleared away two of the trash bags.

"Can I take you home with me?" Ryan asked, lightly, her arms wet to the elbows with dishwater. "Brendan never does that." She turned and cupped her hand over her mouth. What had she said?

Mike looked at her, wrinkling his brow.

Ryan leaned back into the countertop, feeling it cut at the small of her back. She inhaled, but felt something like a sob, a silence rise from the center of her chest, trapped between the bars of her ribcage.

"It's okay," Mike said, but when she turned back to the sink to look out the blurred window into the backyard of another identical house, she saw Kitty's reflection in the window behind Mike, a frail form that moved away without sound. Did Kitty hear her? Soapy water dripped down from Ryan's chin to her chest. She could feel her hands shaking against the rim of a frail red wine glass. When she looked up again, hers was the only reflection left.

Chapter Four

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought,” Mike said, as he pulled an illegal U-turn and headed north toward St. Johnsbury, Newport, though they were still hours away from those cities actually appearing on a sign. His hand was resting on the back of her neck. It had been there, she thought, since that morning, when she’d vomited up breakfast and the alcohol that the twins had fed her the night before in the ladies’ bathroom of St. Joseph’s church. His hand was there during the funeral, as they sat a row behind Kitty and Armand, hemmed into a tiny pew in the church that Brendan had denounced during his first year at college. She watched the slim neck of Brendan’s mother as it remained erect through all but the Eucharist, when she bowed forward, almost choking on the wafer. Only as the casket passed her, carried out of the church by four of Brendan’s childhood friends – none of whom had been with him – did she seem to catch sight of Ryan and Mike for the first time, her gaze hollow and broken. At that moment, Mike had moved his hand.

“All the priest’s metaphors were about fishing,” Ryan said. “His high school soccer coach, Brad, Brock, whatever-the-hell his name was, gave the worst eulogy ever.”

“Yeah,” Mike said, his voice glum. “His Mom should have let the twins do it; Vicky wanted to.”

“Too risky,” Ryan said. She knew how Kitty thought. The twins were at the age where the inappropriate seemed glamorous. They might have discussed

party he threw for their twenty-first birthday, his propensity for expensive alcohol and practical jokes, or maybe the adrenaline junkie he'd become. They might have raised doubts in others that Kitty, herself, couldn't face. "They might have talked about jumping out of planes," she said, finally.

"At least most of the family made it," Mike said after a long quiet. Ryan didn't remind him that Brendan's grandmother had wished her luck in finding a man who would want her after living in sin with Brendan for so long.

When they'd decided to leave, Vicky – or Nessa – the one not sobbing, pressed a phone number into Ryan's hand. "Our number in Atlanta," she'd said. "If you figure anything out, let us know." Ryan told Mike about it later, after she'd said goodbye to Brendan's childhood bedroom alone. He shook his head and said the whole family was cracked. Ryan imagined pottery, a teapot with a broken handle, too hot to touch.

"What did you take from his room?" Mike asked.

"Nothing," she lied. But she didn't take anything after the funeral. What she'd wanted would have been too risky. She was making sure there were no signs of a search. She checked the clothes in his closet – all still hanging, and the shoes lined up like toy soldiers in neat, polished rows. She checked that his baseball trophies were standing shoulder to shoulder, and the clothes in his drawers were as precisely folded as they were when she'd arrived.

"What did you leave, then?"

She looked at him and wondered how much Brendan had told him about the notes she used to write him – the ones during Christmas that she’d sneak into his room to leave under the pillow or tucked into the toe of his slippers. “Meet me at the snowman at dawn. Bring hot chocolate.” Silly things, remnants of something else, a younger self.

They didn’t stop for dinner. Mike drove by the exit without turning his head, and even though Ryan’s stomach felt like it was digesting itself, she said nothing, trained her eyes on the narrow road, and waited for the mountains, her farmhouse.

“I don’t want to go home,” Mike said. He’d been quiet for the last hour. Something was bothering him, though Ryan felt as though she shouldn’t ask. He’d seemed upset about eulogy, or maybe it was what she’d implied that the twins might have said.

“Stay with me,” she said. Paused. Regretted it. Her words sounded too desperate, hollow and cheap.

“I should go back to work.” Mike said, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. “Greg keeps getting orders for bassinets and rocking horses and all that crap.”

“Did you expect to do this after college?”

“What? Make furniture with men I grew up with? No. Never. But it’s better than teaching, and that’s all I’m “qualified to do.” He paused. “Art

degrees.” He shook his head. “Besides, after a while you begin to realize that you’re making something people will treasure and pass down in their families. You’re not killing trees, you’re building sustainable memories.”

“You sound like a Hallmark card.”

“Or you get high on the fumes from the sealant.”

Ryan chuckled.

“It’s the company line. It makes Greg feel less guilty. He’s a tree hugger in a Carhaart disguise.” Mike shrugged and fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. The pack was empty. He tossed it down at Ryan’s feet, tapping his fingers on the steering wheel.

“So leave,” she said.

He leaned back, stretching his arms. “What are you going to do now, Ry?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “There’s still got to be something for me at home.”

“You were waiting for Brendan to come back,” he said.

“I feel like someone should have gone there, should have looked for him,” she said.

“Yeah,” Mike said, sighing. “Yeah.”

Outside the window, frosted by Ryan’s breath, the craggy mountains were snow-capped and uneven as rotting teeth. In her camera case, tucked under her stockinged feet, were a pile of letters, notes that she and Brendan had sent back and forth over the summer that she’d packed up her father’s house and prepared to

rent it, to give it away to strangers for new memories and old comforts. Mike had introduced Ryan and Brendan about a year before her father died, but they hadn't hit it off at first. The letters had been Brendan's idea. But what she had now were her letters to him, things he thought worth saving. They technically belonged to her, though she found them between his mattress and box spring like secrets. She could fill the spaces with his notes to her, saved in one of her father's cigar boxes that was tucked in the bottom of an old photo paper box in her darkroom – objects to be viewed in the dark. There would be no spaces, no unanswered notes. The other things she took were not as easy to justify: a letter addressed to Mike, a photograph of herself, his St. Christopher medal that she'd found tucked inside one of her letters to him and hung on its thin, cool chain around her neck, she could still feel it there now, a small weight between her breasts. She wanted to leave no trace of herself in his parents' house – to disappear completely from his past.

She glanced over at Mike. He was driving with his right hand, his left cupped at the base of his neck, while the meat of his lower lip rested between his teeth. The white shirt he wore for the funeral was open at the neck, his tie a loose knot near the base of his chest. Somewhere in the backseat of the car was the suit jacket he'd draped over her shoulders as they'd stood in the graveyard and watched an empty box be lowered into an equally empty grave. She wished she could remember Brendan as he'd once been, as they'd once been, connected, two people instead of one remembering, and she wondered if Mike, with his furrowed brow and narrowed eyes, was not thinking, wishing the something similar.

Mike pulled over in Littleton. There was a place they could get coffee and gas, he said, though as soon as he had the sweaty Styrofoam mug in his hands, he complained of a headache, gave Ryan the wheel. He was asleep before they hit St. Johnsbury, curled up like a child, his temple pressed to the glass of the window. Had he slept the night before? It didn't look like it, hadn't seemed like it when he'd arrived at Brendan's that morning, clutching a mug of coffee and grinding a cigarette into sidewalk before he came to the door. She'd watched him through the drapes as the twins argued with the funeral director over his seating arrangement. He was worried about something, she thought – he'd grown more and more distant, and now, she didn't know what he wanted, but she was certain it wasn't to go back home. She ran her fingertips along the soft line of his cheek – letting them tingle with warmth. If he woke up she could say she was brushing away a hair, a crumb, but really she wished he'd revert back to their playful banter. She turned on the radio and let the folksy drone of the announcer keep her company, though he was talking about the distance and isolation of winter. It left her with the same feeling as the hollow box now surrounded by earth.

Why hadn't anyone gone to look for Brendan? Obviously, the people on the island must have, but what if there was some miscommunication? If he hadn't gone out that night? Or if he had, and he was just floating in the water, waiting to surface? If she was responsible for his leaving, shouldn't she do something, too? Ryan glanced over at Mike, missing her exit. Things wouldn't be the same

between them until they had closure, a body. He needed it as much as she did, even if he hadn't said that yet. Worse though, was her realization that if Mike were missing, she'd go without hesitation.

Ryan rested her hand on her chest. Through the thin weave of her blouse, she could feel the weight of Brendan's medal, light as the wafer that Kitty choked on. She could find him. She and Mike could bring him home and then maybe find some kind of peace together. She looked out at Newport as she drove down Main Street, past the long gasp of glacial Canadian lake. The shops were already closed and a gaggle of kids were walking up the street with baseball bats and gloves – they'd start practicing at the Municipal building, continue playing indoors until it was warm enough to field a team outside. She didn't want to be there for baseball season, though; she didn't want to take their pictures and continue on with her life without knowing for certain that Brendan wouldn't be returning to it.

If Mike didn't want to go home, back to his life in the same way that she didn't want to return to hers, couldn't they go together? Perhaps they needed to go look for Brendan, to go on one last trip before settling into their adult lives. Maybe Brendan was right in his desire to travel. Mike might be angry, she thought, though she couldn't remember him ever being angry with her, unless he was better at hiding than she was at detecting. And he'd been distant since the night they spoke to Armand; he'd been just as eager to know the truth as she had been. Besides, they could always drive back, and then she could continue on alone. She glanced at him as she approached the last road back toward Coventry

and Irasburg – his lips had formed a soft, relaxed curve in the darkening car. He was happy to be with her. They would be okay, she hoped as she kept straight, heading toward Jay Peak, the narrow pass of mountain that would bring them, eventually, to the New York border with its sculpted bridge and long cold drop into water that had only just shed its ice.

Chapter Five

“Where are we?” Mike asked, startling Ryan as she strained to see through the smoky fog of late evening. A ghostly mist had been skimming over the hood of the car for the last hour. They’d past through Swanton, Highgate, Mooers, Malone and were deep in the St. Lawrence River valley. The road hadn’t changed for miles: fields of dark, turned earth that seemed to promise invisible growth. Until that moment, Ryan had been able to convince herself that she’d know what to say when he woke and asked.

“New York,” she said. She glanced over at him. He cocked an eyebrow at her before scrubbing his hands over his face, moving the skin up and down like stiff clay.

“What are we doing in New York?”

“We’re...” She thought of the long road ahead of them, the twisting miles and thick water where Brendan was or wasn’t and where Max might still be roaming. Would he become feral if left alone too long? Max. “We’re going to find Max,” she said.

“Max?”

Even she was a little surprised by the ease of her answer. “The dog,” she said, as though that might make her response reasonable. “I need to get Max back.” She almost believed herself.

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Looked out the window, then glanced down at the door, maybe the carabinieri. “And...” He knit his brow. “You’ll be okay not going home?”

“Yeah,” she said. Would she be? Ryan tried not to think of the rooms in the farmhouse, empty of furniture but full of boxes packed in closets, ready to be swept up at a moment’s notice. What would Gladys think? What would anyone think if they were to discover the boxes? She flushed, glad for the dark of the car.

“So we’re going...”

“To Alaska,” Ryan said, liking how the vowel rich word sounded. They were going to Alaska.

Mike leaned forward and shut off the radio. She hadn’t even been aware it was still on. He touched her neck. His hand was warm, almost hot, and when she glanced over at him, he was looking directly at her, nodding, smiling, even.

“We’ll have to stop for the night,” he said. “We can get a fresh start in the morning; find a Triple A, get directions.” He was being too practical, veering too far from his normal self. As far as she knew, he’d never bought a map in his life. Did he even belong to Triple A? It seemed like something settled people did: people who owned houses, matching Sedans, living room sets.

“I don’t want directions,” Ryan said. She wanted to run pure and clean and without hesitation. She had always told herself that when she left, she wouldn’t make her mother’s mistakes. She’d go after preparation, not just a bad day. She would leave no trace, no footsteps, no trail of stale breadcrumbs for a hungry child

to follow, stuffing herself on hope and loneliness until her belly swelled with starvation. Already she'd begun to fail. "We have to just go."

Mike reached for her, rested his open palm on her knee, but even in that most intimate of gestures, she could already feel the change. He hoped, she thought, to convince her to stop.

"I feel like we're running away," Mike said. They were sitting in a coffee shop in Northern New York. It was just after ten and he was drinking a double espresso. They'd decided only moments before to drive through the night, to get as far away as possible before dawn broke. Ryan spooned whipped cream from the top of her hot chocolate, savoring the cool sweetness it left on her tongue. Under the table, their feet were crowded together.

"How long was your dad gone before your mom knew for sure?" Ryan asked, trying to ignore his warm ankle against her stockinged leg.

"She knew when he left that he wasn't coming back," he said. "She'd just told him she was pregnant."

Ryan already knew this. But his past always made her feel slightly better and entirely worse about her own. Her mother could have run and left her alone at birth, but she'd made her decision after getting to know Ryan. It didn't seem to matter at that moment, in the warm little shop where vines grew up peach colored walls and photographs hung for sale in simple black frames above a massive, paint-chipped piano with cracked keys. A waitress in a sari and dread-locks wiped

down the mismatched tables and piled chairs on top of them. Every few minutes, Ryan caught her glancing at Mike – small looks, from behind a potted plant, underneath a table (under the guise of picking up napkins), behind the espresso machine. She'd told them not to rush; she lived upstairs and was willing to stay until they were done. Maybe she thought they'd leave separately, that he might linger in those long moments when Ryan would be gone. She was the kind of woman who wore ankle bracelets. Ryan leaned forward and touched Mike's arm; he smiled at her, leaned in until they formed a tent above their drinks and could feel the warmth drift up like the clammy hands of familiar ghosts.

“So if we're talking about my dad, what happened with your mom?”

She'd told him this story many times, maybe too many. But she told it again: being left with Mrs. Beal, the dragging of Brewster Lake because someone had seen a car go in off one of the deserted edges, and the young woman from San Francisco who had been pulled out with her boyfriend; they'd been missing over a year, Angela Thornton and Oliver Walker Richmond the Third. She'd always found his name strange, too much. Her father had, after that, paid for a new set of guardrails, and for days he'd spent afternoons walking the beaches on the south end of the lake.

A second letter had arrived almost a week later, after he'd started to grow gaunt and narrow. Until her mother disappeared he'd shaved every morning at six fifteen. Six ten, the city bus would go by, and he would walk into the bathroom with a white face towel. Her mother had left the note there – in his shaving bag –

she must have thought he wouldn't miss it. But he'd stopped shaving. It was the only time Ryan could remember that he'd ever worn a beard. After he received the second note, he shaved it off.

"What did the note say?" Mike asked. He knew this, too, but he liked the drama of her story, the presence of that now-missing character.

"Stop looking for me," Ryan said. She stood up. It was time to go. The note had been written on a white index card; only the postage mark – Montana – gave it away. But her mother had always been dumb about postage marks; it's how Ryan knew where she was now, from a postage mark on a sympathy card she'd sent after Ryan's father had died. Mike had been gone two weeks when it arrived from Bellingham, Washington, addressed to "Elizabeth Ryan Wesley Marcott," a girl who hadn't existed for three years. Ryan had shed two names on her eighteenth birthday, four was more than anyone needed, and she'd been Ryan long enough to recognize Elizabeth as her mother's work.

Inside the envelope was a simple white card with a silver dove embossed on the front. *My sincerest apologies for your tremendous loss.* No signature, no salutation, no love. She'd tucked it away and opened the other letter that had arrived that day – from Brendan. After giving up on Mike days before, she'd found that she liked Brendan if she tried. His notes were sweet and intimate, written on onionskin paper, soft and thin as old silk. They had the texture of love notes that grandchildren could come across in seventy years in a hat box and

ponder over, and she'd been desperate to create new memories with someone capable of remembering with her.

“What-cha thinking about?” Mike asked.

“Nothing.” Or, at least, nothing that anyone else remembered.

Ryan woke up outside a McDonalds with a thick tongue and slimy teeth.

Mike was sitting on the curb in front of the car, smoking a cigarette and consulting a dog-eared copy of a Rand McNally Road Atlas. When she tapped twice on the window with her index finger, he looked up, stubbed out his cigarette with a quick swipe of his right hand, and glanced at her, sheepish and sweet. She opened the car door.

“Welcome to Ohio,” he said.

“I slept forever,” she said.

“No, almost forever.” She sat down next to him and he touched her cheek, brushing away a crumb of something and leaving her skin tingling. “I need a shower,” he said.

“I want a strong cup of coffee,” Ryan replied, thinking she would give up on tea. One did not make it across the country on cups of Earl Grey. That required coffee, thick and dark as oil in the bottom of heavy porcelain mugs.

“I give you McDonalds,” Mike said, gesturing back at the big marquee. Ryan wrinkled her nose. “Not good enough for you? I can see it now; you’re going to break the bank, aren’t you?”

“I’ll drive,” Ryan said, taking the keys from him. “Where are we?”

“West of Cleveland. We want to get to interstate ninety west. It will take us to Spokane.” He held up the map. The road was traced in blue highlighter.

“I’m not breaking the rules,” he said, “It was in the trunk.”

“What else is in the trunk?”

“You’re not ready to know that yet,” he said, darting his eyebrows up, a quick, cunning gesture. She wondered what he was trying to hide with such showmanship. She’d looked in the trunk earlier; there hadn’t been much back there that wasn’t balled up or strewn. Nothing useful.

She pulled into the first diner after McDonalds. A small building on the right hand side of the highway called “Bessie’s Roadhouse.” It was a place Brendan would have avoided for its cheap vinyl siding and huge, cowboy boot-shaped sign. That was without considering what they actually served, he wouldn’t have eaten their likely array of meat and grease.

“We’re on the tour of fine dining, aren’t we?” asked Mike.

“Note to self,” Ryan said, opening her door and stepping out onto a gravel parking lot pitted with broken beer bottles – Bessie’s apparently had a nightly purpose – “laugh at the waitress’ jokes.”

“Could be worse,” Mike said. “Take your camera in.”

“My camera?”

“The car doesn’t lock.”

Ryan reached into the back seat and slung her camera over her shoulder. By the time she caught up with Mike, a woman with a name tag that read “Bessie” was already leading him over to a table by the window. Ryan waited for a menu, before realizing it was on the table, trapped below a layer of thick glass. It was a typed sheet of paper, the edges translucent from a thousand fingertips, the prices recently crossed out and raised. The dishes were named after various heart surgeries, increasing in seriousness with the addition of grease and fat.

“What are you getting?” she asked Mike, using her hand to hide a crude sketch of a dead man at the bottom of her menu. Above his head, in a heart shaped bubble: “Bessie’s what a way to go!”

“The Double Bypass with toast,” he said. “And a lot of coffee. You?”

“The French toast,” she said.

“They won’t have real maple syrup.”

“I know, but I haven’t had it in ages. Not since Brendan first moved in with me. He used to make it for breakfast on the weekends when I had to work.” She stopped, but Mike didn’t seem to mind, he just gazed at her, his eyes slightly narrow, his brow furrowed. He looked sad, almost repentant. “I’m sorry.”

“About what?” He cocked his head, but it did nothing to change his look of loss.

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I imagined he cooked for you. Why else would you keep him around?” And though he was trying to sound sincere, focused, Ryan noticed that he was,

instead of looking at her, looking at the waitress just over her shoulder. He gestured at her, the way she stood against the counter drinking from a mug that said "Delores" on the front.

"What can I get you kids?" she said from across the room when she caught them staring. Ryan demurred and looked down at the table. Mike met her eyes and stated his order.

"No toast," he said.

"Can't do that for you," she said.

"What?"

"All the heart problems come with toast," she said, walking over to the table. "Need something to soak up that grease."

"But I'm not going to eat it."

"Liability," she said, nodding at Ryan. "You wanna leave this one stranded in the middle o' nowhere Nebraska? I don't think so. And what do you want?" She looked down at Ryan over the top rim of her glasses.

"French toast."

"French toast," she hollered, returning to her cup of coffee. "Double Bypass. Toast."

"I don't know if I should laugh or walk out," Mike said.

"How many days will it take us to get there?"

"I don't know. Four, maybe, to get across to Bellingham."

“Bellingham?” Ryan tried to read his expression, but it was strangely anticipatory, as though he knew who lived in Bellingham, too. But he couldn’t, she had never shown him the letters. Brendan had certainly not known, or at least, if he did, he’d never indicated it to her.

“To get to the ferry. It’s the only way we’ll make it to Southeast Alaska.” He paused. “Where he died. It’ll take a few days. Once we’re up there, it’ll be up to you.”

He seemed to know a lot about the route, the ferry. There was a sense of certainty that she worried he wouldn’t have gotten from the atlas he had earlier.

“I paid rent last week,” she said slowly, gauging his reaction. “I have at least three more weeks before I’ll have to make another payment to Gladys.

“I called my grandfather this morning. He said to say ‘hello’ to you; he’ll tell Greg another emergency came up.”

He must have done it while she was sleeping. But was this really an emergency? She worried that he’d lied for her, for them, or at least, his grandfather was lying for them now.

“I miss your grandfather,” she said.

“There’s a lot to miss,” Mike said, pulling his cap down, trying to cover his ears as they turned pink. “He said he misses you, too. He wants you to visit when we get back.” Mike yawned. “I’m going to need to stop tonight. We’ll have to rent a room.”

“A bed would be nice,” Ryan said. She knit her lips shut and looked across the table at him. He’d splayed his fingers across the glass, his calloused palms forming a double image that framed the reflection of his face. He met her eyes in the glass. Smiled.

“Don’t be weird,” he said, reaching until his fingertips covered hers. “It’s not like it’s the first time we’ve lived together.” She nodded, thought of the weeks after her father’s funeral when he’d helped her keep house. How easily he’d sorted through her father’s things, helping her pick out what to save and what to donate to Goodwill. She could barely move from her perch on her father’s bed. And even though she’d been the one who insisted they do it, she’d been useless as Max, who’d sat, velvety new and reassuringly small, on her lap.

“I know,” she said, meeting his eyes.

The waitress brought out a pot and filled their coffee mugs to the brim. Mike sipped off the top of his before adding sugar and Ryan set hers on a small stack of napkins before jarring the table and letting the top quarter inch spill out onto the napkins. Mike chuckled. “I love watching you do that,” he said.

“Whatever works,” she said, adding sugar and cream. Why had she let Brendan take Max with him? She longed for Max. His habit of resting his head in her lap when she was at the table; she was the only one who gave him scraps.

“We’ll camp in Montana,” Mike said. “We can stop a little if you want – take some pictures: you standing next to the Welcome to Indiana sign, me next to the big ball of string. Something to put in your album when we get home.” Ryan

didn't want to think about home, the moment when Mike would drop her off in the driveway, kiss her on the forehead and head back over the mountains. While she wanted Max back, she couldn't imagine the weight of him standing next to her, as heavy as the weight of Brendan lingering in her chest, clinging somewhere behind her rib cage, as though attached with thick and ungainly barbs. "Don't look so sad," Mike said, "I promise not to sing in the car."