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Forgiveness: A Novel

Sarah A. Beattie
Claremont McKenna College

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Forgiveness

For my parents

for digging in.

“And the choice you make,
between hating and forgiving,
can become the story of your life.”

Gregory David Roberts,

Shantaram

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Part 1

Chapter 1

I have the right Jack. The Jack of Hearts. Boppa cuts me the five of Hearts. He calls fives “everybody’s best friend” in cribbage. I put two Kings in my crib. Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, and a pair is six. I keep this Jack in my hand for no reason at all because I have a six, a seven, and an eight. But I’m lucky in cards, Boppa always says. I know it. I’m going to peg out if he doesn’t when he counts his points first. I’m going to win. We start the play.

“Go.” He makes his eyes little slits. I get one peg forward after the first play. Next play.

“Damnit, twenty-one.” His last card is the Jack of Clubs. We both know it’s a bad play, but he doesn’t have any choice. I lay down my Jack matching his and the side of his mouth twitches. I’m only five peg-holes from winning. Another pair for two. And thirty-one for two more.

With all his cards down, I’m counting his hand in my head. He doesn’t have enough to peg out before I count. I feel his eyes on me. I look up and he’s smiling.

“Well, shit, Bea.” He lets out a laugh like he’s been holding his breath. I smile down into my hands and tears well up in my eyes. I’m afraid he’ll stop playing cribbage with me because I finally beat him. I want to play again right now so I can lose. But he keeps laughing. Boppa, cribbage champion of his country club for the past six years, lost to a seven-year-old. But he’s laughing. I look up and see him all blurry because of my eyes being all watery. He stops laughing, but his giant grin lasts a second longer.

“Are you crying?!” He tilts his head to the side. “Quit it. Little girls are allowed to beat old boys like me, kid. It’s not against the rules.”

Our dog, Cal, has been laying at our feet the whole game. Boppa moved in almost half a year ago and I think he makes the house smell funny, but Cal must like how he smells because he follows him around everywhere he goes. Cal looks up at me now with his head tilted the same way Boppa’s is. I sniff and blink a couple times so my eyes stop being fuzzy. Cal gets up and comes to lick my knees. I grab both his ears and smile.

“I know, Boppa. Can we play again?”

“Go make us a snack and I’ll shuffle.”

I go into the kitchen and Lindsay is leaning against the counter with the phone squeezed between her cheek and her shoulder. She’s mmmm-ing into the receiver and I can hear the other voice buzzing really loud and fast. She doesn’t look up from picking at her fingernails so I jump on the phone cord to make her look at me even though I know I’m not supposed to do that. She wrinkles her forehead at me but at least she is paying attention. Adults think they can ignore me sometimes because I’m a kid. Sometimes it means they talk about things they think I don’t understand so I don’t complain because I learn a lot because I pretend not to be listening. I’m young, not deaf, and I know what that means because a boy in my second grade class this year with Mrs. Bradley had a hearing aid wrapped around his ear and stuck into his brain because he’s three quarters deaf.

I stick my tongue out at Lindsay and go give her a hug around her butt. I look up at her and she sticks her tongue out at me back and I reach up trying to grab it which

makes her smile and laugh but she has to laugh silently because the noise on the other side of the phone line is still buzzing along. Lindsay nods her head at two plates sitting on the counter next to her. She made Boppa and me sandwiches already and I'm happy because I don't like making food unless it has cookie batter or chocolate chips. I want to tell her that I beat Boppa at cribbage, but I don't want to hurt his feelings if he doesn't want anyone to know he lost. Lindsay looks at the doorway and suddenly looks serious again as Boppa shuffles in.

“Well, Linds, can you believe your daughter, this little shit,” he says putting his giant hand on the top of my head making my neck crack, “finally beat me?” His voice booms into the quiet room and he laughs leaning back on the doorframe letting his belly shake. *Watch your language!* Lindsay mouths at him. He just keeps laughing and it makes me smile that he's being a good sport about it like I always am even though I hate losing. Lindsay hates when Boppa swears in front of me but I don't mind. He lets me swear when no one else is around as long as I don't swear anywhere else and I like using bad words with him because he thinks they're funny and even funnier when a seven-year-old says them because it's really against the rules, so I don't ever say any of them to anyone else. Sometimes he laughs so hard he cries.

My favorite way to cry is from laughing. When I can make Boppa cry like that sometimes I cry too because he looks so funny. He'll cough and spit a lot and his nose always runs and he pulls out his grody handkerchief that the lady that would have been my grandmother embroidered his initials on to “clean up all the puddles.” I don't remember her because she died the year I was born. The idea of people making puddles makes me think of him raining. So when it rains, I think of Boppa.

It's funny that my mom has a real name. Lindsay. So I call her that. If I called her Mom, she would only know I was talking to her if we were home but out in public how is anyone supposed to know what mom I'm talking to because there are a lot of them? I call her Lindsay and sometimes Linds like Boppa and sometimes Lindsay Elizabeth when she's not paying attention to me like how she calls me Willoughby Meghan when I've done something naughty. Adults laugh when I call her by her real name and tell me I have a lot of spunk, but I just think whoever made the rule that kids have to call their parents Mom and Dad clearly didn't go out in public very often or else they would have realized just how confusing that is. Bruce doesn't like when I call him Bruce and tells me to stop being sassy, though I do anyway because after all it is my dad's name, but Lindsay doesn't mind. I call my grandfather Boppa not George because when my parents tried to get me to say Grampa, Boppa was all that came out, Lindsay says, so I like that I made it up. Lindsay even calls him Boppa in front of me now, though Bruce calls him Dad even though he isn't really Bruce's dad, just is because he married Lindsay.

Boppa sees the sandwiches and goes over to them to take them off the counter, kisses Lindsay on the cheek and hands them to me. He needs his hands to walk, holding onto doorways, touching the walls as he moves slowly along.

"Mhmmm, mhmmm..." Lindsay is still on the phone, but I don't think she's listening anymore. Her eyes are glued to Boppa's back as he walks slower than a snail towards his easy chair in the living room off the kitchen where Cal is waiting for him. Lindsay wiggles her fingers at me to follow him with the sandwiches. I nod and jump really high over the phone cord and smile over my shoulder at her. Cal gets up from next

to Boppa's chair and runs to eat the crumbs that fall off the plates when I jump. He knocks Boppa's leg as he runs towards me and Boppa says a big long string of bad words really loudly and I giggle when Lindsay glares at me like it's my fault.

It's noon and I know Boppa will go take a nap when we finish our sandwiches even though he said he'd play another game with me. I hate naps and I don't have to take them anymore, but Boppa says he needs them and always looks forward to them. Lindsay helps him get into bed and sometimes she sits and talks to him for a while as he falls asleep, which I know because I like to sit outside his door on the couch where Lindsay sleeps sometimes in the hallway and listen to them. I like when they talk about me because Boppa sometimes says how proud he is of me for things I forget. I don't like when they talk about Trip because Boppa isn't proud of Trip but I am. Sometimes I like to think of what I would say to Boppa if he said those things to me about Trip, and I wonder why Lindsay lets him talk about Trip like that when he is her son for goodness sakes. At least Boppa stands up for Trip when Bruce makes mean comments, though I don't get why maybe because Trip is Boppa's grandson and Trip isn't really Bruce's son.

Boppa puts down his empty plate and his chair springs creak as he slowly gets up. I almost think the creaky sounds are coming from Boppa because when he moves it looks like he hurts so sometimes I think his springs are the ones whining, not the chair's. He shuffles off down the hall making a *whoosh whoosh* sound as his feet slip across the carpet because he can't even pick his feet all the way up. I hear the sound of the phone being hung up on the receiver and my mom hurries past to follow him to his room.

"Hurts today?" She says as she goes up behind him.

“Oh, I’d say somewhat.” He turns to let her come up beside him and he puts his arm around her back and she does the same to him. “Thank you for that sandwich. It was delicious.”

“Are you still hungry? I can heat up some of the lasagna from last night.”

“No, no. Thank you, my love.”

They’re talking in almost whispers, but I can still hear them. Sometimes the way Boppa talks to Lindsay surprises me. He is always loud and his voice sounds like thunder from clouds made of sandpaper, but sometimes, when it’s just the two of them, his voice changes, it gets softer, and it makes Lindsay smile.

Chapter 2

Bruce is staying late at work again tonight. It's a Saturday and he never even used to work on weekends at all. He started working more days and missing dinner around the beginning of the summer and Lindsay lets Boppa sit in his seat at the head of the table and I tell Boppa it means he has to pay for dinner like Boppa says to Bruce sometimes when he sits at the head of the table which makes me laugh because Bruce is still paying for the dinner whether he's sitting at the head of the table for dinner or not even there.

Boppa has been at the hospital more often lately. I asked Lindsay once what is wrong with Boppa, and she said he has a cell in his body that is growing really fast. I almost started crying because Lindsay says all the time that I'm growing really fast, too, and I got scared I'd have to start going to the hospital, but Lindsay said kids are supposed to grow, but adults aren't supposed to anymore when they get old, so I don't have to worry. I just hope I stop growing on time.

"You have an appointment at eight tomorrow morning with Dr. Worley, Dad." Lindsay unfolds her napkin over her lap and shoots me a look to do the same but I already put my napkin in my lap so she doesn't say anything, just nods.

"Oh, that child. The woman barely looks old enough to have graduated high school let alone tell me how much longer I have to live." Boppa is kidding when he says stuff like that, but it's the kind of joke you don't laugh at. Lindsay doesn't think it's funny at all and looks quickly at me to see if I am listening, but I scratch at my elbow

really hard and make my eyes really wide to make it seem like I'm not so they'll keep talking.

“Dad... They just want to try something new.”

“What?” He's getting angry quickly so I start counting the dots on my placemat to keep my heart from bouncing too hard.

“I don't know. I'm not the doctor so I don't understand it all, but Dr. Worley will talk to us about it in the morning.” Lindsay puts a chicken breast on Boppa's plate as if she's saying they're done talking about it, then one on mine before she, like always, takes the smallest one for herself because “she's not the growing girl,” but I think maybe Boppa should have the smallest piece if he's the one growing too fast.

“Yes please, I'd like some chicken. Thank you, Lindsay,” I whisper.

“If you're going to speak, don't mumble,” Boppa barks at me, but gets back to what he's really mad about quickly so I know he's not mad at me. “This is ridiculous. I'm not doing something new. I'm too fucking tired.”

“Dad!” Lindsay jumps at the f-word and I almost giggle but I know this isn't a time I should laugh. I attack my chicken with my fork and knife. “Seriously.” Lindsay glares at him. “I know we've said it will always be your decision, but please do this for me. They think we should give radiation a try. I think it's a good idea, but like I said, it's up to you.”

That's something they think I don't understand so they can talk about it in front of me, and since they're right and it sounds serious, I take the pencil inside my head and write on my brain to look up what radiation is.

Boppa makes a few spluttering noises, but decides he doesn't have anything else to say, cuts his chicken and the knife screeches across the plate as a piece flings off onto the table. His hands are shaking and I realize I'm all jittery and kind of sweaty from sitting as still as I can which I'm not good at. I've been focusing too hard on trying to hear what they're not saying just because I'm here.

Chapter 3

Trip is my big brother and he's seventeen, almost ten years older than I am. I don't like saying he is my half-brother because it makes Trip seem farther away or not as much my brother, but I know he's totally my brother even if it's only from Lindsay. His dad's name was Robert and he played the drums so Trip does, too. Lindsay plays the piano, the violin, the guitar, and the flute, but I like when she sings more than anything.

When she was younger, Lindsay was in a band and she was the lead singer. Robert, Trip's dad, was her husband and he was in the band with her, but he died in a car crash and she quit the band, I think because she was sad he wasn't in it anymore. She met Bruce soon after though. I guess he'd gone to one of her shows with a girl he'd been dating but he didn't really like the girl and thought Lindsay was beautiful. He'd asked about her after the show and heard she was married so he didn't think about her anymore. But he ran into her at a pub where she worked as a bartender a few months later and it took him three times going back to introduce himself because he's shy. Even though Bruce thought she was married, he still thought she was beautiful. When he went back the third time, she wasn't working and when he asked the other bartender where she was, Bruce says he got lucky because the other bartender was a real talker and he told Bruce that she'd taken her parents to the airport because they'd been in town to try to lift her spirits after her husband had died. She came into the bar a while later and sat down right next to Bruce and as Bruce says the rest is history. Bruce saved her from being lonely and I'm glad because being lonely isn't fun at all.

I like that my parents existed before I did. I like that I changed their life like how Boppa moving in changed mine. I'm one of those things, Lindsay says, that once it is, it seems it always has been, even though it hasn't.

I make the pancake batter every Sunday morning and Trip cooks them on the stovetop because I'm not old enough to use the stovetop, though Lindsay's never said when old enough will be and plus I can't really reach onto the top of it enough to flip a pancake. Sometimes she lets me put chocolate chips in the batter. I think Bruce and Boppa like that Trip cooks the pancakes because then they don't have to talk to him much since Trip isn't sitting at the table. Bruce just reads the newspaper and kisses my forehead when I bring him a heaping plate and Boppa makes weird comments that I think make Trip upset but he doesn't say anything back. Bruce and Boppa don't talk to Trip much, and when they do, I can tell they don't like having to and I always get nervous. Sometimes it makes me sad that they don't talk because I like talking to all of them a lot, and if I love them all so much, it seems they should be able to love each other, too, but I don't know if they do.

This morning, it's just Trip and me in the kitchen. Lindsay and Bruce are at the hospital with Boppa, even though most times when Boppa has morning appointments, they're still back in time for breakfast.

"Will they be back soon?" I ask Trip as he flips two pancakes at once.

He shrugs his shoulders.

“Get used to not knowing, Bea. How many pancakes do you think you can eat this morning?” He draws out the ‘a’ in pancakes trying to draw attention away from what he said first which I don’t understand, but am scared to ask him to explain.

“Seventeen.”

“Ooooh, you may have me beat. I think I can only do fourteen.” We’ve never actually eaten as many as we say we can, but he asks me every time how many even though I always have four and he has six so it’s our special joke.

Trip hasn’t been happy ever since he went to high school, but he has Ian to help him keep it together. We all know it. Ian is Trip’s best friend and that’s nice because he lives in the house right at the end of our cul de sac, which is a French word that we use in English. Ian is a year older than Trip so he’s going to college this year, leaving tomorrow for Brown and that is on Rhode Island and I have decided I want to go to school on an island because I like beaches and waves as long as they’re not over my head. Lindsay and Bruce thank their lucky stars that Ian is in Trip’s life to keep him smiling because Lindsay says high school can be really hard for some kids, and I know it has been for Trip. Without Ian here this year, I’m scared.

After breakfast, Trip grabs his bike helmet and walks out the door only saying bye and be safe because we have a secret agreement that he can go on bike rides when our parents aren’t home. We both know he’s supposed to be babysitting me, but I don’t mind that Trip goes on a bike ride because I like being alone in our house sometimes. I like sitting in my parents’ bathtub without any water and singing as loudly as I can. If anyone else is home, I don’t do that because I know it’s a silly thing to do.

I love singing and music because without music Bruce would never have heard Lindsay sing or thought she was beautiful, and then wouldn't have recognized her at the pub and wouldn't have gone back three times and wouldn't have asked the other bartender about her and then there would be no me.

Ian came over about an hour after Trip left this morning. When Ian walked into our kitchen, I almost told him Trip had gone for a bike ride, but stopped because I was confused why Ian didn't know that since Trip always meets up with Ian for bike rides, Trip told me so. Trip doesn't ever go bike riding with anyone else because he doesn't have very many friends. Then Ian asked if he could talk to me. He told me he really cared about Trip and I laughed, partly because I thought it a funny thing to tell me considering it was so obvious, but really because the moment was a little awkward.

I like Ian a lot, but he's never come over to play without Trip except for one time when Trip broke his elbow when I was really young and Lindsay called Ian to come watch me while they took Trip to the hospital, but I didn't have memory yet because I was still a baby. Ian told me Trip was going to have a hard year and that he'd need me. I smiled I guess because I knew all that already and wondered why Ian was being Captain Obvious, but it was nice to hear someone else tell me I was going to be important to Trip. He hugged me and told me again how much he cared about Trip. He told me he loves him. I told him Trip loves him a lot, too. Ian sniffled, but I pulled away and punched him and told him to quit being a baby. He laughed and I thought we were done talking about Trip, but he began to say something when the back door into the kitchen opened and Trip came in all covered in dirt and sweat. Ian walked over to him and gave him a

huge hug. Trip kept his arms hanging at his sides looking straight at me over Ian's shoulder. Then he began to cry. I know I should have gotten up to leave, but I stayed glued to my stool at the kitchen counter staring back at him.

"Ian loves you a lot," I said to Trip when the silence started to make me feel antsy.

Trip dropped his head onto Ian's shoulder and cried harder. His shoulders shook so hard even Ian with his arms still around him was shaking.

Ian finally took a step back and they looked at each other a long time. Trip's face was almost angry. He turned and walked back out the door leaving Ian standing in the kitchen with me, his faded red t-shirt wet from Trip's sweat. He ran his hand down his front and looked like he was waiting for Trip to come back in again, though I think we both knew it would be a while before he did.

"Man, I need a drink," Ian said under his breath but I heard him. As he stared distracted out the window above our kitchen sink I jumped off my stool, happy I didn't have to sit still anymore and poured two glasses of strawberry milk because it's my favorite special drink that Lindsay gives me when I'm sad and I could tell Ian was sad because Trip was sad. I gave him one and he looked at me confused for a second.

"A drink," I said.

He smiled, laughed and, when we'd both emptied our glasses, he left.

Trip came home hours later and the sky was already getting darker. The hospital brigade still hadn't come back so I'd gotten an entire day to play in our big empty house by myself and the only thing that was hard was making myself my own food but I managed and even made myself a peanut butter and Nutella sandwich. I tell Lindsay that

Trip doesn't need to baby-sit me all the time but she gets mad at him if she finds out he leaves me alone at all so I never tell her. Trip hadn't changed out of his dirty clothes. I had gotten one of his comic books out waiting for him hoping he'd ask me if I liked it when he came back so I could talk to him because I didn't like seeing him cry that morning, but he didn't say anything and I was mad I'd spent so long staring at the stupid thing.

Chapter 4

I'm lying in bed, listening to muffled voices up on the roof. I heard Trip moving around through our wall a bit ago and knew he'd go up to the roof soon. He's not pacing like he does sometimes up there, but he's not the only voice I hear. It doesn't take much to guess that's Ian up there with him. I slip out of bed to be closer to my window, thankfully already cracked, so I can hear them more clearly.

Andrea said Ian is really excited to go to college. Andrea is his mom and I get to call her by her first name, not Mrs. Nieder, because I know her really well from living down the street from her my whole life. I don't like calling anyone Mrs. This or Mr. That because it makes me feel small so I like that Andrea lets me call her Andrea. Anyway, Andrea told me Ian has been packed for three weeks and keeps having to dig into his suitcases to get things he needs because he couldn't wait to get all ready.

"So, what's the point?" It's Trip's voice. He sounds stuffy like when he has a cold.

"I don't know, fuck." That's one of Boppa's favorite words and one of the ones he makes really sure I would never say in front of Lindsay.

"I don't want to just hear your voice. That's not going to be enough. I can't do this." Trip is angry. He used that voice with me when I used to take his things without asking though he doesn't use that voice as much with me anymore since I stopped forgetting to put his things back before he notices.

“We’ll visit each other. I’m never going to stop loving you.” They are both quiet for a bit. Ian’s voice reminds me of how Dad talks to Mom when Mom comes back from visiting Boppa if he has to stay at the hospital overnight, kind of like a cat purr.

I’m not sure why but I’m crying. I know Ian is Trip’s best friend. I also know I’m not supposed to think it’s more of a Mom and Dad lovey-thing than just boys friendship because they’re both boys, but I think it. Trip has never had a Mom and Dad lovey-thing with a girl. I think Trip is so sad about Ian leaving because it is like Dad leaving Mom. Mom would be very sad if that happened, and I think Ian leaving is the same thing to Trip.

I told my friend Becca at school once that I didn’t understand why I have to choose a boy to have a Mom and Dad relationship with or why Trip has to choose a girl. I think he’d be happier if he could choose Ian. Becca told me to stop being gay. It made me cry even though I didn’t know what it meant. Anyway, Becca is not my friend anymore. When I asked Trip what it meant, he got angry that someone had called me that as an insult. He told me it means when a man loves a man instead of a woman or when a woman loves a woman instead of a man and that lots of people don’t think that’s okay. I asked him if I was gay because I love Mom. He laughed and said no. I asked him if he was gay because he loves Ian and he looked at me for a long time with serious eyes and said no.

“You don’t know that. There are going to be so many other guys at Brown. Grown-up, experienced... *out* guys. You’ll be so free.” It was Trip’s voice again.

“It won’t ever change who you are to me. I’ll come home for Thanksgiving, Christmas... I have enough saved for a flight back for your birthday... We’ll be together, Trip. It’s just the days in between that will be filler.”

“I don’t want filler. I want you.”

They go silent. I don’t know what I’m hearing or how I’m feeling hearing it. I realize my hands are balled up in tight fists and I’ve been staring at the car parked on my street outside my window but not really seeing it. I only know I shouldn’t be hearing what they’re saying to each other. Trip jumps down from the roof onto his windowsill and I slam against the wall to hide, but I’m too late. He’s seen me because our windows are right next to each other. He swings over to my windowsill and crouches down. He looks in my window at me, my eyes all wide and starting to water because he narrows his eyes and scares me so I’m afraid to look right at him.

“Well, now you know,” he says and swings back to his window and goes in. My heart is beating so hard it feels like it’s knocking up in my head. I hear his bed creak and I hope he’s going to sleep so I can, too. I hear Ian come down a minute later and climb in Trip’s window a little more noisily and clumsily. Trip’s old twin bed creaks again.

I get back in my bed and I can’t close my eyes. Trip did choose Ian. And Ian chose Trip. I think I’m happy, but I can’t explain why I’m confused. It seemed like Becca thought it was wrong. I’ve never seen a boy choose another boy. Bruce chose Lindsay and I think that’s right, but does that mean Trip choosing Ian isn’t right?

This morning, Trip won’t talk to me or even look at me. I wish I could tell him I won’t tell anyone what I heard. I know he doesn’t want me to think what I think now.

Ian left. Trip starts his senior year on Tuesday and I don't think he has anyone to talk to.

Trip was crying harder than I'd ever seen in our driveway as Ian drove off for Rhode

Island.

Chapter 5

Boppa lost his eyebrows. His eyelids puff out like marshmallows. I wanted to play cribbage this morning because I got a snow day from school. He told me he couldn't play. He said his fingers hurt to touch the cards especially because of the cold this winter has brought on. I haven't played cribbage with him in a long time. These days he's either "about to take a nap" or "his fingers hurt," which is just kind of a weird excuse if you ask me.

"Why, Lindsay?"

"If he says his fingers hurt, why would you want him to hurt just so he can play with you?"

"No, but I don't want him to play with me if they hurt. I just want to know why his fingers hurt." I know I sound like I'm whining, especially because of the stupid way I slump my shoulders when I say why, which I immediately wish I hadn't. Lindsay knows I am asking something else but I can tell she just doesn't want to answer my new question and I don't know why.

"Well, if he says his fingers hurt, that's the end of it."

"And they hurt because..." She looks right at me and narrows her eyes. It's not always one of her angry looks, but right now it probably is. She knows I know she doesn't want to answer the question and I'm being nosy.

"Go ask Trip to play with you. I can't. I have to finish your laundry."

We both know Trip would never play with me, plus he went back to bed when he found out it was a snow day, but I creep into his room, poke him and ask anyway. Trip

looks at me with sad eyes when I tell him Boppa won't play with me. I'm happy he doesn't get mad for waking him up or when I say Boppa used a stupid excuse about his fingers hurting. Trip just gives me a hug and asks if I want to read one of his comic books with him instead. His dang comic books are so boring, but Trip doesn't ask much if I want to do anything with him because I'm so much younger, so I say yes.

It's almost Christmas and Trip doesn't seem to think about anything except where he is going to college. He's applying to eight schools all over the place, but I can't help but notice that most of them are on the west coast, gazillions of miles away from home. He never seems to have time to do anything but write college essays, which I guess are like stories about himself, and talk to Lindsay about the different things he wants or doesn't want in a college.

I think I could help a lot with Trip's applications. I'm almost eight and I have an excellent vocabulary for an almost eight-year-old because I like looking up what words mean when someone says one I don't know. And plus, I really like stories and reading so I wish Trip would let me read his, but he won't. He doesn't even let Bruce read them, and I think that's making Bruce angry because he always asks Lindsay to tell him what he's writing when they're alone, but Lindsay says she thinks it's Trip's decision to let anyone read what he's writing, not hers. Sometimes I think I should tell Lindsay and Bruce about the vent that runs up through the floor from their room to mine, but then they might stop talking about so much that I shouldn't know.

Part 2

Chapter 1

Twenty-seven years ago, my mother, Lindsay Elizabeth Dumont, died of an overdose. She'd spent five years taking care of her father, listening every second of every day for his rumbling breaths, but he died anyway. Five months later, she also called it quits.

I can't make myself call her selfish. But it's the only explanation I can come up with when I try to understand it. In the back of my mind I can't shake believing suicide is the most selfish thing anyone can do. But I just can't think that about Lindsay. Her first husband had died, her father died, her son made it clear he hated coming home from college... but is that enough? Doesn't the hurt just make the good that much better? Like the night that cuts off the day to make us appreciate the day born anew again? Isn't that why we're supposed to suffer? She was just stuck in a night between days. How could she forget another day would come?

I wasn't old enough to realize Lindsay was a person in her own right. To me, she was simply my mother; a flawless, unwavering brick house. No matter what, I had a readily available excuse for everything she did, even if that excuse was simply uncomprehending youth. Every time I could hear her crying through the vent in my floor at night, I thought it must be a grown-up thing to do, to cry alone. Every time she yelled at me because I'd left the light on in the kitchen and sent me to my room for the rest of the day, I assumed leaving the light on was just that egregious. It was drilled into me; she

didn't need to have a reason. I could make one up for her. As much as I wanted to believe it was an accident when I saw her lifeless body, I didn't. I still don't. But it's the only thing she ever did for which I haven't been able to come up with a reason.

She couldn't sleep after Boppa died. Bottles of sleeping pills, anti-depressants, who the hell knows what else, littered the cabinets in her bathroom and some in the kitchen. I never questioned her needing them. I truthfully assumed all adults took lots of pills, what with all the vitamins Bruce would take each morning and the endless drugs Boppa was always on, and she never brought it up.

No one wanted to call it suicide. There weren't extreme amounts of any of the medications in her system. It was the interactions, the doctors said, that were deadly. I can still hear the patronizing and pitying tone of the bitch in the white doctor's jacket holding her clipboard like a beer bottle, drunk on the power it gave her. "Self-prescribing is one of the leading causes of death by accidental overdose. She couldn't possibly have known."

The doctors who assured my father it had been a mistake only said so thinking that was what we wanted to hear, after all what family ever wants to hear its wife and mother killed herself? I mean, in a way, that's on us. We must have fucked up somehow if the pillar of our family wanted out. But I'll take that blame if it means we're going to be honest here. I know Lindsay did it on purpose. She made it look accidental for the same reason the doctors infuriatingly told us so.

My mother woke up every morning and read pamphlets from the hospital instead of the newspaper, learning all she could about melanoma and radiation therapy and

whatever new drug doctors were having my grandfather take. She knew what she was doing.

I found her. She was lying on her back, eyes closed, hands folded across her stomach, completely prepared. I don't remember crying. I sat down at the foot of the bed. I took a breath. Then I crawled up the middle of the hard mattress like I had done years before between her and Bruce when I'd had nightmares as a child, but Bruce hadn't come home the night before so his side of the bed was still made. Her bedside table was clear. No scattered assortment of pills, no letters of goodbye. She was simply no longer there.

There's an odd stillness about a dead body. Wrapping her in my skinny arms, I knew what I held wasn't my mother anymore. It was merely what she'd left behind, like her sweaters folded neatly in her dresser and her perfume bottles displayed on top of it. She'd left before I'd gotten to her. Holding her cold hand was only like climbing into her closet and burying my face in one of her neatly hung dresses. And nothing else.

I didn't know how much she was hurting. Yes, she lost her father. Trip had taken off for his senior year a few months before and I knew she missed him but... I was still around. She was healthy. She didn't drink. She ran every morning before I woke up and served me breakfast sweaty and red-nosed from the morning cold. Yet somehow I knew before I even went in the room. It was like the life had been sucked out of the whole house, and I realize I knew she was gone before I opened the door. I rarely even went in that room anymore. I still don't remember or understand what pulled me through that door. I was twelve years old and I grew up.

Chapter 2

I've spent my life invading other people's families, escaping my own in any way I can. After Lindsay was gone, Bruce just slept, went to work, ate in the car on his half-hour commute home, went straight to his bedroom, and from what I could tell, just slept some more. He'd ask if I'd done my homework on his way towards his bedroom and his isolation. He kept up enough of a façade of being an attentive father to appease himself for about two months after Lindsay had died. But for the most part, as soon as she was gone, so was he. His zest for being a father was a two-part deal tied in with being a husband; as soon as the latter was over, the former vanished with it.

At fourteen I went to boarding school, erased the writing across my forehead that at home had blazed "Dead Mother," and began my break-in to the Werth family.

I claimed Maxamillion Werth as my best friend the first day of freshman orientation at the prestigious boarding school in Massachusetts Bruce let me go to when I'd finally had enough of his skipping out on his dad duties. Max had the kind of family who never buys another house; they just inherit them like paintings and tarnished jewelry, kept in the family for infinite generations. Sitting around in a circle playing degrading "get-to-know-you" games, I'd said I liked fly-fishing when we had to go around the circle and say one thing no one knew about us. Not one of the bored, slightly frowning incoming freshmen in the circle sitting in the grass even knew my name, but somehow fly-fishing came out first. Max warmly asked if I would teach him someday because his

father had always light-heartedly teased him that he wouldn't be a man until he knew how. From then on he'd been my best friend.

I think Max's great-grandparents built the Werth's vacation home in Maine, or at least they'd been the ones to originally buy the place and transform it into the grand estate it was by the time Mr. and Mrs. Werth came to own it. The first time I went was for a weekend in the beginning of my sophomore year, and I squirted milk out my nose laughing at Max's older brother Nate's impression of President Carter. The second time in the summer after sophomore year, I broke my finger playing touch football with all the Werth brothers and Mr. Werth who I'd met for the first time that week. I'd felt like a complete idiot, especially when Nate drove me to the hospital. I'd gone up two different weekends during our junior year, and, for our senior year spring break, Max invited me up for the whole week. With college applications all submitted, Max and I threw our bags in the back of his Lincoln Continental and took off. His nauseatingly peppy girlfriend at the time, Abby, was going to the Caribbean with her group of girlfriends whose names all conveniently ended in 'y' or 'ie,' so I was relieved that I wouldn't have to put up with that. I just wanted a week of family time.

I wouldn't have gone home anyway. I'd considered going to San Francisco to stay with Trip for the week. I hadn't even talked to him about it, though, so I wasn't technically backing out of anything. Trip and I had decided near the beginning of my senior year without talking to Bruce that I'd go live with Trip and his boyfriend Jeff that next summer. Or rather Trip had told me I was going to, and I'd been relieved knowing I

wouldn't have to persevere through three months alone with Bruce in his cramped apartment like I'd done the summer before.

Max's brothers, Nate, Lee, and Colin, were at the Maine house for the week, too, and each brought up a few friends as well. In total, there were eleven of us. Mrs. Werth, who insisted we all call her Martha, came up for three days and immediately filled the embarrassing-her-sons quota by breaking out home videos on her first night.

Martha had no daughters. When Bruce couldn't find the time to drive the two hours to freshman year parents' weekend, Martha stepped in. She knew more about me from Max than she ever let on. She protected me from anything she thought may have come off as pity, treating me like one of her own children, sending birthday and Christmas cards and presents, and called every few weeks to check in with how I was doing "just because."

Martha unabashedly hugged her sons and told them she loved them every night before she went to sleep, and they said it right back without a hint of embarrassment. While in Maine for that wonderful week, she gave me hugs in the morning and fully expected me to help out with the dishes after meals, which I always did without being asked. She was the first adult I thought of as my friend rather than just an authority figure. But Martha wasn't a replacement. I didn't want to see her as an attempt to replace Lindsay, but she gave me a kind of love I didn't get much of anymore, and I loved her for understanding that, even as a falsely self-satisfied teenager, I still needed it.

Chapter 3

On Martha's last night at the house, when everyone had gone to the basement to watch a movie after dinner, I stayed in the kitchen with her finishing the dishes and talking. I may have had one too many glasses of wine and my information floodgates were weakening. She may have been in the same state.

"Well!" she exclaimed turning off the faucet and wiping her hands on her yellow floral apron, "If you aren't the greatest little helper. What a fool Max is for missing out on you... Oh! Oh, well gosh, you know I don't mean to belittle his Abby, she's a sweet gal, but, you know dear, that's not going to last once you kiddos head off to college." She winked at me quickly as though trying to hide it from some imaginary third party present. She had a fantastic way of throwing winks around a room, making everyone feel she was including them in some special secret. "So, Max says you're hoping to follow Nathan to Southern California. A good college fit for you I think. Nathan has loved that place and you two are very similar."

I wasn't exactly sure I'd completely set my mind on a first choice, but going to USC was definitely high on my list. Hearing her say I was similar to her charming and undeniably gorgeous eldest son made my cheeks burn.

"Don't worry, Martha, Max will end up with the best, but better for him to test the waters, y'know?" I didn't mean me as the best or as the waters to test. "But anyway, yeah, I've talked to Nate about colleges a bit the last few days. He has definitely made a good case for me to go there."

“Oh yes, yes, and with the apartment Mr. Werth and I have down there by the beach, we wouldn’t have to sell it! We could keep it to come see you, and for Max to have a place to stay when he comes to chase you,” she said with another wink. She was even more shameless than my girlfriends at school with their unfaltering belief that Max and I were truly in love. I laughed and Martha came up close beside me as I was slowly wiping our dinner plates dry and slipped her arm around my waist. “You’re already enough of a daughter to me, Bea, why not just make it official?”

“I think adoption would be more likely,” I shot right back looking at her with a wide smile, “but I’m totally in for that!” If she had been shameless about Max and I, I was equally shameless about wanting to be a Werth.

There was a brief silence as we looked at each other and, above her bright pink lipped smile, that pity she hid so well crept into her eyes.

“How’s your father? I think I’m breaking my own rule a bit asking here... Max has always said, ‘When she’s ready to talk, she’ll talk, but don’t ask!’” Max had a knack for impersonating his friends, and he’d clearly gotten the talent from his mother whose impressions were eerily accurate despite the exaggeration. “I hope you know I absolutely respect your privacy and you don’t need to say a word if you wouldn’t like...” She dipped her head down to look up into my face.

“Oh, I don’t mind you asking about my father, or... well, anything really. You must know most of it anyway from Max,” I laughed. “He’s given himself away before that he tells you everything.” We locked eyes and I smiled, trying to ease her mind about beginning a conversation I could tell was quickly spiraling away from the kind of light after-dinner conversation we’d had the last two nights. I knew I could smile and joke

through this conversation and she'd see right through it all. So I kept smiling and joking anyway, more for me at that point than for her, glad she'd understand.

“Well, he tells me what I ask. I just care about you so much, Bea. You've made my Max so happy being such a good friend to him. Anyone that can do that for a son of mine has a place in this family always.”

“Well... my father is fine, I think,” I said, making my way around the compliment, as all compliments always make me slightly uncomfortable. I didn't really know how 'fine' my father was. Truthfully, I doubted he really was. Our once a week phone calls rarely lasted longer than a few minutes. We mostly talked about me and about what I was writing for the school newspaper or for classes or how my last a cappella practice had been. “He's still working like a maniac. He moved into an apartment closer to his office last year, did Max tell you? So he's renting out our house.”

“Oh, yes, that beautiful house. Gosh, I wish I could make this place that lovely.” It almost was funny hearing her say that while looking at the most elegant room I'd ever been in, except probably for every other room in the house. The kitchen faucet alone probably cost more than Bruce's car.

Martha had come to my little town in New Hampshire for dinner one night the summer after my freshman year when she and Max were driving down to New York from Maine. My father hadn't come home for dinner that night, forgetting that I'd told him my friend was coming and that I'd really wanted them to meet. Martha had gracefully smoothed past his absence in an instant with a brief self-deprecating comment about her own “incessant absentmindedness.”

“Yeah, Lindsay really had some kind of taste,” I mumbled. Martha knew about my way of using first names, “But she would have loved this kitchen. It is so like her style.” *Except for the price.*

After a silence that got heavier by the second, Martha spoke again.

“Do you miss her a lot?”

My shoulders dropped under the weight of what was coming on. I kept wiping the plate in my hands. It blurred into a white blob. I gave myself away with a sniffle.

“Oh dear, Bea. I’m sorry, let’s not. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just always want you to be able to talk if you need to.”

“No, no, I’m fine. I don’t talk about her enough, it’s true.”

Truthfully, I never talked about Lindsay growing up. That night and talking to Martha has stayed so freshly preserved in my mind because of its rarity. Saying her name in the softly lit kitchen smelling faintly of garlic and sea salt mixed with Martha’s Chanel Number Five had been the first time I’d said it in months.

“Yeah, I miss her, but I think I’m doing pretty well finagling my way into other people’s families now.” Another half-hearted laugh and smile. “I started going to see her a lot this past summer and got a lot more used to doing that, so... well, knowing there’s somewhere I can still feel like she’s around is... nice,” I finished lamely. We’d had her cremated and Trip, Bruce and I had spread her ashes in the river near our house where she’d taken me to swim so many summer days growing up in our small New Hampshire town. It had taken me almost five years to be able to go back to that spot on the riverbank.

“Oh, the river. Oh, good, good.” Max really did tell her everything.

“Yeah. Are your parents still alive?” I don’t know what made me ask. I registered with surprise that I wasn’t actually all that anxious to change the subject.

“My mother is, yes. My father passed away soon after I graduated high school actually. He had Parkinson’s, I’d expected it for a while, well, so I know what it’s like to lose a parent young. Not as young as you were, goodness. I can’t imagine that.”

“Well, I guess I just wonder if it really makes a difference how old we are. I didn’t get much time with her, yeah, but... She was going to go sometime, right?”

“Well... yes...” I could tell Martha didn’t quite agree with the sentiment.

“I suppose it would have been nice to say goodbye... to have some kind of warning, I don’t know. Though, maybe I got lucky that I handled that sadness early.” I wasn’t sure I agreed with myself either. I certainly didn’t agree with my use of the past tense of ‘handle.’

“It’s made you quite a strong young lady. I can see that. I guess, though... well, I suppose I’m worried about you still. You shouldn’t think there’s an allotted amount of time we have to mourn and then you’re supposed to be fine. I still miss my dad. I’m still mourning, though it’s changed from being sad to... to living more fully perhaps?”

“Mmm.” My vision cleared up momentarily. The tears dropped and slipped down my cheeks as a new wave of blurriness came on.

“You can still be sad though. You can always be sad. Just make sure you get to be happy, too.”

“Yeah. Oh, I know.” I put the stack of plates away in the cupboard and sat down on one of the countertop stools. “Were you and your mom close after you lost your dad?” Questions were spilling out of suppressed corners of my heart. I had always

refused to acknowledge how much I longed to have someone ask me about Lindsay. With the size of that elephant in the room, it was astounding how rarely anyone ever mentioned it. On the rare occasions it was, I'd gotten so good at maneuvering a conversation away from it, but suddenly it was all I wanted to talk about. It felt like I'd sworn off sweets for an eternity and suddenly the mere smell of chocolate had compelled me to ravenously stuff my belly beyond the pangs of overindulgence.

"No. Not for a while," she softened her voice seeing my tears. After a brief pause she said, "You sure you want to talk about this?"

"Yes!" I said, more eagerly than I meant to but truthfully as much as I meant it. "Oh, I'm fine. Just... like you said, I can still be sad sometimes right?"

"Of course, honey, of course. Well, okay. So... so no, I wasn't close with my mother for a while, but I was a teenager and I think lots of teenage girls drift away from their mothers for a bit. Losing him pulled us more apart for a while. Thank goodness I didn't have a daughter, not sure I could have dealt with that!" Another wink to say she didn't truly mean it, like she was sure I'd been a total angel through the whole aftermath. "I definitely wasn't good with helping her deal with her emptiness. I'm an only child, so I didn't have anyone to make it up to her for me being a brat through the whole thing." *Well, I definitely didn't either,* I thought to myself remembering how Trip had refused to come home again after the last time he'd visited to spread her ashes and had promptly stopped talking to Bruce. "Yeesh, I handled all of it so poorly, I remember. I wish I'd been there more for my mom."

"But, what about now?"

"Now? Like are we close now?"

I nodded.

“I think I can say so, yes. She remarried ten years later and her husband, my stepfather,” she said the word with a hesitant smile, clearly not even now totally comfortable with how it sounded and, in my mind, I heard Trip saying the word in the exact same way, “well, he is a... genius. Quite a wealthy genius, so at least he wasn’t marrying her for her money, pardon my bluntness, but he is fairly ... well, socially inept, and I hate to admit to something so petty, but I resented her for a while for having found what I thought was a replacement and an inadequate one at that... Oh, silly, I know.” She rubbed her hands together quickly as if trying to release a guilt she still carried around, giving me the briefest glimpse of her own battle. “But I am learning from my children how to be there for my mom now. My boys teach me how to be supportive. Funny to say, hm? Seems it should be the other way around!”

“I don’t think I was very supportive of Bruce. I’m still not.” I felt a pit in my stomach saying the words aloud, realizing a guilt of my own that for so long I’d shoved deep enough to be able to pretend wasn’t there. Sitting in that kitchen, it had been six years and I still resented him for the months, years, after she had gone when he wasn’t there for me. “He ran away from dealing with it a lot... I mean, I don’t know what I expected him to do, but he didn’t do whatever it was I’d hoped he would. But I should have done something differently, too, I think... Yeah, something!” My nervous laugh wasn’t remotely convincing anymore, but I couldn’t think of any other way to make the moment any lighter and I was beginning to wish I could turn back.

“Oh, honey, all I can tell you from years of feeling like I did everything wrong is there just simply isn’t a right way.”

I hiccupped. Suddenly my chest was heaving in and out as I took in huge sobbing breaths. I can probably count on one hand the times I had cried before that moment about losing Lindsay. Martha was right at my side. She took one of my hands from holding my face and held it in hers. She was quiet for a while until the last of my sobs settled. She put her arm around me as my breathing steadied.

“You’re alright, honey. You’re alright.”

Chapter 4

The next morning, I poked the sleeping Max and asked if he wanted to walk down to the beach. He didn't. He had a splitting headache, what had clearly been a hangover; something we didn't know much about at that point, and talking about them always made us feel inexplicably sheepish.

I found Nate making coffee when I went into the kitchen. He turned his strong broad shoulders towards me, his dark hair still ruffled from his pillow and asked what I was doing. After half mumbling, half stuttering out my plans to walk to the beach, he asked if I'd mind if he joined me. For a split second I nearly forgot how to speak.

"Oh... uh, yeah," I managed, my 'yeah' more a squeak than a word. "You want to go to the beach?"

"Sure, why not, nice morning, and I'm pretty sure the rest of the gang will be out for another hour or so. Odd to see you up so early!" He was well aware of my teenage aversion to mornings, but waking up early that morning, my body felt shackled staying still and I needed to get outside where there was room for all that was going on in my head. I laughed and shrugged my shoulders, trying to get a hold on my pulse, which for some reason had picked up its pace as he spoke. The last few days I'd found it increasingly more difficult to be in a room with him, and despite not really having ever had much of a conversation with his girlfriend, Claire, I was finding her increasingly irritating.

Nate's dark blue eyes were Max's, but they were so his own and looking into them wasn't helping me get words out. So I said to my feet,

“Yeah, it’s... yeah, crazy!”

He poured some of the fresh coffee in a thermos for the two of us. I went to the bedroom where my bags were to get a sweater, pausing in front of the mirror in the hallway. I felt a twinge of embarrassment for how rumpled I looked, definitely not pulling off the “just got out of bed look” as well as Nate was. I licked my fingertips and rubbed them under my eyes trying to get the unflattering sleepy look to go away, frustrated Nate had just seen my puffy eyes and matted hair. I ran my fingers through the nest on my head quickly, threw it up in a loose ponytail, and, grabbing a fleece blanket off the back of a couch on my way, headed out the back door.

We walked in silence on the short worn path down to the waterfront. Once on the beach though, Nate felt like talking. I felt like lying on the sand and breathing in the salt air. I was still reeling a bit from the emotional downpour the night before, but his voice was soothing and I didn’t mind listening.

“Did you and dear ol’ Marth have a good talk last night? Didn’t see you come down for any of the movie and we missed you for the pong games.” I’d gone to sleep after talking with Martha to avoid anyone asking about my blood-shot eyes and blotchy cheeks. I’d heard them shrieking in the basement playing what I now realized was beer pong. On the first night Colin refused to play Beirut, the throwing of the ping pong ball version of the game, insisting the only way one could play was with paddles as they did at Dartmouth. We called him a snob and gave him shit for being a preppy Ivy Leaguer, but had genially given in to his whining. It made the games longer, made everyone look like bigger idiots and was all in all much more fun. “So, did she tell you her thoughts on

color schemes for you and Max's wedding?" Nate gave me a friendly pat on my shoulder and we both laughed.

"Ha ha ha... very funny. We mostly talked about our parents, actually." I didn't have any desire to make this conversation a repeat, so I kept going before he could interject. "She's just great, your mom. Anyway, it was nice. But... we definitely disagreed on the wedding color. I'm just so set on pink, obviously." We laughed again and I felt the weight lifted back off.

We talked about colleges for a bit; he urged me to choose his alma mater, telling me stories about his fraternity and the Los Angeles lifestyle. He had one semester left there and said he was sad he'd just barely miss out on going to school with me if I went, a feeling I shared deeply with him but didn't express. I fell quite silent when he started talking about Claire. He nonchalantly mentioned how he thought she wasn't *the* girl, which made my throat seem to momentarily clog, and he was afraid she wasn't quite on the same page. After a while, he got up to throw stones into the ocean as I lay on the blanket quietly drinking the coffee out of the thermos, and as the morning sun got higher over our heads, we headed back to the house.

Nate put his arm around my shoulder as we started back. I was constantly in awe of how affectionate Max's family was with each other and their friends. I was mostly used to it, Max being an avid hugger, but it still amazed me. The weight of Nate's arm and his gentle squeeze was all I could focus on, nearly tripping a few times because of it.

"Max is lucky to have a girl like you. You know what I mean, as a friend. You're a part of our family, really. So I guess I'm lucky, too. I really should thank him." He laughed loudly at that for some reason and moved his hand to the top of my head,

something Trip used to do all the time when he'd walk me to school as a child. I could see Nate turn and look down at me out of the corner of my eye and I felt my insides buzz. His tall frame blocked the sun for just a moment making his whole body glow. I shivered, like I was cold, but I was pretty sure I'd been sweating throughout the hour in my wool sweater. I could feel Nate's body heat radiating off him tucked under his arm as I was. He squeezed my shoulders tightly and said, "Wooh, it is colder today. Some more coffee would be nice." He let his arm fall away from my shoulders, which I registered with a twinge of regret. He took the empty thermos from me and made off a few steps ahead.

Chapter 5

Trip stood across the counter from me holding a bowl of whole-wheat pasta I'd made him for a late dinner. Trip's wide shoulders looked even broader above his thin frame. He and Jeff were major health freaks and both took care of their bodies to an extreme. On some occasions they'd gotten me to tag along with them to funky yoga classes where I'm quite positive I was the only heterosexual person, man or woman, present. Their circle of friends was predominantly gay and within a month of me moving in with Trip and Jeff for the summer, everyone began to tease me that someday I'd see the light. The jokes were sobering, bringing to light the absurdity of the kind of useless attempted persuasion they all faced constantly.

"Do you think we have a say in this?" Trip's irritation was infectious, from his tone of voice to the way he was stabbing at the noodles in his bowl. He had come home from work in a bad mood, and me reading him the letter from Bruce didn't make matters any better.

"Not a chance. But come on, Trip, you don't care anyway," I said more aggressively than I'd meant to, getting caught up in my own unexpected inner fury. My bowl of pasta set to the side was getting cold while I looked at the letter from Bruce I'd read too many times in the past ten minutes. He was selling our house.

"I do, though! Not because of the house itself, but it feels like a 'fuck you,' y'know? Like he doesn't care if we want to hold on to it or not. So like him..." We locked eyes briefly and he quickly lowered his in silent apology for letting criticism of Bruce slip out in front of me. Some unspoken agreement between us kept us from

discussing our entirely messed up situation with each other no matter how much we bitched about it to our friends.

“It’s not a ‘fuck you,’ Trip. He’s just completely lost touch with what we would want. How’s he supposed to think about us when we do all we possibly can to stop thinking about him, huh?”

“Oh girl, look at you! Standing up for Daddy now? Didn’t realize you guys had worked it all out.” Trip raised his eyebrows in mock astonishment, partially shocked I pushed the issue and partially shocked it wasn’t in alliance with him, but assuming I’d immediately come back to his side and the issue would be dropped.

Trip and Bruce hadn’t spoken in over two years. The last Bruce had heard from Trip was in my sophomore year of high school when Trip sent him the address to have the last of his things shipped out west. Bruce had to downsize to move into his apartment to start renting out our big four bedroom house so he “didn’t have room” to hold onto anything of Trip’s. I’d assumed the role as messenger between them, dreading any moment when I had to mention one to the other.

Beyond all reason, I hung on to an inexplicable hope that Bruce would snap out of the haze that had settled over him almost seven years before. That summer after high school living with Trip, his mostly unintentional jabs at Bruce, no matter how subtle they were, never got any less painful. I fought hard against my desire to defend him, but in rare moments, I betrayed myself. This was one of them.

“No, Trip. I haven’t worked it out with him. I don’t know if either of us can at this point but... but, Trip...” I stammered, unsuccessfully trying to recover control over my tone to remove the bitterness, “do you think you’ll ever want to try to?”

He didn't expect that and the force of what I'd pushed to the surface, most of which we both knew I still didn't understand, hit him full in the face. His eyebrows stayed up, all expression remaining completely frozen. Then he narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth but it took a moment for the words to come.

"How dare you. How dare you insinuate it is my fault." He dropped the last word like a bomb and I thought we were both referring to the same thing.

"Trip, I didn't mean..." I tried to interrupt but he kept on.

"NO. No, you don't get to take that back. I will never try, Bea. I did not... break apart a family, or... or take what I had for granted. So fuck that," he said spitting his words at me, then dumped his half-eaten pasta bowl in the sink and walked out of the kitchen, slamming his bedroom door after him.

In the moments when I came as close as I was able to Trip's battle with our father, I never felt like I was living the moment, more as if it were an immediate memory with the cloud separating how we distinguish the present from the past already settled over it. It was as though I stood between two people who knew what they were talking about but spoke in a code only they understood. Yet, I was one of the code speakers, I spoke it and gave Trip every sign that I should have understood his coded responses. But I never did.

My battle with Bruce and Trip's battle with him were separate and somehow incomparable. Trying to understand what had happened between them was like trying to hold a fish; it twisted and flopped in my hands so hard I had to drop it before I could get a chance to see what kind of fish it was. I'd been too young when it all came to a head on the day Trip had left for college and sworn he'd never be back.

The pieces didn't fit. I guess I was beginning to believe my family was a bunch of drama queens, making smaller issues into more than they needed to be. Though, I was young and I remember hating being young because I believed a part of youth was having everything perpetually flying over your head. I wanted to grow up just so I knew what the hell was going on all the time.

One night when I was about eight-years-old, I heard Bruce and Lindsay talking in the kitchen.

"He's just curious, sweetheart. He's exploring. It's natural for boys his age." Lindsay's voice was pleading, clearly coming up against someone not willing to be convinced.

"Curious, huh? He's digging himself a hole he won't be able to climb out of later in life. He'll be a creep to everyone that knows him now. He's going to get the cops called on him for freaking someone out, being inappropriate. Ian is a terrible influence."

"Bruce! He is seventeen! He is not going to get the cops called on him for being in a tree."

I remember thinking Bruce sounded a lot like my little friend Becca at the time, ignorantly against being gay. Because that's what I thought they were talking about. Trip being gay.

Trip's voice scared the living daylights out of me, his voice suddenly so close his breathe tickled my ear.

"Paranoid mother fucker, isn't he?"

I let out a scream at the pitch only children can reach, spun around and swatted Trip's arm with my ineffectual fist. We burst into a fit of laughter collapsing on the hard wood floor in the hall. Lindsay and Bruce were soon emerging from the kitchen and hovering over us, Lindsay looking at the bottoms of my little feet kicking up in the air as if she wanted nothing more than to flop down next to us and have a good laugh. Bruce's scowl was cemented in the lines on his forehead.

"Snooping," Bruce sputtered out at us and stomped back into the kitchen. Lindsay took a deep breath and followed him.

Bruce believed, or tried to convince himself, Trip's homosexuality was a rebellious phase that would pass. When it didn't pass, Bruce's frustration turned to anger, and I know on a few occasions they'd exploded at each other. But I, to this day, don't know what was said. Lindsay had always been quick to usher me away from it all, using my youth as an unsurpassable and appreciated shield.

I tried to pin it on that. I tried to tell myself, "Yep, that's their problem, right there! Old guy doesn't like gays and has a gay son. Wham bam, thank you ma'am. Problem explained." But I knew without any alternative theory, it was just one of the nails in the coffin.

Trip closed up apologetically to me most times when his battle surfaced. I knew he didn't want to tarnish my own opinion of Bruce because we had our own wars. He just didn't want me to have to fight his for him.

Bruce, I wrote, beginning a response in an effort to refocus on the issue of the house to distract from Hurricane Trip that I'd just unintentionally set off. *Whatever your decision with the house, I support it. Best, Bea.* From experience, I knew being kind or supportive was a waste of time. It made no difference to Bruce how I responded to him, if it had been rude, loving, if there even was a response. Like everything he did concerning me at that point, it seemed to come from the spark notes of a father-daughter guidebook to get the basics with zero investment. He'd lost energy for anything more long ago.

I sat in the dimly lit kitchen looking out the window above the sink at the foggy San Francisco evening light as a familiar numbness took over keeping my eyes open and my breaths going in and out.

A few hours later, Jeff came home. Trip hadn't emerged from his room and I'd moved to the couch in the living room area, more an extension of the kitchen than a room on its own. I'd been talking to Max on the phone for the first time in a few weeks. He was spending his summer in his house in Maine, and with a whole country spread between us we were already letting our efforts to stay in touch slip. As Martha predicted, he and Abby broke up shortly after graduation and he was clearly enjoying being a single guy on the beaches, though he didn't admit that to me directly. Plus the time change was making it even more difficult to talk. He was tired of having to stay up 'til absurd hours to catch me after I'd gotten off my summer catering job.

"Talking to your booooy? Hey there Maxamillion!" Jeff flopped down on the love seat shoved in perpendicular to my couch. I wrinkled my nose at the joke that couldn't

have been any more worn out, and I quickly told Max I had to go and hung up. “Well, babe, I’m *ex-hausted!* I just kick-boxed the shit out of that class!” He was freshly showered, smelling like a goddamn spa with all his aftershave and whatever, with a dopey smile spread across his face having come home from the gym still riding high on endorphins. Trip usually took off after dinner to meet Jeff there after he got off work. They always came back giggling like little girls.

“Good class?” I asked sheepishly; no real point in pretending everything was okay, knowing full-well Trip would get into it all as soon as he got to their room. But I owed it to Trip to let him talk to Jeff about it.

“Uh... yeah, it was...” Jeff immediately sensed the vibe and, turning and dipping his chin to look at me sideways, he asked, “All okay here?”

“Trip’s in your room. I’m a bitch. He probably needs to talk,” I said, lowering my voice knowing the door to their room was far from a soundproof barrier.

“Oh, Beazer,” Jeff used his pet name for me sympathetically but was still entirely clueless.

“Bruce,” I said, the most comprehensive explanation I could come up with, throwing my palms up as if tossing the issue into his lap for him to take over.

“Ah... gotcha. I’m going in,” he whispered tightening his fists, bracing for the endeavor.

“I’m sorry...” I said to his back as he slowly cracked the door open to face Trip and disappeared inside.

Chapter 6

That September found me at the University of Southern California, following in Nate's footsteps as he'd said I should; a decision I'd convinced myself had nothing to do with him. Max followed his second oldest brother, Lee, to the University of Virginia and we found ourselves facing the reality of a three thousand mile divide for the next four years. Martha kept her apartment in Santa Monica near the beach, flying out a few times each year to check in, taking me shopping and out for a few extraordinary dinners. Each time she'd visit, Nate, who'd moved an hour or so north of the city after he'd graduated, would meet up with us and the three of us would pick right back up like the family I was finally truly beginning to believe I was a part of. But Nate still tied me in knots. Seeing him threw me back to that morning on the beach. I felt like a perpetual little girl in a pilled cable-knit sweater, embarrassed about my rumpled hair.

I remember one of the first of the dinners during my freshman year with Martha and Nate before they had become the routine they eventually were. Nate was late getting to the restaurant because he'd been caught up at work. When he finally did arrive, the dark circles under his eyes and his jacket hanging a little too loosely told me he'd changed from the relaxed, stone-tossing boy on the beach I'd known in Maine that spring. He was uneasy, anxious, and dog-tired.

"First year out of college, Bea. Sleep and time to your self just aren't a part of the deal, I guess," he said noticing the slight shock displayed across my face at seeing him so run down. The Nate I'd known had been zealous, sharp and fit. But over the course of

the night, with a few cold beers, I began to see glimpses of the old Nate and along with those glimpses came the old stomach twists.

After answering endless questions from both Martha and Nate about my new life, I felt I'd rambled and stuttered far too long about myself with an unusual awkwardness. After Martha's prodding about whether or not I'd met a nice college boy and my immediate firm "No" accompanied by a deep red blush, I don't know what made me ask...

"Nate, how's Claire?" Despite letting me in on his little secret, he'd stayed with her. I couldn't help thinking of our morning on the beach only months before when his hesitancy to believe he'd found his match had seemed so painful for him... and yet somehow reassuring for me.

"She's good... great! She's working a lot, dental school is quite the load." Nate's painted smile stayed almost steady, flickering for only an instant when our eyes met. "You know, same old..." I turned to watch Martha's face as she listened to her son speaking about her possible future daughter-in-law. After all, he'd been dating her for almost two years and she was used to the leading questions from her friends wondering when the wedding bells would be ringing. She always hushed them with a smile, squashing any further meddling. I saw her eyes narrow taking in her son's words, and her pursed pink lips twitched as though holding in a thought beating against the back of her teeth to get out.

"Same old, huh? Tell her I say hi, yeah?" I said it to Martha as if she was the one going to see the girl the soonest. I couldn't look at Nate. I was struggling to understand him. What is that thing *they* always say? Only ten percent of what you mean is what you

say? Nate's eyes, his slumped shoulders, his tightly crossed arms, fidgeting elbows, darting eyes, all so unlike the well postured, relaxed guy I knew; he'd been telling me something else entirely.

"Yeah... not getting married anytime soon, we both don't want to hurry into anything or... anything," he said to his sweating beer glass.

"When it is right, it will be right, sweetheart," Martha said laying her glossy manicured fingers over Nate's tensed forearm.

"Ha! Okay! Thank *yooou*, Mother," Nate laughed, shaking his shoulders as if realizing for the first time just how uncomfortable he'd been. We convince ourselves of how grown-up we are in college and times like that made it painfully evident just how much more growing up we had to do. "Well! I'll take another one!" he said nodding to his now empty beer with a defeated shrug.

Martha called in October of my sophomore year. She said she was coming out to see Nate as soon as she could and she hoped I'd be able to spend a day out and about with the two of them. Oddly enough, I couldn't think of a single time she'd come to California to visit before that because of Nate. It had always been on account of something that was going on in my world, some special parents' weekend that she slid right into or one of my a cappella group's performances. As soon as she said she was coming to see Nate, I knew something had to be up.

And I was right. Claire had broken up with Nate just days after their three-year anniversary. He was devastated, Martha said. He'd bought a ring and everything, she told me over the phone. My heart broke knowing how much he was hurting and... from

hearing he'd actually loved Claire enough to want to marry her. But in the furthest corner of my mind was a little voice whispering, "*Well, it's about damn time!*"

It wasn't until a month later that Martha was able to make it out and picked me up in her slick white rented Cadillac. After driving the hour plus to Nate's apartment, we drove around for at least fifteen minutes looking for a parking spot until Martha was on the verge of giving up.

"I'm just going to drop you off. You run up and tell him I'll be there in a jiffy, okay?" She said as she swung up alongside the cars parked in front of his building.

"Sure, yeah," I said, unbuckling and hopping out quickly. And then she was off, zipping around a corner and out of sight.

I rang the buzzer and the intercom came to life immediately.

"Mum?" Nate's voice sounded light, no hint of the dreary gloom I'd expected.

"Hey, no, she's looking for a parking spot, sorry. It's Bea."

"Oh! ..." The intercom cut out and I was about to buzz again when he came back. "Okay. Come up?"

"Yeah, just buzz me in."

The door handle clicked and I made my way up the narrow stairwell to his third floor apartment I'd been to only once before, but I had every inch committed to memory. He was at the door already and as I got to the top step, he came towards me and wrapped me in a tight hug.

"You're just the person I want to see most. Don't tell dear ol' Marth though," he said smiling at me coyly and led me into his apartment. The days were getting shorter

and even though it was barely past 5 p.m. the sun was already long gone. We sat down on his couch and locked eyes for a long moment. He looked wide-awake, refreshed almost. He'd recovered from the shock of the first year of bitch-work post-college and was, from what I could tell, doing very well.

“So how are you? I don't need to ask about... *it* if you don't want me to,” I said with a brief smile, not sure if I wanted him to take the bait to open up to me about it all or not.

“Oh, Bea, don't be silly. I'm fine. I know Mom is making it sound like I'm an emotional wreck. Really, I'm okay. It should have happened a long time ago.”

“Well, you're okay with it all? What happened?”

“She uh... found a ring.” He looked at his palms resting in his lap as though that wasn't really something he wanted to tell me, laughing softly as if it were an old, tired joke not worth repeating.

“Oh, she found it? So, she just got freaked out or what?”

“No! She was... ecstatic. But I didn't know she'd found it. She found it four months ago and didn't tell me.” He looked up at me and it was my turn to drop my eyes.

“So you bought it... a while ago?” I wished Martha would hurry up and find a spot. I didn't want to have to be the one asking these questions. I hated showing him how much I wanted to know.

“Yeah, well... I bought it right after I got my signing bonus... like right after we graduated.”

“How come it took you so long to propose then?”

“Well, I... I didn’t. I didn’t propose. And she finally had to ask the same question, like why was it taking me so long if I already had a ring... and when I couldn’t give her an answer, she said... well, she said she was done.”

“Why couldn’t you give her an answer?” *Where was Martha?*

“Because I didn’t want to propose to her... I didn’t love her anymore.”

“Oh...!” A wave of piercing relief went through my body as the pieces of the story I’d heard and the one he was telling me clicked together. “Martha said *she* left *you*. But you were the one that ended it? Well then... this is good news! I’m happy for you!” Immediately I was horrified for letting my inner joy burst out and wiped the pathetic smile from my face replacing it with what I’m sure betrayed even more.

“I wish I could be happier about it... I just can’t believe how much I could hurt someone else. That’s why I couldn’t go either way for so long. I knew she was in it, but... I couldn’t get in it like she was.”

The buzzer rang and we both jumped up as if snapping out of a trance.

“Hi Nathan dear!” Martha’s cheeriness leapt into the room over the intercom. “It’s your moooooother!” We were both laughing with the echoes of Martha’s voice bouncing off the walls as he got up to buzz her in.

The rest of the night was light-hearted and far from what I’d expected. Martha sensed there was no need for an intervention. Instead, she insisted we each tell the dirtiest joke we knew just because she’d heard one about a Vegas prostitute she thought was unbelievably raunchy and was bursting to pass it on to an appreciative audience. Maybe she sensed just as I was beginning to let myself believe what Nate really needed.

Chapter 7

Sometimes life leads you instead of the other way around. I look back on it and think I was an idiot. I wish I could say the Bea and Nate love story was about to be settled, but life just doesn't work like that. There was no more Claire... but suddenly I had an Alex.

“Just give them to *that* girl, man.” They were walking towards me, a good ways apart as if trying to take up the entire sidewalk. Either they were going to move to one side or I was going to walk straight into them. It was a pet peeve – still is – those people who don't move to their side of the sidewalk. I was staring down the guy straight ahead of me and realized he was staring right back... smiling.

“Yeah, okay man,” he said breaking our eye contact to smirk at his friend beside him. “Hey,” he called out as we were almost on top of each other and still hadn't moved to the side. “Uh... excuse me?”

I slowed until I was barely a foot from him then stopped, looking him square in the eye.

“Excuse *me*,” I said. He dropped his smile looking momentarily as though he'd forgotten what he wanted to say.

“Sorry, I uh...” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see his friend smirking now, getting a kick out of this guy's quickly failing courage. “Well, so...” he coughed trying to recollect his nerve. “So, I've got two tickets to my game tomorrow. My parents were supposed to come but backed out, some last minute thing, y'know. How would a uh... a

pretty girl like you feel about taking them instead?” His show of trying to be charming was clearly more for his buddy than for me. “They’re up behind home plate and well,” he said turning to shoot a smile at the other guy, “I’m the catcher so you’ll have the best view.”

I should have known. Baseball player. They were the cockiest pricks around and the little warning bell in my head was already ringing violently.

“Tomorrow, huh?” I could tell how close I was standing to him was beginning to unnerve him and he was caught between wanting to take a step back and wanting to keep the show going for his friend. So I leaned a little closer. “Can’t. Excuse me.”

Finally getting it, he sidestepped but he wasn’t done. As I brushed by him, he fell into step beside me.

“Now hold on!” He grabbed my arm but I kept walking. So he kept up. “You *can’t* or you don’t *want to*?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

After three years of warding off aggressive college boys, though not always to this extent, I’d obtained a fairly extraordinary level of cynicism and had developed an equally aggressive way of shutting them down.

“You’re not my type.” I shot him a look of mock pity.

“That’s a shame... but I’ll still let you have the tickets. I’m Alex.” He stuck his hand in front of me. I stopped but didn’t take his hand. “Wooh, okay. Making me work for this. I get it.”

“I’m sorry... Alex?” I said as though I’d already forgotten his name. “I’m not trying to make you work for it. You just seem dead set on hearing ‘no’ in as many ways as possible.”

He laughed, throwing his head back like he was gaining confidence the more he kept at it.

“Okay, listen. If you’ll just give me your name, I’ll leave them for you at will call and you can go or not but at least you will have more time to think about it...” He paused, waited. “You can say you won’t go and go anyway without giving me the satisfaction of hearing you say yes. How about that?”

I had to laugh. It *was* tempting. I’d only been to one or two baseball games even though they were always a pretty big event. Turning to look him square on, I said,

“Bea Dumont,” and took his hand firmly, anything to make it clear I wasn’t the kind of prissy, giggly thing he was probably used to that shook your hand like a limp fish with just the ends of her fingers.

“There you go,” he said with visible relief, “Not so hard, right? I promise I won’t even look to see if you’re there. Nice to meet you, Bea Dumont.” And he turned around and jogged back to his friend who was leaning against a wall, arms crossed, waiting for the verdict.

My roommate that semester was Julia Klein, another east coaster but more of a city girl, born and raised in Boston.

“Oh come on!” She said throwing up her hands. “I want to go! Let’s! Don’t be a brat.” We were sunk into our vaguely white couches having a beer before going out to

meet our crew at some bar. I'd given her a run down of the afternoon and she was the level of excited Alex probably hoped I'd be for the game the next day.

“Who said I'd take you, huh? I should bring another boy just to piss this guy off,” I laughed.

“Oh, call Nate!” Julia had picked up where my high school friends had left off, except this time with a different Werth brother.

“Oh, god, Julia. No. Fine. We can go. You really want to come?”

“Of course! I hope he does have as nice of an ass as he seems to believe,” she said bouncing up and down on the couch before downing the rest of her beer.

“He does,” I said.

Somehow Martha figured it out. Maybe I wasn't writing to her as much. Maybe for the first time ever there was something I didn't want to talk about with her. I wish I could say I don't know why I didn't want to tell her, but I'd be lying. I'd been dating him for almost six months before she let on that she knew about him. She flew in one Thursday night in the spring of my junior year and, with Nate, picked me up to take me out for dinner. First time for something else, too: I wished Nate hadn't been able to come.

Martha had chosen The Palm, a glamorous steak house in West Hollywood for the night's dinner and, like always, I was quickly swept up in the elaborate lifestyle this woman led feeling like my life had always been as extraordinary.

“How exciting!” Martha squealed after convincing me to show her a picture of the two of us I'd carried in my wallet. “What a catch, 'scuuuse the baseball pun! Oooh, Bea, he's such a cutie!” I laughed awkwardly at her terrible joke and flowing enthusiasm.

“Yeah, well, you know, he’s always busy with baseball so it isn’t that serious...”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Nate knows his older brother and he said the boy is simply infatuated with you!” Nate sat silently across from me, chewing each bite for quite a long time.

“Nate does? You... you know his brother?” I stammered, uneasy by the unexpected connection and the thought of Nate talking to someone else about me.

“Yeah, he’s an old fraternity brother. Good guy. I haven’t met Alex, but if he’s anything like his brother, you’re a lucky girl.” Something in his voice made me think he wasn’t so sure I was all that lucky. Through the rest of Martha’s giddy questions, which I answered indifferently wishing desperately to move past the subject, I could only watch what looked like forced smiles painfully spread across Nate’s face, his sharp head nods to agree with whatever expression of excitement and encouragement was spewing out of Martha’s mouth.

Nate sat through the dinner mostly silent. I knew it wasn’t fair but for some reason a frustration bubbled up inside me. He’d put me through listening to his gooey love story for years. I was angry at Martha for asking questions, but angry at Nate for not being able to handle what I had gone through for him. But I pushed it down. I fell back on the way I always handled hurt. I clammed up.

Some kind of mutual irritation settled in driving back to my apartment. Hugging the two of them and saying goodnight was brief. Nate and I barely looked at each other through the suffocating façade we’d both put on for what I thought was Martha’s sake. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened that night. Martha had asked me about a new

boyfriend. Nate had said he was doing well with work and “really hitting his stride.” Yet something snagged in my throat when I thought about it. It was the inexplicable understanding that something intangible had shifted. Though we kept writing to each other sporadically, it would be two years before I saw Nate again.

Deep down, I knew I was really only pissed at myself. But the honeymoon period wasn't over with Alex, still blinding me from admitting what I knew from the start. I was letting myself settle for so much less than good enough. That warning bell still hadn't stopped no matter how many silencers I tried to throw at it.

Sometimes in life, you let people in that you never should have, but there they are, they're in and it's up to you to find a way to get them out. But sometimes it takes a long time to realize they need to leave. Alex was one of those people. I needed him gone and let him get pretty deeply rooted before realizing it.

As everyone expected, Alex got drafted that summer in a fairly early round by the Texas Rangers. I could never remember which round and the fact that I didn't, nor could even remember his stats, was incessantly irritating to him. I let myself get caught up in the excitement of being the girlfriend of a sort of celebrity, and went to live down in Texas with him for the summer, waiting tables at an Appleby's that had a wall dedicated to the Rangers' new draft picks; Alex's awkward head shot glaring at me as I punched in every order.

I don't really want to let Alex be a character in my story, but he is. He was like a speed bump on a highway, making me slam on the breaks and screech to a halt before rocketing me into a free fall. One day I came home from work and knew I'd had enough.

I was tired of waiting tables in a shitty restaurant getting shitty tips, going grocery shopping for the two of us without ever hearing a thank you, of being woken up in the middle of the night when he'd come back hammered from some bar that he'd forgotten to tell me he was going to while I'd spent the night watching television wondering where the hell he was. And that's the whole story. When the honeymoon period ended, it *really* ended.

He wasn't the only one deserving of blame. I isolated myself, became so dependent on someone that just wasn't enough. Eventually something clicks in your mind that tells you that you deserve better. I packed my things and left two weeks early, finally unwrapping the claws of the comfortable from around my heart. I bought a ticket up to San Francisco that cleaned out my summer savings to crash with Trip before school started and was done with Alex. But it hurt. I tried to lie for a long time saying I had simply hit the off button on the hurting as though I'd had enough shit happen to me to be able to do that by then, but that's not true. That could never be true.

I didn't want pity. I lived through it. It didn't make me stronger. People who say a breakup makes you stronger are like the people that say a bird shitting on you is good luck. They're idiots. No, it just fucking destroys you. A guy who gets shot in the leg doesn't blame his skin for tearing, saying, "Well shit, if my skin hadn't ripped apart, I wouldn't be lying here bleeding to death." No, he says, "I'm going to kill the fucker who shot this damn bullet into my leg that ripped it open." But for so long, I was the first guy. I blamed my skin for ripping, not the asshole who shot me because, for more years than I'll admit, I was too afraid to face the truth of who had fired the bullet. I convinced myself my skin had just been too thin. So I made it thicker.

Chapter 8

Senior year went by a lot like my junior year, but free of the “burden,” as I liked to call it by then, of a boyfriend. No matter how lonely I was, I wanted to be alone again to prove I didn’t need that constant someone that Alex had been to make me happy. Martha visited a few times, though Nate had left for London for the year as part of a rotation for his job, working stateside for two years, abroad for one.

At Christmas, I finally made plans to see Max again, partially due to Martha’s urging me to come visit them in New York. It had been almost two years since I’d seen Max. I spent Christmas day with Bruce but took off a few days later for New York to visit the Werths minus Nate who, Martha told me in an eerily knowing and apologetic tone, hadn’t been able to take enough time off to make it home from London.

As I stepped down from the train in Grand Central after a long trip from New Hampshire to Boston that until that moment had completely tired me out, my fingers began to buzz with an anxiety I hadn’t felt in a long time. Getting to see Max for the first time in so long was nerve-wracking, like going home hoping everything will be the same all the while knowing something has changed but you won’t know what until you’re there. I hadn’t felt like I’d been going home for years and, even having only been to Max’s apartment in New York a handful of times, it pulled at my heart in ways Bruce’s tiny condo had never been able to.

Max was already there, waiting for me on the platform leaning against a thick cement pillar, his hands tucked into his pockets guarding against the bitter winter cold.

He had his black coat collar flipped up and was tucking his head down into it as much as he could. As soon as he saw me, he was like a turtle extending out of its shell. His hands flew into the air, chin raised high and he let out a shrill whistle.

“Bea! Over here!” He bellowed, continuing to wave madly even after having caught my eye. My shoulders shivered and a burn behind my nose struck me hard, that jaw-clenching beating behind your eyes when happiness overwhelms you, your eyes feel like they’re about to pop and tears come under the pressure of so much joy. I hitched my bag higher on my shoulder and half-walked, half-skipped towards him. He picked me up in a swinging hug and held on for a long time like a soldier coming home from the war wrapping his arms around his loved ones. I was astutely aware how much like lovers we must have appeared to the strangers around us. Feeling the hulking build of this guy lifting me in the air and the shiny dark hair pressed against my cheek, I thought, *could be worse*.

I felt the weight of the past few months slip from me and fling from my toes as Max swung me around, my feet flying out behind me. I realized how weighed down I’d been by the imminence of graduating and being catapulted into the real world. That inexplicable relief washed over me like a muscle unknowingly tensed for too long finally relaxed. And I felt at home. All that Max had been for me through those years in high school, scooping me up from my pits of silent aching for Lindsay and batting away my self-doubt so many times, gushed back into my heart and we could barely speak for a minute as we took the other in and let ourselves remember.

“*Damn*, I’ve missed you, Bea,” he said as we finally broke apart and he put his arm around my waist. “You look older and wiser.”

“I should say the same to you, sir!” Max had grown a good four inches since I’d seen him last. We’d always looked each other straight in the eye and now having to cock my head back made me laugh at my fear of how he would be different. He was strikingly handsome and for a brief moment my heart fluttered. “How tall *are* you now?!”

“Six feet three inches to be exact!” He said puffing out his chest.

“Well, so much for me still being able to take you, huh?”

“Aw, I’m still the same old big baby. I bet you still can.”

He was hardly a baby but he was rather big. He’d joined the club lacrosse team at Virginia claiming he wasn’t “intense” enough for the varsity team though, from what I could tell by the strong set of his shoulders and the rock hard body I’d just had my arms around, club lacrosse seemed intense enough for him.

Taking the elevator with the bellman up to the top floor of the sleek building the Werth’s called home in the heart of the Upper East Side, I was still choked up with the joy of being so close to my best friend. The wide goofy smile that hadn’t left Max’s face told me he was feeling the same way. We rode up in silence just gawking at each other like children looking at a tree on Christmas morning.

The elevator doors opened and there was Martha in a bright pink tweed skirt suit with navy blue piping. Her short brown bob was perfectly coiffed, curled in at her chin, and that signature lipsticked smile beamed at me as I walked out.

Mr. Werth, who I knew the least well as he’d been occupied with business in the city during all but one of my visits to their house in Maine and had never accompanied his wife out to Los Angeles, was sitting in a giant leather chair heightening his

intimidating air of importance. Through all the years I've known the Werths, Martha has always been Martha but Mr. Werth was never James. He was the kind of man who walked into a room and even those with their backs to him felt him enter. His tall stature demanded respect and his eyes were the dark blue of his sons'. But he spoke softly, never condescendingly, and listened intently to whoever was speaking.

He was the last to approach after Martha, Colin and Lee had all nearly suffocated me with hugs and hellos while Max hung back as if showing off a prize he'd won at a fair. Mr. Werth placed his hand on my shoulder and kissed me lightly on the cheek before giving me a one armed embrace.

"So pleased you could come, Bea. It seems almost improper you weren't with us for Christmas with how much you've been talked about since the boys arrived home. I hope you enjoyed your holiday with your father?" He smiled sweetly, and my cheeks felt instantly warmer with the heat of a deep blush.

"Thank you, yes. I had a very nice Christmas and thank you so much for having me here." Maybe because he was the only one missing and I was appeasing myself by finding signs of him everywhere, I saw so much of Nate in Mr. Werth; the way the wide mouth moved as they spoke, the way they flexed their fingers at their sides. An intense feeling of longing enveloped me as I looked into Mr. Werth's eyes, not for the man himself, but for his only son who wasn't there.

The plan was for me to stay through the New Year and then Max, Colin, Lee and I would drive up to their house in Maine. New Years Eve came and Martha and Mr. Werth had invited twenty or so of their obviously high-society friends from around the

city for a party. The boys invited anyone they knew nearby to come celebrate as well. My best girl friend from high school, Hilary Tibber, who I'd kept in contact with but had only seen once since graduating high school, was there as well as a few other friends I'd completely lost track of. The night was full of reconnecting, retelling my years since high school, and hearing about boyfriends or girlfriends, sports teams and plans for after graduation.

Colin hadn't changed a bit, still the wild one, and it seemed he'd found a group of friends around the city exactly like him. Once the beautifully catered meal was over and everyone had been well oiled with a few glasses of champagne and wine, he ushered us with loud carefree shouts into the large hall in the Werth's apartment where they'd had a dance floor set up and an impressive sound system brought in. With the adults bopping back and forth, snapping their fingers and bouncing their elbows, the giddy group of the Werth boys' friends stuck to more appropriate dancing out of respect for the elderly sensibilities.

As soon as the old folks began to take off for their respective midnight functions, the dance floor broke loose. The unspoken signal had been sent out and we lost the inhibitions brought on by the judgmental eye of the older generation. Max found me with two glasses of champagne and handed one to me, spilling some down my arm as he was bumped from behind. He wrapped his freed hand around my waist and we spent the next hour or so rocking and sweating against each other, drunk on champagne and the excitement of the night. As the room got too hot to bare after over an hour of bodies rubbing together, Max and I broke from the mob and made our way to the kitchen to

relax for a bit. I was light-headed, leaning on Max's arm giggling, and breathing heavily. There were ten minutes 'til midnight.

"Wooh! What a party, huh?" Max said flopping into a chair at his kitchen table. I moved towards the window behind the table tugging at my black velvet dress that came up over one shoulder in a bow and fell halfway down my thighs. I pressed my palms against the cold glass trying to cool off and a white mist spread out around my fingers.

"I feel like a silly high school girl again. Weren't we supposed to grow up at least a little these past few years?" We both laughed. Max pulled his chair closer to my legs and touched the backs of my bare knees.

As I looked down at his face, his jaw slack and his wide lips hanging open as though tasting the air around me, I suddenly felt restless, unnerved by what his fingers were hinting towards.

"Nah, we'll always be the same. Getting older is just a frame of mind. We can revert back to this anytime we want," he said smiling up me.

"Almost midnight!" I said raising my voice a whole octave higher. "Let's go get everyone for a champagne toast, yeah?"

"I'd rather... be right here, I think, actually." He ran his hand down the back of my calf and I shivered. "Right... here."

My mind buzzed and before I could think how to stop what was unfolding, he'd stood up and had my face in both hands, putting his mouth on mine. I couldn't breath. I know I didn't kiss back and Max didn't miss that either. A hurt burst through his eyes as he backed away and I nearly cried, almost pulling him back to apologize for not doing

what he'd wanted. He took a few more steps back and quickly blinked away what he'd shown for only a moment.

“Wooh, sorry. That was... ah...” He dropped his eyes and pushed his palms out in a kind of surrender.

“Ah, yeah... sorry, I'm...”

“Hey, it's New Years Eve, right? I just...”

We were jumping on the end of each other's sentences trying to save each other from having to be the one to set the moment right but not sure how to do it ourselves.

“Yeah, not a big deal. It's all good, right?” I stammered trying to simultaneously take a deep breath. My head was still spinning a bit from the champagne and my mouth was dry from the dancing. “I need water,” I said lamely and once again a disappointment washed over Max's face.

“Yeah... yeah, so do I. I'll get it. You... you sit.” He went to the tap and I saw the clock on the microwave flip to 11:59.

“One minute...” I said injecting a false sense of excitement into my voice to numb the gloom. As if my warning had been projected out to the whole apartment, sweaty bodies started pouring through the door with shrieks of *One minute!* and *More champagne! Hurry!* Max never brought me water, letting himself get swept away by the mass of bodies and cheers, away from my awkward denial. Hilary Tibber found me and as the clock struck midnight, we had our arms around each other and I was hugging countless others barely realizing who, not caring.

Waking up on the couch of the destroyed living room, plastic champagne flutes everywhere, my head pounded. It took only seconds for the sense of dread I'd drowned out with countless glasses of champagne after the midnight toast to come right back in the sober morning light.

Hilary Tibber and I had reignited our friendship and acted as the closest of friends the night before holding hands and running around the party, repeatedly slurring declarations of love and promising we'd never lose touch again. She was slumped in Mr. Werth's giant leather armchair covered in a blanket, which I vaguely remembered draping over her the night before then claiming the couch next to her. She had one high heel still on, the other we found later behind the sound system lost in the party carnage. She was still conked out and I sat up slowly feeling the full harsh extent of my hangover's punishment.

I stayed for another two days after New Years, finding ways to make sure Max and I were never alone so the elephant in the room couldn't be mentioned. When the boys started packing to spend their last week of vacation in Maine, I backed out with the excuse that I really needed to go back to school to work on my senior thesis. The excuse was solid, even Bruce bought it, vaguely impressed by my commitment to my schoolwork, and paid for my flight to be changed. Max's absence in my life changed. Though we'd stopped being constantly in touch long ago, something about the silence was different. I didn't know if it was something he could forgive me for. Or vice versa.

I graduated in May, was spit brutally out into the real world, and Nate returned from his year in London.

Chapter 9

It was the last night of Trip's visit. Martha had insisted I move into the apartment in Santa Monica for the summer after graduation until I had figured out what I wanted to do so Trip had come down to help me get packed up. The amount of crap one accumulates over four years in college is unbelievable.

Jeff was the only boyfriend of Trip's I'd ever met, though I'd heard about a few others and I suppose I knew Ian, though I didn't know if I was supposed to count him. Even years after Ian had died, we still couldn't find a way to speak much about him. I knew he'd died right before I'd graduated from high school, one of the early victims of what everyone called at the time "the gay man's plague," and it felt as if speaking about it tainted his memory.

I remember sitting that night on the giant puffy white couches stained with the memories I'd lost in college nights so marked by their excesses of beer and booze. It was the first time I'd seen Trip without Jeff in years. The absence was unsettling. Jeff had become my second brother over the years, as well as a kind of buffer between Trip and me. He kept us away from the pitfalls of unconditional love. But right then, that unconditional love was all Trip needed.

"I just sensed something was going on," Trip said, holding his wine glass with his fingertips, swirling the red light beams over the cedar coffee table. "Finally, I just asked. I didn't want to snoop around, looking for proof or anything. For some reason, he couldn't lie. I mean, what was the difference, really? He already fucking had been... What changed by me bringing it to the surface?"

I'd known the whole time he was visiting that he wanted to talk about something, but it had taken Trip two days and his looming departure to finally open up. I'd geared up to talk him through whatever he was going to tell me, and when it finally did all come out, I realized I didn't have to say much; he just needed me to listen. Jeff had cheated on Trip. That was the grizzly gray that had been floating just out of reach for the past two days. Instantly I realized just how far from a brother Jeff actually was, and how far from a sibling loyalty I had to him. I snapped to Trip's defense; no additional justification, just simply that he is my brother and Jeff is not.

"He's an asshole, Trip... You absolutely have the right to feel however you're feeling. I understand whatever you want to do." I had my legs tucked up underneath me on the couch, running my finger around the rim of my glass. I felt converted back to the fidgety little seven-year-old me that used to sit and watch Lindsay and Boppa's words fly over my head at our cozy dinner table. At least here I was in this conversation, but infidelity was something I had never been able to understand. "So... is he moving out or are you?"

A silence gripped both of us. Trip's eyes were glued to his tensed hands. The question hung in the air somehow like an accusation.

"Neither."

"Oh... Well, so you're going to... or uh... you forgive him?"

"I don't know! Shit, Bea!" Trip's fury caught me totally off guard. It was like a bomb going off between us knocking us both back in our chairs to make room for it.

"I... I didn't mean to be... I just... Trip, I will support whatever decision you make! You've been with Jeff a long time! I understand not wanting to let go... people

make mistakes.” I was vomiting out every reassuring excuse I could think of to say to someone else who’s been cheated on. I’d had a girlfriend in college whose boyfriend had cheated on her and I’d talked her off a ledge, but each time, the same thing is so different.

“But... I refuse to be my mother!” Isn’t it odd that our lives don’t actually have soundtracks playing behind dramatic moments? I swear, my memory of that moment has a full orchestra coming to life at that very second, booming on his final word, bursting out in minor chords crashing down under an intangible heaviness, the entire string section launching into a mind-numbing staccato sequence in double time. And then the gong to shut it all down... That’s when I came in.

“What?” As though bad news comes through the air in silent waves to brace you before it is announced, I steeled myself for what I somehow understood before he’d said it. That’s not something I can explain. Like how I knew Lindsay was already dead before I went in her room. I just already knew.

“I didn’t mean to say that... Bea, I’m sorry.”

“What, Trip. You need to say it. Say it.”

“Bea, I... You still really... really don’t know?” Our roles had reversed. I was about to be the one needing to be consoled.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” My voice dripped like acid. He’d pulled the pin of a grenade and there was no turning back.

“Bruce... he cheated on Mom. On Lindsay.”

Boom.

“When?”

“Um... while she was taking care of Boppa mostly... I guess.”

“How do you know?”

“You never wondered where he was all those nights? I didn’t believe he was really working that much. So I just followed him one night. After that, I started following him a lot when I knew he’d be going to see the other woman. I wanted to scream every time I’d watch him go through her side door and I couldn’t do a thing.”

“Does he know you know?”

“Yes.”

“How long has he known you know?”

“One night that last summer I was home. I followed him like I did all the time, and he... he saw me outside her house.”

“Did you tell Lindsay?”

“Not at first. No. I threatened to unless he did. So he told her about the time I caught him... but...”

“But what?”

“But he didn’t tell her the whole truth...”

“Which was?”

“That it’d been going on for... years.”

“And you told her that?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

Like automated machine guns pointed at each other, the words fired out of us without pause. Until then.

“Trip,” I said, “When? *When did you tell her?*” A panic I’d kept at a simmer up to that moment boiled over.

“I...” He stumbled on the part of the story he wanted to tell me least of all. “I told her right before I left for my senior year of college...”

“How soon before?”

“Right... before.”

We both knew what I was asking. How soon before she killed herself had he told her? Three months before? Three months. How long is three months? What changed in her in three months? Did that do it? Was that the final straw? Was that... it?

“I’ve asked myself everything you’re asking yourself right now, Bea. I... I hate Bruce for making me feel like it’s my fault. I mean... I saw it happening and I didn’t do anything... and *I* told her, right? *I’m* the reason she knew... I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.” Trip was unraveling before my very eyes.

“No... no, *no*, Trip, no... It’s... it’s not your fault.” *It’s not your fault.* The strain to get those words out jolted me back into the moment. The locks on the drawers in my mind were bursting open and all those old confusing thoughts and clues were bouncing around and slamming into each other in my mind finally fitting together. Trip was telling me two things; first, that he blamed himself for Lindsay’s death, and second, the cause of Trip’s war with Bruce. “It’s no one’s fault...” I said. *It’s no one’s fault. It isn’t.* I wasn’t talking to Trip anymore. *It’s not your fault.*

We were both crying. We looked into each other’s eyes, and for the first time I felt my crippling, unspoken guilt shift. I don’t know if I could say it lifted, but it shifted from a place that was about to crack from carrying it and maybe it got a bit lighter.

Lindsay's first husband dying didn't make her stronger, nor did her father dying or her second husband's cheating. Those things destroyed her. So she quit.

Nothing can break your heart on its own. One let down just holds a light up to all the others it's piling itself on top of, those broken promises and abuses you've almost been able to keep hidden in the shadows, and that's when you feel the cracks. My heart felt like a flimsy plastic bag collecting broken china plates, the sharp shards dangerously close to tearing through. But I didn't quit. I dug in and kept fighting.

Part 3

Chapter 1

“Hey hon? Where are the car keys?” Nate’s deep voice slips under our bedroom door as I’m lying with my eyes closed in the patch of morning sunlight streaming through the wide bay windows onto our four-poster bed. Saturday.

“Oh, I’m sorry, they’re still in my purse up here. One sec, I’ll bring them down!” I say just loudly enough for him to hear me from the kitchen downstairs.

“No, no, coming!” I hear his steps coming quickly up the creaky old stairs even as he says it. I open my eyes as he comes through the door. Not a bad view for the first of the day. He’s as handsome and strong as the day I married him nineteen years ago, and I love him more each day.

“Bruce said you put one of his forms on his nightstand, but he can’t find it... I’m sorry, I know you were up so late with him,” Nate says falling next to me on the bed and kissing my forehead.

“I... shoot. I thought I’d put it there... Did you look? Maybe he’s just having selective blindness again?”

“I’ll go check. Not to worry, I’ll find it.” He stays laying next to me for another minute just stroking my hair as though we’re pretending for each other’s sakes that we’re not painfully aware of Bruce downstairs waiting impatiently as ever to be driven to his appointment.

“Go,” I say, wrenching myself from the lulling comfort, “He’ll be getting antsy. And thank you for taking him. Ask them to please just make him comfortable. Hopefully this one won’t take too long.”

“For you, the world.” He jumps up after a last kiss, turns once again with an apologetic smile and says, “I’m pretty damn envious of you, beautiful, because I believe our little rascals want to bring you breakfast... Though I won’t be blamed for any burnt pancakes.” And he darts out, bounding down the stairs taking them two at a time from what I can tell from the loud crashes echoing through the old house. The scurrying of two sets of little feet follows the booms. My dear Julian, seven-years-old, already a spitting image of his father and as thirsty for life, clambers onto my bed beside me planting a wet puckered kiss on my mouth before my stoic eleven-year-old spitfire, Casey, walks in slowly, balancing a cup of steaming hot coffee and a plate of slightly blackened pancakes on a wicker tray. I push myself up in bed, take the tray from my focused girl and place it aside for a moment to take them both in my arms. *Make this last forever*, I beg to whatever greater force allowed me to have these remarkable creatures in my life, *I don’t know what I wouldn’t give. Can I just press pause? Don’t ever let Julian become embarrassed to kiss me or Casey too grown-up to want to snuggle into the nook under my arm.*

“You two are my light, you know that? I love you more than the moon and all the stars.”

“Love you, too, Mom,” they say in unison, Casey in her very serious way and Julian, giddy on his sugar high from what I’m sure were too many spoonfuls of the rich Vermont maple syrup, almost knocking over my coffee bouncing up and down by my

knees. He may be seven, but he has enough horse-sense to see this is the first morning in a while I've had a ready smile. He knows it's so much because of him and he beams with youthful, uninhibited pride at being able to snap me so easily out of my haze.

"Mom," says Casey, dutifully sticking to her aim of trying to make sure I'm doing okay, old enough to understand what Bruce coming to stay has meant, "Do you want to read Julian a few chapters of Harry Potter? We got through the chapter you started yesterday, but he's been bugging me all morning because he doesn't like my voices as much as yours." Slipping in a compliment at the end. She's so damn smart.

"That would make me the happiest mom in the whole world," I say, feeling tears making their way into my eyes with that magnificent sting of happiness.

"Okay!" Julian jumps to the floor, this time making my coffee slosh over, and takes off in his white-socked feet down the wood-floored hallway and, before I can call out the cautionary *Slow down!* a thunk meets our ears as he reaches the end of the corridor and slides into the wall.

"Jules?! You okay?" I shriek trying to suppress the same giggle already bubbling out of Casey. Quick relief comes from the giggles at the end of the hallway as well.

"Yep! Absa-tootly!" he squeaks and throws his socks back through my door before taking off downstairs for the book.

"It's in the living room, Julesy," yells Casey. She smiles up at me and says, "I'm really sorry but I think I kind-a burned the pancakes... I'm not very good at telling when the first side is done yet."

"I think they look delicious! Share with me, lady? I couldn't possibly eat this all!"

“I was hoping you’d say that,” she says sliding up beside me and putting the tray on my lap. She’s still young, hasn’t begun to resent me for being invasive or overbearing and I know in this moment just how lucky I am. It is one of the few of such moments. It usually takes hindsight to feel fulfillment, but right now, hearing the noisy zest of my boy darting around downstairs and the steady breaths going in and out of my glowing girl, I am happy.

Chapter 2

I have days left with my father, but he's been in my life these past two weeks in a way he has never been before. He has only been in our guestroom for two weeks and already that old man smell has oozed into my house just as Boppa brought his into Lindsay's. Bruce's throat cancer, though absolutely expected from years of chain-smoking, has spiraled downward faster than I've been able to wrap my head around it and hits me harder every day. The day Bruce called three weeks ago, Nate demanded he come to stay with us so he'd have an easier time of it all and be closer to the Massachusetts General Hospital. At first, I'd refused, telling Nate it would be too hard having him around, that we could drive out to get him if he ever needed help as he was doing just fine in the home we'd moved him into three years before. But as the imminence of the end began to soak in, I'd relented, and Bruce had come to stay.

I was ashamed to admit to myself the fears of attempting Lindsay's half decade of caring for her father. But Nate was the difference. He refused to let me take it on by myself, going to every single doctor's appointment no matter what the time of day or if it conflicted with his work schedule. He'd declared to his office that he was not to be relied on for the next few weeks because "someone else more important to him" had to be able to depend on him completely. His grey-haired secretary, Janet, had told me of his adorable announcement when she'd called to see how I was doing.

I find myself wishing now that this were at least somewhat more similar to Lindsay's time with Boppa. It's all been moving faster than I could have imagined. The day he moved in, one of his lungs collapsed and the doctors told Nate and I to "prepare"

ourselves. Yet somehow, miraculously, Bruce pulled through. He now exists hooked up to breathing machines with an IV protruding like an external vein constantly pumping an assortment of fluids into his arm. No one has the heart to even broach the subject of a cure so as not to hint at offering hope. There is none. I know I only have a sprinkling of days, if that, but at least this time I know.

Chapter 3

The phone rings after dinner. Nate and I are in the kitchen doing dishes. Caller ID lets me know it is Trip.

“I meant to call you earlier this morning, Trip, I’m sorry! I got lost in a book with Jules and Casey,” I say.

“Oh, it’s Dean! Trip just asked me to dial your number, but he’s not back from the bathroom yet, Bea,” says Trip’s burly boyfriend with a deep laugh. “Well! So how *are* you since I’ve got you for a sec? How’s the old bugger?” he says, dropping his voice, “I know Trip won’t care to hear it, but let’s just not tell him I asked.”

“Oh Dean! Thanks for asking, love, he’s doing fine. He had a good appointment today with that great doctor who gives him lots of goodies if you know what I mean, don’t know how he has slipped under the radar for so long, though the kids wonder why the house has smelled like skunks all day.” We both laugh and I realize how much I’ve been able to laugh today. First time I can say that in a while. “What are you two up to? Doing anything fun on a Saturday night?”

“Oh, I think I’m going to cook him dinner... you know it’s our ten-year anniversary tonight? Oh, shhh...” he hushes me as I congratulate him with a long drawn out, “*aww*.” They’re three hours behind us still living in California, though Trip and Dean moved a little south to Santa Cruz to be near some good beaches. Dean is a fanatical surfer and he’s gotten Trip hooked on it as well.

“Oh, babe, you’re back. She picked up,” Dean says to Trip, who I’m assuming has returned. I hear a few clicks and some static as the phone passes to different hands.

“He’s being grabby! Really wants the phone, Bea! Talk soon, kisses!” Dean’s voice fades out as Trip takes control of the receiver.

“Bea!” Trips voice meets my ears and I smile. I haven’t heard from him in a few days and I haven’t wanted to burden him with Bruce news. “How are you? Tell me something good.”

“Something good, huh? Your niece and nephew brought me breakfast in bed this morning and I do a terrible English accent for Harry Potter voices,” I laugh. “I sincerely hope my kids don’t think that’s what English people actually sound like.”

“Oh, girl, that *is* good.” Trip is in a good mood. His moods are contagious and he’s got me riding his positive wave, to use the groovy surfer lingo he’s embarrassingly picked up in his fifties. I’m not sure how acceptable it is for a guy with gray streaks to use words like “stellar” or “dope,” but I’ve made room for it in my image of him. He’s funky as hell, but I’d rather he be weird than boring.

“I hope you’ve remembered it’s your ten-year anniversary today,” I say, entirely too used to the irony of Trip in his ability to remember any general’s name in any war, any movie quote or mathematical equation he learned in eighth grade, but anything like an anniversary will never lodge in his brain.

“Holy fucking mother of shit!” he whispers closer to the phone. “You are my saving grace. My fucking saving grace.” Can’t say I don’t know where that mouth comes from, I guess. He inherited Boppa’s love of good cursing just like the beer belly and full head of hair.

There won't be any mention of Bruce in this conversation, but Trip sees to it that I'm finding something to be happy about and, despite being in the middle of all this shit, I have.

"I love you, girl, mmmkay?" Trip says like a question I'm supposed to answer. *Love you!* I hear farther away in Dean's slow breathy voice.

"I love you, too, Trippy," I reply and we hang up. I don't mention to him what Bruce and I are doing tomorrow. I'll tell him later, once it's happened and he won't be able to talk me out of it.

Chapter 4

Sunday afternoon. I've been running around like a maniac grabbing every piece of medical paraphernalia I can think of and throwing it in the back of my old Saab. Bruce asked me at dinner last night if I'd be willing to take him back to New Hampshire. In my mind I know the effort could cut time off of the little we may possibly have left, but I know a day spent doing this will be worth a hundred days of lying on his back in a hospital bed. We've packed the countless IV fluid bags and the giant oxygen tanks into the back seat from where the tubes can still reach him in the front and we're driving the two hours up to the small town I long ago called home. I telephoned the doctors this morning to tell them I need to do this with my father. They urged me not to give in to his pleading to make the trip, but a part of me wants it as badly as he does and it's worth whatever he has left for us to go see her.

"If I die on the way up there," he rasped out this morning in all that was left of his voice, "I'll be pissed. If it's going to happen on this trip, let's just hope it happens on the way back."

Nate used bungee chords to strap Bruce's contraptions down securely in the back to combat the pot-holed New England highways and make sure nothing will be tugged at or pulled out unintentionally. I feel like I have a bunch of robot children buckled in the back as we finally take off on I-93 North and continue up the 89.

One hundred and thirty miles later, we pull into a parking spot on Main Street and take a deep collective breath.

“Just go down to the river, Bea. That’s the only place I want to go really.” Neither of us said it before we’d left or at any time during the drive. Sitting in my little hatchback looking through the window of our favorite diner where Bruce and Lindsay had taken me to get French toast the morning of my first day of kindergarten and where we’d gone to get blueberry pancakes after we’d walked up to the main green in the middle of town to watch a meteor shower one early morning when I’d been in sixth grade, we both know what we need to do. I guess it takes coming home again to remember. He needs to say goodbye, to ask one more time for her forgiveness, and I need to see them together at peace one final time. So I pull back out into the street, a car stops and waves to me to let me go, and we drive back down Main Street, past the construction of a new grocery store and CVS, past the turn towards our old house, finally turning onto the roads that twist into dirt paths with deep wheel trenches down to the banks of the river; our spot.

It takes over fifteen minutes to get Bruce to a comfortable spot sitting on the grass close enough to put his feet in the water with all the machines set up and whirring. It is spring, but barely, and I’m afraid the water will be too cold for his frail skin. I sit beside him for a long time in a satisfied silence, both of us lost in thought.

“Do you know, I’ve never gone a day without asking her to forgive me,” Bruce says, the pain of speaking mirroring the pain he must feel sitting surrounded by her and it is the first time I can remember that I’ve ever heard him mention Lindsay.

“Me neither,” I say, turning to see tears streaming down toward his ragged smile matching the slow tears making their way down my cheeks.

“Maybe my begging will be more effective in person.” His laughs sound more like a coughing fit, but I laugh with him in spite of staring the mortality of my parents in the face.

“Please don’t say those things, Bruce.” I move a few inches closer to his hunched form and put my arm across his back, feeling his spine that seems to have crept outwards within the past few days poking through his thin gray knit sweater.

“Well, what’s the point in not? This is a part of life. Maybe you think this is happening fast, but I think I’ve been killing myself for far too long and am surprised I’ve made it this far. I don’t want to be sorry this is happening. Life has been shit without a sense of humor. I’d like to at least go at death with one.” And we laugh more. We laugh because he is too close to the truth.

I long to lean on his shoulder, to have him wrap his arm around me and let me tuck into his side and hear his heart beat against my cheek. Even scarier than realizing that the someone that has taken care of you your whole life is an actual person is the moment you realize you’re taking care of them instead. I feel Bruce’s weight shift and lean into my ribs, into my beating heart.

“I wish you’d forgiven yourself,” I say in almost a whisper, unsure if it’s loud enough for his failing ears to catch.

“I wish I didn’t *have* anything to forgive myself for,” he wheezes, sounding like a breathless sob. “I’m sorry I quit on you, Bea. You’re stronger than I am. Thank heaven you got that woman’s strength.” He pauses on the paradox. Strength. I suppose I have to believe she had it even though... “I wasn’t the father I should have been,” he finishes as if to cut off both of our straying thoughts.

“It’s okay, Bruce.” No sense in lying. He wasn’t. But that doesn’t have to mean everything anymore.

“You and Nate are already a thousand times the parents you ever had. I don’t know how you figured it out.”

We need to be here for this, sitting as we’d done on countless summer afternoons on this riverbank. Something about this place has finally broken down that wall to let us say what we’ve needed to say since she left us. I need her here with me to remind me that there used to be a complete us, that there had been a time when we’d all worked and that Bruce was worth forgiving. He wants her here so she will hear what he is saying to me, to have it as a part of his apology for not protecting what had tied them together. We stay on the grass dipping our toes in the water every now and then until the sun begins to slip behind the trees on the opposite bank.

“I guess... I guess it’s time to go,” Bruce breathes in.

Chapter 5

The night before Lindsay died, she'd made oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. I'd sat on the kitchen counter scooping out spoonfuls of the cookie dough every time she'd turn her back, shoving it in my mouth before she turned around, and happily swallowing "too much raw egg!" My stomach tightening into a dull ache later scolded me, but I'd made her laugh sticking a rolled up ball of dough into her mouth as she'd started to protest. I didn't say goodbye, but I'd said goodnight and kissed her. I wish I could remember if I'd told her I loved her.

Lindsay couldn't find enough to outweigh it all. I wanted to be that 'enough' for her. But in the end, if she'd stuck through it for me, I'd have hated her for that, too. Because that's what I've felt since the moment I found her. I've hated her and I've hated myself for hating her.

But somehow, maybe, I did get to say goodbye. At least I remember that last sunset through our kitchen window broken up by the thin branches of the birch trees, I remember that last good night kiss, the last time I pushed my face into her shoulder, listening to the faint rhythm of her heart beating, and that sweet smell, Lindsay's smell, enveloping me. What else can we ask for besides our memories? For what it was, it was good enough.

Trip still hasn't forgiven Bruce. I'm not sure he ever will, even now that Bruce is gone. I'm not sure if I ever did either, but I've found a satisfactory balance in acting as though I have and silencing the voices in my head that don't believe it. I don't need Trip

to forgive him. For a long time, I needed their battle to be either won or lost as badly as I needed my own with Bruce to come to its conclusion. But I know I have to be satisfied by clearing out the spider webs from my own attic and leave Trip's webs alone.

Just as Trip had tried to protect me from the Bruce he saw, I am doing the same for Casey and Julian. I need them to remember only the best of their grandfather and love him the way I'd loved my brash but compassionate Boppa. Eventually the importance of the truth diminishes because at the end of the day, what difference does it make? My truth isn't my children's truth. Whether their grandfather was a crotchety, unfaithful prick or a loving, committed man, they'll remember him from the Christmas dinners when they'd sit on his lap and share his plate, and his unnecessarily emotional phone calls on their birthdays that they would giggle about for hours afterwards imitating his sappy and tearful expressions of his overwhelming love. Though he never meant them to, those over-the-top outpours of affection for my children cut me. I'm embarrassed to call it jealousy. But to them he was the grandfather they needed, and they will love him forever for it.

I hadn't been old enough when Lindsay died to realize she was human, not the inexorable force I'd fabricated in my young mind. I'd been old enough to see it of Bruce but it took many years for me to come to terms with just how human he really was. He made mistakes. He wasn't the pillar of strength I wish I could say I had as I grew up. But I made mistakes, too. I could never reach Bruce through his haze, but I should never have stopped trying.

Forgiveness is the most selfish necessity there is. Lindsay and Bruce are gone. But I'm not. And I'm just too tired to carry the weight of resentment anymore. It's never too late to forgive. I can say I was there for my father in those last days. We found peace in making up for years in a matter of days, hours sitting next to each other, letting love and the connection created in unified longing for love lost tie us back together. I miss my father in a way I never did when he was simply elsewhere. We can't live each day like it's our last, but when we come upon those days, we get one chance to fill them. And so we had. And it was good enough.