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WHAT LIES BENEATH

by

ELEANOR HARRISON

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MANSOURI
PROFESSOR DECKER**

MAY 1, 2023

Chapter One

Five generations of Farmingtons have gone to Walton Academy since its founding in 1892. On the wall beside the front entrance is a series of photographs of every student who has ever attended, every rosy-cheeked prodigy: my great-great-grandfather with his fading farmer's tan; his son, face kept soft by years of near-agoraphobic study; my grandfather, shortly before his draft into the Vietnam War, the very last nice photograph of him before the afternoon at nineteen when a grenade took out his sprightliness and his left arm; my grandmother, who met him in the school gym when he skinned a knee tripping over her shoelaces and in return raised their five children without complaint; my father, who navigated their occasional bickering and more frequent spells of silence with his sights set down a narrow path of academic and professional elitism, laying down for me, the next generation, just one rule: I must get into Walton.

My acceptance letter came, like them all, in March of my fourteenth year. My father sorted it one morning from the campaign flyers and department store catalogues and laid it at my place at the dinner table, white and crisp-edged. I went to school and tried all day not to think of it lying on the table like a beating heart, an omen, the only indicator of my success.

The day was overcast and rainless, all atmospheric white noise. I walked home shaking underneath my coat.

My father made me wait until after dinner to open the envelope. He came home just after sunset, *thunking* off his tennis shoes that were so worn in the heels that he rocked when he walked, like a sailor newly grounded. My mother came home last, exchanged her crisp office slacks for pilling maroon sweatpants, and started dinner.

We ate hard-shell tacos with shocks of cold tomato sauce and thick slabs of government cheese. My stomach churned. I prayed not to spill sauce on the pristine letter that rested against the centerpiece, a painted ceramic pitcher my great-grandfather had owned before the war that remained empty unless the odd opportunity arose to buy flowers. After an eternity, my father wiped a pinkish bruise onto his napkin, another heirloom from the second Edward Farmington, and dropped the napkin to his empty plate. The meal was complete.

My mother washed the dishes with the same steady meticulousness that now felt agonizing. I sat at the table and stared at the envelope, trying to decipher the grayish squiggles from beneath its translucent exterior. My mother came to the table and sat wordlessly, and I reached for the envelope and opened it.

It shouldn't have been a surprise – it was what fate had ordained from the beginning, another link in a chain tethering me to the institution. In twenty-two words, the Walton Academy for Academic Excellence welcomed me into its elite cohort of the best and brightest. My father beamed and jostled my shoulder with the verve that seemed always to run through him, though not always with this jocularity. The same brutal energy as his lightning anger that shocked every dirty dish, subpar report card and speck of dust on the fading china off of which we ate refried beans and canned cream of mushroom soup, was now a jolt of electric fortune, warming and brilliant.

My mother offered a demure smile. She was never one for outspoken emotional expression, only perfunctory smiles and a knit brow or two of disapproval. At times, she resembled a delicate floral curtain, quaintly functional and rarely noticed. When a breeze would blow in, she'd flutter dutifully, ignored beside the magnificent over-emotion of my father, the perennial fireplace conflagration.

“We're very proud of you,” she said simply, her voice a soft monotone.

It was everything it was supposed to be. It was everything I was supposed to do. My father was shouting words of congratulation from across the dinner table, and soon the rest of the Farmingtons would be called and informed, chain by chain, linking the city with praise. And yet there was a certain flatness to it – a post-anticipation clarity that made everything seem trivial and static, as if the room, just moments ago electric with anticipation, were asking ‘Is this it? Is this everything?’

But then my father came out with a bottle of nice champagne that must have been hard to come by, and he was pouring me a glass even though he never let me drink. It looked like a stream of sunshine, something delicate but strong, something glimmering with opportunity. But it smelled like nail polish remover, the dry nauseating stuff he’d used the time I came home from a sleepover with petal-pink nails that popped against my jacket. It stung going down, and I must have made a face, because my father laughed.

I forced down more champagne, and the room felt hazy again, filling with an emotion both buoyant and ungraspable. I felt both tightly enclosed and set to walk a long and precarious tightrope, the open air a vast and merciless threat. Behind me stood my father, his father, his mother, his father’s father, and his father’s father’s father, pushing me onto the slack. A globe of deadly potential lay around me. This wasn’t a completion, an enclosure on a string of fated success. This was one step of many – the very beginning.

Chapter Two

Walton was an architectural perplexity. Sitting squatly in the middle of the outlying suburbs, it rose from the city like a pillar of excellence, its verticality seeming almost heavy-handed in its imitation of the efficiency and ambition expected within. The school was well over a hundred years old, but the building was refurbished every few years, with new coats of paint and deep cleans to scrub the grime from the floors. Right before my father entered, they put in escalators that zipped up and down with impressively quiet functionality. (Only the basement, dug with the school's founding, remained largely untouched.) Each floor was divided neatly by subject. The gyms, of which three were inexplicably packed into the narrow corpora, lay on the first floor opposite a wall of lockers at which all twelve hundred students bookended each day. On the remaining wall beside the main entrance lay the pictorial tribute to alumni past, each image like a tiny squiggle against the indifferent mass of the wall, on their own insignificant but together comprising the school's very body, its very eliteness, its very self.

Underneath the school lay an expansive basement that, according to my father, few had ever fully explored. Near the single staircase leading into its depths was a bevy of sports miscellany trapped within floor-to-ceiling wire cages, and boxes of old files gathering dust in the corner. My father had only been down there once, he'd told me, to get balls for JV soccer practice. He'd peeked down the corridor past the ends of the cages to see the start of a labyrinth twisting under the school, curling like squat, dank intestines. He was walking back to the stairs when he'd heard a grumbling, something low and animalistic, as if the very basement was breathing. He'd chalked it up to the whirring of an overheated computer lab, and returned to the airy normalcy above

ground. Sometime later, he'd mentioned it to another boy on the team, who'd shrugged with easy indifference: 'That's just the monster under the gym.'

No one knew how the legend had originated, much less whether it bore any truth. Some kids claimed to have seen the monster in person, but they disagreed over its physical characteristics: some said it was scaly, like a glimmering trout; some claimed it bore ivory horns that it rammed against the wall in agony; some swore the monster had soft, matted fur that clumped with human blood after it fed. Some said it purred and grumbled harmlessly, just like a lonely cat. Others told of its deafening roar, the cry of a caged, angry beast, at night after everyone had left. People disagreed over how the monster was bound – chains, cages, and fatal photosensitivity bore equal weight in the discussion. And, of course, there was endless debate over the very existence of the monster. A few swore it was only a myth propagated by past generations, a shared cultural delusion. A few firmly held that the monster was real, tangible, and a constant if unlikely threat. Most people, however, fell somewhere in the middle, maintaining the monster as a cultural phenomenon as real in its social significance as in its corporeality. Even this significance varied, depending on who you asked: the monster was considered everything from a folksy legend to a representation of the constant threat of failure. Those willing to entertain the possibility of the monster's existence generally thought it to target not unwitting interlopers, like my father, but those identified by Walton administrators as academically insufficient. They'd be whisked away suddenly, in the middle of homeroom, at the lockers, in the middle of a basketball practice, and escorted to the building's underbelly, never to return. As kids studied, ate, changed for P.E., passed and failed tests, there was always the possibility of that carnal threat lurking in these depths, hungering for human flesh and failure, like a chasm awaiting an easy mis-step.

On my first day at Walton, I awoke well before the sun, before the city awoke too and began its hectic cacophony. I tiptoed through my room, dressing in dim light, so as not to wake my parents. But when I got to the living room, my father was already dressed and awaiting me, spreading the business section over the little table.

“I see your alarm went off,” he said. “I was concerned, knowing you.”

“Very funny.” You might imagine that I lay awake anticipating this new endeavor, but in reality I slept unnotably, just a blink and then the jolt of my phone’s alarm, the jaunty default tone so piercing in the early silence. It had been impossibly seamless: I’d gone to sleep, woken up, and now I was going over to Walton.

My father had insisted on taking me, even though it was almost entirely out of his way. To get to the school from our apartment, we’d have to take the subway from the city center to the suburbs, where he’d drop me off, then head back into the city to the coworking space at the swanky northern business district where he spent his days. I couldn’t go by myself on a day like today, he insisted. No, he had to be there to hand me off, to pass the torch.

“I’m ready,” I said.

He squinted, pretending to size me up. Today, under the same pressed suit he wore every day – no matter the weather, even when everyone else in the room wore jeans – he donned the tie-dyed t-shirt Walton had awarded him upon his graduation in 1994. Its lettering was still sharp and clean, the coloring still bright and unfittingly wacky from years of preservation on the left side of his bedroom closet, a relic never to be touched – that is, not until today.

“You’d better be,” he returned. “If you’re not in the car in five minutes, they’ll need a warm body, and I’ll have to put my name down instead.”

I nodded, torn between frustration and embarrassment at the idea of my father waltzing into Algebra with the rest of the ninth graders. I gathered my bag, into which I'd layered a small stationery store's worth of crisp, new academic miscellany – books, folders, sleek pens in dark, respectable colors – that didn't feel like mine yet, perhaps because they were so new and perfect. I passed my parents' bedroom, where my mother was still sleeping. I thought I heard the creak of an old floorboard from behind her door, but the door stayed shut and she didn't emerge. I turned out the dim living room lamp, leaving the apartment to slumber.

We went stair by stair, hearing at a few landings the muffled shamelessness of early morning squabbles. Something tacky spackled the floors over the un-mopped imprints of a thousand shoes. On the second landing, the overhead light spasmed violently and went out.

I grew up in an apartment, as well as my father, and his father, and every generation of Farmingtons following my great-great-grandfather, who grew up in a farm and harvested wheat and corn on his summer breaks. At fourteen, they'd get into Walton, and commute from the cramped city center to the airy suburb, filled with big dreams and even bigger expectations. They'd study night and day, blocking out the din of people fighting, and partying, and hooking up, and raising children, of so many people existing, struggling, all around them. They'd ache with the centrifugal force, the defining heartbeat, of the necessity to escape all of this – the fighting, the despair, the masses of people taking up so much space – to fight towards elite singularity, a pillar rising from the expansive flatness in solitary victory. They'd graduate, heads held high, readying themselves to glide into the world with the buttery glisten of academic excellence. Then – this is the part I haven't told you – it never worked. Five generations of Waltons squandered their youths bent over textbooks for a golden promise too elusive to catch. They slid through barbs of financial ruin and social obsolescence. They kept Walton alumni newsletters in neat stacks on their dining

tables next to instant ramen spills. They ironed their graduation gowns every Sunday, shoving aside their tattered jeans to give these relics their proper due. They raised four generations of children in the squalor of the city with the expectation from birth that they, too, would get into Walton, and that they'd be the one to make it out. It was as much a compliment as an obligation.

Our financial state wasn't something we openly discussed. After my parents would congregate with worried half-whispers at the table and send me to my room, after my father came home one day and slammed the door and sat on the sofa with his head in his hands, even after the lights turned out and the fridge stopped working and we ate bowl after bowl of puddling ice cream against the rising funk of rotting turkey, in the dark, we never talked about it. I saw only the by-products of their financial strife – some half-hidden, most strikingly obvious – but was never clued-in to the origins, the processes, the whole picture of our financial state. Some things I knew, like the fact that my mother answered phones in an office that seemed fancy because she made me wear my special-occasion flats to visit. Or that my dad rented an office but didn't have a boss. (He kept telling us it was liberating to work for himself, and that he was just on the brink of a great idea. He was always on the brink.) It felt as if my parents had pulled down a thick curtain so that I could only see parts of this struggle, bits and pieces, and shooed me away when I tried to peek behind it. From childhood, although I don't know exactly when, I learned to stop peeking, to make my own silent inferences about what they knew and I mostly knew: we were broke. Sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. Sometimes the lights went out and we'd play eat-everything-in-the-freezer-before-it-rots. Sometimes we had a good few months and my mother let me get the organic potato chips because even though they didn't taste better they seemed classier, more elite, and she didn't even seem nervous about the price. My parents never showed me any numbers, but in some sense my understanding of our financial instability seemed grounded in more tangible things: in melting

ice cream, and rotting turkey, and crisp non-GMO luxuries. Things I could see and feel and taste, even though they came too infrequently to depend on.

My father reached the lobby first and held the front door for me. “Rapido, rapido,” he said as I squeezed onto the stoop. “It’s almost daylight.”

The air was crisp, a premonition of fall. Down the street, a dark car was letting out a stumbling woman who steadied herself against a lamp-post. There was the low sweeping hum of the garbage truck. We started for the subway past dark windows and skittering cockroaches and squeaking rodents that darted for cover under parked cars. Somehow, this quiet desolation bore a pregnant potential, an electric suspense of things yet to come.

The subway was empty, save a few skittish vagrants continuing their night of inebriated wandering, and some bleary-eyed, morose professionals just starting their days. I sat next to my father and watched from the grime-streaked window as we snaked within the city’s stomach, through the same cavernous tunnels and past the same rattling pillars my great-grandfather had seen one hundred years ago. Side by side in the little persimmon-colored seats that gave a cheap, almost nauseating brightness to the car’s worn, washy beige, we were almost the same height.

As the train shuttered under the city, I thought of the monster beneath the school, salivating in anticipation of some poor victim’s fall from grace. I thought of it waiting just like me, for a certain failure that no one fully believed until it was physically realized. As much as it gutted me to believe it, this monster seemed an extension of this cycle of academic fate: the Farmingtons get into Walton, they graduate, they fail. What more obvious representation of that failure than a carnivorous monster snapping its jaws at the thought of my inevitable stumble?

There was something so frustrating about the train at this hour. It should have been so alive, so plebeian, an extension of the city’s hubbub. Instead, as the few passengers sat alone as if

contemplating their very existence, it roared through the empty stations, rattling through unechoed infinity. When we got off, my legs felt wobbly from the nerves and the newness of stable ground. The station was expensive, brightly-lit, bearing a huge tiled depiction of a golden mountain rising from the mist, towering above a small, insignificant village. It was clean, impossibly so, likely because it was never used: in this neighborhood, everyone drove, avoiding the grimy subway like the plague. At least, no one would be caught dead emerging from its ignoble depths, save the poor souls unlucky enough to possess no other option.

The watery, waking sun surprised our ascension, glimmering softly off of car windows and neat sidewalk squares. Even more surprising was the relative bustle of suburbanites starting their commutes into the city, the slow, intentioned motions of cafes opening for the day, and the nervous congregation of kids readying themselves for the first day of school. And there it was, rising from the rows of picket-fenced bungalows like a beacon of superiority: Walton Academy, my fate and fortune. My beginning and my end. My family, my legacy, my future. The only important thing I would ever be.

My father rustled next to me. I turned to him. He looked awestricken, as if beholding it for the first time, but with the weary, unguarded despair of someone who had long known its disappointments. I saw him perceive his own youth, his fatally elusive promise, rising before him in cruel mockery of his ultimate insufficiency. ‘What do you have to say for yourself?’ it asked, ‘when I’ve remained standing long after you’ve crumbled into dust?’

Kids thronged by the entrance in a flurry of anticipation. They rolled out of SUVs and bid insistent farewell to their lingering, sentimental parents, shooing away opportunities for hugs and photographs. They merged into animated circles, talking with giggling, obvious intimacy. The parents hovered in musing gaggles, talking no doubt with acquaintant familiarity about their

children. All around us these self-contained cohorts were forming, leaving just the two of us to ogle like straggling runts, like decided outsiders, the inexplicable infirmity of Walton's social dynamic.

Then a door opened, and the building extended a magnanimous arm to the awaiting crowd. A warming, magnificent light seemed to radiate from the airy interior, bathing us in its purity. Everything seemed angelic and superhuman, with a simple beauty that seemed to halt time. Even my department-store clothes marked with the unctuous incivility of the subway were pleasant and worthy of admiration. Kids poured in, offering half-hearted good-byes to parents who seemed to let all this wash off their shoulders, returning to their shared commentary on drop-off lines and debt-to-income ratios. I turned to my father, who seemed to be soaking in this seraphic experience. He seemed so small standing on the sidewalk in the alumni shirt he'd tried so hard to keep perfect. All of a sudden, a weighting pity soaked through me at the sight of my father dying to regain what he had lost, or what perhaps had always eluded his grasp. I raised my hand for a reluctant wave, but he pulled me in and embraced me for the first time in a long time. He smelled like the subway. The raw cotton of his shirt scratched against my arm. I felt like a little kid, embarrassed, confused, and protected. I felt a sudden swelling in my throat and the unmistakable, humiliating urge to cry. Then a kid knocked into me and I remembered that we were in the way of traffic, two stones interrupting the ceaseless flow of students into and out of Walton, the merciless march of time. I let him go, his eyes strangely soft, all of the jagged edges flooded away, and lost myself to the inevitable direction of fate.

Chapter Three

My first class, Art History, taught by a Mr. Spektor, was on the tenth and uppermost floor. A series of escalators took me two floors at a time, zipping noiselessly.

As I reached the last floor, a tone sounded flatly somewhere. Around me, everyone was disappearing into closed rooms, leaving the main corridor empty. It seemed oddly full with the memory of people's presence. I walked into the penultimate room on the left. The desks were arranged in a perfect square, four by four, facing the blackboard, where a man in a dark suit and shaggy hair down to his earlobes pointed to a series of phrases in a language I didn't recognize. I found the sole empty seat in the room, at the very last desk in the corner, and waded through the perfect rows. I swallowed a grimace at the chair's sudden chill against my bare legs. I took out a crisp notebook and a pen and tried to pantomime studious normalcy.

The teacher pulled down a flat white screen, framed by the blackboard's chalky darkness. He pressed a button on the projector perched on the desk, and a neat image manifested on the sheet: a brilliant, waxy display, with undulating ripples of vibrant oranges and sinister blues and eerie yellows, a troubled man warping with the rhythmic unrest of the pier behind him. Its color, its sheer humanness, washed through the room.

"What do you see in this picture?" he asked.

"Progression towards insanity," said a girl in the front row.

"A pier at sunset," said the boy next to her.

"Anguish."

"Drug abuse."

"No." The teacher's brow furrowed. "Look closer."

I looked from left to right, top to bottom, scoring every line and the white space in between. But the man was just a man, the pier just a pier. Each line held one flat significance, at least that I could understand.

“Nobody sees it?” he asked, to sixteen blank stares. “God-damn. You’re supposed to be the brightest kids in the city.”

Mr. Spektor leaned backwards against his desk and looked out into the horde of clueless students. “How many people took the test to get into this school? Do you know?”

His eyes flickered across the room and landed on me. My blood burned in my veins. Then, his gaze swept back the other way, and it occurred to me that he actually wanted an answer.

No one spoke. Mr. Spektor scoffed. “Eight thousand five hundred,” he said, “took one test. And how many got in?”

This we knew, but no one answered. “Three hundred,” he said. He was still leaning against the desk, his fingers whitening with the pressure. “What’s the math there? What’s that rate?”

A silence swelled. A bird hit the window with a cracking thud, but no one looked.

“Three and-a-half percent,” he said. “Where else has an acceptance rate that low? Juilliard? Harvard? MIT?”

“Do you know how many kids took that test and couldn’t get in? Eight thousand and two hundred. Eight thousand and two hundred kids who now have to go to public school across town because they didn’t get this opportunity. They don’t get to sit right where you’re sitting. So, the next time you think you know the answer, say to yourself ‘Am I really right? Do I really deserve to be here?’”

He pointed to a girl in the first row. “Come up here.”

She obeyed tentatively. He touched a spot on the left-hand corner of the screen. “What is this?”

She bent towards the area, focusing silently. “There are words,” she said cautiously.

“Read them.”

“Can Kuhn vay – very malett aff en gal mahnd,” she sounded.

“Kan kun være malet af en gal Mand,” he corrected. “Any Danish speakers?”

None that spoke up.

“Can only have been painted by a madman,” he translated. “Who’s the artist?”

I knew this one – Van Gogh. But I wouldn’t dare raise my hand.

“Edward Munch. One of the greatest, and maddest, artists in history. Let this be a lesson.

You kids come in, and you think the world is so big. You think you know everything. You don’t ever stop and actually focus on what you’re looking at.”

Mr. Spektor pointed to the screen’s corner again, where apparently, those eight words were written. I still couldn’t see them.

“This is your sign to look closer. Don’t run around assuming you understand the whole picture. You’re supposed to be smart kids. Now act like it.”

He turned to the girl, who was now cowering against the wall. “You can sit down now,” he said.

As much as Walton seemed to be defined by its strict social exclusion, it seemed to comprise as much intellectual rigor, expecting near-superhumanity from its students. I’d heard my

father talk of the impossible standards, the crushing tests and endlessly perplexing lessons. But I didn't truly understand until I sat through that first class, had my ass handed to me on a silver platter, and then continued my doe-eyed traversal up and down the building's vertebrae from class to terrifying class. In Biology, I learned that Earth Science, which my middle school in the city hadn't offered, was not a pre-requisite but function as one. Without it, Mrs. O'Shaughnessy said, I'd been dealt a particularly unfortunate hand. In World History, I sat behind a group of girls with the same clean-cut manicures who nailed the teacher's esoteric question about the Franco-Prussian War.

Fourth period was lunch, which I anticipated to be a respite from academia. When I got to the cafeteria, an airy space washed in the mid-day light from a wall of windows that overlooked the suburban plenitude beyond, the room was mobbed with teens picking at salads and flipping through hefty textbooks in closed circles. I felt a sharp shock of adrenaline at the thought that I had nowhere to go, that the school's firm social infrastructure had no place for me. Then, I noticed along the far wall a series of benches for solitary dining. I walked over, hoping the mass of socializers would pray me no attention, my footsteps lost to the din.

The leftmost bench, which generously accommodated two, was half-occupied by a girl I recognized from my Biology class, a thin, sharp-boned girl with wheat-colored hair who seemed fatally engrossed in a workbook. I sat gingerly on the empty half, hoping unsuccessfully that it would rouse the girl from her study.

"Can I sit here?" I asked.

The girl looked up, registered me, and fixed her gaze back down at her notes. "Sure."

I pulled out the turkey sandwich my mother had constructed neatly the night before, peeling off the cocoon of cling wrap. I watched the girl highlight a line in her book with slow precision.

Even in the loud room, there was a pregnant silence between us.

“What’s your name, again?” I asked, partly because of the nerve-wracking silence, but also because I genuinely didn’t remember.

The girl looked up, frustration coloring her eyes. “I’m Amy,” she told me.

“I’m Laura.”

“I know. You’re in my Bio class.”

“What do you think of it so far?”

Amy’s face dropped into a deadpan. “The class?” she asked. “It’s fine.”

“Crazy about that Earth Science requirement,” I said. “I didn’t even take it.”

I hoped this sheepish admission would be enough to curry some half-hearted pity, if not to yield a similar confession. Amy just nodded grimly.

“Yeah,” she said, with a flat sincerity. “I guess you’re kinda screwed.”

I waited for her to smile in jest, or take it back, but something told me she wasn’t the type for jokes. For some reason, I pressed on. As difficult as she seemed, Amy was also the only person in the room sitting alone, the only other person here who hadn’t made any friends.

“What are you studying for?” I asked.

“The SATs,” she answered, suspending her highlighter over a line graph.

“Aren’t you a freshman?”

“Mm-hm.” Amy met my eyes blankly.

Again, I had to wonder whether she was serious. Looking at Amy, sequestering herself to study for at test two years down the road while everyone else gabbed around her, I noticed a strange and striking resemblance to my father, an outcast plagued by a compulsion to maintain a standard of academic perfection that no one else understood. What for him would eventually become

stalwart clutching onto the notoriety of his past started something like this: a lonely teenager pushing out the world in favor of benchmarks that would only keep eluding them.

Amy pressed her lips together. “If you don’t mind,” she said, “I have to finish this chapter.”

She looked down at the book, leaving me to finish my cold sandwich alone.

The second half of the day passed much the same as the first. I rushed up and down to classes with peers who gossiped in tight, whispery cliques, and isolated kids like Amy who scribbled notes from the corners of the classroom. In mid-afternoon, we were released to the bright late-summer scorch, to the sun zinging off of the hoods of cars and making the air sticky and dense. The heat was miserable after the building’s air-conditioned temperateness. I longed for its manufactured equanimity.

Kids spread out, some sticking in clusters that clogged the doorway, others getting into shiny cars and driving off into the blistering heat. I slunk through the tidy, tree-lined streets toward the subway station. I prayed that everyone would peel off soon enough not to see me descend into this unmistakable signifier of working-class inferiority. Luckily, by the time I reached the station, everyone had left, and I walked alone into the cavernous wasteland below the ground.

The subway was just as sparse and desolate as it had been in the morning. I stood at the middle of the platform near the turnstiles, my mother’s biggest tip for avoiding an assault. At the far end, a few tourists huddled over unwieldy suitcases spoke in rapid, muffled snatches of a language I didn’t understand. On the tracks, a rat scampered under and over the rails and began gnawing at a discarded fast-food wrapper.

I made the long-winded journey home, compounded tiredness clouding my view of the empty car. Now the perpetual jostling of the moving train felt soothing, as though I was a baby again being lulled to sleep by the gentle physical force surrounding me. I closed my eyes and let the rattling cage around me melt into a purgatorial plasma.

In seventh grade, I was placed on the advanced track for English. In the spring, we read a series of Greek myths that I found fascinating – the idea that these stories cycled through generations and maintained their cultural potency seemed inspiring. I most enjoyed the myth about Orpheus and his late wife Euridice, for whose return to life he pleads with Hades, the merciless Lord of the Underworld. Eventually, Hades gives in, on the sole but weighty condition that Euridice will follow Orpheus down the long passageway between worlds. But as they walk, he must never turn back to look at her, or Hades will pull her back into the Underworld. Of course, Orpheus tries to keep his promise, but as he travels the corridor, the tapping echo of his wife's footsteps digs further and further into his brain, and he becomes convinced that this is all a cruel joke, that Hades has sent a ghost to trick him and has left his wife in the dismal clutches of the Underworld. At last, when the light of the living world beams against him, Orpheus turns to check and put an end to this maddening uncertainty, only to find that Hades had been honest, and his beloved wife had followed him just feet behind. Now, of course, because he'd turned to check, she is sucked back down into the world of the dead, fated to forever live out his punishment.

I supposed there was a metaphor in all this, that with all the uncertainty in the world, one's failure lied in the empirical confirmation of their success, and that the only true way to succeed would be not to prove, but to believe.

Chapter Four

If anything, Walton turned out to be even harder after the first day. I'd always been good at school, getting As on every quiz and dazzling my teachers with salient points about *Oliver Twist*. I thought getting good grades was in my genes, like blue eyes or osteoporosis, something threaded through my generations like a sturdy rope. It turned out that, like everything else, intelligence was contextual, and dependent completely on environment. In this environment, I soon understood, everyone was smarter than me, or had at least come better prepared. Most of my peers hailed from one of several private middle schools in the neighborhood, where they'd taken Earth Science and read *The Canterbury Tales*. Their parents were lawyers and engineers, many of whom had attended Walton decades before but had parlayed their education into more ostensible success than my family had. Whereas, my father was unemployed, my mother had gone to public school, and I struggled to understand even Art History. Suddenly, the material seemed to slip from me like loose dirt. I felt like I was crawling up a steep mountain, clawing at the earth fruitlessly and sliding down, down, past the lowest point I thought down could be.

Now, time's formerly decisive boundaries seemed to break down. The days melted into long nights rising back into days, when I'd have to slog through the city under its stinking streets and throttle up and down Walton's narrow body, up, down, up, down, under, through, up. Over and over. Things stopped seeming real, like everything was one big crazy dream. It wasn't foggy or obscure, like in the movies, but magnificently colored, everything oozing and burning and melting into itself like a cosmic lava lamp. Seconds stretched into centuries and decades imploded into moments that passed with the blink of an eye. I'd find myself standing at the subway station, tipping with a lack of sleep, thinking that there was no way that any of this was real, not the subway

like a dark ghost snaking through the city's entrails, not the chittering of rats making homes of the trash-strewn rails, not the tourists or the drunkards or even me – maybe I was just a figment of some eccentric billionaire's cruel fantasy. But somehow everything was so terribly real, so surreal and palpable, like Munch's painting, everything swirling with bursts of color that enthralled me and washed through me like an ocean of madness.

To be sure, my failure wasn't for lack of trying. I studied as often and as long as I could force myself to, squeezing energy from my brain cells until they wrinkled and starved. At first, I studied at the dinner table, until one night when my father interrupted and insisted he knew enough about mitosis to coach me. After three wrong answers, he proclaimed that the textbook must have been rigged. No one needed to know about mitosis anyway; everything one needed to know about life could be learned by simply living it, by hustling and striving and putting food on the table. Like you've been doing, I said. He pushed my textbook off the table with a terrible *thwop* and stepped over it into his bedroom. I was embarrassed for him, embarrassed at myself, and resolved to hole up studying in my room until graduation.

After a few weeks of unambiguous failure, including a few unsatisfactory quiz grades, a few dozen wrong answers in class and a near-constant feeling that everything around me was being conducted in gibberish, I was relieved when my Biology teacher announced a group project on cellular reproduction. If everything else was really smarter than me, they'd soar through the material and I'd coast my way towards a passable grade on the tatters of their coat tails. I'd just

have to evade any independent tasks and only step in if I was one hundred percent sure I knew the answer. At this point, I couldn't tell how many of my peers knew how incompetent I was at mastering Walton. But I sure wouldn't show them now.

My group consisted of Amy, who I hadn't spoken to since our conversation in the cafeteria on the first day, as well as two girls, Lily and Maddie, who seemed to share Amy's intellectual fortitude, if not her fervent, quasi-Calvinist dedication to her schoolwork. We decided to go to Maddie's house because it was right around the corner, and apparently, her parents wouldn't be home to bother us.

Her house looked just like the ones in movies: three-story Colonial, two-car garage, even the quintessential picket fence. It was the kind of house I'd dreamed of, growing up in a walk-up next to a nail salon, the kind of house whose easy domesticity you'd long for until you looked around and realized, nobody lives like this. At least not without the understanding that houses like these aren't how things typically go, that they're living embodiments of someone else's dream.

The inside was even more casually, unconsciously upscale: crown molding, tasteful gray walls, even a formal dining room like something out of *Downton Abbey*. Maddie led us through the breezy, spacious rooms with familiar indifference.

"Here's the living room," she introduced. It was moderately-sized but impressively furnished, with a gleaming floor-to-ceiling bookshelf packed with gently worn books, a crimson Oriental rug centering the floor, and a plush ivory sectional that even I knew was high-end.

"We can sit on the sofa," she suggested, sounding as though she cared as much whether we did that or crouched to the floor.

The couch accommodated four. Amy moved first, taking the seat next to the chaise. I sat down at the far-right end and set my textbook on my lap.

“Do you want the chaise?” Maddie asked, sounding like she wanted it but didn’t want to be rude.

“Sure.” Lily flounced onto the extended arm with overstated comfort.

I looked over at Maddie, who moved wordlessly to take the last remaining seat. Next to her, Amy was looking at Lily, her eyebrows raised in jovial fake-reproach. Lily looked back, seeming to feign confusion.

“What?” she said, looking flustered.

They held their gaze, communicating silently, like they were the only two people in the room. I couldn’t keep feeling excluded, and surprised that Amy, as much a loner as I was, had this connection I didn’t know about. Was I the only one at Walton without any friends?

“Should we start?” Maddie asked, flipping open her textbook. “So, there are four of us and two types of cellular reproduction. How ‘bout we split two to a type?”

Amy shook her head, sinking back into her usual standoffishness. “There are two phases in meiosis. It’s more work.”

“Fine. Then how about one person each for mitosis, meiosis I, and meiosis II, and someone’ll have to join a two-person group.”

It was what I’d feared: the division of the group project. I prayed I wouldn’t end up alone, but I figured no one else wanted to do individual work either, and would prefer to split it with someone else.

“Does anyone have a preference?” Maddie asked.

“I can do meiosis I,” Amy offered, with the decisiveness of someone who assumed partnership would only slow them down.

“I’ll do mitosis,” Maddie said.

Lily looked at me from the chaise, her head sprawled against the attached pillow. “Do you have a preference?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Either’s fine.”

“I can do meiosis II, if you want,” she said.

“Sure.”

The way Amy looked at Lily then, you’d think she was actually peeved they didn’t get to work together. I too felt a tinge of annoyance. How smart could Lily be if she was just lounging around on chaises? She hadn’t even brought her textbook. Maybe she was so smart, she didn’t even have to try, she could just coast and watch everyone else grunt and sweat.

“What team do you want to join, Laura?” Maddie asked.

I should join Amy, I thought, because she’s the smartest. But wouldn’t that make her more perceptive of my ineptitude? “Meiosis II?” I suggested.

“Sure,” Lily said.

I smiled, my stomach tightening as I were a fighter about to enter the ring.

Lily and I moved to the dining room to work. This made me even more nervous, sitting in this enclosed space with these formal, upright chairs and a long, shiny table that made me feel like I was at a business meeting. But Lily seemed much less academically discerning, or at least less judgmental, than I’d given her credit for. She moved through the material with almost uncaring ease – though whether any of her work was accurate, I had no idea – that suggested mastery. “Does this seem right?” she asked a few times, mid-scribble, to which I faked sureness and affirmed her

guess. By the early evening, we had nearly finished the report, with so little of my own contribution that I felt even putting my name on the project would be a lie.

Lily stretched over the back of her chair and rubbed her palms against her eyes, acting out the instinct we evidently both felt to move, to escape this project. Weeks of little sleep were catching up with me. My vision was starting to blur. And apparently, even the world's most expensive chairs couldn't protect against eventual butt soreness.

Lily sighed. "They must be almost done," she mused, but she didn't move to check.

"Maddie's parents must be getting home soon," I said, eager to get home. An English essay waited unwritten at home, the expectation throbbing in my head.

Lily didn't seem to hear me. "We'll probably get a good grade, if Amy's in our group," she said.

So, people *were* noticing Amy's superior intellect – it wasn't just a distortion by my insecure mind. Somehow, the idea that Lily noticed Amy's profound smartness, and was maybe even intimidated by her, soothed me – maybe if everyone crowded under the shadow of her genius, I wouldn't seem like the only one struggling.

"You know we went to middle school together?" Lily told me.

This was as surprising as it wasn't. I hadn't imagined that Amy had known any of these kids before Walton, or else she would surely have socialized more. On the other hand, a lot of kids at Walton had gone to private school together, where the kids wore crisp white uniforms that always looked miraculously clean. I saw them sometimes on my way from Walton to the subway, trudging in bored lines to the fleet of waiting cars, and I'd almost pity them for the line they walked if it weren't paved with the self-propagating certainty of their parents' social and financial privilege.

“I figured,” I said. “A lot of kids in our grade went to private school together.”

She shook her head. “Public. Out in the city. We were the only two kids to get into Walton, on a scholarship.”

I tried to picture Amy sitting in a cinder-block classroom where the decorations peeled off the walls, sighing boredly at the common core math problems no one else seemed to get. I imagined her trudging home on the subway, holding her backpack on her lap as the train lurched, going through the phases of mitosis in her head. Come to think of it, I’d never ridden the train with her, or even seen her in the empty station. “Doesn’t she ride the subway?” I asked.

“We get on a stop after,” Lily said. “At this school, you don’t really want to be seen going into the subway, you know?”

She sighed. She looked drained, ready to go home. “Did you go to private school?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, the lie tingling in my mouth. I’d expected myself to say it, had even trained myself to regurgitate the perfect backstory: *My dad is an engineer, my mom is the VP of Sales at a marketing firm downtown. We live in that one neighborhood you’ve never heard of but I swear it’s two miles away, and it’s very quaint and comfortable. They sent me to a really nice school in France that runs through eighth grade – you’ve never heard of it – and then, in their infinite wealth, they’ve sent me here. After this? I don’t know. Yale, probably. My grandfather has some connections.* But once I’d actually lied, it burned like I’d done something wrong. Immediately, I wanted to erase it and tell some version of the truth, to admit that I too didn’t come from money and that that wasn’t too shameful to say out loud.

Lily looked at me, and for a horrible second I swore she was studying me. She could tell, couldn’t she? Maybe she’d seen me coming out of the subway station at one point, or had noticed

the department store tag on my jeans. But then she just nodded, nonchalant as ever. “Nice,” she said, and started drumming a bored rhythm on the table.

Chapter Five

For some reason, the more I thought about Amy and her secret-middle class identity, the more insecurity I felt about my own. It should have made me feel better, the idea that I wasn't the only city kid commuting out to Walton every day, wiping the grime off my backpack and trying to fit in. But somehow, the image of Amy slinking off to the subway station seemed to portray not someone lost in their own fervent, isolated determination, but someone hiding from the world in constant, unspoken fear in its judgment. If self-assured Amy cared this much about where she lived, who was I to try not to care? And then there was the nagging thought that if Amy had risen up from public school to outshine everyone else, then why hadn't I? The uneven playing field excuse only got me so far. Maybe my failure, and the failures of my ancestors, weren't due to our lack of resources, but to our undeniable inferiority, our utter inability to survive in an environment like this, to struggle ad infinitum with the only hope that the next generation would get the good genes.

That was it, I'd think, slinking to the subway, traveling into and out of the grime of the city, wearing at Walton a façade of intellectual capability like a heavy coat I strained to hold against me: I would never be good enough. But, or perhaps *therefore*, I had to be. I couldn't exactly articulate why I felt the need to prove myself, or what I'd be losing if I failed. It felt like some enigmatic force was pushing me forward, keeping me awake when I wanted to crumple over my history textbook and sleep like the dead, when I got a wrong answer in Bio that made me even more determined to get the next one right. Every failure made the next one even more unconscionable.

The more I tried and failed and vowed to try harder, the more the monster crept into my head – the one my father swore he'd heard in the basement but never got close enough to touch. The carnivorous being whose lethal potential everyone managed to evade but never conclusively get the better of. The idea of that monster lurking in the basement just of out of reach frustrated me. Whether it scared or excited me, I wasn't sure – I just knew that at the untapped potential of danger, I longed to tackle it, solve it, defeat it before it defeated me. Like Walter White on the TV show my parents never let me watch, I wouldn't be the one blindly opening the door to a gun-toting stranger. Oh, no, I'd be the one to knock!

The thing I feared most, perhaps, was losing the opportunity to continue at Walton. I didn't know what I thought would happen: that someone would swoop in in the middle of math class, and escort me out into permanent expulsion? A slow and steady failure, less melodramatic but no less humiliating, in which I spent night after night studying while the light inside me died? Whatever would happen, the thought of failure throbbed in me like a hijacked heartbeat, sustaining me, an outsider controlling me from within. Not because my father wouldn't be proud of me – although of course he wouldn't, if that ever happened – but because I'd be just another loop in the string of failed Farmingtons, just another humiliating figure known only for their failure that would inevitably push the future generations until they cracked. By succeeding it seemed I would beat the cycle, and the vise grip of four generations of failure would loosen and set me free, uninhibited by the choking legacy that both set me up to fail and threatened hell if I did.

Not long after we turned in the Biology report, Maddie stopped showing up to school. At first, I didn't think anything of it – it was probably a cold, right? It was getting colder out, and I saw kids sniffing in the halls and wiping at salmon-tinged noses. Had she transferred classes? It was improbable this far in the semester – but then again, I knew too little about the particularities

of Walton's policies to question it. What if something more serious had become of her: an illness, a personal tragedy? Every time I looked over at her desk, two rows to the left of mine, its emptiness unsettled me. I envisioned her bedridden in a hospital under a t-shirt-thin blanket, trying not to panic at every beep of a heartless machine. No one at Walton seemed to miss this much school unless something was fatally wrong. Something like – the monster that had whispered its presence in my father's youth, hungering for flesh out of sight. What if the monster was real, and had mauled her?

My stomach lurched at the thought. Around me, people seemed to notice her disappearance, although they didn't seem frightened by it so much as cautiously curious. I heard her name in whispers and noticed people avoiding her place when choosing a seat, as though her absence was known but generally ignored. It was one of those things like my parents' money that was never discussed, although I was fully aware of the awful truth lurking behind the curtain of their whispers: Maddie had been sacrificed. She'd been taken, perhaps on an otherwise uneventful day, when her mind had been full of full of things that would soon cease to matter, and yanked from her class, from her life, from her position of success, never to resurface in the land of the fortunate. I knew it just like I'd known we were broke, just like I knew that there were things, important things, people hide even though you can still kind of see them. When kids whispered Maddie's name in Bio, when Mrs. O'Shaughnessy paused at her empty desk when handing back quizzes, remembering, a fire burned in me that felt fourteen years coming: I would find Maddie, and all the others. I would find the monster my father had heard but never seen or proven. I would rip back the curtain to reveal the hard, real truth that had always been hidden, to reveal that I too, had power in my revelation, that I could find things out and bear the fact of their existence. I'd known long enough that half-knowing, half-seeing, was far worse than truly, viscerally

understanding. Yes, I would find the monster, behold its inhuman realness, capture its volatile violence, and finally, I would have the upper hand!

One day, I cornered Amy and Lily after class. They were walking against the wall, giggling over something I wasn't privy to. "Where's Maddie?" I asked, hoping the question would come out as nonchalantly and bluntly as it sounded in my head.

Lily shrugged, as if Maddie's absence didn't faze her. Then again, nothing seemed to faze her.

Amy looked at her with a pregnant, almost nervous reluctance, as if they knew something I didn't. "She's – in the basement," Amy said. Fear burned in my face, jolting through my fingers. I prayed this wasn't the euphemism I thought it was.

"How long has she been in there?" I asked. I feared my shaking voice betrayed the adrenaline pooling in me.

"A while, probably," Amy said, her voice low, as if this were a secret never to be discussed without great discretion.

"What happened?" As embarrassed as I was to be asking, as though I should know by now, as a fellow Walton student, my curiosity got the better of me.

"Her grades," Amy said. Her eyes were starting to flit with frustration. I could see she wanted to hurry off to class. Sensing all this was above my head, she continued. "This sometimes happens when they get too low. I have to go. I have a Spanish mid-term."

They moved away, leaving me alone in the now-crowded hallway with my consternation. Lily turned after a moment. "Don't worry about it," she said. "It happens to the best of us."

Whether she meant the mysterious absence (or its enigmatic, probably horrifying cause) or my worry, I wasn't sure.

In art history class one afternoon, as Mr. Spektor passed back my third C in a row on a particularly brutal quiz about Caravaggio (on which for some reason I'd written my father's name, at which my teacher raised his brows in unspoken judgment), the gravity of Maddie's disappearance hit me: certainly, something had happened to her. My money was on the monster – Amy had said Maddie had been taken to the basement, where the monster was said to be salivating at the premise of human flesh. It must be a quota system, something like that: the students with the lowest grades got fed, perhaps due to overcrowding, or to teach the student body some twisted lesson about discipline. It was just like Mr. Spektor had said: some of us didn't deserve to be here. Apparently, the fact of this undeservedness would be found out, and punishment would be doled out to anyone trying to sneak in where they didn't belong. Fate always straightened itself out, it seemed, despite our efforts to twist and manipulate it.

Of course, who else would be in on it, administrating it, keeping it hidden from daylight, but the teachers? I had my eye on our Biology teacher, after Maddie went missing, but 4'10" Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, a widow of twelve years whose teeth were spackled with coral lipstick she'd probably kept since 1974, hardly seemed a fitting suspect. But after Mr. Spektor's outburst a few days after my basement expedition, a new candidate fell into place.

Class started one morning, and his desk was empty, which was unlike him – he was almost always prompt, though not always in a cheery mood. The neon analog clock above the blackboard counted seven minutes after the bell while we chattered with waiting-room apprehension for him

to walk in. When he finally burst through the door, it rattled against the wall at a poster of Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*.

Mr. Spektor tossed his bag on the ground behind his desk and leaned towards us, gripping the front edge of the desk with blanching knuckles. "Who was the most important Renaissance painter?" he barked.

No one spoke. It wasn't unlike him to ask ambiguous, intimidating questions, but he'd never been this angry. Something bestial seemed roared within him, something new in him but not unfamiliar to me – that slamming of the door, the way his eyes squinted just so as he seethed and asked an impossible task remind me of my father, kicking furniture out of his way after a brutal commute. He'd give no warning, would just wrench open the door as if to tear it from its hinges, and traverse a warpath destroying anything in its sight: an art project I'd made in fourth grade where the stick-figure cut-outs were holding hands, a pan of unctuous lasagna on the stove, any mention of a bad grade. He'd scald anyone who went near him with the inevitably sacrificial mission of consoling him. The only thing I could do was try to convince myself that it was never about me, that he had a whole world inside of him that I wasn't privy to.

"Who was it?" Mr. Spektor yelled. "This is in everyone's notes from yesterday. Everyone, look."

There was the soft flit of paper as everyone scoured their notes, turning page after page to find it. Somehow, I knew we'd never get his question right. He'd given us a detailed lesson yesterday, but his question was entirely subjective. I had notes on chiaroscuro, on Rembrandt, on Masaccio, but I couldn't answer objectively what painter was the most important. Maybe this was all a big trick. Maybe he wanted to teach us all about the variation in personal or critical opinion, or about the flatness of importance itself, that no one was more important than anyone else. It was

impossible to figure out what he wanted. I don't even think he knew – maybe he was just pulling random strings to watch us twitch and dance, deriving some twisted pleasure.

“Kelsey, who was it?”

The girl next to me, who had ducked her head in hiding, looked up, her eyes widening. “Vermeer?” she said, her voice rising in uncertainty. When he didn't answer, she continued. “He seemed pretty important.”

Mr. Spektor ran his tongue around the inside of his cheeks. “Madison.”

A girl in the back row mumbled something unintelligible.

“Say it louder.”

“Rembrandt.”

“Anyone else?”

A girl in the second row raised her hand and asked what I was sure most of us were thinking: “Isn't that just subjective? I mean, I could think Rembrandt is the most important, but Kelsey” – she pointed over to Kelsey, who smiled sheepishly – “might think Vermeer is the best.”

Mr. Spektor threw his head back, taking this answer in. I couldn't tell whether he was impressed or enraged.

“Final answer, Claire?” he said, as if sizing the girl up.

Claire shrugged. “Sure.”

As uncomfortable as I felt, I relished the opportunity to scapegoat someone else, to use someone else's wrong answer as a lightning rod for the teacher's aggression. To make someone else a martyr.

Mr. Spektor lifted his arm and pointed a clubbed finger at the kid. “Smartest thing I’ve heard all week,” he proclaimed. “That’s exactly it. It depends entirely on the person. There’s no singular right answer.”

I stared at his flushed, florid face. He had stringy third-day hair long enough to tuck behind his ear, although he let it flop against his cheeks. As relieved as I was that the witch hunt seemed to have ended, I was incensed that he had demanded an answer to a question he knew had no answer. Some questions, like this, had no answers. What question was he trying desperately to answer?

I bent my head to feign concentration, filling with unease. Mr. Spektor continued his lesson, barking occasional criticisms to meek monosyllabic rejoinders. The room filled with the prolific scratching of nervous pencils and a timid cough or two. But it was as if a stage light had been shone on my teacher and the sole student brave enough to show him up. This seemed like a glitch in the matrix, something theoretically possible in a world identical to this one. In a place like Walton, opposition to authority seemed not only impossible but certainly grounds for punishment. It was maddeningly unfair that Mr. Spektor would praise this rebuttal. After all, it seemed only to confirm his ultimate, totalitarian power – only he could decide who to reward and who to punish.

But there was something else that haunted me about their interaction. It was as if the classroom were a stage, and the two sparring interlocutors acted the roles of me and my father, carrying forth a scene that had never played out in reality. I had never gone against him like that: not directly, not verbally – just with the occasional surreptitious eye-roll and constant confrontation in my head, where I’d concoct eloquent, effective remarks about his explosions and

the emotional shrapnel they left in the apartment, in my mind and body. But I'd never been so stupid, or perhaps so courageous, as to say something like that out loud.

If this were a real battle, fought by me (or some internal id) and my father, in all his unfettered rage, it seemed necessary to root for a victor. I wasn't sure who I wanted to win. On the one hand, he was my father, and I loved him, although we never said it, and I felt guilty for wanting to overpower him. On the other hand, I bitterly envied Claire her audaciousness. Who was she to go against this omnipotent oppressor, to assume she was strong enough to match his power? Who was she to think she could do better than his objective estimation of her value? If he left the argument disappointed or irate, it wouldn't break her.

Really, Mr. Spektor was nothing like my dad: surely, my teacher was far more mercurial and judgmental. Recently, he'd seemed furiously, desperately degenerative, like a once-taut balloon caught in a shrieking death spiral. He was hiding something – something profound and injurious. Something he had to slam against the walls and scream in half-intelligible criticisms to get off of him. All my life, things had been hidden from me, concealed through whispers and half-revealed in slamming doors, with not so much as a word in explanation, and no chance of confrontation. I'd been an unconsenting fly on the wall, silent and subjected.

Some part of me was five again, listening to the muffled strains of fighting from my room, anxious to make out what my parents assured me wasn't real. I was no idiot. Something was wrong with Mr. Spektor, and I deserved to figure it out.

That evening at dinner, I sat picking up at a plate of dry, piecemeal enchiladas while a set of urgent notes lay beside my water glass. I was pulled in two directions by my father's yammering

about his latest entrepreneurial dead-end and the pounding necessity of keeping my grades above disaster. Yet somehow, I felt something in me pull away, drawing inwards to a third consideration, something more central and internal, though I didn't know exactly what it was. Something in me, something obscured yet ever-present, wanted control. Or if not control, then foresight: the ability to dissolve the fog misting over every jagged rock in my path. I wanted the clairvoyance to see the grade on my next exam, the ending to my father's story – to see, as well, the hidden peculiarities of the basement. If something were waiting in the mist to trip me up, I wanted to be able to see it, process it, adapt to its imminent impact. Or else I'd stumble, hit by something invisible but injurious, clawing through empty air for stability that wouldn't materialize.

“Laura,” my father said, his voice teasing, seeking an answer. “Isn't that brilliant?”

Adrenaline pierced me, shooting to my stomach. I tried to feign understanding. “Mm-hm.”

“It's exactly what people need. It cleans your shoes, and then recycles the dirt into mulch for your garden. It's brilliant,” he said again. “The world will thank me for my brilliance.”

“Mm-hm.”

He met my eyes with his usual jocularly that could turn in a minute to anger. “What are you working on?”

“A quiz for Bio,” I told him. It was the truth, but somehow it felt like a lie, like there was something I wasn't telling him, a part I was obscuring.

He folded his hands under his chin in ersatz understanding. “Mitochondria, right? You know there are two phases to mitosis? Common mistake.”

I held his gaze, caught between apprehension and irritation, between fear of the roaring dragon and the desire to fight it, to assert that I had power too. Moreover, I didn't actually know the answer. What had we learned that afternoon at Maddie's house? I didn't remember anything

besides the plush luxuriousness of her furniture and the bored desensitization with which she'd shown us around. If my dad was pathetic for feigning knowledge of ninth grade biology and clinging to a life long gone, then I in my failure to understand the material, and by extension the very environment around me, was equally pathetic.

I kept holding his gaze, straining not to blink or smile. I couldn't tell whether he thought I was opposing him or submitting to his will. I don't know what I wanted to him to think. If I admitted defeat, he'd guffaw in self-congratulation. But if I answered it, would he be resentful that I bested him? Would he be proud?

He blinked. "You know, in my day," he mused, "there was a monster in the basement. I told you about this. And people say it ate you if your grades were too low."

The words hit me like a brick against a glass door: a heavy impact and then a glittering sprinkle of shock. Was he in my mind? Had he known I'd been thinking about the monster? It seemed as though some impersonal, omnipotent force had flipped a switch in me, like an inherited gene just recently turned on, to make me only now conscious of the monster. Maybe it ran through the Farmington line like the allele for a long pinky toe, this awareness. Maybe every Farmington before me had tried to discover the monster. There was something oddly sweet in that idea, the notion that everyone before me had questioned the existence of this carnivorous entity, maybe had even braved a trek into the basement to verify its presence. Suddenly, my image of the dark, person-less basement of my father's story seemed lighter and filled with joyful human presence. Now, the idea of a bloodthirsty monster that existed solely to threaten students with failure and death seemed like a game, a stimulus not of fear but of engagement and fun. For once, I finally felt connected to the line of Farmingtons, some of whom I'd never even met, linked not out of fate's merciless force but genuine interest. I felt as though a partition in me had lifted and exposed an

inner self that I never showed anyone, as though a hidden room within me was opening, light shining on corners that had never known another human being. Like my ancestors, my father, were exploring, gently, lovingly, the untrodden basement of myself.

But then I was back at the dinner table, and only a minute had passed. My father was still talking.

“You wouldn’t want that to happen to you.”

He said it lightly, in jest, as if cautioning me against pairing a long dress with boots. As if he didn’t care whether I was sacrificed, or if he did, his fear lurked in a place far too deep to reveal to me. There it was: a barrier between him and me, trapping out truth and vulnerability. I knew then, with a frustration that narrowed down to a pinpoint, that there were parts of himself that he would never share with me, just like there were parts of myself that I never shared with the world.

I felt like an idiot. Everything I’d thought about the monster as a force of connection had just been delusion. Now I felt stupid, like a child, for wanting to connect, wanting to feel excited, wanting some sort of safety in a world full of pressure and chaos. I felt stupid, too, for believing that there was a monster – it seemed like the very juvenile figmentation I should have long outgrown.

My dad shrugged. “Nah, you’re smart. It’s not gonna happen to you. You know, when I was younger, there was a kid in my class – Bobby O’Connell, his name was – and he stopped showing up. He wasn’t the brightest kid – some people aren’t – and I could have sworn it was the monster.”

I tried to mask my awe. “Really?”

“Now, you might think that’s crazy, but why not? I wouldn’t put it past the administration. Keeps kids on their toes. Really gets those gears turning, you know?”

He pressed his palm to his chest the way he did right before he started bragging. “Me, I was never worried. My grades were top-notch. In junior year, I got the highest grade in the class for the AP Bio final. Now you know I’m right about mitosis, huh?”

“But you thought the monster was real?” I breathed.

“Sure. Crazier things have happened. In a school like that, there’s a lot they don’t tell you. They’re not going to tell you when you’re going to the monster, so you always have to be prepared. It all could be gone like *that*.”

He slapped his palm against the table. There was the high, meaty sound of flesh hitting a hard surface and the low, delayed grumble of the wood as it shifted. Next to my water glass was a thumb-sized pool of water, freshly spilled. I pressed the edge of my sleeve to it, trembling against the stillness of the table. I removed my arm, and a trace of wet remained, smudged against the wood. I twisted my sleeve to the dry side and rubbed harder, jerking back, forth, the table swaying beneath me like a ship under turbulent water. Then there was the crystalline *dink* of the falling glass against the table, and the sudden superfluity of water: sogging the last of the enchiladas on my plate; blurring my notes into bleeding smudges; enclosing the prized pitcher; sopping a neatly-trimmed Cream of Wheat coupon beside it; wetting my father’s tender, just-slapped palm.

He rose like a lightning strike, immediate and threatening. “What the hell,” he said, a statement, not a question. “We can’t trust you to keep anything clean.”

He flung his chair back with the kind of scrape that sounded even louder because I was trying to ignore it. Something about the heart-pounding surrealness of the situation, the way my presence felt burned in and irremoveable, seemed familiar, reminding me not of my father’s past outbursts but of Mr. Spektor’s sudden aggression. There was the same thundering, masculine rage that came almost without a warning and was based just on enough of my own indiscretion to seem

justified. Then he was coming back with the raggedy kitchen towel we had had for years, even though the tag had ripped off and a couple of threads hung from the cloths in loose arcs like the limbs of a bow. He pressed it to the table and started wiping in a circular, efficient motion, edging closer to my place. He didn't look at me. Then he tossed me the sopping, crumpled towel.

“Use the dry side,” he said. I flipped it over and let the cloth soak up the liquid. I couldn't tell whether he was mad – he seemed calmer, but sometimes that was a front, a mask for dormant anger just below the surface. I cleaned around the pitcher and under my plate and on the ground where water was still falling in slow, collected drops. I got up and wrung the cloth out in the sink, the fibers pressing roughly against my hands.

My father was watching me from the table. He was silent, just looking, with a square firmness in his jaw that usually signaled a rising aggression. Then his eyebrows rose, his forehead creasing into blubbery horizontal rolls, in jest. “At least it wasn't the tomato sauce.”

After that, I knew two things: the probable existence of the monster, and that between the two of them, Mr. Spektor was far more aggressive than my father.

Chapter Six

By the next morning, the feeling had solidified: Mr. Spektor was a volatile tyrant who – now that I was a little surer it existed – probably knew about the monster. It would even make sense if he had an inside job: leading kids down to the basement, feeding the monster cafeteria scraps, organizing the student records to watch for impending failures. That might be why he was suddenly so irate: maybe his conscience had cemented his greyish, watery guilt into the concrete precipitate of anger. Maybe it was the other way around – maybe he loved the thrill of making inept space-wasters pay.

My father's words resounded with half-stinging, half-numb recency: anyone could be snatched up at any time and sent to the monster and its waiting maw. Anyone – even me.

I hadn't been doing well in school. A few Bs, a couple Cs, mostly Ds – on everything, even the subjects I'd always excelled at. As it turned out, my initial estimation of my academic inferiority was spot on – I was tanking. There was no way everyone else was doing this badly, and if they were, they were probably next on the chopping block, too. Something hardened in my stomach when I thought of the probability that I would be taken to the basement, which I had never been to, and fed to a monster that no student, to my knowledge, had ever seen and made it out alive.

That day, I couldn't focus in my classes. My mind was a white slate, impenetrable and inflexible. Every sound from the hallway was the approach of a Grim Reader come to lead me to my demise. Every look from a teacher was a symbol of a fatal fore-knowledge, every half-smile a tacit outreach of pity. By lunch, I was a shaking wreck, my body mushy with stale anxiety. The room spun around me. I drew shallow breaths like a bike pump, funneling in air faster and faster

until the room spun worse and I felt like a fleshy balloon. This was it. There was nothing I could do. At any moment, I'd be pulled from class and taken to my death, the circumstances of which I still knew almost nothing about. No one at school was talking about the monster – which, if it were real, meant that I had no idea what to expect if I were actually sacrificed. Would I be notified beforehand? What did the monster look like? Did it roar? Did it growl like the neighbor's dogs when the doorbell rang? Would they knock me first? Would I get to say good-bye to my family?

There was only one thing I could do – try to find the monster myself. There was no way I was letting myself be sacrificed without at least knowing what it would be like: the walk down there, the abandoned gym equipment, the smell and sound and body of the monster, beforehand. Maybe then I'd have a shot in hell of fighting it, of finding some way to kill this monster, or get some dirt about what the administration was doing and use it as leverage. As long as I could do *something*. I felt like a baby lamb encircled by wolves, trapped. My heart pounded, my nerves glimmering with an agitation that dissolved into thin air. I wanted to tear something, to make a permanent, injurious impact on a breathing, vulnerable body. To look a monster in the eye and crush its scales in my bare hands. I wanted to victimize the victimizer, to unload my fragility and place it decisively on the flesh of that which could destroy me.

The logistics of it would be simple: I'd go after school to miss any faculty lurking around to get me in trouble for trespassing. If my father had wandered down there at my age and heard the monster, how hard could it be to find? That day, I took the back stairwell into the basement one day after my final class. It was much smaller than I pictured, and much more mundane, but not in the uncanny way I'd pictured from my father's description. Instead, the rows of old gym equipment and stacks of worn desks seemed unglamorous and real, as if all of the normal things about Walton were shoved underground, out of sight, out of memory.

I moved through the metal cages, glancing at the miscellany trapped inside. I wondered how long some of this stuff had been here – maybe since my dad went here? It seemed unlikely but not impossible, considering the thick dust caking every object. Even the floor was layered with a grey blanket of lint that clung to my shoes every time I took a step.

At the end of the first row was a wink of a corridor running perpendicular. It was perhaps fifty feet long, with a blank wall abutting the open storage area and five-odd doors on the other side. Peering inside, they revealed themselves to be more storage closets with more sagging soccer balls and torn pinnie jerseys. How much storage did this school need?

I walked the length of the hallway, which was noticeably emptier – apparently, people got more use out of the first room and rarely trod down the half-hidden corridor. I heard the even, trepid tapping of my shoes against the floor and realized with a shock how quiet the space was. There was nothing – no fans whirring, no windows shuttering in the wind (although in a basement, it made sense that there was no wind), no noticeable sound other than that of my human creation. There were just doors and doors of lifeless, unvisited stuff taking up useless space – unneeded relics that had been brought down here to die.

The corridor was a trident, with three paths pronging from the end. Although it didn't matter which I chose, the multiplicity of paths made my heart beat faster and adrenaline spike through my stomach. I had to explore as much as possible, but there was more ground to cover than I'd anticipated. I chose the leftmost path. I'd have to come back and try the other two – with any luck, I could find my way back and do it today. After all, the basement was finite. How much time could this possibly take?

One of three paths. It reminded me of the Monty Hall problem, with the game show host in a cheap tie and the mathematical counterintuition. Only in this case, I wanted to find the door with the hairy beast.

This hallway contained, of course, more sports gear, more empty rooms. One of the rooms at the end of the hall, on the left, was different: from the window, I saw that it resembled a classroom, with rows of desks facing a long singular desk where the teacher would sit. Other than the absence of a window and any subject-specific paraphernalia, it could have passed for a real classroom, albeit a somewhat perfunctory one. It didn't appear to be in active use, but I wouldn't be surprised if it were a detention room, something dark and isolated to scare kids into behaving.

As I moved through the basement, my fear of not finding the monster transmuted into a fear of the monster itself. I needed to find this monster, I needed to. I didn't have much time. I tried to move as quickly as possible, taking a quick, cursory glance behind each door. But the basement proved much larger than I'd anticipated, bending into corridor after unexplored corridor. My feet ached. My heart pounded in my ears. I slowed to a stroll, letting the expanse stretch ahead of me, mocking my failure to explore it all.

There was so much space around me, all of it abandoned. The only animalistic sounds were my own labored breathing and the clipped impact of my feet against the dust. Somehow my apparent isolation made me feel the presence of a strange company, as though I couldn't truly believe I was alone. I believed it and I didn't. I knew logically, primarily, that no one else was here, that behind every door was only a hundred years of dust. If there was a monster, there were no evident signs of it. Yet I had the baseless feeling that I was being perceived by someone, or something, with a preternatural knowledge of my vulnerability. I saw myself from behind, stumbling through doorways and tripping foolishly over garbage strewn about the floor. Every flit

of my arm, every scuff of my shoe against the floor, made me more acutely aware of this inhuman voyeurism.

Suddenly there was a guttural, animalistic sound, almost inaudible but definitely present. Had it always been there, whispering in the background? I spun on my axis for a glimpse of its source. I felt rendered to an animal myself, like a mouse jerking fatally under the constant, silent oversight of an owl. It was a sighing, a lonely grumble that sounded half-human. As I moved down the corridor, it became louder, clearer, more unmistakable.

At one of the many grey, peeling doors, the sound was loudest. Some tangible and horrific presence was behind that door, awaiting only my entry. All I had to do was open the door. Before the permanence of my action hit me, I was reaching out to grasp the knob. It was already warm.

Sitting on a mattress sprawled in the center of the room was Mr. Spektor, resting his bare feet against the ground.

He met my eyes wordlessly. I flinched, expecting him to scream and throw me out, or worse, threaten to drop my grade past where I thought it could descend. Instead, he looked checked out, as if little gears were turning in his head, and putting everything together.

“Laura,” he said slowly, as if trying it out for the first time.

I nodded.

“You found me ...!” he drawled, letting the last syllable trail off into a breathy echo.

“Mm-hm.” I was still standing in the doorway, my legs feeling so heavy, my frame so tall and conspicuous before my recumbent counterpart.

He nodded slowly with a profound notion that, like many of his labyrinthine lessons, I doubted I’d fully grasp. “You know, you’re smarter than most of the people here,” he told me. “No

one's made it this far in. I guess they get as far as the soccer ball cages and leave. No one knows I'm here."

Mr. Spektor widened his lips into a stealthy grin, sucking his gut into a soundless chuckle. It was the first time I'd ever seen him smile. I didn't think I liked it. There was something uncanny, something off, about him – something unlike him, but so tragically human, like a monster bereft of its fangs.

"Come in," he said, tilting his head to suggest that I join him. I didn't want to, but I hadn't ever said no to an adult before. I didn't think I could – certainly not to a Walton teacher. Certainly not to Mr. Spektor.

I approached him slowly, reluctantly. He chuckled. "I don't bite."

The thought of sitting next to him on the mattress made my stomach drop, so I bent down and sat on the floor. I had the unnerving thought that it may not have been cleaned in decades.

"You're looking for the soccer balls? They're back in that direction." He pointed out the way I'd come.

"I know," I said. My voice sounded shaky, unsure.

"I know, too," he said, nodding as if he'd pulled one over on me. "No one ever makes it in this far. You're not here for equipment."

My heart pounded. What would he say when he found out the truth? Would he judge me for still believing in monsters? Would he take back what he'd said, that I was smart?

"Just coming out of class, then, are you? No," he corrected himself, "you're one of mine." Before I could ask what he meant, he raised his brow, and pointed a fat finger at me, as if he'd finally forward figured me out. "You're looking for that monster."

Blood rushed to my cheeks, scalded my ears, but I tried to keep a straight face. “Do you know about it?”

He shrugged. “Sure. Who doesn’t?”

I swallowed, taking a risky leap. “What do you think of it?”

He wasn’t taken aback, like he’d normally be – the question barely seemed to faze him. He seemed to be reacting through Vaseline, slow and thick, the edge taken off.

“What do I think of it ... It’s a hoax. Totally made up. What did you think? It’s a monster. They’re not real.”

A hard lump formed in my throat. I stifled the sudden, powerful urge to cry. I felt like a child, a stupid, inconsolable kid.

“Nah, it’s real. I’ve seen it, actually. Ya know, it wanders the halls sometimes, looking for blood. Sometimes, it’ll grab a kid and swallow it whole, sometimes it’ll just maul through the classrooms and knock everything around.”

He held his eyebrows raised and pressed his lips together into a firm white line. Even I knew he was making it up. I forced a weak smile.

“Come on, that was funny. Look, it really doesn’t matter. It either exists, or it doesn’t. Even if it did, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. Hell, it wouldn’t even be the worst thing in this basement.”

He leaned forward and brought his palms to his thighs. They were cloaked in once-pressed slacks that were now creased deeply at the valleys of his hips. “Do you think I want to live down here?” Mr. Spektor said, somewhere between reflecting and accusing. “Do you think it’s fun sharing a bedroom with forty rats next to a supply closet? When it’s dark, it’s *dark*, and when the roaches come, they come with a fury.”

He sighed, a low, dejected sound. I made a trapped, perfunctory noise, partly unwittingly, partly to remind him I was there. He continued, and I still couldn't tell whether he was talking to me.

“Do you think I thought I'd end up like this?” Mr. Spektor said. “Do you think I ever thought this is where I'd be? I have nothing. I'm a forty-seven-year-old Doctor of Art History stuck teaching fourteen-year-olds who think they know everything about the world.”

He raised his voice in pantomimic falsetto. “*I know, Mr. Spektor, I know. It's Rembrandt, isn't it? No, it's Vermeer. I'm the smartest person in the world. You kids are all idiots, you know that?*”

I stared at him. He seemed to see right through me, as though I were an apparition, or a funhouse mirror that distorted everything into exactly what he wanted to see. “You kids don't know how hard the world is yet. You'd think the world all gets more complicated when you get older, but really it gets simpler. You just learn to wade through the fog and parse out the concrete things, the stuff that's really important.”

I didn't understand what he meant, but I wasn't about to interject. Mr. Spektor paused, his eyes glazing over, skipping back a few steps. “I don't even know anything,” he said. “The more you get older, the less you know. Maybe the more you know, and the worse that gets you? All I know is: I have no place to live, the little pricks here don't know anything about anything, and my wife” – he leaned in – “is a giant *WHORE*.”

His words stung. The shock of this unexpected encounter, which I'd been so graciously trying to suspend, was now crashing through me.

“My parents are expecting me,” I mumbled, my voice shaking again.

My teacher looked up at me, then down at me, then up at me. His eyes were glassy and a little reddish, even in the dim light. I had the horrible half-certain thought that he was going to do something to me, something I didn't want, in that basement. I was suddenly aware of how alone we were.

"My parents are gonna be concerned," I said louder, meaning it this time.

He blinked. I still couldn't tell whether he really saw me, but at that point I didn't care. I stood up, feeling my body in coarse outline, once again strongly conscious of my height over him. Somehow that seemed to give him more power.

I thought he'd threaten me, maybe, or conversely, offer to boost my dismal grades. It never occurred to me that I could blackmail him, that I had any control here. I was just a girl, bound by something akin to propriety, and I just wanted to get out of that room.

But he didn't say anything as I passed him – only when my hands were on the door did he cry, with perhaps as much derision as earnestness, or maybe total delirium: "Good luck finding that monster!"

I said nothing, just opened the door and left. As I wound through the corridors and up out of this horrible, unthinkable dungeon, I thought, of all things, about how he'd called me smart.

Chapter Seven

When I got to the street, I saw that night had already fallen, bathing the neighborhood in gloomy stillness. It felt so odd to be riding the subway in the evening, walking the streets in the dark, as though a curtain had closed over everything and there was nothing left, although I didn't know exactly what that meant.

When I got to the front door and let myself in, my mother was waiting on the other side. She slammed the door behind me, the shock radiating through my back.

"Where were you?" she said, in that quiet, bitter voice of hers that always seemed so loud.

I struggled for words. Somehow, on the long ride home, and the chilly, sunless ride over, I had neglected to come up with a reasonable excuse for my absence. I just looked into her eyes. They were blue and frigid.

"Answer me," my mother insisted, stilling herself like a hyena waiting to pounce, waiting to jump on whatever miserable excuse I could muster up.

"I was at school," I got out, starting with the obvious – *that* I couldn't mess up.

"You should have called," she said. "You know that." She tilted her head in mock curiosity.

"What were you thinking?"

"I wanted to work on something," I said. "It was taking a while."

"You couldn't have turned your phone on?" she asked. "We've been calling for hours."

"I have to leave it off for school."

"You didn't turn it on once you left?"

I fell silent. Next door, a toddler started an ascending banshee howl, and I braced myself against the piercing conclusion. Instead, she slid down into a cheeky, happy giggle. I imagined her running away at bathtime, running soaped-up into her mother's arms.

"I'm sorry," I said. After everything – the subway, all those Cs, these months of pretense, after seeing my teacher in the basement with those sad, glassy eyes, all I wanted my mother to do was hold me, to let me melt into her and dissolve every weight in every crevice of me. She stood and beheld me, really took me in. I hoped she remembered why she was supposed to be doing this, remonstrating, that it was supposed to be some form of rarely-spoken concern. She cracked a small smile and stood frozen again in the moment, thinking it through. She hadn't forgiven me, but maybe she could see that I was trying.

She turned and crossed the hall, the floors creaking under her. At the living room, she turned and nodded for me to follow her, and I was absolved.

When my father saw me walk into the living room, he punched the wall behind the sofa. His jacket *fwapped* against the side as he swung. He clenched his fist in obvious pain, blood rushing against his blanched knuckles like a stream through white rounded boulders.

He spoke before I could ask to help him. "Laura, you have to get here at five. This is non-negotiable. We're not paying for you to go to school and be skipping all over the city getting shot and killed. We need you to be home, ON TIME."

His face was reddening to a bad sunburn, so that only the whites of his eyes popped out, like stark two signposts against red clay.

“You’re not paying for Walton,” I said. “I’m on a scholarship.”

He puckered his mouth so it looked like dry little valleys around a gaping canyon. He barked my name.

“It’s not easy, paying for this,” my mother said, quietly but firmly, from behind me. I’d forgotten she was there, but I didn’t turn around. “We work really hard.”

“Let me talk to her,” my father said to her, with no less fury than to me. I felt a sudden, rare urge to protect her from his fire. It was almost always directed at nothing, or at me, and perhaps because of this, I resented being the only one targeted.

“What were you doing?” he asked in a voice that was quieter but no less volatile. He jerked, and I flinched. Something in me assumed he’d punch the wall again. “Answer me.”

“I was at school,” I said, flattening out my words so they wouldn’t be tilting and vulnerable. “I had a project.”

He wasn’t mollified. “You have to call,” he said. “You fucking know that. I’ve told you that eight thousand God-damn times. Was this the group project from before, with the girls?”

I hesitated. He could easily call Maddie’s mom and confirm. “I was by myself, studying.”

He looked me dead in the eyes with that same quietness that forebode turbulence. “Were you in the basement?” he asked.

Time seemed to stop, lingering in the guilt between my heartbeats. “What?” I stalled, incredulous.

He didn’t break his stare. We had the same icy Farmington eyes, excellent for wearing people down. It’s possible, at this point, that a warm glow of fatherly care was thawing him, the even chill of logic coming back. His great emotional polarity was shifting towards temperateness. “I told you never to go down there,” he said.

“No, you didn’t,” I said. The words melted from me, as through all my dams had been broken. “You never did. You told me all the time how you’d hang out down there. You used to brag about it.”

“I never said that,” my father growled.

“Every five minutes, you tell me I have to be just like you, or else you’ll put a gun to my head. How am I supposed to be just like you when you’re never telling me the truth?”

He lifted a single finger in threat, and the image of Mr. Spektor leaning towards me in the fluorescent chiaroscuro lightnined in my mind.

“You’re going to your room. Don’t bother coming out for dinner.”

I rolled my eyes and stomped my feet a little on the way out, just for the fanfare of it. I felt like a four-year-old, like all of the intellect and independence I’d accumulated at Walton, like a ball of earth I’d struggled to push up a mountain, had fallen down past me, and I’d have to start again from the bottom. Was this my fault? Was any of it? I tried to pinpoint the exact moment I’d gone wrong, and couldn’t. Was it when I started Walton? Was it when I was born? Was it something woven into the cycle of hope and failure and pressure, something that started when my great-great-grandfather rode a horse into town to go to school? No, no, because that would mean that I was fulfilling my end of the prophecy, that I too was a fuck-up, and once that fate was set, it was set in stone, never to be undone, only to be passed forth with several lifetimes of loaded resentment. This was it, what I’d ignored with all of those atrocious grades and wrong answers – I was a failure, just like my dad and everyone who came before him.

But I wasn’t a failure. I couldn’t be – I had to be better, to be pristine, rising gleaming from this bedrock of failure like an obelisk. Not for my dad, for my family, but for me – after everything, I was at least owed that much. I was at least owed an ending that wasn’t written for me.

Sometime later, there was a curt rap on my door. I was awakened to it like coming through a fog – suddenly my butt hurt from the floor and my knees felt tight. At some point, I must have fallen asleep.

My father knocked again. I got up, a sharp pain zinging through my thighs from hours of cramped stillness. When I opened the door, I saw his eyes were red, as though he'd been crying.

“Can I come in?” he asked in the tone of voice adults use when they're expecting something, not asking it.

He crouched down on the floor beside my dresser, where I'd just unwittingly slept, drawing his arm around his bent knees. I couldn't remember him ever sitting with me like this. He looked like a giant in that space between my dresser and my bed that was so narrow that he had to squeeze your shoulders in. Yet somehow, he seemed like a child, the way he drew himself in a little bony cocoon. It made me feel so sad, so helpless, like even though he was my dad, he couldn't protect me.

He pressed his palms against his face, showing me the drooping backs of his hands, with those blue-green glow stick veins popping from the flesh. He looked old, haggard, tired. He'd always been tired, but when did my dad start to get old?

He cupped his hands around his nose and slid them down his chest to his lap. “We're doing a lot so you can go to this school,” he started. “You know, that scholarship you got isn't exactly a full ride – that's two grand out of pocket. And I don't know if you've noticed, but I haven't had a steady job since you were ten.”

I leaned back, away from him and the inevitable guilt.

“I’m going to need you to take this more seriously.”

I rolled my eyes. He was being uncharacteristically calm, almost gentle, his voice hushed and lenient. I couldn’t even blame him for yelling and sucking the life out of me, which seemed to mean that his criticisms were fair, and that it was my fault. For this, I resented him even more.

“What does that mean?”

He raised his eyebrows, as if questioning my confusion. “That means, I haven’t been seeing a lot of honor roll letters coming in.”

I rolled my eyes again.

“No! – no,” my dad said. “Listen to me. We busted our ass to get you into that school and we won’t have you fucking it up. Okay? You can’t gallivant around after school, where we don’t know where you are. You don’t seem to understand how important this is.”

I was about to tell him, *Oh I know how important it is, I heard about it from you every five minutes growing up, and I am trying just as hard as you did when you were my age, maybe even harder*, when he continued.

“When I was at Walton,” my dad said, his voice softening in reverent remembering, “it was this whole other lifetime, this person I used to be, that found such solace and success in that environment. It was like” – his face glowed in the distant warmth of the past – “I was who I was supposed to be, and everything in the universe just clicked into place. I got good grades, I knew everyone – there’s something about being young and prodigious, like you’ll never gleam brighter than this your whole life.”

He leaned in, his shell melted to expose the fleshy humanity underneath. “When I was in my second year,” he said, “I went to the basement to get a soccer ball and I heard this monster,

this beast, somewhere underground. It was growling and crying out for flesh, and as much as I wanted to search for it, I didn't want to jeopardize my whole life, my future at Walton, but getting mauled, or letting the monster out. I knew if I traversed every corridor, searched every inch of that basement, I'd eventually find it, rattling a cage somewhere next to a storage closet. But things like that can only breed distraction, hon. There's so much that can sidetrack you if you don't stay focused."

As he spoke, I saw a tensing, equivocating Orpheus wrestling with the decision to turn around.

"You know, this is all I've wanted for you since you were a baby," my father said suddenly. Before I could resent him for serving up this expectation, this guilt, on a silver platter, he sniffled with the wet obviousness of tears. Only three times had I ever seen my father cry: at his father's funeral when I was ten, when he speed-raced to the bathroom under the pretense of allergies; the last time he lost his job, the steady one, in the recession, and he came home at three o'clock and sat on the couch and put his head in his hands and sobbed; and now, apparently. Sure enough, streams of wet were glistening down his cheeks, dripping into his lap. I felt resentment coil in my stomach – after tight-roping his expectations for fourteen years, why was it my job to pick up the pieces when he fell apart?

But he was leaning in (or was I?) and then I was hugging him and he was wiping my eyes with his thumb. I felt just like a kid, safe and protected, even though I knew there was something about this moment that would never be whole.

Chapter Eight

What happens when you go looking for a monster, and find one? After my run-in with Mr. Spektor and his far-off, inebriated eyes, I had the growing sense that I'd discovered too much, that I'd seen something too real and too terrible for my airy, fervent dreams to ever have imagined. Now there was an odd, awful intimacy between us, although he never directly acknowledged it. Sometimes I thought maybe he didn't remember it, that his addled brain had blacked it out. It made me feel better, like I could slip back into delusion and the comfort in never truly knowing whether this awful thing was real. But sometimes, when I'd walk into class alone, or look up from a test, I'd find his eyes on me, those mournful orbs plagued with infinite self-realization. I'd pulled back the curtain all right, and had seen a monster, an unwashed angry thing lurking in the untrodden depths. But what struck me more was that I'd found a human. It was ugly and beautiful and terrible, seeing his naked humanness, his flawed broken-down vulnerability. There was now this thing that he knew and I knew and no else might ever figure out. Something about keeping this terrible secret that linked me unspokenly, permanently, to Mr. Spektor made me uneasy yet oddly proud. I'd made a mark, seared something permanent into the fabric of fate so that whatever became of me, I'd never leave Walton without a trace.

But after all that, after Mr. Spektor's bare, winking toes and his surreptitious naked eyes in class, I found myself still itching to find the monster. Maybe it was the fact that I'd failed the first time that made me eager to prove that I wasn't ultimately incapable of seeing things through. Maybe it was the fact that my dad had seen it, my miserable tie-dye-clad dad, who had heard the messianic calling of a force that hadn't chosen me for greatness. All in all, I didn't want the monster to be another thing I couldn't understand, another thing that fate or adults or whoever could throw

at me before I had the chance to defend myself. More than that, I didn't want my long and inevitable string of failures to begin here. I didn't want to be a fuck-up.

That's why when a note slipped off of Lily's desk in Biology before she could read it and it fell lazily, legibly on the floor, I didn't rush to look away. Especially considering what it read:

Meet me in the basement at 3:42?

, Amy

After our brief exchange in the hallway after Maddie disappeared, it didn't surprise me that Amy and Lily knew about the basement, and its secret and punitive goings-on. What surprised me, though, was what they apparently consorted down there doing God knows what. Were they participating in these heinous sacrifices? Were they on the front lines, trying to fight it? If so, why were they being so secretive about it? Maybe they were worried they'd get in trouble, that some invisible, all-powerful force would find out and strike them down.

And the closer I'd gotten to Amy – she'd finally started talking to me at lunch and put down her textbook (she was now onto the ACTs, in case she decided to switch) – she seemed to prefer Lily. It was understandable, given their history, that they already had a connection, but I felt a certain kinship with the two of them as the only three confirmed scholarship grantees, even though I hadn't told either of them yet that this was true of me. I wanted us to be a team of three, a compact, exclusive trio bonded by common understanding. But then I'd see the two of them in class, dropping surreptitious notes, Amy grinning like I'd never seen her do, as if they had some sort of secret, some unspoken connection stronger than what I had with either of them, or what I'd

been able to find on my own. After months of lunches, group projects, and chats in the halls, when basement trips were planned, why wasn't I invited?

I kicked the note up the aisle towards Lily's feet so she'd stumble onto it by accident. Halfway through class, her shoe caught on the paper and slide tractionlessly across the floor, and she bent down and read it from her lap. She didn't seem to react, just scratched her left ear and rested her hand back on her notebook. Across the room, Amy was scribbling with visible intensity, a flush rising in her cheeks.

I wasn't trying to spy on them – I just wanted to find out how much they knew. If there was something dangerous or critically important about the monster, if they knew who would be in danger next, it was my right – no, my *obligation* – to find out. I thought about showing up fifteen minutes later so they wouldn't catch me following them, but I realized in a basement that big, I might never find them – I had to narrow the gap.

At 3:37, I made my way down the back staircase and through the anteroom, hearing yet no one but myself. At the fork, I chose the middle path. I had seen most of the left path the other day, and the thought of running into Mr. Spektor again made me stomach turn. I supposed he was another presence to watch out for down here. It was odd, the idea that instead of listening for the monster, which was still a secondary consideration, that I now was searching for other people, whereas before it had been me, just me, alone in the never-explored depths. Now there was Mr. Spektor, inhabiting a ripe mattress, and Lily and Amy, and who knows who else? Who knows how many people lived and died and slept down here?

The idea that I wasn't alone down here, that whatever foul beast dwelt within these walls could be apprehended in numbers, comforted me. But it frustrated me as well. I wanted this to be my thing, that only I could conquer and claim. I just wanted something of my own. Even if Amy and Lily knew anything about the monster, even if we could kill it or tell the press or interrupt the sacrifice system, this would still be something I'd have to share with other people. Something would still be lost.

After another left turn, I started to hear overlapping voices somewhere in the hallway. They sounded human, but they were so muffled that I couldn't be sure. I yearned to make out distinguishable words, even just the conversational tone, but I was left with something too meaningless to parse through. The chatter seemed to multiply, swarming my ears like a blood-thirsty swarm of hornets, sudden and ferocious. Unintelligible and inescapable. Was it Mr. Spektor? Had he made his habitat in another corner of the basement? Was there a fellow squatter? Maybe it was an administrative tribunal deciding on another victim. Perhaps this was all in my head, my brain manufacturing sound in silence. The ground seemed to swim me beneath me, and I felt the same watery immersion of my early days at Walton, where nothing was real and yet it was all so real, so slippery and surrounding.

At the second-to-last door on the left, the voices were loudest, the words now sounded infuriatingly close to discernable. I swung open the door, already regretting the bold swiftness of the motion, and then regretting the fact of my entrance even more. There were Amy and Lily, huddled against the wall. Both were shirtless, with one uniform top lain neatly on a stool and another crumpled mindlessly on the ground. Amy's skirt was still on, albeit unzipped in the back, and Lily's was slung around one ankle.

For a few seconds, the shock hadn't yet set in, and they looked numb, processing. A million thoughts were jetting through my mind and jamming into each other. I felt a sharp pang of malaise at my unwanted interjection, but I couldn't think to move. Somehow it seemed that feigning total stillness, as if I weren't even there and couldn't be harmed, would solve everything.

Time seemed to move through toffee. Everything was slow, painful, and incredibly obvious. Lily flashed me a sheepish, instinctive smile, jerking her elbow against the wall with enough unconscious force to cause pain. Amy just stared and stared – she didn't even seem angry or scared at first, just unbelieving. Then she blinked and lunged at me, and I snapped backward through the open doorway. “Get out!” she said, rapidly, decisively. Her voice was high-pitched, panicky, like a trapped rodent. “Get out!”

I leapt backwards into the hall, watching Lily's smile fade. I reached for the still-open door, and Amy pulled it from the inside until it shut in my face.

I hurried back through the corridor towards the fork, an embarrassed consciousness already forming. This was what they were doing down here – this was the reason behind all those shared smiles and clandestine notes. Then a scream, unmistakably human, pierced the corridor, sending adrenaline through me like shards of falling glass. Someone was in trouble. This was real, not just a figment of delusion, not something I could half-believe, hiding behind the safety of its nonexistence. Yes, there was something vicious and violent down here, its victims tortured prey. Then, a beat later, a moan, drawn out in a near-cartoonish display of – despair? grief? arousal? I remembered Amy, her chest heaving with exertion, and the thought sparked. I chuckled. I grimaced. I was an idiot. I moved through the halls, feeling suddenly so big, so awkward, an interloper forced away.

For the next few weeks, Amy wouldn't talk to me in class, or even look at me, but she avoided me with enough tact so as not to draw attention to it. Lily seemed embarrassed, but not like she was actively avoiding me. I guessed that she'd been strong-armed by Amy into keeping it a secret. The furtive, flirtatious glances, the secretive smiles that were never well-hidden, were no more. They seemed to be avoiding each other as least as much as they avoided me. It looked as though my interloping had precipitated the sudden, maybe permanent end to their relationship, if that's what it had been.

How long had this been going on? I wondered. Weeks? Months? Since before Walton? Maybe this was the first time this had ever happened between them. Did this make them gay? I didn't think I'd ever met a real gay person. Or ever walked in visible evidence of people having sex. My mother had explained sex to me – straight sex – a few years before, with clinical, nervous detachment, her voice trembling slightly as she showed me these confusing, humiliating illustrations. But this seemed to defy everything I'd learned about sex: that it was physically real and not just something that existed in outdated drawings, and that it could be done between two girls.

This seemed to explain the superior intimacy between Amy and Lily, and Amy's unusually bright demeanor around her. Even acknowledging their non-platonic relationship, which theoretically existed on a different plane, it was still hard not to feel excluded, like they had unlocked a new level of connection that remained foreign to me. Surprising as well was the idea that there was something they were doing besides school, as if school didn't have to be everything.

I didn't know how to feel about this. For one, it disobeyed my father's rule about distraction: if I couldn't have my unimportant basement hobby, why could they?

In addition, I didn't know what to make of the fact that every time I'd gone into the basement, searching for an ephemeral, implausible monster, I'd found real, tangible things, hidden things. I'd thought the monster, or at least the search for it, was something to be controlled and conquered, the basement a vast territory to be explored. But I hadn't anticipated finding people at their lowest, at their most ashamed, who came to the basement to hide themselves from the world. I hadn't found a monster, but I had found perhaps equivalent evidence that Walton, or its people, separated their ostensible normalcy from their private shame, that there was far more carnality, fear, and isolation than I could ever have expected.

One afternoon, I swiped into the subway station to find Amy waiting for me, facing the turnstiles she knew I'd walk through. It was the first time I'd ever seen her down here. I knew she rode the subway, so it wasn't a major shock, but how had she known that I did?

"How did you know I'd be here?" I asked her, before she even said a word.

She smiled the way adults sometimes did when they were trying to be supportive of something embarrassing. "I knew you ride the subway," she said. "I'd see you sometimes going into the station."

"You never said anything."

"We all have our secrets," Amy said.

"I knew you ride the subway, too," I told her. "Lily told me."

Amy nodded. “That sounds like Lily. She tries to keep secrets, but sometimes things slip out. I’m surprised she never said anything about – you know.”

“It must be a big secret to keep,” I said, hoping I wasn’t overstepping. I didn’t want her to run off and abandon me.

She didn’t seem offended. “Yeah,” she just said, and cast her eyes towards the tunnel in search of the train.

We were speechless as it arrived, rattling to a stop before the usually sparse mid-afternoon crowd. It always seemed odd to me, the train’s measured entry – all that fanfare for nothing.

We got on and sat down near the left end of the car. It was strange to be sharing the ride with another person. It forced me to see everything around me through a foreign eye: the winter chill of the seat under my tights; the faint, perpetual tackiness of the floor that left a perma-layer of adhesive on the soles of my loafers; the mumbly, half-gibberish announcements I always tuned out; the odd scarcity of riders in a city of almost infinite population. As the train started up, I thought about what Amy had said about everyone having secrets. On the surface, she’d seemed understanding, but I half-expected a layer of calculated insulation beneath that, a pregnant *I-know-something-about-you-and-you-know-something-about-me*. Was this why she’d come here, to blackmail me? I suspected I was the only person who knew her secret with any eye-witness proof. This was the only thing she had on me – it was a good thing she hadn’t found out about my grades.

Amy stayed silent for about half an hour. Then, when the train stopped and shuttered its dusty doors open to let in no one, she spoke into her lap so quietly that I could barely hear her. “When I came to Walton,” she said, “I had two secrets, and now I don’t have any. And I didn’t get a choice in that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I had to say it. This was it – I was stuck on a train with a girl who’d been martyred, who would martyr me.

She looked at me, still somehow calm. “It’s not your fault,” she said. “It’s not even Lily’s fault, really, even though she dropped that note, and told you about the subway. These things just happen, right? And I was an idiot for thinking I could control it.”

“You’re not an idiot,” I said. “You’ll never be an idiot. And, there’s no way to fully control anything, not really. You’re right – things just happen, and you have to roll with it.”

The doors closed, and the train lurched onward. “You know, I thought I’d be the smartest person at Walton when I started,” I said. “I had to be. My dad would kill me if I wasn’t. And I thought it would make me whole. I thought it would make me who I was, or who I was meant to be. I thought going to Walton was the only part of me that would matter. And then it seemed to split me in half: the half that pretended to be normal, and the half that would never be.”

“I’ve felt like that for a long time,” Amy said.

“I don’t even know if I want this, sometimes. Like, this isn’t even me, you know? I don’t even know who I am outside of Walton.”

Amy was quiet for a moment. “I think I know too much who I am,” she said, “and even focusing on school won’t make that go away.”

She was so quiet and reflective. I kept expecting her to fly into a rage pent up by years of social avoidance and a constant failure to control herself.

“Why are you so calm?” I asked. “Not that you shouldn’t be, I guess.”

Amy shrugged. “I don’t know. I really don’t know. Maybe because you found out, and we’re friends, and nothing happened. The world didn’t explode. It’s like everything’s been so

closed off in my mind, and I could only see disaster if this were to get out, and then it did, and everything's really fine. I mean, you don't care."

We listened to the train's shuttling, which now seemed lulling and pleasantly familiar. "Out of curiosity," I asked her, "how long have you been with Lily?"

"A few months," she said. "Since July, maybe?"

"I bet you can do better than *that*," I chided.

She beamed. "Four months, two weeks, and three days," she said.

Chapter Nine

I got off at my usual stop and left Amy on the train. She waved me good-bye and as the train pulled away, I saw her pull out her ACT review book and flip to the very end.

It was almost the winter solstice, and the days seemed shorter than they'd ever been. On my walks home the past few weeks, I'd swim in darkness, the moderate afternoon light dying completely sometime along the subway ride, like a great disappearing act. When I'd get home, the house dark and empty without my parents, the house would always seem desolate, like a newly abandoned shell. Even after I turned all the lights on, it still felt like something had departed.

I got home, turned on all the lights, and tried to get work done. It was pointless: my mind was a fluttery mess after my talk with Amy. I stared at the same sentence in my textbook and flipped the pages back and forth and watching the neon digits on the microwave clock tick upwards.

At 5:52, there was the tinkling harbinger of a key in the front door and the sudden impact of the knob against the entryway wall. My father lumbered down the hall like a flash flood, heavy, quick, and plausibly avoidable, although I never seemed to figure out how.

Something left his hand and hit the edge of the kitchen windowsill. It sounded dense and hard. My father blew into the kitchen, tossing his bag on the counter. From the sofa, he seemed to tower over me, although I didn't even know whether he saw me over the open counter. He stood for a minute, breathing through his nostrils like a cartoon dragon, evidently trying to calm himself. I knew if I moved, I'd wake the dragon and he'd snap.

He took a few tepid breaths, then leaned back and slammed his palm three times on the counter. *One. Two. Three.*

The sound, muffled by flesh and muscle, jabbed with the sharpness of his pain. I felt his agony stab through my veins, burn in my blood. I hated him, I hated this pain that he made me feel. I wanted to cocoon him in my warmth, my flesh, and dissolve his pain.

“Do you want some ice?” I asked, the words floating between us as if they weren’t mine.

His eyes flickered to me. He had seen me the whole time. “Get out,” he hissed. The piggish, sunburnt look was back in his face, making me worry about his little blood vessels bursting like the seams on a too-tight shirt. “Get out.”

I didn’t leave. Something in me, some critical engine, wouldn’t move. I didn’t want to. It was my house, too. I’d been home before he was, and I shouldn’t have had to move just because he was upset. I didn’t get to throw myself around like a toddler when I fucked up – according to him, I wasn’t even allowed a distraction.

“Laura. Out.”

“No.”

“Laura.” It was my mother’s voice this time, higher-pitched, soft but firm. She may have seemed like a fluttering curtain beside my dad’s raging fire, but when the breeze blew the curtain against me taut and fast, like a whip, I felt it.

“Come down here,” she said. I pressed my lips together and followed her, wanting to drag my feet in reluctant obedience but also to slink from the loose cannon in the kitchen.

She led me down the hallway to my room. She was still wearing her winter jacket, which brushed against the pin-narrow walls. She opened my bedroom door and motioned for me to go in. She followed me, unzipping her coat and folding it awkwardly in her arms.

We stood in the tiny room, neither of us speaking. Somehow, standing up made the room seem smaller, more tightening.

“I don’t want you to bother your father,” my mother said. Her voice sounded watery, as though she were crying. “He’s having a really tough time. I think you can see that.”

I sighed, exaggerating it into a groan.

“What?”

“My life isn’t easy, either,” I said. “I don’t know why *you* can’t see that.”

My mother took a thin, nasally breath. “Your father is really struggling,” she said. “I want you to be more supportive.”

I looked away from her at the window and the dim courtyard just beyond, at the stacks and stacks of childhood paraphernalia on my bookshelf, mostly garbage, left abandoned in plain sight. Anywhere but at her.

“Why do you think I’m working so hard at Walton?” I say, my voice clipped and bitter. “Because Dad will kill me if I don’t. Don’t you see? Everything I do is for him. It has to be. I don’t have a choice.”

My mother took another sharper, quicker breath, like a dying balloon spinning out. “You know it’s a big privilege to go to a school like this,” she started, and again I wanted to roll my eyes, to slam the door in her face. “You think I got to go to Walton when I was your age? You think I got to go to private school? I had to go to public school down the street from my parents’ apartment where kids would sell drugs in the halls. If you were a girl, you were lucky if you got to your senior year without getting pregnant. I didn’t get the opportunities you did.”

“You didn’t apply to Walton,” I mumbled.

My mother stared at me as though failing to believe me, even though I was pretty sure she had orchestrated this comment. “Oh, yes I did,” she said. “When I was thirteen years old. I took that test too, same as you did, same as your father, and his parents, and everyone else. And you

know what? I got in. I could have been a superstar just like you, but I couldn't go because we couldn't afford it."

"Really?" I was half resentful, still, but half incredulous. I had never heard this before.

"Yup. I was really excited, but I knew it would never work out. And I didn't want to say anything when you got in because I didn't want you to feel bad, but I don't think you're capable of understanding what we're sacrificing for you – for this."

The word 'sacrifice' shocked me into focus. I'd thought of Walton as a system that needed the threat of human to discipline students into achieving the paramount performance the school was known for. I hadn't thought of this dynamic playing out in my own household, this give-and-take, where someone had to fail for someone else to succeed. If anything, the dynamic at home seemed the inverse of that at Walton: at school I ran the constant, inevitable risk of being sent to the basement for subpar grades. But at home, my parents were the martyrs, bestowing on me a sense of guilt and obligation that felt expected but not exactly advantageous or easy for me. Was there ever a way to win? Could anyone?

"Laura, you're not listening to me." My mother dragged me back to her low, commanding voice and the stale, tiny room. She took a steady, assuring breath. "You know, I'm working hard too," she told me firmly, asserting herself to an extent I'd never seen from her. "I get up every day and go to work and wear shoes that are too tight and smile at a boss who thinks my time is meaningless and my body is something to leer at. Then I come home to a husband who's never paid a bill on time in his life and a daughter who's whining about homework at a school that guess who's paying for? Me! I'm the only one keeping things running around here. I'm the only reason you get to go to that school, Laura. Not your dad and all his family and their stupid pride, not even

all those practice tests you took. Cause you know who paid for those classes? I did, with the hard-earned money that I made, that no matter how much I work, that money never seems to be enough!”

She sniffled, melting into naked desperation. “It’s never enough.”

She pinched her two fingers against the bridge of her nose, as if suppressing tears. Like my father, I rarely saw my mother cry – just a meek, obligatory watery eye at my grandfather’s funeral. And now, for the second time in a semester, cornered in my bedroom, I would see one of my parents reduced to tears.

But when she looked up at me, her eyes were white and dry. “I’m sorry,” she said, seeming at least partly to mean it. “I know you’re working hard. I think we all just need some space.”

I nodded, wishing with a sudden fervor that she’d leave me alone in the tiny room.

We fell silent. The kitchen too sounded quiet, suggesting that my dad had calmed from his rage. My mother slipped from my room to join him and closed my door firmly, as if definitely demarcating my space and theirs. Somehow the apartment seemed too small, too vertical, too pressure-cooker-tight, but at the same time so desolately vast, so lonely, as if the plane of our household was widening so far that we couldn’t reach each other.

In the sudden stillness, I felt the aftershock of my father’s explosion vibrate through me. I wanted to channel it, use it, dispel it somehow. I longed to smash something, to tear through something smooth and perfect, but the thought of bringing about even more destruction made me violently sad. I felt suddenly like a kid standing in the middle of an earthquake-shaken room, everything around me smashed and broken, with the washing permanence of loss, and I didn’t even know why.

Things between Amy and Lily were seeming to thaw. More than once, I looked over and saw them sharing a covert, forgiving smile, much like the one I'd shared with my mother after our argument. I even saw them talking in the hallway a few times before class. They seemed reverent, careful, but at least regaining the ability to look each other in the eye.

One day, there was a quick, indifferent knock at the door, and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy tiptoed over to open it. The interloper was a man dressed all in black – black knit sweater over black dress pants, black loafers, like a collegial grim reaper. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy seemed to expect him, although a concerned, regretful look was already spreading over her. He whispered something in her ear and she nodded grimly, thanking him.

She moved intently, nervously, across the room, down my aisle. Our eyes met for an instant and my heart slammed against my ribs. She was coming for me! She was coming for me! It was one of those moments when everything seemed untethered, just floating through space – the desks, my body – as if there was nothing I could grasp onto to ground myself. As if fate's cruel hand were forcing every motion, and any notion of human will was futile. And yet I racked my brain for things to fix it. I could beg for extra credit. I could threaten to call my parents – my dad would be thrilled to unleash hell over the phone. I could turn to somebody, anybody, who could stand up for me – in a school like this, it was impossible to think that we wouldn't help each other.

She stopped at the desk in front of me, where Lily sat suspended in uncharacteristic nervousness. She bent down and whispered to her so softly that even I couldn't hear. She gave a small, genuinely remorseful frown.

Lily stood up and put on her backpack, both straps. She picked up her notebook, and it fell to the ground. She picked it up again, and it almost seemed like she was shaking. She walked

towards the door, the clomping of her boots the only sound. She looked back like a skittish horse at Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, who couldn't help her. She followed the Grim Reaper through the threshold, and the door closed with a resounding click.

Mrs. O'Shaughnessy ran her fingers through her thinning hair and drew a shaky breath. "We're on chapter five," she said. "Chapter five. Systems of the body." She moved to the board and fumbled for a stick of chalk.

There was a snuffle, half-conspicuous, from the left side of the room. I turned to look. It was Amy, shuddering in breathy paroxysm.

When Mrs. O'Shaughnessy turned to look at her, Amy burst from her seat and ran from the classroom, leaving her stuff at her desk. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy turned back to the board as if she didn't notice.

I was already up and walking past the aisles of desks, the floor so hard and yet so ephemeral under my feet. I was following Amy down the empty hallway, where the muffled sounds of teaching were escaping. She turned in towards the girls' bathroom and entered, the slam of the door echoing in the long corridor.

I went in too. Aside from the two of us, the bathroom was empty. A sleepy mid-morning light washed in from the high window.

"Amy?" I said.

She didn't answer, but I heard a snuffle from the large stall. I knocked gently, the door rattling against the finicky latch. I heard her lumber up and she let me in.

We sat against the wall facing the closed door, Amy crying into her knees. It was the first time I'd ever seen her cry. There was something so strange and unsettling, even dangerous, about

her vulnerability – if the most stoic person I knew was breaking down, what chance did I stand of composure?

“I didn’t think they’d take her,” she said, her voice thick and shuddery. “I didn’t think they’d actually do it. I knew her grades weren’t *that* good, but I didn’t think they were this bad, you know?”

I nodded, not quite knowing what to say.

“And now it’s over. Now she won’t be in Biology with me again, and we won’t talk in the hallway – and it’s all over. Just like that. And there’s nothing anyone can do.”

She reached for a stream of gossamer-thin toilet paper and blew her nose with a wad of it. “You know, all that time we spent in the basement, I thought it was our special place, and now she’s down there forever, and she can’t come back.”

“What do you mean?” I tried to be gentle, but my curiosity was getting the better of me. What did Amy mean, she’d be down there forever?

“I mean, I tried to control everything. I tried to carve out a tiny section of this place for myself, and Lily. And then, it turns out, that’s pointless, because this place controls EVERYTHING!”

Her voice pinged off of the subway tile walls, the empty stalls, the plasticky faux-terrazzo cage we’d locked ourselves into.

“I thought it was enough to make sure I didn’t get taken,” Amy whimpered. “I tried so hard. I kept my grades perfect, thinking at least *I’d* be saved. But that’s not enough. It’s just as bad when it happens to someone that you care about.”

“I know,” I said. There was nothing else to say.

“There’s nothing to gain from this,” she mused. “They sell it like it’s good for the community, like it teaches us all to work harder, to be better, but nobody wins. It just teaches us to be scared. And we can’t even mutiny. We can’t even leave because then we can’t say” – she dropped her head to her hands and cried into her palms. Eventually, she wiped her nose on her sleeve and finished her sentence. “We can’t even say that we got through Walton. After everything, I’m not giving up that diploma. What do I have left?”

She looked at me as if I could provide some help, some essential confirmation. “I’m not such a good person, am I?” she said. “I’ll cry over the fact that Lily’s gone, but I won’t so much as leave to defend her honor.”

“You’re a good person,” I lied. At least, it felt like a lie, like something I wanted to be true, but it didn’t quite seem right. “As good as anyone is. As good as I am.”

She pressed her lips into a tight, frustrated smile. I couldn’t tell if I was being helpful, if there was anything I could do to help. I feared Amy was right: nothing, nobody changed. Everything was endlessly, hopelessly inevitable, even ostensible choices. These really broke your heart the worst: the things you knew you could change, and you knew you’d refuse anyway.

Then she grasped me and pulled me into a tight embrace, half-nestling her chin into my shoulder. It was odd to be somebody’s protector, the person someone melted into – it was a strange, affirming power to be needed.

“Thank you, Laura,” she said when she pulled away.

There was the distant, unmistakable tone of the ending bell. “What do you want to do now?”

“I don’t want to go back to class,” she said softly. “I just want to stay here.”

“Let me get your stuff?”

She nodded like a scared child.

I left to retrieve our things, moving back through the quickly-filling hallways, hauling a weight for two.

Chapter Ten

It was odd not to see Lily in class. Every time I walked in, I expected to see her doodling bubbly flowers in the margins of her notes, or receiving more uncoordinated notes from Amy. But of course, her desk was empty, her absence drawing greater focus than her presence, at least for me. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy seemed just as nervous as usual, but not quite as shaky and disoriented as she had that day, leading me to presume she'd forgotten the whole thing. And I didn't want to think about how Amy be taking it – we hadn't talked since her breakdown in the bathroom. She'd stopped riding the subway with me. Whether she was burying herself in her schoolwork in those afternoons or wandering the school in a solitary daze, I had no idea.

One day, I was swapping out textbooks in my locker, Math and Bio for Spanish and Art History. Out with the old, in with the new. My body moved almost like a fully separate being, mutually unaware and uncontrolled by my brain. I wasn't necessarily lost in thought – at least not clear, coordinated thought – my mind was more a vast vacuum where uncoordinated perceptions went to disappear and pop back up, lost and confused.

I – or my arms – were shoving the thin shell of my backpack around the books and inching the zipper closed, when something jerked in the corner of my eye, and the animal in me turned. It was Maddie, drawing a notebook from her locker and banging her locker door closed. She twisted the lock and disappeared into the throng.

My mind was finally gone. The neural networks orchestrated for maintaining sanity had burst, their particle parts floating in plasmid disarray. Or it was a dream, a lucid concoction of a forgotten thing my mind was swirling back into consciousness. I stood helpless while the world turned around me, then I was running to catch up with Maddie in the hallway.

In the crowd, I couldn't see her. I saw brushes of dark hair, blue backpacks that could be hers, and again I wasn't sure – she could have been anything: a memory, a trick of the eye, a figment of a failing brain. Then, like an omen, she re-appeared by the back staircase, her black hair and navy bag appearing solidly against the wall.

I unsheathed my art history book from my bag and parted the pages with my fingers. If this was a dream, I'd find something I'd never seen before. On the first flip, I landed on an image of *The Scream*, the swirling panoply of maddened colors warping and infuriating me. I flipped again – *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. We had covered all this. I flipped to the last page, a shadowy, haunting engraving whose satiny folds amalgamated a hooded angel of death, with a low-bearing scythe. The caption read: Gustave Doré: *Death on the Pale Horse*, 1865.

Something I hadn't seen before. Grim but new, and utterly, terrifyingly affirming. I was right. I was *right*. I'd seen her – she was really here. But then – I'd been wrong, hadn't I? If Maddie was free to walk around above ground, then there was no monster in the basement, no force removing anyone permanently from school. But then – what had happened to Lily? Why had Amy wept and wept like her world was ending?

The crowds were dispersing, and the starting bell rang, and I was late for class. I rushed through the halls, past the rapidly-closing doors, trying to ignore the baseless feeling that the school was shutting me out, once and forever.

When I got to Spanish, the room was silent, expectant. I walked in, and my teacher, a stern-faced, discerning man, stood before his desk nervously, folding his hands in fleshy perpendiculars, twisting and releasing. Beside him was the Grim Reaper, looking as emotionless as time, as any natural force.

“Laura,” Mr. Alvarez said, like an apology, and the Grim Reaper nodded. “I’m sorry,” he said, and strangely, he seemed to truly mean it.

The Grim Reaper led me out the door, my legs already gelatinizing. My bones were rubbery and pointless. I boinged down the hall with him, unable to control my movements.

He took me down the escalators, one by one, their clinical, airportlike whir now startlingly, saddeningly familiar, as if reminding me of everything I’d miss. This was the very end, I knew, although I’d known it several times before. But the fact of my previous falsehoods didn’t discount this truth: I was really here, being escorted alone by the harbinger of sacrifice, of death itself, further and further towards the beating heart of martyrdom. By the second floor, I felt my hands shake against the hand rail, and by the ground floor I tried desperately to prepare myself for the inevitable, to slow the mad rush of time, but found it impossible: time rolled forward, inevitably, and although it killed me, I was taking one step after another towards my death.

We wound through the first floor and stopped at the main office. I was thoroughly confused – I’d expected, obviously, to be taken directly to the basement. Maybe this is where they’d process me, log me in their books as a sacrifice.

The Reaper led me into the administrative suite, a surprisingly slapdash operation with a couple of flex walls and flimsy professional miscellany. He approached the central desk, where a bored-looking twenty-something in a frayed-collared button-down sat in front of a monitor, his eyes glazing over. “Laura Farmington,” he said. His voice sounded warmer, more vulnerable, than I’d expected. As if he wasn’t a remorseless agent of evil but a real person, even a good one.

The receptionist nodded discretely. He looked up at me, his eyes shifty and nervous. He seemed far more human, and younger, than I would have pictured. “Laura,” he said to me, slowly, “call your mother.”

He looked at me as if he expected me to understand.

“I don’t ...” Was this a last-meal, last-phone-call chance at saying good-bye?

The receptionist pressed his hands together. They looked delicate, unprepared. “Something’s happened,” he said. “You need to call your mother.” He pointed to a landline phone on the wall beside the front door, something my grandfather probably used in the ‘60s. “You can use the phone over there.”

I was saved – I was spared! I wasn’t going to the basement. I got to call my mother. I *had* to call my mother. What had possibly happened that was so serious that they had to pull me out of class, but not to sacrifice me to the monster? Was it my father? Had he –?

There was a silence that reminded me that there had previously been a dial tone, and then my mother’s high, smooth voice. I didn’t remember dialing, didn’t remember walking to the phone, but here she was. Here I was, in the surprisingly shabby command center of my school, of my universe, spared from death but not from disaster. My mind blurred the more I focused on all this, the absurdity of it.

“Laura,” my mother said. Her voice was thick, and sounded like she’d been crying for a long time, and was trying to stay composed. “I’m at the hospital. I need you to come.” She paused, trying to phrase something horrible. “Something’s happened. You need to come.” Her tone conveyed everything and nothing. She spoke in simple, round-edged sentences that failed to easily communicate the truth.

“Laura?” she said. “Are you still there?”

I couldn’t talk. My voice was right there, filling up an invisible room in me, pressing against an invisible door, and yet when the door opened, it wouldn’t leave. “Mmhm,” I grumbled.

“Take the subway,” my mother said. “You know where to go. Get off at King St. and walk right through the doors and tell them you need to see your father.”

The line disconnected, and the arm that was mine but not connected to me put the phone back on the wall. Then hot tears were warming my face, and wetting down my neck, and I was too overcome – whether with relief or frustration or all three I didn’t know – to care.

When I was eight years old, our family cat died of old age. I was never connected with her in the Purina commercial, cuddly-feline-friend kind of way – she was already old and mean by the time I was old enough to recognize her. But it wasn’t like I ever thought it would end. I never thought about it. You don’t think about these things, the first time, until they happen.

A few weeks before the end of my summer break, she started hacking up bloody chunks. I’d come home from the pool or a friend’s house and find unattended piles of drying excretion in the living room, the bathroom, the braided rug in my room that was impossible to clean (that, too, would soon be gone). She’d sleep for hours: under the table where we’d knock into her with our chairs, and she’d make a noise like a muffled piano scale and lumber to her feet; in the sun above the radiator; on the shit-brown kitchen floor tiles where we’d step over her to cook and wash dishes, and where she died, on my first day of school, around when I was raising my hand to name the capital of New York. What I’d remember most, aside from the frustration and easy denial brought on by missing her death, was the conversation I’d had with my mom a week before, when I’d started to pick up on the fact that she was sick, sicker than I’d ever seen her. I’d approached her reading *Architectural Digest* at the kitchen table.

I'd asked her whether the cat was dying. Before the words had come out of my mouth, I hadn't been sure whether they were true. But once they had, this truth seemed tangible, real.

No, my mother had said, you don't need to worry about Midnight.

Is she dying?

My mother paused, laying the *Digest* on the table by its longest edge. With that pause, though I would never completely know it until now, I would never fully trust her again. No, she said, we just need to give her some space.

She propped the magazine back up on the width of its pages.

I didn't know, but I knew. I half-knew. But I couldn't prove it, not until it really happened, and by then my new life was already starting, a life with new friends and chapter books and plenty of time to forget about what was almost gone. I stood there after she looked away, knowing enough to question the truth in her words but not enough to call her on it. I willed her to respect me enough to open her mouth and tell me the truth.

Now, at fourteen, in the brightest hospital room I'd ever seen, the air suffocated with the stench of rubbing alcohol and the transient insignificance of death, I wished more than anything that she would lie to me.

My father was on a respirator and a feeding tube that snaked so far down his throat I thought for sure he'd wake up and choke. What was crazy was that it really looked like he was sleeping, those slow, even breaths, like he was napping on the couch while we reached over him for the TV remote. But these breaths weren't him, they were a machine – something that seemed so static and

indifferent even though its whole purpose lay in keeping him alive. I didn't know which was worse, the idea that everything here – the ceaseless beeping of the EKG, the plethora of old-computer-cable plugs and tubes like the nest we kept under the sofa, those awful tubes that did everything for him – cared not an iota about his life. Everything just seemed too real, and much, much scarier than it looked on the surface. He isn't supposed to be here, I thought, this place isn't for him. This place of death and decay, where no one came out without a chunk of themselves missing. He belonged back in last month, when he would just slam his hand on the table and hurt himself but never end up here.

This felt like a scene from a movie I couldn't control, like things were flashing at me and it was laughable to think I could do anything to stop it.

Paradoxically, I was furious at him for doing this to himself. It wasn't fate, or the cruel hand of time, it was just him, fucking up his own life, trying to hurt me. He must have known I could feel his pain like he was an extension of me, a satellite corpus whose every itch became my own. Everything he did, I did. Everything he felt, I felt. My whole life, he had commanded me like a heartless puppeteer, yanking at the strings that jerked me with abandon, into extra credit and prep courses and now into Walton. It had never been me all along, just him and his constant pulling of my strings. Now, in a final puff of smoke, he'd attempted a sneaky exit, leaving me free but immobile, like a baby bird with its wings clipped.

Now, he was stuck in purgatory, in the great and maddening middle, in the gulf between right and wrong, life and death, free will and fate: half-way between where I could shake him and wake up and where destiny would snatch him away. It was almost impossible to conceptualize this middle – when I tried to think about it, my mind felt a watery nothingness, like TV static. But it seemed fitting, somehow, this ambiguity – the two of us had always dealt in extremes.

At some point during the night shift, my mother broke several hours of silence. “He left a note,” she said, her voice cracking on the cusp of a whisper, even though in a place like this, the time of night didn’t seem to matter.

I looked up from my reading on the urinary system, from which I struggled to glean any meaning. “Okay,” I said.

“I don’t want you to read it.”

“Sure.”

“He mentioned you,” she said.

My head swirled with possibilities: something about my prowess, my failures, my enduring potential? I felt as much resentment as I did the urge to wrap him up in my arms and transfer to him my life, ounce by ounce.

“He talked about the monster story,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

She sighed, already frustrated. She was sitting in one of those hospital torture chairs pulled up to the bed and had grasped my dad’s lifeless hand in her own. I could tell her muscles were getting tired, and she was straining against the urge to let go.

“Just listen,” she said. “He said he told you something about a monster that he heard when he was a sophomore. In the basement. I don’t know why, but he said you should know – he said he never heard it.”

I must have looked confused, because she elaborated.

“He never heard the monster,” she said, her pale, clenched fingers starting to shake. “He told you he had because – I don’t know why. But he said he wanted you to know.”

I looked at the wall, painted a miserable gray that seemed impossible to picture in the natural universe. It was the only thing I could look at. I tried to be properly upset, to form a coherent reaction, but all I could think about was Maddie slamming her locket shut, and the heavily, impossibly empty chair in front of me in Bio, and the fact that the toxins you pee out are converted by your kidneys. I sat staring at the wall, at the gibberish diagram in my book, at my mother’s fading death grip. Perhaps once or twice I fell asleep; perhaps once or twice she let her grip loosen and gave her shaking hands a break. Either way, we sat, the three of us, in that hospital room, still a family, until the sun rose inevitably over the city.

Chapter Eleven

My mother was shaking me and every nerve in my body was resisting, like a sleeping foot forced to walk. I couldn't tell whether I'd been asleep, but being awake felt like a drain. "You'll be late," she said. "You gotta go."

I grabbed my discombobulated array of belongings that now seemed gladly familiar: my jacket balled up in the corner, the backpack that had pressed against my leg all night, the textbook with a thin chunk of pages bent permanently from an unwitting, unremembered slip of my elbow. I buttoned my jacket buttons, struggling with the mechanics of the closure. I was still wearing my shoes.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" I mumbled, tipping with the weight of my bag. At this point, my brain and my body were in agreement: both felt hazy, washy, not quite real. Both felt the pressing, primary urge to hibernate without a second thought.

"Go," she said. "Go be with your friends. I can hold down the fort."

I gave her a hug that was supposed to be meaningful, but I was too tired to make it count. She pulled away quickly, and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

I rode the subway through the waking city, too tired to notice the rising crowds, and missed my connecting stop. I stood on the platform, the world dim and tilting around me, and prayed not to keel over.

As awful as it sounded, I was thankful that my mother sent me to school. Today was a huge Biology test, the most important of the semester, and despite my years of lived experience with the subject, I couldn't grasp the nuances of the urinary system. At school, away from the pool of misery and guilt and fear where my mom was sequestered, I could at least study in peace. As I

waited for the train, tilting and trying to stabilize my spinning head, I thought suddenly of my dead cat, and the capital of New York, and how maybe, probably, my dad would die while I took a test about pee.

I got to school either late or early, and found myself, somehow, in the doorway of my Art History classroom. Again, the hushed voices, and the Grim Reaper watching expectantly as I entered the room. Time felt like a yawning chasm, like a closing pinch. Today was yesterday, but yesterday was so long ago.

“You again,” I said.

“Laura Farmington,” he said for the second time, although he knew me, he had been the one to let me call my mother, and discharge me to the hospital. “Come on.”

I looked at Mr. Spektor, who, in his miraculously tidy suit, with his soft, clean hair, wouldn't say a word to rescue me. It was my dad, wasn't it? The Grim Reaper's eyes held a subtle, silent pity. He knew, and he would send me back to that awful hospital, and it would all be over, wouldn't it?

My dad's florid face flashed through my mind, beaming when I held up my acceptance letter; spreading a picture book over his lap, the same one for a year; helping me mop up the sopping table. The two of us, together. Now it would all be over, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. It seemed like no matter what I did or could have done, no curtain I could have pulled aside would have changed my life as much as the rug that life pulled from under me.

I felt the sudden, uncontrollable urge to cry. As the Grim Reaper led me through the halls, past the muffled sounds of lectures and the jumbled, collective scratching of pencils, I drew my throat closed, widening my eyes against the threat of tears. After everything, I didn't want to lose my dignity.

But by the time we reached the first floor, warm tears were already salting my mouth, wetting my lashes. I wiped a thick grey stream of snot on my sleeve, and the stream commenced with gooey fervor. We approached the main office, where the receptionist sighed over his monitor and clicked impatiently on the world's oldest mouse. Across the room, out of sight, was the phone I would have to use again, and hear the awful words from my mother to confirm this unthinkable nightmare. I turned and stepped towards the office, against every instinct, towards the office, towards my father's fate. The Grim Reaper turned away, towards the opposite wall. He nodded, just imperceptibly, for me to follow.

What was happening? Was my father alive? Had he made it? He wasn't being released, though – that would have been a call, too. So, what was this? Was I receiving an award? A prank? A detention? Or –

Then we were making a U-turn and walking through the first floor, past classrooms with all these safe, perfect students, and it wasn't happening, it wasn't – I didn't want my death to take the place of my dad's. We reached the back staircase and descended it, the lights too bright, and our feet so loud against the linoleum that squeaked just a little under my shoes. Was that selfish of me, that I would trade his life for mine? Was that really what I would do? When it came down to it, didn't I wish that the one being sacrificed was anyone but myself?

At the basement, the Grim Reaper held the door, an odd courtesy. He swept ahead, and led me through the rows of garbage with which I was now well-acquainted. Everything blurred before me, arcing in dancing dizziness. I wanted to scream, to tear the doors from their hinges, and find the monster. I had failed, so miserably failed. I should have done so much differently. I could stall. I could run. The man didn't look armed. But at some point upstairs, someone would catch me, and throw me back down here. I could run away, I could call my mom's family, and make them take

me in. But I didn't want to abandon her with the vegetative specter of my father. I imagined her still clutching his hands in that miserable room until hers were raw, and I ached to go to her, comfort her, form a team of two.

Now, my chest hung with a weight I'd never felt before, like my heart was about to crush itself from the inside. I was light, too light, floating with no weight, no agency, and everything around me too hard and heavy. I felt like I wasn't even on Earth, as though I were being pulled away, up into something intangible and ethereal, leaving this world behind entirely. I fought to ground myself, clinging momentarily to the grips of corners and plodding along, trying to sink my feet into the ground.

As I followed this man down hallway after hallway, an idea flitted into my mind: I'd been Orpheus, maddened by the half-possibility of a tangible being behind me that the world had urged me not to verify. Now I was his departed bride, sentenced eternally to rot in the afterlife, paying mortally for the crime of this verification. I was the seeker and the lost, my own executioner.

We reached the trident, and the Grim Reaper moved rotely down the right path, the only one I hadn't explored. It was that simple – had I ventured this way before, I would easily have found the monster. Had it only been a matter of luck? He led me down that first hallway, where another hallway winked from the end. It loomed closer and closer, inching larger as we neared it. I could feel the monster's presence in every hair, every synapse: it was down that corridor. Now we were close enough to touch it. I could see dust matted along the unswept edges of the wall.

But the Reaper stopped at the last door. It looked just like all the others, like it could have contained a broom closet, a pointless classroom, or a cage enclosing a monster that salivated in anticipation. My mind was blank, processing. The Grim Reaper materialized a thick ring of keys

and sorted through them, muttering just audibly. He dangled an alloyed, near-identical key above the rest and unlocked the room. He held out his arm for me to enter, and I stepped aside.

Rows and rows of desks, just like the empty classrooms I'd seen on my solitary explorations. So many kids, bored, sleepy teenagers just like the ones upstairs, and just as equally familiar with the transient ubiquity of these comings-and-goings, of the Grim Reaper showing up announced. I parsed through the panoply of faces, recognizing immediately people I knew: Maddie sat at the front, smiling tepidly once I caught her eye. Lily sat behind her, beaming as if welcoming me into their little cohort. There were others, more and more of them: the girl to whom I'd lent a pencil or two in Spanish who I hadn't seen after September; the girl from Biology with the really long hair; the boy I'd seen a few times in the cafeteria carving his hamburger with a fork and knife. All smiling, lazy, unaffected, seemingly unharmed.

At the front, a bearded man, medium height, leaned against his desk, glancing at the Grim Reaper, who was still standing in the doorway. "Thanks, Mike," he said good-naturedly. The Grim Reaper nodded and disappeared. The teacher closed the door behind him.

He turned and caught my eye, his gaze friendly and undiscerning. "Laura," he greeted. "Welcome. I'm Mr. McIntyre. Chat with me for a sec?"

He beckoned me into the corner behind the closed door, where a stained American flag drooped from the top rim of the blackboard. In fact, the classroom seemed full of forgotten, discarded relics of decoration: a torn poster of Shakespeare taped crookedly to the opposite wall where a window would be; a stack of dilapidated books on his desk, their bindings gone, held together by yellowing gauze. "I'm very glad you're here," he said, as though he really meant it. He looked me dead in the eyes. It was the first time an adult had done that, or it felt like it. "The

deal is, I'm here to support you. You go at your own pace, and when we feel you're ready, you'll move back upstairs. Sound good to you?"

I nodded, lulled by the fast dissipation of my fear and the gentleness of his demeanor.

"You can sit in that third seat on the right – just behind Lily," he said, pointing to an empty seat that seemed entirely flat, as if waiting for only my presence.

As I passed her, Lily flashed me an easy smile, as though nothing had changed.

Through my tights, the chair was cold against my legs.

"Class," Mr. McIntyre said, "this is Laura, who'll be joining us. Laura –"

He looked straight at me, and a whisper of anxiety fizzed gently through me. "Keep up as best as you can. Don't worry if you don't get everything."

He turned and made a series of even, easy marks on the board. I couldn't focus. I was thinking about the next generation, if I ever had a kid, and how far they would get through Walton. I felt, if my life were a movie, that the crane shot would be zooming away and away, so far above me in that classroom that I'd be insignificant, my chapter finished forever.

Epilogue

What is a basement without a monster? What is a house with a neutered one?

Two weeks after his suicide attempt, my father woke up, wiggled his toes under the tissue-thin blanket, and declared that he'd come up with his best idea yet: a bed with a timer that shakes you to wake you up. But this too was fantasy. Really, it was a lot slower and more piecemeal: first he squeezed my mother's finger, a little flutter, then his eyes drew open like a chrysalis so delicate you could sneeze and break it. Two days later, he said my name, like an alien sounding it out, so unfamiliar I almost cried. He was awake, he was here, but something in him was gone forever. He passed through the psych ward, and they swept him along with a shiny bottle of pills and the instruction to lock down sharp objects. Just like that, he was out of their hands, and back into ours. He took two of the little cotton-white pills every day, with breakfast and dinner, tea dribbling sometimes down his chin. He drank tea now – decaf, because caffeinated would interfere with his meds – and chunky smoothies my mom made at every hour of the day, ignoring the way the dogs next door howled after the cheap rattly whirring stopped. At first she spent days with him while I went to school and relearned basic, infantile algebra while my father relearned everything his mind had erased in the coma: the word for 'coffee'; how to squeeze the toothpaste when brushing his teeth; sometimes, it seemed, what I looked like, or what our relationship was. But then her personal days ran out, and she started sighing over the medical bills that poured in in white crisp-edged envelopes, so full of nasty expectation. Caring for him at night became my job. I cooked the broccoli and changed the sheets and sat with him – so much sitting, endless sitting, while time passed and he never seemed to get better. I was reminded of my mother's bitter accusation – *I do*

everything and nobody notices. Now I sat, growing, metamorphizing, rocketing ever closer to adulthood, while around me everything seemed to stay the same.

What was worse than the stillness, I came to realize, was the nothingness in my father's eyes. There was no haze, no fear, no deadness. There was nothing departed, nothing forsaken, just nothing. When I bent over him to wipe a smear of jam from his mouth, I saw nothing in his eyes but a glassy reflection of my own figure. This nothing bore its own presence, its own source of sorrow. Sometimes I wanted to step around my dad on the sofa, to avoid his eyes as though they were whirling vacuums, keen on sucking the remaining life from the apartment. Somehow, I reminded myself that at least this nothingness took the place of death, that while he couldn't eat or poop or work or solve the crossword puzzle by himself anymore, my father wasn't dead. I reminded myself as I washed dishes that wouldn't scrub clean and attempted the Sisyphean pointlessness of keeping his chin dry: *nothing is better than dead.*

School now lacked the oppressive, rigorous enclosure I'd gotten used to. Somehow, somewhere, the seal had been broken, and school become an open circle I could wash into and out of, swimming from the subway to my father's couch back to the row behind Lily in Algebra. I swam like Munch's madman, but quieter and colorless. Things didn't swirl madly anymore, in pools of vivid, desperate color – now everything seemed gray and thick, as if time were working itself out through pudding, belabored and confused.

Lily's started walking with me over to the long, sunless room that is the basement cafeteria. Did you know she has two brothers and three sisters, all with names that start with L? Her house is smaller than Maddie's, maybe the same size as mine, but it feels much less enclosed, much more filled with something gentle yet exuberant – it feels like a home.

(Amy's doing well. She's studying for the MCAT, just for fun. They've been dating now for seven months, five days, and ten hours.)

I think sometimes about fate, and that vacuum-sealed ring that has now broken. I can't tell whether my dad beat the circle of infinite, asphyxiating promise, or whether I have. Does it count if you're barely conscious?

I think of that girl clutching the crisp letter above the rainy streets, and my heart aches – whether for her or me I do not know. I see myself tracing those desolate corridors underground, see my dad slamming against the counter, and it all feels like a dream, a façade, like an alternate timeline that never could have been real. This, now, *this* is what's real.

Someday, my dad will get better. He'll start slow: talking more, wiggling his fingers, pacing the kitchen with the same furious animation as before. Someday he'll slam the counter, shaking the earth, *one, two, three*. Someday, too, maybe sometime soon, I'll get out of the basement, and I'll see light across my desk, and wear the embroidered uniform, and talk to Amy in the halls like we're just the same. I can get everything back, just like it was before.

Some days in class, when I'm droning out, or pretending not to have received a note Lily's passed me with no trace of subtlety, I think I hear the shuffling of some tangible, beautiful force came to take me away. It's Hades, he's getting the keys, he's come to take me back to humanity again. The Grim Reaper, clad in black, executioner and savior. I pause, the whisper of footsteps dancing in my head, waiting.

Acknowledgments

This project would never have been as successful, nor would it have happened at all, without the unwavering and unconditional support of those around me.

First, I'd like to thank my parents for talking me off many a ledge, for their significant financial contribution to my education, and for providing me with the patience and encouragement I need in order to function.

Next, I'd like to acknowledge the support of my friends, who answered every inane question I asked about writing a thesis and listened to me complain ad nauseum about the hurdles along the way. Your kindness has not gone unnoticed.

Next, I'd like to thank Professor Mansouri for her immense patience and thorough guidance from start to finish. This has been the hardest creative writing assignment I've ever turned in, and I could only ever have succeeded with your dedicated support.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I'd like to thank Professor Decker for her contribution as my second reader. I greatly appreciate your help.