

Provenance

By

Jennifer Ann Mutch

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ABSTRACT

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ADVISORS: Jennifer Mitchell and Shena McAuliffe

Provenance is a term used in art history to refer to the record of an artwork's life after its creation: the paper trail it has left through time showing who has purchased it, sold it, moved it, restored it, displayed it. *Provenance's* intertwined stories use the things we leave behind, both physical and digital, to explore absence, mother-daughter relationships, formative friendships, and personal identities.

Jane is a middle-aged woman whose mother-in-law, an artist named Francie, has just passed away unexpectedly, leaving her home to be cleared out. As she sorts through a lifetime of belongings and paintings, she continues to learn more about the woman who was like a mother to her, the woman she previously felt she knew completely. The process of mourning Francie introduces new complexities to her relationship with her husband, Andrew, and daughter, Rosie.

Ellen is finishing her freshman year of high school while attempting to deal with the absence of her best friend Aleaya, who is spending the summer at a mental health rehabilitation facility. Ellen soon discovers that she has access to a secret Instagram account Aleaya had once logged into on her phone and realizes that there are things she doesn't know about her best friend. While investigating Aleaya's curated digital presence, Ellen comes face to face with her own expectations about intimacy, friendship, and support.

When Ellen, a previous student of Francie's, is volunteered by her mother to help Jane clean out Francie's studio, the two form a significant connection. Despite the difference in their circumstances, Jane and Ellen both discover ways to navigate life after loss, and the sometimes-unexpected ways we continue to exist in the things and people we leave behind.

*For Laura, Norma, Gayle, Hannah,
and all the other women who feel deeply,
who love brashly and lose bravely.
You have made me who I am.*

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: <i>Answering Machines</i>	1
Chapter 2: <i>Dishtowels</i>	6
Chapter 3: <i>Kitchen Counters</i>	13
Chapter 4: <i>Psalms</i>	18
Chapter 5: <i>Beach Roses</i>	27
Chapter 6: <i>Pain Killers</i>	35
Chapter 7: <i>Headphones</i>	45
Chapter 8: <i>Running Shoes</i>	49
Chapter 9: <i>Frames</i>	57
Chapter 10: <i>Pastels</i>	65
Chapter 11: <i>Translations</i>	71
Chapter 12: <i>Sheets</i>	76
Chapter 13: <i>Records</i>	83
Chapter 14: <i>Postscripts</i>	92
Chapter 15: <i>Windowsills</i>	98
Chapter 16: <i>Band-Aids</i>	106
Chapter 17: <i>Picnic Blankets</i>	111
Chapter 18: <i>Reminders</i>	115

Chapter 1: Answering Machines

Jane

The light blue house, its shades all pulled down, was surrounded by dogwood trees bearing almost unnervingly uniform white flowers, hydrangeas in bright teal, violet, and white, and huge overgrown rhododendrons full of deep olive leaves. The top of the driveway was littered with dark purple-turned-brown blossoms from the rhododendron, fallen and now rotting in the early June sun as Jane's tires came to a stop on top of them.

She opened her door into the sudden silence left as the motor shut off, clicking every now and then while it cooled. She stayed seated, but swung her legs out to stretch them, arching her back to crack it. The air smelled of the ocean, but in a distant way, a scent that evoked not candles with names like 'ocean breeze' and 'beach escape,' but expanses of flat, wet sand, swaying dune grasses, dried out seaweed, and barnacle covered jetties. Even four miles from the shore, all of Cape Cod seemed to have the undercurrent of sea salt in its air.

Jane stepped down onto the crumbled seashell driveway, their rhythmic crunch beneath her patent leather loafers accompanying her determined steps up to the narrow stone pathway, up to the door. On the bottom left of the worn door, about a foot up and in stark contrast to its bright white finish was a small patch of faded greenish brown, intentionally painted around, because in the center of it was a bright purple handprint. Tiny and smudged, it was fading to pink on the edges of the fingers. Jane smiled down at it. Rosie had left that there when she was only three.

The soft creak of the screen door's wooden frame as she pulled it open was familiar. The tension in her chest, a pull of discomfort and malaise, was not. White shells tied together with worn twine dangled from the doorknob, bleached by a decade of morning sun, and caught themselves in Jane's keychain as she removed the key from the now open lock. The door stood open, and she hesitated beneath its frame, running her thumb back and forth over the ridges on the key and staring straight ahead, biting the inside of her lip. The hot light of the early afternoon forced its way into the kitchen as Jane stood quietly. Shadowed cabinets, multicolored flyers, lists, and photos held to the fridge by little red magnets, two clean glasses on the drying rack, glinting in the slivers of sun sneaking around her frozen form. The corner of the kitchen rug kicked up and rumped, the empty house stared back at her.

She stepped over the threshold, pulling the door closed behind her, and let out a long breath. The house felt unnaturally abandoned with the summer light cut off, so she went around and opened every shade, turned on every lamp, let the light in with her purse still over her forearm. A dark house in the middle of a summer afternoon always feels wrong, like sickness, like loneliness. The light transformed the space back to familiarity, but Jane still moved gingerly on tiptoe, not touching anything but the light switches and the pulls for the shades. She was holding her breath without noticing. Each sound seemed amplified, the brush of her polyester pant legs against one another, her shoes sliding on the worn wood floors as she kicked them off in their usual place by the hall closet. In the closet, she kicked her loafers off on top of three pairs of nice leather shoes, a pair of snow boots coated in mud and salt, and the worn in running shoes

Francie had worn for long days teaching on her feet at the Art Center. She'd been wearing them when she went to the hospital, they'd returned them along with her clothes, purse, and watch to Andrew and Jane in a large plastic bag. She was wearing the watch now.

Everything looked the same. Looked just as it always had: full, claimed, lived in. Except it was silent. The little table to the right of the door, wedged against the side of the fridge, was still piled with mail and magazines, the landline blinking red to show there was a new message. Jane had found that table with Francie at an antique shop one year, ages ago, even before Rosie had been born. She'd spotted it as they were on their way out, pointing out that it looked narrow enough to fit beside the fridge, and she had been right. Francie's small, Cape style house technically had a front door down the hallway by the stairs, but Jane couldn't remember the last time anyone had used it. The side door was closer to the driveway, and Francie had spent so long manicuring an inviting walkway right up to it, lined by hosta and lilies and ever-encroaching pachysandra, that everyone knew to head right in that way. Plus, when it was nice, she kept the door wide open, the screen keeping out the mosquitos while letting out the sounds of her humming at the stove or listening to AM radio while pacing in her studio.

The door opened directly into the kitchen, which in most homes would probably seem inconvenient. Jane had always liked it this way, though, it was nice to enter a house right into its heart, to not have to pass through the barren placeholders of an entryway, hallway, or mudroom. It cut right to the chase, welcomed you in, ushered you to a chair at the kitchen table or a stool by the counter where you could always get a cup of tea or a glass of lemonade filled to the brim with ice. On holidays it announced your arrival immediately, dumping you right in the middle of the hectic kitchen dance, arms full of baking trays and freshly topped off glasses weaving and dodging the newcomer, still bundled up and carrying bags of gifts or tin foil topped side dishes. There was, however, the issue of having nowhere to leave your bag or keys unless you wanted to open the fridge and toss them in the produce drawer, hence the hunt for the table. Shoes went down the hall, by the closet, the only downside being a consistent path of dirt through the middle of the kitchen heading that direction. Sandy all summer long when flip flops traipsed to and fro from the beach, damp and dirty all winter when boots left puddles of snow and ice melt, always guaranteed to be stepped in by socked feet at some point in the near future. The rug never helped much; it always got rumbled up and folded over, just like it was now. In the silence, Jane used her toe to flip its corner back over and ran her foot over the worn wood by the doorframe. Sure enough, small grains of sand dug into the balls of her feet.

She decided to start simple and neat the kitchen. It was something manageable and familiar, cleaning just like she would in her own house. She put away the cups and silverware from the drying rack, opened the dishwasher, found it half full, filled it with soap and started the cycle. The trash was nearly full and topped off with an all-black banana peel, so she tied it off and brought it outside. Holding the new bag, empty and reeking of sanitized plastic, she stopped by the fridge. Photos of Rosie smiled back at her through the years, as a toddler at Christmas time sitting in the living room, on the beach sitting on Francie's lap, school photos from

kindergarten and high school. Her hair changed lengths, she got and lost braces, but her face smiled back at her with the same familiarity as always, every age layered on top of one another in her memory. By the top of the freezer smiled Andrew, clean shaven and young, so young, holding baby Rosie still wrapped in her hospital blanket. Jane had mailed Francie the photo the day after she left from staying in their guestroom to help out, had written in thin Sharpie across the bottom of the photo ‘Thank you!!!’ with three big exclamation points. She ran her fingers over the handwriting of her much younger self and opened the fridge.

She dumped the produce out first, most of which still looked fine after sitting unattended for only six days, but somehow it felt wrong to bring it home and cook it, her dead mother-in-law’s zucchini, so into the bag it went. Then the meat, including some questionable ground beef, and Tupperware of leftover meatballs and some kind of red sauce. The milk and pineapple juice went down the sink, along with an extremely expired half-used can of evaporated milk and some ancient soy sauce. When the fridge held only jars of mustard and jam and some old, bottled water she turned to the cabinets and drawers, emptying out English muffins, a bag of bread with only the crusty end bits and two normal slices left in it, half of a giant oatmeal cookie preserved in a zip lock bag. Staring down at the empty drawer full of crumbs and the bulging bag of not-quite-rotten food, Jane realized again she’d been holding her breath. She felt like she was trespassing, somehow, like she wasn’t supposed to be doing this. Ever since she’d opened the door, she felt like tiptoeing around, like Francie would come out of her studio and down the hall at any moment to ask her what she was doing.

Of course, though, this was exactly what she was supposed to be doing. It’s what you do, when somebody dies, you clean out their house. Somehow, though, that phrase invokes chests in the attic full of potentially priceless heirlooms and knick-knacks on bookshelves, not half-eaten cookies clearly saved for a later that never arrived and a pickle jar from ten months ago with a single slice still floating in it. How could she ‘clean out her house’ when Francie was still everywhere, in the grocery list on the fridge and the dishes currently being cleaned by the whirring dishwasher. Her favorite mug was still on the counter, Jane hadn’t noticed when she’d put away the dishes, half full of coffee, decaf, Jane knew. A semicircle of lipstick stained the rim.

She took out her phone, opened it and stared down at Andrew’s contact until the screen faded back to black, then put the phone back on the counter face down. She wouldn’t bother him, not now. He was at work, she pictured him standing at the front of a lecture hall, or on the phone behind his imposing desk, imagined him holding his head in his hands for a moment, rubbing his tired eyes with two fingers. She remembered them standing here, in this kitchen, her clutching Rosie’s sonogram behind her back, grinning at each other like idiots and waiting for Francie to come out from her studio so they could tell her the news. Her heart had been beating out of her chest, and when she’d shown Francie the black and white photos they had both burst into tears and she’d pulled Jane to her. She wore glasses on a beaded chain that hung down around her neck, and they’d pressed sharply into Jane’s chest as Francie squeezed her. She’d looked over her shoulder at Andrew’s beaming face.

Glancing again at his almost childish face magnetized to the freezer, her chest constricted, and her eyes felt hot. She slid down against the cabinets and sat down on the hardwood, a rectangle of sun falling over her from the windows above the sink. It wasn't supposed to be like this, not yet. Rosie should have had her grandmother at her graduation, her wedding. Andrew should not be an orphan. Even at the age of forty-six the phrase felt strange, infantile. Combined with his familiar eyes, a little brighter in their distance from this present moment, still upon her from the photo and the dense silence of the house she couldn't shake the heavy weight of time and her own powerlessness in the face of it. The six days since Francie had passed felt like a lifetime, and like an instant.

They had gotten a call from the hospital, she'd driven herself there and said something didn't feel right, asked them to call her son and his wife. She and Andrew had raced home from work and headed for the Cape. Rosie had still been at school, and they'd figured if things were bad, they'd come back and get her. Francie was healthy, busy, had nothing wrong besides some arthritis and the occasional migraine as far as they knew.

She had been asleep when they arrived. And she had never woken up. She looked peaceful. The nurse who unhooked all her monitors as they sat there in shock said she was incredibly kind, and that she told him to tell Andrew and Jane that she'd locked up the house, and that she loved them. Andrew had driven them home to Rosie.

Andrew had woken her up this morning, six days later, rolled over and rubbed her shoulder and upper arm until she also rolled over towards him and said good morning with a soft grunt.

"Hon, I just, I can't go. I've been lying here thinking about getting in the car and driving all the way down there again and opening the door to that silence and just... I'm not ready to be there without her. I think I just need to go to work."

It had been dark still, his voice a tentative whisper. She had kept her eyes closed; it was the first honest thing about his grief he had said since the day she died.

"Okay." She paused. The heaviness of facing this alone already wearying her. "That's okay. If you're sure, I'll just go around ten and be back after dinner."

"Okay." He had said, rolling again to lie on his back with a sigh. She glanced over at him, his eyes were open and staring into the middle distance of their pre-dawn bedroom. They had breathed together in the dark for a while when he whispered again, "Thank you."

She had held her breath then, forced the cry creeping up her chest back down her throat and kept painfully still. She couldn't speak, couldn't reassure him, if she opened her mouth, he would know she was crying, would hear her voice strain, and she didn't want to cause him the pain of seeing her cry. She just reached for his hand. They were both flat on their backs, and he stroked her thumb with his own as hot tears ran down the sides of her face and into her hair.

Now, sitting next to the trash bag and still holding her phone in a clenched hand she raised her head and took a shaky breath. The living room, across from the kitchen with all its

warm reds and tans and golds shimmered behind her tears, streaks of light and color wobbling before she closed her eyes again, blinking the water away. The dishwasher whirred by her left shoulder as she took some deep breaths, then stood up again and leaned on the counter.

Suddenly, the phone rang.

Francie had kept it on maximum volume, as most hard-of-hearing eighty-year-olds do, and the ring, a distorted classical tune, blasted throughout the house in a domino effect from one room to another.

“Call from” the robotic voice announced, “wireless caller.”

With another deep breath, Jane reached for the talk button.

“Hello?” She asked.

“Hi, Francie? This is Matilda from J&B Automotive calling to confirm your appointment tomorrow at 3:15 for an oil change and-”

“Oh, I’m sorry, this is Jane, Francie’s daughter in law. You can actually cancel the appointment, Francie passed away this week. Thank you.” She said, in one long breath, ignoring the pleasant voice beginning to protest a shocked sympathy as she put down the phone.

There was silence again, and she decided to listen to the message on the machine.

“One new message. 9:56 A.M.” read the voice, followed by a static silence and a sudden, distorted voice saying “-have three days to respond to this final warning or the IRS will be notified-” and she hit delete. Unsurprisingly, spam callers don’t care if you’re dead or alive.

Chapter 2: Dishtowels

Ellen

It was about a thousand degrees on the violently green football field where Ellen and the rest of the family members of Yarmouth High School's graduating class were sitting, and Michael Robert had been talking for what felt like six years. She wanted nothing more than to be back in the cool dark of her bedroom, safely ensconced in some corner of the internet where she didn't have to think at all about her real life, could watch Kylie Jenner eat gross foods or zone out to two-hour documentaries on YouTube about aliens building the pyramids.

Instead, she was melting in the early June sun. There were drips of sweat on the wrinkled paper program sticking to her left thigh, and when she peeled it off to try and fan her face it only folded weakly in half. She took a deep breath, reminding herself that Michael was the last of the speakers and had to be almost done. It didn't make listening to his voice any more tolerable. She absolutely did not want to be anywhere near her high school campus at 5:49 p.m. on a *Sunday* just a week before the end of the year, and honestly Jonas could get his diploma just the same without her watching it happen.

As she inhaled, her dress constricted uncomfortably and, she thought, unflatteringly around her waist, its tiny purple zipper straining where it met the tight waistline seam. Its vaguely floral fabric seemed now to be just a continually dampening sweat rag. She exhaled and the fabric loosened.

She turned her gaze back upwards, above the sea of white caps and gowns shimmering in the blazing sun, to the light oak podium perched on the temporarily constructed stage and the acne-covered brunette clutching its sides as he leaned down to speak into the microphone.

Michael Robert was an asshole. His speech was all about his "community service" trip to Peru, he'd just finished alternating between various *hilarious* vignettes and some poorly articulated moral lessons, and was now waxing poetic about his key message: "*emphasizing the importance of understanding.*" Whatever that meant. How he had won the contest to speak at graduation was beyond her, but his voice had that verging-on-over-the-top level of confidence that frequently convinced adults a kid was mature and competent, and he stood tall and surprisingly poised given his lanky limbs. His speech also had just enough substance to let parents latch onto it and really dwell on all the *important* things their now-graduate must have learned these past four years. In reality, however, she knew for a fact his ex-girlfriend basically re-wrote all his papers for him and he'd almost been sent home from said voluntourism excursion for showing up hungover to every single event and puking somewhere on Machu Picchu. He'd bragged about it incessantly in his first period world history class, so much so that Jonas, who for some reason considered Michael one of his close friends, had complained about the over-exaggerated anecdotes. One morning, as they'd each hurriedly wrapped an English muffin in a paper towel to eat on the drive to school, he'd called Michael's story an "overdone weird flex that wasn't even that funny."

Michael, currently, was discussing “the lifelong value of friendships forged through the shared experience of high-school.” Forged in the dull fires of a cinder block Hell, thought Ellen.

Despite being three grades below all the shiny, sweaty graduates Ellen knew most of what there was to know about nearly all of them, her older brother Jonas being the social butterfly he was. Michael might be an asshole, but he hadn’t seen his dad in a really long time so sometimes people tried to give him a pass, either out of genuine compassion or just pity and awkwardness. Ellen was not inclined to give his talkative ass such leniency, no matter what the rumors were. All she knew was his dad used to run this seafood place that did a decent business in the summer, but also got a lot of locals all year round. You’d always see Mr. Robert out front chatting with clients on the deck, and then one day he just vanished. It might’ve been drugs or something, maybe money issues. There’d been a rumor he had another wife in California but that seemed a bit far-fetched and a little too Hollywood. Most likely it was drugs in one way or another, at least according to Ellen. It's not like it would be a rare story for the Cape.

They’re doing fine, though, the Roberts. His mom moved the place to somewhere practically on the water and now the tourists love it even more. For most of the last two years Michael had dated this girl Kiley who used to be one of the captains-slash-coaches of Ellen’s summer swim league, always in her bright red lifeguard suit and somehow with *no* tan lines. She was in the honor society and going to Cornell. She’d dumped him the week after she got accepted but kept editing (more like rewriting) his papers. Which Ellen only knew because he for some reason also considered this a so-called “weird flex” and told everyone but the teachers grading said papers.

Currently, he was finishing up a weirdly detailed anecdote of thanks involving his freshman year geography teacher who had let him pass by rounding up his 59.4 “And look where I am now!” he exclaimed to some awkward chuckles. Maybe not something you should bring up at graduation? But it was unsurprising, the guy had no sense of what to keep to himself.

As she glanced around at all the other faces assembled in front of her, she really didn’t think she’d notice that any of them were gone next year except Jonas, and maybe Dom, Aleaya’s older brother, even though a solid number of them had spent hours in her kitchen or backyard. Jonas’s uncountable number of friends were mostly boring, and there was never any little-sister-crushing-on-older-brother’s-friends. Her life was not that interesting, and neither were the senior boys of Yarmouth.

Aleaya, though, *she* liked Michael. Something about his height, or his confidence, or whatever it was had had its desired effect on her. Despite claiming to share Ellen’s distaste for condescending popular kids she would stare at him in the hallways, laugh at all his jokes, and even asked him for his Snapchat in Ellen’s kitchen one afternoon when both she and Jonas had friends over. Of course, for Ellen that meant pretty much always and only Aleaya, and for Jonas it meant six or seven loud giants, eating every damn snack food in their kitchen. He’d even said sure and actually *given* it to her, which made Ellen hate him even more, an opinion she never hesitated to remind Aleaya of. “It’s fucking *creepy!*” was her main argument, but it never worked.

The squadron of boys had all laughed when the Snapchat exchange had gone down, only Ellen had stayed stoic leaning against the counter. Jonas had seen her facial expression and said “Oh, don’t be a prude, Len” with a mouthful of ranch and baby carrot. It was unusual for the oldest to be the most outgoing and constantly flouting the rules, but in their family that was just how it was. Ellen felt like she got most of the actual older sibling traits: responsible, constantly keeping the younger ones in line, and always getting told “you’re not *Mom*, you can’t tell me what to do” in taunting voices with stuck out tongues. She did the best in school, certainly better than Jonas, but currently she was wondering what the point was when he was still up there somehow, about to walk across the stage. C’s, or D’s, really do get degrees.

Ellen was at the end of the row, the last folding chair along the thirty-yard line before the aisle the graduates had all traipsed down to Pomp and Circumstance forty-five minutes ago, or maybe it was six hours, she couldn’t tell. Her mom was directly to her left, then Rachel, Elliot, and finally her dad. Her mom almost never wore her hair up unless she was at work, but it was currently wrapped messily into a thin bun. It shone blond and silver, a stringy clump that her glasses rested against when she pushed them to the top of her head. Her damp neck was almost as shiny as the gold necklace clasp resting just below her hairline, the bone that protruded from the base of her neck glinted like precious metal. She had more freckles all around her neck and chest than Ellen remembered from when she was little. Ellen could see them more now that it was getting warmer, and her mom had been outside weeding and gardening in the sun. Ellen watched her unstick another wispy strand of hair from her forehead and tuck it behind her ear.

Noticing Ellen’s eyes on her, her mom turned towards her and gave her a sympathetic smile. “Can you believe your brother’s done with high school?” she asked in a whisper, raising her lightly penciled-in eyebrows.

“Yup,” Ellen replied, turning her gaze back to the podium, “I just can’t believe this guy is the one sending him off.”

Her mom let out the tiniest beginnings of a laugh and turned back to the stage. Her eyes looked slightly misty, and Ellen could tell she was searching for Jonas. She shook her head in disbelief, and Ellen reached over to squeeze her hand.

The sun had sunk below the tree line by the time the Birdwell family all loaded into their silver minivan again, all significantly more disheveled than when they’d arrived. Jonas was right behind her dad in the driver’s seat, staring down at his phone, his just-tossed grad cap on his lap, his gown unzipped and sliding off one shoulder. In the back seat, Rachel was dictating exactly what four songs she wanted to hear on the twelve-minute ride home, played from a fraying cord that connected the practically ancient CD-playing radio to an iPhone. Elliot was bent over beside her, twisted around so he could get his forehead right where the nearest AC vent was letting out a weak stream of cooler air, one hand lifting his hair off his forehead to try and dry it off. He sighed in exaggerated relief.

Ellen stared out the window, her own pale face reflected faintly in the darker sections of the view, countless taillights of other departing families pulling out of the same parking lot blurring in her tired eyes. One of those cars contained Aleaya's parents, she'd seen them as they were making their way out of the gates in the chain link fence that surrounded the field, trailing Dom and his friends who were talking loudly and jostling each other. Ellen had caught her mom's eye accidentally, awkwardly. She'd felt her eyes widen and her stomach tighten, then had made herself smile a little bit, politely. It didn't feel like her eyes had matched the smile, after all, why would she be smiling at them. Aleaya's mom gave her a tight-lipped smile, but her eyes made it seem genuine, if weary, then continued walking to the parking lot next to her husband. Ellen had deflated after this, exceptionally conscious of the fact Aleaya was nowhere to be seen. She had some thought about Michael's speech she was dying to share with her, jokes no one else would understand.

Now, she sat in the car a little pissed off that Jonas didn't seem nearly as excited and grateful as he should have been, in her opinion, for having just graduated. They might as well have been on the way home from some tied baseball game or a forced family dinner. She'd gladly take his cap from him, move the tassel over ceremoniously, walk off the stage and across the Sagamore bridge and never come back.

She had one week of school until she'd finally get a break, the bittersweet relief of summer, but there were three final exams and a project to do before then, and every hour alone in Yarmouth High lasted three times as long as it should have. It seemed intentionally cruel they held graduation before all the other students were allowed to leave for the summer, and on a Sunday no less. Not only did she have to wake up at 6:17 tomorrow morning to make it to school on time while Jonas would be free to do whatever the hell he wanted, which was probably just sleep till noon, but she had to live with the knowledge that three more *full* years of this loomed ahead of her. Freshman year was like the Sunday of all of high school, when it was over there was just more coming as soon as the sun rose again.

Trees were rushing by outside the rapidly cooling car, the sound of Lady Gaga's voice and Rachel's high-pitched accompaniment mixing with the steady whirr and rush of the air conditioning and her parents murmured conversation a row in front of her.

"Hey guys, how about a stop at Sundae School on the way home, huh? A little celebration for the graduate?" Her dad's eyes glanced around at them through the rearview mirror, his eyebrows raised.

"I told Matt I'd be at his by, like, nine, but yeah we could stop quick," said Jonas without looking up from his phone.

"I still have to do chem homework, Dad, it's a school night..." responded Ellen, the thought of another stop before she was able to change into comfy clothes and crawl into her soft, cocoon of a bed almost torturous.

"It's your brother's graduation, Lennie, think you can spare fifteen minutes for ice cream?" he asked kindly, meeting her eyes in the mirror this time, and using the almost sickly-

sweet version of her various nicknames. No one in her family called her Ellen, they'd all somehow decided on Len as its shorter version rather than El, which had worked out well when Elliot arrived and claimed it. Lennie was rarer nowadays, but deep down she missed it a little.

"Sounds good to me!" said Elliot, unsurprisingly. He was the main reason pints of grocery store ice cream vanished from the freezer before anyone else had even had a taste, and Ellen was continuously surprised his twelve-year-old body could physically contain that much sugar without imploding. Ellen just nodded, meeting her dad's eyes with a small smile. The rest of them kept chatting, deciding it was a good idea, and Ellen's eyes returned to the window.

So, she found herself with a small cup of moose tracks ice cream with chocolate sprinkles in her lap as the van made its final left turn into their driveway, her body shifting familiarly to the right, and they slowed to a stop in the garage.

When she was younger, and would close her eyes, drifting off to sleep in the back of the van on the way home from a friend's house or school or a late family dinner she used to wake up as they turned onto her road, the exact centrifugal force of Round Cove Road and Route 135 an embedded physical memory. She'd keep her heavy eyes closed, know exactly where they were just by the way her body leaned into each curve and turn until they stopped in the garage and she was carried in to bed, awake but keeping her eyes closed so she could feel her mom's arms lifting her gently and cradling her head. Rachel had pulled the same thing until pretty recently, way too long for anyone but the baby of the family to get away with. Once her mom had accidentally smacked her lolling head onto the doorframe as she attempted to carry her in because she was just too big, and Rachel had decided it was easier just to walk from then on.

By now it was pitch black, and the peepers and crickets faded out as the garage door came down behind them, stepping over the door frame one by one to disperse inside the house. They'd had an early dinner before leaving and all gave Jonas cards, Ellen had made hers from scratch, as well as the one from Elliot since he'd practically begged her to. He'd gotten some in the mail from their grandparents too, as well as two hundred dollars in cash. He was the first one up the stairs and in the shower, so Ellen sat down at the dim kitchen table to finish her ice cream, scrolling mindlessly through Instagram as she did.

There were already dozens of photos from graduation up, both from graduates themselves and from a bunch of younger siblings in her grade or the one above her, smiling faces on the turf holding diplomas, cigars, flowers. After the first few she scrolled past them without really looking, annoyed at the repetition and jealous of everyone in those caps and gowns. Mindlessly, she opened her DM's and scrolled up to some of the more recent posts she and Aleaya had sent each other. There were screenshots of tweets, ridiculous videos, and a photoshoot a famous instagrammer had done standing in grassy sand dunes at sunset. The last messages, following these beach pictures, read "omfg these are actually so cool, can we pls do that," and then Ellen's reply: "yesss," read 3:42 P.M, May 26th.

Six days ago. It had been six days already.

She flicked her thumb up on the screen a few times, as if to refresh it and load new messages she knew didn't exist, then exited the app and dropped her phone down on the table, looking up.

Her mom was putting away the dinner dishes from earlier, left in the sink as they'd rushed out the door to make it to the ceremony only a few minutes late. She caught her eye, the sound of ceramic and stainless-steel clattering together in the background. It went quiet as she finished and came over to where Ellen was sitting.

She rested a hand on the back of her kitchen chair and said, "Honey, are you okay? You've been hiding in your phone more than usual the last few days." She was drying her hands on a dishtowel and looking down at Ellen with a deep furrow between her brows. She was full of her usual nervous, worried energy.

Ellen gave her a look. She was not interested *in the slightest* in a lecture about screen time right now, one she got every couple of weeks when her mom pleaded with her to just spend more time 'in the real world,' told her she only pestered her because she cared.

She sighed sadly in response to her daughter's subtle glare. "Oh, baby, I'm not trying to be mean, I'm just asking if you're okay. Is it about Jonas leaving?"

"No, not everything is about Jonas." Ellen paused, frustration building inside her. "I don't know, I guess I just don't wanna go to school tomorrow, sue me!" she said a little more aggressively than she meant. The prying was exhausting. She couldn't give the real reason, that the last few days of school without Aleaya had felt like a horrible dance, one she didn't know the steps of and was doing in front of the whole school, in her underwear, for like eight hours straight. Because then she would ask why Aleaya wasn't there.

And that was not a conversation she wanted to have. So, she stood up.

Her mom rubbed a hand on her shoulder as she rose, saying "Well, don't be so down about it, it'll be summer before you know it. And then in the blink of an eye you'll be leaving, just like Jonas..." She was still holding the light-yellow dish towel, and was folding it kind of obsessively in her hands, back and forth, back and forth.

Jonas was leaving in less than two weeks for some summer semester class to catch him up on the math requirement for the economics major he was interested in. He hadn't known about it or signed up for it until less than a month ago, the very last day before the deadline, as per his custom, and her mom was clearly still rattled by having to send him off three months earlier than she'd been prepared for. Ellen tried not to be angry the conversation had gone right back to her brother as she watched her mom walk over to the oven and hang up the towel, straightening it relative to the others. Jonas was her favorite, there was no question, and she must be sad to see him go so far away, all the way down to South Carolina. Of course, like all parents, she always said she loved everyone equally, and maybe she did, but if she had to pick the one kid that she *liked* the most, it was Jonas. And he was definitely a mama's boy, always got her a gift for Mother's Day and knew she would be there to do pretty much anything he asked. Ellen could see it now, him three days into college trying to make instant noodles or do his laundry and

having to call her to ask how to do it, as he probably would like a hundred times in the first few months.

Ellen didn't want to upset her any more than she already was. She might have a nervous breakdown if she had to worry that much about two of her children at once, if she knew about the phone call six nights ago.

"I'm gonna go finish my homework," Ellen said, throwing out her empty Styrofoam ice cream cup and heading upstairs where the sound of rushing water told her the shower was still occupied. She stared down at her phone screen again as she went, only catching a glimpse for a second as she started up the stairs of her mom stood still in the kitchen, watching her go with a slightly sad look on her face, illuminated softly from behind by the one light left on above the sink.

Chapter 3: Leftovers

Jane

Jane returned late the next Friday from another day spent at the Cape, closer to midnight than to just after dinner, with a car full of boxes and a takeout container of pad thai. The kitchen lights were out, the mail was piled in one corner of the counter, and one bowl was left in the sink with the melty chocolate remains of mocha ice cream gluing a spoon to its bottom. She dropped her purse on the kitchen table, slid off her shoes, and walked softly upstairs. The hallway was only illuminated by the light from beneath Andrew's office door. She opened it slowly, the widening sliver revealing his hunched over frame. The desk was covered, as always, in open books marked with post-its, thick packets of paper folded over their staples, red pen marks and pens themselves everywhere, a laptop on top of it all. Jane had teased him after he first got this job as a professor that he couldn't be more stereotypical if he tried, books piled high and hair messy from running his fingers through it. 'My academic,' she'd called him with a kiss.

He looked up as she opened the door and pulled the wire of his earbuds so they fell from his ears.

"Jane." He leaned back in his chair and sighed, running his hands up past his temples and into his hair, disheveling it even more. "It's so late."

"Yeah." She stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. "I got caught up. There's a lot to do." She walked over to him, running her hands across his shoulders and back. "A lot. How was your day?"

He sighed again, absentmindedly reaching a hand out to straighten papers, piling them into slightly neater stacks. "It was fine. I got some work done, came home around 4. Rosie didn't come home till..." he checked the time on his laptop, 11:51, "about an hour ago."

"Cutting it a little close to curfew for a school night."

"That's what I said."

They paused in silence for a minute, Jane still with her hand on the back of his neck. She tucked the tag of his t-shirt in beneath its neckline. He seemed quiet, not in the sense that he was talking less than usual, he was usually quiet in that way, but something seemed still, hesitant within him.

"I brought home Thai King for dinner, I'm gonna go eat." She headed to the door. "How much longer do you think you'll work?" Jane had long ago learned better than to try and have any conversation that mattered while he lingered at his desk. The sentences he'd written and was considering writing swirled around him like a fog that enveloped all her words. Currently, it was an article on the witchcraft trials of 1500's Scotland and their impact on local agriculture and trade systems.

"I'll come down in a minute, I'll just finish this thought," he responded. He leaned forwards again, reaching his hands toward the keyboard as Jane turned into their bedroom to put on more comfortable clothes.

Downstairs, Jane stopped the microwave one second before it beeped, then ate the pad thai from the plastic container. The shrimp were tough and rubbery, and still slightly cold in the middle. She didn't really care. She hadn't eaten the whole time she was at Francie's, so her last meal was a bacon egg and cheese on her hour-long drive down. She ate leaning on the far side of the counter, checking her emails on her phone at the same time. Her exploration of the basement this afternoon had been continually interrupted by calls from clients and colleagues, in particular Maryanne, her boss. Each time the phone rang she'd had to rush upstairs to where there was service in order to answer it.

She was tired. The whiplash of going so often from the muffled, quiet basement, immersed in Francie's collection of photos from her childhood up to Andrew's, to the off-puttingly empty upstairs where she switched her voice and mind back into its professional register had drained her. Deciphering who in these photos was Francie's mother, childhood friend, sister; reminding Maryanne that she'd already forwarded the Linux proofs to their design department. Opening boxes of ornaments collected from almost a century of life, finding the ones from Italy, from Georgia, from the set Francie's father had whittled, going over their newest intern's favicon thumbnails and answering his questions about Adobe Illustrator conversion.

She only had four new emails, luckily, and three of them could wait until morning. She typed a response to the other one as she ate, fork in one hand, phone in the other, assuring Maryanne that Kevin knew about the advanced deadlines for Heal-tech.

Andrew came downstairs with two empty glasses and started to put them in the dishwasher.

"How was it?" he asked, bumping it shut with his hip and turning to face her.

"It was fine. One sec..." Jane put down her fork and used both hands to finish the email, looking up as she hit send. "I mostly finished the kitchen last time, so today I went through some of the basement. I'm just trying to get a sense of what's down there, take an inventory, you know. I brought home all the photos I found, the things that seemed the most important." It was easier to think of it as a task, as something that needed to get done, that there was no point in avoiding. It was *a* kitchen, *a* basement, not Francie's kitchen, Francie's basement. At least that worked now, away from there.

Andrew nodded, but his eyes were having a hard time pulling themselves back from that middle distance. Sometimes it seemed to Jane like he processed the world around him at half speed; she'd long ago learned to pause for longer than she normally would after asking him something before repeating it, to give it time to sink in. "That makes sense," he said slowly. He was incredibly smart, he just moved at a different pace than she did. In the beginning this had caused them to grate against each other, two tectonic plates moving in the same direction at different speeds, jostling and slipping against each other, earthquakes rumbling out from the impacts. By now their edges had mostly worn smooth, and they slid gently next to one another.

Jane looked at him, and he turned his eyes to meet hers. She softened a bit at the familiar feeling of his gaze on her, and said as gently as she could: "We need to talk about a service, hon.

I know she didn't want a wake, or a funeral, or any of that, but what should we do for some sort of memorial? Maybe something by the water, or in the garden?"

"Yeah, I don't know, those both sound nice. She would like those." His eyes had unfocused again, probably no one else would even notice the difference in his gaze, but Jane could tell he wasn't really thinking about her words. "We should sing something," he said, then turned around and put his hands on the counter, leaning into them as he stared down at the floor. Jane could tell he was trying not to cry.

She came around the counter to stand next to him, lifting his arms up and placing them around her waist and shoulders deliberately, as she'd been doing ever since they started dating.

"I know it feels impossible," she said. And it did, to her too. There was a whole life, suddenly gone, and they were the only two people in the world left to manage its evidence. The house, yes, and the objects, but the suddenly severed connections with everyone she'd known, too. Jane thought back to the first morning after she'd passed, when she'd locked herself in Francie's studio with her rolodex and home phone, dialing every number she could find, everyone she'd thought would want to know, need to know. Her voice would start off professional, polite, and then always slid into something softer, not when she actually had to say the words, but when the other person was expressing their shock, their sadness, sharing memories of Francie, the ways she mattered to them. "This is Jane Sereno, Francie's daughter-in-law," she would say, "yes, hi, I'm calling with some bad news, Francie passed away yesterday... No, no one saw it coming... it was very peaceful... thank you, thank you that means a lot... We're managing..."

Jane pulled herself back into the present, focused on Andrew's arms around her, the feel of his smooth button-down shirt.

"We'll get everything figured out, everyone always does," she said out loud, to herself as much as to him. She pulled away from her husband, who had let a few tears slide down his cheeks. She touched them with her fingers on either side of his face, their slick tracks disappearing into the sharp stubble of his beard. She had known from the moment Francie passed that he would not be able to do this on his own. He struggled with decisions at the best of times, doubted himself over things like which mustard to use on a sandwich and if Rosie was more likely to call his grey sweater or his orange sweater frumpy. She knew this, she knew him. She didn't mind taking the lead, she knew how to do that.

"I know," he said. "It's just that nothing feels right, or like the perfect thing to do. To do next, even. To do now. She did so much to make this easy, with the deed, the insurance, all of that, but we never *talked* about this." He sighed. "I just don't know what she would want."

"There might not be one perfect thing. But whatever we do next is good. It's right." She rubbed his shoulders. "I think something in the garden would be nice, like what she put together for your dad. She worked so hard to make it beautiful back there, and we wouldn't have to worry about renting anywhere, or organizing a venue..."

She trailed off as she heard the soft creak of the bottom stair and Rosie appeared in the doorway, her dark hair in a messy bun falling off to one side of her head, and her hands tucked

into the sleeves of the massive hockey tournament sweatshirt she was wearing. It must be one of Liam's. She had smudges of mascara left under her eyes from when she'd washed her face earlier and was pulling her headphones out of her ears.

"I thought I heard the garage door," she said, padding further into the kitchen to lift herself up so she was sitting on the counter, her long bare legs dangling in front of the cabinets. "How was Francie's, Mom?"

Rosie had always called Francie by her name. At first, they'd been trying to get her to say Grammy, cooing over her things like "this is your Grammy, can you say Grammy?" Her little murmurs of "ammy" sounded more like "annie," and they'd decided just to stick with Francie. For a while she called her Fancy, which made everybody laugh. The first time she said the whole word, not just Fancy, Francie had scooped her up off the couch to bounce her on her hip saying "yes, my dear, Francie, that's me! I'm your Francie, and you're my Rosie!" Francie used to laugh every time she would babble it out, said it made her feel young to hear her name from such little lips. She had said when they were out and about everyone might think she was only Rosie's aunt or her sister, not her grandmother.

"It was good, Rosie," Jane responded, turning to give her daughter a kiss on the head. "But strange. Always will be, I think, being there without her."

"Yeah..." Rosie said, her feet swinging to a stop. She glanced at Andrew, then back to Jane.

"You okay, Dad?" she asked softly, in that concerned voice of hers, winding the wires of her headphones round her hand, back and forth.

He looked up at her and smiled, but it wasn't all that convincing. "I will be, we all will be. But right now, I just miss her."

"Me too," she responded. "We were talking about paintings in history today, how a bunch got stolen during World War II and some still haven't been given back, and I kept thinking about what Francie would have to say about that."

"A lot, I bet," said Jane with a smile. She was never known for her lack of opinions. Andrew nodded in agreement.

The three of them sat in silence in the semi-dark kitchen for a while, Rosie perched on the countertop, Jane and Andrew leaning against its perpendicular edge, Jane's hand on Andrew's back.

Rosie's face had dropped after her lighthearted mention of class, and she looked so forlorn in the dim light of the kitchen, and Jane pulled her into a hug. "I know, honey, I miss her too. She was so proud of you, you know that. She loved you so much." Jane pulled back and kissed the top of Rosie's head again, standing on tiptoes to reach her from up on the counter.

"I know," Rosie said, not sounding all that reassured. "Do you need any help, Mom? I could come with you next time if you want." She looked up at Jane.

"Oh, I'll be okay," Jane said, "but thank you for asking. You just focus on finals and enjoying your last few days of high school." Rosie nodded, and looked away. Jane would never

have asked her to give up her summer weekends to sit in Francie's basement, she didn't want to add to the pain she was already feeling.

"Thanks for checking in on us," said Andrew.

Rosie hopped down, sniffed once, and ran a sleeve under her nose, then headed back to the stairs. The motion was so childlike it seemed incompatible with her nearly adult face. Some part of it had closed off, and Jane wished there was more she could do to make her feel better.

"I'm gonna go to bed, I think. Just wanted to say goodnight," Rosie said, and Jane let her go.

"Night, honey," she and Andrew said, at almost the same moment.

After putting her left over pad thai in the fridge, and putting the fork in the dishwasher, Jane grabbed a paper towel to wipe down the counter. "So, does the garden sound good?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at Andrew.

"Sure, I think so. If you think so."

"Okay," she said, and decided tonight was probably not the time to push decisions on the rest of the details. "We'll pick a date tomorrow, and we can start sending out the information." She tossed the paper towel in the trash and grabbed her phone. "But for now, I think it's time for bed."

Andrew followed her upstairs, and she saw Rosie's light still on down the hall, heard her voice muttering softly, presumably on the phone with Liam. Jane headed into the bathroom to brush her teeth. She'd thought Andrew might come to bed, climb under the sheets beside her, but as she turned off the tap, she heard the sound of his laptop logging back in and the door to his office closing softly.

Chapter 4: Psalms

Ellen

Aleaya and Ellen communicated in four different ways, frequently more than one way at a time. Ellen's mom had joked, once, that they'd started a conversation in the fifth grade when Aleaya moved to town and it had just never ended, instead it had simply changed form and content, lulled and swelled, but continued on like an unstoppable garrulous wave.

Firstly, they texted. An intricate language of intentionally lowercase letter 'i's, not *too* many, emojis, and never a period at the end of a message unless they were genuinely mad. Ellen's name in Aleaya's phone was 'El Oh El' with the sparkle emoji next to it, and in Ellen's phone Aleaya's was 'lea michele', no emoji, no caps. Aleaya had been obsessed with Glee for *years* and Ellen wouldn't let her forget it, plus she got a kick out of it every time her phone told her she had a new message from Lea Michele. She imagined if anyone else ever saw it they'd be intrigued. Aleaya was the only one who called Ellen El, not Len. Their texts were frequently lengthy, and the majority of them were sent at night. Aleaya texted in one long message, crafting it like a paragraph and leaving Ellen to stare at the three dots that meant she was typing for minutes on end. Ellen, however, sent dozens of shorter messages, one after the other, hitting send in between each phrase, thought, sometimes word. When one of them was sad, or feeling overwhelmed or just needed to vent, they'd start the message with "are you there?" and the other would respond "i'm here." When they had to go, they never said 'bye,' only 'see you later,' or 'talk to you soon,' or 'brb.' They both thought 'bye' was a little too harsh.

Secondly, they snapchatted. Throughout the day, even if they were just in different classes for three periods in a row, they sent unpretentious selfies back and forth, sometimes having whole separate conversations through the words they added over the photos than in their iMessage app. They never used the beautifying filters, only the ones that gave you giant noses or a fake beard or stretched your whole face around weirdly. Sometimes they took photos mid yawn or mid sneeze and captioned it as such, laughing at their own ridiculous expressions. They each had an arsenal of mortifying screenshots of the other from over the years. That was true trust, not making someone delete the most hideous photos of yourself you've ever seen. Forehead only, eyes crossed or rolled back, double and triple chins as they lay on their bed watching Netflix, tears still on their cheeks as they made a peace sign with one hand, typing out 'just had a breakdown!' with a sarcastic emoji sticking its tongue out.

Thirdly, they sent each other Instagram DMs of videos or posts that made them laugh, clothes or outfits they thought the other might like, astrology interpretations of their signs (Virgo for Ellen, Scorpio for Aleaya), and countless other things. Sometimes they'd send posts by people in their school with captions like "wOW dId yOu KnOw ThEy DRINK?" when the photos were intentionally full of red solo cups. Often it was posts by their favorite musicians or actors and actresses where they looked stunning, drooling over someone's jawline or waistline. They weren't outwardly big fans of the Kardashians, but they each still liked every post by Kylie and Kendall. Sometimes they sent poems or paintings, or videos of DIY crafts. Mostly, though,

they sent memes or stupid posts that just made them laugh. Sometimes they talked about how their sense of humor would probably be indecipherable to most other people, even though most of the posts they sent had tens of thousands of likes. No one could make them laugh the way they did together, though, that much was true.

And, finally, they talked. In fast whispers while teachers had their backs turned during a presentation, loudly in the halls walking to the cafeteria or the busses, softly and earnestly in the dark late at night when everyone else in the house was asleep, sarcastically through uncontrollable laughter while watching something on TV or on Ellen's laptop, but always, always talked. They would joke that they could probably sit in an empty room for a week and do nothing but talk and still never run out of things to say. It wouldn't hurt if they could listen to songs or watch music videos or sitcoms or stalk celebrities on Instagram to add fodder to their conversations. They still passed notes every now and then, and the edges of their worksheets ended up scattered with jotted down remarks when they sat next to each other in classes. They could sit in silence comfortably, they just rarely wanted to. On more than one morning, while Aleaya and Ellen were still half asleep, quietly eating cereal at her breakfast bar Aleaya's dad would walk past with a cup of coffee and say "Ah, the girls have ceased to speak, has the world ceased to turn?"

They never called each other on the phone, though. Their methods meant they could be doing other things, chores, homework, listening to their parents, while still continuing their conversations. Talking on the phone made it much harder to do anything else, and plus, anyone near you could hear everything you said. It made no sense to them. Even for the most important of conversations, like when Ellen's cat died or David Tennant liked Aleaya's tweet about his new show, they never called.

So, when her phone had rung that night, now over a week ago, and she'd seen *Call from: lea michele* appear, she'd already started to panic.

Currently, as she climbed the three steep metal stairs onto the bus in the cool air of a late spring morning, Ellen was extremely aware of her phone's silence. There had been barely a buzz or a ding to be heard in well over a week. Aleaya had been the source of probably ninety percent of her notifications, so all that remained were alerts from Facebook that her aunt had commented on some cringe-worthy meme or an email from her English teacher about the essay due on Wednesday. Each vibration sent her racing to check her phone, but they always amounted to nothing.

She sat down on the bus, leaving her phone on the seat beside her as she looked out the window waiting for Isabel. Isabel and Ellen had been riding the bus together for a year now, ever since high school started in the fall. Mabel had been Ellen's bus driver since the third grade, even when bus routes switched for middle school and again for high school, she somehow always had Mabel. She was a kind old lady, but unafraid to scold the boys who threw backpacks around and screamed at the top of their lungs. Isabel had been switched onto her bus for high school, getting on just five stops after Ellen. They sat about as far back as was allowed for freshmen, somewhere

near the middle of the bus, on the right side. Ellen got the window on the way to school, Isabel got it on the way back. Ellen preferred the window, because that way there was no pressure to turn around and talk to anyone else seated near you, as Isabel so often did. The morning ride was quieter, anyway. No one wanted to be awake at 6:53, much less sitting on a school bus with their legs tucked up against the seat in front of them so they could scribble in the rest of their math homework against their knees. Ellen always thought teachers must be able to tell when homework was done on the bus since the writing was so messy, random lines jutting out at all angles when the bus hit a pothole or made a sharp turn. And Mable drove like a madwoman.

Even if she'd had unfinished homework, she wouldn't have bothered with it this morning. It was cold for June this early in the morning and her yellow cardigan was doing nothing to stop the goosebumps crawling up her arms and legs when her bare skin touched the chilly green pleather seat. Three stops till Isabel got on.

She had wondered if maybe she shouldn't be doing so well with homework, if maybe she could get away with slacking a little, for once. It would make sense, honestly. If anyone asked why she hadn't turned something in she could tell them what had happened last week, and they'd have to understand. But that would mean she'd have to tell them what had happened last week. And besides, she'd somehow been even more on top of it than ever.

As soon as she got home from school the thought of writing paragraphs on F. Scott Fitzgerald or conjugating French verbs seemed absolutely impossible, and she would escape into Netflix shows, YouTube videos, explore random Wikipedia articles, and otherwise waste time with her eyes glued to her screen, curled up in her lavender duvet. But around ten p.m., it would all start to lose its appeal, the words of some actor playing a time-traveler or beauty guru explaining how to blend eyeshadow becoming frustratingly dull, and she would slam her laptop shut and open her binders, losing herself instead in assignments and problem sets.

Last night she hadn't been lying about needing to finish her chemistry homework after the graduation, and her brief, slightly panicky stint of productivity had ended around quarter-to-one in the morning with the litany of homework questions answered. Probably incorrectly, she thought, but oh well. Chemistry was impossible anyways. She missed biology. Not least because Aleaya had sat beside her in the back corner of the classroom.

She rubbed her eyes and looked down at her phone, scrolling mindlessly through Instagram. She'd spent enough time on it last night during the few hours of procrastination before the productivity wave had hit that there was absolutely nothing new or interesting to catch her attention. She went to switch from her normal account, her profile full of photos of friends, sunsets, and most recently a rare photo taken by her mom where she'd actually looked okay, to her smaller, more private account. When the window popped up, though, there were two other options. Aleaya had left her account, @aleayyaaaa, logged in, but there was another, unfamiliar one, something called @image.insight3. Ellen remembered a few weeks ago Aleaya's phone had died, and she'd wanted to find some post she'd saved to show Ellen, so she'd borrowed her phone to do it. This explained @aleayyaaaa, but not @image.insight3. The mystery account was staring back at her. The only person who could have logged into Instagram on her phone was

Aleaya, so it must have been hers. She wasn't sure, though. She was somehow afraid of what she might find if she opened it. She clicked on Aleaya's regular account, and the screen refreshed.

Upon first glance, the feed looked pretty much identical to Ellen's. They followed a lot of the same accounts, of course, mostly people from school. All their recent photos were unliked. Aleaya clearly didn't have access to a phone or the internet in any way. Ellen scrolled down the feed quickly, careful not to like anything or watch any stories that would reveal someone had been active on the account. She came across a bunch of posts from Shawn Mendes, rolled her eyes that Aleaya even followed him. Ellen was always making fun of how she muddied her otherwise immaculate music taste with some of these cringy, whiny, popstar boys. She smiled to herself, leaning against the chilly metal wall of the bus as they rounded a corner. More photos she'd already seen, she could see her own Instagram handle popping up, letting Aleaya know that this post had been liked by '@ellen.lemon and 85 others.'

She clicked on Aleaya's profile, and it looked just the same as it always did, her most recent photo was one of Aleaya in her backyard, a huge hydrangea bush behind her as she sat cross legged, looking off to her right with just a hint of a smile at the edges of her eyes and lips. She'd added a subtle black and white filter that made it look like an ad you'd see in a magazine, she looked effortless and serene. It was from three weeks ago, and Ellen had taken it.

When she clicked on the explore tab, she noticed that the top recommended search, the one she must have made most recently or most often, was @image.insight3. She'd been looking it up, checking on it from this account. It must be hers, but she'd never told Ellen anything about having a second Instagram. She didn't even have one of the silly "fake-instas", or finstas, like Ellen did for posting things you only wanted a few people to see. The profile picture for it was a simple, flat grey-blue color with a white flower drawn over it, the strokes loose and looping, made with a single line. It was elegant, very Aleaya. She opened the options for all the accessible accounts, and only hesitated a moment before clicking on @image.insight3. She had to know. She'd only look quickly, see what it was all about, then she'd log out permanently. Plus, Isabel would be getting on soon. The thought came to her, though not particularly reassuring, that it wasn't the first time she'd read something Aleaya meant to be private.

The screen loaded. The feed was full of unfamiliar photos, she clearly didn't follow anyone they knew in real life on here. Ellen clicked on the profile. The numbers at the top jumped out at her first: 3,721 followers? And she was only following a few hundred people? That was basically famous.

In place of her name, there was only the initials A. Her bio read "images & insights // images in sight" and was followed by some emojis of flowers and leaves. Ellen clicked on the first post. It was a zoomed in photo of a hand, Aleaya's, she could tell, with the fingers curled gently in. The black and white filter made the small creases running all over the pale palm and darker knuckles more visible. Skin filled the whole frame. There was only the subtle glint of the silver ring Aleaya always wore on her middle finger tucked beneath the crease where it met the palm to break up the soft grey shapes. The caption was a poem, stretching down past the bottom of the screen.

“you’re mint tea and migraine nights,
stomach aches and fairy lights.
watercolors in the rain,
something scratching at my brain.

dizzy, fizzy, fuzzy, faint
try to speak, my body shakes.
caffeine sweats and aspirin sleep,
eyes i just don’t want to keep.

it’s cold and dark, you might be gone,
everything drags on so long.
someone pulled my gut too tight,
i know i won’t rest tonight.

benadryl naps and alcohol sips,
eyeliner smudges and poisonous drips.
my body’s decaying before my eyes,
i sit in the dark, too young to die.

missing, kissing, falling, faint,
try to breathe, my body breaks.
caffeine sweats and aspirin sleep,
eyes i just don’t want to keep.

tremble, bend, inhale, stop.
exhale, maybe, maybe not.

everything shakes, i still can’t sleep.
eyes i just don’t want to keep.”

The poem was signed only with the initial A. Ellen sat back, stunned. The poem had over 300 likes, and dozens of comments. She scrolled through a few of them, the top ones reading: “omg I think this is the best one yet,” “eyes I just don’t want to keep is SO GOOD,” “wow. I wanna know this girl’s name before she gets famous,” and “this is what my insomnia would sound like if it could write.” It had been posted only a day before the night of the phone call.

She scrolled to the next one, another black and white photo, zoomed in closely, this time of the edge of a shell lying on the beach. She could see the individual grains of sand, gritty along the ridges of the pale shell. The first line of the poem read

“ocean air and salt swept hair-”

“Hey, Len!”

Isabel dropped into the seat beside her. Ellen clicked her phone off with a start, stared up with what she knew must have been a guilty look on her face. She rearranged it into a dull smile.

“Hey,” she said back, “happy Monday.”

Luckily, Isabel hadn’t noticed anything. She was arranging her backpack on the floor of the bus between her feet. She sat up, pulling on the grey hoodie she’d been carrying and leaning back into the seat with a huff.

“I almost missed the bus. My mom was already pissed so thank god she didn’t have to drive me. I snoozed my alarm in my sleep like six times.” She was pulling her own phone out from a pocket of the backpack and shoving her reddish hair back out of her face with her other hand.

“Yeah, yikes,” responded Ellen half-heartedly. All she wanted to do was keep scrolling through that account. There were so many posts. She didn’t even know *Aleaya liked* poetry that much, much less *wrote* it. Why wouldn’t she tell her? Did she think Ellen would judge her, think it was stupid or bad? Because she wouldn’t, she thought it was fucking cool. That poem was *good*, like really good. Better than Rupi Kaur, for sure.

“What do you drop today?” asked Isabel. “I don’t have chem, which, thank God, because I fully forgot about the homework.”

“Uh, math, I think,” Ellen said, struggling to remember. “That chem homework was long.” Her mind was still reeling. She must have had the account for a long time to get that many followers, and it seems like they loved her. Was she friends with any of them, or were they just strangers? Did she really trust those random people more than Ellen?

“Ugh, really? Damn. I guess I better start it during study hall because practice goes until like nine tonight.”

Isabel was a theatre kid, but the kind who always got a lead and was genuinely talented. She wasn’t just family friends with the director. This spring the school was putting on *Children of Eden*, and Isabel was playing Yonah. She had the best solo, she’d told Ellen the day the cast list had been released, so she was happy with it even if she hadn’t gotten to be Eve. The show was next week, so it was tech week, she was currently explaining, which the cast and crew called hell week.

“We legit have to be at school for over twelve hours every day. It’s crazy. I don’t know when I’m supposed to get any homework done.” She pulled her hair up into a bun, then bent down to tie her shoe as she continued talking. “My mom sent me with so many snacks, though, so at least I won’t have to eat the school pizza they give us for dinner.” She opened her backpack once her laces were done and motioned for Ellen to look inside. On top of her binders were piles of fruit snacks, Ziplock bags of apples, granola bars, apple sauce, and clementines.

“Nice,” said Ellen.

The bus was filling up now, it’s morning quiet evolving into the soft murmurs of conversations and occasional bursts of laughter that would flow into the chaos of the school’s lobby and hallways before the first period bell.

Isabel kept talking about the show, saying something about mic tape and how her costume was so see-through she had to go buy a slip, and where even did you get a slip in the twenty-first century, and Ellen was once again grateful for her ability to carry on a conversation completely by herself.

Only a few minutes later another one of Isabel's friends sat down in the seat next to them, and she turned her knees out to the aisle and started explaining hell week and mic tape all over again, leaving Ellen to pull her backpack up onto her lap and open Instagram again with her phone hidden by the bag. She opened to the profile, rolling the username over in her mind, @image.insight3. The whole account was made of close-up black and white shots. Sometimes they were clearly an object, a hand, a shell, a leaf, a glass of water on a windowsill, but sometimes they were more vague, composed of abstract shapes made up of dark and light spaces. One looked like it was divided in half by a grey line, darkness on one side, light on the other. Ellen figured out it was a door frame, carefully angled and cropped. The poem that accompanied it was fairly short:

at three a.m. i cross some line
bleeding into another time in
the witching hour, the dark, the calm,
where time may wallow, a lonely psalm.

i'm never sure i'll wake anew,
or who i might be if i do.

my breath a steady decrescendo,
lungs empty, dry, as desert willow hear
a mourning dove coo a soft amen,
and i rise, reborn, and try again.

There were more comments saying that the poem spoke to them, people complimenting her, pointing out the significance of the photo as it related to the poem. The account had responded to one person's comment of "Where do you get your inspiration to write things like this???" by saying "anywhere and everywhere!"

Ellen noticed she never really responded to comments, except for those by one account, @mayjohnson.photo. She seemed to comment on every post with things like "lovely" and "so glad you went with this one" and "love this photo," to which Aleaya would respond with a single emoji of a black heart. Ellen clicked on the commenter's account. She was a photographer apparently, this May Johnson, and most of her images were of the same girl, maybe May herself. There were images of her with her hair slicked back, her face shiny and wet, staring intensely into the camera. There was one of her bare back, her arms wrapped around herself so her fingers almost touched the bony protrusions of her spine. There was a series of images of her hands holding bunches of roses, some with her fingers pricked by the thorns and beads of blood appearing on the skin. They all had grainy filters over them, and deep shadows. She had almost ten thousand followers. @image.insight3 was following her, had liked and commented on nearly

every photo. The comments were the same, intensely familiar, and casual. They must be friends, Ellen thought. She clicked on the tab for direct messages, and sure enough the first one was a conversation with @mayjohnson.photo.

She was about to open the thread of messages when she was jostled by Isabel pulling her backpack up from the floor, and realized they'd pulled into school. It would have to wait.

The voices all around came back into focus, and Ellen blinked as if she'd just woken up.

"Anyway, I guess it'll be fine that way, but I would rather have had it be more of a surprise to the audience, you know?" Isabel was saying.

They filed out into the aisle of the bus, thanking Mable who responded with a nod as they climbed down the stairs and made their way through the large glass doors of the high school. The clamor of four grades worth of students milling around in the last few minutes before the first bell rang surrounded them.

"Do you have lunch one or two today?" Isabel was asking as they headed towards her group of theatre kid friends by the doors to the auditorium.

"One," responded Ellen, dropping her bag to the ground where she could lean against it. She didn't feel like making conversation with Ethan or Lila or Rachel. They were nice, but they were Isabel's friends, not hers. She just sat with them in the mornings now that Aleaya wasn't here.

Usually, the two of them would claim a bench outside the main office, but just one person taking up such coveted real estate usually garnered dirty looks or, worse, someone asking to sit next to you. So, Ellen settled into a spot on the floor and was about to use the last five minutes before the bell to dive back into her phone, but Isabel kept pulling her back into the conversation.

"Ellen, do you think you'll come to the show on Friday or Saturday?"

"Uh, Friday," she responded, with no intention of going at all. She felt bad, she really did like Isabel and enjoyed watching her perform, but there was nothing she wanted less right now than to walk alone into an auditorium full of her peers when she didn't have to.

"You okay, Ellen?" Isabel was asking. She was looking into Ellen's eyes with sincere concern. "Is it about Aleaya?"

"I-" Ellen started to respond, but Isabel cut her off, reaching out for her hand to squeeze, causing Ellen to let go of her phone.

"We're here for you, you know. It must be really tough watching your best friend go through something like that."

"What? How do you-" again, Isabel cut her off, shushing her in what must have been an attempt at soothing her but came off more like how a preschool teacher would reassure a student who dropped their ice cream.

"Oh, don't worry, I won't tell anyone. I know it's kind of awkward, I just heard from my brother." Her brother was a senior, Ellen realized. Could Jonas have known something?

"Its not," Ellen started, "it's not awkward, she just doesn't really want people knowing her business." She stared around, the rest of Isabel's friends were looking at her with an infuriating mix of pity and avoidance. They kept looking at her but wouldn't meet her eye.

“Don’t worry,” Lila chimed in, “we won’t tell anyone.”

“Yeah,” said Ethan, “and I’m sorry about all that. My brother attempted suicide a few years ago, but he’s okay now, so don’t worry.”

“Yeah,” said Isabel, “she’ll be totally fine, don’t worry.” She finally let Ellen’s hands drop and smiled as if her platitudes had fixed everything. Her palms had been sweaty and cold, and Ellen tried to subtly wipe off the back of her hand on her cardigan.

“Thanks, guys,” Ellen said hesitantly, not really meaning it. They all kept staring, like she was going to give them details, or start crying and have some kind of meltdown. Instead, thankfully, the first bell rang. Ellen leapt up, said bye, and walked as quickly as she could to her first period class.

She’d promised she wouldn’t tell anyone. How had Isabel found out?

Chapter 5: Beach Roses

Jane

Francie's service was held in mid-June, on an overcast Sunday in her backyard where the guests could see her beloved gardens, only mildly overgrown. Jane had been watering them each time she came down, doing her best to keep them alive. The reception after Luis's funeral had been held here almost two decades prior, but it had been drizzling that day, a mild reprieve from the downpour they had stood in during the burial. Today, the air felt strangely ominous. A strong wind blew the pale grey clouds rapidly across the sky and rustled the faded purple tablecloths. Rosie and Andrew were by the edge of the yard, where the moss and grass faded into undergrowth and narrow trees, cleaning up the last quiche crusts and picked-over crudité platters on folding tables. Jane watched them from the deck as they chatted to each other. She was in a pale purple dress with a wide floral print that fell just below her knee. She hadn't realized it kind of matched the tablecloths until just now.

She smiled, watching Rosie's narrow back bent over the veggies and stray cocktail napkins, gathering things up. Rosie had been invaluable this weekend, helping Jane organize food and photos, setting up tables, doing her best to take charge and help out. They had stayed up late last night, folding programs in half so they'd be ready to give out to the guests. Jane and Rosie had sat at the dining room table, laying them flat one by one and folding them so Francie's smiling face was on the outside. Jane had seen them clutched in almost every hand as people milled around before the service started, then open on laps as the guests took their seats in the folding chairs, and now there were a few left behind on seats, or scattered on the grass.

A large, framed photo of Francie sat on the porch table beside a bouquet of beach roses they had cut earlier that morning. They had been her favorite flower, and when she taught beginner pastel classes, she always had her students start by drawing beach roses. They'd brought out some of her paintings of the *rosa rugosa*, its bright, determined blooms shining pink in the faded light of the afternoon.

In the late morning, the scene had looked nearly identical, except the platters were full, the napkins nearly stacked, and the chairs only halfway assembled. Now things looked a bit more disheveled, and the emptiness seemed louder after the chatter of voices, the high-pitched whine of the crickets and distant peeper frogs amplified.

In the busy silence before the service, Jane had heard a car pull up the driveway, wheels crunching over loose shell, and had walked down the lawn to see who was the first to arrive. Their invitation had specified that this was *not* a funeral, there was no need to wear black, but when Jane recognized her mother stepping from their low BMW, she was unsurprised to see her in a plain, somber black dress and black stockings, her short grey hair slightly flattened in the back from the headrest. She'd at least put on a glittering pin, some kind of rainbow-colored bird. Jane recognized it as a gift from Francie to her son's new mother-in-law from their very first Christmas together. She appreciated the thought.

“Mom, hi, how are you?” Jane walked over to her side of the car, standing with a hand on the open car door.

“I’m well, dear, how are you doing?” she responded as she finished extricating herself, brushing her palms against her dress to smooth out any wrinkles from the drive. She looked up, making momentary eye contact with Jane. She got right to down business and asked, “what can I help you with?” then called back into the car, “don’t forget my pocketbook, Dave, it’s in the backseat.”

“Nothing, Mom, we’re all set, really. It was good of you to make the drive.”

“Of course, dear, of course.” Her mother leaned in to give her a brief hug with one arm, her set of silver bangles pressing into Jane’s shoulder blade uncomfortably. “We were so sorry to hear the news when you called a few weeks ago, so sorry...” She trailed off as she pulled back and started to head for the front door of the house.

“Oh, this way Mom, we’re actually all in the backyard.” Jane realized her parents had only been here twice, both times over a decade ago.

“Diane,” Jane’s father called after her, “your pocketbook.” He turned to Jane, locking the car and dropping the keys into the large leather bag before handing it over. “I’m so sorry, Jane. So sorry. How is Andrew holding up?” They walked into the back yard after her mother, Jane’s dad peering at her through his narrow, wire-rimmed glasses, one hand rolling up the sleeves of his grey collared shirt. It was almost the same shade as his hair and eyebrows.

“He’s okay, Dad. You know, still figuring everything out, but he’s okay.” He patted her firmly on the shoulder as they made their way towards the array of purple tablecloths, the flimsy paper rippling audible in the slight wind. She looked up, meeting his eyes for the first time, soft bluish-grey and set deeply into his wrinkled face, and saw that they were slightly damp.

She was surprised. “Thanks for coming, Dad. Really.”

He didn’t respond, just patted her shoulder once more and made his mouth into an even tighter line. She could tell he would have started to cry if he’d spoken a response. They stood silently next to one another for a moment, looking at the still empty set up of the yard, and Jane pretended not to notice as he regained his composure. She wanted to say something but had no idea what.

Diane was handing an off-white envelope to Andrew by the table with the beach roses, patted his hand twice as he took it, then headed inside. Rosie was lingering awkwardly by the food table, staring at her phone. Jane could tell she wasn’t in the mood to talk to her grandparents, and even though Rosie would never say this to her, she was far too considerate, she felt an ache realizing that the only grandparent Rosie had felt truly close to was now gone.

“You can find a chair, Dad, if you want. Do you want some water? I know it was a long drive.” Jane asked, relieved to find his eyes dry once more.

“Oh no, I’m perfectly fine, thank you.” He hadn’t exactly been close to Francie, so she was left to speculate what it was about the scene of his daughter organizing a memorial service for someone else that was paining him. “Do these still need to be set up?” he asked, motioning to the pile of folding chairs leaning against the edge of the deck.

“Oh, yeah, but Andrew can handle it, Dad, don’t worry.” He waved her off before she had time to protest and started lining up the rest of the chairs on the lawn, busying himself carrying them over one by one. Jane heard another car approach and decided to leave him to it. Andrew had vanished into the house, presumably with her mother. She’d have to go rescue him once she greeted whoever else was arriving. He was too kind to stand how awkward and anxious her mother frequently seemed when outside of her own house, and would no doubt be doing his best to make her comfortable, as if this day were at all about her. He’d been like this since the day Jane had first introduced them, desperate to get her to like him, to feel comfortable around him, but it never happened. Jane had given up herself quite a while ago. Her mother was never content, never effusive or affectionate the way Andrew could be, the way Francie had been.

The next arrivals were Ginny and her husband. Ginny ran the Art Center where Francie had taught, and her husband was thirty years younger than her. They held hands everywhere they went. Jane accepted their platter of cucumber sandwiches and Ginny’s lingering, tight hug, and left them to wander the yard.

Rosie was hanging up the last few prints of Francie’s paintings and drawings along a string they’d tied between two trees, abstracts in yellow and blue interspersed with delicate pastel drawings of the sea in the sun, the dunes at sunset, birds in flight, flowers bending beneath the weight of their blooms. They had pulled these prints from the basement, where they had been stacked neatly in a cardboard box beneath many layers of newsprint. Many of her originals were still hung at the Art Center from their most recent show, or up on walls all around the house, or leaning against desks and easels in her studio, piled ten deep. The only original they’d pulled out was hanging on a nail on the outside of the house that usually held a windchime. It was a self-portrait done in oil, dated 1966, just a few years after she dropped out of art school, and not too long before Andrew had been born. She was sitting on the side of a pool, a black bathing suit covering her torso, and the colorful light filtering through a beach umbrella was making her skin glow rainbow. She was smiling with her lips closed, but her eyes looked like she was mid-laugh. Her dark hair came only to her shoulders here, thick and full and curling in slightly at the bottom, but the creases around the edges of her eyes looked just as they had in her last years, when her hair had turned pure silver and reached all the way to her waist. The light seemed to dance around her, fusing with her skin and melting into the air in places, blotting out some of the tops of her thighs, her stomach, a shoulder.

Jane excused herself from the most recent stream of arrivals offering their sympathies and made her way into the house. Sure enough, she found Andrew and her mother in the kitchen, her mother holding a half-drunk glass of water.

“-art history? How interesting. Has she always liked things like that?” she was saying.

“Oh yeah, she loved museum field trips, even as a kid. And I think she liked hearing Francie talk about her art and all the other artists she knew and loved. They used to look through some of her huge catalogue books for hours.” He caught sight of Jane, and called over to her, “Hon, we’re just talking about how Rosie’s been all into art history this year.”

“Mhm. Mom, do you want to come outside?” Jane interrupted their conversation, glancing at Andrew. His eyes looked back at her with understanding, and thanks. He’d just gotten out of the shower five minutes before everyone arrived, and his hair was still wet, glistening black. He looked young to her today. She couldn’t explain it, but he looked just like he had when they’d first met: wide-eyed, easily side-tracked, one foot in that middle-distance she could never quite reach. There were dark spots on the shoulders of his white and blue shirt, and she had the urge to reach out and try to brush them off, as if they were specs of dust.

“Sure, sure,” her mother said, following Jane back out, Andrew walking behind them, running a hand through his hair to smooth it back as it dried.

Rosie was talking to Ginny out in the yard, her husband standing silently beside them, tethered to Ginny by the hand as always. She was nodding quietly as Ginny explained something or other, waving her free hand in the air animatedly. The yard had filled up with mostly white-haired folks. The neighbors and their young kids had come by, and some teens she assumed must have been Francie’s art students at one point were lingering in a closed-off clump by the table of sodas, waters, and lemonade. There were some groups standing by the string of prints, pointing things out and discussing amongst themselves. Jane smiled, she felt pride seeing them admire Francie’s work.

She, Andrew, and her mother lingered on the deck. Jane reached out and took Andrew’s hand. His eyes were unfocused, somewhere between Rosie and the bouquet of beach roses.

“She was a beautiful woman, very dignified.” Diane said suddenly, looking down at the photo of Francie.

“Tenacious, too,” Andrew added, pulled from his daze, “like those beach roses.” He smiled at Diane, who simply nodded in return, without looking at him. His face fell slightly.

“Mom, we’re going to go talk to everyone for a bit, okay?” Jane said.

“Of course,” she said, “where did your father get off to? He’s always disappearing at things like this... oh there he is.” she said, spotting him scooping some cut strawberries onto a paper plate. She headed carefully down the stairs.

“You okay?” Jane asked.

“Yeah, I mean- yeah.” he responded. He sighed in something that seemed like a mix of resignation and reluctance.

“What was she talking to you about in there?”

“Mostly about Rosie, she wanted to know how school was going, if she was still with the boyfriend whose name she can never remember, if she was applying to college yet. She said I put together what looks like a very nice memorial.” He smiled at her and kissed her hand. “I told her it was you who made it so nice.”

“Thanks, hon. Do you want to start the service?” Jane asked. “Or give people some more time to mingle?” In some part of her brain, she felt a desire to have it over with, as if this would somehow be easier for both of them once this was done. As if this was the hard part.

Andrew hesitated, and she knew that he would never truly want to start, to stand up in

front of all these people. He was remarkably shy for a professor that spoke in front of people for a living. She watched him steel himself, saw his resolve form as he straightened up and took a deep breath, shifting into his professorial persona, strengthening his voice. "I'll get it started," he said.

Andrew had stood in front of the assembled crowd, doing his best to stand tall. His teaching voice had sounded odd to Jane in this context, as if a crowd of grad students were assembled before him, not everyone within driving distance who had cared for his dead mother. The Art Center ladies had gathered near the front, holding purses on their laps, tan loafers tucked on the metal bars of the folding chairs. The teenagers were in the last two rows, doing their best not to whisper to one another and looking physically awkward as they shifted in their dresses and light cardigans. Jane didn't recognize any of them, although they had all greeted her when they piled out of someone's minivan, said how sorry they were, how much they loved Francie as a teacher.

Rosie had been standing off to the side of Andrew, at the edge of the chairs. She was in a soft pink dress, and she looked truly beautiful against the deep green of the towering rhododendron bushes that lined part of the yard. Her hair was about the same length as Francie's in her self-portrait, and just as dark. Jane had walked over to her, put her arm around her, and squeezed her close. She had been watching her husband, but a cardinal landed in the dogwood tree beside him, and its bright splotch of red drew her eye. She'd had to pry her gaze back to him.

She noticed with a start that he had finished speaking, so she reached down to the speaker Rosie had connected her iPhone to, and gave her a nod to press play. 'Singing in the Rain' came through the speaker, Gene Kelly's happy voice flooding the verdant yard with its nostalgic, radio-like sound. It almost seemed like it might even rain, Jane thought, looking up at the light grey clouds as the first line started. She looked down at Rosie as they sang, and noticed that she was crying. Her daughter's tears were quiet, but she could hear them in her voice as she sang along from beside her, could pick out the wobble in her tone from among the overlapping smattering of voices that had joined in. She wrapped her arm around her again, pulling her tight, looking out at Andrew who seemed stranded in front of everyone now that his prepared speech was done. The cardinal flew away.

Andrew met her eyes and she beckoned him over. He came to stand beside Rosie, relieved. His eyes were damp, too. The three of them sang together as they went through the song, and Jane felt hot tears on her own cheeks. She couldn't help but smile, though, as they ended the song, remembering Francie singing it to Rosie during a huge summer storm when she was only four or five, thunder clapping overhead as they danced on the deck, soaked to the bone, and laughing like maniacs. She'd started out miserable because their beach day had been cancelled, and ended up practically radiating joy. Jane had toweled Rosie off when they'd come inside, scooping her up in her Little Mermaid beach towel and rustling her hair, grinning at Francie as she insisted they watch the movie again that night after dinner.

She had watched Rosie read a poem in front of everyone, seen her pull her shoulders back and raise her chin the way her drama teacher had told her to do, projecting her voice clear across the yard. In the audience, Ginny was clutching a tissue, the girls were sitting somberly, fidgeting much less now, and her mother's still eyes were fixed directly on Jane. Her father was staring ahead, seemingly entranced by Rosie's reading. She met her mother's eyes. Her lips were pursed so tightly there was a rim of white around them, and she was clutching her hands in her lap. She stood out in her black dress, a blot of darkness among the summer greens and florals surrounding her. Rosie had finished, dropping the piece of paper she'd been clutching down to her side, and her mother looked away, towards Rosie. There had been a brief, quiet applause.

Now, Rosie came towards Jane with an armful of platters, plates, and napkins. She gave her a quick smile, then headed inside to throw everything away. Andrew had folded up the tablecloths, but the breeze had caused them to unfurl a bit and ripple in the wind. He hadn't noticed, as he had started to take down the tables, folding each leg in one by one as he knelt on the lawn. Jane's mother came out from the house.

"Jane, dear, shouldn't you be helping him with those tablecloths? They're going to be blown away." She was digging in her purse for something or other, probably a comb for her ever so slightly windswept hair. Jane could practically feel her eyes on her own hair, stuck to the back of her neck with sweat and brushed roughly off her forehead.

"He'll be fine, Mom. I'll get them in a minute."

"Mm." She made a slight noise, the one she'd adopted in favor of comments that would cause Jane to remind her she was an adult, and no longer in need of parenting.

"Where's Dad, is he alright to drive home so soon, or do you want to stay for dinner?" Jane asked, slightly reluctantly. As her mother proceeded to explain, as she'd known she would that he would be fine, they would head out as soon as he'd finished helping Rosie with the dishes and recycling, Jane had the upsetting thought that she would have rather been stood with Francie watching everyone clean up her own mother's funeral.

The thought immediately brought tears to her eyes, and she clenched her fist on the side her mother couldn't see. Diane looked up, though, and caught the pain in Jane's expression.

"Oh, Jane, I'm very sorry. I know you and Francie were very close, and I know Andrew must be hurting now, being all alone."

Jane couldn't respond for a minute, as she did her best to gain control of her throat. She had felt like a child in front of her mother only twice since moving out, once when she had run out of money at twenty-five and needed a loan, and once when she told her she was pregnant. Her whole childhood, her mother had felt like she held a distance between her children, like there was some barrier that stopped her from truly knowing them. She had treated them like adults from the time they could talk. Jane knew she loved her, loved all her siblings, and wanted the best for them, but there had always been a deep, immovable sadness laced with fear deep down in her core. As a teenager, Jane had decided it was because she regretted having children, because she felt trapped in the role of a mother and was only halfheartedly playing it out. She

imagined a life for her mother in which she was a fast-paced businesswoman pursuing some secret passion, traveling the world, jumping between men every few months or years. She had created countless dreams her mother might have been clinging to, desperate to leave behind her bland, disinterested family and follow them. She thought maybe her mother resented her but was too good of a person to abandon them.

This had been her explanation up until the moment she told her mother she was pregnant. She had imagined the moment countless times, sitting across from her at her childhood dining room table in the yellow light of the seventies chandelier. She'd imagined saying the words, catching a glimpse of pain, sorrow, or pity flash across her mother's face. She had imagined she would give her advice on what to do differently, tell her to wait, to not have the baby. Or maybe even be excited for Jane to have an opportunity to do things differently, jealous of her joy about having this child. But her reaction had been tepid, lukewarm. She had congratulated her, smiled convincingly, given her a hug and asked all the expected questions about due date, gender, how she was feeling, how far along, if she'd been to the doctor yet. But at the heart of it, somewhere, Jane had felt like she just didn't *care*.

Jane had cried. She remembered doing her best to hold it in, but she had burst into tears at the dining room table and asked her what it was about her life that had made her so sad, so guarded, so content to be bored and unhappy, so resigned to whatever the next day would bring. And her mother hadn't had any idea what Jane was talking about. She had said she loved her children, her husband, her life, had no unfulfilled wishes or secret dreams. Jane had merely cried harder at this, hating her tears as her mother tried in vain to reassure her with phrases like 'it's normal to be nervous' and 'you'll figure everything out.' She hadn't even known how to explain that that wasn't what she was afraid of.

Jane felt her mother pat her gently on the back, her bracelets clinking against each other as she made another soft humming sound.

"I'm going to go find your father." Jane had just nodded.

Francie had been the one who had soothed her fears about Rosie. Jane had told her one day, while they were sitting on this same deck, on a similarly warm summer afternoon, that she had seen a cross-stitch pillow on sale at the Christmas Tree Shop last week that said 'Mirror, mirror on the wall, I have become my mother after all.' The phrase had haunted her. How could she be a good mother if her own mother had only given her examples of how to pretend to be kind, how to go through the motions, how to appear like the perfect family from the outside? Francie had pulled her into an embrace, her glasses poking into Jane's chest as always, and told her that she was *not* her mother. That she knew how to have connections, how to be honest, how to be vulnerable.

Jane came back into the present moment. Her eyes had unfocused as she stared into the rhododendron bush at the edge of the yard, seeing the pinkish purple flowers sway gently in the breeze. She wiped a tear from her chin as she heard voices coming out of the side door.

“Andrew, let us know if you need anything, whatever we can do,” her mother was saying.

“Of course, thank you, Diane, thank you guys for coming.” Rosie was following them at a distance, flipping her phone case on and off in her fingers.

They each gave Rosie a hug, awkwardly shuffling around each other and making their way down the steps to the yard and heading towards the driveway. Her father looked like he wanted to say something else, hesitating by the steps with his hand on Andrew’s shoulder, as Diane called for him to unlock the car. He followed her call, their car turning on and crunching down the driveway in reverse.

The yard was nearly empty now, a pile of folded up chairs leaning against the edge of the deck, a stack of folded up tables, the wavering pile of purple tablecloths. A single program was left on the table with the beach roses and Francie’s photo, two versions of her smiling up at Jane.

She turned and gave Andrew a hug, not saying anything, just wrapping her arms around him and breathing slowly. Rosie wrapped her arms around the both of them, and Jane felt her lips move against her arm as she buried her face in her shoulder, and said, “I love you guys.”

Chapter 6: Pain Killers

Ellen

During the school day, there was no time for Ellen to dive back into Instagram. All her teachers had strict no-phone policies, and the risk of getting it taken away wasn't worth it. So, as soon as she got on the bus again for the ride home, she eagerly opened the app. Isabel wasn't here this time, thankfully, and no one joined her in her seat, so she was free to scroll without distraction or fear of prying eyes. She pulled her knees up to rest against the back of the seat in front of her and opened the DM's.

@mayjohnson.photo. There were a couple other message threads with what looked to be other poetry or photography accounts, but they were all older with the last messages sent three weeks ago, five weeks ago, three months ago. @mayjohnson.photo, though, had last sent one two days ago. Ellen could see the text from the overview screen, the small blue dot indicating an unread message.

Just message me back pls.

She knew that as soon as she clicked on this message, there was no way to make it appear unread again. It had been sent to Aleaya, not her. The thought of someone reading *her* messages with Aleaya, or with Isabel, or anyone, was embarrassing and honestly infuriating. The few times her parents had tried to go through her phone, a screaming match had resulted, and she'd been allowed to maintain her privacy. Besides, she wasn't Aleaya's mom, or some stranger, she was her best friend. And clearly this May person was worried about her, just like Ellen was. She could at least tell her she was okay, explain to Aleaya later that she'd just wanted to make sure she wasn't worried.

That was reasonable. That was something a good friend would do. And, besides, the last time she'd read something of Aleaya's it had probably saved her life.

She opened the thread of messages.

-get taken away?

I know I'm far away but if there's anything I can do let me know.

Aleaya I'm worried, are you okay?

Where are you?

I don't even know ur phone number to call...

Please let me know if you're okay

Just message me back pls

They'd all been sent over the course of the last week and a half. Ellen's fingers hovered over the keyboard, to type a response, but she thought of her promise again.

Don't tell anyone, please.

She'd already broken it, and now apparently a bunch of people at school knew, and she didn't know how. Did she really want to break it again? How much did this girl already know?

She decided to read through just a little bit more, to see what she talked about with May, if she knew about the depression, about her parents, about the dark nights.

Ellen had read Aleaya's journal once. She still felt guilty about it to this day, considered bringing it up every time they had a serious conversation. Somehow the phrase "hey, just so you know, I snooped in your bedside drawer once and read a few pages of your most private thoughts and didn't tell you about it for like six months" just didn't feel like something Ellen was capable of saying. Neither was "do you really want to die?" So, Ellen had never brought it up.

Aleaya hadn't used those words, exactly, in her entry on January 27th, but she had been describing how she hadn't been sleeping the last few days. She'd written that she would lie awake and stare at the ceiling until her eyes felt like they were going to explode, and then she'd try to watch tv or scroll through Instagram, but she'd get bored too quickly, not invested in any of it, so she'd start to make up scenarios.

In one, she took a cab to the bus station, then a bus to the city, then walked to a building about ten or fifteen stories high, one she could get into the ground floor of, then made her way into the stairwell and climbed all the way to the roof. She'd imagine standing on the edge, watching all the people below her who never looked up.

In another, she just walked to the ocean in the middle of the night, resigned herself to its frigidness, and waded in until she couldn't touch. Then she'd swim out as far as possible, let out all the air in her lungs so she'd start to sink. She imagined swimming for as long as she could underwater, getting deeper and farther out.

In the last one she crept down the hallway, through her parent's room and quietly reached into their medicine cabinet. She'd feel around in the dark for the narrow orange bottle that had at least three weeks' worth of painkillers from when her dad had surgery on his back. That, plus his sleeping pills, would be enough. She'd get in the bath, except that the running water would definitely wake someone up, so she'd just wrap herself up in blankets instead, maybe listen to music through her headphones with her eyes closed as she waited.

She'd ended the entry with "these don't feel like plans, it's just scary that they're comforting."

Ellen had shoved the journal back into the drawer when she heard Aleaya getting out of the shower, and pretended like she was just on her phone, her heart racing.

Now, she turned back to her phone. The bus jostled her as she scrolled up, the mass of voices around her a blur in the background. There were so many messages. So. Many. She went back a few weeks and found a thread that started just a few days before Aleaya had called her, had done exactly what she'd described, sneaking into her parents' room for the bottles of pills.

The thread started with a message from @mayjohnson.photo.

Hey girl. Hows your week been?

Its been okay. I have a geometry test on thursday that I reaallyyyy need to do well on but its hard to make myself care about proofs and triangles lol. My mom is gonna be so pissed if I get another B tho.

Lol, i remember sucking at geometry. pre-calc is honestly way better, so dw too much.

Did ur mom ever apologize for the other night?

Hah. No. We just haven't talked about it.

That sucks dude im sorry.

She's an ass.

What kind of mom calls their own kid fat.

Especially when she's like blatantly fatter than u, wtf.

Then, a few hours later,

I mean yeah, she was being a bitch.

May responded immediately.

James still hasn't come around.

Isn't that good tho? That's the goal, remember, you're not gonna let him in again?

Yeah.

Listen I know it really hurts, but you know what he did was so not okay. You know that.

I know I know... that doesn't mean I don't miss him tho... bc I miss him so fucking much. Its like I can't go anywhere without seeing him behind my eyes or remembering him and I can literally feel it in my heart, like it physically hurts

I'm really sorry May. You can't let him treat you like that tho. He said shit that is not acceptable. If Michael ever called me a slut I would legit never speak to him again. And we're not even dating technically.

Hasn't he, tho?

What? No never.

When he asked you about your number, and you said you were a virgin but had

thought about just getting a tinder and like getting it over with?

He didn't call me a slut. He just said I shouldn't.

Not in those words.

I just mean you have to understand why I want to see him again. I cant help it.

I do.

I have to go, class. Talk to u later

Have fun, talk to u later

They didn't talk for quite a few hours, and the next message was timestamped well after midnight.

I was talking to Michael tonight, and we actually had such a good convo. He was so sweet and we talked about our parents, he said his mom can be really shitty too sometimes, like wont listen to him and doesnt know him at all

Sounds familiar. Thats good u talked abt like real stuff.

IKR lol. I was like I get that, my mom doesn't know a thing about me, and only knows maybe two things about dom

It sucks shes so tough on u.

I actually wanted to talk to u about this, the other night, I tried to talk to her about like how I'm feeling.

Oh rilly? How did it go, what did she say? What did u say?

It went fucking terribly. We were watching tv after dinner just me and her, and I basically just said like mom, Im having a really hard time and I feel so scared all the time and so sad, and I can't sleep and I know a lot of people who go to therapists and I think it might really help me feel better, and she was like are you kidding me, you don't actually have any real problems, youre a teenager its normal to be sad sometimes and basically said I was only saying this for attention.

Shit. that blows ugh. She should be willing to listen to her own daughter.

I really thought she would. I was like crying and then my dad walked in and was like whats the matter and she told him I was just being dramatic and would be okay and he just didn't even care. I honestly don't think theyd even notice if I was gone, they just think I'm a hassle and like everything I do is annoying to them or inconvenient. How dare I be depressed u know

*Im really sorry it feels that way.
I'd notice if you were gone. So would dom.
And so would Ellen, right?*

I know.

It just feels so heavy. Like everything is so tiring and every year it just gets heavier and heavier and I wish I could just go to sleep for like a long fucking time.

Not even die, just like sleep.

*I feel that. But hey. You're gonna be okay,
I know it feels heavy a lot, trust me I get that better than anyone. But you'll b okay.
James came over last night.*

What, May noooo. I know you're sad but you promised you wouldn't see him again remember??

I just thnk you don't get it, you've never actually been in love with somebody. I can't help it, I just had to see him, it was like a physical need. I'm addicted to him I s2g.

That means you should trust me more then, I'm the outside perspective. And hes toxic. He's just gonna do it again, you're gonna fight and he's gonna say fucking horrible shit and then you're gonna be even more miserable than last time.

He apologized for like three hours

*Doesn't matter. Nothing will change.
Also, can I just finish venting about my mom?
Sorry I just can't stop replaying it in my head and i cant sleep and its just driving me insane.*

Its so quiet in here.

I can't stop crying.

Suddenly, Ellen noticed the bus had gone silent. She looked up, recognized the intersection as the one significantly down the road from her street, grabbed her bag and raced down the aisle clutching her phone in her hand.

“Mabel, I’m so sorry, I missed my stop, I was- reading. I can just get off here and walk.”

Mabel looked up, surprised. “Oh honey, no worries, I’ll just make a quick turnaround up here and take you back.”

Walking up her street, only ten minutes later than usual and a little embarrassed, Ellen kept scrolling. She hadn’t missed her stop since elementary school.

She barely felt the pebbles in her flip flops or the humid air on her skin, and only glanced up occasionally to make sure she wasn’t veering off course.

Michael. Aleaya was texting Michael? Since when? Why hadn’t she told Ellen?

Their conversation continued.

Did u tell Michael about ur mom?

Yeah, it’s what we were talking about. He said he noticed I looked sad the other day at Ellen’s house, and it was so nice that he noticed you know. Ellen definitely didn’t.

What did he say, anything helpful?

Just that she was really mean and def should have listened more. He said we should hang out over the summer, but idk. I doubt he means it, he always says shit like that and then goes back on it.

Yeah... but if he ever does ask u totally should, you could have sex if you wanted, I bet he’d be good. And he’s hot.

May.

Whaaaat, I’m just saying :p

Ellen reached her front door, heard her dad’s voice on a work call booming from the kitchen, and headed straight upstairs. She sat down on her bed and kept scrolling.

*Sorry I’m just not in the mood.
I honestly couldn’t care less abt losing my virginity rn. It’ll probably never actually happen, its all just talk
And I don’t even really know if I want to, I didn’t really mean it about that tinder thing I just thought it would seem more casual idk*

Up to u

I'm so tired but I can't sleep. I can't stop thinking.

Steal a shot?

No I don't wanna go downstairs. Plus I've already replaced like half the bottle with water they're totally gonna notice if I take more. I just want to rest. Like not just sleep, but rest

Watch one of those meditation videos to help u fall asleep?

I watched one earlier. Did nothing

Ugh I'm sorry

*Yeah. I just don't want to be awake and in my own head rn...
Can I send u the poem I wrote earlier?*

Yeah ofc

*Okay. Its a really personal one, idk if im gonna post it
Here u go:*

*Sometimes, I want
to float.
To look into another's eyes
and have them see nothing at all.*

*Sometimes, I want
to float, in this darkness that holds me.
To hold your hand and have you not feel me
but love me all the same.*

*Sometimes I want to hear you breathe
and align my pulse with yours
Until I make no sounds of life at all.*

*Sometimes, I want
to float, in this darkness I know so well.
To walk through the trees and
leave no footprints behind.*

*Sometimes, I want
to be this darkness,
to be
not anything,
not anyone,
not anywhere,
at all.*

Wow.

*you really need to be a poet when you
grow up.
Or at least a writer. Thats so good Aleaya.*

*Thanks, honestly. I'm glad u like it. Does it
make sense? Like that feeling of not wanting to
be anywhere, have to be anyone in particular,
put on that mask for whoever youre around, just
not have to try so fucking hard all the time.*

Not feel artificial

*Totally.
It makes total sense*

Okay cool

*Hey I think im gonna sleep, I have calc
tom morning and i should probably pay
attention at least a little*

*Yeah course, sleep well, thanks for listening to
me rant and ramble. You're always there for me
and I really appreciate tht.*

Anytime girl

*I never wanna bother u, ik u have a lot of shit
going on too*

*We all have shit, it's no bother.
Goodnight <3*

Night <3

Ellen heard her mom coming home, now, late for her usual return from the clinic. She sounded in a rush. Ellen heard her throw her keys across the counter so hard they slid off the other side and clatter to the ground.

“Oh, shit...” her under-the-breath mutter made its way all the way upstairs. There was no privacy in this house.

Ellen realized she was feeling hollow. There were more messages below, a few days' worth, and so many more above that from the weeks and months before. She wondered when they met, where this May girl even lived. She was definitely older, maybe at least a junior. A lot of Aleaya's conversation was familiar, her tone was definitely more brief, though. She was holding back. One line had stuck to her the moment she read it, though, and hadn't left.

Ellen definitely didn't.

She remembered that day, she'd talked to Aleaya the night before about having a conversation with her mom. Aleaya had texted her, said

El, I can't sleep and I'm shaking and I keep thinking about the pain killers my dad got from his surgery. I know they're still in the cabinet. I don't want to be thinking about them but I am and I can't stop.

Ellen had stayed up until two or three in the morning, in bed with the lights off, fingers flying against the glow of her phone screen, her heart racing and palms sweating.

Aleaya. I know you're scared, and you're sad, and I know I can't take that away. I wish I could. But you are GOING to be okay, i promise you that with every ounce of myself, okay.

They had ended up watching three of their old favorite YouTube videos, ones that they described as bittersweet in the best way, that hurt so good. They were guaranteed to make you cry, but they were sweet too, and some of the tears were happy tears. One was about an old woman and her dog, the dog followed her across miles of dirt roads to the hospital where she was being treated and waited outside for weeks while she was sick. When she came home, the dog was so excited. Then she had to go back, and she died, and the dog stayed outside the hospital for months, waiting for her, until eventually he died, too.

They cried, but in a good way. They felt better, and Aleaya felt tired enough to sleep.

Then, the next day Jonas had friends over, including Michael, and Ellen kept looking at Aleaya who was standing across the counter. She looked tired, her eye bags were deep, but she was talking animatedly and gesturing as she talked about some movie she'd seen that the boys wanted to watch that night. Ellen had no idea when she'd seen it, but now she thought maybe Michael had mentioned it, so she'd watched it.

What had Ellen been thinking about that day? Oh. It had been the day she overheard her mom saying to her dad how she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep working at the clinic. How she couldn't take another failure. And she'd had a paper due the next day in English. Maybe she had been distracted, hadn't listened to Aleaya enough when she mentioned the conversation with her mom. She remembered being annoyed about how much time Aleaya had wanted to spend with her brother and his friends rather than up in her room.

Ellen couldn't relate, sometimes, when she talked about how her mom was so dismissive, probably never even noticed when she was in the house or not, how she could stay the night at Ellen's house and not have to even let her know. It was a foreign experience to Ellen, and sometimes she had to suppress her jealousy.

"Ellen, hon?" her mom called up. "Could you put some of that pasta salad in a Tupperware for me real quick? I got held up again... I'm gonna be late for Kate's." Her voice

trailed off and Ellen heard the bathroom door click shut. She clicked off her phone with a deep breath and stood up to head downstairs.

The kitchen was empty, and Ellen reached for the leftovers in the fridge, scooping some out of the giant bowl covered in plastic wrap. There was a flush, and her mom emerged as Ellen was clicking the lid onto the Tupperware.

“Thank you so much, baby,” she called, ruffling Ellen’s hair as she headed for the stairs to change out of her scrubs and into her waitressing outfit.

Standing in the kitchen, Ellen opened her phone again, the end of the conversations staring back at her. She still had a final paper to write, and a chemistry exam to study for, but she desperately did not want to do either of those things.

Ellen definitely didn't.

She felt ashamed, remembering the moments where she’d dismissed Aleaya, even if they weren’t intentional. It felt, heavy, the burden of always having to know the right thing to say, the right way to reassure her, the right response to distract her from her own thoughts.

She exited the conversation. She switched back to her own account, searching Aleaya’s public profile. The photos were vividly saturated compared to @image.insight3. She looked at her second most recent post, a shot of her face, up decently close, in the bright sunlight. The tips of her long eyelashes were almost golden in the sun, one side of her face drenched in warm gold. She was smiling softly into the camera, her hair in long braids around her bare shoulders. Ellen smiled back at the photo instinctively. Aleaya had captioned it ‘when it’s finally above freezing’. They’d walked along the beach the first day in March when the sun felt like spring, and Aleaya had been beaming all day. She’d said the sun was like the best painkiller, burning away all the dark corners in her head.

Her mom came rushing down the stairs, grabbing the Tupperware and her keys.

“El and Rachel will be home soon, could you get them started on homework?” She asked.

“Sure,” Ellen said, not looking up from her phone.

“You’re the best,” her mom called, kissing her three times quickly on the top of her head, and she heard the door slam shut and her car start up again in the garage.

Looking at the photo, she could see Aleaya’s eyes smiling at her, and thought about how anyone else looking at the photo wouldn’t know who was behind the camera, who was inviting her warm, open smile. She searched her eyes, looking at the camera, but that had been in reality looking at Ellen, for a sign of something guarded, something hidden. There wasn’t anything, she looked happy. She looked like Aleaya, perfectly shaped eyebrows, warm brown eyes, soft brown skin with high cheekbones and remnants of baby fat making the apples of her cheeks round in a way Ellen had always envied. She had silver studs in her ears, and the tiniest trace of old eyeliner along her bottom lash line. She looked beautiful, and happy. Ellen wished again that she knew where to reach her, how to call her. She just wanted to hear her voice.

Chapter 7: Headphones

Jane

When Jane got home from Francie's late one night, having left later than planned, Rosie was sitting on the kitchen floor, her back to the cabinets and knees pulled into her chest, wearing her big over-the-ear headphones, not the thin earbuds she usually wore around the house, and she was crying. Jane paused, slowly putting her purse down on the counter as she watched her daughter's shoulders rise and fall, watched her take a deep slow breath to try and stop the sob from coming, then squeezed her eyes even tighter shut as more tears leaked out. Every time she saw her daughter cry the image seemed to freeze itself and remain as a snapshot layered on top of every other instance of tears since she'd been born. Rosie made the same face, the same patches around her cheeks and above one eyebrow got red and blotchy, and she rubbed her nose with the side of one thumb in the same way she had since she was little.

Jane bent down, slowly, and rested her hand on Rosie's knee, stroking her hair with the other. Her head shot up, she clearly hadn't heard her mother come in, and as she locked eyes with Jane, some new pain seemed to cross her expression, and she cried even harder. She didn't turn away, like Jane had expected, or even make a move to stand up. Rosie rarely cried in front of her anymore, but this time she just tore off her headphones and fell forwards into her arms, causing Jane to lean back on her heels to absorb the weight of her. Rosie wrapped her arms around her mother's neck, her wet cheeks slick against Jane's skin.

Her lips moved against the fabric of the blouse on Jane's shoulder as she kept her face buried, and said:

"Liam and I broke up." Her voice rose at the end of this admission, fading into a whisper.

Jane let out a fast sigh, like she'd been hit, and she closed her eyes in a wince. She squeezed Rosie in tightly, maneuvering their intertwined bodies so they could sit more comfortably on the hardwood floor.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She ran her hands through her daughter's hair, keeping her eyes closed, still tired from the drive home, and truly remembering the pain of being seventeen and losing your first love. For her, his name had been Xavier, and they'd been sitting on the curb outside an ice cream shop when she'd told him she was leaving him. She'd been convinced for two years that she'd never love again.

"What happened?" she asked gently, pulling back slightly to get a better look at her daughter's face.

"He said it was just time. I guess because of college and stuff, and because we're moving on in life." A tear was clinging to the bottom of her chin and she sniffed between phrases. Jane got up and grabbed a box of tissues from the counter, pulled a few out and put them down next to Rosie.

“I’m sorry, this is pathetic,” she said as she reached for one of the tissues to wipe her nose with, leaning her head back against the cabinets and looking away from Jane and up towards the ceiling.

“It is *not* pathetic. You guys were together for a long time, he meant a lot to you. Grieving that must really hurt.” Jane had thought Liam was a good one, he was always polite, gave her flowers randomly, and she spent pretty much every night at his house until her curfew of eleven. They’d been together for almost two years.

Rosie’s eyes welled up again, and her shoulders were quivering as she tried not to let out a sob. “I just…” she got out, “I didn’t see it coming. I thought we still had time.”

Jane ran her palm up and down her daughter’s arm, wishing she could soothe some of the pain so evident in her soft features. Rosie had always seemed comfortable and confident around Liam, but he was a year older.

“Had you talked about this at all? About what was gonna happen when he left for college?” she asked softly.

“I mean kind of,” Rosie dropped her hands to her lap with a sigh, still clutching the soaked tissue and picking at its edges. “We said we were just gonna take things one day at a time, but just thought it would be more of a conversation. It didn’t seem like he was listening to anything I was saying. He just kept saying it was *time*.” Her voice broke again, and she leaned her head back on her mom’s shoulder, squeezing her eyes shut as more tears leaked out, welling in the inner corner of her eye and running down her temple.

“It was like he didn’t have a choice, but he did,” Rosie went on, “and he decided to leave me.” She leaned in to hug Jane again.

Jane stood up and made them each a cup of lemon tea, a nightly ritual they came back to every now and then. Rosie stayed on the ground, her knees pulled up, talking about Liam. She was angry, but far too understanding to feel wronged or blame him. It would never have occurred to her to try and convince him to stay. In one way Jane felt relieved, it seemed clear that Rosie knew there would be others, knew that she had no desire to stay with someone who had any doubts about her or who did not want her. None of this made her hurt less, but by the time their mugs were empty, Rosie had mostly run out of tears. Jane stood up from the floor, helped Rosie up, and folded her into her arms one more time. She whispered into her hair, “You will be okay. You are so loved.”

An hour or so later, Jane walked into her bathroom and stripped down to get into the shower. Rosie had fallen asleep, exhausted by her tears, still fully clothed but with Jane stroking her back and hair, then covering her with a blanket and softly closing the door once her breathing had deepened into the rhythms of sleep.

Her shower was scalding hot, and tonight its burn felt cathartic. She closed her eyes and held her breath, letting the water cascade down over her face. She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the flesh memory of Rosie dropping into her arms. She couldn’t remember the

last time she'd felt the full weight of her, not just a hug or a head on her shoulder, but the total weight of her child against her body again.

She couldn't remember, either, the last time she'd fallen asleep with Jane still in her room. When she was younger, their bedtime routine used to last longer and longer every night it seemed, Rosie begging for Jane to stay, tell her one more story, rub her back one more time, arrange her stuffed animals so they were just right.

It was bad, she felt guilty, but it had been nice to be needed by her again. To be the one she turned to when something went wrong, when she needed help or support, needed to be loved. To hold her, and sooth her. Rosie never wavered on her feet anymore, never asked questions about why the world was the way it was, never cried when she fell over outside and needed Jane to wipe the grass stains from her scraped up knees and elbows, asking with her eyes if everything would be okay, and never believe her when Jane said it would.

The sight of her alone, in the dark, curled up in the kitchen like that stayed in Jane's mind all night, the loneliness of it making her chest ache. She wondered about Rosie's friends; she'd seen less of them since she'd been dating Liam. She thought tomorrow she'd ask about them, try to get her to see some of them, get out of the house for a bit.

After her shower, Jane slipped into her pajamas, careful not to wake Andrew up, and padded down the hall to Rosie's room. She opened the door a crack, making sure to turn the hallway light out before hand so its bright light wouldn't wake her up. The moonlight coming from Rosie's windows and the soft light from the bathroom let Jane just make out her curled-up figure, lying on her side, hair spread out across her pillow, clutching an armful of her blankets. Her phone was peeking out from under her pillow, and she had in her earbuds. She must have woken up after Jane left and decided to listen to something to help her fall back asleep.

Jane recognized the sleeve covering the arm resting on top of her covers, she was in one of Liam's hockey t-shirts again. She must have a dozen of them. As she thought this, a pile of fabric caught Jane's eye in the corner of her room: it was all the other shirts.

"Mom, I'm awake." Rosie said, her eyes open now and looking at Jane.

"Oh, sorry honey, I didn't mean to wake you up, I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine," she said, not moving from her curled up position, and closing her eyes again.

"I just wanna sleep."

"Okay," Jane responded, and started to pull the door closed.

"Night, Rosie. I love you."

"Love you too," she responded, her lips barely moving. If she hadn't heard her soft voice, she would have thought she was still asleep. Jane clicked the door shut as quietly as she could and turned out the bathroom light so the hallway fell into darkness.

When she climbed into bed, Andrew woke up and leaned over to kiss her.

"Hi, hon, you're up late," he murmured.

“I can’t believe they broke up.” Jane said quietly, arranging the pillows so she was sitting up slightly, and pulling the covers up to her chest.

“What? Who? Rosie and Liam?” He asked, propping himself up on his forearms.

“Yeah,” Jane said, turning to meet his eyes in the darkness. “She didn’t tell you?”

“What, no! Is she home? I asked her to wake me up when she got back.”

“Yeah,” Jane said, “She was sitting in the kitchen when I got back at like eleven forty-five. We talked for a while, apparently it was about Liam leaving for college. She’s asleep now. She seemed pretty blindsided.”

“Shit.” Andrew said. “I liked Liam... I didn’t think he would do that.” He lay back with a sigh. “Poor Rosie. Is she okay?”

Jane sighed. “She will be.” She picked up her kindle, opening it on her knees so its soft glow illuminated her face. “But this is the first heartbreak, so it might take a while.”

Andrew lay in silence for a while, but she could tell he wasn’t falling back asleep, he was too still.

“I wish she’d have woken me up,” he said into the dark.

Chapter 8: Running Shoes

Ellen

The Sunday night after Jonas moved out, the house was eerily silent. It was only about a week after the end of the school year, and he and her mom had left early in the morning to embark on the long drive down to South Carolina, the minivan loaded with every pair of basketball shorts he owned, a twin extra-long mattress topper, his ancient Xbox, and a single photo of his track team to hang on the bare concrete walls. Standing in her own, dim room, Ellen could picture his dorm room now, rumpled tan sheets, floor strewn with socks and sweatshirts and empty Gatorade bottles, much like his bedroom here used to be. Now it was piled with stuffed animals and pink blankets, Rachel having already claimed it so she no longer had to share with Elliot. Both of the little ones were spending the night at a friend's, though, their neighbors the Greens who had a daughter in Rachel's grade and a son in Elliot's. Her dad had dropped them off, kissed Ellen on the head at her desk after dinner, and said he was going to be working late tonight as he disappeared into his office.

Ellen pulled on her soft pajama shorts, and digging around her overflowing t-shirt drawer found Aleaya's fake-vintage Rolling Stones shirt. She'd found it at Savers, but it was originally from Urban Outfitters and had cost over twenty dollars. She pressed it to her nose, it still smelled faintly like Aleaya's tea tree shampoo. She put it on and climbed into bed with her headphones in to try and muffle the overwhelming silence. But all she did was toss and turn. There was no more homework to do, so when she'd gotten sick of the show she was watching while mindlessly scrolling Instagram she'd slammed her laptop shut and been left with nothing to do but lie in bed with her thoughts. She hadn't even been brave enough to look through more of the messages with May. She knew it wasn't right, but if she was honest with herself, she was afraid of what she might find. Something else she had done wrong, some other conversation about her being a bad friend.

She almost wished she could hear Jonas screaming into his headset about lag or strategy or some shit, or that Rachel would barge in without knocking and insist Ellen braid her hair, right that instant, and not too tight, either. Or that her mom would come stand outside her door, so Ellen could see the shadows left by her feet as she hesitated, deciding whether or not she was going to knock.

She ripped her headphones out, the playlist she was shuffling no longer sounded 'calm & soothing' as she'd named it, but more like the music you hear drifting along the barren hallways of an airport late at night. The strings felt too haunting, the base too off-putting. Plus, the last lyric she's heard had reminded her too much of Aleaya. The soft voice singing '*we're just misguided ghosts/ traveling endlessly/ don't need no roads/ in fact they follow me/ and we just go in circles.*' Not helping.

She considered reopening her laptop, turning on one of her comfort YouTube videos, a what's-in-my-bag, a day-in-the-life, or a travel vlog. They felt like conversations, just ones

where she didn't have to worry about coming up with the right things to say, ones she could just sit back and enjoy. But her eyes hurt too much, even in the darkness.

Sometimes, when she really couldn't sleep, the only thing that worked was when she would imagine having roommates. In the silence of one, two, or three a.m. she imagined she lived way up in a high-rise in some big city, heard distant sirens travelling to unknown locations and carrying strangers with unknown injuries. She imagined hearing her roommate in the kitchen, which would be just outside her flimsy bedroom door, clattering plates as she emptied the dishwasher, humming to herself. She imagined another roommate opening the front door, the clatter of his keys in their shared key-holder, the low murmur of voices as the two imaginary strangers conversed outside her door. She imagined smelling sharp coffee as she woke up, hearing someone swear under their breath as they ran around the apartment gathering everything they needed for the day, rushing to make the train. No one in her house drank coffee, and neither did Ellen, but she adored the smell of it and it always seemed to mean you had somewhere to go and something to do. She imagined her phone ringing late at night, waking her, hearing her roommate's voice saying he lost his keys, could she please buzz him in? She imagined a soft knock at her bedroom door, someone saying they were making lasagna, did she want any for dinner? There was plenty. She imagined bringing home a plant, putting it in the window, everyone watering it with no rhyme or reason until the google results for "yellow leaves on dying plant" revealed it was desperately overwatered and they had to make a schedule. She imagined her week for watering was the first of the month. She imagined the plant blossomed and thrived. The quotidian ebb and flow of amicably sharing a space might make the days brighter, the nights easier, she imagined. She even imagined fights over who kept putting someone's good mug in the dishwasher, making the writing start to peel off, and who was leaving all their running shoes in a pile that stopped the front door from opening all the way. She liked the idea of having others around her, real, individual, unknown people to reflect off of, to remind her she existed. They felt safe.

These roommates sounded so much more enjoyable than those she currently shared the house with. They wouldn't stand on their chairs at the dinner table to scream protests about finishing their math homework, which literally was only three subtraction problems, or sigh at her when she slid another glass into the sink when the dishes were almost done. They would laugh, share, coexist peacefully. There would be no expectation for her to watch over them all the time, it would be so much better than the way she had to carefully consider every single thing she said to her mother. And it would certainly, certainly, be better than this silence.

Ellen was fully aware that this was beginning to sound a lot like imaginary friends, even though these friends didn't exist specifically, and changed every night. To avoid feeling like they were truly imaginary friends, she refused to give them names. Now no one could accuse her of falling back into an old childhood habit, not that she was ever going to tell anyone about this anyway.

In the end, though, the comfort of the imaginings won out over the fear of its childishness, and she drifted off to the thought of group movie night, lighthearted panic as the

smoke alarm went off when someone burnt the popcorn, scrambling around waving dishtowels, and laughing about it the rest of the night.

Ellen woke up the next morning and rolled over to face the window with her eyes still half closed. She clutched her phone in her hand, ready to hit snooze on her alarm as soon as it dared to sound its obnoxious chime again so it wouldn't wake anyone else in the house up. The room was bright, she always slept with her shades wide open, didn't like waking up and not knowing whether it was day or night, rain or shine outside. She opened her eyes, checked the time on her phone. It was only nine, her first alarm hadn't even gone off yet, she'd set it for ten. No need for the snooze-prevention-grip, then. Plus, she remembered, it was just her here, her dad would have already left for work. At least it was a Monday, and she didn't have school. She couldn't pretend that wasn't nice.

Alaya could hit snooze probably thirty times on an alarm and fall right back asleep each time. For Ellen, she was lucky if she got one more cycle of extra rest. Once her body realized she wasn't asleep anymore, it itched to get up, stand up, move around. So, Ellen stood, untwisting the long t-shirt from around her body where it had ended up after a night of tossing and turning. Outside the window, the pale green leaves at the tops of the trees were rustling slightly in the faintest of breezes, and two fat squirrels were on top of their birdfeeder, looking up at her with as close to a smug expression as a squirrel could have. Last summer she and Jonas had spent an afternoon crafting the most complex barriers they could think of to keep the squirrels off the feeder, and now when they navigated them to climb up and overindulge, she felt like they'd at least earned it. Nibble away, little bastards, she thought.

Making her way downstairs, Ellen poured herself a glass of orange juice and almost downed it almost without breathing. She was surprised to see Rachel at the kitchen table, eating a stack of Eggo waffles so drowned in syrup it almost made Ellen gag to look at.

"Weren't you spending the night at the Greens?" She asked.

"Yeah, but I had a nightmare and couldn't sleep so Dad came and picked me up. Now here I am." She brandished a loaded fork as she threw her arms wide.

"Gotcha," Ellen said. "I thought you were doing better with that," she went on, "being able to sleep again after bad dreams?"

"Yeah, usually," Rachel said, rolling her eyes a little, "but this one was about a motorcycle man who threw buckets of fire at us in the garage and so I couldn't."

"Ah, I see. Fair enough." Ellen rustled her stringy blond hair in sympathy. Rachel's audible munching as she shoveled the waffles into her small, sticky mouth, though, drove Ellen from the room as soon as her OJ was gone.

"Dad said to tell you to call Woods Hole today," her waffle-muffled voice called as Ellen headed down the hallway. She groaned and threw her head back a little as she went back up the stairs. Her parents had been hounding her to follow up about this job pretty much since the second the last bell of the year rang. A few weeks ago, she had sent in applications to Woods Hole, a local oceanographic institute, and the Creative Arts Center, where she'd taken countless

art classes. The Arts Center had gotten back to her saying they didn't have any intern positions or need any help besides as a teacher's assistant for their summer programs, so she'd declined. She'd done said summer program once, as a middle schooler. She'd woken up at eight a.m. to cut flowers out of paper and draw boats in number two pencil along with fifteen other bored tweens and she had no interest to revisit the experience from the other side. Now, she preferred to make little watercolor paintings of whatever she chose, on her own time.

So Woods Hole it was, but she hadn't heard anything from them yet. Why it was on her to follow up was beyond her, if she sent in the application wasn't it their job to contact *her*? Once she got back to her bedroom, though, she sat at the edge of her bed and checked her email.

There actually was a response, surprisingly enough, from watersk@woodshole.org, subject line, 'Welcome to the Woods Hole Staff!' confirming that her application for a summer job had been accepted. At first, she felt a burst of genuine excitement. Being from the Cape had approximately *one* advantage over other places, and that was the ocean. All around, at all times, on pretty much all sides. If she wanted to use that as a selling point when applying to college, she figured she should probably do something besides swim in it and lounge on the sand next to it, and she was definitely not going to be a lifeguard, so helping oceanographic researchers sounded pretty ideal. She did well in biology, and doing labs was her favorite part of any science class. For a while art had been her favorite subject, but recently it had definitely been biology. Plus, she liked fish. Well, they were fine. They didn't gross her out the way they did Aleaya.

One line into the email, though, her face fell. They weren't hiring any research assistants or anyone in the realm of actual oceanography at this time so she would be working with the young campers. If she had applied earlier, maybe they would have been able to place her in research. Instead, she was to be in charge of Group Pufferfish, the group for five-and-six-year-olds, along with a few other adult counselors. Great. The application had asked you to check off positions in order of interest, and camp counselor had been *last* on Ellen's list. Unfortunately, turning the position down was not an option, because her mom had been going on and on about how great a job at Woods Hole would be, and how it might even help her get a scholarship if she worked there for multiple summers. She knew she'd be even more miserable if she had to sit at home all day and listen to her ask what she was going to do that day, what her summer goals were, what she could do to be productive, if she felt okay, if she could help with this or that. But this was going to be pretty damn miserable too.

She responded to Kristina Waters, the perfect last name to work in oceanography, Ellen thought, to say she would attend the orientation session later this week and could start the week after that on the first day of camp. She ended the email with a polite 'thank you for the opportunity!', grimacing as she typed it out. What, the opportunity to be snotted on and insulted by a squadron of tiny tornados? Yeah, thanks so much.

Goddamnit.

She texted her mom, "got a job at woods hole. Camp counselor. I start next week." Her response, just two minutes later: "That's gr8 baby!!!!"

Ellen left her on read, unable to muster up enough fake excitement to even type an exclamation mark. She'd be home from South Carolina tomorrow anyway since she couldn't get more than one day off work, and she'd see her then.

Her mom worked for a local substance abuse clinic. In the summers, she cut down to part time hours at the clinic and took on another part time job as a waitress at this fancy seafood restaurant in Chatham called Kate's. She'd worked there every summer when she was in college, and said it kept her young, shook up the monotony of working at the same place all year every year, plus when you did the math it paid just as much, if not more depending on how big her parties were, on summer weekends. The tourists were good for spending their money, if nothing else. Ellen thought the clinic made her sad, sometimes, being around people who were struggling to keep their life together, who were being overtaken by addiction. The restaurant lifted her spirits, let her interact with other people. She usually came home from the clinic around one or two in the afternoon, then started her restaurant shift around four. When Ellen and Jonas were little, she used to make them fancy lunches in between her shifts, cutting peanut butter sandwiches into stars and hearts and sprinkling sugar over their strawberries to make a sweet, syrupy goodness. Nowadays, Ellen sometimes made her mom lunch, usually a turkey sandwich and lays original chips, as she sat on the couch and rubbed at her feet before rushing upstairs to change into her slacks and black apron.

Ellen needed to get out of the house. Her eyes felt tired, and her skin felt tight and all she wanted to do was escape, if only for an hour. As soon as she heard Elliot slam the screen door on his way in, having walked home from the Greens, (which was allowed during the day, but not at night) she threw some things into a drawstring bag, changed into a sports bra, laced up her running shoes and headed back downstairs.

Elliot had immediately turned on *Teen Titans Go!*, and Rachel had moved to the floor to watch something on her tablet. Her plate was still on the table, along with the syrup and the thawing bag of Eggos, of course. Ellen sighed but put the bag back in the freezer.

"El, Rachel, I'm going for a run, don't burn the house down or go anywhere," she called as she stepped out the back door.

The humidity surrounded her immediately. It had been warm last week, but it was truly hot now. She pulled her hair up into a ponytail to keep it off her already moistening neck and started walking. Behind her house was a decently large expanse of woods, crisscrossed with dirt roads and marked in the center by a large pond. It was a bright, airy kind of woods higher up, the trees were fairly sparse and light in color, but the underbrush grew thick and engulfed pathways and roads in what felt like days or hours if they weren't consistently trimmed back.

The path from the back of her house was definitely overgrown, but it hadn't quite recovered from the first trim of the season. It would be back with a vengeance soon. It opened out onto the wider dirt road, the beginning of which was lined with long driveways, but then became only trees and sunshine. She was definitely not going to run in this humidity, although

she frequently gave that excuse to get some time alone out of the house. Plus, her back was already sweating where the plasticky fabric of the bag was pressed against it.

About half a mile down the road, an intersection with another dirt road told her to start paying attention to the gaps in the brush, and a hundred or so feet further she found the one she was looking for. A narrow trail, winding its way down through the shrubs and pricker bushes and vines. She turned sideways to fit through a little easier, holding branches out of her way ahead of her and feeling her ankles start to itch as she made slow progress. Quite a few thorny twigs scraped against her, and she stepped in more than one giant puddle of mud, coating the heels of her shoes. It didn't seem like anyone else had been down here yet this season, which she liked, even if it meant she had some scratches on her shins and forearms from the thorns.

As she jumped down the last little bit of the hilly pathway, the pond revealed itself. Wide, but not too long, and surrounded entirely by the neon green leaves of early summer, with a few tiny islands dotted with only a spindly tree or two, she liked to pretend she was the only one who knew about this pond.

In reality, she'd only found it when she *was* actually out for a run and heard voices coming from her right, the small high laughter of little kids, and the gentler voice of a mother. She'd worked her way down the path, cautiously, stopping as soon as she saw the opening and the kids in floaties and the back of the mom's sunhat, heading back, having decided to come back later. Sometimes there were groups of teens who lingered in her spot, usually later in the afternoon and after dark, and she'd found empty liquor bottles and cigarette butts after their visits. The kids were there the most, though, so she was relieved they were nowhere to be found today.

The tiny stretch of earthy beach was augmented by the few large, flat rocks that stuck up above the surface of the water within jumping distance from the shore. They were perfect places to sit, and meant that more than two people could squeeze into the area without being ankle deep in mud. The edges of the pond were really quite gross, especially this close to spring. Ellen avoided the deepest mud by standing on a fallen branch and leapt out to the closest stone. From there she stepped onto the one farthest out, that extended past the overhanging brush so she could see the whole perimeter of the pond. She sat down with crossed legs, settling in.

First, she selected a cheerful, more upbeat playlist and shuffled it quietly, the soft sounds of a ukulele playing out loud from her phone. She never played music out loud at home, so this on its own was a luxury of this spot. No one to tell you to turn it down or turn it off or that the song was annoying, or too sad, or not 'real music.' Opening her bag on her lap, she pulled out a purple journal and a black pen. The journal had been sitting on her desk for over six months, she'd made one entry on New Year's Day and one halfway through January, then forgotten about it until recently. The last entry was from the night of Aleaya's suicide attempt. She'd switched on her bedside lamp an hour after calling Aleaya's parents, not knowing what else to do, and just scribbled every thought she could pin down long enough to elucidate. She hadn't known what else to do.

Now, she flipped past those few pages and the messy, frantic handwriting covering them, and dated a new page, Monday, June 21st.

School is out, she wrote, we're now technically sophomores. I can't believe it's been almost a month since I've talked to Aleaya.

She paused, her pen hovering. She had no idea what to write. She was thinking about the Instagram account, about May and her messages, Aleaya's mysterious relationship with Michael, but she didn't want to write about them. Somehow that felt like it would solidify her guilt, like there would be proof that she had snooped. If Aleaya ever read this, she'd know.

Instead, she decided to try and write about the pond, about the things she saw. She thought of the beautiful language Aleaya had used in some of her poems, how artfully she'd phrased things.

I'm at the pond, Ellen continued, and it's hot. This week has been the first week it's really felt like summer, it's so humid. I can hear a ton of insects out here, there's this low-level background noise mixing with the song coming from my phone. Its Vane Joy right now, I think. No, it just ended, now its Passenger. The leaves are all so bright, they're like gemstones. And the reflection in the water is so clear, there's almost no wind so there's not many ripples. Even the sky is super bright and flat.

She paused, her hand hurt, and the crook of her elbow was sweating.

Aleaya would be so much better at describing all this than I am. She's like a magician with words, even when she texts, they're so well written, they make so much sense. I want to tell her about this job, that I'm gonna have to work with kids. I want to hear her laugh as she imagines that... she knows how I feel about being in charge of kids that aren't Elliot or Rachel. I want to sleep over at her house on Saturday, stay up until three in the morning talking and trying to recreate makeup looks from YouTube with her mom's Maybelline stuff. I want to tell her that Rachel's already started stealing my shirts even though she's practically half my size.

Every time I open my phone, I still half expected to see some sort of notification from you. I wish I had something to open where I could see your face or hear your voice, even just hear in my head the exact tone of sarcasm you're using in your text. I want to ask you about Michael, what he said to you that hurt so much, tell you I'm here to listen about your mom, about how they don't believe you when you tell them you're suffering. I want to know what rehab is like, how you're feeling, if you're glad to be alive. That you'll never try to kill yourself again, that you don't want to die anymore. That I don't have to worry.

Because all I do is worry, Aleaya. I lie awake at night, alone, and worry. I should never have read your diary, that was the wrong thing to do, I know that. But if I hadn't, I might not have been so scared that night. I might not have called your house, might not have told you parents to check on you, they might not have gotten there in time. I wanted another sleepover, and this time when you take a shower, I won't open your bedside drawer and flip through the diary, I'll just curl up in the blankets and pillows that smelled like you, feel your warm presence next to me when we watch Bob's Burgers later that night, when you smell like your coconut lotion and tea tree shampoo-

Ellen looked up. She heard a noise behind her, about a hundred yards back where the path met the wide dirt road. It sounded like the little kids; she could hear multiple voices chattering over each other. She sat up, realized how hunched over she'd been, and shook out her hand. Looking up, she squinted to bring the distant trees and sky into focus in her eyes that had adjusted to the journal page a few inches from her face. She paused the music.

The sounds of the insects seemed even louder, somehow, and the kids were crashing through the twigs and branches down the path. She didn't feel like seeing anyone. She'd just go back home; she really shouldn't leave Rachel and Elliot alone for too long anyway. She slid the journal back into her bag, her mind still not fully in the present moment. She could see why Aleaya liked journaling, she felt emptier, in a way, like some of the things that had been crowding her head and heart were now on the page, and she had more space to breath. It had been nice to just write down some of the things she wanted to say to Aleaya, even if she'd probably never read them. She missed talking to her, intensely. It was how she regulated her life, how she knew what had happened to her, by what she had to tell Aleaya.

The kids and their mom emerged onto the small beach and looked surprised to see her. Ellen smiled at them, putting on the drawstring bag and skirting around them to the path.

"Don't worry, I'm just heading out," she said to the mom. "Have a good swim!" She called to the little ones.

As she made her way back up the trail in the heat, her back, hands, and feet sweaty, her shoes gaining more layers of mud. She just felt tired. She wanted someone to talk to besides herself. The kids were laughing behind her, and she heard their distant splashing as she made her way back to the road.

Chapter 9: Frames

Jane

The house had grown stale in the week since Jane had been here last. She left the door wide open as she walked in to let in some fresh air. The smell of the wood floors warmed by the sun mingled with old air, heated by day and cooled by night, their scent surrounding her. Luis had installed those floors, the grain strong and full of knots and texture, but planed perfectly smooth except for where wide nail heads hold it all down. Jane remembered when Rosie was little how she would constantly keep an eye on her, afraid she'd throw something or scrape a toy against the floor, leaving a dent or a scratch on one of the irreplaceable planks.

Francie had never installed central air, much to their dismay during long summer stays, so the house creaked as the temperatures rose and fell over the course of a day. There was one window unit upstairs that Andrew had installed years ago when their stay coincided with the hottest week of the year and Rosie woke them up three times the first night to say she couldn't sleep, she was too sweaty. It didn't make much of a difference, though. Jane went around and threw open all the creaking windows, propping some up with coffee table books and candle holders so they wouldn't slide back down. She opened the sliding door to the deck out back, opened the front door to the overgrown walk. The air was still slightly cool, the late morning sun hesitating behind pale clouds.

The kitchen was, of course, as she'd left it. Gleaming countertops, empty fridge, bare sink. The rest of the first floor, though, was still cluttered and so, so full. You don't notice how much *stuff* is in a house until it has to be dealt with. She and Andrew didn't even know if they were going to sell the house yet. It could be a rental, play host to various vacationers and their families, have toddlers crawling across the floor again, kids using the outdoor shower, babies throwing blocks around the living room. The thought made Jane smile, even if the idea of some other family walking through the door was unfathomably strange.

On the drive down, surrounded by weekend traffic, she had decided her task for today would be to go around and gather all the rest of the most important items. The things there was no way they could get rid of, the things she wanted for Rosie, for Rosie's children one day, the things Andrew remembered from childhood. She'd already brought home all the photographs, some books from Francie's bedside table, the journals and sketchbooks from her desk in the studio. But there was so much left. She took the lid off one of the plastic tubs she'd bought at Walmart yesterday afternoon after work and carried it into the living room along with a roll of packing paper.

The living room was a long, colorful room with two chairs and a two-person couch arrayed facing the fireplace, upholstered in a soft, tan, silken fabric with gentle stripes of light green and pink. Far too many pillows for the smallish couch crowded it with embroidered shapes, ruffled textures, and an explosion of color. A rough wooden chest served as the coffee table, and a standing lamp bent over one of the chairs, the only one with few enough pillows to sit comfortably in. It had been Francie's reading chair.

The fireplace itself was blackened and well worn, the grate's golden edges shone with wear from being adjusted and readjusted constantly. Even on this late June morning, standing close enough to it brought the smell of woodsmoke, snowy nights, and charred Christmas ribbons. Jane could see Francie bent over the fireplace, striking long matches to catch crumpled newspaper with Rosie watching excitedly from over her shoulder. The room was full, every inch covered in either memorabilia or memories.

Face to face with the floor-to ceiling bookshelves that lined nearly a whole wall, and the wide mantle around the fireplace, each miniscule figurine, vase, bookend, and statuette seemed like a looming presence. Jane shifted the bucket on her hip, contemplating the accumulations of a lifetime, the current most prized possessions occupying prime real estate on these shelves. She smiled, putting down the bucket to reach into a clear glass jar that sat on one end of the mantle, full to the brim with translucent marbles. She picked one up, the clink of the others adjusting to its absence surprisingly loud in the silence of the house. Francie used to get these for Rosie at the old penny candy store and they'd play with them for hours, hiding them around the house, rolling them down the hallway. The cacophony of little collisions as Rosie dumped out the jar onto the hardwood, her shrieking laughter, and Francie's flustered footsteps running to grab the ones that were escaping seemed contained in this one little sphere. She put the marble back with a clink.

Jane went to the kitchen for a Ziploc bag, poured the marbles into it, and wrapped up the jar with the bag of marbles inside, putting it into the plastic bucket.

Next to the marble jar was a stack of white, smooth stones, piled from largest to smallest, balancing delicately. Francie and Luis would walk the shores of their favorite nearby beaches back in Maine for hours on the weekends, or at sunset after work. They always looked for these smooth stones, ranging in size from a marble to a softball, but usually flatter and more ovular, worn smooth by countless waves and currents grinding them down. Once Francie had moved to the Cape, she'd find them by the dozen, always coming back from the beach with at least one more for her collection. Over and over, they'd been tossed and turned, until they felt buttery smooth and cool in your hands. The stack was gingerly held together with ancient bits of Blu-Tack, so Jane wrapped it up delicately, securing it with a rubber band.

On the bottom shelf furthest to the right, within arm's reach of the small tan couch, a pair of green-rimmed glasses were sitting, slightly over the edge. A red and black beaded chain looped around from the earpieces and dangled off the shelf. Francie had about seven different prescriptions, bifocals, trifocals, readers, distance glasses, and left multiple pairs of all of them lying around. Finding the right pair of glasses to complete a task usually took her about as long as the task itself.

Jane continued working her way around the shelves, taking only the most important statues, paper weights, little framed photographs and wrapping them up. There was a framed photo of Luis, in a suit in front of the courthouse, and another of him holding Andrew, wrapped in a hospital blanket, smiling down at him. Jane had missed these on her first pass looking for photos, she'd mainly grabbed photo albums, and she slid them into the bucket now. There was another one, Francie, Luis, and Andrew, all standing together in the backyard of this house, when

the rhododendron was only about two feet tall, the gardens a quarter of their current size. Jane remembered taking it one afternoon in the fall.

She made her way through the bookshelves, then down the wide hallway that led towards the back of the house, towards Francie's studio, and the basement stairs. At the end of the hall, the front door stood open. Francie would leave it open most days when the temperature was above freezing, she loved how the morning light poured through the glass storm door and made its way all down the hallway. The door was rarely used for actually entering or exiting the house, there was barely even the remnants of a path leading to the driveway. Its bright red color gave the house a welcoming look as you drove up, though, and at Christmas time it always held an enormous, gold and silver clad wreath that smelled of pine and snow and all things festive.

The beams of light coming in from the front door fell across the three paintings that lined the hallway. One was of a heron, and seemed to be a print of an Audubon, or something like it. One was an abstract, a bloom of color shifting from yellow to green to pale blue near the center, with fine lines of orange and grey winding around over and under the colorful cloud. The painting felt cool, and spacious. It was one of Francie's first forays into abstraction, and even though she'd told Jane she'd grown to find it dull and flat, she kept it as a marker of when her artistic career took a turn. The last frame held a nearly pointillist representation of a grassy hill, atop which sat a small, weathered, red house. In the distance, purple marshes faded into ominous skies, and the distinct marks of various oil pastels gave it a fragmented sensation, like the whole world has begun to slowly disintegrate, atom by atom, and the artist has captured the very first separations. It was by Alice Bonneau, one of Francie's oldest friends, from even before art school. Francie had told the story countless times of how Alice drove up to stay with her the week she dropped out of art school, and gave her this painting to encourage her to keep making art.

As she stood outside the studio, peering in, Jane was once again overwhelmed. Her second plastic bucket was almost full, and heavy on her hip. She stepped into the studio and put it down on the floor. Francie's easel drew Jane's eye. There was a canvas still sitting on it, about two feet square. Jane thought back to one of the last phone calls she'd had with Francie, where she had been complaining about art block on this one. It had changed significantly since the last time she'd seen it when it was yellow. Now it was mostly blue. Francie had a consistent problem with overpainting, so Jane wasn't surprised. Things rarely looked the same between visits.

Now, the canvas stood at attention, unfinished, never to be finished, caught in a halfway state, having already been multiple different paintings.

Jane stared around the studio, bright light streaming in from the windows, and her eye was drawn to the largest pile of paintings, the one leaning up against the back wall of the studio. They were completely blocking the closet door, which wasn't a surprise as Francie had complained about its inefficiency at storing materials for years. Jane leaned the first one out to examine its surface. A pale blue ground was scattered with narrow, block-like stripes of greens and golds with tinges of purple. The colors faded softly into one another within the blocks. It

reminded Jane of a sunset over the salt marshes, their pale green grasses and the light blue sky glowing along the horizon, beams of sunlight dividing the earth from the air.

This whole stack was unframed, just loose boards and canvases piled up against one another. Jane thought how different these looked than the framed ones. Even though to her eye they seemed just as finished, the rough edge of the painting with colors spilling over onto bare canvas or dripping off the bottom of a board, many of which no longer existed in the painting, made them feel exposed. She wanted to wrap up their messy edges, lay a soft gold frame over them, package them up neatly. She smiled at Francie's loose signature at the bottom of the paintings, often in red or orange, a scattered brushing that vaguely started with an 'F'.

She punched open a few of the narrow cardboard boxes she'd picked up from the swap shop at the town dump last week and left in the studio to start stacking paintings into. She figured she'd pack up all the loose ones, the unframed canvases, then take a look at all the supplies. It would help to be able to move around the room, have a place to spread things out, to be able to open the closet. After wrapping the first, large stack in packing paper, vaguely labeling the outsides, and sliding them into the boxes where they stood upright, she could reach the closet door.

Opening it, the immense, cartoonishly messy stack of materials spilling from boxes and bags and drawers, haphazardly labeled on painters' tape, almost made her cry. Picking things up one at a time, pulling out boxes to glance into them, she didn't know what on earth to do with four different brands of mineral spirits, a box full of what was probably decades old varnish, sixteen different brands of colored pencils and conté crayons, gesso, staple guns... any of this.

Looking down at the floor, already cluttered with bottles and tubes and sticks of paint, there was not much room to spread out. Jane sighed, and figured it was bound to get worse before it got better, so she dove in and started taking things out of the closet, trying her best to pile them vaguely in groups of paint, drawing materials, surfaces like canvas and boards and tracing paper, and things she had no idea what they were for.

About halfway through, she thought of Ginny from the Art Center. She would know what to do with a lot of this. She decided she needed to get someone in here that knew more about this stuff, someone from the Center that would tell her what to throw away and what to donate. Some of this stuff must still be useful, she thought.

She wouldn't ask Ginny, herself, though. Otherwise, they'd be here for days on end as she told endless stories, went off on a tangent about every individual paintbrush. She wasn't exactly what Jane would describe as practical, and efficient was pretty much her antonym. Maybe one of the students, someone younger. Grabbing her phone, and searching through for Ginny's number, she dialed.

"Oh, Jane, dear, how are you?" Came her voice after about half a ring.

"I'm well, Ginny, thank you," Jane answered, wandering towards the windows, and looking out at the greens of the garden, her hand on her hip.

"Good, good, I'm glad to hear it-"

Jane jumped in before she had the chance to go into how sorry she was or recount some other anecdote. Normally she didn't mind too much, but she didn't feel like spending an hour on the phone with her today. "Listen, Ginny, I'm just starting to go through Francie's studio, and she has so, *so* many art supplies, things I haven't even heard of, paints of every kind, extra canvases, you know. I was wondering if there's any way one of the students at the Center could come over one day to help me sort through it? Show me what to donate, what to toss, that sort of thing?"

That sounded callous, she thought. Tossing the supplies Francie had spent a lifetime collecting, had treasured and ensconced herself in for decades. But Ginny responded quickly.

"Of course, Jane, of course. That's a great idea! I should have thought of that... I'd be happy to come by myself, if you'd like. I could help you go--"

"Oh, thank you Ginny, you're too kind, but there are quite a few heavy boxes, and I could use a younger set of legs myself to help me manage everything." Jane looked around at the studio conspicuously devoid of heavy boxes.

"Ah, yes, these old legs are no good for carrying things anymore, I'm afraid! My back is useless, too... and my hip!" She laughed to herself, and Jane joined in to be polite. "I'll ask one of Francie's old students, I'll get back to you soon... I'm sure someone will be able to help out."

"Thanks, Ginny. That'll be a great help."

"Is there anything else I can do?" She went on, "Anything at all? I know this must be quite the task..."

"Oh no, I'm all set, thank you, though," Jane replied, and was about to try and end the conversation when Ginny chimed in again.

"That Francie did love her materials! She was always coming in with something new to try, cold wax, thinners, scrapers, bits and bobs to mix into her paint... she was a clever one, wasn't she, always trying something different."

"She was," Jane agreed with a smile. "Thanks Ginny. I'll let you know if there's anything else."

"Okay, dear, please do."

"Bye, Ginny, thanks again."

"Bye -bye now."

Dropping her phone to her side, Jane returned to contemplating the closet. She'd emptied out about a third of it into her piles, but the shelves barely looked any emptier.

On the top shelf, behind a pile of folded-up drop cloth and an ancient box of rubber gloves, there was a stack of much smaller paintings than what Francie usually worked on, the largest only about eighteen inches across. Their frames were much simpler than the ones Jane was used to seeing from Francie, a varnished dark wood with pale canvas mats, and no glass. There were six or seven of them, and Jane was positive she'd never seen them before.

Instantly curious, she pulled aside the neglected supplies and carefully brought down the stack, backing out of the closet to kneel down on the only remaining exposed section of floor. The top painting was black and white, with the tiniest glints of rainbow hues scattered

throughout, like the dark and light pattern of sunlight falling through leaves with a crystal sun catcher glinting through. There was a figure, Jane noticed suddenly, tilting the frame side to side as if it would bring him out in clearer relief. He was delicately laying along one side, crowded into the corner of the frame and barely visible in his rendering, practically just another clump of light and dark. Jane was fascinated, Francie almost never painted figures. She had painted Rosie, once, when she was about six, from a photograph she'd taken of her running into the waves one summer, leaping and shrieking. And she'd painted that self-portrait after she had to leave art school. Jane had asked her why she didn't paint people, and she'd said they were too hard to capture, that as soon as you pinned them down in one pose or with one expression, they became less than they were, all she could see was the parts of them that were missing. She'd explained this while standing over that self-portrait, looking sadly at her rainbow-drenched figure as Jane exclaimed that it was beautiful.

She handled the painting gently, placing it down next to her to examine the one stacked below it. The next was also primarily black and white, but it was more clearly a figure, the back of someone, hunched over in a chair, seeming to look at some kind of brightness in the distance. The edges of the figure were almost glowing, tinges of orange, green, and yellow highlighting the light. The others were all similar, black and white, loose shapes with the tiniest glints of color. One seemed to have a small hand in it, one was full of gracefully curving lines. The final painting of the stack, the biggest, stared back at her. It was Francie, she must have been around the same age as she was in the self-portrait so familiar to Jane, that had stared back at her a few weeks ago at Francie's service. In this one, too, she was similarly brilliantly colored, but the light wasn't falling from an umbrella or any discernible source, and the edges of Francie's form were fading into a surrounding ether of black and white swirls. She seemed to be laying, reclining, in something like a more extended fetal position. One arm was cradling her head. She looked hurt, in some way. Jane ran her fingers over the gentle curve of her spine, the glint of blue on her tightly rendered cheekbone, the orange on her shoulders and collarbones, almost bending inwards as if to protect something she was curled around.

Her signature was nowhere to be found. Jane turned the painting over to look for a date, a year, a title, anything to tell her when and where this was from. The back of the painting was covered in a thick paper to conceal the mechanisms of the frame, as most of Francie's works were, but there was a small tear in the bottom left corner of this one. There was a date, too, just a year sketched onto the paper. 1964.

Surveying the stack of paintings, Jane felt poignantly aware that the story of these images would never be known. She wanted to ask what had inspired them, why she had chosen to paint in black and white when she'd never done that, except for homework assignments, as far as Jane knew. The year was the last year Francie was at art school, could these have been for an assignment? They felt deeply intimate, though. The examples of her other schoolwork Jane had seen throughout the years felt technically focused, distant from Francie as a person. She wanted to ask her. Who was the figure, hunched over, who did the hand belong to? She sighed, looking

up at all the progress she hadn't made in the studio, the closet gaping open, spilling out more boxes and drawers to go through.

She stood up, gathering the stack of paintings to wrap them up and add them to their own storage box, but when she held the painting out in front of her, shifting it vertical, she heard something shift inside of it. Something slid from one side to another.

There was already a small tear along the edge, so Jane gently wedged her finger in and tore through the paper, wincing as it tore crisply, having yellowed and weakened over the years. She peeled it back, leaving rough edges all along two sides, and revealed the metal clasps and wire of the frame's backing. Sitting against the bottom edge of the frame was a small, postcard sized piece of photo paper with a faded mark from where it had spent years tucked under one of the frame's clips. Jane knew what it was immediately.

She turned it over, and the black-and-white, yellowed sonogram stared back at her. Running her finger across its slick surface, scratched slightly in some places, Jane made out a tiny nose, the static blurred image of a first trimester scan. The type in the corner read *Francine Sereno, 1964*. That was five years before Andrew was born, the same year this and all the other paintings were dated.

This baby wasn't Andrew.

She turned the painting back over, eyes wide, holding her breath without even realizing. The swirls, the light and dark all around Francie's reclining form, it was the sonogram. Where the head would have been faded behind her torso, and there was no other way to recognize it as a human shape, but the swirls matched exactly as Jane looked from one to the other. She felt her eyes well up slightly, whether with sadness for Francie and whatever had happened to this child or with the shock and hurt that she had never told her, told anyone as far as she knew. She wiped them quickly to clear their blur from her vision and looked back at the sonogram. She could just make out the mechanical type along the bottom edge after Francie's name and the year, *October 9th*. She left school before her spring semester that year, Jane remembered. She was twenty. Was this why? It must have been. Did she leave because of grief, or to prepare for a child she didn't know she would have to grieve? She'd always said she just couldn't afford it anymore, and maybe that was part of it, too. Where was Luis at this point? Was the baby his?

Jane leaned back on her heels, the painting lying on the floor in front of her, holding the sonogram.

Had she really never told Andrew? Had she told Luis? Jane's mind was racing, and she felt a sense of guilt, too. Francie had hidden this away, buried these paintings in the back of her closet and never shown them to anyone, never told her about this. She clearly hadn't wanted her to know, had she been ashamed, or was it still something painful she kept secret in order to keep it closer to herself, to keep the memory for herself?

She wished she hadn't ripped the paper all the way along those sides, so she could slide the sonogram back inside, cover it up, tape up the tear and not have to feel its magnetic pull drawing her eyes back to it.

The midday light was filtering through the half-opened blinds in the studio, catching dust particles. The house was so still, the day so silent and calm compared to the chaos running through Jane's mind. Her feet were going numb from sitting on them, the creases of her pants cut into the back of her bent knees. She stood up, holding the sonogram, glancing around the room in a daze.

Her phone buzzed, a text from Andrew.

How's it going? Overwhelmed?

She'd told him she was going to try and tackle the important objects and start on the studio today. He knew she was stressed, but he had a deadline for an article tomorrow, so he had stayed to work.

Jane knew, though, that he was still avoiding having to come back to the house in its disarrayed state, walk through the door without Francie coming to greet him, brushing her long hair over her shoulder to reach up and hug him. After losing his dad, they'd at least still had each other.

Jane felt blindsided by this secret, one she'd never been meant to find. But there was a reason she hadn't thrown out the scan, gotten rid of it in some way over the years. She must have known at some point her family was going to go through this closet, through her artwork. Maybe she just thought it would be able to stay tucked away behind the painting, let them wonder about the image, about the glints of light she'd created with paint rather than the sonogram itself. She ran a finger over the mark where it had been held by the frame's clasp for so long. There was no way to know when it had dislodged. If it hadn't, she never would have known, it would have just been another painting.

Looking down at her phone, another message from Andrew came in.

ETA for coming home?

Jane let a breath out of her teeth and tossed her phone onto the paint splattered stool Francie would sit on by her desk. She would respond later. Once she had some more of a grasp on what she was going to say to Andrew.

As she wrapped up the rest of the paintings from this series, she found herself unable to come up with the right way to tell him, the right thing to say. This felt like such an intimate part of Francie's life, something that shouldn't be shared. And somehow, holding the fading sonogram, Jane felt comforted for the first time since she had died. She could all but feel Francie in the room with her, imagine her face looking down at it, sadly tracing the tiny features in the scan.

Jane pulled back the paper backing again and slipped the sonogram back under the frame clip. Then, with a small piece of packing tape, she taped down the edges. Flipping over the painting, nothing slid or rustled, and she felt better knowing it was back where Francie had wanted it, tucked away in this painting. She'd leave it there for now, wrap everything up and bring this box down to the basement. It didn't hurt to give this decades-old secret a little while longer on its own.

Chapter 10: Pastels

Ellen

It was Friday, finally. Ellen was waiting outside the front entrance of Woods Hole for her mom to pick her up at the end of her first week of camp. She was late, as usual. Her phone rang, and Ellen's heart jumped as she whipped her vibrating phone out of her back pocket to check the number. It was a 508 area code, and said it was from Chatham.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Ellen? It's Ginny, from the Creative Art Center?" Ginny was the director of the Creative Arts Center where she'd taken classes, and she was a friend of her mom's. They'd gone to high school together, or something, but Ellen didn't really understand how because Ginny had a very odd British accent and seemed much older than her mom.

"Yeah, hi, Ginny, how are you?" Ellen asked.

"Oh, I'm well dear, I'm well. Listen, I have a bit of an odd favor to ask you, your mom said you might be up for it."

Great, an odd favor from an eccentric artist. Of course, her mom had mentioned nothing to her. This would be interesting.

"Well, Francie, you knew her, right, took her classes?" Before Ellen could respond Ginny went on, "Oh, yes, of course you did, I saw you at her service. Silly me. But, yes, her daughter-in-law is going through her house, you know, cleaning up as you do. She called me the other day and was explaining how she's just absolutely at a loss as to how she should tackle Francie's studio. She was never the neatest painter, no, I'd imagine her space must be rather a mess..."

Ellen shifted from one foot to the other, looking out for the minivan as Ginny recounted her long-winded story about how Francie once apparently left a whole pack of oil pastels scattered across her classroom floor.

"...well, anyways, the point is, this daughter-in-law would like some help. I figured, you know a little about art supplies, maybe you'd be willing to pop over once or twice and help guide her as she sorts through it, letting her know what she should throw away, what could be donated here, what she might want to keep. How about it? Could you spare an afternoon?"

"Um, yeah, sure," Ellen replied, making a mental note to tell her mother once again to please not volunteer her for tasks without her knowledge. "I get out of work every day around 4, and I'm free on the weekends."

"Oh, that's just lovely, thank you so much, dear, I'm sure this will be a great help for the poor woman. Do you have a good email address for me to reach you at? I'll send her information right on over. I'm afraid I'm not really one for texting, so you'll have to make do with an old-fashioned email."

Ellen recited her email address at a glacial pace, e as in elephant, l as in lamp, all the way through, until Ginny was satisfied she had it correct. Ellen half hoped she'd managed to write it down wrong, and she'd never hear from her again. It's not that she didn't want to help, she had liked Francie, but the idea of walking into a dead woman's home to help a random lady clean out

her studio felt extremely weird and just not like a dynamic she was itching to be a part of. But unfortunately, Ginny knew her mom, so she knew she couldn't say no.

She was just hanging up as the minivan came around the corner, and Ellen climbed into the passenger seat. The AC was an instant relief, and she took a giant swig of her water bottle as they pulled out onto the road.

"Ginny sends her love." Ellen said, giving her mom a sideways look.

"What? When did you see Ginny?" her mom asked, frowning her brow as she kept her eyes on the road, leaning forward like she always did while driving, as if it took all her energy to keep them going in a straight line.

"She called me just now, said you told her I would help some lady clean out Francie's art studio?" Ellen was holding her phone in her lap, flipping one corner of its case on and off, on and off.

"Oh, yes, yes, I did mention you to her when she was telling me about Francie's passing. Poor thing, she had a lot of stamina left, you know."

"Remember last time, when you said I'd help Ginny with her garden over spring break? How I asked you to talk to me first before signing me up for jobs? We had a whole conversation about it...?" Ellen prompted carefully, eyeing her mother.

She dropped one hand from its white knuckled grip on the wheel and rubbed her temple.

"Oh, I do, I do Lennie, I'm sorry. I promise I'll remember next time, I'll ask you first. I was just on the phone with Ginny, and she sounded so frazzled, and I didn't think you'd mind, oh, I'm sorry, baby..."

"It's fine, Mom," Ellen replied, trying to cut off her sappy apology. "Just try to remember next time?"

"I will, sweetie." She reached over to give Ellen's hand a squeeze.

"Mhm." Said Ellen.

"So, are you going to help?" She asked tentatively after a moment.

"Yeah, I said I would."

"Oh good, you're a good one, Lennie, I'm sure she'll really appreciate that." She smiled without taking her eyes from the road.

Ellen kept her gaze out the front window, counting the cars with bikes on the back or kayaks on the top or noodles sticking out the windows as she always did in the summer. Thus far on this drive she'd seen three of each, a nice even tie.

"How were the kiddos today?" asked her mom, as the car came to a stop at a red light.

"Oh, you know, tiny terrors as always. One of them threw his dinosaur toy at his brother so hard he left a red mark in the shape of a stegosaurus."

Her mom started to laugh, and Ellen smiled a little despite herself, glancing over at her mom's open face. She did love hearing her laugh.

"I was going to say something about how you'll learn to love them, how when it's your own little ones they never seem quite so crazy, but that's just a hoot," her mom said over a chuckle.

“It was so detailed,” Ellen continued, glad to see her smiling and not dwelling on her admonishment earlier. “Really, you could see all the little spine things that stick out of its back. It was impressive.” They both laughed as the last light before the turn onto their street turned green, and the worn old van made its familiar turn.

Just a few hours later, after dinner, Ellen checked her phone to see she’d already received an email from someone named Jane, who she assumed was the woman she’d be helping.

Hi Ellen,

This is Jane, Francie’s daughter-in-law.

I got your email address from Ginny at the Arts Center. Thank you so much for agreeing to help me out with all of Francie’s art supplies.

I’m on the Cape most weekends, including this upcoming one, so let me know a date and time that works for you to swing by. If you can make tomorrow, that would be great.

Best,

Jane

VP Marketing Design, IMW Inc.

They exchanged a few emails back and forth, most only minutes apart, prompting Ellen to wonder once again why old people always insisted on using email when they wanted it to function exactly like texting. Oh well. They agreed to meet at twelve noon, tomorrow, at Francie’s house, 9 Round Cove road. Ellen was slightly surprised her mom was so okay with dropping her at a complete stranger’s house to meet another complete stranger, but she supposed anyone Ginny knew couldn’t be a danger in her mind.

“This is a good thing you’re doing!” she called to Ellen as she climbed out of the passenger seat the next morning, wishing more than anything she was still in bed with her laptop, spending one of her two days off as God had intended, watching a full season of Criminal Minds under the covers. “Call me when you need to be picked up!” Ellen knew she’d call her at least an hour before she actually wanted to be picked up, otherwise she’d be an hour late. But before she could go home, she had to go in.

The path to the front door was mostly overgrown with moss, and the one to the side door looked meticulously manicured, but it felt invasive to knock on this woman’s side door. Ellen made her way to the front and pressed gingerly on the doorbell. She didn’t hear anything from inside, but just in case she waited a full minute so she wouldn’t seem rude, then knocked as loudly as she could make herself. Which wasn’t all that loudly.

She heard footsteps, though, and in a moment the door swung open, and a tall brunette woman smiled out at her.

“Come in, come in!” She motioned Ellen inside, and waved over her shoulder to her mom in the minivan, who had already begun to back down the driveway.

“Hi, Ellen, it’s nice to meet you. Thank you so much for coming, really.” Jane reached out and shook her hand. Her skin was cool, and she had a firm grip that matched her tall, confident posture. Her fine hair was blow dried to give it more volume, and it shook and waved slightly as Jane shook her hand up and down. She was in yoga pants, the stretchy-but-thick kind that all older people bought a few years ago when it became acceptable to wear yoga pants in public, even a bunch of those who railed against the youths being in skintight clothes all the time on the internet a few years before. Her shirt was a nicer tank top, though, one Ellen could see her wearing to the office with a cardigan or something over it. It was a bright shade of blue, with some white and silver beads along the neckline. If she hadn’t already seen her email signature, she might think she was a secretary or something, not working in design, Ellen thought.

“Did you know Francie well?” Jane asked, as they walked down the hall to her studio.

“No, I mean, not really. I took her abstract class last summer, and her pastel class the year before. So, a little.”

“Oh, that’s so nice. I’m so glad someone who knew her was able to come and help, because you know what she was like, then.” Jane chuckled, slightly, and gave Ellen a knowing smile that she didn’t feel she understood the full meaning of.

Ellen just smiled politely back in reply.

They reached the end of the long hallway, and Jane pulled the pocket door back to reveal what, at first, glance, was a scene of pure chaos.

“I don’t really know anything about art, or making art, only what Francie told me over the years,” Jane said as the two of them stared into the colorful room.

“I mean, it’s mostly the same for me,” said Ellen, hesitating in the doorway.

The two of them paused in silence for a moment, watching the dust motes dancing in sun rays that landed on tables piled with brushes and boxes, stacks of papers and canvases leaned up against every vertical surface, clippings and prints thumbtacked to the walls. The midday sun hit the ones on the left side of the opposite wall the most, and their colors had faded over the years. This room smelled like Francie’s classroom, Ellen thought, like linseed oil and mineral spirits unstretched canvas and something worn in, like patina.

“I came to her service, actually,” Ellen said, interrupting their silence at the door.

“Oh, you did? That was very kind. There were a lot of faces I wasn’t familiar with there, so I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you. Thank you,” she said, smiling at Ellen, “for coming.”

“No problem.”

“So,” Jane said, clapping her hands together as she stepped into the studio. “I was thinking we could start with brushes, then do paints and pastels and things like that, then lastly we could go through the canvases and sketches and actual artwork. I’m imagining we’ll need to sort everything, maybe trash, donate, or keep....” she trailed off.

“Although, I don’t know what use any of the materials will be since no one in my family is particularly artistic. So maybe just trash and donate.”

“Sounds good,” Ellen responded. “I can start gathering all the brushes and stuff?”

“That would be great. I’ll grab us a trash bag and a box for the donations.”

As Jane made her way to the closet to get a trash bag, Ellen wandered around the studio, stepping over a few boxes of what looked to be wrapped up paintings, piles of paints, and all sorts of other materials. She picked up every brush she could find, most were standing up in old pringles cans or spaghetti sauce jars or narrow glass vases, but quite a few were scattered in drawers and on surfaces. She picked out the ones that had dried stiff, covered in old paint, and set them aside to be thrown away. Jane came back in and started putting them in the trash bag.

“So,” she said to Ellen, “you’re an artist then?”

“Not really,” she replied. “I mean, I like art, and I like to paint sometimes, but it’s not, like, the main thing I do.”

“I see,” Jane said, helping her slide all the good brushes into a smaller grocery bag she’d labeled *DONATE*. “So, what do you do, mostly?”

“Well,” Ellen started, “this summer I’m a camp counselor at Wood’s Hole. I love biology and stuff, but working with kids wasn’t exactly my first choice. Last week was my first week, and it was exhausting.” She sat down to start going through the impressive pile of paint tubes, tossing the ones that were almost out, had the lid died on, or that looked crusty and expired when she peered inside.

“I understand that,” Jane said with a smile. “I thought I wanted to be a teacher for a while, but then I spent a fall doing it and realized I’d much rather boss around adults who don’t ask you to help them go to the bathroom or make fun of you for not knowing what comic book they’re talking about.”

“Exactly!” said Ellen. “And they want us to teach them about algae and microplankton and pollution and stuff, and I’m like, they’re five! They just wanna go build sandcastles and splash around. Which they do get to do in the afternoons.”

“At least they get to do some of that.” Jane said, taking her lead to sort through the paint tubes, and occasionally asking her if one looked salvageable or not.

“Do you live on the Cape, too?” Ellen asked after a few minutes.

“No, I live across the bridge, between the south shore and Boston, kind of,” Jane said. “It’s about an hour to drive here, which isn’t too bad.”

“That’s nice,” Ellen replied, feeling awkward in the lull of their conversation. Jane didn’t seem to mind, though, she just kept tossing paint tubes into the trash bag or the donate bag. To make conversation, she continued to come up with questions about Francie. Was she always an artist? No, she’d worked as a secretary for a while before quitting to follow her passions and had started teaching as a way to make some money and discovered she loved it. How long had she lived on the Cape? Almost twenty-five years. Was she a big gardener, I noticed all the plants when I came in? Yes, yes she was, it was her second favorite pastime. She’d actually grown and arranged all the flowers for her own wedding.

By the end of the day, they'd made it through almost all of the supplies in the studio. There were still a few more boxes of pastels and some mixing mediums Ellen hadn't known what to do with, but most of what remained was the piles and piles of artwork. She had enjoyed chatting with Jane about Francie, forgetting about her week with the devious children and how much she missed Aleaya for a bit. After she'd called her mom, warning Jane it would take at least an hour for her to show up, they'd driven over to the Art Center together to drop off their first bags of donations. Looking out the window of Jane's car at the trees rushing past, Ellen was reminded of how much she'd used to love reading when she would disappear into another character, learning everything there was to know about them.

She had been a reader growing up, but the rigors of high school classes, and even eighth grade classes *preparing* her for high school, had caused her to go quite a while without having picked up a book for pleasure. Her favorite part of books had always been meeting different kinds of people she otherwise would never have known existed, getting to know everything about them, becoming familiar with their lives, so drastically different from hers (frequently involving magic or dragons or prophecies). She liked that the stories had such clear cut good and evil. Even ones where you were supposed to feel the characters struggling between the two, it was never really a difficult decision to stay in the light, on the good side of the force, to not be a death eater, etc. etc.. The books she'd had to read English this year, though, were not nearly as understandable. You never really *got to know* Lenny and George, and there was definitely no clear cut good and evil. And Gene and Finny in *A Separate Peace*, what was all that tree branch bouncing shit about? Were they friends or not? She didn't feel like she knew them any better at the end of the book than she did in the beginning, and it bothered her.

Delving into Francie's house, though, was like picking up a truly immersive book about a kind old woman and making up some of her character on your own. She knew just enough about Francie to give context to everything she and Jane sorted through. She knew she was an artist, that she'd had only one son, and she learned that her husband had been a translator who spoke four different languages, that she had loved to watch *I love Lucy*, that she'd only had one son who she loved more than anything, that she'd been like a mother to Jane.

Jane herself seemed content to have Ellen as company, and when they had pulled back into Francie's driveway and were waiting for the minivan's arrival, one of the things Ellen spent most of her life doing, she thought, she'd asked her if she'd want to come back next weekend and help out with all the paintings. Ellen had agreed readily, willing to indulge Jane's desire to prolong this venture, and excited to hear more stories about her life. She agreed to get dropped off again next Saturday at noon, and she waved to Jane from the window of the van when as her mom pulled out of the driveway, only forty-five minutes late.

Chapter 11: Translations

Jane

Jane opened a new tab on her browser the night after Francie's passing, and searched *'how to clean out a deceased parent's home'* on Google. She didn't know what she was expecting, but she wasn't prepared for the first five results to all be sponsored websites advertising dumpster rentals. She had shut the tab immediately and given up on turning to the internet for help in this particular case. She was definitely not going to go around tossing things willy-nilly into a dumpster.

On her drive home from Francie's this weekend, she'd thought about what on earth she'd be putting in a dumpster. She was making progress, and somehow losing herself in all the tasks that had to be done at Francie's was helpful. It felt calming, like she was still there somehow. In the moments alone in her house, it felt like Francie was still there for her. She hoped this was a normal part of the stages of grief. It seemed like it would be.

In her fifty years of life, she'd had surprisingly few encounters with death. While both sets of her grandparents had been born in the same town in Massachusetts where they stayed for most of their lives, they had retired farther south when she was quite young. Her father's parents moved to Virginia where two of her aunts had ended up, and where there were already grandkids, and her mother's parents had gone all the way to Georgia for no clear reason other than preferring the warmth and the politics. They had all passed on before she graduated college, leaving her with distant memories of Christmas pies, stories of growing up with next to nothing, and drug store birthday cards that contained twenty-dollar bills and brief messages.

When she was a senior in college, one of her roommates was killed in a car accident. Her name was Catherine, she had bright ginger hair and eyes so green and round they seemed to bulge out of her head, and they had been friends since the first day of freshman year. Catherine was going to be a nurse, until a Volkswagen t-boned her at an intersection on Route 9. The college held a memorial service for her in the chapel no one ever went into besides for convocations, and Jane was invited to speak at it. The truth was, even though Catherine and Jane still lived together, they had been growing apart all year. They had gotten in a blowout fight three weeks before the accident, and still hadn't made up, had barely even spoken to one another. Catherine couldn't understand why Jane wasn't being more sympathetic about her rejections from nursing school. To be fair, she'd barely studied, and her letters of recommendation were from her high school teachers, the last ones to have seen her make an effort, but still, couldn't she at least be a little supportive? Say she was sorry?

Jane remembered crying at the podium in front of professors and students, feeling far more guilt than grief, realizing it was far more guilt than grief, and feeling even more guilty. That was the only time someone truly close to Jane had passed away, and the whole thing was tinged with a guilt that still made Jane feel selfish and terrible.

Her mother had a scare with skin cancer in 2003, but the biopsies of the areas proved to be benign. It stopped spreading once they were removed, leaving only a wrinkled scar in the

crook of her elbow and the feeling that Jane had dodged a bullet she was in no way prepared to handle. Especially with a two-year-old clinging to her at every spare moment.

Jane's first boss and mentor, a woman named Denise Coleman, had passed away just a few years ago. She had been eighty something, having retired shortly after Jane received her first promotion, although the two stayed in touch. She found that she still thought of her often, still heeded her advice, even coming up on thirty years later. They had mostly been friends in a professional sense, but whenever Jane answered a call from the supervisor of her department, before lifting the phone to her ear, Denise's thin lips and narrowed eyes seemed to look down at her over her glasses, and Jane heard her saying "not standing up for yourself is inexcusable."

So, in 1996, when Andrew got a call at the hotel they were staying at on their honeymoon that his father was very sick and he needed to come home, and then another call as soon as they got home that he had died, Jane was at a loss. How do you comfort your new spouse when his father suddenly dies of a cancer they had declared beatable just a few months ago? Andrew had been standing in their entryway, the cord of the land line still bouncing slightly, un-melted flakes of snow nestled in his jet-black hair and on the shoulders of his jacket. Jane had quietly watched them melt from the passenger seat of the car as he sat stiffly, eyes fixed on the highway north. He had insisted on driving.

Jane arrived home and closed the garage door behind her, coming back with yet another carload of items from Francie's house. She called through the door up to Andrew for help unloading the car. He came down from his office, and they chatted about her progress on sorting the art supplies with Ellen's help.

"She knew exactly what to donate, and what to toss, so we got through almost all of that stuff in the studio. She was sweet," Jane said. "She reminds me of Rosie a bit."

They shut the trunk, and headed inside, as Jane asked, "How did she seem today, it's been a couple weeks since Liam... she said she might see Siena today, did she?"

"No," Andrew said, "she was home for most of the day. We did some yardwork, then she had a shift at the bakery. I think tonight she's going to someone's house, though."

"Oh, good," Jane said. She felt like she'd barely seen Rosie lately, spending her days at work and her weekends on the Cape had been keeping her busy.

"Are you sure you're okay doing all this on your own?" Andrew asked, as they put the plastic tubs down in his office where a pull-down hatch opened to the attic. "I can come help, next weekend I won't have as much work. You've been doing so much."

He looked at her so intently, it just increased Jane's resolve not to burden him with more of these tasks. He'd done all the paperwork to sell Francie's car, handled the banks and so many of the forms and documents, but she knew she could handle most of this cleaning process, most of the sorting. Once they decided if they were going to sell or convert to a rental, she'd ask him to come help, they'd have a yard sale, do some renovations.

“No, hon, I’m alright. I got this, I promise. And if I’m ever overwhelmed, I promise I’ll let you know.” She gave him a quick kiss. “I’m going to go start dinner.”

“Hey,” he said, pulling her back, “I love you.” He pulled back, and let her go, and said, for the hundredth time, “thank you.”

Jane just nodded with a smile, and headed downstairs.

She felt a small pit of guilt sitting in the bottom of her stomach, unable to explain that she felt a little selfish, keeping Francie’s house all to herself, that she liked working through it alone, and now, keeping this secret for her. The words felt truly impossible to form, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to tell him for a long time, maybe ever.

In the kitchen, she started pulling out ingredients, her mind only fractionally present, her body on autopilot as she lost herself in thought again.

She never lied to Andrew, but some part of her was clinging desperately to this secret like a lifeboat, using it to keep her afloat. She pictured Andrew’s face, driving them from the hospital after Francie had passed, eyes firm on the road. It was the exact same expression he’d made driving them home after Luis died, the glint in his eyes just a tiny bit harsher. She thought of the pain she’d seen him in after he lost his father, and again after losing Francie. She told herself she just didn’t want to hurt him, that she would carry this secret to save him another aspect of hurt. She found herself again thinking of his face, this time as they’d stood at Luis’s burial, as she started chopping potatoes, carrots, and onions to make beef stew.

Luis was buried twenty-two years ago, on a rainy December day, in Waterville, Maine, and Francie had Jane was certain no one had rented a dumpster. Luis’s parents had moved from Portugal to Maine when he was fourteen, so his father could take an adjunct professorship at Colby College, which he later attended. After marrying Francie in Boston, they moved back to Waterville to raise Andrew. The town was small, and the cemetery even smaller, with spaces already reserved next to Luis’s parents and older brother. The cemetery was separated from an interstate by only a few hundred feet of sparse woods, bare of leaves and brush, which on the day of the funeral left the damp, black ensemble exposed to the rushing sounds of midday traffic. Jane remembered wondering how many of the cars rushing past had looked out their passenger windows and noticed the proceedings, the dripping geraniums and roses, the flimsy white tent that echoed the patter of rain over pastor Finnegan’s low voice. Jane had stood next to Andrew and Francie, on the tenth day of their marriage, discomfort clinging to her like the wet jersey of her skirt. Their honeymoon was abandoned, interrupted by the uncaring entity that is metastasized colon cancer.

The real ceremony, the time for celebrating and grieving the man that was Luis Sereno, was later that morning, at their house. Francie had invited his old colleagues from the courthouse, friends from their life in Maine and on the Cape. His high school sweetheart told stories of his first days at their school after moving from Portugal, a quiet, solemn man even at fourteen. Quite a few of his former clients came to the service. One of whom, a woman named

Rogeria Alves who he had worked with for over five years, seeing the immigration case for her and her two sons through to the end, brought photographs of him smiling beside her family, surrounded by the light wood of a county courtroom. He had, primarily, been a court interpreter, fluent in English, Portuguese, Spanish, and some Italian. Certified in every state in New England, he had traveled frequently for work, assisting clients all over for weeks at a time as trials progressed. He also translated articles for publication in scientific and legal journals in the U.S., Portugal, and Brazil. While those who met him only briefly or knew him only in a professional context described him as exacting, precise, and occasionally callous, Francie preferred to call him ‘a flawed perfectionist’. His sister, who flew in from Los Angeles for the service, called him an asshole, mostly fondly.

While he might not have been an artist like Francie in the most direct sense, she often described him as an artistic soul. He didn’t write poetry, or prose, or really anything original at all save some simple journal entries here and there, but he studied linguistics and the nuances of language and translated his favorite works to and from different languages for fun. Francie described his efforts over the years to improve her Portuguese or Spanish, or even her English, as comparable to her attempts to teach him the principles of color theory or composition. They complimented one another in unconventional ways. She apologized for his brevity and frankness when he, sometimes accidentally, offended dinner guests or distant family members, and he would wind down her wandering anecdotes, to the relief of everyone around, with a firm but endearing “I think that’s plenty on that.” Not to say they never fought, because that would be a lie. They fought often, threw harsh words at one another, and yelled from different ends of the dinner table while Andrew, and eventually Andrew and Jane, sat between them, silverware frozen in their hands, but they were equals on the verbal battlefield and their fights never indicated a lack of love or respect. Jane used to be amazed at how they could stand at the sink washing dishes side by side, Francie humming and swaying contentedly, just fifteen minutes after raising their voices about something they disagreed on in the daily paper.

Jane had known Luis only briefly as a distant, preoccupied man who loved his son but was never quite sure how to articulate it, despite his polyglot abilities. The words “I love you” frequently evaded him in all languages, though he did his best to show it by sending Andrew to a local private school where his government job earned him a subsidy, keeping every article of Andrew’s that was printed in the school paper, and driving him miles and miles away at ungodly hours for hockey tournaments without complaint. He thought he was caring for him, too, by only speaking English at home, by giving him an American name, never bringing him to Portugal. Jane saw the sadness in Andrew’s eyes, though, when they looked around the yard during his service at various translations he had done, Portuguese words and phrases printed out and strung up around the living room by Francie earlier that day, and he realized he understood none of them. They had been so young, that day, and Jane remembered feeling that Luis’s death would be the true test of their marriage. She laughed to herself, remembering that now.

When Jane had first learned she was pregnant and they had started discussing names, Andrew had mentioned Rosa, his grandmother’s name. She had moved back to Portugal after his

grandfather passed when he was young, so he had very few memories of her. Luis had kept her photo framed on their mantle and spoke of her often. He described her as parsimonious and reserved, but deeply compassionate. Andrew had told her how he had sometimes peeked into his father's office and seen his face while writing letters to his mother, Rosa, and said it was the same face he made only when he looked at Francie while she was painting, or at him when he thought he was asleep. At first, he'd thought he looked scared, but when he grew up, he realized the expression was devotion mixed with vulnerability. He said it was how he pictured his father now, when he thought of him, hunched over his narrow wooden desk covered in papers, with only a small, red-shaded lamp on, writing quickly with his eyebrows softly raised and his dark eyes softer than they looked in daylight.

Jane said it reminded her of someone she knew.

Chapter 12: Sheets

Ellen

Ellen's neon green camp t-shirt had grape jelly all over the bottom hem and smelled embarrassingly like B.O.. Jamie had smeared about eighty percent of his PB&J sandwich all over himself and Lexi while her back had been turned for two minutes during lunch, and discovering he didn't like the sensation, he'd immediately grabbed and tugged on the bottom of her shirt, his sticky, weighty hands filling her with quite frankly something like genuine disgust. The kids could be really sweet, but sometimes she just found them unbearably annoying and needy. Trying to cover them in sunscreen, make sure they kept track of their sharpie-labeled water bottles, and stop them from ripping leaves from tree branches to use as confetti thrown over friends and enemies alike was neither fun nor glamorous. A summer job at THE Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute had conjured up much different images, ones of microscopes and complicated waterproof equipment and boats on the wide-open ocean full of busy scientists. But no, instead Jamie and Lexi and nine other five-and-six-year-olds picked their noses and slapped each other with pipettes while she tried to interest them in pictures of algae. She tossed the balled-up shirt into the dark recesses of her closet, the evening shadows concealing her growing pile of dirty laundry.

She was exhausted. Her dark, cool room and the sound of crickets droning the summer's version of silence were heavenly in comparison to the hot, loud day. Her socks left woven imprints on the tops of her feet, and she had a shorts and sneakers tan that was getting pretty aggressive. There was a white film of sunscreen creased in the soft divots behind her knees and in her elbows and she couldn't wait to get in the shower. Preferring the dim glow of a late sunset to the harsh overhead light she only flipped on the switch for the fan as she walked into the bathroom and started the water crashing down from the showerhead. Her mind was blank for the moment, all energy for worry or overthinking drained by another day of herding around first graders, and the emptiness was a blissful relief. She leaned back against the cool countertop, the granite freezing against her bare skin, and turned on her phone with a practiced motion, waiting for the water to heat up.

A snapchat memory popped up, one year ago today, a photo of Aleaya and Isabel, each holding an ice cream cone high above their head, standing on the bench of a picnic table. The bright sun illuminated them from behind, their frizzy baby hairs lit up, extended limbs outlined in gold. They'd biked to that ice cream place after swim practice, a premeditated but seemingly spur-of-the-moment invitation extended to Isabel who until that summer they'd thought too cool to want to hang out with them. She was really just shy, though, Ellen had learned. She was in California, now, doing some kind of theatre camp. Probably lying on the beach singing show tunes and drinking kombucha, or something. That's what she'd been doing in her last two Instagrams, anyway. Ellen closed her phone and stepped under the water.

She'd just rinsed out her shampoo, squeezing out her dripping hair while reaching for the conditioner and lamenting the fact she needed to shave her legs again *already* when her phone rang, a rare occurrence.

No one called her, except her mom, who was downstairs, and something made her get out of the shower, wipe her dripping fingers off on a towel and peer down at the screen as she soaked the bathmat.

Call from: Unknown. Caribou, ME.

The number started with an unfamiliar area code, but not something like 1-800. She answered quickly.

"Hello?"

After a pause, a familiar voice asked: "El?"

A shot of adrenaline rushed from her chest and out to her hands and feet, sharp and sudden. The sound of Aleaya's voice was like a physical injection to her nervous system, her heart sped up and her palms were suddenly shaky and sweaty.

"Aleaya? Hi, oh my god," she said, "how are you?" She had stood up straight at the sound of her voice and was pressing the hot screen of her phone hard against her ear to make out her words as clearly as possible over the sound of the shower.

"Hey, hi, yeah..." she answered slowly, then pushing forward "I'm good, I'm doing good, how are you?" Ellen closed her eyes at the sound of her voice, feeling relief on top of the anxiety at just hearing her speak for the first time since the last, terrifying phone call.

"I'm pretty good too I guess," Ellen responded, immediately feeling like somehow this was the wrong response. She grabbed the towel and quickly used it to wipe off the side of her face and her phone, then squeezed her hair. "It's really nice to talk to you," she added, "it's been a long time."

A slight silence followed, and she rushed to fill it with "Where are you? I mean, if it's okay for me to ask..."

"No, no, it's totally fine. I'm actually somewhere in Maine, the town is kind of small and like all the way up north, but the facility is pretty new so that's nice. It's an inpatient treatment center, I guess that's what you wanted to know. Mental health rehab, basically."

"No, I... I want to know all of it!" Ellen's voice rose as she tried to sound less nervous than she felt. Aleaya sounded good, her voice was bright and mostly casual even through the awkward pauses. "Maine's not too far, do you like it? Would... Would you want me to visit?"

"I don't know, Ellen. It's not that I don't want to see you, but... it's just we only get one visitation every week and it's been really nice to see my Dad then, you know?"

"Yeah, no, of course. That's good he's been visiting. Do you like the doctors and other patients and stuff? Is there anyone nice there?" She struggled to think of the right questions to ask, not too invasive, not too vague.

"Yeah, they're pretty nice. Everyone's really normal, which is good I guess." She laughed a little, surprising Ellen with how comfortable she seemed answering her questions. It

sounded like she'd answered them all before. "There's a girl named Phan down the hall from me who's pretty nice. We eat dinner together a lot, she's from California."

Ellen paused, listening more to her tone of voice than to the words. Another pause filled the space, and she leaned into the shower to turn off the steaming water. She wrapped the towel loosely around her and snuck quickly out of the bathroom and down the hall to her room. "Hey, Lea... I just wanted to say, I-"

"It's fine, Ellen. Really. You don't have to apologize."

"No, I do, I really just want you to know that I'm sorry, I know I promised-"

"It's okay, Ellen. I forgive you, really. It's not like you were wrong to be worried." She was saying the words Ellen had been waiting to hear, but they felt hollow somehow. She didn't believe them deep down, whether that was from her own guilt or from a sense that Aleaya really didn't forgive her, she wasn't sure.

"We don't have to talk about it," she continued, "it's really okay. Just fill me in on your summer, if you want, what have you been up to?"

"Well." Ellen laughed a little, sitting down on her bed and leaning against the headboard. Her knees were covered in goosebumps and water droplets as she pulled them up to her chest. "I got a job at Woods Hole like I'd talked about... but I would *not* call it scientific. I got stuck as a camp counselor, so I basically just attempt to keep a whole bunch of first graders and kindergarteners from pushing each other in the water or getting their goopy hands all over the fossilized samples I show them."

"Oh no," Aleaya laughed, "that sounds like a nightmare. You hate kids!"

"That's what I told them!"

"Are they at least paying you? Like you're not volunteering to do this for free, right?"

"No, no they're paying me. Minimum wage, but still. I would *not* do this for free." She paused for a second, a smile still on the corners of her lips. "Maybe, when you get back, we could go for a picnic or something? Isabel and that group had a really cute picnic on the beach last week and the pics were honestly so pretty. I could buy some fruit and like crackers and stuff, we can get dressed up... you know, like we were talking about in the spring?"

"Sure," Aleaya said, "that sounds really cute. I'm not sure it'll be soon, though, I don't really know when I'm coming home."

Ellen rested her chin on her knees, the arm not holding her phone wrapped around her prickly shins. She was staring out the window, her eyes unseeingly taking in the last few orange and blue glimmers of the day over the treetops. "Okay, well, whenever you do come home, we can do it then."

"Yeah... I wish it could be sooner, but they don't care what I think."

"I'm sorry... I-"

"Do you know what day school starts?" Aleaya asked, cutting her off. "Just in case I have to stay until like September, I don't wanna miss any more school and have people asking questions and stuff, you know. It's just annoying."

“Aleaya, about that, I need to tell you something.”

“What?” Ellen’s heart was racing again, she only paused for half a second before Aleaya’s anxious voice came back, “What, Ellen?”

“People know, you know, where you are. It’s not a big deal, they’ve all been really nice for the most part it’s just-”

“What? How? Did you tell them? I asked you not to, you know tha-”

“No! It wasn’t me, I swear! I think it was Michael.” She paused. “I’m sorry. He was the only other one who knew how you were feeling. I only found out because Isabel said her brother who’s a senior knew. I tried to ask Jonas about it on the phone one night, but he didn’t have any idea. A couple people have messaged me to ask if it was true, but I haven’t told them anything. Just that you’re away.”

“Oh.” She said quietly.

“I know you really liked him, Lea, but I just don’t think he’s that good of a person. I didn’t know you guys were even that close.”

“Yeah, he just, he was always really kind, and I thought...” She sighed but didn’t finish her thought.

Ellen knew she shouldn’t push it, but she was hurt that Aleaya had thought she’d been telling other people all about her depression, her suicide attempt, and she couldn’t help but bring it up once more, as tears were stinging her eyes.

“Aleaya, I know why you might assume it was me, but I promise I would never just talk about you behind your back like that. I know I broke my promise when I called your parents, but I never will again, and I’m sorry. I just don’t want you to think that I would do that.”

“I know, Ellen. It’s not your fault.” Her voice wasn’t particularly convincing. “I have to go, though. I’ll call you again soon, okay?”

“Okay. I miss you.”

“Miss you too, bye.”

“Bye.”

The line went dead, and her phone went dark.

Her hands were freezing, but still shaking, and the towel was soaked and leaving wet spots on her blanket and pillows. Instead of getting back in the shower, she put the towel over her pillow and lay down, sliding her naked body under the cool sheets of her bed. She curled up, the skin of her stomach and chest still hot from the shower, and closed her eyes.

A little while later, she had fallen into a light sleep, the kind where you’re not sure if you’re dreaming or just imagining things, where five minutes could be an hour and an hour could be a whole night. A soft knock echoed into reality, and she forced her eyes open to find the room fully dark. A sliver of light came in as her mom cracked open the door, saying “Dinner’s ready, hon, are you asleep? It’s so early.”

Ellen rolled over onto her back, pulling the sheets up to her chin and said, “Yeah, I’ll be down in a minute.”

“You okay, Lennie? If you need the sleep you can stay.” She walked over to the edge of the bed and ran a hand across Ellen’s forehead and into her damp hair.

“I’m fine, I’ll come down in a little bit.” She kept her eyes closed, feeling her face get hot and her puffy eyes ache.

“What’s the matter, Lennie, tell me,” her mom pleaded, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “I can tell something’s going on in that head.”

Tears were coming, and her heart was beating quickly once more. She knew once she said it out loud it would mean countless conversations, her whole family would worry, they’d stare, they’d ask her if she had ever felt like hurting herself. They’d make comments to Aleaya once she came back, they’d give her that sad, pitiful stare.

“You know you can talk to me, baby,” her mom encouraged.

She couldn’t make the words come, and as she lay there in the dark next to the silent weight of her mom she felt everyone’s stare pressing her down into the mattress, felt her throat constricting and her eyes looking frantically around behind her eyelids. She couldn’t open them. She tried to take a deep breath, but it was shuddering and shallow. Her fingertips had gone numb, and she was crying full on, now, tears running down the back of her throat.

“Oh baby, baby, it’s okay, come here,” her mom went to place her hands under her shoulders to pull her into a hug, but Ellen twisted back, grabbing hold of the sheets. Don’t cry, don’t cry. She opened her eyes, for a second, and saw her mom’s concerned eyes staring down at her, the hallway light almost painfully bright in its yellow sliver behind her. She wanted to slam the door shut, so no one could walk by or come in. Make her mom disappear, the concerned, babying, pitying voice and reaching hands just leave her *alone*. She felt like her mom must be able to feel how fiercely and quickly her heart was beating, it was echoing into her throat and ears and stomach. She could practically feel it slamming against her ribs. There was no way out of this now, she was crying too hard, her mom knew something was wrong and wouldn’t leave until she told her what. She never did.

“Ellen,” she said softly, still stroking her hair, pinning her down with her gentle touches. She might as well just say it, just say it.

Break her promise again, like she’d just said she wouldn’t do half an hour ago on the phone. All she did was lie to Aleaya, no wonder she didn’t want to talk to her, kept things from her, didn’t forgive her.

She was clenching her jaw intensely. She forced herself to stop thinking, to just say it: “Aleaya tried to kill herself.”

There was a pause, and Ellen heard her mom exhale in surprise.

“What? Oh my god, Ellen, is she okay? When?”

“A few days before graduation.” Her breaths were still getting caught in her throat, making her whole chest heave as she tried to calm them. She hadn’t cried like this in years, like she was a toddler wailing about dropping an ice cream. “The end of May.” She opened her eyes

and saw the panic and concern in her mom's face, strands of her hair hanging from the loose bun at the nape of her neck. She was still in the scrubs from work, they made the employees wear them even though it wasn't a medical facility, really.

"What? Why didn't you tell me? That was weeks ago, have you just been sitting on this? Oh, baby..." She trailed off and went to pull Ellen into a hug once more, but again she dodged the outstretched arms by pulling up the covers.

"Mom, I'm naked. And I'm not a baby."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry." she said with a dazed look, staring down at her daughter, blatantly aware of the pain in her face. She stood up, closed the door, and flipped on the light. Ellen sat up, leaning against the headboard with the covers pulled up around her, and watched her mom walk silently to her closet and pull out t-shirt, underwear, and sweatpants. Her mom was breathing slowly, intentionally, and she could physically feel all the questions she was doing her best to shove down. Ellen's own breath had slowed, but still caught and almost hiccupped every now and then. She hiccupped a little. She felt like a child. Like a traitor, like a liar. She was exhausted.

"Here, I'll turn around." She placed the clothes on Ellen's lap and sat down at the far end of the bed, facing the hallway door. She asked quietly, "What happened, baby? Please talk to me. I can't believe you've been keeping this in..."

Ellen reached for the t-shirt. "She called me, one night, pretty late. She never calls me." She paused. "She sounded like she was saying goodbye. I don't know how to explain it, exactly. Then, she wouldn't answer when I called her back. I'd promised I wouldn't tell anyone how bad it was, but she wouldn't answer the phone. So, I called her parents, and they found her and she'd taken a bunch of pills, and now she's at a treatment center somewhere in Maine."

"Are you dressed?"

"Yeah." Ellen was sitting cross legged now, fiddling with the damp edge of the towel that was still on her bed, staring down at her lap.

"That's a really serious thing, Lennie. And really scary. You did the right thing by telling her family, you might've even saved her life. I know I've worked with people who would've been so, so lucky to have a friend like you do that for them. It breaks my heart that you had to go through that, and that we weren't there for you. You know you can talk to me about things like that, right?"

She reached out a hand under Ellen's chin, softly tilting it up so their eyes met. "I'm here for you."

"I know." Ellen looked away again.

Her mom did not. And she could feel the question coming, feel her overcoming her own hesitation to ask it, see it rising to the tip of her tongue as her lips parted, the thin lines like parentheses around them creasing.

"Have you ever felt like hurting yourself, Ellen? Have you felt like she did?"

"No, Mom, please don't worry. I haven't. I promise."

“Okay. If you ever do,” she took her chin in her hands again, her voice much more serious, sterner than she had used with Ellen in years, “you tell me.” Her eyes were intense as they met Ellen’s, the remnants of today’s orange shimmery eyeshadow and mascara flecked on the papery lids. “You understand? If you ever, for one single moment, think about hurting yourself in any way, if that ever feels like the only way out, you tell me.”

“Okay.” She tried not to look away.

“Can I give you a hug now?” Her mom asked, still making eye contact. She sounded sad.

“Mhm,” said Ellen as she leaned over her folded-up legs and into her mom’s arms, her breathing finally slow, but her stomach still in a knot. Her mom squeezed her tight, holding the back of her head against her shoulder.

“Have you talked to her at all since? Do you-”

“No, I haven’t. And, Mom, I don’t really wanna talk about it anymore. I think I’m just gonna go back to sleep.” Ellen said, doing her best to give her a small smile so she knew she wasn’t mad, so she wouldn’t worry.

“Okay, baby. I don’t mean to pry. I just want you to know how much we love you, okay. And how much we love Aleaya, too.”

“I know, Mom. Thanks.”

She was sliding her legs back under the covers while her mom stayed standing at the foot of her bed, looking hesitant to leave. She opened her mouth as if to say something else, but then decided against it and walked over to give her a kiss on the forehead and turned to leave. Ellen saw her shadow pause outside her door for a minute after she’d closed it again, and heard what she thought might have been a quiet sob. She turned over, curling up, and tried not to think about her mom crying. She hadn’t wanted to hurt her.

In another minute or two the shadows receded, and she heard her footsteps on the stairs, then her soft voice murmuring to the rest of the family. The sound of silverware on plates and distant conversation resumed, and Ellen pulled the blankets over her head.

Chapter 13: Records

Jane

Jane's week at work had been hectic. Her mind was so infrequently focused in the laser-like way it had been before Francie's passing, with almost no effort on her part, that she found she was missing emails and dropping balls like the interns she so frequently scolded. She'd been beating herself all week long, feeling like Maryanne as she asked redundant questions left and right. Which department was heading the Aroh campaign? Which file was the color palette for the social suite in? Usually, managing her team of designers to execute advertising campaigns came instinctively, she had worked her way up through dedication and a little bit of luck, and rarely faltered nowadays. But taking so much time off to be at Francie's was intensely distracting, and managing the team creating Instagram stories for a luxury vacuum brand suddenly fell much lower on her list of priorities, despite the paycheck that would accompany it. She still had her two weeks of vacation time and was planning to take it soon so she could focus all her energy on the house.

Maryanne called her one humid, blindingly bright Friday after Jane had left work early to drive down to the Cape.

"Jane? Hi, hi, sorry to bother you again, it's just I can't find the new timeline for Healtech, I know they needed cross-social promotions for next week about their summer sale, but I think you were in charge of grouping the schedule?"

"Oh, you're right, I am, and I'll have that to you by the end of the day. Sorry for the delay, Maryanne."

"Oh no worries, no worries, I thought I might have just lost it somewhere in my inbox... you know how I can be..."

"Nope, that was me. I'll get it sent over ASAP."

Jane kicked herself, flexing her knuckles against the wheel. She hated forgetting little things like this, the mundane tasks she knew for a fact she could do in her sleep, the ones other people needed to be productive and do *their* jobs. No wonder her team had been so disorganized today. The fact that Maryanne had remembered something she hadn't was deeply upsetting, since Maryanne never seemed to know what was going on.

The cars around her seemed to be intentionally pissing her off on the highway today. It was a Friday, so the summer traffic was horrendous, hence her early departure. Despite this precaution, however, there was still a backup for the bridge as she knew there would be. Two, two-lane bridges did not allow for enough traffic to bring every family, vacationer, day tripper, and beach goer onto the Cape. And pretty much every weekly rental had Friday as a change-over day. She sighed as the car in front of her came to a stop way too early, and way too quickly. New York plates, classic.

An hour and forty-five minutes later, after creeping across the bridge and down Route 6, she pulled into Francie's driveway. Ellen was already sitting on the front steps in a dappled patch of shade, her light brown hair falling around her face as she looked down, scrolling on her phone. She looked up when she heard Jane's tires on the driveway. She'd forgotten Ellen was supposed

to meet her here after today, the camp had the Friday off, so she'd been free. Damn it, how long had she been waiting?

"How long have you been waiting?" Jane asked after putting the car in park and jumping out.

"Oh, not long, don't worry! My mom dropped me off on her way to work, but she was running late too. It's only been like ten minutes."

"Okay, I'm so sorry I'm late, Friday traffic, you know."

"Yeah, it sucks."

"Let's get to it, shall we?" Jane smiled at her, unlocking the door to let them both inside. It was stuffy in the house, as usual, so they first went around and opened all the windows, propping the doors open for some fresh air. It wasn't cool air, but at least it moved.

"How was your week?" Jane asked, as they headed into the studio, now bare of the countless brushes and rollers and scrapers and pastel boxes.

"It was fine, a lot of wrangling kindergartners who would rather do anything than what I'm supposed to have them do... but sometimes they can be sweet."

"Oh, I remember exactly what that's like." Jane glanced at her. "It's tough even with your own kids!"

"Yeah, and I have like ten of them at once! Jean, the other counselor for my group, is way too easy on them so they don't listen to her at all."

"Why don't we start cataloguing while we talk," Jane said, handing her the sheet she'd brought. It had a category for the description of the painting, its dimensions, material, and name/date if there was one listed.

"I figured we could record everything on here, number the entry, then when we wrap it up, we can number the outside and we'll know which one's which."

"Sounds like a good system," Ellen replied.

Jane walked over to the nearest leaning stack of canvases, as Ellen kept complaining good-naturedly about the kids in her group.

"This one little boy named Jamie is just pure chaos. He tries to put *everything* in his mouth, which is ridiculous. I'm pretty sure he should have grown out of that by now, and today he tried to *eat* a tadpole! Why?" Ellen was half laughing, but mainly looked disgusted as she waved her arms in exasperation from her kneeling position. "Like really, why?"

Jane laughed. "I have no idea! That's extremely gross."

"I had to pull it out of his mouth! Like he was a dog, and I was yelling 'drop it!'"

"My Rosie grew out of her eating-everything phase pretty quickly," Jane said as she wrapped up the first painting, an abstract in shades of green with a bright yellow line cutting right through it at a diagonal. "She was a total kleptomaniac, though. She used to steal things off the shelves of stores and I'd only realize once we were home. Or she'd take things from friend's houses by hiding them in her clothes." Jane smiled, picturing a tiny Rosie, chubby fist clenched around one of Francie's countless pairs of glasses, squealing and running away from her as she tried to chase her to return them before the drive home.

Ellen smiled at the thought of a baby thief, and said “Children are so like tiny little criminals, but usually without the bad intentions.” She handed Jane her wrapped up painting, which she had described as *‘Yellow, brown, and orange abstract with circles.’* “Not all of them, though, I’m pretty sure Jamie just *wanted* to gross me out. You should’ve heard his laugh, after. Pure evil.” She rolled her eyes in exasperation.

Jane had an urge to tell her that she was sure he wasn’t really evil, and that she might not mind so much once she had her own children, but remembered Rosie’s admonishments whenever she implied with certainty that she’d one day have her own children, saying ‘you can’t just assume everyone wants kids, Mom,’ and held her tongue.

They worked in relative silence for a while, with Ellen asking the occasional question about how she should describe something, how to differentiate one pastel beach scene from another, one untitled blue abstract with green blobs from another.

After a while of quiet, the only sounds the crinkle of brown paper and rustle of bubble wrap, Ellen asked, “When did Francie start painting abstracts? A lot of her landscapes are beautiful and super realistic, but it seems like the later ones start to get more abstract. Like, after,” she glanced down at the pastel she was holding, “1996?”

“That makes sense. It was about then that she got into abstract art. Right after Luis passed away.”

“Oh,” said Ellen, dropping her hands to her lap. “I’m sorry.” She fidgeted a bit, the way Jane still sometimes had the urge to do when faced with someone else’s pain or loss.

“It’s okay,” Jane said. “I think the change was good for her. She said it helped her get out of her funk once he passed. They were together for thirty years, that’s a big shift, learning to live without someone you’ve spent every day with for that long.”

“Yeah... How did he- how did he die? If you don’t mind me asking,” Ellen said hesitantly.

“Cancer, it was very quick, but he didn’t suffer a lot, at least.” Jane replied. “After that, Francie moved here. I think she needed a change of scenery, too.” Jane looked down at the painting she was holding now. A bright, pale green background mixed with soft yellows, with a much deeper, warmer center. It seemed to be glowing, like a deep hole in the earth opening up into a light, sunshiny meadow in spring.

“She did that quite a few times in her life,” Jane continued. “Made a big change to try and figure out something difficult. She became a full-time artist only after her mother died. Before that, she’d been working as a secretary, like I said before, but I think it took losing her mom for her to decide she just couldn’t waste any more time doing something mindless.”

“Hmm,” Ellen said, looking down at the bold, blocky pastel drawing of undulating dunes and sharp grasses. “I can’t picture the person who made all these working in an office. She was so... colorful.”

Jane smiled at the adjective. “She totally was. Colorful is a great way to describe her. She never settled, and I always admired that about her.”

They wrapped up one more painting each. “What other stories do you know about her, about being colorful?” Ellen asked.

Jane thought for a minute. “She went to art school in New York City,” she started. “Her parents thought it was an awful plan, but, well, you knew her, you saw how impossible it was to change her mind. So, she went, and this was way back when, so she got a good scholarship and then paid the rest of the way through working as a waitress and a secretary. Back when you could do that, you know. Until she couldn’t anymore...” Jane trailed off. “I think she was one of the first women to study at her school,” she added after a minute.

“She met Luis in high school when he moved to her town, she grew up in Maine, and they dated from sixteen on. Apparently, though,” Jane went on, leaning in towards Ellen conspiratorially, “she was proposed to by two other men while she lived in the city.”

“What? No way,” Ellen said laughingly, looking shocked.

“I know, that’s what I said! But, yup, two different men. She told me she would still go on first dates while she and Luis were apart, she just never went on any second or third dates, that was the rule. But one guy that worked in the same office as her proposed after their first date to try and get her to leave Luis, and the other guy didn’t even wait for a first date. He just asked her out of the blue. He was a friend of a friend, apparently, someone her roommate knew.”

“Where was Luis during all this?”

“He was living in Boston, getting a degree in about six different languages from what I understand.”

“Wow. That’s pretty ballsy.”

Jane laughed. “It is.”

They worked their way through all the piles of canvases in the studio, and all the drawings. There were sixty-one paintings on canvas, all of them abstract. There were forty-three abstract drawings in pastel, and twenty older landscapes done in pastel or colored pencil or watercolor, from before the move. These had mostly been tacked to the walls, covered over often by other cut outs or sketches. She had prints of Cezanne, Klimt, Bonnard, and many other, more modern abstract artists all over. Jane dug out some more cardboard boxes, and they stood up the paintings and drawings in them for safekeeping. The room looked so much emptier already, the walls bare, all the artwork contained in a handful of boxes.

“While we’re at it,” Jane said as they stood up and dusted off their hands, “I know she has more hanging around the house, and probably in closets and hidden in random places for storage. Why don’t we go around and look for every piece of art we can find and bring it in here?”

“Okay,” said Ellen. “I’ll start in the basement?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Jane decided to take everything off the walls on the first floor, then make her way upstairs. The living room had one giant painting done by a friend of Francie’s that she left for now, but the rest were smaller and more manageable. She made a pile of works by other artists in the studio, recognizing most of the names as friends of Francie’s. There was a

painting of a little white house by Ginny, some lovely portraits by Alice. She had quite the collection of drawings and paintings of great blue herons decorating the dining room walls.

Moving up to her bedroom, Jane took down a small array of framed psalms, handwritten on heavy cotton paper. Some were in English, and some in Portuguese. Luis had translated them and written them out. Francie wasn't religious, but Luis was. This difference was one of the things Jane had always admired most about them. It was something off-limits for their loud, heated discussions. It had seemed to Jane that Francie loved the way Luis loved God, and that that had been enough of a religion for her. She always said her religion was painting. Luis's bedside table still had a small, framed cross-stitch on it that read 'Be still and know that I am God.' Francie had told her once that his mother had made it. Jane gathered it up, stacked on top of the framed psalms, and carried them all to the studio.

She carried various stacks of frames in multiple trips, and Ellen did the same, gathering the prints of Ansel Adams photographs that lined the stairs, and two or three more stacks of canvases that had been scattered around the basement. They met back in the studio and resumed their wrapping and packing system.

After a few minutes, Ellen held up the painting she was about to wrap and label for Jane to see, and asked "Who did these ones? It doesn't look like Francie's, and there's no signature. It kind of looks like a finger painting." Ellen smiled as she examined it.

Jane glanced up at it, it was a decently large frame, with two smaller pieces of wrinkled paper in vertical alignment, each splashed with primary colors and muddled with blobs of brown and brownish purple. Trails left by small fingers reveal the white paper in swirling lines, having cut through the wet paint. Some of it had dripped down closer to the bottom of the paper. There was a joyful chaos in them, the reckless abandon of unconcerned children.

Jane smiled, too. "Andrew did those," she said. "He was three at the time, I think. She told me countless times that they were, and I quote, by far her favorite paintings of all time. She'd say she only wished she could paint with such joy and carelessness."

"Aw," Ellen said, lowering the frame onto the piece of packing paper she'd laid out, but continuing to look down at it, contemplating.

"She used to say she spent her whole adult life trying to get back to painting like a kid, without fear or anxiety. Kids never worry about what something will look like when it's done, or judge something for being not good enough. I think she had a hard time with that, the judging."

Jane paused for a minute, also staring at the swooping finger swirls. She went on. "And, oh, Francie was a *serial* painter-over of her paintings. We'd talk on the phone on a Thursday night, and she'd describe this purplish one she was working on based off the view into her garden or something, then when we'd all arrive on Friday, she'd take me into her studio to see it and it would be a bright orange boat." They both laughed.

"Once," Jane said, "she spent what must have been over six months working on this one painting, something for a show that was supposed to celebrate 'oceanic diversity,' I think it was. It was all these greens and greys, with little wiggly bits that kind of looked like water-" Jane

smiled apologetically- “I’m not very good at describing art, sorry. But, anyway, she spent so long on this one painting, and then two weeks before the show she painted totally over it. She got inspired by this weird piece of sea glass she found, probably not the best example of oceanic diversity, now that I think of it, but she went with that. Then it was jellyfish, then the sunrise... she must have painted over it about eight times before the show. I don’t even remember which one was the final product anymore.”

“I can see that,” Ellen said. “She’d always talk in class about not being afraid to totally change whatever it was you were working on, that if you kept things just because they were pretty on their own they could stop you from creating the best painting possible *overall*.” She slid the now wrapped finger painting into the box and went on. “I was never any good at that, I was always too afraid to get rid of stuff I liked because, I mean, what if I could never do it again? We can’t all be great artists the way she was...”

“I’d probably be the same way,” Jane said. “I work in advertising, and manage a whole bunch of talented designers, but can’t draw a stick figure myself. It made it hard to give her advice, sometimes, when she’d ask my opinion.”

Ellen just kept wrapping, but Jane went on. She liked talking to her, she seemed older than fifteen, but also with all the brazen confidence and criticisms of a teenager. “I remember once, right after Andrew and I got married, she asked me about some section of a painting, and I told her it was pretty. She looked at me like she was genuinely offended, and I had no idea why! She told me she never wanted to make things that were simply ‘pretty.’ She wanted them to convey a mood, or a message, or have some kind of interest, and she taught me all about composition and color theory and balance, all these things I would never have known to look for in abstracts. I definitely never told her something was just plain old pretty again.”

Ellen seemed to think about this for a minute, and Jane finished wrapping up the last of the blue heron prints. Francie had loved these birds, would always look for them out on the marsh and frequently sent her and Andrew photos of the ones she spotted. There was one in particular that she swore she saw whenever she went to Red River, and she named it Henrik. When Jane had asked her why, she said he looked regal and upright, like a terse German man. Jane had just laughed.

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Ellen said, interrupting her train of thought. “That calling something pretty could be, like, diminishing. Like there’s more to look for and you’re not seeing it because it’s, I don’t know, easy on the eyes.” They wrapped in silence for a minute.

“Although,” she went on, cocking her head in consideration, “I guess it’s like when a random aunt or uncle or someone just tells you that you’re so pretty, or a lovely young lady, and doesn’t care about the fact you haven’t gotten less than a ninety-nine on a science quiz since 7th grade, or that you won a writing competition.”

“That’s totally true,” Jane said. “My grandmother used to always do that to me, tell me I looked nice and then immediately tune out whenever I tried to tell her anything about my actual life.” It was probably part of why her mother was the way she was, Jane thought to herself.

“Did you and Francie talk about her paintings a lot, then?” Ellen asked.

“A decent amount. She liked to just talk through them out loud, sometimes. A lot of the time I’d just sit there on the phone and listen to her work through whatever she was stuck on. She’d always thank me for helping when she was done, and I’d say, I didn’t even do anything, but I’m glad you figured it out!”

“Sometimes that’s all people need,” Ellen said.

Jane nodded. “Mhm. It definitely can be.”

“Okay,” She said, dusting off her hands and slapping them down onto her thighs. “I think we’re done with all the paintings and frames!” The studio was definitely much neater now that it was just full of cardboard boxes stacked with brown paper wrapped rectangles. “Should we get these downstairs?”

Ellen didn’t move, but nodded.

“Did Francie have a best friend?” Ellen asked suddenly.

“Hm. That’s a good question.” Jane sunk back onto her heels from her crouch, she’d been preparing to stand up from. “I think Ginny was her closest friend on the Cape, but she had a friend from high school, Eliza, who died a couple years back. They were friends for over fifty years. I think she’d say Eliza was her best friend.”

Jane smiled, as a memory came back to her. “Luis told me once, that before they were married, and even after, he’d been worried because he thought she loved Eliza more than him. He said he knew if he ever messed up, she could leave him and have Eliza still be there, but she’d never leave Eliza just to be with him. He said he was more nervous of her disapproval than of Francie’s parents.” She smiled. “It’s a gift to have a friendship like that. I remember setting up her first email account, and then having her call me a week later to ask if I could help Eliza set one up too, so they could email each other. And email they did... She was so excited to finally be able to talk to her any time, since Eliza had lived in California ever since college and they’d mostly communicated over the phone, or by writing letters, and visiting every few years.”

Ellen smiled at this, but something in her smile looked bittersweet. Jane didn’t pry, she just waited patiently, pretending to look through the sheets they’d numbered all the paintings on.

“I always tell my best friend Aleaya we’ll be friends when we’re old, till death do us part, but she never believes me.”

Jane waited for a moment, then put down the stack of papers and looked over at Ellen. “Why do you think she doesn’t believe you? I’m sure you can keep up your friendship as long as you both work at it.”

“I don’t know,” Ellen paused. “She thinks I’ll get sick of her, or that we’ll get too busy when we’re adults. Or... I don’t know.”

“I lost some friends from school as I grew up,” Jane said, “but only the ones who I didn’t make an effort to keep. It takes work, but you can do it. If she’s your best friend, I doubt you’ll really get sick of each other.”

“Yeah. As long as she still wants to, I guess.” Ellen said. Jane was hesitant to pry as Ellen’s voice sounded a little tight. “I broke a promise to her,” Ellen continued. “But I didn’t have a choice.” She sat still, her hands fidgeting with a piece of tape still stuck to her finger. The

lack of crinkling made the room feel noticeably silent. “And I... I just found out that she had some things she didn’t trust me enough to tell me, and I’m worried she doesn’t want to. That I haven’t been a good enough friend to her. But it’s all I try to do, be a good friend to her, be there for her.”

“It sounds like you *are* being a good friend to her, and like she’s really important to you. Have you been able to talk to her about these things you know that she didn’t tell you about? It’s probably best to tell her sooner rather than later.”

“She called me the other night, and I apologized for breaking the promise, and she said it was okay, but I don’t know if I believe her.” Ellen fidgeted with the tape, folding it in half and then in quarters. “And I’m afraid she’ll be mad at me for snooping when I tell her I looked through her Instagram.” Ellen paused, then explained, “that’s what I found, her secret Instagram.”

“Well, I don’t know the whole story, but it seems like you meant well and can apologize, and she should forgive you. No one is perfect, and we all do things we regret. Snooping isn’t great, and even if she’s your best friend she has a right to privacy and to keep some things from you, but I bet she’ll forgive you.” The irony of her words was not lost on Jane. “Not talking is rarely a good solution, though. If she’s had some space, you should talk to her about it.”

She only wished she could talk to Francie about this.

“Yeah...” Ellen said trailing off. “I just hope she forgives me. I miss being her best friend.

“I’m sure she will,” Jane said, “I’ve only known you for a few weeks, and you seem like a really great person to have as a friend.”

Ellen met her eyes and smiled. She took a deep breath, and seemed to be putting herself back together the way Jane had seen Rosie do before, when she didn’t necessarily feel better but didn’t want to talk any more.

The two of them stood up, and headed down to the basement, each with a box of paintings in their arms.

“Ugh,” Ellen said, sighing overdramatically as they came up the stairs after their fifth trip, “I used to be a runner, but apparently I’m out of shape because this is *killing* my legs!”

Jane turned around at they reached the top, also breathing a little heavier than she would have liked. “Mine too- and I was never a runner!”

They walked back into the studio, only two boxes remained.

“Thank God,” Ellen said, and they picked them up to make their last trip.

Sliding the boxes into line next to all the others, on the floor by a shelf holding mostly old canned goods Jane had missed on her first pass as throwing away all the food in the house, one of the boxes on the bottom level of the shelf caught her eye.

“Actually,” she said, “I think these are all from Eliza.” She pulled out the cardboard box, opening the one flap that had fallen over to of it, and thumbing through all the records stacked in it. “Francie was always much more of a radio person, but I remember her saying Eliza loved

music, played the piano her whole life, and used to mail her these records every now and then, ones she thought France would enjoy the most.” She pulled out a few of them, two recordings of various artists’ live recitals of Chopin and Mussorgsky, and one of a full orchestra playing some piece in Italian Jane didn’t even try to read. She handed one to Ellen.

On the inside of the album cover, the white sleeve that covered the record had a note written on it. The Chopin one read:

Francie-
Bill and I heard this last month and were absolutely blown away. He played with so much emotion! I hope you enjoy, and that it might even bring some inspiration.
Write me soon!
Yours,
Eliza.

Ellen turned over her album cover and pulled out the sleeve to read the inscription.

“Aw,” she said, running her fingers over the letters. “These are so thoughtful. I love that Francie kept them all these years, even though she wasn’t really a record person.”

“It was definitely about more than the records,” Jane said. Ellen was peering into the box, so she said “go ahead and look through the rest, if you want. If I remember right, a lot of them are really sweet, and there’s some funny ones too. I think there’s something from the Muppets in there, with Carol Burnett. I don’t know how they ever found that on a record...” She trailed off, and headed upstairs, leaving Ellen to explore the box.

She wasn’t sure what the trouble was with her best friend, but she remembered being fifteen, and the sharp pain of doing something wrong in a friendship or feeling excluded. She felt a little more pleased than she probably should that Ellen had opened up to her at all, as it seemed like something she kept close to her heart. She seemed guarded, like there was something she was unwilling to talk about.

Jane hoped the records could bring her some sense of peace, or at least a smile. She hoped she felt better and was happy to be able to let Francie, once again, brighten someone’s day.

Chapter 14: Postscripts

Ellen

From Monday to Thursday, the long, hot, summer days seemed interminable. Children surrounded Ellen at all times. Despite how much she had enjoyed her biology class, the hour spent at black-topped lab benches taking notes on orders of classifications, types of cells, and food chains, pointing out the parts of a microscope to nose-picking kindergartners who couldn't care less absolutely did not bring her the same sense of joy. Every afternoon, after lunch, they spent two hours down in the marsh by the ocean side, chasing low tide. This was the only time of day Ellen actually enjoyed the job. Even though the kids were just as chaotic out here, she didn't mind so much if they got salt water all over their basketball shorts or Spiderman t-shirts, and they did look pretty adorable bending over tide pools, unruly hair glowing golden in the sun. They looked up at her with genuine awe and fascination when she was able to find a hermit crab and pick it up by its shell for them to inspect or point out the bubbles made by clams digging their way down in the wet sand. They screamed and giggled when she tossed clumps of seaweed at their feet or pulled a horseshoe crab shell from behind her back to surprise them.

The constant vigilance needed to make sure none of them drowned, or stepped on a crab, or ate anything revolting, meant that she had little to no time for thinking or worrying. The mornings were spent in various cool, over-air-conditioned classrooms where the hardest part was keeping her own attention on the activity enough to make sure *they* were paying attention. She did make a pretty great rendition of a freshwater ecosystem out of construction paper this week, though.

The first moments out in the sun and the hot, sea air were always more than welcome. Despite how often she and Aleaya talked about counting down the seconds until they could leave the Cape, she didn't know how she'd feel living more than ten minutes from the ocean. She'd never spent more than a week away from here. She wondered how Aleaya felt about it now, having spent longer somewhere else. Not that proximity to the ocean was her main concern, but still.

On Friday afternoons or Saturday mornings, Ellen met Jane at Francie's to help her around the house. She'd said she didn't expect Ellen to come back after the first afternoon where they sorted all the art supplies, and then again after she came back to help with the paintings, but Ellen was enjoying the distraction of losing herself in someone else's life so completely. Jane was a good storyteller, and the way she admired Francie was clear in her eyes when she talked about her. And, plus, she thought Jane liked having someone to tell the stories to. So, she kept coming back, and Jane said she was glad to have her. She gave good advice, too.

One Friday, they were tackling the remnants of the living room shelves and some of the basement storage, when they found an old box of letters Luis had written to Francie while they were apart during college.

"Oh, I've never seen these," Jane had said wistfully, trailing off as she flipped through the stack of papers and envelopes, slightly yellowed but otherwise perfectly intact, kept in an old floral patterned cardboard box.

“Are they love letters?” Ellen asked.

“In a way,” Jane said. “They’re the letters of two people in love. From what Francie told me, though, Luis was never one to write overly sentimental things, or come anywhere close to sappy. Words were his whole life, and he chose them deliberately.”

She held up a letter, it only took up two-thirds of a page, “See?” She smiled, glancing her eyes across the page.

“How well did you know him?”

“Not all that well. He passed so soon after Andrew and I were married, and we’d only been together a few years at that point. He was always very kind to me, but he could be a little old fashioned, you know. He was very... precise.”

“I know he was a translator, but what kind of things did he translate?” Ellen asked. “What exactly was his job?”

Jane dropped the letters to her lap to answer. “He mostly worked for the courts, but also for magazines, journals, things like that. He did a lot of work with technical writing, manuals, instruction sets, et cetera. He loved poetry, though...” Jane trailed off, her eyes scanning the paper for a moment. Then, she suddenly folded the papers back into the envelopes and tucked them back in their box.

“You’re not gonna read them?” Ellen asked.

“I’m not... I’m not sure. I don’t think so. It doesn’t feel like any of my business, you know.” Jane’s eyes were still latched to the stack of envelopes and pages, unable to look away, she looked slightly haunted.

“Why not?” Ellen asked. She thought that the look in Jane’s eye looked like the one she’d had when she read Aleaya’s diary. Or the messages. She looked curious, but afraid of what she might find out.

Jane looked at her, considering. “I...” She seemed to decide something then, looking at Ellen with consideration. “Can I tell you something, if you promise not to tell anyone else?”

Ellen sat up straighter, felt her palms start to sweat. She clenched them in her lap. An adult had never said that phrase to her before, and she had absolutely no idea what it could be.

“Sure,” she replied, not making eye contact. She didn’t really want another secret.

“A few weeks ago, when I was going through the studio and first called Ginny to see if someone could come help me, I found something. A few paintings I’d never seen before, from right after Francie left art school. She never actually got her degree, you know. I think I told you that.”

“Yeah,” Ellen said, “She couldn’t afford it, right?”

“That’s what she always told me. But in the back of one of them, I found a sonogram.” Ellen looked at her blankly. “The photos they print out at your ultrasounds during pregnancy.” Jane explained. “But my husband wasn’t born until three years later, so it wasn’t him.” Jane glanced around the basement to the cardboard boxes she’d stacked the paintings away in, and Ellen assumed one of them must contain the paintings she was talking about. “She never told me about another pregnancy. I don’t know if she lost the baby, if it wasn’t Luis’s, or... I don’t know

what happened. And I don't know why she never told Andrew, or me. I don't know if Luis knew."

"Wow," Ellen said leaning back on her hands. "That's... that sounds like something from a soap opera. That must have been really sad... I wonder why she never wanted to talk about it." There was a pause. "Maybe making the paintings was enough," she suggested.

Ellen had no idea what it felt like to be pregnant, quite frankly the thought of it terrified her. She thought she'd probably want kids someday, but it wasn't something that crossed her mind often. "How old would Francie have been, then?"

"It was 1964, so... about twenty, I think."

"Wow." That's young, Ellen thought. She could imagine being twenty. She could not imagine being one of the first women in an art school, having multiple marriage proposals, and being pregnant. Those were not the kind of things that happened to her.

"Yeah, it's pretty young to be dealing with something like that on your own." Jane fingered the box of letters, lost in thought.

"Maybe she mentioned it in the letters, to Luis, I mean." Ellen said.

"Maybe." Jane responded, but she made no move to open them or start searching for a clue, some more details of this story.

Ellen sat patiently for a few moments in silence, trying to imagine being in Francie's shoes. She couldn't even imagine being in a relationship, much less carrying a baby while trying to decide which man to marry. The person she had come to know over the course of this summer seemed so full of life, and love, she almost had no room for tragedy like this. Ellen was desperately curious. She hoped there would be some revelation in the letters, that Francie would mention being pregnant, maybe a miscarriage, explain what had happened. Jane was still lost in thought.

"I could read them, if you want." Ellen offered. "And just see if there's any explanation. If there is, I don't have to tell you if you don't want."

Jane looked over at her, seeming hesitant but like she was trying to convince herself.

"I don't know, that's a lot to ask, and, I feel like maybe I should." She was still holding the box, flipping through envelopes as she pondered. Ellen could tell she wasn't all that willing to give the box over to her, which she understood. Who was she to be reading Francie's letters, ones her own family hadn't read? But, she couldn't deny it, she was curious. And despite Jane making no move to relinquish the box, she was also clearly afraid to look too closely at any of the letters in case she read something she didn't want to. Ellen wasn't sure which scenario she was most afraid of, that the baby had been someone else's? That she'd given birth, had a child, and then had to suffer through the pain of losing it? She wasn't sure.

As Ellen was pondering, Jane seemed to come to a conclusion. In some ways she really did remind Ellen of the girls in her grade, hesitant with their secrets, but desperate to be known.

"Sure," she said, "why don't you read them. I trust you." She smiled at Ellen, handing over the box of letters gingerly, like it was a baby and she wanted to make sure she was going to support the head. "I just can't help feeling like there's some reason she never told me. Like she

always wanted it to be a secret. But she kept that sonogram for a reason... if she hadn't, no one would ever have known. Maybe she'd be okay with me finding out." She sighed. "I don't know. I hope I'm not burdening you with this, that it's not inappropriate for me to share," she looked at Ellen with concern.

"No, no" she responded quickly. Then, softer, "I'm glad you told me. Keeping secrets can be exhausting, and heavy. And I like getting to know Francie, she felt like a kind teacher before, but now she feels like a friend." Ellen smiled at her. "And so do you."

Jane smiled back, and looked genuinely touched, not in a fake way like adults sometimes do when you try to make them feel better. "I'll leave you to look through these." She said, standing up and brushing the dust off the back of her pants. "Come back up when you're done, okay?"

"Okay," Ellen said, and Jane headed for the stairs, still seeming a little dazed, and apprehensive. nervous, too, Ellen understood why. Sometimes you don't want to know what people are hiding, what they felt the need to say but could never say to you.

She scooted back so she was leaning against the edge of a shelf and pulled her knees up to start reading. The basement was cool, and slightly musty in a comforting way. She couldn't name the smell, but it reminded her of the dusty smell before a summer thunderstorm, and also of the back rooms of old churches and those roped-off sections of houses-turned museums. Like patina and puddles. She loved it.

She took all the letters out of their envelopes and sorted them by date. They only spanned one summer, from June to early September of 1964, and the first was from Luis.

Dear Francie,

This week has been dull, mind-numbingly so. The hearings are long and pedantic, we're still not finished with the Weisman case. I don't know how much longer I can work on these depositions of insulation manufacturers. I went in to speak to two more editors this week, but neither was interested in my services. I'll have to find something by the end of the month, which is getting close, but I'm sure I will.

I think of you often, especially as I make dinner and eat it by myself. Richard isn't always the best company in the evenings, lately he's almost always out with his newest lady friend, Rebecca. Hopefully, I'll have a Friday without any hearings next week, and I'll be able to take the train to see you. We should watch the sunset by the harbor again, like last summer. That night remains one of my fondest memories.

Hoping your week is more exciting than the lives of insulation manufacturers,

Yours always,

Luis.

Francie's return letter was dated almost ten days later.

Dear Luis,

You've just left for the train, and I'm missing you already. I know you'll call once you arrive, but I can't help myself and I'm writing you again already. Every day we're able to spend

together is a gift. You make me smile so wide, my Luis. Eliza told me she found you a downright hoot this weekend, as usual. I think your dry humor set her off during dinner. She said she was still chuckling when she got home after midnight.

I'm glad you've found some more articles to translate, that's a relief.

I have something to share, Luis, and I hope you won't be upset with me. I meant to tell you about this while you were here, but I didn't want to spoil the good time we were having, and it really was such a good time...

The thing is, I'm not sure how I'm going to pay for my last semester of school. My parents let me know a few weeks ago that they can only give me one hundred dollars towards tuition next semester, they just have to save the rest for expenses at home. They gave me some long explanation about the roof needing fixing and my mother's bills...I'll get another job and do my best, even though I don't know how I'll have time to work at Greenman's, do my schoolwork, and work somewhere else. I'm so close, and I don't want to give up now. I'm so hopeful I can do it, so don't worry about me. But now I've told you, and I don't have to beat myself up anymore. I hope it doesn't make you worry too much, Luis. I'll figure it out, like I always do.

I'll talk to you soon, as I write I'm wishing you a safe journey back.

Yours, as always,

Francie.

Ellen flipped through the rest of the letters, but they all said pretty much the same thing. I hope you'll be able to visit soon, I had a great visit, until about July, when Luis didn't have the funds to do anything more than barely scrape enough for rent, much less pay the train fare to New York City. Then, they wrote each other letters describing their imaginary dates for when they were able to be together again, mostly sunsets, dinners out, and long walks. There was nothing about a pregnancy, nothing about any other man, no drama at all. The letters were perfectly ordinary, they were exactly what Ellen would have imagined them to be if someone had told her an art student wrote them to her boyfriend over fifty years ago. She was slightly disappointed when she found herself on the last letter, turning it over to read Francie's signature, signed '*Yours, as always*' like all the other letters, and found nothing more. Just a P.S., reading, '*P.S. – Eliza's ring is really quite beautiful. Just in case you were wondering my thoughts on its style. For no reason at all, of course.*' She refolded all the letters, sliding them back into their envelopes and tucking them into the box. Heading upstairs, she found Jane piling pots and pans into a giant cardboard box, layering paper towels in between them to stop them from banging around and scratching. She looked up when Ellen came down the hall.

"Well? What'd you find?" She had frozen, one hand halfway through lowering a saucepan into the box.

"Nothing," Ellen said, and she saw Jane's shoulders relax down. She wasn't sure if it was relief or disappointment. "Just normal letters of two people in love, like you said. They talked about their weeks, work, school, their friends, their plans for when they could see each other again. They were sweet, they seemed really in love...But there was nothing about a pregnancy.

The juiciest thing was at the very end, when it seemed like maybe Francie had been dropping hints that she wanted Luis to propose.”

“Huh.” Jane said, finally putting down the pan, and grabbing another from the cupboard. “They did get married in 1966, so not too much later. I’m not surprised she didn’t mention anything. If she never told anyone in the fifty years after the fact, at least no one I know of, I wouldn’t have expected her to write it in a letter when it was happening.”

“Yeah,” Ellen responded.

“And the scan was from October, so maybe she didn’t even know about the pregnancy during the summer she wrote those letters.” She sighed, closing up the box she’d been packing with a loud pull of packing tape. “It’s strange to think there’s no way we’ll ever know.”

Ellen nodded, and Jane went on. “I wish I could just ask her, talk to her one more time. Say, *‘hey, Francie,’*” Jane waved a frying pan in the air as she spoke, looking frustrated and sad. “*We’re all doing okay, and love you and miss you, and, P.S., what on Earth do you want me to do with this... thing I’m now carrying around for you?’*”

Chapter 15: Windowsills

Jane

A summer rain was battering the windows and roof, streaming in rivulets off leaves, petals, windshields, and anyone who stepped outside for more than thirty seconds. Jane was getting ready to leave for the Cape, she had packed a bag as she was planning to spend the weekend there making some serious progress in clearing out the least essential things. She wanted to have a yard sale the following weekend.

“You’re leaving *now*?” Rosie asked when she saw Jane come downstairs carrying her bag. She paused in the middle of folding up the last of the paper bags. “It’s pouring out, and it’s crazy windy. I think the dad almost hydroplaned like four times on the way home from the grocery store.” Rosie did look like she’d just taken a shower.

“It’s that bad? I guess I haven’t looked out the window in a while.” As she said this, she turned to stare out the window in their front door and was met with a wall of rain, rivers running down their long driveway and street and pooling around drains clogged by pine needles and fallen leaves. The thin branches on the trees that leaned over their yard were being yanked and ripped to one side as a gust blew through.

“Hm...” She really wanted to get there tonight, and besides, someone should be there to check on the house after all this rain. “I think I should still go; someone should check on the house.”

“Okay,” Rosie said, rolling her eyes. She was standing in just her soaked purple t-shirt, jean shorts, and running socks, tucking the bags into the recycling. Her socks made squelching sounds across the kitchen floor. “I’m gonna go take a shower,” she said, “even though it looks like I already did. Don’t crash and die on the way there, Mom.”

“I won’t, Rosie.”

Jane looked out the window, and reconsidered. She really didn’t want to drive through all of this, and Rosie was right, it was pretty dangerous. She decided to wait until morning when the rain was supposed to let up, and Rosie looked smug when she saw Jane still in the kitchen after she got out of the shower.

The rain, however, did not let up. That night, summer thunder came through and shook the house with a few claps that seemed to come from directly above where Jane was trying to sleep. Andrew still hadn’t come to bed a few hours after Jane had started tossing and turning, kept awake by the flashes of light. He stayed up late working more and more these days, even though school was out for the summer, there was always some article to finish, some deadline to meet. Publish or perish, he said.

Eventually, the rattling crashes faded and left only the soothing sound of rain on the air conditioner that stuck out from their bedroom window, a tinny drum that lulled Jane to sleep.

It was still raining just as hard the next morning, but the wind had died down slightly. Jane woke up before anyone else, she hadn't slept well, so she got in her car early and left a note letting everyone know she was off. Andrew hadn't even stirred when she'd climbed out of bed.

Ellen was supposed to meet her at the house just before noon, she'd have to ask if her mom was still able to drive her through this downpour. Jane herself drove slowly, staying in the slow lane, windshield wipers thrashing against the blurring layer of rain. It was a summer rain, no doubt about it, but it was a cold one. It made all the greens around the road seem to glow they were so vibrant and left the trunks of trees a deep chocolate brown, the highway a shiny jet black.

When Jane finally, cautiously, turned into Francie's driveway her garden looked beautiful in its dampness. The flowers that hadn't been beaten down to the ground were saturated with color, the green hosta leaves glittered, and the hydrangeas looked like they'd had some kind of gloss painted over them. It was good, this rain, for the garden, since no one was here to water it nearly as often as Francie had. The plants would be thankful.

Jane unlocked the door, and headed inside, more storage buckets and a box of giant garbage bags in tow. The last time Ellen was here they'd finished the studio and made a few runs to the dump to get rid of the bags of unusable art supplies, a whole file cabinet worth of junk mail Francie had saved for some reason, and the rest of the expired food from the basement. Now that the studio was empty, the first fully empty room in the house, Jane was planning to use it as storage for everything they were absolutely going to keep before they went in the basement so the rest of the house wouldn't feel so overwhelming.

The empty studio was shadowed with no lights on, only the grey diffuse light of the storm filtering in through the shades. It looked about three times as big as it had with everything in it, but about five times less welcoming, less familiar. She had left a few sketches pinned to the walls, just so it wouldn't feel completely barren.

She first wanted to get two folding tables up from the basement, ones they'd used a Francie's service. This way they could have most space to leave the plastic bins, and be even a little more organized. After opening the shades, Jane crossed the hallway and started down the stairs.

Even before she reached the halfway landing of the basement stairs, Jane heard a drip. She froze, her foot hovering above the next stair. Then, she smelled the unmistakable musty, wet smell of a flooded basement. Her heart sank.

Sure enough, she rounded the corner and was met with six inches of water, coming up almost to the edge of the first step, surrounding plastic bins, cardboard boxes, the bottom of shelves, and the legs of old desks and other furniture. All the boxes, all the meticulously wrapped canvases, all the frames, all the paintings.

The paintings, all the paintings that they'd just moved down here.

"No, no, no, no," Jane whispered as she rushed down the stairs, soaking the bottoms of her pants as she stepped into the water without a second thought and raced towards the paintings, her feet slipping against the bottoms of her sandals. The slosh of water echoed around the

concrete room ominously. She tried to pick up a box, holding three paintings and some sketches, but the cardboard had absorbed too much water and softened at the bottom, so it disintegrated as she pulled up, dropping the frames back into the water and sending sketches out floating across the surface. Jane watched them sitting on top of it, perfectly flat, gentle pastels blending, merging together, swirling into the water. The oils didn't budge, but their paper darkened. Beach scenes soaked in musty rainwater. There were so many boxes. So many paintings. She didn't know where to start, what to try and salvage first, what to take and how. Where had all this water come from?

Jane rarely felt like giving up. Her first instinct was to push through and keep going, to prove them wrong, prove herself wrong, prove she could handle it and that everything would be okay. But right now, she wanted to give up. She wanted to sit down in the rainwater and splash it through her hands like she was a little girl again and not worry for another second about the dollars dripping through the floor, the memories leaching out of everything around her and swirling into the flood.

Instead, she gritted her teeth and lifted the three paintings off of the floor, leaving the melted cardboard behind, and waded back to the stairs. Then she went back for three more, then four more, then five, grabbing papers up before they could slide down completely into the water and laying them flat on the landing. She tried not to look at the images yet, at the smeared lines and warped canvases. She didn't want to know yet. She had to find where the water was coming from. She waded in, in search of the last small pastel drawings that was still floating, waterlogged. There, from the bottom edge of the high, small window looking up at a bare, grey sky, rivulets of water were spilling over the narrow windowsill, running down the concrete.

She looked back down at the floating papers. When she gingerly lifted one up from one corner, it tore, soft as tissue, around her fingers. She slid her palm underneath it, lifted up, and the center of the drawing came up, the rest tearing and dripping down the edges. She laid it flat on the last free stair. Rolling up her soaked pant legs, she gathered the first armful of paintings from the landing and brought them up, laid them flat on the empty floor of the studio, where they had lived until less than three weeks ago, where they would have been fine if she had just left them, if she hadn't been trying to do any of this, if Francie had still been here. The basement had never flooded before, not once, and now? Now? Right after she moved the most important things in this house down there? She clenched her jaw again. Walked back down, gathered another handful of dripping works of art. In the garage there were still a stupid number of old newspapers waiting to be recycled, thank God. Jane brought some of them in and spread them out across the floor to help absorb the water from some of the papers and drawings.

She called Andrew.

He picked up on the third ring.

"Hi, hon, how's it going?"

"The basement flooded, Andrew. I need help. There's got to be... six, maybe eight inches, maybe more. It's coming in from the windowsills, the high ones in the basement, and I

just moved the paintings down there and now they're all wet and there's furniture and so much *stuff* and I just... I don't know where to start, I can't do this all-

"Hey, hey, slow down. There's water in the basement? From the windows? Okay, okay... shit... well, first we should try and stop wherever it's coming in from. Could you see if the sump pump is working? And if not, we'll call someone. It's only supposed to rain a few more hours, we can get the ShopVac down there and start getting it out."

"It's a lot, Andrew, it's gonna take more than the ShopVac."

"Okay, I'm getting in the car, I'll be there in an hour, just try and get what you can out of the water, and maybe stop the leaks if possible."

"Okay. I bet- the gutters, I don't know the last time she had them cleaned, she was telling me she needed to have them done just a few months ago, I said I'd call someone for her since her last guy retired, I never did, oh, God..."

"Hey, Jane, it's not your fault. It'll be okay."

"I'm so sorry, Andrew, all the paintings, the drawings..."

"I'm getting my keys now, okay, I'll get Rosie to come help too, we'll be there soon."

Looking down at the spread of paintings on the floor, Jane started tearing off the soft, wet paper from around them, laying them flat to dry, taking the ones in frames apart to let the air get at the canvases and boards. The fourth box she unwrapped had the paintings from the closet in it, the black and white colorscapes with their rainbow flecks. She turned over the self-portrait, the sonogram was still tucked into a pin on its back. Andrew would be here soon, she could leave it out, he could find it himself, tucked into the back of the painting. They would have found it anyway, today, even if she hadn't stumbled upon it earlier. She could say she'd never seen it; they could wonder about it together. She left it clipped in and stood up to get another box.

She brought up boxes of plates, silverware, summer skirts, beach towels. The easel came back up, and she leaned it against the front door. Quite a few trips later, and with a narrow wooden end table in her arms, Jane heard the kitchen door rattle open, the seashells clacking against the doorframe. She heard Andrew and Rosie's soft voices from down the hall, sounding concerned. She put the table down in the studio and glanced down at the painting. Their footsteps were approaching.

She couldn't do it; she couldn't leave the sonogram out for them to find. Bending down, she pulled it out from the back of the frame, pressed it to her shirt to pat it dry slightly, and slid it into her pocket.

"Hi, hon," Andrew said as he and Rosie came around the corner, Rosie dragging their old ShopVac.

"Hi, guys," She ran a hand across her forehead and into her hair, meeting Andrew's eyes with an expression she knew was full of panic, but, she hoped, empty of guilt.

"Does it look like it's just from the rain? No pipes or anything?" Andrew asked, and she could see the reserved panic in his eyes. He looked tired.

“Yeah,” Jane responded, “it was coming from the windows. I did my best to stop it, but there wasn’t anything I could really do to block it. I wedged some plastic wrap in around the windowsills. It’s slowing down.” She caught her breath for a moment. “I got all the paintings out.”

Rosie wandered down the hall, heading toward the basement stairs to look at the damage. She started down them for a moment, then started to descend.

“I just moved them all down there.” Jane said, glancing to and from Andrew, still slightly dazed. She could tell her eyes were focused on that middle distance, the one Andrew frequently got lost in, and she made an effort to pull them back. “I think they’ll be okay, I did my best to get them dried off, but I-”

He moved toward her, and she met his eyes finally. “It’s okay. Jane, it’ll be okay.” He pulled her in for a brief hug.

“I’m so sorry, honey. I’m sorry... she never had any issues with the basement, I thought it was safe...”

“It’s not your fault,” he responded. “We can handle this. Remember when our condo flooded, right before Rosie came? We can handle this.”

She took a deep breath. He was right. It was just water. Just water.

They walked down the stairs together and saw Rosie standing calf-deep in the water, staring at everything that Jane hadn’t brought up yet. She was in an old t-shirt from a summer camp she’d gone to at least four years ago and a pair of athletic shorts, her hair up in a messy bun, one hand on her hip. Jane could tell from the slight furrow of her brow that she was problem solving, trying to come up with a plan.

“At least a lot of the boxes are plastic, right? And a bunch are up high, so those’ll all be safe” she said, turning as she heard her parents at the bottom of the stairs.

“Very true, Rosie.” Andrew said. “Let’s bring up everything still in the water, okay?” He squeezed Jane’s shoulder briefly, then bent down to roll up the bottoms of his jeans.

Rosie nodded in affirmation, heading deeper into the basement, and grabbing a plastic bucket. She met Jane’s eyes as she headed up the stairs, and gave her such a reassuring glance, her eyes full of such a clear attempt at telling her everything would be okay that Jane found herself tearing up. She smiled back at her, and followed her lead, wading towards a shelf with some boxes half submerged in water to grab one and carry it up.

For the next hour, they worked carefully, but quickly, bringing up everything they could find that was still covered in flood water. They carried up old side tables, stacks of dripping folding chairs, soggy stacks of board games, sealed plastic tubs of memorabilia, piles of jackets and sweaters and scarves. The box of letters Ellen had read through was soaked, she’d tucked it back onto the bottom shelf where she’d found it, and now the papers were just shreds of swirling ink and blurred shapes that were once letters. When Jane opened the box, the lid tore softly off, and rivulets dripped out from the corners. She carried it up anyway. She’d never read them.

By the time everything that could be moved had been, the stairs were soaked as well, and the beach towels they’d spread out all down the hallway were sodden under their dripping feet.

Jane wandered into the studio and looked out the window into the dim garden. The rain had let up, and everything outside looked vibrant and glowing, like it had on her drive down. The sky was a yellow she hadn't seen in a long time. They had badly needed this rain, the summer had been hot and dry thus far, and lawns were turning yellow all across the coast. It had been a relieving rain, sweet and nourishing to everything green and growing despite the damage to the basement.

Jane heard the ShopVac turn on and Andrew start instructing Rosie to suck up what she could and empty it into a bucket he'd found in the garage. He came up the stairs a minute later, two more buckets three-quarters full of water in his hands and headed towards the door to dump them out. She emptied out one of the big plastic storage bins, lifting out a pile of Christmas decorations and a tangled mess of colorful lights, and brought it down to help.

They started scooping, bailing out the basement one bucket at a time until the water level was low enough that they had to wait for the ShopVac to fill their buckets. They soaked the driveway even more, sloshing buckets of water down it, watching some smaller bits of shell float down the streams of rainwater mixed with flood water towards the street and the drain. Jane went hunting for every fan Francie owned, pulling them from closets and pointing them at the parts of the basement where the most water was still pooled. Andrew started calling the plumber.

Rosie came up into the studio where Jane was still patting things dry. Andrew was taking a turn with the ShopVac, it's whirr still audible from up the stairs and across the hall. She nudged with her bare toe a pile of cans and boxes, mostly soups and pasta, whose labels were sodden. One box of spaghetti was spilling its contents onto the floor.

"Mm," Rosie said, "flood pasta. Delicious." She bent down to look at the box up close. "Expired, too. In 2012."

Jane laughed. "I thought I'd gotten rid of all that, but I just keep finding more. No harm done there." She came over to stand next to Rosie, who looked up at her. "You should've seen some of the things that came out of the back of her cabinets... croutons from 2006, spices from the nineties... there was a box of baking soda that expired the year you were born!"

Rosie just smiled a little tersely at her. "I could've helped you, you know. I wouldn't have minded."

"I know, hon. You're good like that." Jane rubbed her shoulder and noticed all the wet spots and drips across her shirt and shorts. "I didn't want to ask you to do all that, spend your summer weekends down here cleaning. I didn't want to make you sad."

Rosie walked away from Jane's hand, towards the windows. "I'm already sad, Mom. I miss her. And now..." she gestured at the piles of damp boxes, the ruined drawings. "I don't know. Now it feels too late, somehow. Like... she's gone, and now so is a lot of the stuff she had left. I know the paintings will probably be okay, but..." Her back was still to Jane.

"Oh, honey. There's still plenty to do, we have a lot more stuff to sort through. I'd love to have you here to help."

“I know, but you’ve already done so much, and it’s all in boxes and packed away. The kitchen looks so empty, and the shelves in the living room used to look so full and, and comforting, and now they’re all weird and bare. And now so much is ruined...” She looked down at the pile of pastel drawings, the papers covered with blurs and swirls of color.

“It is strange to see everything emptying out. All the things she left behind, all the stuff that made Francie’s house Francie’s house... I feel that too.”

“But you’ve been the one emptying it out! You’ve never even asked me if I wanted to come with you, to see the house again.” Rosie paused. “I feel like I never even got to know her. As a person, I mean, and not just my grandmother.”

“You knew her, Rosie, I promise. Who she was as your grandmother, kind, spontaneous, loving, colorful... that’s who she was. And she loved you so much.” Jane came over to give Rosie a hug and was relieved when she let herself be enfolded in Jane’s arms, leaned her head against her shoulder. “I’m sorry you’re feeling left out from this. I know it must make you miss her even more.”

“I just feel like I lost Francie, and then I lost Liam, and he’s who I want to talk to about her. And she’s who I want to talk to about him.”

Jane squeezed her a little tighter, and winced. “That must feel really lonely. I’m sorry, hon.”

“Yeah. It’s okay.” Rosie pulled away, and knelt down on the floor, absentmindedly picking through the sodden box of what used to be letters.

“Were these between Francie and Papa?”

“Mhm.” Jane said. And, with regret, “I never got to read them either.”

“I wish I knew Papa.”

“I wish you did too. I wish I’d known him more. It feels weird to learn about someone after they’re gone, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. It feels lonely.”

Jane felt a sudden surge of guilt, imagining Rosie sitting at home on the weekends, wandering around the house like she so often did with her headphones in, listening to podcasts and trying to pass the time in a slow summer. She’d been working at a café nearby, but frequently had weekends off. Jane hadn’t been paying attention. She had noticed she was sad and asked if she wanted to talk about Liam, but Rosie always said no. Of course she was lonely and felt left behind.

Jane suddenly imagined Rosie at her age, going through her closets, her basement, finding things she’d wonder about the story of, even some things of Francie’s, and knowing even less about those than Jane did. She imagined her walking through their house, overwhelmed and lonely.

She rubbed Rosie’s shoulder, and sat down beside her. The sonogram crinkled in her back pocket as she crossed her legs.

Francie’s reaction to Jane showing her Rosie’s first sonogram played back in head, the way her eyes had immediately filled with tears, and how she had pulled her in for a long, tight

hug. Her joy had been almost cathartic for Jane, she remembered the relief she had felt during that hug, the relief that this was something exciting, something to celebrate, that Francie harbored no reservations or doubts. The first thing she had said when she'd pulled away had been "You are going to be a great mother." She'd smiled at her and Andrew, looking them in the eyes. "You're going to be great parents. I can't wait to meet her." Then, she had turned to Jane, and gently touched her belly, still flat, and the memory of her warm hand made Jane smile. "Treasure this," she had said, eyes still damp. And her sincerity had once again given Jane a sense of stability. "Treasure this."

"When I first found out I was pregnant," Jane said, "I was terrified." Rosie turned to look at her, surprised. She realized what a non sequitur this was for Rosie, and back tracked.

"I was just thinking about the moment we told Francie I was pregnant, in the kitchen." Jane nodded towards the door to the hallway. "I remember being afraid that I wouldn't be a good mother. I knew I would love you, I already loved you more than I thought it was possible to love someone, but I was scared I would mess it up. My mom, Grandma, she didn't always know how to show us that she loved us. I felt lonely a lot as a kid. And I was scared I might leave you feeling the same way." Jane looked over at Rosie, who was staring at her with slightly wide eyes. She looked almost concerned for her.

"Don't worry," Jane reassured her with a smile, "somehow, after I told her, she knew the first thing I needed to hear was that I was going to be a great mother. She was so happy." Jane realized she was smiling again at the memory. "She told me to treasure it, being a mother. To treasure you. And she was right, because you make it all worth it.

"I know I haven't been the perfect mom. I know sometimes I work too much, and I can forget about everything else that's going on, I can make you guys feel excluded. And I know you're feeling lonely right now, but there is so much you already have, and I know for a fact that Francie would be so proud that you're still here to remember her."

Rosie sat in silence for a minute, then leaned her head against Jane's shoulder.

"Thanks, Mom." She paused, then said with a soft smile, "it's like she's a part of my provenance, and I'm a part of hers."

"Yeah, it is." Jane looked down at her, her face bright even in the dimming room, her dark hair shining.

"How do you know about provenance, you little art historian?" she teased.

"I think Francie told me about it once," Rosie said with a laugh.

Chapter 16: Band-Aids

Ellen

One Thursday afternoon in late July, a camper named Eric tripped over a barnacle-covered rock at low tide. His neon blue sneakers had almost no grip on the slick surface, and he wasn't looking where he was going because his sister Meredith had just stolen his plastic test tube of seaweed. She'd turned back around to gloat laughingly, her pink raincoat muddied by the sleeves, and had yelled out when she saw him slide off the rock, skinning his knees and shins on the way down.

Ellen heard her small voice yell and turned just in time to see Eric land on the wet sand, right by the distant lapping edge of the tide. She pocketed her phone and walked over to him as quickly as she could while looking extra calm.

"Eric," she called out, "you got a little too friendly with those barnacles there, didn't you?" She laughed gently as she came up to him, scooping him up by the armpits to help him stand and bending down to gingerly brush the sand from his legs. They weren't bad, but she could see a few spots of blood blooming around the dark, wet sand. His face looked down at her, mostly with surprise and concern, and a brave show of not looking in pain. She'd learned years ago, with Elliot and Rachel, they only panic if you do. "Let's go walk up to the classroom, we can use the rinsing hose outside to clean off your legs, huh?"

She took his hand, and they walked up to Jean, the older woman who was frequently Ellen's co-counselor on Thursdays. Ellen smiled at her reassuringly, and said "Hey, Jean, would you mind watching everyone for the last bit of exploration time? I'm taking Eric to go rinse off his legs, he had a run in with some barnacle rocks!" She squeezed his hand and he nodded with determination.

"Of course," Jean replied, giving him a smile, her long jean skirt and grey-brown hair blowing in the sea breeze, probably half the strands escaping the clip she used to hold it off her neck.

Back on the deck outside the building they used as the camp classroom, Ellen sprayed a hose gently down his legs, blocking some of the stream with her thumb so it spread out in a softer fan.

"Let me know if it stings, okay?" she asked Eric, who had one hand on her shoulder as she sprayed, looking down intently.

"Okay. It's not too bad. Last summer," he paused to shift his weight to the other leg, and sniff, "I fell off our stone wall, and Mom had to get the leftover rocks out of my knee." He pointed to a pale scar on the bottom of his left kneecap.

"Oof," Ellen said, looking up at him impressed, "that can't have been fun!"

He shook his head.

They went inside to put one of the specially reserved dinosaur Band-Aids on his knee and shin, and he smiled animatedly telling her about the *reason* he had been climbing the rock wall:

which was only, like, two feet tall, by the way, and it was because in his Minecraft world he was building a castle and needed the stone. She told him that was perfectly understandable.

“Can I go back out now for the rest of exploration?” He asked, the second she finished sticking down the pterodactyl bandage. He slid down off the low, elementary school style table he’d been sitting on, and headed towards the door before she’d even responded.

As he was turning back to look at Ellen and make sure she was going to say yes, her phone started vibrating in her pocket.

“Yeah, Eric, just hold on a sec,” she reached into her back pocket to grab the phone. *Call from: Unknown, Caribou, M.E.*

She glanced back at Eric, urgently wanting the buzzing in her hand to stop, but terrified at the same time that it would.

“Go ahead back, just tell Jean when you get there, okay?” He nodded, and Ellen followed him out the door to the deck where she could watch his wandering path back down past the marsh to the shore where the kids were scattered around, digging, sifting, poking.

She answered the phone, on what must have been the second to last ring, her heart pounding, bracing herself.

“Hello?”

“Hi, El. It’s me.”

“Aleaya, yeah, hi, I saw the number, Maine... How, how are you?” She stumbled through her sentence, wrapping her other arm around her stomach, grabbing onto the waistband of her shorts as if squeezing herself in a hug.

“I’m not great, El.” She sighed. “I’m gonna be staying here right up until school starts.”

“Oh,” Ellen said. Her heart had dropped. The thing she hadn’t even realized she had been anticipating, Aleaya saying she was coming home, could see her tomorrow, or the next day, making some kind of plan to be around her soon, hadn’t happened, and wasn’t going to. “Okay, I’m sorry. I mean, is that a good thing, do you think? You know, for you?”

“Yeah, I guess. It was kind of complicated, and I was looking forward to going home and things being normal again, but that’s just not going to happen yet.” Ellen could hear in her voice that someone else had told her those exact words recently, and she was reciting them without really believing it.

“Do you,” Ellen asked, hesitantly, “want to talk about it at all? You don’t have to.” She held her breath. She watched Eric go up to Jean, saw her pat his shoulder and send him out to the waterline again, and turn back to catch sight of Ellen. She waved, but Ellen just started back without really noticing.

“No, it’s okay. I don’t mind. It’s my parents... They came up for this week, because it was supposed to be my last week and my therapist wanted us to do this group therapy thing for a while, to, like, make sure I’ll be supported when I go home and not feel like it was a toxic environment.”

“That makes sense,” Ellen said. She thought about all the times Aleaya’s parents had told her to just *get over it*, to *calm down* and *get on with things*, that she was being dramatic or an

attention-whore. Her mom had said that, once, had told her *it wasn't sickness, it was just a decision not to participate*. That had caused the confrontation Ellen hadn't been good at listening to her talk about, apparently. She made a conscious decision to listen. To be there for her as best as she possibly could.

"I had just been talking with her, Lindsay, my therapist, about how I felt like I was asking the people I loved the most for help and I was being ignored. It felt like I was doing everything wrong, and everyone was just trying to tell me they didn't want me around. I know that's not true, but I felt like that whenever I tried to talk about how I was feeling with them. It felt like nothing I said got through.

"But when I said all this in the group therapy thing, they got so *mad* at me. My mom cried, but not because she felt guilty or sorry for hurting me or anything, no," Aleaya added with a vicious sarcasm, "but because she thought I was doing all this just to hurt her, to make her feel like a bad mother. We kind of had a meltdown. So now Lindsay wants me to stay for another month and have group therapy twice a week with my parents. Well, mostly my mom, my dad's pretty much fine."

"Wow." Ellen said. "That's really shitty. I'm sorry, I don't know what else to say. But I'm glad you have a plan, and I hope it's helpful. I really do."

"Thanks, El." Aleaya sounded defeated, and, if Ellen wasn't imagining it, a little bit annoyed or frustrated.

"I'm sorry again." She said, hating herself as the words left her lips. "For not being as good a friend as I could have been. If I made you feel ignored-"

"El, please don't apologize to me. You didn't do anything wrong, okay? I'm not talking about you, it's just this stuff with my parents... I'm not mad at you. But I don't want to constantly have to make everyone feel better. Sometimes it feels like," she hesitated, and then seemed to decide to go through with whatever it was she was going to say. "It feels like I'm the one who is having a really fucking hard time managing my own emotions and own brain, and then because of that I'm supposed to constantly manage other people's emotions and make them feel better."

"I'm sorry. You're right." Ellen said. "I can totally see that happening." And she could, she saw that all she wanted was for Aleaya to make her feel better about all of this, to say that everything was okay between them, that she was going to be okay, that there was no reason to worry or feel sad. Because there was. Things weren't perfect, there was no easy solution, but deep down, she still wanted Aleaya to give her one.

"Aleaya, I, I'm not looking for you to make me feel better about this, but I have to tell you something. I really don't want you to feel like, like you have to manage me here, I know you just said how frustrating that is and I totally see that, but-"

"What?" Aleaya asked, cutting her off. Here she went again, giving her bad news. Ellen took a deep breath.

"On my phone, before you left, you left your Instagram logged in. Images and insights. I clicked on it because I had no idea what it was, or how it got on my phone. So, I saw that it was

you, and I read some of the poems. And I saw, in your DM's, that someone named May had messaged you a bunch, and she seemed really worried. I read your last few messages, but not a lot, really. I only went back, like, a day, I just wanted to know if you'd want me to tell her you were okay or not and I couldn't ask you..." Ellen trailed off.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm trying to justify and explain, I'll stop. I shouldn't have snooped, and I'm sorry." She had to bite her tongue to stop herself from continuing on, from saying, but I really missed you and it felt so nice to hear something in your voice, but I was curious about all these things you never mentioned to me, why did you never tell me, I just wanted to know you better, to know what was going on.

Aleaya was silent for a slightly longer moment than Ellen liked.

"It's okay. I guess I'm not mad that you opened it, I would've done the same thing. It's a little weird that you read the messages, though, honestly, but it's okay. You can tell her I'm fine, by the way. That would be great, actually." She sounded genuine. Ellen didn't think she was trying to hurt her feelings, but she felt a weird sense of jealousy and sadness anyway, like Aleaya was slipping through her fingers.

"Yeah, okay, I will." Ellen said quickly.

"Cool, thanks. I must've scared her to death. She lives in L.A., there's no way she could've done anything or checked on me..."

Ellen kept quiet. She felt relief, having said it, but the diary incident had risen in her mind now. If she was honest with herself, she was not nearly brave enough to add anything else into the mix of factors working against her in Aleaya's mind right now.

There was a weird silence. Jean was gathering up the kids, Ellen heard the distant clapping of her hands, encouraging them all to come and show her their seaweed samples. They'd implemented the policy of inspecting each kid's collections before heading inside a few years ago, Jean had told Ellen, after one boy brought in a dead moon jelly and left it on someone's worksheet, causing him to scream-cry for forty-five minutes because he'd accidentally touched it.

"I miss you, Aleaya. A lot. And I really really hope things can get better with your mom. I'm here for you, if you ever need me. And I'll be here when you get back." She felt her throat getting tight, but the gaggle of kids was finished showing off their findings and they were heading up this way. Ellen walked off the sunny porch, back into the cool, dim building.

"Thanks, El. I miss you too." She paused for a minute. "You're still my best friend, you know."

This caused Ellen to start to cry, but she pulled the phone from her mouth so Aleaya couldn't hear and composed herself as much as she could.

"I wanna be the best best friend I can for you, because you're the best best friend I could ever have."

"Thanks, El. I- I have to go, I think. Please," she hesitated again, and Ellen could feel her voice shifting back to the one she used with adults, the voice for when she felt nervous and like she needed to overcompensate to show she was confident. "Please don't go through any more

stuff, it's just... it's really personal and I'd rather show it to you in person later."

"Of course, yeah, of course. I won't, and I'm sorry for doing it at all, I know it's private."

There was silence again. The kids were clamoring up the steps to the deck, Ellen could hear their small feet on the boardwalk, hear Jean reminding them to wipe off their feet on the mats, rinse off anything that got super dirty.

"See you later, El."

"See you," she said, and the line went dead.

She walked into the hallway, needing a moment to compose herself before they started getting the kids ready for carpool. At least she'd said 'see you later,' not 'bye'.

She headed for the staff bathroom, around the corner from the classroom. Somehow, she felt both better and worse. Just hearing her voice, getting to have a conversation, to say out loud some of the things that had been swirling around in her head for weeks, hear *something* from Aleaya instead of just everything she was imaging... it was relieving. It felt right, reassuring. But she missed her laugh, hated how tense the conversation felt, how awkward every sentence started and ended. In the middle, it was like some of that slipped away and they knew how to talk to each other, were familiar with sharing with this person, but then the instant faded and all the unknowns and the awkwardness crept back in.

The bathroom was quiet, and the old overhead light buzzed noisily, and turned everything slightly orange. She noticed how tan it made her look in the mirror, today's tank top showing off her increasing farmer's tan. She washed her hands and took a deep breath. She just wanted to get the kids home, hope her mom wasn't too late to pick her up, and crawl into her own bed for a while. Slipping her phone back in her pocket, she took a deep breath and got ready to organize lunch boxes and hats and bottles of sunscreen to be sent home with the right greasy kids.

Chapter 17: Picnic Blankets

Jane

They went at sunset, knowing it would be busy, so they brought a picnic. Andrew made sandwiches, ham and provolone and salami with some mustard for him and Jane, plain for Rosie, and brought a bag of potato chips and some carrots. They spread out the blanket Francie had been using for sitting on the beach ever since even Andrew could remember, just a few minutes' walk from the parking lot, by an empty lifeguard stand. This beach didn't face due west, so it wasn't the most popular place to watch a summer sunset, but the sky's orange glow and the low, steady waves still drew their fair share of couples walking hand in hand, families with little kids standing in the shallow surf, and old women in beach chairs reading by the day's last light.

It had been overcast all day, but the sky had cleared just before six, and now the distant haze of clouds was lit up in a medley of soft, summery colors. The flat, wet sand by the surf reflected the sky like glass. Jane dug her toes into the sand at the edge of her side of the picnic blanket, feeling its residual warmth from the heat of the day.

Swallowing a bite of potato chip, she asked, "what colors do you think Francie would have said those clouds are?" and gestured towards the horizon.

Rosie laughed, looking up from her phone towards the sky. She was sitting cross legged, the breeze blowing strands of her dark hair across her face and into her mouth; she kept picking them out and tossing her head to keep them back. "I think... aqua, lavender, and clementine."

"I was thinking clementine, too! That was her favorite word for oranges." Jane said.

"I'd say... teal, violet, and... orange?" Andrew chimed in. "I don't know another word for orange besides different kinds of oranges!" They gave him a look.

"You sure you're not color blind?" Rosie teased. "Those are so boring! She'd never call anything teal... or violet."

"You're probably right," he conceded. "Maybe... aquamarine, or azure, or... cerulean!"

They laughed, and watched a flock of seagulls land on the wet sand about twenty feet in front of them, scouring for french fries or other dropped bits of food. Jane thought of Rosie when she was much younger, sprinting into the surf at full tilt, in the slightly-too-big orange bathing suit Francie had painted her in one time.

"Once," Rosie said, "Francie told me that sometimes when she looked out at the sky for a long time, like a really clear, bright blue sky, she could see these little flecks of red in it."

Jane smiled. She remembered the conversation. Rosie had only been about fourteen, and they'd been on this beach, on this picnic blanket. It had been a blazingly hot day, and they were sitting under her rainbow umbrella eating Doritos.

"I remember that," Jane said, "none of us believed her, and we all went a little blind from staring at the sky too long trying to see the red flecks."

"Yeah," Rosie said, pulling her knees up to her chest and resting her chin on them. "I kind of know what she means, though." Her whole head moved as she spoke now, her chin anchored to her knees. "There's, like, little flecks of color, like some weird psychedelic rainbow, hidden behind all the blue."

They all stared at the sky again, even though it was already a dusky blue purple, no red in sight.

“I bet she had that extra cone, or rod,” Rosie said, tilting her head.

“What extra cone?” asked Andrew

“I listened to a podcast about it once,” she explained, “and apparently some women are born with one more cone in their eyes than everyone else, and they can see more colors, or more variations of colors.”

“Huh,” Andrew said. “I never knew that. But I can definitely see her having that.”

“There’s a kind of shrimp that has more than twenty more cones and rods than us,” Rosie said, “imagine what the world looks like to them!”

They chatted as they finished their meal, making baseless guesses about this blessed shrimp’s vision and lamenting that such an opportunity was wasted on a tiny crustacean as the sky darkened, the sun already set somewhere behind them. Most of the families scattered as the evening encroached, and the beach was soon empty except for them, one older couple walking in the distance, and a group of teens around a bonfire clutching red solo cups. Their laughter was just loud enough to echo down the beach, and it sounded peaceful over the gentle rushing of the small waves.

They gathered up their things, crinkling up the empty chip bag which Andrew shoved in his pocket and folding up the picnic blanket, and walked further down the beach. A narrow path over the dunes wound between dark green beach roses towards the marsh, where rivers and rivulets of patterned sand and saltwater pools cut through carpets of tall grasses. They’d taken off their shoes to cross the open sand, but when they made it halfway down the path they had to stop to put them back on because tiny shoots of stiff grass were scattered around, jabbing the soles of their feet.

“I can see why Francie wanted to move here,” Rosie said, “you can’t look at the ocean or a marsh like this without wanting to paint it, even if you’re not an artist.”

They nodded in agreement.

“I remember being happy when she told me her plan to move her,” Andrew said, balancing with his arms out as they jumped down the last steep bit of the dune onto the flat sand at the edge of the marsh, “but mostly because it meant she’d be closer to us. Then, I saw the house for the first time, right after she had it painted light blue, and we walked along the beach, and it just made sense.”

Jane smiled at the memory. They’d gone on that first walk together after helping Francie reassemble her bed frame and organize the basics so she could get the rest of the house in order. It had been just between sunset and dusk, like it was right now, and they’d eaten pizza on the same picnic blanket.

Rosie walked slightly ahead of them, picking her way through the shallow streams that ran in at high tide, leaving tide pools and deposits of salt at low tide. The ripples in the sand

beneath the crystal-clear water were so uniform, barely even indented by Rosie's careful barefoot steps, her flip flops once again dangling from her fingers.

"I'm glad you wanted to do this tonight," Jane said. "After last weekend, I didn't want it to be too much all at once."

Andrew stepped closer to her side as they followed Rosie, her body becoming more and more of a silhouette in front of them as the light faded to a soft grey blue. "I'm glad you suggested it," he said. "It feels right. We only lost stuff, last weekend, and maybe it was even a good thing. It means we're getting rid of some of the stuff we might have held on to even though we didn't need to."

"Yeah," Jane said, pausing in the hopes that he'd go on.

"I mean, she wasn't her chairs or her décor or her bath towels. And the paintings, those matter, and we still have them. The rest is just stuff, it was never really going to make us feel better about her being gone."

"And neither is this," he said, gesturing to the green bag Jane was carrying, which contained a simple wooden box, Francine Sereno engraved on its front. "But it's what she wanted. She wouldn't have wanted us to sit around mourning her *stuff*."

Jane smiled, taking his hand with her free one. He shifted the blanket over his arm so they could walk more comfortably side by side.

"Rosie seems in good spirits, too," Jane said. "I love hearing her memories of Francie."

"Me too."

As if she heard them, she turned around as she reached the edge of the flat sand, the water deepening in front of her until it was engulfed by seagrass, the marsh stretching out for at least half a mile. Jane could just make out the tiny blue shapes of the bird boxes that stood out from these marshes, serving as nesting homes for birds. They looked almost black in the dusk.

They couldn't hear anything but the waves and the wind, now, and even the lights from the parking lot and nearby road were hidden by dunes. Jane took a deep breath, and the sea air wasn't exactly cool and refreshing, but the scent of life and decay in it still comforted her in its salty familiarity. They came up to where Rosie was standing, Jane and her hair whipping in a sudden sea breeze.

"Does this seem like a good spot?" she asked Andrew, turning to look at her dad.

"Seems perfect," he said.

Jane adjusted the straps of the green bag hanging from her forearm, and undid the zipper sewn into its plasticky fabric. She took out the box and handed it to Andrew.

They stood for a minute, and Jane reached over to take the blanket from his arm and took Rosie's flip flops for her, so their hands were free. The wind died down, but they still paused, looking out over the darkening marsh.

Andrew shifted on his feet, then said "I guess it's time, before it's too dark to see our way back." He looked over at Rosie on his right, then at Jane on his left. They each nodded at him, solemnly.

“Mom,” he said, his voice immediately breaking. He cleared his throat, and shifted, then started again after a deep breath.

“Mom, I love you so much, and I’m so grateful for all the years we got to spend together, and for how much you loved our family. I’m so glad that Rosie got to know you, and that you could be as special to her and as special to Jane as you were to me.”

He slid open the lid of the box and rested his hand on the bag inside that contained Francie’s ashes.

“I know you didn’t believe in heaven, but I know Dad did, and I’m pretty sure he believed hard enough to get you both in, so I hope,” his voice broke again. Jane saw the tears sliding down his cheeks, and felt her own eyes get hot. She saw Rosie was standing perfectly still, her shirt rippling in the breeze, staring at her dad.

“I hope you’re together wherever you are, and I hope you’re happy... and at peace. I love you.” Without looking down, he reached into the bag right as another gust of wind came blowing off the ocean, and the ashes were taken by it, swirled over the grasses, across some of the pools of water, and vanished out of sight into the darkness. He tossed out another handful, then turned to Rosie.

“Do you want to say anything, sweetie?” he asked.

She pulled in her lower lip, and said “I love you, Francie. I’m so glad you were my grandmother. You taught me so much.” Andrew offered her the box, in case she wanted to scatter any of the ashes herself, but she shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself.

He turned to Jane, and she shook her head, too. “You already said everything that needed to be said,” she got out. “I love you, Francie.”

Andrew shook out the bag, the last of the ashes drifting on a softer wind now, falling down into the grasses only a few feet in front of them. Jane took the box, closed it, and zipped it back in the green bag. Rosie leaned into Andrew and wrapped her arms around him.

They stood for a while, their feet getting cold in the gently moving stream of water, the breeze rising and dying away, until the last bits of light were just barely visible over the horizon.

“I’d call that indigo,” Jane said, gesturing to the last few clouds.

“Me too,” said Rosie. “Or maybe amethyst.”

“Amethyst is way better,” Andrew said, and they turned to walk back towards the dunes, back past the beach roses and sea grass, onto the now cold sand of the beach. Before getting back in the car, they walked along the shoreline a bit, up to a jetty and back. The water was almost the same temperature as the air, it must have been a fairly cool night for that to be the case, but they didn’t really feel it.

Rosie bent down and searched in the dark for shells and stones, turning on the flashlight on her phone to see better, it’s bright light reflecting off the breaking and retreating waves like hundreds of tiny crystals. She picked up the three white stones she found, smooth, about the size of the tip of her thumb, and handed one to Jane and one to Andrew, and slipped the third one into her pocket.

Chapter 18: Reminders

Ellen

Wood's hole ended its summer camp programs the first week in the beginning of August, so Ellen spent her first Monday off in a while exactly as she'd spent most of the weekend. She'd spent most of the weekend curled up in bed, or sometimes on the couch downstairs, staring at either her laptop or her phone. She'd made it through an entire season of *Avatar the Last Airbender* already, the familiar storyline of her favorite show since childhood comforting her, and probably scrolled through five hundred Instagram posts. It seemed like everyone and their sister was at the beach, posing in their bikinis like the models on swimwear websites, and looking downright joyful. She was in a hand-me-down sweatshirt and hadn't even brushed her hair since Friday morning.

Currently, she was watching Iron Man 2 for approximately the sixth time with her parents and Rachel. She was only paying about fifty percent attention to the movie, and not only because she already knew what happened. She'd been staring at her own Instagram for days now, keeping her promise to Aleaya to not look through hers any more than she already had, but she was constantly waiting for a response from May.

The day Aleaya called, Ellen had gone home and opened the app again. She logged into @image.insight3 and clicked on the chain of DM's between Aleaya and May. May had sent three more messages since Ellen had last looked. After *Im really worried*, she'd said, *Did I do something? And then, I don't know why you're not talking to me*. The most recent one read *I hope you're okay*.

Ellen had hesitated, her thumbs over the keyboard. What exactly was she supposed to say to this girl? She didn't know her at all, didn't know who she was or exactly how much Aleaya wanted her to say. She started typing a few different times, deleting the ideas as they came. *hi, this is aleaya's friend ellen. she wants you to know she's okay*. No, that felt so insincere. *hey, aleaya's okay, she tried to kill herself but she's okay. this is her best friend, by the way*. Way too blunt. Even looking at the words made Ellen uncomfortable. *hey this is ellen, aleaya asked me to tell you she's okay, she doesn't have a phone rn*. Too vague? Too weird?

She'd spent probably half an hour staring at the screen going back and forth between various options before finally hitting send. She felt like Aleaya, typing out a whole message before sending it. She would have been proud, Ellen thought, and she could imagine exactly what she'd say in response if Ellen had texted her a message like this.

hey May, she'd said, this is ellen, aleaya's friend. She asked me to tell you she's okay, she just doesn't have her phone rn. she's in a rehab place for her mental health, but she's okay.

She'd sat and stared at the thread of messages for a few minutes, imagining that May would probably respond almost immediately. She hadn't heard from Aleaya in over two months. Ellen knew she'd have leaped towards her phone if she got a notification that could even

possibly have been from her. But no response came, not that night, not the next day, or the next. There weren't even read receipts on, so she had no idea if she'd seen it.

She did her best to keep her promise to Aleaya, and she didn't look through any more of the poems or read any further back in their conversation. She did spend even more time than usual on her own account, knowing she'd still get the notification when May responded, and hoping it was soon.

Sitting on the couch with her parents and Rachel, Ellen's phone buzzed. She was sitting curled up against the arm of the couch, a blanket pulled over her knees, and her phone had fallen into the crater created by her weight and was tucked under her foot. She reached down for it, still watching the screen as Tony Stark hyperventilated in his car. When she looked down at the screen, the notification was from Instagram.

@mayjohnsonphoto: thx for telling me.

As she was looking, another message popped up.

@mayjohnsonphoto: what happened?

Ellen bit her lip. She stared at the messages on her lock screen for so long her phone went dark again before she even unlocked it, leaving her concerned expression staring back up at her in its reflection.

"I wish I had one of those so I could fly and have a robot assistant," Rachel said as Iron Man launched into the sky, dodging some kind of attack in an explosion of light and color. Ellen stood up.

"I'm gonna go upstairs," she said, dropping the blanket back on the couch.

"You don't want to finish the movie?" her mom asked, looking up at her as if she was genuinely surprised and upset.

"I've seen it like five times before," Ellen said, and she headed for the stairs.

"Is everything okay, baby?" She heard her mom call from behind her.

"Fine!" Ellen responded, exasperatedly.

Her room felt intensely quiet without the background noise of explosions. She sat down on her bed, and opened Instagram. She stared down at the two new messages, their weirdly intimidating white bubbles like clouds full of the possibility for wrong choices. She had to reply with something, but she probably shouldn't explain everything, should leave that to Aleaya. This time, she drafted the messages in her head so May wouldn't see that she was typing for so long, just in case she was looking at the thread. In the end, she decided on:

it's complicated. i'll let Aleaya explain when she gets her phone again. but she's okay, so dont worry.

This time, May responded immediately.

did she try to kill herself
shit
I didn't think she was serious

Ellen stared at the message in shock. Her jaw actually dropped a little, and she stood up and tossed her phone across the bed. Before, she'd thought maybe she only didn't like May because she was jealous, had worried she was overreacting, that she was mad Aleaya hadn't told her about Michael and not about the way May was talking to her. Now, though, she hated this girl. Was she serious? What kind of a response is that, if that was her first thought, obviously they'd talked about it, she knew Aleaya was suicidal. Did she think she was just doing it for attention, the same thing her mom had thought when she'd tried to talk to her about it?

That was bullshit.

Ellen desperately wanted to read more of their messages, now, see what May had said to her if she'd mentioned it. She wanted to gather evidence, build a case to Aleaya that May sucked for when she came back. She made up her mind pretty quickly she wasn't going to respond to that. She'd leave it alone for Aleaya to see.

When she clicked out of their messages, @images.insights3 profile popped back up, and Ellen found herself staring at the grid of black and white photos, for even longer than she had the first time she'd looked. Something caught her eye, suddenly, and she couldn't believe she'd missed it before. It was towards the bottom of the screen, at least nine posts down. A closely cropped photo of someone's hand holding their phone, resting on the grass. It was her hand; it was wearing her ring. Ellen always wore one ring on her right hand's middle finger that her mom had given her a few years ago, a simple silver band with a small turquoise stone on it. The highly contrasted black and white filter meant you couldn't tell it was turquoise, but it was without a doubt Ellen's hand. She clicked on it and read the poem.

she loves the tree that drips with strokes of lichen
i love the thought of my father's vicodin.
in the fall its leaves aren't red, just brown.
and damp surrounds its shadowed ground.

she paints all seasons in colors bold
and never seems to mind the cold.
i wonder if, come spring, she'll bloom,
or fall, weighed down by my untimely tomb.

does she even know it's me she haunts,
that she's my beloved provenance?
the one i'll leave behind to mourn,
an empty canvas ripped and torn.

if i believed in ghosts, she's where i'd go,
the one i'd find, protect, and follow.

watch over as she paints her life
in vibrant colors and loving light.

she holds my woes, my aches, my sorrow.
breaking her heart keeps me here 'till morrow.
she calls me artwork, without a doubt.

but she's the artist, I'm just the paint,
a lonely stroke, in the sun, fading out.

Ellen's eyes welled up with tears, and she opened the tab to switch accounts, and clicked log out of @images. insights3. She didn't want to tempt herself with anything else. She wanted to wait, wanted Aleaya to come home, she could give her a hug, so she could show Ellen the poems she wanted to. She hoped she'd show her if there were any more about her.

She'd slouched down onto her bed, curled up around one of her pillows, and cried for a minute. They weren't tears of guilt, or fear at the way she'd almost lost her best friend, but they were tears of pure sadness, and of love. Her heart broke for Aleaya, and she just wanted her back. She almost climbed under her covers, started watching something on her laptop just to distract her, but she felt too lonely, too isolated up here.

Instead, she followed the sounds of Iron Man blowing something up and Rachel making appreciative noises back downstairs and curled up on the couch again.

"You okay, Lennie?" her mom asked.

"I just miss Aleaya," she said, not seeing any point in trying to hide it.

"Oh, I know, baby, come here," she said, patting the spot beside her, and Ellen tucked herself under her arm and allowed her mom to pull her in close, leaning her head against her chest. The feeling of her thumb stroking her shoulder as she rested against her, her chest rising and falling under Ellen's head as she breathed did make her feel better.

The next morning, Ellen's mom dropped her off at Francie's. As soon as they pulled up to the house, Ellen was shocked to see a giant, worn blue dumpster taking up most of the driveway. Walking up to the door, not the front door, she knew better by now, she noticed the hydrangeas were browning around the edges of their petals, the late summer heat overwhelming their color, drying them out. The dumpster smelled bad.

Jane let her in, and Ellen was struck by the organized chaos of the scene. There were dozens of pale blue and grey plastic tubs scattered around the kitchen, living, room and down the hallway. Four mismatched dining room chairs were standing by the fireplace, and sheets and towels were laid out all across the floor, covered in canvases, the ones they had so carefully labeled and wrapped over the last month.

"What happened?" Ellen asked, stepping over some cans of house paint, tan and pale-yellow paint splashed over their edges and staining the wrinkled labels.

“Flood.” Jane said, standing next to her and surveying the scene. “In the basement. That huge rainstorm we got two weeks ago? The windows in the basement must’ve let half the rainwater in.” She ran a hand through her hair. She didn’t seem all that stressed, given the state of the house and what she was saying.

Ellen’s eyes widened, and she dropped her phone on the counter as she picked her way into the living room to survey the mess. “Wow. Holy shit.”

“Pretty much.” Jane replied. “All that hard work we did, organizing everything, filing it all away in the basement for safekeeping? Yup. Soaked. All the boxes are ruined, and most of the drawings. I think the paintings will be okay, the oil paint is at least not too damaged. I’m gonna take some of them over to Ginny later this week to have her look at them and see what we need to do to conserve them.”

“Oh, God,” Ellen said, looking back at Jane. “I’m so sorry. There were so many drawings, and those paintings...” she trailed off.

“I know.” Jane said. “Most of them are laid out in the studio. We kept fans on everything for about a week, this mess is actually better than it was, I did a lot of reorganizing last weekend with Rosie.”

“Wow,” Ellen repeated. “What are you gonna do next? Where are you starting?”

“Well,” Jane said, “we went and got a bunch more shelves for the basement, all at least six inches off the ground, and the plumber and contractor were just here working on resealing the windowsill leaks. So, now, we have to put everything back.” She gestured to some piles of garbage bags, stacks of soggy paperback books, and record sleeves. “A lot of this, though, is just trash. The stuff that’s completely ruined. Hence the dumpster. Rosie and I made two piles, on this side,” she motioned to the trash bags surrounded by piles of sodden papers, boxes, and what looked like old tablecloths and winter coats, “stuff to get rid of. On this side,” she motioned to the other half of the room, “stuff to keep.”

“At least all the art supplies are already at the center and didn’t go in the basement,” Ellen said.

“That’s true. And it looks like a lot of the framed paintings will just need new paper backings and to be cleaned off but should be okay. And I took home almost all the photos the first day I went through the house, so those are safe. We lost a lot of documents, pretty much everything made of paper. Some of it was so soaked it was hard to even tell what it was, so we’ll never even know what we lost.”

“And the drawings,” Ellen said, kneeling down by a pile of the salvaged ones, smudged and bleeding, most with torn edges and full of wrinkles.

“The drawings are the worst part.” Jane agreed.

They each surveyed the mountains of stuff for a little longer, then got to work. The shelves were already assembled in the basement, and two or three of them had been stacked with new plastic tubs labeled with things like “china” and “bedding” and “knick-knacks.” They filled about a dozen of the new ones with the books that hadn’t been soaked, Francie had been quite

the reader, more knick-knacks like little statues, sculptures, and ornate bookends, and random odds and ends like alarm clocks, throw pillows, and serving utensils.

“I talked to Aleaya again this week,” Ellen said. The two of them were standing up the dried-out canvases in the studio, leaning them against one wall so they had room to walk around. Ellen thought it was kind of ironic that they were basically returning the studio to the way it had looked the first time she’d seen it.

“She called while I was at work.”

“Oh,” Jane said, glancing over at her with a large landscape in her arms, just a bare canvas. “How was that?”

“Honestly,” Ellen said, “it was good. It wasn’t, like, perfect or anything, but it was just so nice to hear her voice. I feel more... more normal after talking to her. And I told her about the Instagram, that I’d seen it. I don’t think she was too mad. But even knowing she’s a little mad at me feels better than her not knowing, and me not knowing, and just all of the not knowing.”

“That’s really good, Ellen, I’m so glad.”

“Yeah...” Ellen trailed off, staring at the painting she’d just stood up, a purple and bluish abstract, but she wasn’t really seeing it. “I just really miss her. I don’t know how everything is gonna be when she does come back. But she sounded a little more like herself than the last time we talked. It didn’t feel quite as awkward.”

They worked in silence for a minute, then she continued. “Her parents are just not very understanding about mental health stuff at all. They basically think she’s making it up and doing it all for attention and should just get over it. I guess, even though my mom can be kind of overwhelming, it’s not for lack of caring.”

“Mom’s always care.” Jane responded. “It’s really hard when they don’t know how to show it. And they don’t have to be the only ones who care.”

Ellen came face to face with the sonogram painting, the flecks of rainbow catching her eye just as they had done the first time she saw it. Jane came up beside her, and they looked at it together.

“We scattered Francie’s ashes a few days ago.”

Ellen looked up at Jane, her brown hair loose around her shoulders, her peach shirt wrinkled along the sleeves. Her bare arms reminded her of her mom’s, freckled and pale, with a wiry strength. She was wearing her narrow golden watch, and she twisted it around before she spoke again.

“We went down to Red River, by the marsh. It was just after sunset, so everything was dusky and muted. Francie could have made a really beautiful abstract out of it, the colors...”

“That sounds beautiful.” Ellen said.

“It was.” Jane said, and Ellen could tell she was picturing it in her mind, she smiled a little sadly at the memory of it. “After the flood... I think it felt like a real goodbye.”

As if pulled from her reverie, Jane stepped forwards and picked up the painting. She held it out to Ellen.

“I want you to have this. I talked to Rosie and Andrew about it, said how much of a help you’ve been this summer. You’ve done so much more than you had to, and it’s meant a lot to me to be able to share some of Francie’s life with you.”

Ellen looked at her in surprise. She didn’t reach for the canvas. “What? But that’s, isn’t that the painting you found-”

“Yeah, it is. Maybe you could even give it to Aleaya, if you want. As a reminder that she’s loved.” Jane looked down at the painting and held it out again. She looked pensive, then went on. “You know, I never really cared about art until I met Francie. I thought it was useful, and pretty, good for selling people things or filling space on your wall, but I never really thought it could have any of those deeper meanings you hear people assign to works of art. But-” she smiled at Ellen, “to me, this painting, beyond anything, is about love. It doesn’t have to be sad, and the mystery of the story behind it, the details, in the end, they’re not what’s important. Francie loved so freely. And she changed me with that. It made me a better mother, a better wife, and definitely a better friend and person.”

Ellen reached out and took the painting, holding it almost reverently. She was having a hard time meeting Jane’s eyes. In all the days they’d spent together, she’d talked about Francie with so much poise, Ellen had seen her sadness, but it had seemed hidden behind whatever task they were accomplishing, whatever goal Jane had for the end of the day. Now, she could hear it in her voice, but, like she’d just said, it didn’t even seem like the most important thing anymore.

“It seems to me,” she went on, “that Aleaya is very loved. Maybe somehow this could remind her of that. Or remind you of that. No matter what you decide to do with it, I want you to have it. As a thank you.”

“I-” Ellen started, looking down at the painting again. The frame had no glass, it was just a thin, dark wood edging, and she ran her finger over some of the thicker areas of paint, the black and white swirls, the curve of the figure’s shoulder. “Thank you, Jane, are you sure?”

“I’m positive. We want you to have it. And besides-” just then the doorbell rang, and Jane started, and turned to the door. “That’s the contractor, he said he’d be back this afternoon.” She paused in the doorway and looked back at Ellen. “Really. It’s yours.”

Ellen stood for a minute, frozen in place with the painting in her hands. She heard Jane open the door, heard their voices discussing something or other, and a pair of heavier footsteps follow Jane down to the basement. The painting was magnetic. The longer Ellen looked at it, the more ways she could see it. It was lonely, but joyful, hurt, but beautiful. It really did look like love. She thought of her mom, then, of the day when she would be standing in an empty house full of things, of her mom’s footsteps pausing outside her door, of the way she instinctively stuck her arm out across Ellen’s chest when she braked too fast on the road, of the way she kissed the top of her head three times, one after the other, whenever she hugged her. She felt her arm around her last night, heard her sigh of relief when Ellen had cuddled into her.

When Ellen got home that night, she showed her family the painting, and they all gathered around it to appreciate it. Her dad said it reminded him of fine-art tie-dye, and Elliot couldn't bring himself to stop snickering at the hint of a breast on the delicate figure, but Ellen didn't really care. She brought it up to her room and leaned it against the wall on her desk. Aleaya would absolutely love it. She couldn't wait to show it to her, and maybe even give it to her. She knew for a fact she could write countless poems about it.

The weight of its secret gave her pause, though. She hadn't wanted to ask if Jane had told her family about the sonogram. She'd been so into what she was saying about spreading Francie's ashes, and love, that Ellen hadn't pried.

She was curious, though, and after dinner that night, back in the quiet of her room, the sounds of Rachel and Elliot playing Mario Kart downstairs making their way through her closed door, she laid it down on her desk. She peeled back the taped-down layer of wrinkled paper covering the back of the frame and looked under the clip where Jane had said she found the sonogram.

It wasn't there. And, mostly, Ellen was relieved to not be the keeper of another secret and honored to be the guardian of this piece of someone who now existed only in the things and people she had left behind.