

Mayfair

Senior Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Undergraduate Program in Creative Writing
Stephen McCauley, Advisor

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

by
Mara Sassoon

April 2014

Copyright by
Mara Sassoon

“Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o’er life’s solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.”

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, ‘A Psalm of Life’

“I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! Yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep — while I weep!”

- Edgar Allan Poe, ‘A Dream Within a Dream’

Mayfair

1

Annie Milton stepped into the bubble of humidity that was the jetway. The moist heat did nothing to subdue the funny feeling that had been lingering in the pit of her stomach. She knew it wasn’t just the turbulent plane ride that had made her feel this way. It was something she had been conscious of for the past week and a half, almost like one of the horse-sized multivitamin pills Craig had her taking hadn’t fully digested and had instead just sunk to the bottom of her belly. It was a light but heavy feeling, one of the many things she couldn’t explain articulately enough for her own liking. One thing she knew: it had everything to do with coming back to Mayfair.

“Damn, it is hot here,” Craig said, mopping his shiny forehead with the back of his hand. A few of his blonde hairs still stuck to the gloss of sweat. He was wearing a pair of white linen J. Crew pants he had bought especially for the trip after claiming he finally had an ‘excuse’ to wear them. They were thin, but not thin enough for someone who had never experienced Florida summer heat.

Thank you for flying with us, and have a wonderful day. Thank you. Thank you. Have a wonderful day. Thank you. Annie could still hear the muffled twitter of the red-lipped stewardess reciting her lines to the stragglers coming off the plane.

An acrid mixture of airplane and ozone comingled in the stuffy tunnel, burning her nostrils each time she took a breath of thick air. She liked it. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. The smell reminded her of the rainy days of her youth. She had always loved going outside after it rained, when the sky was twilit and the scent of earth and ozone was strongest. She had loved to sit in the wet grass of her backyard for as long as she could, which was usually until her mother noticed and called her inside to chide her for getting her clothes muddy and rain-soaked.

Until now, she hadn't realized how much she had craved that assaulting scent. It told her she was home.

"I told you it was going to be like this," Annie gestured to the whole of the jetway to indicate the overwhelming heat and humidity that would likely dominate most of their trip back to her hometown. "You're going to want to reserve your pants-wearing time for Lou's wedding." She glanced down to the knee-length jean skirt she had on, taking in her long, ghost-white legs that stretched down to a pair of jute clogs. The months she had wasted away in a dim cubicle had effectively washed away any trace of her usual healthy olivine tan.

Annie could just hear her best friend asking when she decided to dress like her own mother, who had a collection of clogs that would make the 1970s jealous. Lou didn't hold back her opinions. She never had. And Annie had long since learned to predict exactly what Lou was going to say.

“Annie, hon, let’s get moving. You’re holding up the line.” Craig stood next to her. With one hand he grasped the handles of a duffle bag balanced precariously atop a wheeling suitcase; the other he ran through his long hair. It came just above his chin now, and was tucked behind his ears. It was starting to look too feminine, Annie thought, and the white linen pants did nothing to help the overall look.

Those pants. He came home with them right around the time she started feeling that lingering queasiness in the depths of her stomach. It had always been a general rule of Annie’s never to trust anyone wearing white pants. It said something about their confidence level. She assumed that deep down people who thought they could pull off white pants were full of themselves.

She shared nothing of her opinions on white pants with Craig though.

Craig moved his free hand to the small of her back and nudged her forward. She hefted her own duffel bag higher up on her shoulder and speed-walked away from his hand, until she was out of the tunnel. It was difficult to reconcile that Craig was here with her in Mayfair. The two couldn’t mesh in her eyes, but he had insisted on accompanying her.

Outside in the terminal, she had to weave through a group of sunburned European tourists, all tall Scandinavian boys with mussed white-blond hair and loose, hipstery tank tops. One of them walked over to the LED sign that said ‘Welcome to West Florida Regional Airport’ and stopped to pose for a picture. On his shirt was a faded palm tree in lime green ink with ‘Mayfair Island’ printed beneath it in a mod-surfer kind of font. Mayfair saw an abundance of European tourists during the summer months.

Annie used to think that Mayfair probably made ninety percent of its revenue off of touristy t-shirts alone. In the winter, particularly each December and January, everywhere you looked there would be people flashing their Mayfair swagger. Annie had always found it odd and frankly a bit frightening, all these Mayfair clones milling around and crowding the very places she frequented year round. She'd still see this in later months, but in the winter, when it was prime tourist season, it was the worst. It had made her feel like an outsider in her own home. The tourists never thought of Mayfair as someplace people actually lived.

There were two big rival t-shirt shops on the island. One of them, Decked Out Mayfair, was owned and operated by Carl Opelman, Lou's father. It used to be that Decked Out was the one and only store on the island that sold all the tacky tourist gear. Then, just a few years ago, Garrett Donovan Jr., the son of Mayfair's ancient mayor, opened Island Threads, in the same plaza as Decked Out to boot. In a long email, Lou detailed the intense war of words her father and Garrett had initially exchanged.

Now, Mr. Opelman had apparently taken the more passive aggressive route, on occasion sending Lou and anyone else he could recruit to Island Threads as his little moles. Lou's dad was the first and only person Annie had met who had a passion for the gift shop business. That's what it was, a glorified gift shop. Though, if you used that term with Carl he'd tell you it was more than that. Annie got a kick out of hearing the 'disguises' Lou had come up with to go in to spy at Garrett's store, but she was pretty sure anyone on the island could spot the girl from a mile away, what with her wild rust-colored curls and all.

“Watch my bags, babe?” Craig said. “I’m just going to use the facilities before we hit the road.” He draped the strap of his duffel over her free shoulder and rolled his wheelie bag to her side.

“Okay,” Annie said, and watched him walk away, his deck shoes squeaking when they hit the shiny linoleum tiles. She pushed down the handle of Craig’s bag and perched on top of it.

West Florida Regional Airport was in desperate need of a renovation. Annie couldn’t see any recognizable change in the shabby tropical décor, and the once-white walls were now yellowed. The same xylophonic Caribbean music played over speakers that dotted the ceiling every five panels or so. There were no lyrics, but a crackling static broke through the song in unpredictable intervals.

“This place is... cute,” Craig said when he returned from the bathroom.

Annie stood up from her makeshift seat. “Cute, interesting. That’s what people say when they don’t want to admit they’re being all judgmental and don’t like something,” she said. “Unless,” she considered aloud, “what they’re really trying to say is that something’s cute. Or interesting.”

Craig just smiled at her. It was one of those smiles of his that told her he really didn’t understand her at all. “Okay, you got me,” he finally said. He mussed her hair like she was one of his family’s terriers and chuckled. “This place is a real craphole.”

2

West Florida Regional Airport was a place Annie got to know well her first year of college, when she had struggled with her insecurity about leaving Mayfair to go to film school in New York. Before she took a step back and saw how crazy and foolish it was to

come home for just weekends at a time, she shuttled back and forth on a near weekly basis. She spent her time home cooped up in her bedroom, hiding from her parents' expectant eyes, from everyone on the island. Lou still didn't know about this weekend commute of hers, and it lasted for almost the entirety of her freshman year.

As Annie trailed behind Craig on their way to baggage claim, she calculated what time they'd arrive at her house considering it was near rush hour and the causeway that connected mainland to island would be bumper to bumper with people coming back from work. She cringed thinking about staying with her parents and brother. It was her father who had called her shortly after she got Lou's invitation in the mail to tell her that her room was waiting for her, and Craig was welcome to stay with them as well.

Suddenly, she felt a sharp pain in her chest. She decided then and there that she was going to call around to find hotel room vacancies once they were settled in a cab. She would let Craig know when she caught up with him. He had, after all, suggested a few days earlier that staying at a hotel might be a better idea.

"Craig," she called out, placing a palm on her chest. He was already a great deal ahead of her and he didn't hear her call out.

Annie sucked in air, finding it difficult to catch her breath. All of her ached, her stomach, her chest. She felt dizzy and panicky, so she walked over to the right side of the hall and leaned against the wall, trying to stay out of the way of the steady flow of foot traffic. People were weaving and parting around her. It was uncannily busy for summertime.

She had gotten these aches and shakes every now and then in the weeks leading up to the wedding, when she thought about coming back to Mayfair. Now that she was at

the airport, an hour or so away, they were at their worst. It was only a matter of time before she ran into Aunt Leona. The only saving grace would be that their encounter occurred away from the vicinity of her parents. Somehow, she knew the expert hiding skills she had acquired when she returned home all those weekends her freshman year wouldn't come in handy this time around. She assumed this was what a panic attack felt like, though she felt incredibly unworthy of having one.

3

“We're staying at a hotel. I just decided.” A flushed and frazzled-looking Annie came walking up, just as the baggage claim area was emptying out. She had a crazy look in her eyes, Craig thought.

“Where the heck did you go?” he asked her. She did things like that sometimes, just disappeared on him. One night their sophomore year, about a month after they had started dating, they had plans to go out. Craig had a fraternity brother whose uncle was a co-owner of this hot new club in the Flatiron District, so they had an automatic in. When he went to pick her up at her dorm, though, that roommate of hers opened the door, and told him that she hadn't seen Annie since that morning. He never could remember the roommate's name, just that she always smelled strongly of cheap musky perfume and seemed to never leave the room.

After trying her phone more times than he had wanted to admit, he gave up. He went to the club without her, which turned out fine since his frat brother's older sister, a second year law student, was all over him the whole night. The following morning, Annie called him to apologize, claiming she had lost track of time in the library, working on her mid-term project for her screenwriting class. She said she hadn't had cell service sitting

there between the stacks. Maybe he should have taken this particular incident as a warning sign, but without Annie, he might not have made it through school, certainly not through the final project for their Intermediate Producing workshop. They first met when they were partnered for that assignment and her intensity had shone through the moment she pulled out her laptop and began crafting a daily schedule for what they had to get done.

But, she was gorgeous and she was his. He could see the looks of desire other guys gave her, though to Annie's credit she appeared completely oblivious to these stares. Craig didn't allow it to bother him either because it also meant that he was respectable, enviable even; he could pick well. He prided himself for being able to spin most anything in his favor.

And of course, Annie's relation to Leona Haven didn't hurt either.

"I was thinking about it on the plane, and you're right. We should just stay out of my parents' hair," Annie said to him.

Craig nodded. He was relieved, but he kept his face cool and neutral. Meeting the parents was one thing, but staying under their roof for a whole week? From the way he heard Annie talk about them, he wasn't all too eager to confine himself to la casa de Milton. He was the one who did her the big favor of convincing her to stop going home almost every weekend when they met at the end of freshman year.

"Hey," he said, the idea springing into his mind.

"Yeah?" Annie asked.

"Didn't you mention that your aunt moved back? Maybe she'd have enough room for us, considering it's just her."

“Oh, no. No, no, no. That would be a bad idea,” Annie said.

“I believe you called her house a ‘palace,’” he said to her, flashing his teeth.

She’d told him before that he had a great smile.

Annie’s mouth, however, puckered into a tight, angry pout. “I was exaggerating.” She sighed. “We’re not staying at Leona’s, Craig. Enough already.”

“It was just a thought,” he said, but he hated the way she had spoken to him. She could be so controlling, especially lately.

They hadn’t really talked about it, but Craig knew it bothered her that he got that promotion to sound assistant a few weeks ago. On top of that, he got that offer from his boss, Leslie, to do a voice work audition for the new animated feature the production company was starting up on in the next month. She told him his voice was perfect for the role.

So what if he used the connection his father knew at Great Frame Pictures to get his name moved to the top of the list for consideration for the promotion? Annie didn’t need to know that detail. He was getting his foot in the door, as anyone in his position would. Meanwhile, Annie was still stuck in a cubicle on the third floor of the company’s Midtown office building, sorting through thousands of unsolicited submissions each day and carting them off to be trashed, or going on coffee or lunch runs when she was asked. Craig was done with that. He was meant for something more.

4

Annie stood under the overhang of the arrivals area, her arm out stick straight to hail the cab that was pulling up in front of her and Craig. The driver, a man with white

muttonchops and a Hawaiian shirt, nodded in recognition and swooped around, stopping about a millimeter from the curb.

“Look, let’s just forget what happened back in there,” she turned around and said to Craig, waving her hand toward the automatic doors behind them that kept opening and closing. “There are some nice hotels on the island, and since it’s the summer it shouldn’t be too hard to get a room. I’ll call around when we’re in the cab.”

“Fine,” Craig said. He sounded exhausted.

Biting her bottom lip, Annie waited for him to say more. He said nothing, so she stood up on her toes and kissed him. She wasn’t sure why she always did this, seeing as she and Craig were the same 5’8. She always wound up with her back painfully arched and her face tilted at an awkward angle when she did.

The taxi driver honked at them to get a move on. Craig held up his hand and gave him the finger. Annie tried swatting his hand down as fast as she could, but the driver reciprocated the gesture and sped away.

“Craig! What was that?”

“That guy’s impatience was uncalled for,” Craig said. “Why should we give someone like that our business? Another cab should be coming by any second.”

They stood there on the curb for another twenty minutes without seeing another taxi. Even though they were at the airport, cabs were a much hotter commodity here than in New York City. Annie tried telling Craig this and that they should just wait inside, but he insisted on waiting out in the searing heat so he wouldn’t miss one if it came around.

It had to be ninety or so degrees outside, and the back of Annie’s linen top was soaked through. Craig wasn’t making conversation, so she sat down on the curb and

pulled out her phone. She texted Lou that they had landed. Then, she began searching for hotel rates. She pulled her sweaty hair back into a ponytail.

“Annie?” a voice that wasn’t Craig’s asked some minutes later. Annie looked up.

It took her a moment to realize who was standing there before her. She hadn’t seen him since the night before she left to go to New York. Back then, he had let his rust-colored hair grow out into a shaggy mop. Now it was lightened with summer blondeness, and cropped close to his scalp. He was wearing a thin white t-shirt that showed he had put on quite a bit of muscle, too.

Annie had been hoping to postpone this encounter for a little longer.

But, here he was. Jake Opeleman. This was supposed to be Lou’s dorky younger brother, though she hardly recognized him.

He stood coolly slouched against the driver’s side door of a black Jeep that had taken up the spot where the taxi had been. It seemed to Annie a perfect frame from a movie, with a plane taking off in a frozen slant in the sky behind his left shoulder, the sun glowing orangey pink behind a mask of wispy cirrus clouds. She blinked, in hopes of preserving the image in her mind, at least for a small while.

“Jake, hi,” she said. She stood up and tried brushing off some of the pavement grime that had gotten on her skirt and legs. She realized Jake was now holding his arms out for a hug, so she leaned in and wrapped her arms stiffly around him. Jake held her tight, but glancing down at her own sharp elbows jutting out at his sides, she suspected her cowardice was showing through.

“How are you?” she asked, breaking the hug. She looked to her left and caught a glimpse of Craig’s eyebrows elevated to a quizzical level. Before Jake could answer, she added, “This is Craig.”

Jake shook Craig’s hand.

“I’m her boyfriend,” Craig said. “I’m not sure if Annie mentioned that.” He looked at her pointedly.

“Right!” Annie laughed, nervous. She scraped a clog on the sidewalk. “And Jake,” she said, reaching to place a hand on Jake’s tanned arm. She retreated before she made contact though, and brushed some phantom hair from her cheek. “Jake is Lou’s brother,” she said to her feet. “We went to high school together, same year.”

“Ah, nice,” Craig said. He made a visor over his eyes with one of his hands and searched the distance for a sign of a mustard yellow car coming their way. “Hey, what’s the deal with the taxi deficiency here?” he asked, turning to Jake.

“I’m not sure, man. I can’t say I’ve ever taken a taxi before. Maybe they’re on a reduced schedule for the summer.”

Craig looked at Jake like he was some exotic creature, an unevolved version of a human being - the kind that didn’t ride in taxis. Annie had started to notice that his big city-bred attitude often gave him this inexplicable superiority complex.

“I can give you guys a lift to the island,” Jake offered, punching his hands into the pockets of his khaki shorts. “It’s no problem. I’m here picking up our cousin Judy, but there’ll still be room.”

“Thanks, bro. I’m getting heatstroke waiting out here,” Craig said. He pushed the handle down on his luggage and started to carry it over to put in Jake’s trunk.

“Jake,” Annie cut in. “You don’t have to do this. We were all set to take a taxi anyway.” Please let him rescind his offer, she thought. She had tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to forget that night before she left for New York and feared the car ride might give him the opportunity to conjure it all up for her again in horrible vividness.

“Annie, really. I said it’s no problem. It’s not like I’m going out of my way. Your house is between Lou and Tom’s new apartment and my place. You know, I can tell your dad’s really excited to have you home.”

Annie stood there puzzled, reeling from Jake’s comment about her father.

Jake then intercepted the wheeling bag from Craig and hefted it into the trunk. “What do you have in there? It looks deceptively light.”

“Oh, you know,” Craig said. “Some clothes, shoes, toiletries.” He brushed down the front of his pants, and then examined the palms of his hands. “And some recording and sound equipment I wanted to test out this week. I figured the reception would be a great opportunity. I’m sure Lou wouldn’t mind having some extra footage of her big day.”

Annie rolled her eyes. She hated that Craig had the habit of speaking on behalf of people he didn’t know, people he’d never met, people like Lou. She silently pleaded Craig wouldn’t go into a full description of his new job right now.

“You’re into film, too? Like this one, I see,” Jake said, patting Annie on the back. Now she silently pleaded that Jake hadn’t just gotten a palmful of back sweat. “Everyone knew Annie was going on to do big things,” he added.

Annie winced, her usual reaction to receiving a compliment. “How did you know we’re staying with my parents?” she asked Jake, both curious and wanting to change the

subject. “And when did my dad talk to you?” She tried sounding nonchalant. But, sooner or later, she realized, the Mayfair world shrinks to the size of a pinhead for each and every islander.

Now it was her turn for this to happen.

She used to consider Jake a lovely rarity for being someone who was separated from the Mayfair network, uninvolved in any of the petty island gossip. He was the mystery she couldn't crack and she respected this. She couldn't remember a time when Jake had had an actual conversation with any one member of her family, so this sudden chumminess with her father was hard to process.

Like her, Jake had mostly kept to himself when they were growing up. Until high school, both of them had barely uttered a word to each other, except for the obligatory hello and goodbye when she came and went from his house after hanging out with Lou. Annie had always been Lou's Friend. That was just the way it was, ever since that day Lou, the brazen fire-haired eighth-grader who had just moved to Mayfair from Boston, took Annie under her wing and rescued her from what was sure to be a miserable start to junior high, what with coming fresh off that end of summer bonfire debacle, to which what seemed like all of Mayfair had unfortunately been privy.

5

Jake was still that enigma, Annie realized. The guy who was chatting with Craig right now was not the Jake she had known all these years. He had this newfound easy gregariousness, slapping Craig on the back in a bro kind of way. It was unsettling to watch, she thought.

Jake turned to her now. "I've been helping your dad out with little repairs to the general store," he informed her in an explanation of why he'd been spending quite a bit of time with her father. The general store was just a hobby of her dad's, not the big source of income for her family. His father had started it when her dad was a young boy and recently, her father had taken over managing it since Grandpa Felix and Grandma Barbara had reversed the typical retiree migration pattern and moved to Chicago.

"Cousin Judy," Jake said. Annie looked behind her to find a tree of a woman, all legs and big bones, coming towards them. She wore a halter dress that showed off her toned arms, and her short, spiky blond hair was so gelled it looked wet. She must have been at least in her forties.

"Jakey," Cousin Judy said, enveloping Jake in a big hug, not unlike the bear hugs Lou was notorious for giving. She brought his face towards her and kissed his forehead.

"Judy," Jake said through laughter. "It's been a while." He took her bags, and put them in the Jeep.

"This place is great. So laid back. You linger at Logan for too long and the cops blow a whistle at you until you move. Or you get honked at incessantly. Those Bostonians are so impatient." Judy said all this with a thick Boston accent herself. "And who might you all be?" she said to Annie and Craig, clapping her hands together.

"Oh," Jake said. "Sorry. This is Annie. She's, um," he paused. Annie anticipated how he was going to describe her.

"She's the Maid of Honor," Craig cut in. "And I'm her boyfriend, Craig." He shook Judy's hand.

"Oh *you're* the one and only Annie," Judy said. "Lou's sidekick."

“That’s me,” Annie said.

“Well, we should get going, I suppose,” Jake said.

“Let’s!” Judy said. “I can’t wait to see your father’s place, Jake. I hear it’s just a hop, skip, and a jump from the Gulf,” she said, climbing into the passenger seat.

“Yeah, but I’d add a few more jumps and that would probably be a little more accurate.” He closed the door behind her, and then opened the back door for Annie and Craig. Craig slid in first. Annie went in after him, but as she drew her tote bag toward her lap, the invitation to the wedding fell out and hit the pavement.

You are Cordially Invited to Celebrate the Wedding of
Ms. Louise Amber Opelman
and
Mr. Thomas Gerard Kingsburg
The Mayfair Resort and Golf Club, Mayfair Island, FL
Saturday, the Nineteenth of June
Two o’clock in the Afternoon

Jake picked it up and handed it to her. “You know, you don’t need this to get in to the wedding,” he said, not letting go just yet. Annie looked at his eyes again, thinking about that night with the sketch again. He stared back, unrelenting. The sound of Judy’s loud voice filled the car. She was telling Craig about how excited she was to finally make her way down to Mayfair, how she couldn’t believe it had taken her this long to do so.

The air felt heavy. Jake finally pulled his hand away, leaving the invitation to flop under Annie’s fingertips. He walked around to the other side of the car and climbed into the driver’s seat, turning the keys in the ignition before he was even settled in his seat.

“Adventures await,” he announced jovially, tapping a few fingers on the steering wheel. Annie knew he was joking, being intentionally corny, but as the car hurtled toward the gray skies ahead of them, she also wondered if he could be right.

6

Jake sighed as soon as Lou thrust open the door to her apartment. He moved around his lower jaw, only now realizing he had been driving with his teeth clenched the whole time. He rubbed his chin, the lazy stubble from days of not shaving prickling his fingertips.

Thankfully, Judy had yammered on about her newfound love of knitting animal sweaters for most of the car ride. She didn’t even own any pets. It was a matter of size, she said – any sweater bigger than what would fit a small dog or cat she wouldn’t have the patience to make. Only did Craig’s seizing the opportunity to talk about his family’s prize-winning show dogs briefly punctuate Judy’s extensive chronicling of her hobby. This led to Judy pulling one of her creations out of her bottomless pit of a bag and giving it to Craig for Bertrand, his West Highland Terrier. Jake never thought he would be so happy to hear that much dog talk. He had put all of his efforts into concentrating on the road in front of him, and not on who was sitting in the backseat. It had been difficult, though. He knew he had put himself in the position, offering to drop Annie and Craig off at the Milton’s. When he had spotted Annie sitting there on the curb at the airport, it occurred to him that might be the perfect way of clearing any awkward tension from the get-go.

But, he had found himself sneaking glances in the rearview mirror all too often. He saw Annie periodically rub Craig’s shoulder with limp detachment. Otherwise, she sat

with her forehead practically pressed to the window, looking like she would jump out if it were a safe enough option. He had made eye contact with her just once, when they were stuck in a small bout of traffic on the Mayfair Causeway, the glorified bridge that was the main thoroughfare to the island. As soon as she caught him looking, she turned her attention back to the window. That was the moment when he realized his plan wasn't going as he had envisioned. If anything, it was just amplifying the way he and Annie had left things off four years earlier.

Lou's phone call that came when they were stopped on the bridge was a blessing. She demanded he drop off his passengers at her place before stopping anywhere else. He might have shaved off a good half inch of his back left molar had he continued driving any longer.

Lou now made a sound akin to a tribal chant as she ran down the three flights of stairs to the parking lot. This broke Jake out of whatever sort of funk he had sensed himself approaching. His sister had that rare ability to make everything around her light up. He got out of the Jeep and watched Lou envelop Annie in her arms. Even though she was almost five inches shorter than Annie and shaped like a pencil, she still managed to lift her off the ground.

"Thanks for returning my better half to me," Lou said to Jake once she had released Annie from her grip.

Annie giggled, and then added in quiet half-heartedness, "Yeah, Jake. Thank you."

Jake put on a smile and kicked the pavement. His hands were sweating, balled up in the depths of his shorts pockets once again. "No problem." The chatter of Annie

introducing Craig, the blonde stallion, and of Cousin Judy giving the same forehead kiss to Lou ensued. And here Jake had thought himself special for receiving such a greeting back at the airport.

He looked up at the balcony of the third-floor apartment Lou shared with her fiancé Tom. It was strung with tacky palm tree lights, clearly a design choice of Lou's. The lights fit right in with the overall aesthetic of the building. The apartment complex was one of the newer ones on the island, built only four years ago. But, you couldn't tell that by looking at it. The façade of the building already had a weathered appearance, and the sand and salt air gave it a dustiness that matched the older structures on the island. Its once vibrant pink paint was now speckled with faded blooms, giving it an 80s vibe. There was also some island law that had been in place since forever that prohibited buildings from being made higher than three or four stories. Something about not wanting to obscure Mayfair's beautiful ocean views from any point.

The string of lights on Lou's balcony suddenly flicked on, providential. They glowed green against the dimming sky. Jake saw Annie stop and look up at the lights, too. He took a deep breath of the thick salty air as the group made their way upstairs, and then he broke into a jog to catch up.

7

Inside the apartment living room, Jake saw Tom crouched by an old bulky stereo system, fiddling with one of its dozen or so knobs. Tom stopped for a moment on a staticky station playing salsa music before moving on to a much clearer classic rock station.

“No babe, go back,” Lou said. “I’m feeling the salsa music.” She started to do a little hip sway dance, arms stretched to the ceiling.

Tom obeyed, always listening to whatever Lou told him to do. Jake could see that the guy was in deep, had been since Lou brought him home with her for dinner just a week after they met. Tom then joined the rest of them by the entry, where they were crowded in a small huddle.

“I see Lou’s already got you trained,” Craig said to Tom. He licked his lips and smiled.

Jake saw Annie flick Craig on the arm, a pathetic attempt at telling him to stop his horrible habit of spewing obnoxious sentences. He wanted to tell Craig that Tom wasn’t one of his dogs. He was afraid he wouldn’t be able to contain himself much longer. It was hard enough playing the Mr. Congeniality role for that long back at the airport. Now he felt himself at his snapping point.

“I’m going to get a drink,” he announced quietly, interrupting Annie and Tom’s reminiscing about the first time they met. They laughed now about playing a round of midnight golf with Lou and a group of the Mayfair Resort’s summer employees. “Can I get anyone else something?” A chorus of “No thanks” came back to him. He walked to the little alcove of a kitchen and pored through the collection of craft beers Tom always had in the fridge. He settled on one and hoisted himself up on the back counter.

He couldn’t help but sit there and watch Annie with tunnel vision through the cutaway that exposed the kitchen to the living room. She kicked off her clunky shoes and linked arms with Lou and Tom, joining in on a goofy version of a cancan. Even Judy was

clapping along to the music. Craig, however, stood still. He looked quite uncomfortable, Jake noted with satisfaction, taking a nice, long sip of beer.

8

Annie felt Jake's eyes on her. Her arms tingled. Her legs tingled. She took robotic, rigid steps around the living room, too aware of every move she made. That damn cutout in the kitchen wall may as well have bared her soul to him, she thought. He sat at the counter just behind it, with his chin propped in one of his hands. His dark eyebrows made him look permanently contemplative. He saw everything, Annie believed. She'd believed that since their first encounter all those years ago.

In those first months of her friendship with Lou, Annie hadn't realized that the quiet boy who sat behind her in Algebra class was Lou's brother, not until she went to the Opelman house for the first time and he opened the door. It made sense, though – he was one of the few of her classmates who hadn't grated her nerves, who hadn't seemed remotely jaded by the island. The rest of them, spawns of generations-established island families, had already gotten "Mayfaired."

It was a term Annie and Lou had come up with, back when they thought they were just too clever for their own good, to indicate that phenomenon where people got so tied to the island that it consumed their identity. Mayfair was all they had, all they would ever have, all they would ever be. That's what happened to most of the people here, and Annie had been afraid of becoming another addition to the statistic. But, Lou got her thinking beyond the island confines, and past her countless self-imposed inhibitions. Of course, she had never told her that – it would have given Lou too much of an ego.

Annie had stayed that night of her first visit to Lou's house for a late dinner of boxed macaroni and cheese – something her own purist, Food Network-obsessed mother had refused to buy – and burgers on the grill courtesy of Lou's dad. That evening was one she remembered vividly. If she thought hard enough, she could still smell the scent of the charcoal grill that had hovered in the sticky air above them. She could feel the chattahoochee flooring poking the bare soles of her feet as she padded across Lou's patio. She could see herself sitting cross-legged on the plastic lounge chairs in Lou's backyard, taking huge spoonfuls from the bowl of macaroni in her hand, the electric orange concoction's plasticky deliciousness filling her mouth.

Sitting there, she had listened to Lou tell her about how her mother had left them on a whim and disappeared for two whole months, when Lou was five and Jake was just three. Eight years later, she ran off again, that time leaving a note telling them it was permanent. She never said where she was going. To this day, they didn't know where she was.

Lou had gone on to describe how the day after her mother had left them for good, her father grabbed a map of the United States and told her to hold it out in front of him. He closed his eyes, spun around once, and jabbed his pointer finger at the map. It landed somewhere in the middle of the southwest coastline of Florida. From there, Mr. Opelman settled on moving to Mayfair. Lou told this tale with such earnestness, Annie didn't doubt her for a second, and when she finally met Mr. Opelman, Lou's explanation of how they moved to the island only made more sense.

It was the memory of that night that came to Annie when she was at her lowest points. She believed everyone had these go-to nuggets of nostalgia. Even though it was

over ten years ago, if she could pick, that was the moment she would go back to. It was a pure night, when everything seemed like it was looking up, when she felt free to have dreams instead of burdened by having them. It wasn't just the taste of the food, the smell of the muggy fall air and wet leaves that stuck with her though. What made that night so distinct in her memory was what she saw when she went back inside the house, after she had helped Lou wash up the bowls from dinner. She asked Lou where she could find the bathroom, and Lou pointed her down the small hallway that was just off the living room.

Jake had long-since excused himself to go back inside, and as she went on her quest to find the bathroom, she caught a glimpse of him through his doorway. He was pinning something up to the wall space above his desk, with his back to her. She had stood there watching, taking in the easel against the window by his desk, the paint tubes and various drawing utensils scattered about the wooden floor. There were little paintings and sketches tacked up all over the room, so many of them that only a few tiny patches of the light blue wall were visible. She remembered standing there, feeling ashamed of her own room that was so devoid of personality with its plain white walls and generic furniture her mother picked out of a Pottery Barn catalogue.

She didn't know how long she stood there at his door, but when Jake finally turned around and saw her, it looked as if someone had knocked the wind out of him. Annie tried to make it seem as if she had just been passing by.

"Bathroom?" was what made its way out of her mouth. She pointed down the hall. "Yeah," Jake said, taking a couple steps back. He stumbled over his desk chair. He pushed it back under his desk, and then shuffled over to his bed, as if self-conscious about its unmade state, with the sheets all in a mound in the center of the mattress. He

fiddled with the sheets for a second, but then that look of panic crept back to his face as he whipped his head back to look at the wall where he had been pinning something up before.

Annie followed his gaze and it was then that she saw it. She squinted to get a better look, not completely believing her eyes. There on the wall was a delicate little pen drawing of her. It was unmistakably her – he had captured the daisy clip holding back her unfortunate bangs to one side, her trademark coy grin that didn't reveal any teeth. He had captured the fullness of her mouth, even the little scar on her chin from when she had flown Superman-style over the handlebars of her bike years before, after she had hit an uneven part of the sidewalk just right. He must have sketched it when she was outside on the patio with Lou, watching them through the sliding glass door. It was on thick creamy paper and seemed to glow against the blue wall.

The best part about the drawing though, the thing that really struck her, was that the background was left empty, with only an uneven wash of inky grayness. She had gotten so accustomed to being noticed because of Leona's brief return that summer to the island, because of her nutty, dysfunctional family. It was nice to be noticed in her own right for once. Annie in anyplace. One glance at the drawing and she believed she could go anywhere and do anything.

She also remembered from that night Jake's hazel eyes, wide with fear from beneath his thick eyebrows. He had tried standing in front of the drawing of her, to hide it from her view. But, she had seen it, and she knew it was something she couldn't ever forget. She smiled at him, but didn't say anything more. And when she walked away, she

heard his door shut quietly behind her. After that night, Jake became the enigma, the one thing that wasn't disappointingly transparent on the island.

She felt juvenile for still remembering that moment, ashamed for letting that youthful lust she had felt sit within her and linger to this day. It was borderline psychotic, attaching such meaning to a lame childhood encounter. But, she supposed she came by the madness naturally considering her family history.

9

Lou sat on the couch and watched as Annie emerged from the kitchen with a glass of water in hand. She brushed past the coffee table in her awful denim skirt, and though she wore a wide lip-glossed smile, there was a perceptible emptiness in her eyes – perceptible, at least, to Lou. Her years of friendship with Annie endowed her with a particular intuition: something was off. She fought the urge to reach out and forcibly pull Annie over to the couch, to rescue her from being swallowed up by the carpet, which in her mind had transformed into a kind of domestic quick sand. Instead, she said, “Annie, come here. Sit.” She patted the cushion next to her.

Judy was in the kitchen, on a conference call with “some potential business partners,” talking about launching a website for her knitting creations. The boys were in the spare room, where Tom had set up a ping-pong table. It was the only space in the apartment for it, and it took over most of the room's square footage. Even if Lou wanted to do something else with the space, she didn't have the heart to refuse Tom his childish whims. The floor plan for the apartment designated the room as an office, but who was she kidding – she and Tom would never be the types to have an in-home office.

Tom had picked up the dented and slightly warped table at a garage sale a couple weeks back. When Lou came home from her managing shift at Water Wonderland, the huge water park just across the causeway, on the mainland, she was met with the sight of Tom and their ancient neighbor, Mr. Delgado, playing a match right in the middle of the living room. The coffee table was pushed against the wall to make room and Mr. Delgado nearly dove into it in an effort to snag the winning point. Until then, Lou hadn't realized how surprisingly agile the old man was. After Delgado's near-collision with the coffee table, she and Tom came to an agreement to move the ping-pong matches to another space.

She could now hear muffled plink after muffled plink as the ball hit the table. One of the guys shouted, "That was out. That was clearly out, man." She couldn't tell who it was.

Finally conceding to Lou's command, Annie set down her sweating glass of water on the coffee table, and then curled up on the piled lima bean green couch next to her. Annie placed the same hand that had just been clutching the glass upon Lou's arm. Lou shivered under the icy weight of it.

"You okay?" Annie asked. "You're looking at me funny." Lou became suddenly aware that she was smiling the fakest of smiles, the kind where the corners of her mouth were nearly touching the scrunched corners of her eyes. She felt a sharp pinch at both of her dimples. She relaxed her face.

"Alright, you just went from looking like you were on some kind of uppers to looking like you're about to confess a huge lie or something. Are you about to tell me that you're really a man?" Annie let out her breathy laugh, and immediately looked down

at her knees. She knocked them together, still shuddering from laughter, emitting some husky giggles. She had the kind of laugh that was funny in its own right.

Lou joined in as soon as a snort escaped from Annie's mouth. "Yeah, yeah you got me." She threw her arms up, playing along to coax the old Annie back out again. She put on a gruff voice. "You figured it out. I just couldn't keep it from you any longer."

It was silent again except for the sound of the guys hitting the ping-pong ball back and forth. Lou closed her eyes, letting the sound play hypnotic on her ears. She heard Annie clear her throat. She considered Annie's face for a moment. The girl had her hair pulled back in a librarian-tight bun. If only she'd let it down more often, Lou thought.

Annie took another gulp of water and flipped through the food issue of the *New Yorker* (Tom's subscription) on the coffee table. She turned the pages fast, stopping on a long article profiling some ridiculously spicy pepper that grows in Trinidad. The photo on the opposite page featured a man sweating profusely with an inset image of the benign-looking, jellybean-sized culprit.

"This is nuts," Annie said, her eyes scanning the article. "Did you read this?"

"No," Lou said. She sat there thinking about the last time they spoke, a couple weeks back. All she had talked about was that she was trying to figure out if the Naples-based tent company she had decided to use was jilting her - she was still convinced they'd duped her, but there was nothing she could do now that she'd signed the contract. As she had spoken to Annie, she had been staring at her laptop screen, eyes burning, looking up reviews of All InTents. Annie had countered with an unenthusiastic tale of how her office floor's break room finally got its own K-Cup coffee machine. Most of

their conversations this year were spicy pepper article-level, she realized. She'd pushed Annie to get away from Mayfair for a while, never imagining that could happen to them.

"Look Lou," Annie said, glancing up from the magazine. "I'm fine."

"I don't want to talk about peppers," Lou said.

"Okay." Annie pushed the magazine down to the other end of the table. "I really am fine."

"If you say so."

"Lou," Annie said. "I don't want you playing the role of my rescuer again. Not now. I don't need it, and anyway it's your week."

Lou nodded. She knew she'd have to accept her words for now. It was too easy for Annie to pull away. Besides that, a sudden crash from the back of the apartment punctured her little speech. Though she felt horrible for even acknowledging it, Lou was relieved. The fraudulence behind Annie's words, the scriptedness of it all, angered her.

"Sorry about that, man." Lou watched Annie's boyfriend trot out from the back hallway, his mouth pulled in a taught line of shame. Tom and Jake followed behind him. Judy came out of the kitchen.

"What happened?" Lou and Annie said in near unison.

"Well, it was nice while it lasted," Tom said, feigning lightheartedness. Lou knew him too well, though, and could tell he was holding back his anger. He wrinkled and twitched his nose, then made a sharp noise with his tongue against his top front teeth.

"The table's busted."

Jake, meanwhile, stood with one elbow propped on the mantle of the fireplace that would surely never get used. He wore an amused smile.

Lou sent him a glare. Jake shrugged ever so slightly and shook his head. “Craig here got a little too into the game.” He thumbed in Craig’s direction.

Lou’s eyes widened. She knew Jake was smart enough to receive all the hints she was sending his way to knock it off. He was just choosing to ignore them.

“You broke the table?” Annie shouted.

Annie had been on the island for half an hour, and already the drama had started. The correlation was all too clear in Lou’s eyes. She took a sharp breath and raked her fingers through her frizzy curls. “What happened?” she asked again.

Tom threw his hands up, like he couldn’t be bothered to explain.

“I slammed my racket down, and it must have hit the table just right. The integrity of the whole thing was compromised as it was,” Craig said. He had the conviction of a seasoned lawyer and the petulance of a child whining to his parents all at once. It made perfect sense that Tom looked like he wanted to strangle him. But, Lou also didn’t like the way Jake was molding the situation totally against Craig’s favor. Annie had made her choice. He had to accept that. “It was only a matter of time before the table broke. Hell, it was caved in at the middle,” Craig pushed.

Lou’s gaze was honed in on Jake and his smug smile. She wanted to smack him. “Jake,” she growled under her breath. Couldn’t Annie see what was happening here?

“I think we should get going, no?” Jake said. He took his keys from his pocket and swung them around on his index finger.

“I think so,” Annie said, with a measure of uncertainty. She looked back at Lou.

“You and me – lunch tomorrow?” Lou said, biting her bottom lip. “Before the dress fitting?” She was going to heed Annie’s words. This was her week. She wasn’t

going to let the great ping-pong debacle and whatever jumble of Annie-related subtext that went along with it rattle her composure.

Annie didn't respond before Craig said, "Jake buddy, do you really think you're good to drive us?" He pointed accusatorily to the beer bottle sitting on the kitchen's cutaway counter.

"I do, *buddy*." Jake didn't turn his attention to where Craig was pointing.

"I'm not so sure I feel the same way," Craig said. "Annie, are you comfortable with him driving us to your parents?"

Annie stood there, a deer in headlights, staring at Jake only.

"Why don't you let me take the wheel," Craig offered, waggling his fingers for Jake's keys.

Jake swallowed hard, his Adam's apple threatening to poke out of his throat.

The memorized sound of the ping-pong ball being hit back and forth came back to Lou unexpectedly. "Okay," she said, in as saccharine a tone as she could conjure. "Tom will take you and Annie home. And Judy, he'll drop you off at my dad's. It's not a big deal. Right, hon?"

Tom grabbed a set of keys from a small bowl on the coffee table. "Not at all. I need to fill'er up with gas anyway."

Craig rubbed his hands together at rapid speed and then said, "Excellent." Judy nodded her approval of the plan. Meanwhile, Annie was already at the front door, one hand turning its squeaky brass handle. After Judy, Craig, and Tom stepped out, she said, "I'll see you tomorrow, Lou." She sounded exhausted. She let the door shut hard behind her, marking her harsh exit.

Lou listened to Jake tap his fingers against the mantle. She whipped around, ready to siphon out of him the details of what had just gone down.

“You can’t just leave it alone, can you?” she asked him.

“Lou,” he said, arms up in surrender. His palms were covered in dusty white calluses from all the odd handy jobs he had been doing over the past few months. “I’ve done nothing. So why don’t *you* just leave it alone?” He was perfectly calm, verging on smug.

Lou wanted him to shout. She had wanted a good, satisfying screaming match and she didn’t much care about who her sparring partner was. Jake would do. There was this pent up something in her that needed to be released. She sighed from deep, but it didn’t do anything for her. “Just go,” she said. It was in a much more meager voice than she had ever used before, the opposite of what she wanted. What she wanted – she wasn’t even sure of that anymore.

Jake released an irksome combination of mutter and chuckle as he walked out the door. After watching him walk down the portico and disappear down the stairs to the parking lot below, Lou closed the door. She secured the top chain lock in place and pressed her back against the cold, whitewashed wood. She slid down to the floor, her thin t-shirt catching on a protruding splinter. Legs spread out in front of her, creating two channels through the fluffy carpeting, she started to think the time had come that she couldn’t keep the act up much longer. She dropped her head into her hands, the nervous habit she had never been able to kick manifesting itself as she frenziedly scratched her hairline. It caught her by surprise when she felt the telling sting that started in the corners of her eyes, and then the first wet drop hit her bare leg.

It had been Annie's dream to become a director ever since she first got her hands on a camcorder at the age of nine. Her father had given her his old one, at the time thinking she'd be interested in it for maybe a week, if that long. Her Grandpa Felix, her dad's father, was always buying the latest gadgets on whims. He would fiddle around with the purchase for a few days and then he would either get too confused or too bored and would pawn it off on her dad.

It was because of this cycle that Annie ended up with the camcorder. After she figured out how to work the thing on her own, she was hooked. Her brother Kevin, who was four years younger, had been the star of most of the films she had scripted until she was eleven. Mayfair's idyllic island stasis might have driven Annie insane if she hadn't discovered the appeal of crafting elaborate, if rather unoriginal, plots for her films. Her favorite one had involved Kevin scaling a mountain (really, the jagged rocks of the Mayfair Causeway embankment) in an attempt to find hidden treasure (their father's massive change collection).

All this was back when Kevin had been young enough to boss around, before the stubbornness that ran in the family had inevitably come out in him too and he refused to partake in the realization of any of her dream world inventions. After that, she started experimenting more with making documentaries, even if they were about subjects as banal as a day in the life of Carl Opelman running his gift shop. Annie couldn't have a conversation with Kevin now that didn't end up in an argument. Granted, it was usually over something completely trivial; but, both of them had their pride at stake, so none of

these petty tiffs had ever really been resolved. When Kevin started to lose interest, she began recruiting anyone on the island who was willing to participate.

She was a natural dreamer, and that was something she had gradually come to be ashamed of. She didn't want to become one of those pitiable kinds of people who freely admitted to having high aspirations that were more than likely unattainable. She was only twenty-three and she still had the grand dream, though the cynicism of adulthood had already begun to creep into her thoughts more and more each day.

11

On a cul-de-sac at the end of Shady Palm Lane sat the modest (by Mayfair standards at least) bungalow Annie's parents had purchased some thirty-two years ago. The Milton house was covered in thin horizontal siding, painted a sandy brown color, except for the façade, which had scrabbled stonework flanking each side of the green front door. Its wrap-around porch was painted the same dirty brown. The house looked like it belonged in the middle of the woods somewhere up north, and for that reason Annie had always liked it. It was the only house of its kind on the island; it stood out. It didn't belong in Mayfair, and yet it was there, standing amongst the pastel-hued cottages scattered about the island, and the massive manses that opened up to private beach access and that had more rooms each than the island had islanders.

True to the road's name, they passed palm tree after palm tree as they advanced towards the house. Annie was filled with a warmth she hadn't expected, dizzying herself by focusing on the trees. She allowed the verdant blur to overtake her vision. To the untrained eye, all the palms probably looked the same, but when she was a little girl her

botany-loving father pointed out that there were at least five different species of palm lining their street.

Coconut palm, Annie thought in her head as they jetted past a towering one with clusters of coconuts hanging just beneath its wild fanning fronds. “Royal palm,” she said, quiet enough that neither Tom nor Craig heard her. Sabal palms. They passed a row of trees with smooth, striated barks that led up to a mess of hatched spikes.

Tom turned into the cul-de-sac, bringing the house into view. A sharp glint of setting sunlight bounced off its metallic Key West roof and streamed in through the car’s windshield. Annie blinked, remnant spots swirling in the blackness. The roof was the only aesthetic feature of the house that was shared by other homes on the island. It was also the only part of the house Annie didn’t like; she had been jarred awake too many times by coconuts from the palm in their front yard falling on the metal with a loud thud.

The house looked the same, but a woman in capri pants stood on a ladder placed at the left corner, peaking under the roof’s eave. She had a paint roller in one hand and stumbled slightly as she shifted her feet.

“What is she doing?” Annie said. As soon as Tom put the car in park, she jumped out. “Good thing I didn’t honk,” she heard Tom say. She trudged up the front lawn, the too-tall grass prickling her calves. She shielded her eyes, and looked up at her mother. A drop of pastel yellow paint fell from the roller in her hands. Annie jumped back to avoid the splatter.

Aileen climbed down from the rickety stepladder and brushed her hands down the front of her pants. “Wasp nest,” she said as a greeting. Her eyes twitched in the sunlight. She looked right through Annie.

“Hello to you too, Mom,” Annie said. “What in your right mind were you doing up on a ladder?” Annie’s hadn’t inherited her clumsiness from her father.

“I was starting up on some much-needed renovations,” her mother said. Paint still dripped from the roller onto the grass.

Annie could now see that the whole left side of the house was covered in that awful yellow. “I liked the brown better,” she said. As soon as the words escaped her mouth, she curled in her bottom lip, ashamed.

Her mother pulled out a crumpled pink tissue from her pocket and blotted at her nose. “I did too,” she said, sighing. “But, there’s no going back now.” She started to walk up the lawn and climb the porch steps. Her garden clogs clomped against the wooden planks. She stopped short of the front door and looked down to the driveway, where Craig and Tom were unloading the luggage from the car.

“That’s Craig,” Annie said. “I’m asking you now, please be cordial.”

Her mother cleared her throat. “I don’t know why you’ve gotten into the habit of telling me how to act, Annie.” She didn’t look at her daughter, but came down the steps again and pushed past her. “You must be Craig,” she hollered, all full of cheer. She ambled towards Craig. “I’m Aileen. It’s so nice to finally meet you!”

As her mother put down the paint roller and reached in to hug Craig, Annie bit down on her lip too hard. She drew blood. She held back a gag as the salty metallic taste filled her mouth.

“Tom,” Aileen said, finally acknowledging him. “It’s so nice to see you again, too. I’m sure you’re quite the busy man these days.”

“Oh,” Tom said. “I’m really letting Lou take the reins with the wedding.”

“Smart man,” Annie’s mother said, still grinning. She led Craig and Tom through the front door.

Following them inside, the queasiness she felt at the airport returned in an even more potent form. She clutched her stomach, noticing suddenly that in the process of hugging Craig, her mother had gotten some splotches of paint on the back of his crisp white shirt and pants.

12

“So, this is the guest room. I made the bed up for you, and if you need an extra blanket or something, you can find one in the linen closet down the hall.” Annie listened from her place on the living room couch downstairs as her mother gave Craig the grand tour of the house. “Here, actually, let me get you an extra throw. You’d be surprised how cold it gets in this house at night since my husband and son like the AC set to arctic temperatures.”

The squeak of the closet door sliding on its track came through loud and clear. It must have had something to do with the way the place was designed; sound seemed to bounce off the walls and still come through in perfect quality even if it was traveling from across the house. Annie had a fond memory of sitting at the kitchen table one morning years ago and listening her brother butcher a Mariah Carey number in the upstairs shower when he thought he couldn’t be heard. She gave him such grief for it when he came down for breakfast. Now, her mother sounded like she was sitting on the couch next to her, rather than with her head in the linen closet upstairs, poring through blankets Craig wasn’t going to use.

Annie stood and went to the kitchen, thinking, hoping, that maybe it was only hunger that was causing the awful feeling in her stomach. She grabbed a nectarine from the bowl of fruit on the island counter, pleased that it was in the same place it had always been. She ran it under some water, rubbing her thumbs along the smooth skin, and then swathed it in a paper towel.

Before she could even get a bite of it in her mouth, she heard her brother's voice say, "That's my nectarine." What was it with her family and their terrible greeting skills?

Annie turned around to see Kevin leaning in the doorway. She bit into the fruit, and as if to add insult to injury, let its juices run down her chin. She savored the sudden buzz of childish giddiness that overcame her. "Tell you what," she said, noting how Kevin's once cutely pudgy visage was now disturbingly more angular and manly. He had a wide-brimmed black baseball hat sitting loosely atop his head, and it looked like he had shaved his hair into a severe buzz cut. "I can go to Roy's and get some more fruit. Unless I just bit it off, I don't see 'Kevin' scrawled on here anywhere." She turned the nectarine around in front of her.

"The first thing out of your mouth would be a smart-ass comment like that," Kevin said, nodding to himself. He stepped out of the doorframe and into the brightly-lit kitchen. He looked so pale.

Annie found herself relishing this hostility-laced banter that she and Kevin had perfected over the years. She tried licking away the nectarine residue stuck between her teeth and smiled.

“So that’s your boy-toy upstairs with Mom,” Kevin said. He took a seat on a stool at the island, though it looked a little painful for him to do so in those tight pants he was wearing.

“Yeah,” Annie said, exhaling through her nose. “That’s Craig.” She sat down in the stool next to her brother. She put the half-eaten piece of fruit down, and then folded her arms atop the counter’s cold mosaic tiling. Resting her head on top of her arms, she said, “Wake me up when the nightmare’s over.”

When she lifted her head up moments later, she found Kevin polishing off the rest of the nectarine. He grinned at her.

“When do you start school?” Annie asked him. Kevin, as far as she knew, was starting at Western Florida Community College in a few months. It was such a waste, she thought. Not that Kevin cared one bit about her thoughts on his future.

“End of August,” Kevin said. “I forget the exact day.” He shifted, his discomfort evident. He was a far cry from the happy boy who had talked about becoming an engineer pretty much since he could speak.

“Have you picked your classes yet?”

“Nah,” he said. “We have until the week before school starts to choose them.”

“Okay,” Annie said. “But you know the earlier you pick, the better chance you’ll have of getting into the classes you want.”

“I’ve got it covered, Annie,” he said. “Chill.” His chair screeched across the tile and he walked out of the kitchen.

Annie climbed down from the stool. She longed for the days when Kevin picked her as his confidante, when what she thought mattered to someone.

She stood gazing into the counter tiles, playing with the chunky bracelet on her left wrist. Craig had given it to her on her birthday last year, along with a party at a Midtown bar he rented out and filled with a hundred or so people she didn't know.

"There you are." Two hands on her shoulder pried her back into reality, away from her thousand reflections in the little bubbles of glass tiles. "Your mom said she made up the guest bedroom for me," Craig said, his breath hot on her neck.

"It's sweet, your room," he continued when she didn't say anything. "I didn't take you for one to have all the frilly pastel touches and never change it. You seem like one of those girls who would have decided to paint a wall black one day on a whim."

"Maybe I'll go do that now," she said, lips pulled in, looking away. She turned around so that her nose was inches from Craig's. His hands skated down her back, and he shook his head side to side.

"No, not now," he said.

13

Aileen hovered over a pair of cat-shaped bookends she had taken off one of the living room shelves and placed on the coffee table. Whenever she had guests over, she went around the house and examined each forgotten knickknack – and the house was filled to the brim with them – one at a time. She'd brush off the non-existent dust with a washcloth and move on. She felt a need to get reacquainted with this place she called home, so she busied herself with all the parts of it that she didn't notice most of the time.

She put down one of the cat bookends – it was a bonnet-wearing cat reading a copy of *Lady Catterly's Lover*, one paw masking a modest smile – and moved on to the

dreaded cluster of family photographs. They sat in a battalion atop the clunky pinewood table in the back corner of the room.

Annie and her boyfriend were talking in hushed voices in the kitchen next door. She couldn't quite make out what they were talking about, and silently cursed the funny acoustics of the house. She strained to catch even a word, resting a palm on the table and leaning her head to the right, making sure she looked like she was busying herself with cleaning.

The hushed talk stopped, and Aileen could hear the sound of footsteps on the kitchen tile. She stumbled, one foot rolling over the side of her wedge shoe. She tried to regain her balance, slapping a hand down on the table and knocking over a picture frame.

The downed photo was of her, taken back when she was Annie's age. Next to her was her sister, Leona. She swiped the washcloth over their smiling faces, only making the glass smudgier. They were cheek to cheek, a position that emphasized how different they looked. Leona's everlasting tan made Aileen's milky complexion look dingy and ashen in comparison.

A pair of loafers peeked out from under the photo in her hands, startling Aileen.

"I didn't mean to scare you." Craig was in front of her.

One of the hygienists at her dental practice, Terry, was notorious for his sneaking approach. Around the office, everyone referred to him as Ninja. Craig must be one of those ninja-like people who pop up on you when you least expect it, too, she thought. Because of that, she docked one point from the mental tally she had started keeping the moment he stepped foot on her porch.

"Oh, is that you?" he asked, one finger on her pock-marked cheek.

“Yes,” she said, pulling the photo away. She put it back in its spot.

“And a young Leona Haven,” he said, fanboy gaiety shining loud and proud.

“That’s right,” Aileen said, feeling cornered.

“How old is she there?”

Leona had turned fourteen that year, and she was one of those girls who had a sudden blossoming of beauty at that age, skipping over any of the awkward, bumbling stages of puberty that Aileen herself – and most other girls for that matter – had experienced. Although she was three years her senior, Aileen looked younger than Leona in the photo. Even through the graininess and the circle of solar flare the lens captured, the constellation of acne that stretched across both of her smiling cheeks - it had taken her until she hit her thirties for her complexion to clear up - and the curtain of curly bangs she sported then was forever preserved. Her parents loved seeing the photo when they came over, but it disgusted Aileen, which was why it had its place all the way at the back of the cluster.

“No kidding,” Craig said, when she told him how old Leona was in the photo.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed how much she and Annie look alike.”

“I have.” She stepped around him. “So,” she began, hoping to end any further discussion of the photograph. “You do like fish, don’t you?”

Craig laughed through his nose. “Yes.” Then he added, “Well, it really depends what kind.”

A simple yes would have sufficed, Aileen thought. “Sole,” she said. “Dover sole. The people pleaser of fish, I believe. It’s very mild.” Her fish soliloquy delivered, she

turned on her heel towards the kitchen. With Craig trailing behind her, she added, “We’re having it for dinner, in case you didn’t gather.”

“I see where Annie gets her sense of humor,” Craig said.

14

Annie stood statue-still at the entryway to the living room, watching her mother. Her eyes watered as she held back a sneeze. Aileen had gone back to wipe down the glass of that old photo of her and Leona one more time, still executing that nervous cleaning habit that she thought no one noticed. She had left Annie and Craig in the kitchen to chop up some tomatoes.

Her mother had only fed her small details at a time over the course of many years, so it had taken Annie a while to piece together the story of how Leona rocketed from Mayfair to volatile film star. Maybe it was just the way her mother had told it to her, but Annie gathered that Leona’s path to stardom happened uncannily fast. According to Aileen, things just tended to work out for her capricious sister. A serendipity magnet, she had called Leona.

The only one who could get in Leona’s way, it seemed, was herself.

At the age of seventeen, Leona Ruth Radnitzky left Mayfair for Los Angeles. Once she got to LA she nixed the Radnitzky, so to speak. At one early audition, a casting director informed her that Leona Haven had a million times more star quality than Leona Radnitzky ever would.

Leona, Aileen told Annie with scary reserve, took off on a random lazy Saturday afternoon in April, about a month before she was supposed to graduate high school.

Leona had a fling with some spring breaker boy from Yale who had a wealthy aunt and uncle in the LA area. He was able to get them to agree to let Leona stay at their place until she figured out her living situation. It sounded to Annie like a film scenario in its own right.

Leona could schmooze with the best of them. The money she made working at Sandy's Ice Cream throughout high school (one of the more lucrative businesses of Mayfair since, to this day, it has the island's monopoly on cold treats) funded her Greyhound ticket.

Leona apparently told her family that she was going to meet some friends at the beach, not unusual weekend behavior for the once very popular Leona. In reality, Annie thought, her classmates had probably been fonder of her than she had been of them. Her aunt didn't seem like somebody who had ever forged a close relationship in her life.

At the time of Leona's disappearance, her mother was attending Western Florida College, which was a half hour away from Mayfair. She didn't live in the dorms, instead opting to stay in the very room in she grew up in for all four years. She commuted every single day. She only moved in to her own apartment when she went off to dental school, but that was also at WFC.

Aileen said she had a feeling Leona wasn't coming back when she left for the beach that day. She claimed she looked out her bedroom window, and saw Leona getting in the Yale boy's car with a suspicious amount of baggage, more than the dusty tote bag in which she usually carried a change of clothes to the beach.

Across the dining room table, Annie's father sat with his hands clasped, letting his hairy knuckles brush the end of his white porcelain dinner plate. Back and forth, he moved the back of his hand across the plate's edge, dangerously close to the fish filet. The vermillion evening sunlight came in through the bay window behind him, spreading orangey shards across the formica table. A sparse tamarind tree in the backyard swayed in the breeze, its few pods dancing their own separate dances.

Annie traced the cracks of light on the table with her finger, flinching when her father said in his therapist voice, "So, Craig." Annie's fork screeched across her plate, dragging an asparagus stem along with it. Her father peered at her over his square rimmed glasses and stroked his thin gray beard.

"Yes, Hugh?" Craig said, adopting the same folded hands position. He straightened his back.

"What do you think of Mayfair in the short time you've been here?" The wide smile that spread across his face was, to Annie, a small beacon of hope. She glanced over at her mother, who was at her place at the head of the table, looking down at her plate and pulling the fleshy white fish apart into little flakes with her fork.

"I don't think I've seen enough to give you a good answer," Craig said, ever the diplomatic one. He had changed just before dinner, upon noticing the smears of paint on the back of his shirt and pants. Annie thought she might have seen some tears forming in his eyes as he balled them up and chucked them in the tiny metallic trashcan. He said it would be a waste of time trying to get dried up house paint out of linen.

“A good answer?” Her father’s voice was filled with incredulity. “I hate good answers. I like first impressions.”

Craig gave a laugh.

If only her father was joking, Annie thought.

“I’ll let you sit on that answer for a bit, Craig,” her dad said, pointing his fork at him. He had some half-masticated fish in his mouth as he spoke, and some crumbly remnants of the hunk of French bread he had eaten were stuck in his beard. “Also, be warned – I’m going to ask you the same question before you leave. I like to hear how people’s opinions can change like that,” he snapped his fingers, “for better or worse.”

“Dad, you don’t need to be quizzing him right now,” Annie said.

“I’m not quizzing him, hon,” her dad said. “I ask every outsider that question. Mayfair has to be a lot different than – I’m sorry, remind me of where it was you grew up Craig.”

“NYC, born and raised. My parents still live in the same apartment on the Upper East Side that I grew up in.”

“See, Annie,” her father said, agitating his beard some more. “Very different *upbringings*.” He chuckled. “Pun most definitely intended, considering Craig grew up amongst the clouds. Is it a penthouse suite?” he asked, jabbing a finger down on the table like he already knew the answer.

“Yes, sir,” Craig said, testing the waters.

“It’s okay,” Kevin turned in his chair to Craig and said, the first words he’d uttered at the dinner table that evening. “You can tell him you think this place is a shithole. Compared to what you’re used to, I’m sure.”

Annie sent her leg flying out under the table, but couldn't reach all the way across to make contact.

"Kevin," said Hugh.

Annie looked around at her brother, father, and mother. Kevin stared back at her, his big brown eyes now hard and challenging. Her father looked like he was thinking up another weird, off-putting question for Craig. Aileen's head was still bowed to the fish on her plate.

16

The squeal of water escaping the tap from the bathroom sink across the hall stirred Annie from the state of half-sleep to which she had eventually succumbed. She could see two perfect beams of light creeping in through the parts of her bedroom door that didn't meet up with the berber carpet.

A glance at the old Hello Kitty alarm clock on her nightstand told her it was almost four in the morning. She hefted herself out of bed. Even in her not fully lucid state, she registered disappointment at the hardness of the carpet against the soft pads of her feet, its tightly woven fibers mimicking the feel of a bed of packed dirt.

Out in the hall, she saw Kevin trudging back to his room. His baggy pajama pants, covered in a billiard pattern, had little frayed bits that dragged along the tile.

Kevin turned around, sensing someone was behind him. He staggered back a step. "Shit, Annie. You can't just sneak up on someone at four in the morning," he whisper-yelled.

“Sorry, Kev.” She walked down the hall. “It took me forever to fall asleep, and then I heard the sink running,” she said, though she didn’t know why she felt the need to explain this to him.

Kevin nodded. He unrolled one of the sleeves of his Tampa Bay Buccaneers t-shirt. It was so old that the print was cracked and fading. “I couldn’t sleep either,” he said. “You’re boyfriend was talking on the phone for at least two hours. He finally stopped around one, I think.”

“Really?” Annie said. “I’ll make sure that he doesn’t do that again.” She dragged out her words with suspicion.

“It sounded like a work phone call,” Kevin said, probably registering Annie’s concern. “I heard him talking about a sound board.” He stepped a little closer.

“Yeah, maybe,” Annie said with a distracted haze in her voice as she was reeling through the possibilities of who could have been on the other end of the phone call. She looked over at the closed door to the guest bedroom, knowing it wasn’t just work-related.

“Hey,” Kevin said. The brightness in his voice broke through Annie’s distractedness. “Remember when we used to play Pac-Man?”

“Yeah,” Annie said. She crinkled her brow, curious. They hadn’t had one of their videogame showdowns in over ten years. It had been a tradition of theirs to sneak down to the big television in the living room and hook up the old game console on those nights when neither of them could fall asleep. Pac-Man was the only game of Kevin’s extensive collection that Annie had liked to play, though Kevin always said it wasn’t a ‘real’ videogame.

“Or should I say, remember when I always used to kick your ass at Pac-Man? That should jog your memory, An.”

Annie smiled. She recalled that Kevin was always the first to fall asleep, usually with one cheek plastered to the carpet. “So do you want to revisit the old tradition – is that why you brought it up?” she asked.

“Do you?” Kevin asked. He had that annoyed air about him again, like one of his internal switches had been flicked off again.

“Yeah.” Annie nodded her head, cautious. “Let’s.”

They walked downstairs with soft steps.

17

“I need to ask you something, Annie,” Kevin said once they were settled in front of the TV. Annie sunk back into the soft white leather, sensing that she should get comfortable for whatever Kevin had in store.

“Alright, ask away,” she said. She tapped one foot on the carpet.

“You already know what I’m going to say.”

Annie shook her head and then folded her hand forward to signal him to get on with it.

Scratching at his ear, Kevin said, “How could you leave?” His eyes darted over to the display of family photos in the corner. “You had it so good here. Don’t you miss being able to see Lou in a second’s notice? And what about Jake?” His eyes flicked back to the television screen, and his hands maneuvered the controller’s keypad like they memorized the patterns long ago.

Annie drew in a deep breath. “People go away to school, Kev. I got a decent scholarship to one of the best film programs in the country and so I went. There’s nothing wrong with that.” She’d graduated over a year ago and still she had to defend her decision? “Tell me you wouldn’t do the same thing.”

“You have no idea,” said Kevin. He turned the television off. “Or maybe you just don’t care.”

“Oh my gosh, Kevin,” Annie said. She stood up and jabbed her thumb into the power button on the remote, turning the television back on. An infomercial for an at home foot massage bath played back on low volume. “I’m still trying to figure out what I did to get you so damn angry with me.”

“Stop being so selfish,” her brother said, his voice a little too loud for the early hour.

“What are you two doing?” Their mother now stood in front of the TV, clad in running clothes.

It was a shock to Annie that her mother even owned a pair of spandex shorts. They were an outrageous shade of turquoise and hugged her thin thighs, revealing their surprising muscularity. Her t-shirt, on the other hand, was three sizes too large and billowed around her.

“You run?” Kevin asked.

“I started, oh, about two years ago,” Aileen answered.

“It’s five a.m. Mom,” Annie said.

“Indeed it is. So, what are you both doing up then?”

“We were just talking,” Kevin said, and Annie nodded along half-heartedly.

Their mother bent down and retied one of her sneakers' laces. She sprung back to her feet. "Good," she said. "I'm going for a run." She sprinted past them and out the door. "Turn the alarm back on after me," she called out behind her.

"I can't believe it," Annie said to Kevin once the door slammed shut. It almost felt like she had just discovered her mother was having an affair. There was just something unsettling about finding out that the woman went on runs in the wee hours of the morning. Presumably by herself, but who knew?

"That's just it," Kevin said. "I blame you."

"Excuse me?" She had no idea what he was talking about. Somehow Kevin had taken up the habit of speaking in cryptic half sentences, like he was the star of some noirist mystery. He was the detective; she was the criminal. Annie expected a harsh light to be shone on her any second now.

"Come on, Annie. After the way Leona left? You had to know Mom wasn't going to take it well. So, yeah, I blame you for the deterioration of this household."

The deterioration of their household? Dramatics were apparently the sap of their family tree.

"I made it clear I was going to New York early on. It's not like I ran away. It's a three-hour plane ride." Annie looked over to the front door, part of her fearing their mother had stalled on the front porch and was listening to their conversation.

"Doesn't matter." Kevin shook his head slowly.

Their whispering ways were long over. Annie knew her father would be awake any minute now. Craig, however, could sleep through an earthquake. "I can't stay in Mayfair forever," said Annie. Her words sounded hollow against the hum of the

television. She swallowed, and then added, “Make sure you go live in the dorms. For your own sanity.”

“It’s not just that you went away to school, genius,” Kevin said. “How the hell don’t you see it? How don’t you see the similarities?”

“Between?” Annie prodded. “Come on, Kevin, you have to stop with this I-can-see-everything-before-you-can routine. I can’t believe you called *me* a smart-ass.”

“Fine, let me put it in a way you’ll understand.” He sat down again on the couch next to Annie. “You’re playing a starring role in the *Life of Leona*.”

Annie blinked. A sour dryness filled her throat.

“You’re playing the role of Leona,” Kevin added.

“Yeah, thanks. Your oh-so-clever metaphor did not escape my genius capabilities.” Annie stood again. The up-down coupled with the numbing effect of Kevin’s revelation had given her that phantom sensation of being on a rocking boat.

“You see it, don’t you?” Kevin’s voice sounded distant and tinny in her ears.

She didn’t want to answer him, but she knew she couldn’t walk away without saying a word. So, weakened by this comparison she’d tried for so long to escape from, she settled on a most cop-out answer. “I’m not sure what I know anymore, Kev.” She grabbed the chenille throw from the back of the couch and wrapped herself in it. It may as well have been made of insecurity.

Kevin cracked a few of his knuckles and sighed. “I’m going to attempt to fall asleep.”

“Good luck with that,” Annie said. She stood there with the blanket wrapped around her. It covered her head and flowed down to the floor. She grabbed the fabric and drew it under her chin, babushka style.

“Goodnight, Annie,” Kevin said to her when he was halfway up the stairs.

“Night,” she called up. She couldn’t shake his words though, and went back upstairs as well. She climbed into bed again, instantly too warm underneath her quilted comforter. She sandwiched her head between her pillow and sham, feeling like the thousands of hairline cracks her world had suffered over the years were close to giving way.

18

Annie did finally fall back into a sleep plagued by a harrowing dream about a copper-haired boy and a roaring fire she tried so hard to quench, but couldn’t. She woke up clammy and for a second was convinced she saw the bright, beautiful flames from her dream out of the corner of her eye. It was only the sunlight peeking in through the swaying vertical blinds of the window by her desk.

She could hear the groan of the coffee grinder running downstairs – somebody was up and about already. Not quite ready to face the day, she stayed there under the covers for a while. She knew that dream of hers had been spurred by her conversation with Kevin. Those flames. It couldn’t be a coincidence. Now, recollections of the bonfire came flooding back to her.

The summer bonfire celebration had been a Mayfair tradition ever since Annie could remember. At the end of each June, everyone would gather in front of the Bard’s Beach lighthouse, which was located smack dab in the middle of the island’s longest

stretch of coastline. It featured your typical summer fare – barbeque, live music, a cheesy talent show – and then, as darkness swelled in the sky, the great wood heap would be lit into a blaze of blinding light. Not a single person on the island missed it.

For Annie, watching the bonfire’s flames rise out of the sand was magic. It had been something she had looked forward to with unabashed happiness every year until the summer of 2002 – the summer Leona returned to Mayfair. It so happened that her aunt showed up the very day of the bonfire.

Until that day, Annie had no idea Leona was her aunt. All she knew at the time was that her mother had a sister who ran away.

She hadn’t even found that bit of information out from her own family. She’d heard this long lost sister mentioned by many an islander over the years leading up to the infamous bonfire.

By the time Mr. Roy, who owned the island’s overpriced grocery store, stopped her parents in the canned goods aisle and asked, “Have you heard from Lee lately? Is she visiting any time soon?” Annie had just about had it with not knowing who this person was. She was young, maybe nine years old, and they had been pillaging the store’s non-perishables in preparation for the upcoming hurricane season.

Annie remembered her mother dropping a can of green beans. That was one detail she couldn’t forget, not after watching the green beans splatter across the floor and smelling their tangy, metallic rankness heavy in the air around them.

Then her mother slowly shook her head to tell Mr. Roy that, no, she had not heard from this Lee person. That became her signature move whenever someone asked her about Lee – not the dropping a can of green beans, the head shake. It was as if the

question sucked all the energy out of her. It was the only times Annie ever saw her mother act so defeated.

Once Leona returned to the island, her mother's quiet defeat became a more permanent thing.

When they arrived home that afternoon, Annie bombarded her parents with questions about Lee. Was she her mother's friend? Why did everyone in Mayfair know about her? After placing the last can in the pantry, her mother said that Lee was her sister, who had run away years ago. Simple as that. End of discussion.

Her mother had said it the same way she used to say, "Go brush your teeth."

Annie knew her mouth must have fell open at that point. It scared her, because knowing her mother's sister had left just like that made the whole scenario so distinctively possible. It made the whole foundation of her family feel too fragile, like it might fracture without notice, like anyone in her family could pull a Lee maneuver when she least expected it. In that moment, she had tried to imagine waking up one morning to find that Kevin had left them, or vice versa. Though she hadn't been able to imagine herself ever having the nerve to leave.

She had too many questions for her mother, but she shut her mouth when Aileen said, "There are certain things we just don't talk about, and this is one of them." And so their family tradition of not talking about 'certain things' was established. After that day, Annie learned to filter what she said and the Milton household got a whole lot quieter.

To this day, that was how most of the island's longtime residents referred to her aunt, as Lee – the childhood nickname she couldn't shake. Lee Radnitzky. And so Annie

had never made the connection. Everyone had messed up families – she just hadn't realized the extent of her own family's issues.

19

Craig was sitting on the Milton's front porch with a mug of tepid coffee resting on one knee. Except for the constant tropic buzz of insects and mystery, he was met with welcome silence. When he had opened the front door to go outside earlier, he had tripped the alarm system, sending a series of deafening beeps through the house. Hugh had come down in a pair of threadbare shorts and wordlessly punched in the code to turn it off. Then he shuffled back to bed. Craig couldn't see why they even felt the need to have an alarm system here.

He kept swinging his arms in the air every so often to swat at the mist of gnats that surrounded him. He presumed everyone else was still asleep inside. In the hour he had been out there, he had seen just one biker pass by. So far, Annie's hesitance to return to Mayfair Island made no sense. The only negative he could possibly spin was that perhaps it was too quiet here, but that was nothing a couple hours drive to Miami every now and then couldn't fix.

The part of Annie that had attracted him initially, aside from the physical, was her determined refusal to settle for anything short of perfect. He'd admired it when they met working on their production class project. Now, that quality had morphed into the very attribute he could not tolerate anymore. He was beginning to see that she was the kind of person who might never be satisfied with anything in her life. It had gotten tiresome trying to keep her pleased.

Craig slid to the other side of the porch swing now, hoping to escape the cloud of gnats he kept breathing in. He lost grip of the coffee mug, and it tumbled to the porch floor, cracking into three jagged pieces. The milky brown liquid pooled at his feet. “Damn,” he muttered, and rushed to the kitchen to retrieve a wad of paper towels.

He found Annie washing her hands at the sink. She was staring out the window absentmindedly, letting the water run too long.

“You got a towel or something I can use to clean up a little spill outside?” he asked, touching her shoulder.

Annie jumped, flicking the faucet off. Craig tried not to think about how many times Annie had jumped in the past week when met with his touch.

“You’re up,” she said. “How long have you been awake?”

“A couple hours,” Craig said. “Look, I don’t want the coffee I spilled to stain the porch...”

“Oh, a coffee spill. Yeah, of course.” Annie swooped down to the cabinet under the sink and pulled out a roll of paper towels. “Here, let me help.” She followed him outside.

“I may have broken the mug as well,” Craig said. “And by ‘may have,’ I mean I did. I’m really batting a thousand this trip.”

Annie started wiping up the coffee. Craig stood above her, watching. A chalky cloud was left behind in the spill’s wake. “Aw no,” Annie said, picking up the mug pieces. “I made this for my mom in the third grade.” There was a noticeable catch in her voice.

Beneath a faint mess of colorful lines on the mug shards, Craig could now see the equally faded 'Happy Mother's Day' message done in shaky child's scrawl.

Annie wrapped the pieces up in a sopping paper towel. Craig opened the front door, so that she could rush the dripping mess in her hands over to the kitchen garbage.

As he was turning the handle, he heard a lush voice behind him say, "Well, I sure didn't expect anyone to be up at this hour."

On the second set of porch steps stood Leona Haven. Her big pouty lips were upturned at the corners into a knowing smirk. She was wearing a beige caftan, and a turquoise bathing suit peeked out from underneath it. Hanging on her arm were two empty reusable green bags.

Craig admired the way her long brown hair tumbled down in beachy waves. He detected the coconutty smell of sun block mixed with some expensive perfume.

"Aunt Leona," Annie said in timid acknowledgment.

"I heard you were back in town, An," Leona said, climbing up the rest of the porch steps.

"What are you doing here?" Annie looked down at her wrist to check the time, but there was no watch there.

"I was walking to Roy's to pick up some things for a party I'm having later, and when I saw you I just had to stop by. You're looking lovely." She rubbed Annie's shoulder.

"Thanks," Annie said, tentative. "So are you."

She waved Annie off with a well-manicured hand. Her hands were the only feature Craig could find fault with. They looked oddly ancient for someone in her mid-

40s. They showed every bump and protrusion - every vein and every knuckle stuck out, offset by her long, spindly fingers. "Please, I just went for a swim." She grabbed the ends of her hair and glanced down at them with a dissatisfied look before releasing them again.

Her gaze finally met Craig's. He smiled at her. He tried smoothing his bed head, feeling the hard crust of yesterday's gel as he raked his fingers through his hair.

"Is this your boyfriend?" Leona spoke to Annie, her thin eyebrows arched skyward. She hardly masked the condescending surprise that bolstered her question. Leona's reaction brought back the same current of anxiety he had felt upon hearing Annie's confession that he was her first real boyfriend. He had never gotten used to this facet of their relationship in the three-and-a-half years they had been dating. Sometimes, he felt too much responsibility because of it, like her expectations of him were higher than those of the other women he'd dated.

"Yes, yes this is Craig," Annie said, wrapping her arm around his back. Her nails dug slightly into his flesh. Craig moved his arm around her waist in return.

"Hi there," Craig said, extending his other hand for what felt like his twentieth introduction this trip. "It's awesome to finally meet you." He found himself taking in Leona's details. Until now, he had only seen her in photographs or on TV. He was struck by how freckled her chest and arms were.

Leona's hand met his with a firm grip. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Craig. Come to think of it, I think Annie has mentioned you once or twice."

"She's joking," Annie said. "I've talked about you a lot."

“Yes, but you haven’t talked to *me* a lot,” Leona said. “My sense of humor does not fly with everyone. Well, most people,” she quickly added. She gathered her long hair and tied it back with a stretchy gold band that was on her wrist.

Annie released a laugh in a couple short, awkward bursts.

“I don’t want to hold you two up from getting to whatever plans you have,” Leona said.

“No plans here,” Craig said. “I know Annie’s meeting Lou for lunch later, though.”

“Oh that reminds me,” Leona said. “I just sold that empty lot next to Carl Opelman’s house, Annie. A nice couple from Minnesota bought it. Would you believe it?” Craig remembered Annie mentioning Leona’s recent foray into real estate.

“Nice,” Annie said, painfully unenthusiastic. The more Craig looked at Annie, the more he realized how scared she looked. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake all of this bizarre moodiness out of her. Any sympathy he may have had for her peculiar behavior was quickly waning.

“Well,” Leona said brightly, glazing right over Annie’s weirdness. “If you two don’t have anything going on tonight, you should come by my party. Bring whoever.” She turned to Craig, and in a bored voice added, “Unfortunately, there aren’t too many folks here I don’t know.”

“We’ll be there,” he said, looking at Annie for agreement.

“I’ve got a dress fitting, so we’ll see how late I get back,” Annie answered. “What are you celebrating?”

“Nothing in particular,” Leona said. “Do I have to have something to celebrate?”

Craig and Annie watched her plod across the lawn before she hung left and disappeared down the sidewalk.

“Well, now you’ve met her,” Annie said, heading back to the house. Inside, she chucked the wad of paper towels into the trash.

“We should go to her party, Annie,” Craig said.

“It’s going to be a bunch of her drunken, schmoozy real estate buddies and random Mayfairians who still relish Leona’s film heyday – really not too exciting,” Annie protested.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Craig said, using Annie’s favorite line on her.

“Hmm. Sure.” Annie swiped some crumbs off the counter with her bare hand.

Craig watched them fall to the tile. He noticed for the first time clumps of dust scattered about the floor. It was an incomprehensible sight to him. His mother would never let their apartment accumulate such signs of negligence, such obvious evidence of a lack of care. It helped that his parents hardly kept food in the kitchen. Even when he was younger, they’d eat most meals out or do take-out and eat in the enclosed balcony.

“What are you thinking of doing today while I’m off at the dress fitting?” Annie asked him. She came up to him and put her palms against his chest.

Craig still thought about the crumbs she just brushed to the floor. “I don’t know. I have to make some phone calls for Leslie before I do anything else,” he answered, looking straight at Annie’s nose.

He’d had a long conversation with his boss the night before, and she had requested that he sort out some of the upcoming travel arrangements for the Toronto International Film Festival with the company’s CFO. Leslie had hinted that he would be

joining the group going to TIFF, but he felt that this was something he shouldn't mention to Annie at the moment.

“More phone calls? Kevin said you were on the phone until really late last night.”

“Leslie just wants me to clear some things up for Toronto,” Craig said. “Money things. Press junket things. Lots of *things*.” He had taken on the habit of speaking in vague half-truths when it came to anything work related. His mind traveled to that evening at the bar, when Leslie had sidled up to him. The promotion to sound assistant came just two days later.

“You should check out the beach when you're done,” Annie said, patting his chest.

“Okay. I will,” Craig said. He peeked out the window over the sink, noticing the big, gray cumulonimbus encroaching towards the house.

“That will pass,” Annie said, noticing his wary expression.

“I hope so,” Craig said.

20

With a loud pop, a fat raindrop hit the umbrella covering Annie and Lou's street-side table. Annie scooted her chair back for a moment, and looked up at the sky. Like a time-lapse video, a smear of grayness overtook the intense sunlight and the heavens opened up. That was how the rain here worked – first a drop or two and then a few seconds later, the deluge.

Annie and Lou were shrouded in an ochre glow created by the meager sunlight filtering in through the bright yellow umbrella. It made Lou's hair a wild shade of orange.

Lou pushed the crab cakes from the edge of table, so they wouldn't get sopping wet. "It better not do this on my wedding day," she said, pointing a finger skywards.

"So it's all outdoors?" Annie asked. She pictured herself dripping in the eggplant-colored monstrosity that was her bridesmaid dress. She hoped the actual gown would turn out better than the rough sketch Lou had shown her back at her apartment.

It had come as a surprise to Annie that even Lou was living up to the cliché of choosing horrendous bridesmaid gowns. She had anticipated Lou choosing something funky, maybe even something utterly untraditional, like pantsuits – not a selection from the life-size doll outfit category. There must have been something psychological at play – there always was – the subconscious bridal fear of being usurped by her bridesmaids. It was obvious and it was understandable, Annie knew, but she thought all along that Lou would be immune to that petty trend.

"Yes ma'am. All outdoors," Lou said. "Why? You think that's a horrible idea. I can tell."

"I didn't say that. Stop putting words in my mouth."

"I know what you're thinking. June. Florida. Hurricane season."

That, and the oppressive heat, Annie thought. She swiped her index finger across her hairline, picking up an inordinate amount of sweat. It was collecting above her lips, too, adding unwanted saltiness to each bite of crab cake she took.

"It will be a perfect day, I'm sure," Annie said.

"Nice try," Lou said. "I'm not convinced, hon." She proceeded to rattle off a list of everything that was wrong with deciding to have an outdoor affair. Annie just listened while the waiter brought over the huge salads they ordered.

“My dad fronted the whole venue cost. I’m feeling so guilty - do you know how friggin’ expensive the country club is? It’s ridiculous. Tom’s parents took care of everything else.”

“That’s nice of them,” Annie said. Tom’s parents lived down in Miami, and his father was a partner in a big personal injury law firm – the kind of attorney whose face was all over television commercials and billboards around the Miami metro area.

“Alright,” Lou said, shoveling some romaine lettuce in her mouth. She chewed and swallowed, then cocked her head to the side and considered. “I’m getting annoying with all this wedding talk, I know.”

“No. Again, you’re putting words in my mouth,” Annie protested. “You have every right to have wedding-brain, Lou. I’d be the same way in your position, I mean if I was getting married in three days...” She trailed off. She had the feeling they both knew that all her protesting was more out of not wanting to talk about herself.

“How’s Leona and everything?” Lou blurted. “You know that’s what I’ve been wanting to find out. Let’s stop with all this avoidance bullshit.”

Annie sighed, and drew one leg up in her metal chair. She rested her chin on her knee, thinking that if her mother were there, she’d make some comment about how inappropriate it was to sit like that in public, let alone in the dining room of their house.

“I saw her this morning very briefly,” she confessed. “It was super uncomfortable - probably more for me than for her, to be honest. And then she invited Craig and me to one of those parties of hers that she’s throwing later.”

“Oof. One of those,” Lou said. “I haven’t been by her place in a while.”

“Craig wants to go,” Annie said. “I tried telling him what it was going to be like, but I didn’t realize how much of a Leona fan-boy he is until this trip. It’s beginning to bother me.”

“Yeah, I kind of gathered that he has a bit of an obsession with her. You tried telling him that a Leona Haven party is, like, a Gatsby fête on steroids, right?” Lou asked.

“Put it like that, and I wouldn’t blame him for wanting to check it out,” Annie said.

“Good point,” said Lou. “And your mother? How’d she handle the Leona visit?”

“She didn’t. I don’t know where she went off to, but she wasn’t home.” She left out the part of discovering her mother running before the crack of dawn. After that encounter, it hadn’t much surprised her that her mother wasn’t home during the Leona visit. “It was so early when she stopped by, it was like Leona was making sure that she wouldn’t run in to anyone. Anyways, as far as I know, they’re at least on speaking terms.”

“That’s good.”

“Is it? Did you forget about the salad incident?” Annie asked, referencing that time she came home for Thanksgiving two years ago and found Leona and her mother in the kitchen wordlessly tearing wedges of iceberg lettuce and chucking the pieces at each other.

When Leona pulled out the giant carton of cherry tomatoes as her next set of ammo, Annie stepped in. Everyone in attendance that day had laughed off the incident, brushing it off as another comical moment in the notoriously tumultuous relationship her mother and Leona had. But Annie found it sad, the nasty childishness of their

relationship, and the backbone of jealousy –on both of their parts – that drove them to acting the way they did.

“Oh, yeah, the salad incident.” Lou snorted. “That was intense.”

Annie pushed her own salad away, suddenly faced with a loss of appetite.

“They both said they’re coming to the wedding,” Lou said. “That should be interesting.” She dipped her fork in the side of raspberry vinaigrette she and Annie were sharing, and then licked the dressing off.

“So you had mentioned,” Annie said.

“I couldn’t not invite either of them,” Lou said. “They both watched me - by virtue of being your amiga, and all – grow up.”

“Eh, that’s arguable,” Annie said, laughing.

“Shut up,” Lou said, tearing a piece of breadstick from the basket in the center of the table and flinging it at Annie.

21

By the time they had finished their lunch the rain had stopped. They got in Lou’s old Pontiac convertible and headed for Love and Lace, the one and only bridal store on Mayfair Island, and Lou’s place of choice for procuring the wedding party’s get-ups.

Annie tried holding back her opinion on the horridness of establishment’s name. It sounded instead like a cheap lingerie store, a place with those creepy wig-wearing mannequins in satin bustiers in the window.

Her assessment was partially true, she realized, when they pulled in to the parking lot of the tiny shopping center it was located in. It was sandwiched between a bead store and a candy shop boasting barrels of salt-water taffy outside its entrance. Love and

Lace's window had those creepy mannequins, but instead of lingerie they were wearing Cinderella's post-princess wardrobe. Any moment now, Annie expected ol' Cin's bird friends to come swooping in, holding a satin sash in their beaks.

"Don't worry," Lou said, reading the alarm on Annie's face. "You're not wearing any of those."

"I'm not worried, Lou. I saw the sketch, earlier."

Lou shrugged and pushed open the door. A small bell was affixed to the handle with a piece of ribbon. The tinny ring announced their entrance.

"Welcome, ladies," said a woman crouched down next to a folding table at the back corner of the room. She was rifling through a big cardboard box on the floor. "I'll be right with you," she added, not looking up.

"Thanks," Lou said. She had made her way over to a rack of dresses, each encased in its own plastic garment bag. She flipped through the dozen or so dresses with great vigor.

"I thought you have everything picked out," Annie said from the spot she took on a plush velvet ottoman in the center of the room. "What are you looking for?"

"I just want to see what else is here," Lou murmured. "What other people are going to wear. There's a hell of a lot of gowns here for such a small store."

The saleswoman – it appeared she was the only one working the floor on this day – finally finished going through whatever mysteries were contained within the box, and joined Lou at the rack. "Yes," she said, placing her tiny hand on Lou's shoulder. "June is of course our craziest month here. We have fifteen customers getting married on the island this month, would you believe it?"

Lou's brows were knit into a deep 'v' as she held out a heavily bedazzled number and examined it closely. She scowled, rubbing the beaded bodice with her thumb and forefinger through the plastic.

Annie could see that the dress was slipping off its hanger. She watched from the ottoman, amused, as the saleswoman clasped and unclasped her fingers, looking ready to pry the dress from Lou's hands.

"I just ask that you look at these a little more gently," the woman urged. "A lot of these dresses are custom designs our owner Katherine created for our brides that are waiting to be fitted." She leaned her head back and forth, then rubbed her neck as if she had a crick in it.

Lou pursed her lips. "Customs," she said. "I was tempted, but I just picked a classic design out of your partner manufacturer's catalogue." In an instant, there was a shift in her voice. Her words were no longer laced with bridal intensity. Instead, it was as if she realized the futility of all this nuptial hoopla she had been creating.

"Lou," Annie said, standing up, sensing for the first time that she should rise to the occasion of her maid of honor status.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," the saleswoman said, stepping in first. "In fact, that's what most of our brides do. It's certainly the cheaper option." She grabbed one end of the rolling rack and started pulling it towards the table in the back. "Your dress must be in here somewhere. Remind me of your last name and I'll go find the invoice slip. Then we can start the fitting."

Lou released her grip from the other side of the rack and nodded. "Opelman," she said. "Soon-to-be Kingsburg."

“Louise,” the woman said, pointing a finger at Lou in recognition. “Right, Katherine mentioned you’d be coming in today. No one else in your party is coming today?”

“Maid of honor here,” Annie said, waving both hands.

“My brother – a groomsman – is coming along with our cousin. She’s a bridesmaid,” Lou said. “And my other bridesmaid, Francesca, should be here any minute now.” Lou looked up at the pink clock tacked up on the wall across the room.

“What?” Annie said. She had no prior knowledge of Jake – or any of the others – joining in on the fitting. Lou had to have sensed how painful the exchanges between her and Jake were at the apartment yesterday, so why would she want to have a replay of that? Plus, it sounded horrible, but she might have taken better advantage of their lunch outing if she knew that was the only one on one time they’d be having.

Instead, she realized, she had spent the whole time complaining about her family and Craig. She felt embarrassed, thinking back on the lunch. How Lou had put up with listening to all of her trivial quibbles was beyond her comprehension. When had she gotten to be this way? It was one thing to be a downer, but to be hyper-aware of it was just unbearable. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to crawl out of her own skin.

“It’s craziness, with everyone coming in on different days,” Lou continued to the saleswoman. “We’re just missing our best man and another groomsman. They should hopefully get here by tomorrow afternoon.”

Those spots, Lou had told Annie, were being filled by Chad and Jenson, Tom’s college buddies who had yet to graduate from their frat boy lifestyle. They were both

MBA students at the University of Michigan, living in a dumpy rental near the campus and, according to Lou, still throwing parties every weekend that attracted mostly drunken, wandering undergrads.

“Alright, I’ll be right back and then we’ll get you set up,” the woman said.

“Thanks,” Lou said. She collapsed onto the ottoman Annie had been occupying. Even with a dour frown she looked beautiful, with a rosy glow on her cheeks and a few curls falling out of the loose pile atop her head.

Annie took a seat on the couch behind Lou. She knocked her knees together in a trance of repetition until Lou placed a hand on her leg.

“Stop fidgeting,” Lou said. “I know what you’re thinking, and I spoke to Jake yesterday after you left. So, he’ll hopefully be less of an ass today.”

“Oh, I have no doubt,” Annie said. Craig wasn’t here, and she was no fool – he was the piece of the equation that resulted in Jake’s less-than-cordial behavior. At some point this trip, the dreaded moment would come when she and Jake would have to have a conversation that went beyond stupid, empty small talk.

And maybe it wasn’t as dreaded a moment as she was making it out to be.

There was a small part of her that looked forward to it, that wanted to get any tension out in the open. Visions of a scenario like that had occupied her thoughts in the days leading up to her flight to Florida, a continuous loop of things she might say to Jake when she got the chance playing in her head. There was just so much to say.

She had allowed herself to get excited about the prospect of finally having that discussion with Jake, had even found herself one evening packing her bag for the trip

with him in mind. Craig was working late, helping his boss Leslie with something for the animated feature the company had took on.

Annie had been going through her closet, trying to find something to wear to the reception, when she saw the burgundy dress she had bought on impulse while perusing a small boutique on a random lunch break. It was the kind of dress that hugged her body in all the right places, a rare find considering she inherited her mother's wide hips. She had yet to find the courage to wear it out. As she placed the dress in a garment bag and tucked it into the suitcase, she had been acutely aware that it was Jake she had in mind in the moment, and not Craig.

22

The sound of the bell announced another arrival at Love and Lace.

Annie looked over to the door, and saw Francesca Schneiderman standing in her usual sky-high heels. Francesca and Lou had become friends in high school. They were in the same year, and both participated in gymnastics club.

Francesca offered Lou everything she couldn't in their friendship. Lou had once said she had befriended Francesca "just for the fun of it," a description that, at the time, made Annie uncomfortable. Now, she understood it. Francesca had been the one who would go to all the parties and what-have-you with Lou that Annie wouldn't. Annie was the one with whom Lou could have a meaningful conversation.

Now Francesca worked as a receptionist at Aileen's dental practice. Although she would never admit it aloud, Annie found this a little uncomfortable.

"Hello, Francesca," Annie said. She stood as Francesca waggled her way over.

"Annie!" She gave Annie a fierce hug. "It's been way too long."

“I know,” Annie said, pulling away. She put on her biggest smile, feeling her mouth quivering. “How are you doing?”

“All is great, Annie. All is great.” She pulled up her tight, grey-hued jeans by the waistband. “I can’t believe how wonderful you’re looking. I’m so jealous of you right now.” Francesca mimicked an hourglass shape with her hands as she said this, a nod, Annie guessed, to her figure.

Annie appreciated this quality in Francesca. Even if they were empty, conversational filler – she couldn’t quite figure out when Francesca was being genuine – she had the tendency to shower whomever she was speaking to with generous compliments. For the first couple minutes of any extended exchange she’d had with Francesca, she had been wrapped in the warm confidence that the compliments had elicited. But, just as soon, the conversations would get insufferable, with Francesca prattling on in a self-centered monologue every time.

“Thanks. You are looking lovely yourself,” Annie said, always feeling the need to reciprocate Francesca’s kind words. Maybe that was where Francesca got her overabundance of confidence, with her friends all feeling obliged to extend the same level of flattery back to her.

“Oh please,” Francesca said, flapping her hand down. “Your mom gave me a discount on veneers for my front teeth. See?” She chomped down a couple times as her face encroached on Annie’s personal space. “They were still expensive as hell, though.”

“Wow,” Annie said. “They just brighten your whole face.” The horse-like chompers Francesca was now sporting gave off an unnatural gleam beneath the store’s fluorescent lighting.

Francesca had moved on, though, now twirling around in the middle of the room while sporting a ridiculous tiara she had pulled from a shelf display.

Annie moved back to her place on the couch, happy to wallflower it up again. More than once, Lou had called her out on contorting her face into an open book of judgment when they were with Francesca. She concentrated on keeping her expression neutral, though all this focus on her facial muscles was causing her to pull her mouth into an involuntary duck face. She couldn't stop.

Just then, the door swung open again. This time, the bell flung off the door handle and fell to the carpet with a stifled little jingle. Judy barreled into the store, followed by a sheepish-looking Jake.

“Hi again, Miss Annie,” Judy said, first laying eyes on her. Lou and Francesca were at the back corner of the store, trying to peek through the open door of the storeroom to see what was taking the saleslady so long. “What are you doing over here, vogueing on the couch?” She tried to mimic Annie's expression.

Annie opened her mouth and stretched her jaw. She laughed. “Just practicing for the wedding photos,” she said.

“You might want to work on that a little more,” Judy said.

Annie nodded. “I think you're right.”

Judy looked over to Francesca and Lou, who were giggling like gossipy pre-teens. “What are you girls up to?” she asked. “Up to no good, I tell you,” she said, turning to Annie. She laughed and walked over to join them.

Annie wondered how Judy projected that kind of lighthearted enthusiasm all the time. It had to be an act. People that overtly ‘happy’ either had thousands of superficial

relationships in their lives and no true connection with any single person, or they were compensating for some inner torment. She suspected Judy fell into the former category.

Annie then felt the couch cushion next to her sink down. She could smell the strong, pleasant mixture of cinnamon gum and some body wash with the word spring or waterfall in its name.

Jake cleared his throat. “So, I’m sorry. I thought I should say that before anything else.”

Annie considered his apology for a moment. “Okay. Thanks for that,” she said, her tone even, ignoring the small spark of thrill she felt from toying with him.

“I don’t know what came over me yesterday,” Jake said.

Yes you do, Annie thought. She turned to really look at him. His hair was still shower damp, deep amber and matted down. She wanted to reach up and muss it a little.

A squeal from across the room caught both of their attention. Francesca clapped her hands as the saleswoman carted out a rack with the bridesmaid dresses and Jake’s tux.

“Where’s Tom?” Jake asked Annie. He looked too happy for the break in their conversation.

“He’s coming back here with his groomsmen tomorrow,” Annie said. It was clear that banality was his go-to outlet when talking to her now. She couldn’t exactly blame him for that. It wasn’t as if she made it easy. But, why couldn’t she just call him out on it? She stood up and walked over to the rack, leaving Jake behind.

Jake felt ridiculous standing in front of the three-way mirror next to Annie. He had never been comfortable in formalwear of any kind. Whenever he put on dress

clothes, he felt like he reverted back to his awkward middle-school self, more set to linger on the fringes of a parquet dance-floor than to assume adult responsibilities.

“So handsome, my brother,” Lou cooed, coming up to him and lightly pinching his cheek. He swatted her hand away, then looked behind him at the too-long tails of his tuxedo.

“This thing is ridiculously big, Lou,” he said, letting his arms fall slack at his sides. The jacket fabric bunched under his armpits. “I gave you my measurements. Why is this made for a linebacker?”

“We can take it in,” said the eager saleslady, rushing up to lay a tape measure across his ass. “Louise,” she said, twisting her neck up to face Lou. “Our owner just arrived. She’ll take you in the other consultation room to go over your second fitting.”

Francesca, who had been standing behind Jake and Annie, looking at herself from all angles in the little open space of mirror between them, expelled another excited shriek. She jumped up with surprising prowess in her high silver heels. Her bridesmaid dress rode up a bit, and Jake caught the smeared orange of an artificial tan line against the pale flesh of her upper left thigh.

“Oh yes! I’m so coming with,” she said, grabbing Lou’s hand. “Judy?”

Judy occupied the lone chair in the fitting area, flipping through an old copy of the *Mayfair Gazette*. She had the right idea, Jake thought.

“Judy, you coming to see our girl Lou in her gown?”

“Of course,” Judy said, climbing around the chair. It took up a large part of the tiny fitting area. She tossed the newspaper she was reading down on a nearby coffee table.

“We’ll deal with all this in a moment,” the saleswoman said, done with taking measurements of Jake’s pants. She stood up from her kneeling position, and made a whirlwind hand gesture as she eyed Annie’s dress up and down. “Yes,” she agreed with herself, “Lots to deal with.” She pivoted on one heel to face Lou. “Now, I can show you three ladies to the consultation room if you’d like to follow me.”

Francesca and Judy trailed behind Lou in a funny display of ascending height. Though the two bridesmaids were wearing the same dress, it looked immensely different on them. Somehow, Francesca had managed to make the bland mauve cocktail dress look risqué. On Judy, it looked identical to how it appeared in its bag on the rack, flat and shapeless.

A sharp quiet presented itself as soon as they had all filtered out the door.

Next to Jake, Annie shifted and rustled in her gown. He watched her as she tried smoothing the top, which was made of an ugly rippled shiny material. Her gown was pretty much a longer, more elaborate version of Francesca and Judy’s dresses. The same satiny-looking fabric formed the bottom of the gown, but it fell in long undulating folds. Something had gone awry in the measurements of her dress, too, perhaps an even more drastic overestimation than had gone into his tux.

Annie gave him a half smirk, still staring straight ahead into the mirror.

“Does this mean we can go?” she asked. “Please tell me it does.” She stepped down from the small, three-inch platform upon which they were standing.

“No,” Jake said. He imitated the flailing hands of the saleslady. “This needs to be dealt with. Lots. To. Deal. With.”

Annie began to double over with laughter, clutching her stomach. She hobbled over in her laughter fit to the chair in the corner of the room, her dress dragging along the carpet behind her. “I forgot how spot on your impressions are,” she said. Her big, deep brown eyes – in some light they were so dark, Jake thought they were black – held his gaze. Her closed smile challenged him.

Jake looked away. He heard her let out an irritated sigh, which only made him tilt his head down further to the carpet.

“Jake, can we grab dinner tonight?” he heard her blurt out. He pulled his head back up and was met with that same hard gaze.

Jake had always felt like Annie could see *more* than everyone else, like she was privy to a whole other layer of perception that everyone else couldn’t discern – a synesthetic kind of phenomenon, but not quite. He’d read about the people who could see sounds, who associated certain letters with certain colors. That had always fascinated him. Whatever Annie had probably wasn’t that, though. It was something exclusive to her. He wanted to ask her what she saw now.

“We need to sit down and talk at some point,” she said, more assured this time.

“You’ve just decided this now?” he asked, feeling some of the hurt he had been trying to tamp down for all these years start to surface. It rose in flames inside of him, first tickling and then burning his chest cavity.

“No.” Annie bit her lip. “I know we haven’t sat down and had a real conversation in a while now.” Her voice faded on the last couple words.

“Try four-and-a-half years, Annie,” he said, watching her face blanch against his own words.

“That’s why I want to talk tonight. There have been too many distractions otherwise.”

Jake pulled off his tux jacket, burning up all of a sudden. He flung it on the coffee table near Annie’s legs.

All of the excess material of the dress’s skirt ballooned around her. She appeared to be drowning in the muddy purple fabric, sunken back in the chair and still looking at him with those wide eyes of hers. Except now the hardness was gone, replaced with a hangdog sadness.

“You never answered a single one of my phone calls,” Jake continued, on a roll now. “And, supposedly, you had been back to Mayfair. Though, I didn’t have any visual proof of that. How did you pull that off? Never leave your house? Slink around like a ghost?” He had started pacing around the room at this point, his new oxfords sliding around on the carpet. He thought the pacing would help him keep up the momentum, give him the necessary will to get out everything he’d been meaning to tell Annie. Why should he have to wait for a quiet dinner with her? Besides, he wasn’t too sure he’d be able to handle an evening alone with her.

“I only came back on my school breaks. I haven’t been back here in almost a year since I started working,” she said. “Geez, stop painting me as the villain here.” It sounded like she really was drowning in her dress, as her words floated back to him muffled and reserved.

Of course, the saleswoman took the opportunity to come back in the room as Jake skated past a bare mannequin, with what he was sure was a crazed look on his face. The mannequin rocked in his wake.

“Is everything alright in here?” the woman asked, looking at Jake’s jacket in its crumpled heap on the table.

Jake nodded and breathed out of his nose. He slumped his shoulders down, aware that the saleswoman’s presence marked an end to his and Annie’s conversation.

“Sir, you can change out of the tuxedo. I took all of your measurements.” She looked down at his backside.

“Oh, okay then,” Jake said. He went to pick up the jacket.

“Just hang the garments up in the changing area and I’ll come get them,” the woman told him. He felt her watch him as he ducked behind the changing room curtain.

“Now for you,” he heard her say to Annie. “Let’s get you back in front of the mirror. I can’t even begin to say what happened here.”

Jake heard the rustle of Annie getting out of the chair, then the sound of her plodding up to the hollow platform in front of the mirror. He started to unbutton his crisp dress-shirt as Annie started to argue with the woman about taking in the excess fabric at her back.

“Look, I don’t want to suffocate. Can we leave a little more room than that?” He heard Annie’s voice rise in dramatic puffiness. He laughed quietly.

“I can assure you that you’re not going to suffocate,” came the saleslady’s sharp retort. Then, “Excuse me, ma’am, what are you doing?”

Jake heard a horrible screech of metal rings against metal rod, and the curtain to the dressing room blew back.

“We weren’t done talking.” Annie stood in front of Jake with her hand on her hip.

“What the hell?” Jake spat. He had his shirt off and the top button of his dress pants undone. He caught the saleslady peeking over Annie’s shoulder. He reached for his t-shirt and pulled it over his head.

Annie rolled her eyes. “So, dinner tonight?”

“I can’t, Annie,” he said to her. He knew he was going to get an earful with the excuse he had in line.

“Why?” she asked him with the testing tone of someone innately distrustful of everyone.

“I’m actually going to Leona’s house for a party she’s throwing,” he said, then added, “I feel obligated to show up.”

“How did you...” Annie wondered aloud. “Wait.” She pointed a finger upwards in an aha moment. “Let me guess - you did work on her house.” There was no shortage of condescension in her voice. He’d heard enough misgivings over this recent gig of his from Lou and certainly didn’t need it from Annie.

“So what’s up with this little handyman business of yours?” she asked. “First I find out you’ve helped my dad with the general store, now Leona. What, did her Jacuzzi break?”

“No, I’m not sure I’d be able to help her with that,” he answered, deadpan. “I feel like I’m making up for all the time I spent holed up in my room as a kid. It doesn’t have to be a permanent thing. Right now I’m just enjoying it. I’m getting to know so many people on the island a lot better, too.”

Behind them, the saleswoman hovered over the coffee table, rearranging and straightening the newspapers.

“I’m not knocking it,” Annie said. She stood with her hands on her hips, gripping the bunched up fabric of her dress.

“This is you not knocking it?” he asked. He knew Annie’s relationship with her aunt was complicated.

“I just wanted to get an idea of how someone goes from attending a top art school to becoming Mayfair’s resident handyman,” she said.

“Now that would be a good slogan if I need one. Mayfair’s Resident Handyman.” Jake fanned his hand in an arc in front of his face, pretending to see the words written right in front of him. “Not too clever. But, simple - effective.” He took a few steps out of the dressing room and looked Annie square in the eye.

“I’m serious Jake,” she said, stepping back. “Lou told me you got that gallery job in New York.” She looked down at her fingernails and examined them to avoid his intense gaze. “I walked by it on more than one occasion. Okay, more than just walked by. I think I got to know the collection better than some of those gallery workers.”

“Why would you go there?” Jake asked.

Until now, he and Annie had not spoken since the day she had left for school. In a warped version of telephone, Lou took on the duty of filling both of them in on what the other was up to. The damage he had done to his and Annie’s relationship had felt irreparable, and more than once he had found himself clutching his phone, with his thumb in static hover over her name in his address book. It had never gone any further than that.

Jake knew it was messed up, all this childish avoidance; but any time Lou had dangled a bit of Annie news in front of him, he’d jump at the bait. It was how he had found out about her moving in with Craig, about her taking the job at Great Frame

Pictures. With each nugget of information Lou fed him, there would be a warm swell of anticipation, followed by the icy shock of knowing that Annie was in fact on her way to realizing this grandiose dream of hers that had somehow, along the way, seemed to transform into a vision of corporate success.

“Why? Because the gallery’s a short walk from where I work – fifteen minutes tops. I’m usually on my own for lunch breaks.” Annie’s lips fluttered as she spoke at rapid speed, and Jake became fixated by them. “Because I thought – it’s stupid I know – I thought that maybe one day I’d walk in and there you’d be.”

“Oh,” Jake said. Her sudden barefaced honesty caught him off guard. It was one of those rare times that she spoke to him without that maddening barrier of sarcasm or feigned apathy, defense mechanisms he could see through so clearly.

He placed a hand on Annie’s bare shoulder, and then let his thumb stroke her smooth skin in the slightest of movements, fully expecting her to recoil from his touch. “Unlike you, Annie, I always knew I’d return to Mayfair,” he said. He watched Annie glance down at his hand before returning his stare. She bit her bottom lip.

The saleswoman still messed with the newspapers behind them. Annie gave her a ‘one second’ gesture, while Jake still had his hand resting on her shoulder.

“I think I have enough to work with,” the woman said to Annie. Her smile oozed passive-aggression. She began to head out of the room. “Just leave the dress on the hook next to your friend’s tux.” In her grand departure, she slammed the door behind her.

The room felt stuffier by the second, and standing here in front of Annie, Jake’s thoughts upwelled into fast-moving currents in his mind. Driving them was the

acknowledgment that he needed to address what happened that night before Annie left for New York – something that was more than four years overdo.

“Annie, I know I went about it in the wrong way that night,” he said to her. He watched her tuck in her chin and fix her eyes on the coral colored carpet.

“Please, Jake. Not here. You don’t want to talk about this here,” she said, speaking to the floor.

“I want to talk about it,” he said. “I don’t much care where. It has to be said.” He could hear the murmurs of Lou, Francesca, and Judy coming back down the hall.

“I agree,” Annie said to him through gritted teeth. She glanced at the door. “That’s why I wanted to get dinner, or something.” Her voice cracked a bit. She looked up again. “It feels, I don’t know, messed up.” She threw her hands up in the air just as Lou and the gang began to filter into the room.

It was then that Jake realized his cruel mistake. He looked up at the words *Here Comes the Bride* stenciled on the wall across from him. Cheap-looking floral arrangements were scattered about the room, spilling their fake, technicolor paper flowers all over the place. Here they were, surrounded by this wedding bliss – however artificial and painfully trite all of it was – and he wanted to rehash the moment he unintentionally broke Annie’s heart. His ineptitude was endless.

“Everything okay?” Lou asked, her voice laced with suspicion. She looked from Annie to him, and then back to Annie again. “Why are you both still in your wedding gear?”

“We’re good,” Annie answered. She punctuated each word as if trying to convince herself there was some truth to her words. “I was just about to change.” She

hiked up the bottom of her dress so that it didn't drag on the floor and went to the dressing room.

Jake's jeans came flying over the top of the curtain and he caught them just before they hit the floor. Francesca let out a sharp catcall whistle in an attempt to make the maneuver look suggestive.

Jake could almost see Annie's eye roll from behind the curtain, but he flashed a smile at Francesca before shouting, "Thanks Annie."

Lou squinted one eye, staring at him in disapproval. She looked like she wanted to chew him out again like she did the day before at her apartment, but only said, "Well, we're all set. So meet us out front."

The door shut hard behind them again. Jake changed back into his jeans as Annie still occupied the dressing room. "Okay," he spoke to her through the curtain. "We'll do dinner. Tomorrow night. Your boyfriend will be okay with that?"

"It's just dinner," he heard her say. She flung the curtain open, back in the shorts, t-shirt, and flip-flops she came in wearing. She shook her hair out of the tie that had held it back in a tight ponytail, and let it fall in smooth waves around her face.

Jake nodded. "Okay. It's just dinner."

But, looking at her now, he knew it wouldn't be that simple.

Annie sat at a small wiry table set up at the edge of Leona's pool, trying to forget the small series of events that had led to her being here. Perching on the edge of her seat, she stirred the margarita Craig had just placed in front of her and drew the glass to her

lips. The drink burned as it went down her throat; it had Leona's signature all over it – more tequila than anything else.

“Oh. I can't even,” Annie said, wincing while the overwhelming bitterness filled her mouth. With the back of her hand, she swiped off some big salt crystals that had stuck to her lips. It had been her experience that somehow she would skip over the initial alcohol-induced warm fuzzies most people get and go straight into a state of deep introspection and bitterness. Now she feared what even a few sips of this battery acid concoction might do to her in this already high-tension state she was in.

“Let me try it,” Craig said, scooting his chair back with a loud screech. He walked over to her side. The light was dimming, and behind him, Annie could see a thin line of pink stretch just above the horizon. The moon hung faint, like a ghost print, against the smooth spectrum of sky.

When they had arrived at the house just ten minutes ago, the front door had been left wide open. Granted, Leona lived in one of the more extravagant communities of Mayfair, where each house had its own private gate at the foot of its driveway. Leona's house was located at the end of a curvy road aptly named Conch Shell Drive. It resembled a Mediterranean villa, with an all white stone facade and roof tiles made of deep red clay. Her driveway was lined with tall trees covered in years of Spanish moss growth that hung from the branches like silky drapes. In broad daylight, from the front of the house, you could see the tips of the tall royal palms that stretched skyward in her backyard.

On normal days, an eight-foot-high gated wrought-iron fence blocked off Haven's Heaven from the rest of the community. The fancy community Leona lived in forced all

the homeowners to come up with a snazzy name for their houses, and then gave them personalized signs to put out by the entrances. It had always struck Annie as funny – the big menacing gate and the choice of name for her not-so-humble abode.

But, on days like this – the handful of days of the year when she threw her infamous parties – Leona would open up gates, doors, windows – whatever apparatus shut her off from the rest of the world at any other time.

Annie and Craig had followed a stream of people inside to Leona’s lavish foyer, where everyone kicked off their shoes into a ridiculous pile before traipsing off onto the plush butter-colored carpet that lined the living room. It seemed the whole island was there, milling about.

Even more people had spilled out into the backyard now, coming through the living room’s wide-open French doors. The party-goers all looked costume-clad to Annie, their bodies glistening under the yellow glow of the obligatory tiki torches that were sprinkled around the edge of the pool and staked all throughout the expansive yard.

By now, there had been a tacit establishment of the Leona Haven party dress code. Dozens of Leona clones thronged around Annie, sporting an array of long patterned maxi dresses. With each step they took, their bright manicured toes peeked out from the edges of the flowing fabric. The men’s attire consisted largely of expensive-looking guayabera shirts and linen pants not unlike the pair Craig had been wearing when they landed in Mayfair.

25

When they had left for Leona’s earlier that evening, Aileen had given them a resigned and skeptical “Have fun” from her place on the couch, where she was zooming

through some program she had recorded on child beauty pageants. She hadn't taken her eyes off of the glowing screen in front of her. Her mother had looked like a little girl, wrapped cocoon-like in the old chenille blanket that had been draped over the backside of the couch ever since Annie could remember.

As Craig took her hand and began to whisk her out the front door, Annie had needed to suppress the strange impulse that came over her to go and curl up next to her mother. She had felt herself pause at the door, watching Aileen shift and rewrap the blanket more snugly around her body. Only when her father, who occupied his usual spot on the leather recliner next to the couch, flicked the newspaper in his hands back into shape did Annie snap to attention and respond to Craig's unrelenting tug.

26

Annie scanned the backyard crowd for Leona, squinting her eyes as if it would help. The daylight was waning and the mosquitoes were coming out in full force. She swatted absent-mindedly at her bare arms with each slight tickle she felt.

"Have you seen my aunt around?" she shouted to Craig above the din of the music and party chatter. Her voice came out a bit too loud, and she laughed to cover up some of her embarrassment.

Craig shrugged and shook his head no. He went back to typing something on the cell phone in his hands.

"She's inside, putting out shrimp platters," a voice said from behind them.

"What are you doing here?" Annie asked, turning around to find her brother. He had a girl hanging on to his left arm, her thin fingers wrapped around his pale bicep.

“Hey man,” Craig said from behind Annie. He stuck his fist out to bump Kevin’s, but Kevin just looked down at it with his mouth stretched thin in amusement. Instead, Kevin’s arm girl met Craig’s hand with her own fist and giggled.

“We’re making a pit stop before heading to Rizzo’s house. He lives down the street,” Kevin said. “Oh, and this is Monica by the way.”

“Hi,” the girl said in a light but sultry voice. Her presence filled the air with a mix of smoke and daisies. Annie saw a cigarette tucked like a pencil behind her left ear.

“Hi,” Annie said. “Nice to meet you.”

An apron-clad member of the catering staff Leona hired came up with a tray of blue drinks. Kevin and Monica grabbed two each, then clinked glasses with each other.

“Kevin,” Annie said pointedly to her brother. He hadn’t even turned eighteen yet. His birthday was coming up in a few weeks.

Kevin widened his eyes at her before downing one of the drinks in two big gulps. He coughed and smeared the back of his hand across his mouth. “That’s absolutely disgusting,” he said.

Monica giggled again, tucking a strand of her wavy blonde hair behind the cigarette ear. She took small sips of one of her drinks, setting the other glass down on a tall round table behind them.

Kevin started on his other drink, his eyes fixed on Annie from above the rim of the glass. “Oh relax,” he said after taking a few sips. “Didn’t you have friends who would sneak into Leona’s parties for their booze fix when you were my age? Don’t deny it.”

He was right. Annie's junior year of high school, one of Leona's parties happened to coincide with the night of homecoming. It quickly turned into the after-party of choice for her entire grade.

Annie sighed, not knowing how to respond. She didn't have to, as she looked up and spotted Leona sauntering over from across the lawn. Her aunt's face lit up as she met Annie's gaze. Her pace quickened. It was apparent, even from the considerable distance between them, that Leona was already quite drunk. She moved in uneven curves, crossing one foot over the other on some steps.

"Annie!" she shouted. "Kevin!"

Backlit by the emerging moonlight, she looked wraithlike. Her dress blew eerily in the breeze.

Kevin waved to Leona, turning back to face Annie for a moment and snicker. Annie wasn't sure when their aunt's antics had stopped angering him and had become a perverse source of amusement.

It looked as if the lawn had transformed into one long treadmill; Leona walked toward them but she seemed to make minimal progress.

"You can do it," Kevin muttered.

Annie elbowed him hard in the side. "Come on," she said under her breath. She grabbed Kevin's arm and dragged him along with her to meet their aunt halfway. The crunch of footsteps behind them told her that Craig was following them.

"Hi guys," Leona said, enveloping them in one big group hug. "I'm so glad you came." She reached out to touch Kevin's shoulder, but he backed up ever so slightly. Her arm dropped, more exaggeratedly than it would have in her sober state.

“I’m glad you came,” she said, looking at Kevin. Her voice contained a sadness that made Annie uncomfortable.

“Yeah, me too,” Kevin said. He smiled.

“So glad,” Leona said. Her face brightened. “Hey, are your parents here?”

Annie shook her head no. “Afraid not.”

Leona clicked her tongue, disappointed. “Of course not.” She looked off into the distance.

“This is a great turnout,” Annie added.

“This is awesome,” Craig echoed. He bounced on his toes as if pleased with himself for finding something to say.

“Everyone’s here,” Leona said faintly, as distant as her gaze. “Excuse me,” she said, patting Craig’s arm.

Annie was becoming tired of all the trite two-word exchanges. She shifted her weight to her other foot.

Leona teetered off, stopping some ways off to talk to a tall, scruffy man with his dress pants rolled up above his ankles. They could all hear her boisterous laugh as loudly as if she was still next to them. They watched her playfully jab a finger at the man’s chest.

“She’s everything you imagined, right?” Kevin said to Craig.

“Sorry?” Craig looked shocked that Kevin had chosen to address him.

“It’s pretty clear you’re a member of the extensive Leona Haven fan-club. Has she lived up to your fantasies?” His voice filled with contempt, he said this while twirling his index finger at his temple, making the gesture of insanity.

Craig just laughed off Kevin's comment like it was a joke. But Annie knew Kevin wasn't trying to be funny.

"It's true," Craig said. "I was a fan of *Classic Beauty* even before I met your sister. But aren't a lot of people? It has such a cult following." He was referencing the late 80s sleeper-hit that starred Leona as an old calendar pin-up model, Roxanne Harding. A dorky, down-on-his-luck scientist summons Roxanne to life in the present and brings her to his high school reunion. It was a real kitsch-fest, with its neon glow aesthetic, over-the-top costuming, and relentless sexism.

Over the years, Annie had realized that most people weren't quite sure whether they should mock or have true, formal appreciation for *Classic Beauty*.

Her sophomore year Independent Film lecture professor had put the film on the class syllabus. Nobody in the class - not even the professor - knew her connection to Leona, but Annie couldn't help but keep quiet during the week that they discussed the film. The last couple classes devoted to that unit were the most uncomfortable, as they had turned into rather cruel analyses of the dissolution of Leona's career. "It's so sad," one of her classmates had concluded. "To have *Classic Beauty* be your one and only career definer."

Annie could still remember her professor's haughty chuckle at the student's comment. "You don't consider a stint on *Celebrity Dance-Off* an honorable follow-up?" was the woman's response. Annie fled to the bathroom when the class had erupted into laughter, where she had proceeded to mutter affirmations to herself in front of the mirror that she had made the right decision about moving to New York.

Annie's chest felt heavy with this memory and the realization that now, almost

three years since then, it was looking like maybe those silly affirmations she had watched her mirrored self whisper weren't holding up.

It was too much, looking at her aunt press herself up against this young bearded man in front of them, wobbling too close to the pool's edge.

"I can be your gir-ir-irl," Monica said all of a sudden in a singsong voice, startling Annie. The line she was quoting was one of the little musical numbers in *Classic Beauty*. The girl's light, raspy rendition floated out creepily and sat there in the humid air.

"Please don't," Kevin said, stepping between Monica and Annie. Monica shut up at the sharpness of his tone. Craig let out another nervous laugh. After the few beats of silence that followed, Kevin added, "We should walk over to Rizzo's." Monica nodded and locked hands with him.

Kevin looked as uncomfortable as Annie felt, though she had always kept her emotions concealed better than her brother. He was the open book of the family.

Monica scratched at her head before walking off with Kevin. She lifted her arm in a small wave goodbye. Next to Kevin's brisk stride, she looked like she was stepping on glass as they crossed the lush lawn.

When Annie turned her attention away from her brother's disappearing silhouette, she noticed her aunt was no longer in sight. Another familiar face had taken her place by the pool's edge. All traces of sunlight had now disappeared, and Jake's sturdy frame was illuminated by the undulations of pool light. Annie watched him mouth something to her. The music, some instrumental heavy with horns played by a live band, had swelled to ear-deafening levels and she could not make out what he said.

She cocked her head to the side to let him know she didn't understand.

Jake started to walk over to the tall table around which she and Craig now stood. Craig, Annie noticed, kicked idly at the folds of the long tablecloth. She rested her hand atop his.

“Hey,” Jake said. He sounded winded even though he’d taken just a few steps.

“Good evening, Jake,” Craig said. He took Jake’s hand in a firm grip and held it for a second before giving it a vigorous shake. A sharp smile emerged on Craig’s face.

Annie looked across the lawn at the swirls of couples dancing. The song had slowed; the sea of arms dipped lower. A thin buzz of murmurs replaced the loud clamor.

“You’re here,” Jake said. “Color me shocked.” He brought his hands to his cheeks.

“I don’t see why we’d have missed this,” Craig said. His eyes sparkled with the reflection of a nearby torch.

“I think what it came down to is that there’s nothing else to do here on a Saturday evening,” Annie said flatly.

Jake smiled. His eyes flickered at her, but it had nothing at all to do with the torch’s reflection. “I’ll give you that.”

“Well, I happen to think that Mayfair’s awesome,” Craig said. “So relaxing.”

“Sure. It’s a nice place to visit,” Annie said. She looked down at the dark grass.

“You complain about here, you sure complain a hell of a lot about New York,” Craig said. “Where is it that would make you happy Annie?”

Annie felt like she’d just been slapped across the face. Mouth shut, she slid her tongue across her top teeth, considering how to respond. “I’m happy, Craig. I’m happy,” she said. How dare he question her emotional state here, right in front of Jake?

Craig let out a small humming noise. “Could’ve fooled me.” He laughed again.

Annie glared at him. “I’m happy.”

Jake looked around them, spotting a tray of chicken skewers that had been set down a few tables ahead. “Those look good,” he said. He patted his stomach, and then started to walk slowly backwards, seeming to bounce on the balls of his feet. “Can I bring back a plate for either of you?”

“Sure,” said Craig. “Thanks.”

“No thank you,” said Annie. She patted the tabletop in impatience. She felt like running. She’d go anywhere but here.

27

Annie picked up a wadded cocktail napkin from the table and started smoothing it out. Once Jake was out of earshot, Craig turned to her and asked, “Can we dance?” He reached his hand out for hers and nudged his chin towards the big dance floor set up across the pool. It ran along part of the back fence, near the gate that opened up to private beach access. Some tired, tipsy dancers now spilled off the dance floor and began to fumble with the gate’s elaborate latch.

Reluctant, Annie touched her fingers to Craig’s and together they glided past the pool.

“You’ve been acting funny since we got here,” Craig said, pulling her onto the dance floor and tipping his head to her ear.

Annie swung away from him, and then did a quick turn back, almost slamming into his chest. She looked into his eyes and held her gaze.

“What’s going on?” Craig persisted.

“Nothing,” she said. They stood still as swarms of sweaty dancers shuffled around them. Again, Annie spun away from Craig. She released her grip of his hand. She waited for Craig to come closer.

“I’m just a little uncomfortable being back in Mayfair,” she said when he did. “I don’t want people to get the wrong idea.”

“The wrong idea?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Care to elaborate?” Craig asked, wearing that goofy grin he got when he wanted to get something out of her. She had told him before what a terrible tactic it was.

“I don’t want them to think that I’ve given up.” She started to walk to the edge of the dance floor and Craig followed her.

“Okay,” Craig said. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know,” Annie said. You wouldn’t, she thought, all the while hating herself for being so compartmentalized. She knew it wasn’t Craig’s fault that she only gave him access to certain parts of her life. She offered different glimpses of herself to different people, never revealing herself fully to one single person. Not to anyone in her family. Not even to Lou.

“I don’t think you coming back for your best friend’s wedding is a signal to anyone that you’ve given up.” He put a hand on each of her shoulders and leaned his face in closer. Instead of kissing her, he brushed a piece of hair off of her cheek.

Somehow she knew that Craig wouldn’t understand what she was getting at, this feeling that she didn’t know what she wanted anymore, this feeling that she didn’t have the right to change her mind, this feeling of being directionless.

She felt she had boxed herself in.

Everything was so concrete for Craig, so simple. He had the full support of his family to do whatever he wanted. This, she knew, had everything to do with the fact that he was the offspring of professional dabblers who did anything and everything they wanted at the drop of a hat. Craig's grandfather on his father's side, Merrick Lancaster, had been an entertainment lawyer for some years, which had set up the family with A-list connections galore. Craig's father had made a name for himself as a photographer for many of the big-name fashion magazines. Craig's mother, on the other hand, continued on with the socialite tradition of her parents, owners of a large textile manufacturing company. Needless to say, Jerome and Sylvia Lancaster didn't have too much of a concern as to what occupational direction their son was headed.

Until she had met Craig, Annie hadn't truly realized how much of one's life could be prescribed by the connections one had, and ultimately chose to use.

Her mother and father had always shunned the kind of industry connections Leona had, ignored that they existed. The moment Annie broached the subject of going to film school, Aileen and Hugh took the opportunity to sit her down in the living room and warn her about taking the easy way out.

Was that how they saw her decision? It was ridiculous, hypocritical even, considering her mother had expected her to stay in Florida, go to dental school, and work at the family dental practice.

Talk about connections. Her family was built upon vocational inheritance.

While it was now more of a hobby since he only operated it during the winter season, her father had taken over the island general store from his parents, who had

moved to Mayfair when Hugh was ten years old. And her mother now worked at the very dental practice her own father had established on the island.

Aileen and Leona were born and raised in Mayfair. As the daughters of the island's dentist, they were treated like the royal family of Mayfair – a surprisingly large number of Mayfairians had bad teeth and thus revered her Grandpa Bernie. Bernie had long since retired from dentistry, but people continued to refer to him as Doc Radnitzky around town.

Annie had come to the realization that her parents had expected her to stay in Mayfair forever; to Annie, the island seemed the equivalent of Rapunzel's soaring tower.

But, she had escaped.

At least, that's how she had viewed it. By going to New York, she had entered the very world that had ruffled her aunt and spit her out never to be the same again. Annie had gotten there on her own volition, had not even consulted Leona in making the decision.

Annie had heeded the part of her parents' advice that warned her not to take the easy way out - whether they realized it or not – in keeping her relation to Leona under wraps. It had been over a year into their relationship before she told Craig that Leona Haven was her aunt, all the while knowing that it would change something in their relationship once he had that bit of information.

She had taken anything but the easy way out. Still, she had committed an act of treason in the eyes of her parents.

Clutching Tom's hand, Lou pushed through the sea of sweaty bodies. She had spilled some Merlot on the hem of her cream-colored cotton dress and needed to get some water on the stain before it set in.

All bathrooms were occupied, so she headed for the kitchen.

Leona's kitchen was expansive, with gleaming marble counters that looked like they'd never come in contact with food before. For some reason, aside from the steady flow of catering staff coming in to replenish their trays, the crowd stopped there. Lou felt like she could finally breathe again, and took pleasure in the frigid air that spilled out from the vent above her.

A pixie-haired young woman sat on the counter next to the sink, so close that she was practically half in the basin, and a man stood in front of her, rubbing her bare feet.

Lou had learned not to be surprised by anything at a Leona Haven party.

"Excuse me, I need to get to the sink," she said. The woman pretended not to hear her, while the foot massager looked at her with an arched eyebrow and an obnoxious smirk, and then returned to groping his lady friend's bony toes.

"She needs to use the sink," Tom said with more force than she had used. He nudged the man's back.

"Rude," the pixie-haired woman said with a click of her tongue. She hopped down from the counter and headed out of the kitchen area. The man followed her.

"Did that just happen?" Lou asked Tom.

"I'd like to burn that from my memory," he said.

"Me too."

Wordlessly, Tom lifted Lou up onto the counter. She scooted back in the very spot the woman had occupied and held the hem of her dress under the sink faucet. She watched the wine-stained water drip down the drain.

“Good enough,” she said, examining the faint pink bloom that was left.

Tom helped her down. She stood on her toes, wrapped her arms around his beefy neck, and kissed him deeply. Two days was too long. She wanted to get married right now, in this moment when everything felt perfect and the barrage of doubt-filled questions that had flooded her brain in recent weeks had miraculously stopped. She craved some concrete validation that she was on the right path, that she had finally gotten her shit together. Maybe just getting the whole thing done and over with would provide that very confirmation that she needed. She hoped so.

The defined cleft of Tom’s chin quivered just so. He looked down at her, and appeared confused. He combed his dark hair back with his fingers and opened his mouth to say something, but didn’t follow through.

Instead, something behind Lou caught his attention. “Hey, is that Annie?” he asked, pointing past the counter to a lanky girl in a minty mod-style dress standing in the living room.

Lou could not believe her eyes. Annie had vowed never to make an appearance at one of her aunt’s parties ever again, yet there she stood, doing a nervous sway as she talked to none other than Jake. Craig was nowhere in sight.

An inexplicable anger rose from the pit of Lou’s stomach. She grabbed Tom’s hand again and marched with him over to where Annie and Jake stood.

She tapped Annie on the shoulder. “You’re here,” she said with forced cheer.

“I’m here,” Annie said, sounding tired of people acknowledging her presence in this most bizarre of settings.

“And you’re here,” Lou said to Jake, eyes narrowed.

“Who isn’t here?” Jake asked.

“There are some notable absences,” said Lou. She glared pointedly at Annie.

Annie grimaced before saying in a tiny voice, “Craig’s off getting a drink.”

“There he is,” Jake said nudging his chin towards Craig, clad all in white. A straw fedora rest crooked on his head, and he carried a margarita in each hand. Lou couldn’t help but think that he looked like he might whip out a ukulele, all faux-hipster, and break into song.

He leaned in and kissed Lou’s cheek in greeting when he arrived, sending a cloud of warm, alcoholic air her way.

“Jake,” Lou said. “Francesca asked if you were coming tonight. Did she find you yet?”

“No, she hasn’t.” Jake said. The words came out slowly. He played with the top button of his shirt.

“You should go find her.”

Jake’s arm dropped to his side. “Oh, should I?”

“Yes,” said Lou, glaring at him. She noticed Annie’s doe-eyes dart back in forth, taking in the exchange. She placed a hand on Annie’s back and steered her away towards the quiet refuge of the kitchen. “Excuse us,” she said.

In the kitchen, a tray of cheesecake bites passed in front of Lou’s face. She grabbed one and removed it from its papery cup. She held it up for Annie to see. “I’m

going to have to get refitted just for eating this. I have about a millimeter to spare in that dress as it is.” She shrugged, and placed the square on her tongue, letting it melt. It coated her throat. Through the thick creaminess, she blurted what she had wanted to say.

“Annie, be careful.”

“Excuse me?”

Lou leaned against the counter. She rested her elbows on the cold marble top. “I just don’t want you messing things up when you have it so good. I tried telling Jake to back off.” Lou’s cheeks felt warm in anticipation of Annie’s backlash. She’d never talked with Annie about what had happened between her and Jake that summer before she left. The details were still a bit fuzzy to her.

Here she was, continuing the pattern of giving Annie the very advice that she herself should be heeding. There was a part of Lou that wanted to go and mess things up. It’s what most people would expect of her.

“Lou, I already told you that you don’t have to worry about me,” Annie snapped.

“I know,” said Lou. “I just think you could use another perspective on what’s going on.” Both of them looked out at the living room to the motley trio of men. Tom slapped a hand on Jake’s back, and laughed heartily.

Annie made to leave, but Lou grabbed her by the shoulder.

“Did he ask you to stay?” she asked.

“What?”

“Oh come on, Annie. You know what I’m talking about.”

“The note,” Annie muttered. “That infamous note.”

“Yes.” Lou tapped a little beat on the counter. “I’ve held my tongue for five years,” Lou said. “We’ve never talked about it, Annie. Not once.”

Annie nodded, appearing to be looking at nothing. Her eyes had that distant glaze. “Jake and I haven’t talked about it even,” she said.

“You haven’t?”

Annie laughed through her nose. “Pretty messed up, right?”

Lou felt like shaking the answers out of Annie. She wanted to demand to know what Jake’s note had said, once and for all. She wrung her fingers, remembering how her brother stopped by the Milton’s that indelible, rainy evening, a few weeks before Annie was set to leave for school, clutching a crumpled piece of notebook paper filled with his inky scrawl. That was so like Jake, she thought now, to try to use what he perceived as the noble, romantic approach. She hoped it hadn’t been filled with a poem.

She and Annie had been in the living room when Jake rang the doorbell. It was Lou who had padded over and opened the door, assuming her role as an honorary member of the Milton family. She had not expected to see a drenched and fidgety Jake pacing the porch. She shouldn’t have let him in.

29

Annie knew that the time had come when she had to let Lou in on what happened that night, after Jake had tucked the note into her hand and walked out the door in one swift, awkward maneuver.

“He didn’t tell me to stay,” Annie said. She kept her eyes fixed on Jake, who was flailing his arms in some elaborate description of something to Tom.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Lou said. “I was so sure he did.” She giggled nervously.

“He told me he loved me,” Annie said.

Lou’s laughter came to an abrupt halt. “No.”

Annie stood still, knowing what was to come next in Lou’s flood of questions.

“What did you tell him?”

Annie dropped her head into her folded arms atop the counter. “Nothing. I didn’t tell him anything.” She could feel her warm breath hit the crook of her arm as each word came out slow and steady. She picked her head up again. “I just left. I went to New York.”

Lou remained silent.

Annie waited for her to say something, feeling the weight of the silence pushing down on her until she could not stand it any longer. Without a word, she started to walk away. Lou didn’t try to stop her this time, but followed her out of the kitchen.

30

Annie stood between Tom and Lou, not really listening to the conversation that was going on around her. She was too preoccupied with wondering if Jake, or even Tom or Craig, could notice the shift that had occurred between her and Lou. Annie couldn’t help but feel an icy cold coming off her best friend now, like somehow she had morphed into the villain in Lou’s eyes. She felt she had owed it to Lou to divulge the contents of the note, but now she was left also feeling like she had betrayed Jake.

Though, Jake probably assumed she had told Lou about it right away, joined at the hip as they were.

She looked at Jake’s profile now, noticing the thin gold stubble that washed over his cheek. He wore a wide smile that deepened his deep dimples, listening to Tom go on

about an upcoming fishing trip he was planning on taking with his father. Annie realized she was staring too intensely, and averted her gaze.

“One of the partners at my dad’s firm just got this huge new yacht – how could we pass up an offer to go on a sailing trip with him? We’re talking two bedrooms on this thing,” Tom described.

“I wish I was still going to be down here,” Craig said. “That sounds amazing.”

Behind them, Francesca emerged from the sea of bodies. “What sounds amazing?” she asked, finding a perfect little niche in between Craig and Jake in the small circle they had formed. Her tight dress had big semicircular cutouts at the sides that gave a glimpse of toned stomach.

“Just a fishing trip I’m taking with my dad and some of his colleagues in a few weeks,” Tom said.

“Ooh. How fancy,” said Francesca. She had a glass of white wine in hand and took a sip.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” Craig said to Francesca. “I’m Annie’s boyfriend, Craig.”

“Finally, we are introduced!” Francesca shouted unnecessarily. She spoke with a drunken accent, a kind of upturned lilt on each word. “I’m Francesca.” She laughed.

“Francesca’s one of my bridesmaids,” Lou stepped in.

“Why aren’t you all out there dancing?” Francesca asked. She held her glass up in front of Craig’s face for a moment, and Craig clinked it with his own, looking unsure if that was what she was going for.

Francesca turned to Jake. “Jakey,” she said. “Dance with me?”

“Sorry, Francesca,” Jake said. “You know I’m not much of a dancer.”

“Oh, come on,” she said, taking his hand in her own.

Jake looked back at them and shrugged, then followed Francesca through the living room crowd and out through the French doors again. With only the slightest of nods to each other, Tom and Lou followed them.

Annie caught Lou’s eye before she escaped into the throng, and gave her a sallow smile. Lou scowled back.

“Shall we hit the dance floor again?” Craig asked Annie, looking around the room. Someone had turned up some awful techno music on the living room sound system, and now a couple was dancing on top of the coffee table.

“I’m not in the mood right now,” Annie said. She felt she had to keep herself away from Jake. At least, that’s what she believed Lou’s scowl was meant to tell her. She rested a hand on the back of one of the couches. It was made of bumpy orange leather and reminded her of a basketball. “You’re welcome to go on out there if you want,” she said to Craig, not wanting to hold him back.

As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized she sounded like her mother. Her mother used to say the same line to her father at every function they had attended that featured a dance floor— bar mitzvahs, holiday parties, weddings. *I’m not in the mood.* The Macarena would come on and her father would trot out onto the parquet on his own. And Annie would stand with her mother and Kevin on the fringes of the dance floor and laugh along with them as they watched Hugh make a fool of himself.

Annie saw that Craig had now whipped out his phone and was scrolling through his emails. It was what he did any time he wasn’t sure what to do or say. He opened one,

and his eyes widened as he read on. “Shit,” he said, eyes darting back and forth rapidly. His lower lip was juttled out in perfect alignment with his strong, square chin.

“What’s wrong?” Annie asked.

“Great Frame’s downsizing,” said Craig. “Harris said he’s heard rumblings all week and they hinted at it during the staff meeting today.” Harris was Craig’s one and only work buddy, a rat-faced little guy who loved to dish out workplace gossip and never seemed to actually work. Annie took everything the guy said with a grain of salt.

Still, she asked, “Which departments?”

“I’m not sure,” Craig said. His voice was shaky.

“No use getting worked up over it right now,” said Annie. She didn’t want to hear about work right now. She didn’t think she could stomach it.

“Yeah, I guess.”

Annie rubbed his back for a brief moment and folded her lips into the same sickly smile she’d been putting on the whole evening. She may have avoided using the connections Leona could have brought her, but she knew she didn’t get the job at Great Frame on her own accord. Neither did Craig.

They had his father to thank for their positions at the production company. And that, she thought, had to be why Craig looked like a scared puppy right now. It was something neither of them had mentioned to each other since they started at Great Frame a year ago. It was something she’d never dared mention to her parents. She could never tell Leona either.

Even Lou was under the impression that Annie was this brazen go-getter who wowed a bunch of steel-haired executives during her interview and landed the job. She

must have told Jake something along those lines, what with the way he talked her up back at the airport. She could hear him now. *Everyone knew Annie was going on to do big things.*

Big things. What did that even mean?

No, it had nothing to do with some miraculous display of nerve or grit on her part. She knew it had everything to do with that phone call Mr. Lancaster copped out to making once she got the interview offer. He knew someone on Great Frame's board of directors. He thought he was doing her a favor.

She wondered if a similar acknowledgement had anything to do with Craig's sour expression. Maybe it wasn't enough to have been handed the job because of who his father was. Maybe he still felt the pressure to prove himself. Maybe the pressure was even worse because Jerome had made that phone call.

Until now, Annie hadn't even admitted any of this to herself. She let everyone in Mayfair believe what they wanted to believe. Though Aileen had probably seen right through it all from the start. A month after graduation, Annie was thrown into the cubicle she shared with three other hungry twenty-somethings and given a stack of spec scripts to read through. She had been ecstatic for the proof that she had made the right choice.

But now, she wondered, was that really so?

31

Craig's brow crinkled in concern again. He squinted his eyes.

"What now?" Annie asked.

He motioned with his chin and said, "Aren't those your parents over there?"

Annie looked across the living room. She first spotted her father, who was leaning against a wall and wiping his mouth with a turquoise cocktail napkin. He had on a bright white polo shirt, its sleeves hanging down past his elbows.

And then she caught sight of her mother, walking back to Hugh. She had probably been outside getting food, judging by the plate in her hand, which was piled high with various hors d'oeuvres. She was laughing as Annie's father took the plate out of her hands and snatched a piece of bruschetta from the top. Her lips were painted bright red, accentuating her gleaming teeth. Her mouth looked like the one on the poster in the dental practice's waiting room.

The rest of the room disappeared and it was all Annie could see – that bright shiny mouth in a sea of haze. She couldn't bring herself to believe it belonged to her mother.

"Come on," Craig said, grabbing her hand. She allowed him to pull her towards her parents.

"There you two are," said Hugh in his hearty voice, like it was the most natural thing for the two of them to be there at Leona's house.

Aileen's smile closed as Craig and Annie planted themselves in front of them. The elaborate wall sconce beneath which she stood cast her in a radiant beam of yellow light. She wore a classic black wrap dress that Annie had never seen before. Aileen looked refreshed and youthful with her shining, rosy skin, and her dark hair was pinned into a loose up-do.

"Hi," Annie said quietly. She was about to tell her mother that she thought she looked refreshed, but could predict what Aileen would say to that. *What? Did I look like a tired old crow before?*

Her mother tugged slightly at the gold sunburst pendant around her neck before saying, “You’re surprised to see us here.” It wasn’t a question.

What, Annie wondered, was Aileen hoping to get out of her with that kind of remark? Of course she was surprised to see her parents here. The woman in front of her was a far cry from the cocoon on the couch she had seen earlier in the evening. “I am,” she said to Aileen.

Then, she allowed herself to ask the question she really wanted to know the answer to: “Does Leona know you’re here?”

“We just said hello to her before we came inside,” Hugh said. “She’s holding court at a table by the pool.”

“Not that she’ll remember,” said Aileen. “She is in a very good mood, though.”

Hugh and Craig laughed while Annie and Aileen had the briefest of stare-downs, pushing their shared stubbornness to its limits.

While Craig and her father made a swift and quiet getaway to the backyard, Annie and her mother still lingered in the living room.

Annie remained steadfast in not being the first one to break the silence. She looked down to see that Aileen had on a pair of strappy heeled sandals. It was so like her not to have taken them off and tossed them in one of the piles like everyone else. Annie smiled, strangely comforted by the sight of the heels amongst the bare feet that scuffled around them.

Aileen caught her staring. “I know. They’re not clogs.”

“They’re nice.”

Aileen gave a small smile. “Thank you.” She shuffled one foot back and forth and added, “I think I’m going to wear them to the wedding. They’re comfortable.”

“Perfect,” said Annie. She started to think about the exact moment the conversations with her mother had gotten so terse, so strained. It had to have started around the beginning of her senior year of high school. Not talking was easier than yelling. Neither of them was big on shouting, and they instead preferred the method of quiet indignation. It had proven much more annoying and effective than any screaming match, Annie thought.

“Look, Mom,” Annie said, trying to at least make a crack in the wall of ice that settled in between them and restrained every recent exchange of theirs. She watched her mother’s pillowy cheeks relax.

She closed her eyes, and she could almost trick herself into believing that not much had changed, that the past few years might have only been a figment of her imagination. It was like she hadn’t even left Mayfair. She listened to the surrounding chatter and let it put her in a trance-like state, feeling the over-tired sensation of being on a rocking boat. She had forgotten she was standing in the middle of the living room with her eyes closed until she felt her mother’s warm hand on her arm.

When Annie opened her eyes, her mother pulled her hand back. “Mom,” Annie said again.

She felt like a fool, scrambling in her mind to come up with a proper script, the right thing to say to her mother. She shook all the words away. Nothing she came up with felt right. At last, she said, “I’m happy to be back.” She stepped closer to her mother. “I am.”

Aileen nodded, slow and sure. She reached in and placed a tentative hand on Annie's shoulder. Annie looked down at it, sighing. Then she reached in and hugged Aileen, really squeezed her tight.

"I know, Annie," Aileen said, softening to Annie's hug.

Annie wasn't so sure that Aileen knew the extent of what she was trying to tell her, though. Did her mother know she wasn't happy in New York? Did her mother know that being back in Mayfair felt, on one hand, like exactly what she needed and, on the other hand, like she was admitting defeat?

Aileen was whip-smart and had this kind of precognitive ability that, much to Annie's disappointment, she hadn't seemed to pass down to her daughter. Annie had always been oblivious to things, blindsided so many times in the course of her life, whereas her mother had been able to call so many things from a mile away, like how Tom was going to propose to Lou for instance. She called that one from six whole years away.

Lou had met Tom the summer after her high school graduation, when Tom and his parents were in Mayfair for a weekend trip. They were staying at the big resort on the island, and Lou was working at the reception desk to earn some extra cash before going off to the state university at the end of the summer. She must have made quite the impression on Tom. While his parents returned to Miami, he snagged a job as a caddy on the resort's golf course just so he could be around Lou for the rest of the summer.

He's the one for her.

Annie had thought her mother was being ridiculous at the time, not to mention utterly embarrassing since Lou was within earshot when she had said this. She hadn't thought it was possible that what Tom and Lou had could last past that summer.

But now here they were.

"It's okay," Annie heard her mother say. Her voice sounded far away.

What part of her being back here was okay? The part that was here to attend her best friend's wedding? Or the part that was here to stay?

Had Aileen just been waiting for her to admit this latter part?

So many of the questions that Annie had been trying so hard to tamp down were now spilling out with great rapidity. She rested her chin on her mother's shoulder and breathed in her soft, soapy smell. Though the questions continued to bubble to the surface and knock around the inside of her mouth, she didn't say anything. She didn't want to mess up the moment. She could see the wall of ice crack and split open before her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Aileen mumbled into Annie's shoulder before stepping back. "I gave up on you even before I tried believing in you."

Annie shook her head. "No," she said.

Annie was afraid she might break down right there if she continued to look at her mother's eyes. People were always commenting how much she looked like Leona, but she saw herself there in Aileen's eyes. "Come with me," Annie said, leading her mother to the only quiet place in the vicinity. The kitchen had become her little sanctuary for the evening.

Her mother was not entirely blameful. She had to make that clear. Annie knew she had pulled away from the rest of her family long before she announced she was going

to New York. She just hadn't readily acknowledged it before. And now that she was standing here, digging her toes into this soft, creamy carpet, surrounded by a million people she hardly recognized, and staring at her mother's big, sad eyes, she had to acknowledge that her escape to New York did have a lot more to do with her aunt's return to Mayfair all those years ago than she'd ever admitted before.

Because that was the thing about being related to Leona Haven. Annie knew she owed her restlessness to Aunt Leona. But, even Leona proved she ultimately couldn't escape the weird magnetic pull of Mayfair Island.

And that was how Annie knew she wasn't getting back on that airplane at the end of the week.

32

Annie sat face to face with her mother on a pair of barstools they dragged into the kitchen. "You know that Aunt Leona had offered to foot the rest of my tuition, right?" she asked, wanting to clear the air immediately. Yes, she had received a hefty scholarship, but it only went so far when the regular tuition was as off the charts as it was.

"I know," her mother said. "She told me."

"I didn't accept. Hold up – what did you say?" Annie said.

"And I know you didn't accept her offer. Annie, it was never an issue of money."

"Aunt Leona told you?"

"Yes." Her mother removed the clip from her hair and tousled the strands before putting it back up again. "Our bouts of not talking only ever last so long," she said with a sad smile.

Annie knew her mother had always had a complex relationship with her sister. That was why she had begged Leona not to mention her offer to her parents, to forget this momentary display of generosity of hers. After that, she had immediately began to research how to apply for additional financial aid, and looked into how to secure a campus job. She told herself then that she wasn't about to let silly family dynamics get in her way.

It shouldn't have surprised Annie then to find out that Leona hadn't heeded her pleas.

"I couldn't forbid her from paying for it. I couldn't control her," her mother said. "We all know that's never worked out well for me in the past."

Annie shifted in her seat, listening to the swivel top squeak beneath her weight.

"But, then she told me you refused, and I didn't know what to think."

"It kind of upended your theory, right?" Annie said, biting her lip as soon as the words escaped her mouth.

"What theory?" her mother said, leaning in closer.

Her parents had never given her a straight answer as to why they didn't want her to go to New York, but it didn't take much to figure out the reason. She could look at their faces every day that summer before she left and see them staring at her like she was a stranger, like they could see her turning into Leona right in front of their eyes.

33

"I didn't think you were turning into her," her mother said after Annie had admitted the reason she thought her parents so vehemently protested her leaving Mayfair.

She said this in a hushed voice and looked around, even though Leona was nowhere in sight.

“The way Leona left,” Annie began. “I didn’t do that. It was different.”

“I know,” said Aileen.

“Then why did you give me such grief?” Annie asked.

“Because I thought that wanting to escape was not a good enough motivation for leaving,” Aileen said. “It’s a dangerous reason, in fact.”

“What? That wasn’t my only motivation for leaving, Mom,” Annie said. She didn’t deny that it was a part of it, though. “I wanted to go to film school for a long time. Even before I knew Leona was my aunt,” she cried. That was what Aileen was hinting at, she knew. It had to be. The summer Leona showed up had changed them all, but perhaps it had affected Annie the most.

There was something about the summer, Annie realized. Her life was defined by its summers. The rest of the year could blur by in a boring haze – the truly noteworthy stuff was reserved for those few unbearably sweltering months.

Her mother leveled her hands, telling Annie to keep her volume down. “Come on, Annie. You’d been wanting to get out of here long before film school even became a possibility,” her mother argued. “Ever since…” she trailed off.

“The bonfire,” Annie said, conjuring up the exact moment she had been trying to forget all these years.

Aileen nodded.

Annie saw how her mother gripped each side of her seat and pulled back. Her arms were stretched out, pronouncing their new muscularity. Her dress fell like a lampshade around the stool.

“Maybe,” Annie said softly. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I already told you how your aunt left in that boy’s car when she was seventeen,” Aileen said now.

Annie nodded vigorously. “Presumably to go to the bus station.”

“Yes, well,” Aileen began.

Annie couldn’t imagine what else there could be to add to the already spectacular tale.

“The bonfire was the first time I had seen her since she left then,” Aileen said.

It used to bother Annie, to know that Aileen had never really left Mayfair, had never gotten a taste of what life was like outside the island. It had made her angry to think she could be content with that.

But, in that moment, she saw it for what it was. It hit her like a wave. Her mother had to stay. She had to be the safe, reliable one when Leona was so careless and fickle.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Annie said. She looked down at her bare toes that gripped a rung of the stool. “That was a long time coming, I know.”

Of course, Annie knew of Leona Haven before the bonfire incident. Every morning, she and Kevin used to walk with their father to the general store before school. Her father used to go in early to help their grandfather out. Annie would kill some time

before heading out by flipping through all the celebrity gossip magazines on the checkout counter display while Kevin played on the old pinball machine in the back.

CelebStar Magazine had even done a retrospective piece on Leona a few months before the bonfire, for their 100 Top Beauties double issue. It was a timeline spread of Leona over the years, complete with a cheesy title that worked in *Classic Beauty*. It culminated with a still from some film released that year in which Leona played a diva figure skater vying for a place on the Olympic team who falls for her hardass but soft-at-heart trainer along the way. It never made it to theaters.

Her father had seen the spread. Annie knew he had. And yet he hadn't said anything. The next morning, Annie had noticed all of the copies of *CelebStar* were gone because she had wanted to take another look at a how-to article on creating a watermelon nail polish design – a Hot Spring Trend the cover had boasted. Maybe some seeds of suspicion had been planted deep within her subconscious at the time, maybe. But, in the end she had chalked it up to being a popular issue, nothing more.

Years later, when she raked through her memories to see how she could have been so oblivious to the fact that Leona Haven was her aunt, she thought back to that empty slot in the magazine rack and knew there had been more behind those missing magazines.

35

Annie took her mother's hand. They sat there in the kitchen in silence, listening to the party drone on around them. Somehow, Annie knew they were both thinking about the same thing – that moment Leona showed up at the bonfire.

They hadn't even gotten to the actual bonfire part of the evening when it all began to fall apart. Maybe it had never stopped falling apart, Annie sometimes thought. Maybe Leona's arrival all those years ago had been a catalyst that got the proverbial boulder rolling, crushing everything in its path. Maybe Leona was the boulder – no, a hurricane rather (being in Mayfair, Annie felt she had no right to make mountainous analogies), swirling everything around her into a chaotic mess.

For months prior to the bonfire festivities, Annie had poured herself into creating a short documentary that followed a day in the life of Phil Courtney, the old man who ran the Mayfair Shell Museum, which was exactly what it sounded like – four walls filled with cases of shells scavenged from Mayfair's shores. She was set on showing it for her talent show entry since there was always a screen and equipment set up for showing a movie after the bonfire was lit anyway.

Annie had been convinced it was a hard-hitting piece, but in reality all it consisted of was Phil going on about poisonous cone snails and showing off what their shells look like for ten minutes. At one point he came right up to the camera lens, so all you could see were his watery blue eyes and a bit of wrinkly skin, and he uttered the line, "These babies are poisonous. And Mayfair is infested with them."

She screened the documentary for her family a couple nights before the bonfire, and Kevin screamed at that part – from Phil's creepy mug, or the fact that poisonous snail-like creatures could be lurking in the sand, or both, she wasn't sure. Annie cut the video off there. Never mind that she'd seen only two tiny cone snail shells in her life, both washed up on shore in tangles of seaweed. Her parents had to drag Kevin to the

bonfire festivities, and he walked on the sand that day like he was avoiding stepping on hot coals the whole time.

Soon after the sun dipped away, Annie came on the little makeshift stage set up against the lighthouse, right after a juggling act - three men from the Mayfair Moose chapter tossing swords (rubber swords, Annie discovered, since she helped clear them off the stage before she went on) at each other. A real tough act to follow.

She never did get to finish screening her documentary. There had been no winner that year. After Annie took the stage, the show had not gone on.

Well, a different show did.

Halfway through, her screening suffered technical difficulties. The screen zapped to black and a hum of snowy static flowed out of the speakers. After a few minutes of trying to get the VCR to work again, she heard the crowd fall silent, and the sound of the speakers and the surf took over.

There was too much quiet for it to have been just a technical difficulty, she realized even in that moment. But, she ignored it, nervous as she was, and let the crowd remain a fuzzy blur in her sight. She sucked in her anxiety, continued to fiddle with the VCR a bit, and got the whole thing working again. Phil's wobbly voice came through loud and clear, and for a moment, she let herself think that the issue had been resolved.

But, it was still eerily quiet amongst the crowd, and not the paying-attention-to-the-act-on-stage kind of quiet. The quiet murmurs of people distractedly watching – that was normal. This kind of flat silence, not so much. She could remember hearing the collective squeaks and creaks of lawn chairs adjusting beneath the weights of their owners as people turned to get a better look at what had captured their attention.

And then she made the mistake of looking up. A tall woman was weaving through the mess of portable chairs planted in the sand, ducking under beach umbrellas, making her way up to the stage. She was backlit by the little, solar-powered portable lights that dotted the sand. Annie didn't know what was happening, tried squinting her eyes to get a better look.

Next thing Annie knew, she was up on stage with her.

Leona Haven was up on stage with her.

And that's when it all clicked into place.

A roaring applause took over the roar of the surf. Annie ran to the projection equipment, stumbling over small wells in the sand, and shut off the documentary. She remembered people shouting, "Lee!" She remembered hoping she could sink deeper, deeper into the sand as Leona walked up to the stage's microphone.

"My niece," Leona said. Annie still remembered hearing those two crackly words ring out from the speakers, then making eye contact with her horrified mother who had been sitting in the middle of the crowd, feeling a deep rage take over any confusion that had lingered within her.

But, she must have looked like a scared animal in the moment, because, to this day, her aunt hadn't tired of bringing up how Annie resembled a "terrified little rabbit" when she first laid eyes on her that evening - whatever that looked like. Too many people had commented on the fear they observed in her over the years. Why was it that only the worst emotions manifested themselves on her face?

"My niece, everybody. Trying to follow in the footsteps of her aunt. How adorable." Her aunt had accidentally dropped the microphone after that, creating a loud

thud that reverberated endlessly, and she wandered back into the crowd, stopping to say a few words to the people who still shouted her name. Annie didn't remember seeing her mother rise up out of her chair and approach Leona.

She wished she had. She wished she could have stopped her.

She only remembered Aileen scrambling to pick up the fallen microphone. The memory still sent chills of embarrassment through Annie. Her family had a particular talent for public displays of dysfunction.

“How dare you,” her mother had said in a low, icy voice. She repeated those words twice more, getting louder each time. The third and final time, she outright shouted them, sending an achy, piercing jolt of feedback out to the crowd.

Leona had stood there, frozen in place in the middle of the sea of lawn chairs. Annie had seen the way people darted their eyes between her mother and aunt. This moment of petrified shock that followed her mother's outburst had given Annie the opportunity to observe Leona.

It was the first time she noticed the slightly upturned corners of Leona's full mouth, which had been played up by a deep burgundy lipstick that would have looked garish on anyone else. Small details like that stuck with Annie because they had looked so, well, out of place in Mayfair.

Annie had come to realize this kind of vague smile was a permanent fixture on her aunt's face. It gave her a look of bored amusement, so Annie could never tell when Leona was really being genuine. She had taken to checking Leona's eyes to gauge her true emotions, but even that was a crapshoot – sometimes they looked plain empty, filled with a practiced kind of blankness.

Mayfair had a special effect on anyone who lived there or stayed there for a prolonged amount of time; it caused the island residents to look a little tacky, or so Annie thought. But, in a good way. Appropriately so. You weren't a true Mayfairian if you didn't absorb the island's dusty charm. Even Lou and Jake, who had moved from Boston just a few weeks after the bonfire, swiftly adopted that Mayfair kind of delightful tackiness, shedding any signs of their big city origins after the first couple months of school.

But, not Leona. Not then, not ever. She was immune to the Mayfair effect. The day she showed up at the bonfire, she had been wearing a tight black cocktail dress and towering stilettos, and yet she still managed to walk through the sand with a kind of grace that Annie had yet to ever display - even in flat footwear. Leona's dress had been covered in sand. To Annie, with the particles illuminated by the outdoor lights, it had looked like snow against the dark fabric.

After Leona's little speech and her mother's subsequent freak-out, Annie had lost any ability to be taken seriously ever again. Annie hadn't really listened to what her aunt had said in the moment, but Leona's few words convinced everyone to believe from then on that she was only trying to model herself into a clone of her aunt. The whole island had been there, or so it seemed, witnesses to this first grand display of erratic Leona behavior. Then her own mother flew off the stage, and when she was mere feet from Leona, Hugh had to intervene and hold her back.

By that time, Kevin had run over to Annie, appearing part amused and part frightened, like he couldn't quite understand what was going on. So Annie took him by the hand, and together they walked home in the darkness. She couldn't bear to witness all

the fascinated faces of the bonfire-goers as they observed her mother and aunt's soap-operatic exchange. No one had noticed that Kevin and Annie had left, not until their parents showed up at the house an hour later and were shocked to find them huddled in the living room watching cartoons.

But, their parents weren't nearly as shocked as Annie was to find Leona standing behind them.

36

That evening had been Annie's first introduction to her mother and Leona's bizarre relationship. She missed the bonfire and was instead subjected to a painful dinner, during which Leona dropped the bombshell that she was moving back to the island, and was about to close a deal on the large villa she still occupied. That was before they had even started eating.

Annie spent the time Leona took yammering on about her miserable experience filming *Deep Ice* (the horrendous ice skating movie) in Canada for months to try to fathom how she had never realized that Leona Haven was her mother's sister. Had her mother made sure no one mentioned Leona around her? At the time, Annie was too young for *Classic Beauty* to have been a popular film among her classmates. Once she hit high school, that was another story – for some inexplicable reason it had a huge cult following amongst her peers, and she couldn't get away from people quoting lines of it to her to see if they could get a rise out of her. But, it wasn't so surprising that none of her classmates had brought it up to her then. It was hard to remember a time when people falling at Leona's feet hadn't been a norm.

When they were sitting next to each other at the dinner table that evening, Annie realized the two sisters resembled each other to a shocking degree. The same dimples, the same pronounced cleft in their chins, the same full lips. How had she never seen it until then? It had to have been that disassociation in her mind – until then, Leona hadn't even been a real person. She had been this icon that existed in an otherworld, and so she repressed any recognition of these similarities; but, if she ignored the rhinoplastic ski-slope nose and heavy makeup, she really did resemble Aileen.

Aileen opened her mouth for the first time that evening only after she had finished her bowl of salad. She crossed her utensils atop her plate, fixed a steely gaze on Annie and Kevin, and asked, “Before we have the lasagna, do you two have any questions?” Annie could tell that was her mother's way of telling them not to ask questions – she'd become an expert in her mother's passive-aggressive language at an early age.

Kevin had yet to learn, however. Annie remembered him addressing Leona directly, asking, “Why did you leave?”

Before Leona had a chance to open her mouth, Aileen spat out, “The real question is, why are you back, Lee?”

With her look of permanent amusement, Leona had stared straight across the table. “I need a change of pace, Aileen. And Kevin, to answer your question, I knew there was something more for me outside of Mayfair, and so I went to find it.”

Annie felt her aunt was staring right at her at that point, so she concentrated on her salad. A horrendous silence took over the dining room, forcing her to ask just one question of her own. “Did you find it?”

Leona's smile widened, slow and deliberate. “I believe I have.”

She had avoided looking up at Leona's eyes at the time, but Annie had a feeling that if she had, they would have shown a telling emptiness. Leona had attributed her sudden reappearance in Mayfair to "needing to take a break and come back down to earth."

The article in the issue of *CelebStar* that came out the week after the bonfire revealed that Leona was more forcibly brought back down to earth than she had let on at dinner that night. It detailed how Leona's agent dropped her, and quoted an internal memo from the production company that produced *Deep Ice*, which panned Leona's constant lateness on set. Remembering the final line of the article still filled Annie with a sour queasiness. She took it upon herself to bear the brunt of her family members' moments of embarrassment. Sometimes she thought the humiliation affected her more than it did them. "Classic beauty can only take you so far, Ms. Haven," read the final line. Her aunt never acknowledged it. She'd carried on for the next eleven years without acknowledging that article or any of the others, for that matter.

Since that year Leona showed up again, Annie hadn't been back to the bonfire. The rest of her family still went every year, but not her. She refused.

It was a blessing that Lou and Jake showed up at the end of that summer. Annie would have liked to believe that even if Lou had bared witness to what had happened just before the bonfire, she still would have taken her under her wing, but she wasn't entirely convinced that would have been the case. In bits and pieces, she'd cued Lou and Jake in on, for the most part, the general shambolic state of her family relations, and Lou would always counter with fuzzy memories of their own runaway mother's antics.

But even Lou had admitted to Annie one day that she might have had it a just little simpler because, unlike Leona, her mother hadn't returned.

All Annie knew was that Lou had made school bearable. Lou and Jake had been the only normal ones, the only people who hadn't treated her like a shadow of her aunt. Since the bonfire debacle, Annie had to fight to be taken seriously - up until the day she left for New York.

And now here she was, back in Mayfair.

37

The catering staff began to rush en masse into Leona's kitchen. Aileen removed her hand from Annie's. "I'm happy here, Annie," she said, breaking their long silence. She stepped down from her stool. "I don't think I've ever questioned my happiness." She watched Annie swivel in her stool, just one time around. For Aileen, the maneuver conjured a broken memory of her daughter, six-years-old, spinning, spinning, spinning on one of the sparkly, vinyl chairs at the counter of the tiny Mayfair Diner. Aileen remembered the dizzying sight as Annie had increased her speed with each shrill spin. She had yelled for Annie to stop, fearing she was about to lose control and send herself crashing down to the speckled linoleum floor.

Now, Annie stood and faced her. She took a few steps, throwing low, hollow thuds across Leona's sprawling kitchen, even in her bare feet. She peered out the window that hung above the round kitchen table. Aileen couldn't be sure what she was looking for.

“But, are you happy?” Aileen asked at last. She heard Annie laugh, that funny laugh of hers that came out in short breaths out of her nose. She’d had the same noiseless laugh since forever.

“Craig said the same thing earlier,” Annie said, still looking out the window. “Well, he implied it.”

“Oh,” Aileen said.

“I wasn’t happy, Mom,” Annie breathed out. She wove back around the table set and center island, with her green dress swishing around her long legs. “I wasn’t, but now I think I might be. Does that make sense?”

“I think it makes perfect sense, Annie,” said Aileen. She wrapped an arm around her daughter’s warm shoulder and squeezed tight. Annie’s head fell slack against her own shoulder. “You had to come back.” She spoke into Annie’s scalp.

Annie twisted her neck and looked up at Aileen. She nodded, her long hair tickling Aileen’s shoulder. “Do you have any idea how stupid I feel?”

“You shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” Annie asked. “I took this big plunge. I got out of Mayfair.” She looked back down. “But, I hit concrete.”

“No you didn’t.” Aileen knew that she and Annie were still testing the waters, that the safer bet would be to just agree with her. But, even Aileen, stubborn as she’d been since Annie first left for college, had to admit she’d sensed a shift in her daughter since the last time they spent quality time together (well, as much as staring each other down in the living room while Jeopardy glowed on low volume in front of them could be considered quality. That had been during the last weekend Annie came home her

freshman year). “Annie, you were brave. You were brave like I never was. I took the easy way out, in a sense. Your grandfather assumed I’d never leave the island and take over the practice, and I went along with it. It’s not like I regret my decision, not at all. But, I never saw past it, never even had the idea that there could be another option.” She had meant to say those words ages ago. She had begun to see it as Annie must have seen it – the dental practice, looming there heavy with a big dose of guilt and ready to drop any second and quash her real desires. That was never how she intended to present it.

“Don’t waste your time, Mom,” Annie cried. “I appreciate it, but I’m standing in Aunt Leona’s kitchen right now – it’s time for me to admit defeat.”

“No. I’m serious, Annie. I was afraid that by going off to school you were entering this, this dream world, someplace you could just continue to avoid. I think maybe you’re right. Maybe I did fall for that theory of yours. I just, I see Leona, and how unhappy she is, and how can I not hate it all?”

“Maybe she’s happy now, though. Who are we to decide? I can’t even tell if I am.”

Aileen shrugged. She looked out to the living room, thinking that by mentioning her sister’s name, there Leona would be, chattering away to all these people she hardly took the time to get to know. But, her sister was nowhere in sight. “Maybe she is. You’re right – who am I to speak for her?”

Annie smirked. “That’s funny, you know?” she said, elbowing Aileen playfully in the ribcage. “Because you two have never had a problem speaking for each other before.”

“Oh yeah, so funny,” said Aileen, her mouth pursed in a thin, but good-natured, smile. “What I’m attempting to tell you, though, is that I know I was being foolish. I

know you're nothing like Leona. I know you're not turning into her by being in New York."

"Thank you," Annie said. It was hard not to hear the sadness that her voice emitted.

"Oh, Annie. You're young. I think maybe you'll figure out what you want soon enough." Though, even Aileen had to begin to doubt what she was saying. Something about this conversation with Annie had instilled this kind of insecurity in her, because wasn't Annie right? What could anyone be sure of anymore?

A small whisper from Annie broke Aileen from this spell of wondering. "What was that, hon?"

"I know what I want," Annie said in a hushed voice. "I'm not going back to New York."

"This week?"

Annie sighed, fiddling with the paper towel roll on the counter. "Until further notice." Then, with what Aileen could perceive as a certain deliberate assurance, she added, "I'm staying."

Aileen nodded. There was a part of her that wasn't entirely shocked by this revelation. She had to ask, "Did you tell Craig?" She was surprised by her own composure.

Annie shrugged. "He has to know. I think."

Aileen rubbed her daughter's back. With a wan smile, she said, "You have to tell him, I think."

Annie followed the shoreline, letting the chilly froth lap at her feet. She glanced behind her, enjoying watching the row of her large footprints wash away with the surf. The din of the party floated over from Leona's backyard, faint enough that she could trick herself into believing the whole thing was maybe just a fanciful figment of her imagination.

She bent down and brushed at her stinging shin, sure she had felt some blood earlier. She had to stagger through a whole mess of spiky weeds before arriving at open sand. Did Leona even come back here? Her yard and its elaborate, topiarian landscaping were worthy of a spot on the cover of a home-improvement magazine, but it was as if she completely neglected the part that led out to the beach, the part no one else saw.

A thin cloud now shrouded what would be an intensely bright moon, and it was hard to see anything around her. Annie took her stinging shin as a warning against the impulsivity she was so prone to these days. She plunked herself down in the sand, figuring this was as good a point as any to stop walking. She wasn't sure how far she'd traveled away from Leona's house. Not that far, she thought, as the muted hum of big band music hit her ear.

The saltwater licked at her scraped shin, irritating and soothing at the same time. She anticipated each perfectly timed swell. A quick burn, then a shock of cool. She glanced out at the water, getting lost in watching the rolling flow of the waves and breathing in the tang of the warm salty air that filled her whole body.

Her mother thought she'd been brave, and that's exactly what Annie thought she was proving to herself by going to New York – that she could exhibit a kind of

fearlessness for once in her life and get out of Leona's stifling shadow. If she could start to believe it, she had thought, then maybe everyone else could believe it, too. But, what was brave?

New York had quickly become a convenient escape, rather than the place where she could cull a name for herself, unattached to the island and her aunt. Perhaps it had been all along.

She had been foolish enough to think that Mayfair had been holding her back. At the end of the day, Annie knew she hadn't pursued what she wanted. It was the same story, different location, when she perched herself beneath the wide awning of all that Craig and his family could offer, all that *they* wanted. She had shrouded herself in the comfortable shade of a more sure thing the moment the fear had begun to creep back inside of her. She had allowed herself to get pulled into their world too fast, had followed Craig right along when his father laid out all these connections before them. She had gotten away from herself.

How foolish she was to think a change of scenery could do the trick. It couldn't do anything when it was she who was the problem. It had never been the island - it had been her. She'd known it all along.

She had told herself to ride it out, but she'd had enough of that. There were too many unanswered questions, too many things left unsaid for her to just ride it out. It all led back to Mayfair. And Jake.

Annie had known for a while that she had to come back to the island, to settle things, to regain sight of what she thought she should forget so that she could pick herself up again. Lou had called her to say that Tom proposed the night before she was set to

start working at Great Frame Pictures. “So, you can’t stay away from Mayfair forever,” Lou had said, joking, after she had finished telling Annie the plan was to marry at the resort where she and Tom had met. After Annie hung up with Lou, she carried a cardboard box full of rattling office supplies down to her car, feeling a deep-seated restlessness that she couldn’t begin to explain, and thinking the timing of Lou’s phone call was somehow telling. Still, the next day she had trailed right behind Craig through the doors to the cavernous lobby of Great Frame’s headquarters.

Brave, she thought again. She laughed aloud, looking out at the slowly growing string of moonlight that sliced across the water. She had left her mother back in Leona’s kitchen, slinked past Craig, Lou, and Tom – past everyone – and pushed her way through mobs of smashed partygoers in order to get here. She had felt the ocean beckoning her. She had fled once again.

39

The breeze had picked up by the time Aileen made her way back outside. The skyscraper-tall palms that shot up from behind Leona’s house danced against the blue-black sky, their long lean silhouettes seeming to move to the music. Somewhere behind her head, chimes rattled.

She scanned the dance floor, expecting to find Hugh someplace in the mix. But, the parquet was nearly empty. To the left, she noticed, an assembly of guests had gathered around the perimeter of Leona’s Olympic-sized swimming pool.

“Look!” Aileen heard someone shout as she approached the crowd. A collection of laughs broke out around her. She wove her way to the front, rubbing past too many sweaty shoulders.

She could see her now. High up, on the other side of the pool, Leona straddled the springboard she'd had installed a few years back when she got on a diving kick – the deep end of her pool stretched down a ridiculous fourteen feet. She had stripped down to a pale blue bathing suit and clutched a big margarita glass in one hand. Her skin was a pale blue as well, illuminated by the shaky pool light that rippled across her long, dangling legs. She scooted back a bit on the wobbling board, gripped the railings on either side of her, and then hefted herself up to a standing position in one incomprehensibly graceful maneuver.

The whole scene screamed 'bad idea' to Aileen. She was sure that to everyone else it was just another one of Leona's performances. She pushed her way free from the crowd and rushed over to the side of the diving board, seconds away from climbing the steps herself. She shouted her sister's name, but the word seemed to break up in the air above her head before it reached Leona all the way up there.

Leona tried to set the glass down on top of one of the rounded railings, but the glass just as soon toppled over the side, raining down thick green slush before breaking into big plastic shards across the stone floor. Aileen jumped back to avoid getting hit. She heard heavier footsteps running up behind her, then a warm hand on her shoulder. "Back away." Hugh tried pulling her with him to the growing throng at the other end of the pool.

"No," Aileen protested. "Leona!" she shouted again. More laughter drifted out from the crowd, igniting a fire deep inside of her.

Leona glanced downward and gave a thin smile. She closed her eyes for a moment before stepping forward an inch or so. She might have said something. Aileen

couldn't tell. Leona's whole body was now illuminated by the pool's wavy light. It was the body of someone who had never even considered having children.

Aileen couldn't get another word out before Leona hit the water, sending a cloud of chlorinated spray in her direction. She stepped closer to the edge of the pool, holding her breath as she gazed down into the emerald water. She could see hundreds of tiny beads of liquid rolling down the Teflon-y fabric of her dress.

The crowd was silent now, and Aileen knelt down, gripping the edge of the pool to get a closer look. Slowly, Leona approached the surface. She continued to hold her breath until Leona's head finally popped above the water. Aileen felt like collapsing into a heap right there at the pool's edge.

Leona threw both of her dripping arms skyward, eliciting a chorus of whoops and hollers from her guests. A young bearded man made a running start for the pool and cannonballed into its middle depths, still wearing his dress pants and button-down. More cheers erupted. More people followed suit, jumping into the water. The band music, which Aileen hadn't even noticed had stopped playing, started up again.

Aileen met eyes with Hugh, who shook his head as if to ask, "What are we going to do?" She shrugged at him, bending her lips up into a defeated smile. "Nothing," she muttered to herself. "Nothing at all."

"Aileen!" Leona swam in choppy bursts to the pool's edge, her thin arms cutting the water clumsily. She pushed her wet stringy hair out of her face. "I'm so happy to see you." She reached one arm out of the pool, propping herself up with the other.

Aileen reached down and squeezed Leona's hand. "I'm happy to see you too, Lee."

Jake caught Annie escaping through the gate just before it shut. He pushed his way past the people who had resumed their places on the dance floor after Leona's diving act – some dripping wet and still shaking it out to some cover of a horrid pop song – and jogged to follow her. As he paused to lift the gate's latch, he knew he was taking a huge risk.

Don't be a fool, he told himself.

He stepped through. Behind him, the small metal sign reading "Private" that was affixed to the gate clanked in the wind.

He couldn't see a thing with the lack of lighting. It was up to the homeowners to install outdoor lighting on their particular patches of beach, Jake knew. Either Leona didn't feel the need to do so or she had forgotten to turn the lights on.

Jake braced himself for a treacherous walk towards shore.

It was as if all of his other senses took over to compensate for his lack of sight. The salt air stung his face and tickled his throat as he called out Annie's name. He wasn't even sure he was heading in the right direction until he began to hear the low roar of the surf tumbling to shore, telling him he was getting closer to the water's edge. Sand poured into his loafers with each step he took and he stumbled over a patch of brushy sea oats.

With only the meager moonlight guiding his way, he finally made it to her. He saw her sitting at the edge of the surf, her green dress splayed around her and getting wet.

"Annie," he said, coming up behind her.

She looked back at him for a second, and then turned her attention back to the ocean. “Had enough of the party?” she asked. The wind made her hair fly wildly in all directions.

I’ve had enough of *this*, he thought. He took a seat in the sand next to her. They said nothing for a while, staring out at the calm Gulf water. “Screw dinner,” Jake said at last.

“Excuse me?”

“Forget dinner, Annie. I don’t need to go to some restaurant. Let’s do this. Now.”

“Let’s do this.’ What, are we making some kind of business transaction?” she asked, facing him finally. Her eyes were two shining black disks boring into him, always making him nervous. Always.

“Come on. Let’s talk.”

“Okay,” said Annie. The shoreline roared to life.

“Alright, I’ll start,” Jake said, laughing – the only way he knew to deal when Annie was in one of her pulling-teeth moods. She was so hard to access sometimes, but he never stopped trying to break through. He could never stop trying. He scooted closer to Annie and nudged his shoulder into hers. She didn’t back away.

Drawing his knees up near his chin, he glimpsed down at his sand-covered feet and wondered where to begin. “Why did I wait that long?” he asked aloud, not expecting an answer from Annie. “I was wrong. I know I was wrong.”

“You said that back at the bridal shop,” Annie said, the words coming out smooth and detached.

Jake sat up straight for a moment. “I know,” he said. Then he dropped his head to his knees.

“Well, I left,” said Annie. “I was no better. I just left. I’m really good at that.” She stood up and brushed some sand off her legs. Her knees were level with Jake’s eyes, and they fixated him. Two perfect sandy kneecaps. “I was scared, Jake.”

Jake stood up now. His pants were slightly damp and hung heavy on his frame. “It’s okay, Annie. I get it.”

“Just...” Annie said. “Just listen. I was scared, so I left. But your note has hung over me since I’ve been in New York.”

“I said I was sorry. I thought about it every day in Providence, too. There was a part of me that figured I’d be leaving for school in a couple weeks, too, so why not get it out then? It was the easy way out. I felt awful, though.”

“Forget sorry. Did you mean it?” She looked right into his eyes, pausing for a moment before hurling more words at him like knives. “When you said you loved me, did you mean it?”

Jake stood there and looped his thumbs into his pockets. An artificial kind of hum ran through his ears. “Of course I did,” he said. *I still do*. The words were millimeters away from his closed lips. He couldn’t do that to Annie again though. He was done making things more complicated for her.

Annie made a small noise, but said nothing more. Jake’s chest tightened sharply. He started back up the shore in the direction of Leona’s, breaking into a slow jog. Annie followed. She fell into stride beside him, kicking sand his way with each step she took. He could hear her breathing heavily.

“I never finished a single film I started,” she said. “Not a single one.”

“In New York?” He knew she’d finished plenty of short films when they were in high school. He’d offered to help her with them, just to spend a few more hours with her everyday.

“Yeah. I just got stuck. Each one I started, I couldn’t finish. Professors would tell me something along the lines of, ‘How do you know it’s *not* finished? Maybe it is.’ But, I knew. I knew that none of them were finished. How could they think they were?” She spoke fast, confessional.

“With my paintings, I think I usually come to a stage of satisfaction, a place where I’m content to leave them, but I don’t know if I’m ever convinced that any are finished.” He, too, spoke with a similar rapidity, though he wasn’t sure why.

“You’d know,” said Annie.

“No. I don’t think so. Sometimes, you just have to know when to let go. Stop trying to fuss over and control everything. That’s the point you lose it, the point *I* start to see my work take a turn for the worse, the point I know I have to stop for the time being. But, I don’t know about calling that finished. I know I can always go back.” Was he even talking about his paintings now?

Annie shrugged, so he shrugged back. He started to jog ahead, knowing she’d continue to keep pace with him.

“Stop,” Annie shouted out of the blue once they were at the point of shore that was a straight-shot down from Leona’s gate.

Jake halted in his steps as she grabbed him by the back of his shirt. He spun around to face her and she pulled him in closer with surprising force. “What are we

doing?” he asked, his voice coming out all full of gravel. He wasn’t even quite sure why he was asking this, supposed he shouldn’t be so concerned at this point. He had said all he could say. Moments ago, he had swallowed the rant he had mentally prepared, sensing it would be another ill-timed profession. He didn’t tell her how Craig couldn’t see her for who she was, not the way he could see her. He didn’t tell her how empty she had seemed to him back at the airport, and how he could see some of her old feisty vibrancy reemerging ever so slowly since she’d been back in Mayfair.

He had said none of those things. His thoughts, he had told himself, didn’t matter at this point. He had to support her after all he had put her through, right? That was his obligation now, coming off his grand offense, his horribly executed profession of his love. There was no taking his words back, but silence could be an effective remedy now at least.

So then why the hell did he ask her what they were doing?

Annie placed her hands on either side of his face. “I don’t know,” she said to him, her warm breath hitting the tip of his nose.

“I don’t either,” he said, inching closer to her face.

“It’s simple, I think,” Annie said, bringing her head down to rest on his chest and pulling him into a full on embrace. “The answer’s simple.”

Jake peered above Annie’s head, holding her tightly. The shoreline looked jagged from his vantage point. Party sounds drifted out to them with the wind, catching him by surprise. Then, Annie looked up at him. Her beautiful neck curved back in a perfect arch, slate-colored in the shadowy night. He bit his bottom lip and stared right back at her.

“I love you, Jake,” she said, just loud enough that he could hear her over the waves and the party.

He released her from his arms, and bit down harder on his lip. He nodded, and then the next words out of his mouth were, “What about Craig?”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear.” She looked down at the sand.

Jake pushed the sleeves of his shirt up above his elbows and with three fingers he wiped away the sweat that was forming above his brow. “Okay. What about New York? What about us? How is that even going to work?”

“I’m not going back,” said Annie. She smiled up at him, her teeth on full display. She folded her arms loose around his neck, and let them sit there.

She made everything so difficult. But, he’d always found her difficultness so incredibly appealing. “You’re not going back,” he repeated back to her, his own voice sounding distant to him. “Who else knows this?” He kissed the top of her soft scalp.

“My mother,” she said.

Jake chuckled. “Wow.” He pulled her in closer again. She felt solid in his arms.

“I’m going to tell the others. After the party, I’ll tell them.” Her voice was a whisper, but it sounded surer of the words it spoke now than it had the whole time she’d been back. He believed everything she said.

Leona’s gate creaked audibly behind them. Somewhere in the back of his mind it occurred to Jake that maybe he hadn’t closed it properly, allowing some of Mayfair’s high raccoon population to join in on the party; but he waved the thought away. What did it matter? He had Annie’s face in his hands, and rubbed his thumbs across her soft cheeks. “Annie Milton,” he said, “It has always been you.”

She'd become bored of the party. At any of the parties she threw, Leona would always come to a point when she became tired of it all. The alcohol had run its course through her thin limbs. The shininess of the evening had worn off.

Now, she padded across her bedroom to the master bath with a towel wrapped around her wet hair. The moment her feet touched the cold bathroom tile, she shimmied out of her dripping bathing suit and let it fall with a loud slop. Her dress was draped limply around the towel bar and she stepped into it and zipped it up before she could catch a glimpse of her naked body in the mirrored medicine cabinet in front of her.

A bottle of eye drops sat in a small puddle of water at the edge of the sink. Leona squeezed a generous amount of the saline liquid into both of her eyes, holding her head back and blinking rapidly. She peered into the mirror at last, and then reapplied a thick coat of mascara to her lashes, all the while lamenting the faint sunspots that were flourishing across her high cheeks. She sighed aloud and tossed the tube of mascara down. It sloped down the sink basin, and settled partly in the drain. She removed the towel from her head and raked her fingers through her waves until she was satisfied.

Passing by her bed, she wondered if she should even bother going back to the festivities. Aileen was the only factor keeping her from crawling beneath those satin sheets. Had she really seen her sister back at the pool? She still couldn't quite believe it. Maybe her mind had been playing its cruel tricks on her again. But, then she thought about Aileen meeting her at the pool's edge, her warm hand grasping her own. Aileen had said she was glad to see her. Her mind couldn't make that up. Because when was the last time either of them had admitted any kind of feeling of contentedness to each other?

She was almost brought to tears she was so happy to see Aileen standing there, a singularly comforting face in a mess of random townies. She had seen the fear in her sister's eyes before she had stepped off the diving platform, and it had only spurred her to jump faster, faster, to propel herself to the very bottom depths of the pool, where she had yet to reach. Aileen still cared.

42

In the kitchen, Leona took a foggy wine glass from the back of the cupboard and filled it with a couple inches of the warm chardonnay sitting on the kitchen counter. Through the window, she could see her sister and Hugh at the edge of the back porch, slowly rocking back and forth in each other's arms. She smiled.

Leona ventured outside again. As she passed by Aileen and Hugh, she patted her sister's back. Aileen smiled back and gave one small nod.

Taking a few slow steps down from the porch stairs, Leona noticed that the crowd out back had dissipated some. In less than an hour, the band would be done for the night. That was usually the point when the stragglers left. She never kicked anyone out of her parties, never insinuated to any of her guests that they should get going. No, she allowed her visitors to leave on their own volition, often turning in for the night before some people even left. After all, who was she to tell someone when the fun should end?

A scraping noise caught her attention, and then she saw the white gate swinging back and forth in the breeze, catching every so often on the edge of the dance floor. Funny, she always kept it latched. Otherwise, that horrific screech she could never get it to stop making would have driven her to insanity. Further insanity, she mused.

She went to push the heavy gate shut again, digging her heels into the soft grass. But then she caught two silhouetted figures at the end of the sandy path that led out to the shoreline. Probably two guests drunker than herself whom she'd have to wrangle back to her yard, she thought, not without a hint of bitterness. Stepping past the gate, she could hear the barely audible chatter of the two figures. It was definitely a man and a woman, she could tell. She heard the man say something she couldn't quite make out, followed by a light, playful giggle from his female counterpart. She was in no mood to stumble upon a random hookup in her backyard, so she started back for the house.

She stopped in her tracks when she heard the woman's voice shout, "Stop!" followed by more of those flirty giggles.

It couldn't be. Her niece was incapable of making a noise like that.

"Don't go back yet," she heard the girl's voice say. It was unmistakably Annie, that velvet smooth voice of hers that Leona had to strain to hear in most of their interactions. Every word that girl spoke was like a piece of treasure. It was like hitting the jackpot whenever Annie uttered a whole sentence to her.

Hearing her niece's voice required no effort this time around, though. Then the talking stopped altogether. Well then, Leona thought. She'd let Annie and her boyfriend have their fun.

She began latching the gate behind her, when she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Hi Leona." His hand lingered there on her back.

Leona turned around, and bit down hard to keep her mouth from falling agape. Even in her semi-fuzzy state, it took only two seconds for her to piece everything together. She scratched at one of her eyebrows. "Hi Craig."

“I just wanted to thank you again,” he said.

“Of course, hon.”

“Have you seen Annie around? As much as I hate to say it, we should probably get going. I mean I’d never leave if I didn’t have to.” He looked down at the shiny watch on his wrist. “But, I believe there is a rehearsal brunch tomorrow.” He stared at her with his head cocked to the side, then added, “Proof that television does not lie. You really are beautiful.”

Leona laughed, brushing off the slime of his comment. She considered what to say next. Craig’s hair, slick with sweat, stuck up in every odd direction. He carried a straw hat in one hand. He looked around, searching out the backyard for Annie.

“Craig why are you here?” she asked him.

He laughed again. “For Lou’s wedding?” It came out as a question.

“That’s not what I’m asking. With Annie. Why are you here with my niece?” She continued on her trek back to the house, having little doubt that he’d follow. The grass felt cool and damp beneath her feet and made her toes itch. Up on the back deck, she threw herself in a chair at one of the glass-top tables. Craig sat down across from her, picking idly at his chin with his thumb.

“I’m not sure why you’re asking me this,” he said finally, sounding like he still thought he’d yet to be clued in on some joke. His big smile was getting more annoying by the minute.

“She’s a confirmation of sorts, am I right?” Leona asked. Craig shook his head ever so slightly, still smiling. Still confused. “She’s not easy,” Leona continued. “And I can tell that you’re used to easy. So I’m just trying to reconcile why you’re here.”

“I’m not used to easy,” Craig said in one breath, hardly letting Leona finished. She knew she had struck the right nerve. “I work. I work hard for most everything.” He stood up.

Leona smiled back, and folded her hands in front of her. “So that’s it,” she said. In an instant, it was all clear to her. Craig had pursued Annie precisely because she was that much of a challenge. Leona knew it wasn’t like that was a new phenomenon. People were drawn to challenges.

Annie, for her part, had managed to find someone just as, if not more, insecure as she was. This pairing she had struggled to understand since she had spoken to them outside of Hugh and Aileen’s made a depressing amount of sense now.

“You got Annie all on your own,” she said. No help from Mom or Dad for once. Annie had once told her, in a rare moment of chattiness, that Craig’s father was Jerome Lancaster, one of the premier magazine and fashion photographers of the late 80s and early 90s. His might not have been a name that most people would immediately recognize, but Leona knew it quite well. Jerome Lancaster had photographed her for an issue of *Vogue* back in 1989. She hadn’t mentioned that to Annie, but she had suspected the girl had known that somehow. Leona was all too aware that her world was so miserably miniscule.

“What do you even know about me?” Craig asked, pulling Leona out of the small crevasse of nostalgia she had almost slipped into. Well, there it was.

She’d met a lot of Craigs before. She looked right into his small blue eyes. I know more about you than you could begin to imagine, she thought. She held her tongue.

Craig stood there, waiting for what she had to say next. He was in a fight stance of sorts; legs spread apart, hands clenched at his sides. His cheeks were tinged with an alcoholic ruddiness that somehow functioned to make him look more like a little boy.

Leona felt the tiniest bit bad for him. She stood up, too. Her eyes came up to his chin. She could hear the sound of wet mud footsteps in the now-quiet night. Annie and Jake were ambling up to the deck. She watched Craig's eyes dart in their direction. He brushed past her and took quick, heavy steps down the deck stairs.

Leona could feel a small breeze gust at her in his wake. She took a spot on the top step, wishing she had a glass of wine with her.

43

Annie could tell it was Craig and Leona up on the deck all the way from the other end of the yard. Her heart skipped into a rapid drum when she saw them because she knew what that meant she had to do next. She hung back by the gate for a moment, letting Jake get a head start back to the house. She kept her eyes fixed on the deck. Craig's silhouette featured those telltale hunched shoulders and forward-set head, like he had a permanent crick in his neck. Leona stood up, her curvy figure prominent thanks to that skin-tight maxi-dress she was wearing.

Annie had been silent the whole walk back from the beach, hiding behind Jake's long, confident strides. Any of the impassioned self-assurance she had exhibited out on the beach had now faded into the warm night air. A few feet from the deck, she stopped alongside Jake. She felt her mouth's wide smile wane off into its usual closed off purse.

Craig came down to meet them. "There you are," he said, grabbing Annie with a soft grip above her elbow. His eyes were slits, set in a prolonged wince. "You ready to

go?” he asked. She noticed that his voice was painfully high. He glanced at Jake for the briefest of moments.

Annie bit her lip and looked at Jake, too. She saw that he still wore a soft smile. Her mind buzzed with a hundred iterations of what she should say. She let her eyes blur everything around her, something she hadn't done since she was a young girl. She used to think that if she focused hard enough, she could disappear into that blurriness.

“Annie?” Leona's urging voice drifted down from the top of the deck. For once, she was grateful for some familial meddling.

The world came back into focus and Annie looked at Craig again. Slowly, she pulled her arm out of his grip. “I can't,” she said.

Craig's eyes opened wider and he sucked in the sides of his cheeks, making a weird noise. It was a noise that told her he understood what she was telling him.

He started to nod, and at the same time backed up the deck's steps. He somehow managed not to trip. “I should...” he said, trailing off. Still nodding his head rapidly and walking backwards, he neared dangerously close to the sliding glass door that led into Leona's living room.

Annie ran up to him, and grabbed one of his hands – a horribly timed, oddly intimate gesture, she realized. He stopped in his tracks, and she released it. “I can't go back to New York,” she said.

“With me,” he finished for her. He looked past her to where Jake had been standing. Annie turned around and saw that Leona had joined him. Leona looked away as soon as they made eye contact.

Mistaking Annie's glance as a confirmation that he should approach now, Jake started to walk towards her and Craig.

"No, Craig," Annie said. "I can't go back, period. I'm just starting to realize that what I need right now is here in Mayfair."

Craig shrugged – the worst thing he could've done right then, Annie thought – and then flung the sliding glass door open. "Nothing is ever simple for you," he said.

Leona suddenly sidled up next to them. She locked eyes with Craig. Annie watched as, in a near-imperceptible moment of communication, both blinked at the exact same time. Right away, Annie knew there was something to those blinks. They lasted a few milliseconds beyond normal. But, she had no energy left in her reserves to pursue whatever lay behind that exchange.

Craig turned and walked across the living room, muttering to himself. Annie followed him to the front door.

"I'm sorry, Craig." Annie scuffed her foot across the shiny tiling. She *was* sorry for having him come out to Mayfair, for having to tell him this way. But, he'd get over it. Something about the sharp, vicious smile he now wore told her that maybe he already was over it.

"I should change my flight," he said. He started to do that vigorous nod again and pulled out his phone like he was about to do it right there.

"I'll help you," Annie said softly. She then thought of Craig's excessive luggage spilling out across the entire length of the guest room. She had stepped in there earlier that morning when he was showering and had been shocked at the messy jumble of clothing and wires from chargers and all that filming equipment he had brought along

with him. She was pretty sure she saw parts of a boom mic in the mix, shrouded by a couple pairs of jeans and a ball of boxers. It was so unlike Craig to leave anything in such a state of disarray.

“Don’t,” Craig said. “I’m capable of doing it.”

Annie nodded. She could feel her skin crawl as she heard Jake and Leona come inside. The sliding door screeched shut behind them.

“Where the hell are my shoes?” Craig said. Annie looked to her left to find that there was still a rather large pile of footwear left in Leona’s foyer. How could so many people forget to put their shoes back on? That was Mayfair for you. Craig crouched down by the pile. He flung a pair of beige patent pumps behind him as he riffled through it. Groaning, he raked his fingers through his greasy-looking locks.

Annie couldn’t watch anymore. She stepped in to help, picking up a big leather boat shoe.

“Screw it,” said Craig, pushing her hand away. He stood up and grabbed the front door’s brass knob.

“Where are you going?” Annie asked.

“To pack,” he spat at her.

“It’s pitch black out there, and you don’t know how to get back to my house.”

“I’ll figure it out. I’m smarter than you’ve ever given me credit for,” he said. His palm squeaked along the shiny metal knob.

“Craig, just let me walk you back.”

He shook his head. He flung the door open and took long, brusque strides across the front lawn. She followed him, almost tripping when he came to a sudden halt on the

sidewalk. His back was to her. He stretched his shoulders back, cat-like. “Leslie was about to let you go,” he said matter-of-factly. He turned around. “Let’s be real, Harris’s position probably won’t last either.” He wore a smug smile, looking yet again like a mischievous little boy there in the diffuse moonlight.

Annie only nodded. She wasn’t knocked off the ground by his comment, not even the slightest bit surprised if she was being honest with herself. She could tell he’d been waiting to say this to her. But, what if she hadn’t told him she was staying? Then when would he have broken this piece of news?

“At least I know what I want,” Craig said. “At least I’m going somewhere.” He took off down the curvy sidewalk.

Annie stood there for a moment, watching him fade away. The air suddenly smelled chemical clean, almost like a vat of household cleaner had spilled somewhere nearby. She looked towards the house, where Leona and Jake stood in the doorway. Then she cast her eyes upwards.

The palms that lined the sidewalk loomed above her, judgmental. She stood in their swaying shadows for a few more minutes, until she heard Jake’s soft voice call out to her. “Annie, it’s time to come back.”

“Do you have an opened olive oil, or can I use this one?” Annie asked, shaking the tall glass bottle in her hands. She was standing in the middle of Carl Opelman’s bright yellow kitchen, trying desperately to find some way to help out. She’d never felt entirely comfortable here, even though Carl was one of the warmest people she’d ever

encountered. Any time she'd visit, the man would be there in his usual oversized Hawaiian shirt and gym shorts, trying to guilt-force food and drink on her.

She hadn't thought to tell Lou or Jake when she had decided, feeling utterly restless back home, to walk over to the Opelman house and show up an hour early for the brunch. She had to see Jake. She had to explain everything that happened the night before to Lou. She had no doubt, as she smacked the fish-shaped knocker against the bright blue door, that they'd be there.

But Jake, Carl informed her when he opened the door, had stepped out with Judy to pick up half a dozen key lime pies from some bakery on the mainland. Lou and Tom had yet to show up, either. They were dealing with some fiasco involving an early wedding present smoker and two overly-smoked salmons back at their apartment. Lou refused to have the brunch catered, insisting that everything be homemade – everything but the pies, that was.

“Go ahead and open it,” Carl said. He stood across from her, tossing an ambrosia salad. With a sharp sucking noise, he licked something syrupy off the side of his thumb. Flecks of coconut trailed across the counter.

“Okay,” Annie said. She drizzled some into a blender filled with huge cloves of garlic. “Do I add anything else?”

Carl held up one finger and walked away from the sticky bowl. He pored through the avocado-colored fridge and produced a bunch of cilantro. “Thank you for your help, Miss Annie, but I've really got it covered.” He fed the sprigs into the blender and sprinkled some salt into the mixture, too. “Go relax in the living room or something. Watch some TV. Or, I know,” he said. “You should take a look at the big ol' hammock I

just put up between those two trees in the backyard. The ones that shower down those annoying tiny leaves? Well, now they can shower down on me as I relax in my hammock.” He pressed the blender into shrill, screeching life, slowly pouring some more oil through the top opening.

Annie laughed. “I don’t mind,” she said, watching the green dressing slosh around as the blender’s blades slowed to a halt.

“I think we’re all set for the most part,” Carl said. He started covering everything out on the counter and putting it in the fridge. “I don’t know what Lou was thinking, cooking for forty people. Why even bother calling this a *rehearsal* brunch? She didn’t have a rehearsal!”

“Lou’s always been a ‘winging it’ type,” Annie offered.

“I guess so,” Carl said. Without the clatter of silverware or the whir of the blender, they were left with an overwhelming silence.

Annie rocked back and forth on her heels while holding on to the counter. “Can I help clean or something?” she offered. At this point, if he asked her to start tap dancing she would.

Carl waved away her offer. “Enough, Annie.” To make a point, he swiped his arm across the counter, sending those coconut flakes and whatever else had accumulated there down to the floor. “I’ll get the DustBuster in a few.” He began drumming his fingers against the countertop. He reached up and picked off a few dead leaves from the houseplant that hung above them.

“My aunt said she sold the lot next door,” Annie said, grateful she had come up with something to talk about.

“Oh, yes. I am yet another victim of a Leona Haven realty negotiation.” He popped a hand over his mouth. “Did I say victim? I mean, yes, a lovely couple from Manitoba will commence building their dream vacation home any time now.”

Annie laughed. She liked that Carl wasn't afraid to make his true thoughts known.

Carl adjusted the frayed navy baseball cap on his head, adding, “Your aunt's business is really taking off. I'm afraid her next step might be selling off the whole island. Can she do that?”

“I don't think so,” Annie responded.

“She is Leona Haven after all,” Carl said, raising his bushy brows.

“True. Maybe that does give her some special privileges – but, I really doubt it bestows upon her the authority to sell the island.”

“Alright, if you say so.” Another awkward pause followed before Carl said, “Come, I'll show you the hammock.”

It occurred to Annie, as she followed Carl to the backyard, that she'd be a horrible hostess if the time ever came for her to assume that role. If she had put up a new hammock, she would have automatically assumed no one would be all that interested in seeing it. It was just a hammock. But, now that Carl had brought it up for the second time, she found herself kind of curious.

Outside, a few sickly rays fought through the thick gray cloud cover. A monarch skated along the fluorescent pink bougainvillea that ran along the perimeter of the fenced backyard.

“I show this baby to everyone. It's my new pride and joy. Came across it when I was ordering inventory for the store and I couldn't pass it up.”

Annie stared at the bright flamingo patterned hammock Carl had strung between the two big trees at the back right corner of the yard. A pile of small yellow leaves had collected in its center dip. She couldn't help but smile, taking in the lawn flamingos staked all around her. The backyard was a thousand dizzying shades of pink. "It's wonderful," she said.

"You probably have no place for one of these in your apartment," said Carl. "I know Lou told me, but you can't even count on me to remember what day it is. So tell me again, what part of Manhattan are you and that boyfriend of yours living in?" He reached over and flipped the hammock over, sending the pile of leaves that had collected there raining down to the tall St. Augustine grass.

It struck her then. It wasn't her apartment anymore. Craig would be sending her things in as few shipments as possible, though she did offer to go back up to pack it herself and drive down again.

"Is he coming with the rest of your family, by the way?" Carl asked.

Annie rubbed her temples at the sudden onslaught of questions. "Who?"

"Your boyfriend."

Annie swallowed and let out a sour-tasting laugh. "It's not my apartment anymore," she said.

"No?"

The sun beat down heavy on Annie's neck. "Mind if I take a seat?" she asked, nodding towards the hammock.

"By all means," said Carl.

She fell into the center, wobbling side to side. “And he’s not coming,” she said, fighting to stabilize herself. “He went back to New York.”

“Oh?”

For some reason, Carl’s minimalist style of interjection spurred her to tell him more. “Yes. And I’m moving back to Mayfair.” She heard Carl clear his throat. The hammock stopped wobbling at last. Annie closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the shade.

“It’s surprisingly comfortable right?”

When she opened her eyes, she saw that Carl had started walking back to the house. She heaved herself out of the hammock and followed him inside. She shut the patio door behind her, and heard the sound of a baseball game blare from the living room.

45

“Make yourself at home, Annie,” she heard Carl holler. “Jake and Judy should be back soon.”

She headed to the living room. Carl was sunken into a brown recliner. He popped open a can of diet cola. Annie grabbed a seat on the loveseat. They watched the game in silence until the front door opened a few minutes later.

“I smell like fish,” said Lou upon slamming the front door behind her. Annie turned around to see her shuffling to the kitchen with an armful of groceries and a foil-covered plate balanced on top of the whole arrangement.

“You do. I can smell it from over here,” Carl said without peeling his eyes from the television screen.

“Thanks, Daddy. Thanks a lot.”

They could hear Lou rustling away in the kitchen. Annie went to find her riffling through the refrigerator. “Hey, Lou.”

“Annie! What are you doing here so early?” Lou asked with her head still in the fridge.

“I thought you’d have been here already.”

Lou groaned as she removed her head from the fridge. She didn’t quite clear the shelf above her, and rubbed her scalp in pain. “Judy gave Tom and me this at-home smoker thing as an early gift,” she explained. “And it was Tom’s brilliant decision to try it out at five in the morning.” She bent down and lifted up the foil on the platter she had placed in the fridge to give a peek at two blackened-looking fish. “We’ll see how these turned out.”

Annie tried to cover up the disgusted snarl that had appeared on her face. Lou did reek of a strong, fishy odor.

“Yeah, I know. I’m going to take a shower.” Lou’s eyes darted all around the kitchen. Her mind was obviously in a million different places. She began a silent count on her fingers. “Tom’s bringing me a change of clothes,” she said to no one in a slow drawl, bending her pinky finger back.

Annie nodded along as Lou rambled on about more things she had to take care of before the guests started arriving in a half hour or so.

“Dad!” Lou hollered, done with counting. Her eyes were wide.

“What? Everything is all set. Pretty much,” Carl said, stepping in to the kitchen.

“This place is a mess,” said Lou.

“DustBuster,” said Carl, holding up a finger.

Lou shook her head. “That’s your solution for everything.” She swiped her thumb through the coating of crumbs on the counter. “I’ll go grab it. It’s still in the garage, right?”

“Louise, does it look like I have moved anything around in this house?”

“No, Dad,” Lou answered flatly. “It’s like a museum every time I come here.”

“As it should be,” said Carl as Lou walked away. Behind him hung one of Jake’s paintings, a portrait of a young woman in a newsboy cap. Annie had never seen it before, but with its haunting washiness, she knew it was one of Jake’s. It was done entirely in blues, grays, and browns. It had an almost vintage look to it. He had allowed the paint to drip down from the brim of the woman’s hat, forming a gauzy-looking mask.

“Some things have changed,” said Annie.

“That?” asked Carl. He touched the black frame around the painting. “I hung that up a few years back. Jake did it his first year of school.”

“Who is it?” Annie said, approaching the piece closer.

“Madeline.”

“Who?”

“My ex-wife. I don’t know when Jake got his hands on that old photo of her he used for source material, but imagine my surprise when he schlepped this back home after his first semester.”

Annie didn’t know how she hadn’t noticed it the first time around. It now took on a dark, heavy presence in the bright kitchen. Why did Carl hang it up, and why in the kitchen of all places?

He obviously saw her confusion. “It’s a beautiful piece, right? And it was about time I stop ignoring that she exists.” He chuckled and gestured to the painting. “She exists all right.”

Lou returned, DustBuster in hand. She saw them staring at the painting and said, “It’s so creepy. Every time I come over it creeps me out - I still can’t get over it.”

Annie had to agree with her. Sure, it was beautiful, but it was sad, too. It would have been less weird anywhere else in the house, away from the cheery yellow walls. For Carl, it seemed, the painting had become another piece of kitsch, another joke.

“I don’t know why you feel the need to remind yourself of her every time you come into this kitchen,” said Lou.

“That particular image of her was from the good days,” Carl said, unfazed. “I like to be reminded of the good days.”

In response, Lou started up the machine and proceeded to move down the counter with even swipes.

“I know Jake could never make a painting of you like that,” Carl said to Annie above the noise.

She didn’t respond immediately, and stared at the painting trying to figure out what he meant. “I suppose you’re right,” she said hesitantly, almost questioning.

“That,” Carl said, throwing an arm out to the painting, “was painted with the kind of detachment of knowing there was no way he’d ever see her again, no way he’d want to see her again.”

Annie stared at him as he spoke, her eyebrows knotting closer and closer together while he went on. It was a warped comparison, for sure, her and Jake's deadbeat mother. But that was Carl for you.

"He knew you'd come back." Carl said, smiling at her. He held the brim of his cap and gave her the smallest of nods.

Annie nodded back. She understood. The doorbell rang as she began to feel her features starting to spread out into a look of shock. Carl pushed past her to the living room. Lou turned off the vacuum.

"These pies are massive," Annie heard Judy say in her booming voice. She burst into the kitchen with more grocery bags than Lou had been carrying. "Seriously, look at this." She slid a pie in its container down the counter to Annie.

"Massive," Annie agreed.

"Annie," Jake said, almost bumping into her as he walked behind the counter, his arms encircling two big brown bags. He cleared his throat. "You're here early."

"She thought I'd be here earlier," Lou piped up.

"Yeah, what was I thinking?" said Annie.

"You didn't factor in Lou time?" asked Jake. "Remember, you always have to tack on, like, an extra hour to whatever time you think she'll show up."

"Ha," said Lou. "Everybody, there's the resident comedian over there."

Judy was fluttering around the kitchen, periodically peeking through the bags of grocery store haul. "What in the name of all that is holy is that smell?" she asked.

"That would be Lou," said Carl.

“Alright already. I’ll go shower.” Lou threw the box of plastic cutlery in her hands down on the counter.

“We’ve got it all covered, hon,” Carl called after her through a wince. “No worries.”

“I hate when you say ‘no worries,’” Lou shouted back.

They all heard the bathroom door smack shut. “That’s my Lou,” said Carl. He shoved all of the pies in the only remaining space in the fridge. When he was done, he pointed from Annie to Jake. “Does she know?”

“Does she know?” Annie repeated back. She knew what he was asking, but still she stood there twirling her index finger through her hair and said nothing more.

“No,” Jake said. “Right?” He turned to Annie. “You didn’t tell her, right?”

Annie shook her head no.

“Tell Lou what?” Judy asked. Her head was bent down as she scrubbed away at something that had gotten on her sundress. “Oh,” she said slowly, picking her head up. Her teeth started to peek through her parting, bright pink lips. “Oh.”

“Tell her,” Carl said. He bent down and fetched some plastic tablecloths out of one of the cabinets. He left for the patio and Judy followed.

Annie watched the two of them through the glass door as they shook the folds out of the tablecloths and laid them across two long tables. “She was so distracted she didn’t even ask where Craig was,” she said to Jake.

Jake took her hand and held it, his fingers lacing between her own. They stood like that for many minutes, silent, watching out the window. Judy took up residence in the hammock and Carl tweaked the tablecloths so they hit at an even length on each side

of the table. He retrieved two small floral centerpieces that he had stored next to the big barbeque grill on the patio and placed them on the center of each table.

Annie looked up at Jake, enjoying the way the few warm rays of sun filtered in through the window and hit her cheek. She clasped his hand tighter. She could do this everyday, she thought. She could do this forever and be happy with that. She tilted her head up and kissed him with a strong certainty. How had she just walked away all those years ago? She continued to bask in the perfect, comfortable silence with her fingers still threaded through Jake's. But, it didn't last long.

Tom barreled in through the front door along with his two college buddies. Their powerful, booming laughs spread throughout the whole house. Before making any introductions, Tom walked straight past the kitchen and delivered Lou her change of clothes.

"Hey there," said the enormously tall one of his two friends. "Jake, nice to see you again, man." He turned to Annie and grinned widely. "I'm Jenson, and this is Chad." Chad, who was not a short man, only came up to his shoulder.

"Annie." She shook hands with both of them.

"Ah, you're the famous Annie," Chad said.

Annie wondered what he meant by that.

"Good. Introductions are all set. I hate introductions," said Tom, padding back into the kitchen. Around his friends, he seemed puffier, Annie thought. His chest stuck out and he swaggered around the kitchen on the balls of his feet. All three men wore the same kind of outfit of striped button-downs with the sleeves rolled up, khakis, and long-toed loafers.

“I didn’t get the memo it seems.” Jake laughed, looking down at his dark jeans and suede lace-ups. He wore a plain gray t-shirt. The three friends didn’t hear him, though. Somehow, Jenson had produced a bottle of champagne and a carton of orange juice and was making a round of drinks.

Tom lifted one of the plastic cups to his mouth. Annie felt him peering over the rim at her and Jake. He put the drink down and squinted his eyes. “Where’s Craig?” he asked.

Annie drew her hand to her cheek and felt its heat. She hadn’t expected Tom to be the perceptive one in that moment. He had the slightest of smiles on his face, an expression that told her he knew Craig wouldn’t be showing up for the brunch. “New York.” The words spilled out hard and fast. She looked down at the small brown kitchen tiles, thinking she might hear them hit the floor.

“What?” a voice that wasn’t Tom’s asked. Lou now stood in the doorway wearing a silky floral dress.

Annie could smell her hair product from across the room. It smelled like apples.

“What do you mean, New York?”

Above the counter, Jake took Annie’s hand again. She didn’t pull away. If anything, she inched her arm up higher, a signal for all to see. For the first time since they had arrived, Tom, Jenson, and Chad were silent.

A profound sigh escaped out of Lou’s nostrils and she backtracked to the living room. A minute passed before they heard her say, “Well, are you two coming? We need to talk.”

Lou twisted her back so she could face Annie. They sat next to each other on the small loveseat. Lou felt herself falling deeper into the buttery leather with each second that passed. She could see the lingering creases at each corner of her friend's mouth had returned. Her heart pounded, still reeling from the revelation that Annie would be staying in Mayfair indefinitely.

“He left on a 6 am flight,” Annie said.

Jake sat in the recliner. He looked down at his hands. He kept touching the tips of his fingers to each other and quickly pulling them away. Lou was entranced by the maneuver.

Touch. Pull away. Touch.

She broke her staring when Annie said, “At dinner a couple nights ago, my dad told Craig he was going to ask him for his opinions on Mayfair again at the end of his trip, to see how they changed.” Annie snorted out a short laugh. “He had the good sense not to, though.”

“Did he say anything more back at the house?”

“I planted myself on the living room couch and didn't move. But, I could hear him muttering even from there. He called a cab and stormed out. My parents haven't asked me anything yet.”

Jake and his nervous twitching grabbed Lou's attention again. She liked seeing him sit there quiet and nervous, like he was begging for her to voice her approval of the situation at hand. Truthfully, she hadn't envisioned that Craig would last to her wedding day. Perhaps she hadn't given the guy a fair chance, what with the few encounters they

had; but in all of their interactions she had picked up on his derision-laced comments, the way everything he did projected as a mockery of the island and the people around him – his monotone linen wardrobe, the way he strutted through whatever space he occupied like he owned it.

Craig, it was easy to see, was the kind of person who had the need to lay claim to whatever he could, who walked around with the natural assumption that he was entitled to whatever he wanted. To some people, maybe that translated to his having motivation, drive, confidence – and maybe Annie had seen those things in Craig at first. She couldn't fault the girl for that. Not once had Lou sensed any outpouring of supportiveness between Annie and Craig. That crucial supportiveness was instead replaced with a kind of competitive one-upperry that would surely have gotten exhausting at some point, if it hadn't already.

All this, Lou knew, Annie had to figure out on her own. If anyone else had tried to convince her of it she may never have seen it.

“Jake.” Lou leaned across the coffee table and clamped her hands over her brother's. “Stop.”

Jake smoothed the palms of his hands down the legs of his jeans.

Lou looked from him to Annie again. She would give both of them what they were craving. “All I have to say to the two of you is: finally.”

47

It was almost noon by the time all of the guests had shown up. Now, they all sat around the two enormous tables in the backyard, gorging on the platters of brunch fare that were being passed around in a continuous loop.

“I don’t think I can fit another bite,” Annie said, pushing her plate back. Kevin, who sat to her left, swooped a key lime pie down in front of her face. She then handed it off to Jake, who was on her other side. Beneath the table, their knees touched comfortably.

“I picked my classes,” Kevin said into the air. He was looking at Annie. Across the table, Hugh put down his utensils and gave him a little golf clap and Aileen joined in.

“That’s great, Kev,” Annie said. She had noticed how shockingly dapper Kevin looked when he stepped into the Opelman house. He was wearing a pair of chinos and a blue blazer – two clothing items she thought he didn’t even own – that was now draped around the back of his chair. He might have been the most dressed-up of all the guests.

“So, what did you sign up for?” asked Jake.

“Lots of pre req classes,” Kevin said. He fiddled with the tablecloth as he spoke and made a hole in the plastic. “Like this writing class all freshmen are required to take. I’m dreading that. But, I did get into this engineering design class that sounds pretty awesome. I actually snagged the last spot in that one.”

Even though he was looking down, Annie saw that her brother was smiling sincerely for the first time in a long time. She filled with pride as he went on about his classes. “I’m really happy for you, Kevin.”

“Thank you.” He stopped fussing with the tablecloth and looked at her. “I think I’ll try to transfer into WFC or one of the other state schools for second semester,” he said. “We’ll see.”

Annie caught her mother’s eye across the table and smiled back at her.

The clouds above had been thickening as the afternoon wore on, and now Annie felt a raindrop fall on her bare arm. She knew the downpour couldn't be far off as a low rumble of thunder roiled around them.

Tom attempted to tap his plastic spoon against the side of his plastic champagne glass, but only produced a dull sound. Still, he had everyone's attention. "Uh, no big toast here. Just a suggestion that we take this shindig inside before we all get drenched."

In a matter of minutes, the sky blackened. Annie stared up long enough to see that the clouds were moving with great rapidity. A muddy, grassy aroma swelled up into the air, and big raindrops started coming down. A trail of small leaves from the trees in the corner of the yard traveled across and swirled above the tables.

"Don't worry about the food," Carl said to the guests as he flung open the sliding glass door. "It's mostly scraps anyway."

Everyone crowded around the small kitchen and spilled into the living room. Judy was the last one inside, and she was soaked. "Not to worry. I saved two of the pies," she said, balancing one on each arm, their surfaces pocked by the rain.

Annie noticed her parents were making the rounds and saying their goodbyes. "I think we're going to head out," Aileen said when they got around to her. "Do you want a ride back?"

Annie shook her head no. "Thanks, but I promised Lou earlier that I'd go with her to pick up the wedding favors from Carl's store. I guess we'll be doing that once the rain lets up." She followed her parents and brother to the front door and while Hugh and Aileen made a run for the car, Kevin hung back.

“Annie,” he said, his hands in the pockets of his chinos. The way he was standing made his jacket ride up and the shoulder pads look wonky.

“Yes?”

“Even if it’s just for now, I’m glad you’re staying in Mayfair.” He reached in and gave her an awkward hug, with one of his bony elbows digging into her back.

She hugged him back more tightly, feeling the cool mist of rain blowing inside through the open door. “So am I.”

48

Lou sat on the floor of the dim storeroom of her father’s store next to Annie and a stack of heavy cardboard boxes. “My dad ordered all the favors from one of those trade catalogues he gets,” she said to Annie. “I entrusted him with that job.” She pulled out one of the little favor sachets from the open box at her side. Inside the bag were a small notepad and pen, both emblazoned with her and Tom’s names and two flamingos facing each other with a heart between their beaks. Some Jordan almonds were scattered at the bottom.

“I can tell,” said Annie. Though the rain had stopped, thunder growled outside and rattled the storeroom walls.

“Stop it,” Lou yelled, throwing her hands up to the sky. “I can’t have it rain tomorrow.” She tugged at her hair, grabbing from the roots.

“I think it’s just getting it out of its system today so that it can be clear tomorrow.” Lou knew she was trying to be helpful, but Annie’s words fell flat to the cold gray floor. “You can always move inside or under the country club’s big patio,” Annie then conceded.

“Is this a sign?” she asked, thinking it must be.

“The thunder?”

“The thunder. The rain. Those are two *very* symbolic things in film and literature, right?”

“Lou. Seriously? No. You make everything into a sign of something. Remember that time you had to take your SAT on the mainland, and you made every green light on the way there? You called me before the test, convinced that was a sign you were going to get a perfect score.” Annie was shaking her head.

“I had said an almost-perfect score. I still did well.”

“Yes. But that had nothing to do with making a few green lights. Besides, what do you think this weather is a sign of?”

“That maybe I’m not making the right choice. I know it’s foolish to think this way, but I’m always thinking about what comes next.” She folded her legs into a meditative contortion.

“You love him, right? You love Tom.”

“Without any doubt.”

“He loves you too,” said Annie. “I see it. He *wants* this.”

Lou nodded. “I want it, too.”

“You can’t say what comes next and you have to be fine with that,” Annie said, her voice so strong and forceful, it caught Lou off guard. Annie stood up, the soles of her sneakers squeaking on the smooth floor.

Lou looked down at the flamingo favor in her hands, and dropped it back into the box next to her. Annie was right. She knew that she wanted to marry Tom tomorrow. Knowing that had to be enough. It was enough.

49

Leona pushed her way through the horde of women gathered at the sinks in the ladies' room, all fixing their bouffant hair that had expanded many unsightly inches in the humid air. The lungfulls of hairspray had begun to tickle the inside of her nose and throat. Those women were all wasting their time, she thought. She plucked the feather-adorned hat off her head and smoothed her own wavy locks with a swipe of each hand. Then she stepped outside, welcoming the wall of hot dense air that hit her face.

Standing underneath the covered patio of the country club's event space, she looked at the sprawling lawn before her. She could see the gazebo and the guests fidgeting in the flimsy chairs that were staked into the soft earth in perfect rows. The wet grass sparkled underneath the brilliant white sunlight, but as far as she could tell the drizzling had stopped.

She replaced her elaborate hat on her head, tilting it just so, and saw that she was not alone on the patio. On the other side, the rest of the wedding procession had lined up. Annie, Francesca, and Lou's cousin formed one small line. To their right, the men formed another – first Tom's best man, then Jake, and then that bizarrely tall groomsman.

Leona watched all of them for a moment, so beautiful despite the awful mauve of their attire, laughing about something the giant had said. Tom's young niece and nephew wove around their legs in a game of chase, throwing flower petals at each other from the wicker basket the little girl held. The whole lot of them moving about in their predictably

terrible attire created an overwhelming whirl of muddy violet in Leona's vision. But, they all appeared to have this buzz of bright, renewed energy, especially Annie. It was a sight that she would have sneered at any other time, but now she was unable to shake the feeling that even just passing by them she might be able to pick up some of whatever it was they had. She couldn't be sure what it was, but she believed in it.

It was time to return to her seat. The ceremony would be starting in a matter of minutes. She hiked up her dress so it wouldn't drag across the rough stone floor. Sauntering in the direction of the group, she observed as Annie twirled around and reached across to squeeze Jake's hand. For the first time, Leona had felt some purpose in throwing the previous night's elaborate bash, knowing all along that they'd both show up, that they'd find each other.

She was about to pass by the group when she caught Annie by the arm. At first she just held her hand there, grasping Annie's thin wrist and saying nothing. She stared at her niece's high, pink cheeks and then at her wide, expectant eyes. Everyone was now looking at her, she realized. "You're fortunate," she said to Annie. She retreated her hand. "You've figured it out for now."

Annie considered for a moment. "For now," she quietly agreed.

Leona rushed through the wet grass back to her seat just as the processional music started up. She followed the gazes of the other guests, squinting in the glaring light. Out there, in the distance, Annie emerged out of the shadows of the overhang, and slowly, with each small step, she disappeared into the prismatic void of sunshine.