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REMAIN

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REMAIN

By

Johanna M. Hardy

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

REMAIN

This thesis by Johanna M. Hardy is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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ABSTRACT

REMAIN

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Johanna M. Hardy

After completing her own grief counseling group, Gennie Maxwell becomes the leader of a grief group for young adults. Six people are left to her charge in the face of the loss of a loved one. Gennie, still grappling with her own grief, leads the way through each week's group session, and the people within the group begin to find support and growth in their time within the group. As each member finds a place amongst the others, they unfold a stories of their individual struggles with being left behind when someone they love dies. As the weeks progress, grief begins to warp the group as emotions become more prevalent and more grief is brought forward. Frustration comes from some while guilt piles on others as they are all challenged to leave behind their individualized grief and come together as a group of people who have known loss.

Between the narrations of each week, the characters recount pieces of their life, telling the story of who they've become and how they've dealt with their loss before the grief group was found. Chapters alternate between a member of the group's story and Gennie's narration of the group counseling sessions. These spotlight moments shine on the moments in which each person has found themselves the only thing that remains and gives voice to the thoughts they've had to work through in the midst of their loss.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Week 1..... | 7 |
| By a Thread..... | 14 |
| Week 2..... | 19 |
| When the Music Hits, You Feel No Pain..... | 25 |
| Week 3..... | 30 |
| Hole-Filled Sole..... | 36 |
| Week 4..... | 41 |
| Still Here..... | 48 |
| Week 5..... | 57 |
| In the Fire..... | 66 |
| Week 6..... | 72 |
| How Much Has Passed..... | 78 |
| Week 7..... | 87 |
| Out of the Woods..... | 90 |
| Week 8..... | 99 |
| References..... | 102 |

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of this story goes back five years before my writing process began. In season 8 of the TV show *So You Think You Can Dance*, a number was performed by seven men in which each person represented a stage of grief with the group as a whole making up one whole person (*Prague*). The dance started with each man in a spotlight, moving independently for a few measures before pausing and fading into the background as the spotlight changed to another. As the music crescendoed, the dancers began moving with each other, interacting outside of the spotlights before the lights came up and they moved together, their actions synchronized while each man carried himself differently within the identity of his grief. The clenched fists and scowl of the man representing anger moved in short staccato next to the man portraying disbelief whose actions were nearly in slow motion. The movements showed hesitation in the steps of the man who showed shock and the lifted chin of the man showing acceptance never lowered as they moved with each other. Toward the end of the dance, all seven men gathered together and moved as if they were exploding outside of the one man they represented, reaching out of their center as they grasped at what it meant to be grieving, each expression unique and pained in a different way (*Prague*).

This dance number was the main inspiration for *Remain*. My writing has often centered around the idea of loss, prodding at the ideas of a loss of innocence to a loss of hope. I have found solace in the universal idea of grief, how there is not a person who escapes life without some sort of grieving, whether it is for a piece of themselves they leave behind or a person they

lose in some way. As I continued to write these short stories, I gravitated toward the experience of losing a person and how isolating this can be. In the words of Ronnie Lee Graham in *And Then, The Train Wrecked*, “This is the story about life and grief, and neither is that simple,” (Graham 99). I have spent the time put into these pages creating scenarios when people are faced with a loss that no one ever wants to go through. I have faced the grief with them, looking to friends as well as within myself for the reactions of these people and have felt the pains of their mourning. I have asked questions of friends about what they might feel or what they have felt in loss and I have searched for the connections that bring us all out of hiding and into the light of hope.

Though grief over the loss of a close person is not a unique experience to go through, it is experienced in ways that are unique to the person and their loss. And while there is no life that finishes without loss, this is a thing that is often kept private or under the table, something that people become awkward in talking about and something that no one wants to face. It has become more apparent to me in creating this piece that loss is something nearly forbidden to talk about when, after the initial loss has been suffered, the world attempts to keep on moving when, more often than not, there is still a person or people who are stuck in the moment of time when they lost someone they loved. That person, then, has to make sense of their world without a person in it while the rest of the world keeps moving forward with little or no change. *Remain* attempts to look at these people in their moments of grief, together and separate from others who are grieving, and show the denial and acceptance of what has been lost.

In *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis writes, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear,” (Lewis 3). In the moments these characters are most afraid to grieve – the moments which require some amount of moving on, some degree of acceptance that this loss has occurred, or

some challenge to the world they have created to grieve in – the characters of *Remain* are given spotlights like those in the dance, moments to show the world what they have learned, how they are coping, and how they are changing.

Madeleine L'Engle, in the forward to *A Grief Observed*, comments that “the death of a beloved is an amputation,” (Lewis vi). Lewis, too, comments on the loss of a person being similar to the loss of a limb. He spends time in an extended metaphor looking at the healing of someone who has lost a leg, how time has allowed the person to “get over” the original pain and heal yet how the pain may return throughout the rest of his life in varying degrees of pain, and, more so than anything, the man will always be one-legged (Lewis 52). This idea of amputation laid another level to the foundation of my characters, how they begin to figure out how to operate in their own bodies without that person who was held so dear to them. Like a physical amputation, these people are working through the phantom longing for what’s no longer present in their lives.

The stories progress independently while being tied together through the voice of a grief support group leader. The characters all find themselves in attendance of the group as they try to figure out who they are in the absence of a person. There is something comforting about finding others who have experienced something relatable, and in the time of grief, it is sometimes the hardest thing to do. While we as people are social creatures, it is hard to bring light to that which has left us in so much pain. Owning up to the feelings and diving into the healing is a brave and intimidating move because it takes us out of our memories and back into everyday life.

This, to me, is the greatest challenge of grief. While there is the moving on, the changing of life, and the loss of rituals and relationships that were shared, the real challenge seems to come about in owning the feelings of grief. I wanted to look at this and get to the bottom of why

something that everyone experiences in some way or another becomes such a solitary struggle. Why not come together? Like most people in real life, these fictive characters struggle with this concept. Something I've come to understand in this process of writing is that there is so much weakness to be found in loss, but what many people do not see is that there is strength in learning to grieve. Instead, we hide and shy away, push everything away and say we're okay. I wanted the characters to do the same, to see the ways in which they could lean into people or perhaps tried to lean into people and the results they were left with.

In writing *Remain*, I wanted to get inside the heads of different people who have experienced loss in different ways. I wanted to challenge the idea that grief is a solitary experience and challenge the idea of silencing those who are grieving. I wanted people to see that it's okay to look at the awkward interaction of grief with the rest of the world and it's okay to feel awkward about it. I wanted to make people look at something that's not comfortable and understand that there's nothing worse than losing someone and feeling completely alone.

There is a back and forth of present and past times for these characters, the present bringing all the characters to a single room in which they have to dissect the loss they have gone through. These sections are narrated by Gennie, a woman who, at times, seems to claim she's made it through her own grief, though fretful moments give her enough pause to see that grief is still present within her actions. The past shows a moment in which each character has felt most lost and struggles to make sense of what they've gone through. Like the spotlights in the dance, these characters tell a story of their time in grief and the things that have paralyzed them in moments they don't want to see. The spotlights then collide like the raising of the lights in the dance and Gennie tries to lead this group of young adults to a better understanding of themselves in the aftermath of loss.

In reflecting on the writing of this compilation of stories, something I have been challenged with is the feeling of having to make happy endings for these characters. I think that it's so easy for the fictional characters to find catharsis in their grief and to be done grieving, and while some of the characters do find comfort or healing, many more are left with the open wounds that will take time to gut and heal. I didn't want there to be the happy endings; I wanted to show the pain of grief, the hope of finding life beyond loss, and the hope of coming together that is interrupted by the return of pain that never quite goes away.

I think, along with this, I wanted to show the changes that people experience when they experience loss. Where many changes happen over a long period of time, there is usually a quick change to a person in the face of loss followed by many moments of change and many other moments in which change is resisted. The internal struggle to figure out who we are meets the external struggle of what the world is without our people, and somewhere in the middle, the grieving person is left to figure everything out. And if we're all left to figure things out in the face of grief, why not do it together?

Anne Lamott writes the following about grief:

You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp (Lamott).

This quote has gathered the words of C.S. Lewis and the steps of the dancers into one quote and portrays the meaning I have sought to create in *Remain*. While all these characters struggle to find a place within the new world without their people, there is always a piece of

them that will remain within the pain of the loss, a piece that will become less of a problem as time goes on but will always be present in some way.

Though each chapter can stand alone as a short story, they have been gathered, ordered, and placed between moments when the characters come together to show that the times in which we feel most alone are often times in which others are going through the same thing and the best weapon we have is to come together amidst the pain and learn to live with what remains.

Week 1

“Welcome.” I pause when I know I’m supposed to continue. I can feel the quiver under my words. Six people are sitting in the chairs that have formed a circle, all staring, all waiting. I’m caught off guard by having to be the breaker of the silence, so I am left only staring back at them for a moment. So much for coming off as a confident leader.

I clear my throat. “Welcome to grief support group. My name is Gennie. I’m going to be leading these sessions. Could we please introduce ourselves?”

My words bounce off the white bricks that make up the walls and fall to the floor, splattering against the polished wood of the gym-style panels. No one is saying anything. The only sound is the echo of metal chairs on the flooring as people squirm in their seats.

One boy, maybe college-aged, slouches down, causing his chair to wrench noise into the silence. He looks at me and looks back down when we make eye contact. He snorts. “Man, this is bullshit.”

I look at the boy. His chocolate complexion sets off his hazel eyes as he stares me down. “Thanks for speaking up.” He rolls his eyes and sets his jaw. “Could you please tell the group your name?”

The boy tightens his arms and stares at the ceiling for a moment before meeting my eye again. “Danny.”

“Welcome, Danny.”

When no one continues, I clear my throat again and look around the circle for a person to meet my eye, and the silence continues as they all look down or at the walls as they look anywhere but at me. After about thirty seconds, I nod at the woman on Danny’s left and ask her

to continue so we can go around the circle. She looks at me, and I think I see her start to shake her head before she sighs and whispers out her name.

Jessie, a petite woman with golden hair.

Then Tucker, a shaggy-haired boy with a quiet demeanor who never quite meets my eye. Ella, a strawberry blonde girl who looks to be the youngest in the group and smiles as everyone says their names. Paige, who squirms in her seat and does her best to keep away from eye contact with anyone while she tucks her pixie-cut hair behind her ears over and over. And finally, Darcy, a lanky young college girl whose chestnut hair is long enough to get caught behind her when she leans backward, making her jolt forward every few minutes to keep from pulling her own hair.

I wait a beat after Darcy says her name. “We’re here,” my papers are shaking in my hands, so I drop them to my lap, pinching my nervousness as close to myself as I can. “We’re here to talk about grief and how to get through it. This is a safe space to talk about those we’ve lost, okay?”

I see some people shift, hopefully in agreement since they are straightening themselves in the chairs. Danny still has his arms crossed, staring at me like his eyes might weld me to my chair. His challenge taunts me, pulls apart my inner need to please and my annoyance of his unacceptance of my authority position. In this moment, I don’t know if I want respect or trust from him, but it’s clear he’s giving me neither. The others seem okay, though I worry I’ll forget their names by the time I get through my entry speech.

“Grief is a natural response to loss, but,” I pause and take in a deep breath, trying to keep my hands from shaking as I recite the thing we as grief group leaders are supposed to say, “you don’t have to go through this alone.”

I can feel Darcy unfolding herself in the chair next to me, just outside of my peripheral range. I hope that she's loosening up a little so the room might not feel so hostile.

"Does anyone want to share anything about who they've lost or what they're feeling?"

Even the chairs stop screeching this time. It's a silence so dead, I wonder if this too could somehow count as loss. If nothing else, it seems to show the loss of doing this alone, though I doubt anyone but me would say that now. I want to push the answers out of them, challenge their silence, but I hated that in school, and I don't want them to feel like I'm expecting anything like that from them.

"I'm never going to make you guys answer," I say. "But talking about it, it helps."

"I lost my daughter," I hear. I look to see Jessie pulling at the loose strings on the bottom of her shirt. "She was only a few weeks old, and something happened, and," Jessie shakes her head as her speech trickles away. She tucks a piece of blonde hair behind her ear, pulls her feet up onto the chair, and cradles her head on her knees, her eyes wide and shiny. She's a surprisingly small person, though I can tell she's probably closest in age to me out of this group. Her bright blue eyes shift between me and the floor as she tucks her arms around her legs.

She looks at me and shakes her head, burrowing her chin into the crevice between her knees as her eyes gloss.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Jessie. That must've been so difficult." I hate the scripted words that are the only ones I know, especially for this woman who got to know her child for a few weeks. Grief seems to only come in wordless, heartfelt sentiments or cheesy whatevers that are said every day, and I can never think of anything but the clichés when I'm nervous. I want to reach out instead, cross the circle and place a hand upon her shoulder or give her a hug, give her proper condolence, let her know she's not alone in this suffering, but I can't touch her without

asking and there's no way to ask her now. I've never been much of a hugger, but something I've learned about grief is that hugging is something grievers tend to do.

I turn toward the entire group instead, wait to see if another voice might sound off on Jessie's bravery. Half the circle is looking at her, though I suppose I would be too the first time I learned that grief is not always a lonely thing.

"Okay," I say after a few minutes. "Like I said before, I will never force you to talk. I hope to create a group of open ears and minds as well as open arms. Every grief is different," I say, quoting the pamphlet that probably led the majority of the people to this group. "But that doesn't mean it has to be solitary."

I give Jessie the papers I've been holding. I ask her to pass them around the circle, tell everyone to take a piece. I walk to the table that holds the coffee and water and grab the box of coloring tools beneath along with the large children's books.

Returning to the group, I set the box on a chair in the middle of a circle and place the books next to it. "This may seem silly," I say, trying to catch each of their eyes at least once, "but there is so much importance in mourning. Today, I want you to draw a picture that celebrates the life of the one you've lost. You don't have to share it if you don't want. Just take a few minutes to draw."

I sit back down and lean back, crossing my arms in my lap. The colors remain untouched until Jessie moves forward and takes away a yellow marker and three colored pencils along with a book to use as a hard surface. The chairs around me screech with movement as more hands reach into the box and gather what they need to create.

Danny looks at me. "You doing this too?"

I hadn't planned on it, but I nod. He waits until I grab paper, a book, and a pencil before going in to get some himself. The scratch of tips to paper combine with the screeching of chairs and the air conditioner that kicks on somewhere on the other side of the room. They are holding their papers close, each seemingly intent on what they're doing.

I try to do some too, draw the slope of a nose, the curves of eyes. I keep to simple outlines in the profile. Around the drawing of my husband, I place little pictures – a bouquet of flowers, a little log cabin, a lot of trees, an airplane, and a backpack. Hunter and I were adventurers that recovered from our trips in a small cabin with our dog, Bailey, who was a replacement for the kids we didn't have.

After about ten minutes, the scrawling begins to slow. I give a five minute warning and fold my own paper in half twice and slipping it amidst the supplies I will have to put away after group has adjourned.

“Does anyone want to share?” I ask as the last pencils and markers are tossed back into the bin. Nervous eyes avoid mine but twitch between each other.

Ella offers. “I lost my brother about nine years ago in a house fire. He was just a little boy then. I drew him how I think he'd look now. I also drew him with a trophy. He always seemed like he'd be good in sports, and I think he'd be one of the best if he were here now.”

I nod to her words and smile as she finishes. “It's always a process to mourn those closest to us. What you've drawn is beautiful. Thank you for sharing.”

The young girl smiles back before pulling the paper into her lap. I mentally slap myself for thanking her for sharing. More scripted words. I try not to let it show and continue on.

“Anyone else want to share?”

Danny stands up in his spot. “I will.”

I smile at him, tilt my head and crunch my brows together as he flips the paper over.

In red lettering with blue and black outlining, one word sits in the middle of the otherwise blank paper: Bullshit.

“Like I said before,” Danny says. “This is bullshit.”

He crumples the paper in a ball and drops it at his feet before turning and walking out the door.

As I watch him go, I realize all eyes have turned to me. It takes me too long to find words. “I think we’ll end early today, okay?” I say. “Please let me know if you need to talk throughout the week or if you need anything else.”

The group rises in near slow motion, each eyeing the other with the question of what just happened sitting on the edge of every lip. A few of them seem to be waiting for me to do something more. I ask for help in putting the supplies back, hand off the bins and the books, ask some of them to fold up the chairs and put them in a corner. They seem to like having tasks.

As I box up the supplies, Jessie comes and refills her Styrofoam cup. She gives me a slight smile.

“Thank you so much for sharing today,” I say. “That was really brave of you.”

She looks at me and smiles before looking down to stir in cream. “My husband’s been pretty worried since,” she pauses, looks at me, and looks back down. “He can’t stop talking about her. I want to learn to be okay with that.”

I smile. “It gets easier.”

She smiles over the rim of her coffee as she takes a sip. “I hope you’re right.”

We exchange goodbyes and I pull the last of my things into the pile I’ll take to my car. I watch Jessie lift her purse to her shoulder before slipping her hand into her pocket and pulling a

small ribbon into her hand. She grips at it, lets her fingers slide along the silky surface before gripping it into her fist again and pushing the door to the parking lot open.

I slip my own purse over my shoulder and head to the exit. I look back over the room and watch the dust particles for a moment before pushing into the parking lot, following the others back into the world.

By a Thread

I slipped down the sidewalk as cars rushed past. My eyes were pinned to the ground as bodies pushed past me intent on a destination that probably didn't matter as much as the people wanted it to. I had been one to rush around too for a long time, but I had wanted a family more and had slowed to make room for what I thought was a surefire thing. Sometimes I wondered what might have been different if I had decided to stick with the rushing of work life.

Without warning, a hand reached out, sliding long fingers across my forearm. It embraced me, just the way the warm hands had when they delivered the news of Abby's death in that cold room. Yet somehow, today, the roles have reversed. The air was warm today and this hand was cold.

I turned toward the hand. A woman stood in front of me, gripping my arm with less tenderness than the nurse had. She was short in stature, foreign of some sort, maybe Middle Eastern. Very smiley. She was so happy. How was she so happy?

It took a minute for me to realize that not everyone was grieving as I was.

Without thinking, I twitched my arm out of the woman's grip, pulling my arm back to my body and staring at the ground.

"What do you want?" I asked her.

There was silence, stillness. I pulled my eyes up to find the woman balking and leaning away.

I sighed, tried to smile a little. "I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

The woman smiled back, white teeth glowing off the soft chocolate color of her skin. “Would you like to buy some jewelry? I have so much. You can choose whichever, and I will sell it to you cheap.”

The woman was patting a table just behind her that I had missed before. I eye the jewelry for a moment, more for the woman’s sake than my own, before shaking my head. Though Sam and I had money coming in after selling the rocking chair from Abby’s room, most of the still brand new clothes, and the big stuffed teddy that had sat in the corner for the past few months, I was not in the mood to buy anything. We had bought enough, bought everything to make Abby’s life happy and comfortable, but it wasn’t enough to save her. No matter how much I had begged the doctors to tell me what I could’ve done differently to save my daughter, they said that sometimes death just happened.

The jewelry on the table was beautiful, just as Abby was, and that was too much.

I sniffled, blinked back the thoughts, and shook my head again before I forced out a smile.

“No,” I told the woman. “Thank you, but no.”

I turned away then, readying to push myself back into the pace of people that always busied the streets of this town on a sunny afternoon. But the woman caught me again, this time like Sam caught me the night we came home without Abby, my arms empty of her for the longest stretch since she had come out of my womb.

Had it only been a week since we lost her?

Sam’s large hand had almost covered the space between my elbow and shoulder. He had turned me back toward him like this woman was trying to do. He had held me, crying when I couldn’t, telling me it wasn’t my fault.

“I’m sorry,” I had whispered to him over and over. I let him cling to me as I apologized for not keeping our daughter safe.

I mumbled the words again now without thinking, but the woman didn’t seem to hear, or maybe she just didn’t care. Maybe she just didn’t understand.

“I have ribbons too. Sweet, silk ribbons in all sorts of colors. You can fix the ribbon in your hair, or perhaps your niece’s or your daughter’s.”

I stared at the woman, holding my breath for a moment too long. I considered pushing the woman away again, pushing away the thoughts of being able to tie ribbons into my daughter’s hair as she readied to play outside, to go to her first day of school, to match a dress she picked out for a daddy-daughter dance. A pain pushed against my womb as these thoughts spilled to the surface, a phantom pain that had been haunting me this whole week, a reminder of the nine months I kept her safe and the inability to keep her safe that had come when she’d been born. I almost turned to run, but my thoughts chained me to the spot, to this woman I didn’t know.

Abby would’ve loved the ribbons, I’m sure. I would’ve spent so many afternoons brushing my little girl’s hair before tying it back with small slips of ribbon like these.

My eyes betrayed me, slipped to the table, searching for the ribbons. At the back of the displays sat a jewelry stand with the ribbons draped over it.

I stepped forward, my fingers lacing around a sky blue ribbon. I picked it up, rubbing my fingers over the slick, silky fabric. It would’ve been just the right color; it matched the room Sam and I had painted, and since both of us had hair the color of wheat, Abby looked like she would too, and that sky blue would have looked so pretty in her hair as it grew from the baby fluff to gentle curls.

My fingers glided across the fabrics for a few minutes as I took in the colors and the textures, the variety of beauty in the simple fabrics and jewelry on the table. I could feel the woman staring at me, the people rushing by behind me on their way to something so important, but I didn't let that rush me.

If Sam were with me, he'd be crying or talking about her, but I couldn't say the words. Where he was so full of emotion, I just felt empty, and these things that would bring him to the brink of tears only made me feel emptier. But I didn't know how to tell him without seeming heartless.

After admiring for some time, I looked up to the woman who was still smiling at me with all the patience of a good saleswoman. "Do you have daughters?"

The woman nodded, her grin widening. "Two daughters and three sons."

"Beautiful, I'm sure."

The woman nodded again. "Do you want the ribbon then? Or a piece of jewelry?"

Nothing in the house that was Abby's had stayed. I ridded the house of her just days ago. Sam had been sitting in the emptiness since then, a place I couldn't stand to be. I had nothing left of her, and I thought that's what I wanted, but maybe Sam was right.

I looked again at the ribbon, a piece of sky in my hands. It was fraying on the end, but it didn't matter much that the ends were coming loose; it would have still held in place were it in Abby's hair.

Abby would've liked it just the way it was. She would've wanted it from this stand, would probably have begged for it as we walked past, just as I always begged for small treats when my mother took me out as a girl.

I realized I hadn't given the woman a response.

“Yes.” I didn’t look up at her, my eyes still taking in the beauty of the simple ribbon and the many things I would never get a chance to do with it. “I’d like this one.”

The woman ducked behind her table, took my money, and gave me the change.

I nodded once to the woman before making my way back into the pace of people on the sidewalk. I dropped my eyes to the ground and slipped my hand and the small blue ribbon into my pocket, holding on to the small piece of fabric like it was the only thing I had left to hold onto.

Week 2

The chairs are closer to the coffee table this week, maybe pushed out of the way for some indoor game they had between now and then. The rain's been pretty heavy.

Jessie and Ella are already sitting, Ella's knees tucked up to her chin on the chair as the girls talk about some movie that just came out.

Tucker's holding a Styrofoam cup I assume had coffee in it a few minutes ago. He grips the cup and watches it bend in his hand as he leans against the table. When I get close, he looks up and smiles at me.

"How are you this week?" I ask.

He nods, dipping his head toward his cup. "It's life, I suppose."

Setting my bag onto the table, I turn toward him. "It gets easier. Not as easy as before. But easier."

He raises his head to look at me again. He seems like he's about to say something but doesn't. His dark eyes stare at mine, and I wait for what he wants to say. His brow scrunches and for a moment, I can tell he's holding his breath. He lets it out and looks away, tapping his cup against the table a few times.

"Guess we better get going," he says.

He pushes himself off the table and moves between the chairs to find a place across the circle from the girls. I pull the two dozen magazines I've collected from local doctors and dentists from my bag along with scissors, glue, and construction paper. I set the supplies on a chair in the center of the circle as Paige, Darcy, and Danny walk in.

The girls stop talking as Danny lowers himself into the final open chair.

“More art might seem silly,” I say. “But I want you guys to see that you can express yourselves, that expressing yourself helps you get through the grief.”

Expression is supposed to be one of those key things to healing, or so I’m told. I’ve made my fair share of collages in my old group, and I enjoyed it. Even if it’s nothing but trying to get the mind to focus on someone who’s no longer here. When I lost Hunter, I wanted to remember him. Some people didn’t. I hope I’m making the right decision.

I lay my hand on the top magazine, some cooking magazine with some vegetable dish on the front. “Look through these. Find pictures, words, colors, whatever, that remind you of your person. Make a collage. You won’t have to share, but you can, okay?”

I see Ella and Tucker nod and take that as enough of a sign. I pull the vegetable magazine back with me along with a pair of scissors. Hands stretch forward after mine, much less timid than last time. Even Danny reaches forward. He might’ve sighed or roll his eyes. I’m choosing not to notice if he did.

I pull my phone from my pocket and pull up a playlist of classical songs. “Moonlight Sonata” plays first.

I try to catch eyes around the circles and see if this is okay. I look around the circle to see if opinions might be hidden under lowered heads. No one seems to notice or care.

I look down at the magazine I’ve chosen. Hunter wouldn’t have chosen these foods. His mother had never made him eat vegetables much as a kid, and when he did, the main ingredient was butter. There’s a picture of a roast on page 16 that’s way more his style. I put scissors to paper and let them slide. I cut out the potatoes from a few pages later and the thanksgiving dinner from the back cover. A backdrop of food seemed very Hunter-esque. I slip the magazine

back into the pile and grab at another, let the cutting and the shuffling of papers fall into rhythm with the piano.

The song changes to Arvo Part's "Spiegel im Spiegel," something of a hypnotic song that lulls most people to sleep. I had seen a dance on TV a few years ago choreographed to this song. I had found it again and again on the internet, often calling Hunter to come look at the dancers who moved like waves on an ocean too. He always put up such a fuss, but he would come and watch. A part of me hopes the dancers for this song are somehow still together and relevant years later on the front or in the middle of one of these *People* or *Time* magazines, that I could use them to show Hunter. Instead, I cut out an engagement ring that's similar to mine.

The songs rotate through, sliding from one key to the next for about twenty minutes. Everyone seems to be settled with what they've created. Paige is running her hands across the pictures on her green construction paper. Tucker's staring all around, perhaps finding differences in the paint on the white block walls.

I clear my throat. "Okay, guys. Let's come back together. It'd be really great if some of you share. I'm going to go first, if that's okay."

I wait for some response. I clear my throat again. They're all looking at me. That's enough of a sign, I guess.

Flipping the page to face them, I watch their eyes take in the small cut pictures, searching for some sort of pattern.

I take a breath. "My husband passed away about four years ago. He was my rock." I clear my throat. "He was my best friend."

Pointing toward the pictures, I try to explain them. The dog that looks nothing like the fat, black lab that we picked out during our first year of marriage that still keeps me company

and makes me clean the house so it's not covered in her hair. The shelf of books that I've written titles on – a book for each Christmas and birthday Hunter and I were together. The food. The ring.

I meet their eyes one by one, and some smile back. When I finish, I ask for a volunteer.

Darcy offers up a collage for her sister, Megan. Bouquets of roses and lilies. A tree house that looks like the one from their home. Two girls holding hands and running on the beach. She doesn't explain much, just says it's for Megan.

Tucker offers to go next. In the center of the page is one picture – a guitar.

“My brother and I,” he says. “We always made music together. We were going to be famous for it. I play guitar and he sings.” Tucker shrugs. “Or he used to, I guess.”

I watch the others watch their groupmates. Danny is actually paying attention and quiet, and it makes me nervous. Everyone's paying attention except for, apparently, me. The hum of talking drains from my ears a little too slowly as the last person explains their collage and all six of them sit, waiting for direction on what to do next.

I clear my throat, pull myself back to the moment. “I think this is a good stopping place for today.” I nod at them all. “For next week, can you bring something that reminds you of your person?” They all shuffle, which I'm starting to learn means yes. “After next week, we're going to be moving forward, but I really wanted to spend the first bit honoring everyone. If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know, okay?”

After a quick thank you, I start to gather up the supplies. I task Ella and Jessie, both back to talking with one another, to grab the supplies and put them on the coffee table. I walk around the chairs to the door.

“Danny?”

He turns as he opens the door to the damp outer world.

“Thank you for coming today.”

He huffs out a laugh and smiles. “It’s still bullshit,” he says. “But my mom raised me better than to be rude.” He looks me up and down. “I forgot that last week. Sorry.”

I smile back at him. “It’s okay. Big changes in life make everything feel weird. I don’t think I knew how to respond to people I didn’t know trying to help me at first either.”

He smiles and grunts some sort of agreement but doesn’t say anything else, doesn’t say goodbye. After staring at each other for a moment, he pushes the door the rest of the way open and jogs toward a small, blue car with a girl his age in the driver’s seat.

I go back inside and thank the girls for helping. I push the supplies into my bag and pull the straps onto my shoulder. Paige, the one who’s said the least over these two weeks, waves to me from the door of the building, a small smile playing on her lips as the door glides shut behind her. I wonder if I should’ve gone after her, asked her to talk or something, “made the connection with the client” as the manual probably put it. But she will talk when she’s ready, I’m sure. I wouldn’t have wanted to be bothered to speak right away. Grief might be too fresh still for her.

I follow Paige out the door a minute later and turn the lights low, since the building always has some sort of light on. Paige is getting into a red car, and Tucker is hovering at the bottom of the steps, presumably waiting for a ride.

“Do you need a ride?” I ask as I come up next to him.

He shakes his head. “I have someone coming.”

With a final nod, I turn my body away from Tucker toward my car, still looking back at him. “You let me know if you need anything, okay?”

He shrugs. I doubt that he'll take me up on the offer, but I want to connect with him somehow.

When my gaze lingers a little too long while I'm lost in thought, he tries to smile at me.

"Everything's fine with me," he says.

"Okay," I say, "But the offer still stands."

He nods and I let him be, walk toward my own car. I wait to leave until his friend pulls up and he shifts his tall frame into the small vehicle, leaving me alone in the parking lot before I, too, put my car in reverse and leave.

When the Music Hits, You Feel No Pain

I heard the first of the four drumstick taps slap together in Brian's hands. My fingers lingered above the metal tips of the top string, my other hand already pressing into the neck of the guitar. With the stage light above me, the dust particles whisped toward the audience that was hidden behind the blackness of a nearly lightless ballroom. I could feel my lip drying as I sucked in a breath, felt the weight of the eyes pressing on me from Joel and Andy who stood to left, from Brian who sat to my right, from the people in front of me that I couldn't see.

The second tap came. I curled my fingers back, bending my hand to a fist, and shook out my wrist. The tattoo on my forearm smiled up at me, the eyes of the shark my brother had drawn staring me down, waiting for me to open up, to take the opening chords that Robert used to sing. The bowed body of the shark led to a half-opened mouth curved to the slightest smile, a shark readying to attack. Robert had drawn it because he said I wouldn't let anything I could catch out my grasp once I had it.

Somewhere, six feet under, the eagle I drew for him was buried nearly a year ago. We hadn't even had the tattoos a year before the accident. He never donated blood. He always said he was going to, and then we got tattoos and he couldn't, and then he never did. I don't know why that matters. Maybe he could've saved his own life if we hadn't gotten the tattoos, hadn't made a move to follow the lifestyle that we thought was expected of us. I don't know.

The third tap brought me back to here, to this music. My hair was falling in my face, the tips dripping with sweat before we even began. The smell of sweat and electric energy twirled around me. My fingers lurched for the chords that would come, my voice tangled in my throat as I waited. It felt like I had never had an audience for my singing and guitar together, even though

I'd been doing this in front of people for almost six months now – for whatever reason, my brain finally decided to catch up to reality.

I picked up the pick I had left sitting in my lap, the pick my brother got for me before our first performance, saying it would bring me luck. He had licked it right after that before pushing it hard into my hand, saying his little brother would always need a piece of him close.

He didn't know how right he was.

I twitched my head to move my bangs from my eyes and tried to make it look like I was just catching the rhythm. G minor. G minor. G minor. I started on G minor and would fall into the song just like we'd practiced every night that week, at least twice a week for the last year aside from the month following Robert's accident.

Back then, Andy volunteered me to sing when no one good enough came to our telephone pole-posted ads. I had agreed because I knew someone had to, and Joel and Brian were no good at singing, and Andy - Andy was the only person closer to Robert than me. We knew we couldn't let the band fall apart. Robert would severely haunt all of us if we had the nerve to end our group on his behalf.

In the final months we'd had together, Robert and Andy were convinced that we were going to make it big. They told us all to ditch homework and practice, and then ditch sleep and practice. On the days they were most convinced we were going to make it, they even pressured us all to skip school and practice. They talked with any band people they could get ahold of, even the town's heavy metal group of 40 year old men. As we got better and rallied more performances than graduation parties and friends' birthday parties, Andy and Robert wanted more. They dragged us out of our town and into the bigger cities – Indianapolis and Cincinnati mostly – and they tried to get us into the band lifestyle. I wanted so much to follow in my

brother's footsteps that I listened to him and went along with this plan to see how the real bands lived. I drank the beers I didn't like and smoked the things I was offered, and eventually I began to like it.

Brian clicked the sticks a fourth time. My hand crunched together, twisting to grasp at the pick, raising to hit the first note as my left hand's finger crushed against the strings between frets.

The shark charged toward the strings as we hit the first note. A melancholy chord hovered for only a second. On the second note, I let my voice sound as I raised my head to the audience I could not see. It was not Robert's voice; I could hear my own voice through the cushion of my earplugs. Before, I only heard Robert's voice singing over mine, and I was only miming. Tonight, it was all me, and I thought that the audience would know something had changed.

As the song went on, I kept pushing forward, trying to think of nothing but the next note. I looked to my left to see Andy dipping his head as he plucked at his bass guitar. He wasn't smiling, he wasn't even bouncing on his feet for each beat like he used to. I wanted to think he was just concentrating harder than before. I wanted to believe that was all it was as his calloused hands made their way across the strings and down the neck of the bass, his shoulders slumped forward as if to cradle the guitar as he leaned forward, like he was lying it down.

I couldn't turn enough now to see Joel or Brian. It was just me and Andy here with the space where Robert used to be. The dust particles seemed to form the outline of him, mark the spot where he should be but no longer was. He had given so much to the performances that his voice constantly sounded like he was on the brink of puberty. So much of me wanted to give that much, wished for all the years we had this band that I could give that much, but every time I

closed my eyes, I was convinced I would see Robert there when I opened them, that the whole year had been some sort of stunt he'd done for publicity and one day he'd be back.

I looked back out at the blackness and lost myself in the progression of chords, trying to pull my concentration to the song I was playing. I tried to forget my brother's face, tried to forget the audience's love for him. I wanted so much to be like him back then, but maybe if I'd stopped us, he would still be here. The band lifestyle was too much. A bonfire on a hillside led to too much drinking. Too much drinking led to reckless behavior. Reckless behavior led us to night swimming. And swimming made Robert dive into a shallow space in the pond at the edge of the woods. He never resurfaced.

We made our way through three minutes of movement, paused for a moment and dove back in before too much time caused a loss of emotion. I turned to check in with the guys behind me, saw that they too have lost the excited smiles we used to have. We weren't a bunch of kids anymore, we weren't a bunch of guys that came together to tell the story of our lives. Joel, Andy, and Brian looked so much older than we were supposed to be.

I felt my voice start to shake as I let my thoughts get off track. I couldn't catch the beat, couldn't find the moment to enter. My voice was jittery but I kept trying. It felt like time was slowing to my mistakes and the audience was staring at me behind the black blanket.

Just as I was giving up, I heard a voice take over. My heart started pounding and I almost forgot to strum and change chords. It was Robert's voice. I pulled my head up and looked side to side for my brother, for his grin that told me he just got away with the greatest joke over. But I couldn't see him.

I tried to seem subtle as I looked for my brother, but I felt like I was going to burst from my skin. I had to find him.

As we neared the end of the song, I noticed Andy. He was singing, his words fitting into the space I thought Robert was fitting. He sounded just like him, a doppelganger to my brother's voice. I would have thrown up if I had anything in my stomach.

Instead, I looked back down at my guitar. I swallowed a few times and started to push my voice out, doing my best to harmonize to Andy. I pushed forward as I pushed my thoughts away. I did my best to lose the loss that left tonight feeling like it was missing something in the pounding of noise all around me.

I grasped at the pick in my hand and kept singing, kept playing, kept doing anything but thinking of what's missing.

Week 3

I clear my throat and look around the circle. Each of the six people around me is holding an object. I twist the heavy sweatshirt I have in my own hands, feel the give and pull of the elastic band at the waist, the warm scent of a campfire still perfuming the cloth.

“Are we okay to go?” I ask.

There are a few slight nods, a few screeches of chairs as they wait in silence for me to continue.

I hold out the navy sweatshirt in my hands. It unfolds to reveal the front to the group, the last of the white lettering fading, barely reading “Bar Harbor” from a trip Hunter and I took about six months before he died.

“This is Hunter’s sweatshirt. I wear it on the nights I miss him most.” I pull at the fabric as I lower it into my lap. “Something about it reminds me of him,” even though I can’t even picture him wearing it some days. “So I honor him with it” even though I’m scared I won’t remember him one day and I’ll still have this sweatshirt of his, hoping it will bring back his burly grin somehow.

They say grief is a process, and these memories still make me crazy some days. Hunter’s sweatshirt is one of the best things I have left of him, but it can be one of the worst on the days I feel lost.

I can’t say that as the group leader though. I’m supposed to know the ins and outs of grief. That part’s not in the manual they teach from, but one of the ladies whose been doing this grief group thing for something like ten years says that most people are looking for a strong leader and they are the ones with grief figured out without crying about everything.

Trying to push away the silence I've probably left open too long, I turn to Darcy, on my left this week. I nod and she lifts a small necklace up, one that is a half a heart that reads "Best Friends" when latched to the other half a heart. It doesn't look like the cheap kind of necklace from Claire's though; this seems to be at least real silver.

"For my sister," she says. She clasps the pendant in her hand, lets the chain dangle below her hand. "Well, not really my sister. I guess I sort of lied last week. She was my best friend, but we should've been sisters."

She twists the pendant around and looks to her left at Tucker.

Tucker raises a light green and black guitar pick. "My brother."

The circle continues around.

A teddy bear from Ella for her brother.

A small ribbon from Jessie for her daughter.

Danny isn't holding anything. I thought he got it figured out next week, but it seems like he may not yet have it. I wait for the bullshit announcement to begin.

He looks down at his feet, pauses, and finally points down at his shoes.

"For my mom."

My heart jolts slightly as a feeling of wrongness crosses my mind. Lower the gavel, Judge Gennie; the boy seems to actually be trying.

Danny looks to Paige to continue, and she seems to be waiting for some explanation from him. I see Ella crush her eyebrows together, hear a few chairs screech. Danny raises his eyebrows at Paige and nods at her to continue.

"Are you just blowing this off?" Paige asks. Her hand closes around what looks to be some sort of small piece of jewelry.

Danny leans back and looks away from her. The solemn downturn of his lips has turned to a straight, strict line. I see him shaking his head and can guarantee he'd like to say that this is all bullshit, though he doesn't.

Paige looks at me and waits.

Others are glancing at me too, trying to figure out what to do next. The chair screeching is going up as people wait for someone to respond, and I know it has to be me.

"He doesn't," I pause. "He doesn't have to explain. This is time to honor, not time to dig into why these things honor our people." I pause for a few seconds and see if she will react. When doesn't, I nod at her. "It's your turn."

Paige frowns at me and then down at her clenched hand in her lap. She unfolds her hand to reveal a thick, silver ring shaped like a leaf curved into a circle with a small gem on what looked like the part of the ring that faced up, some sort of green gem, though I would never be able to place a name to it.

"This is from my best friend, Cal," Paige says, her words short. "He gave it to me a few weeks after we met. A promise ring that was supposed to be followed by an engagement ring."

She twists the ring between her fingers. "He was my best friend."

She won't make eye contact with anyone.

"I would give anything to have him back."

The circle is quiet, watching the member who, up until today has been the quietest, fold in around herself, her hand clenching and unclenching around the ring.

I wait to see if she will say more, but she doesn't seem like she will.

“Remembering hurts,” I say. All eyes, including Paige’s turn to me. “But that hurt is better than forgetting, I think. We need to honor the memories and remember that they’d want us to keep moving forward.”

I point to the papers I have placed in the center of the circle. “I’d like you to work on writing about what you think your person would want you to do after their death. You could write like they’re writing you a letter or you could write down ideas, or however you want to do it.” I clear my throat. “Just think about what they want for you.”

I sit in the silence of the scratching of pens and pencils on paper. I scribble out the same words I wrote when I went through group myself; my mind is too caught on Paige to write up something new. Hunter would’ve wanted me to be happy, he would want me to pursue the new dreams that come into my life, he’d want me to travel to the places we never went.

After about twenty minutes, I clear my throat and the scribbling stops.

“We’re out of time, so we’re going to have to end here for the week,” I say. “The letters are for you, though it might be something you share with another person who was close to the one you lost. It’s up to you on what you do, but grief doesn’t have to be solitary.” The grief group leaders would be so proud to hear that line. “Thank you all for sharing,” I continue. “We’ll see you next week.”

Paige is the first to stand. She watches Danny for a moment, frowning down at him, before she turns to me. “Can we talk for a minute?”

I nod and follow Paige to the far side of the room from the door.

“He drives me crazy, Gen. He does.”

I nod my head. “I know, Paige. But-”

“No,” she shakes her head. “He doesn’t get it. It’s like he doesn’t care.”

I reach out and place my hand on Paige's shoulder. She doesn't move away, just looks up at me.

"He's hurting too," I say.

Her eyes are tearing, which surprises me. "I lost my best friend, Gen," she says, "and he," she gestures toward the door, "seems to think this is all a joke. Can you please talk to him?"

I nod. "It's going to be okay. I will."

Paige looks at me for another moment. I recognize the look she's giving me from the one I saw in my mirror for months, questioning the eyes that stare back, asking them why I had to lose him.

"It's going to be okay," I say again.

She takes a deep breath and nods. "Thank you."

All of a sudden, she is leaning toward me, and I lift my arms in time to wrap them around her as she falls into a hug, her breaths heaving out tears. I try to loosen my stiff shoulders, let her feel supported for a moment. I pat her short hair as gently as I can and tell her again that it's going to be okay.

After a short time, Paige leans away and I release her. Her eyes are glossy, but she's pushed back the tears.

"Sorry about that, I..." Paige stops. "Thank you. I guess I just feel alone sometimes, and I don't know why Danny bugs me, but he does."

I smile at her. "Grief does funny things to us. We're all grieving in some way or another, and it can be confusing when someone else's grief doesn't line up with ours."

She nods, sniffs a little. "I have to go. Thank you again."

I nod to her and watch her walk out the door. When I turn back to the group, I see Jessie putting the extra papers by my bag, straightening the last of the room. Ella is straightening chairs.

As I get close, I thank them for their continued help.

Ella smiles back. “Cleaning up was my job at home too,” she says. “Seems like a pretty good way to honor my brother – doing the things we used to do together.”

I smile at the girl. “Your brother would be so proud.”

She smiles as we turn toward the door to leave. We walk the few feet in silence before opening the door to the parking lot. We wave and send pleasantries with each other as we break for the week into our own cars.

Hole-Filled Sole

The shoes in the window were solid white. In late afternoon, as the sun sunk down, the shoes glowed with a newness I had never seen on my own feet. The ones there now were dusty and patched, and my socks peeked through more than just where my feet entered them.

I scuffed the ground with the toe of my shoe and looked back up. There's a small check marked on the side of the shoes – not Nike, but close.

The offset of black on the epitomic white made my mouth water.

I slacked into the store and wandered to an aisle to look for the glowing tennies from the window. I found the shoes lined up in boxes, glowing white and black in the center of one of the stacked up aisles.

They looked better here than they did in the window.

Mama would've loved to see them, would've promised that she'd try to get them. She always tried her best to get what I needed.

I pulled size 13's off the shelf and slumped toward the nearest bench, the box pressed to my stomach. Opening this up, it was like Christmas.

When I was a kid, Mama got me shoes kinda like the white ones for my birthday one year. They were worn down by someone else's steps, and they were soft and smelled of summer and stink bugs. The white stripes were more brown and the black had become a dark blue, but Mama put them on my then-small feet and smiled up at me – that first time I was taller than her as she tied those shoes onto my feet.

“Ya like ‘em?” she asked, her hand resting on my knee.

I kicked my feet from her lap and back on, staring at the shoes for a moment before catching her eye and smiling.

“They’ almost new,” she said, her eyes wavering to the ground with a squeeze of my knee.

I looked down at my shoes and then back up at Mama as her words echoed to silence. One of the cats crinkled wrapping paper as he tried to make his way to us, and Mama sighed once, her eyes still resting on me.

“Mama, they’re awesome,” I said to her. “I got shoes with no holes!”

Her eyes got shiny, and I asked to play outside in them. I ran through the trees behind our house that night, my feet dry and warm for the first time that I could remember, and I let out a shriek as I ran, leaping into the air.

I could see Mama watching me, and I smiled and waved, running and spinning around the trees, jumping in the air as I threw fake hoops, like I was one of the guys that played on the TV sometimes.

She might have been crying as I made laps of our yard. But I didn’t know she could then.

The shoes in front of me glistened like her eyes did that night. I reached forward, tucked my fingers around the slippery tongue, and pulled the slick cobbler’s prize to me. I dropped to the bench behind me, plucked off my newest pair of hole-filled soles, and slid my feet into the new kicks.

I stood, let my feet settle in. I flexed my ankles, stretched my toes, strolled forward down one aisle and up another. The clerk eyed me on my catwalk. She snorted, turned away, and smiled so slightly. I smiled back as I lapped her register like the path around my old school’s football field.

I ran track in high school, and Mama was always there to watch me. Just before my senior year began, Mama sat me down at our house. She sat a box on my lap, gave a soft, worn smile.

“I got ya what I could,” she muttered.

Her hands gripped and ungripped as she waited for me to open that box.

I lifted the lid, pulled bright orange shoes out. The heels were missing grippers, the tongue on the left one had a hole in it, and they smelled like dogs fresh in from the rain. The orange was washed too many times to be bright anymore.

But they slipped on real easy, hugging my feet only slightly less than what I preferred.

I smiled up at my Mama and she ducked her head. She wasn't working much anymore since the doctors had found the lumps in her breast a few months before. The money she did make went to rent and doctor bills. The shoes were like gold, I knew.

“Thank you, Mama.” I reached up and grabbed her hand, letting it swing between us.

“They’ almost new,” she said.

That was the last pair of shoes she got me.

I jumped up and down on my second lap of the register, flexed my legs, stretched them out, and smiled at the clerk, winking as I walked by. I lunged forward twice, stretching to the tip of my toes as I worked back to my corner of the store, sunk down to the bench, and reached to untie the laces, crossed like barred cages.

I pulled my old shoes close to me, ran my thumb along the worn heel.

Stealing a glance backward, I saw that my audience had her back to me, reaching for a box on a shelf higher than her. She looked back to me once during a stretch upwards.

I smiled.

She turned away, but I caught a smile as she shook her head at me.

I looked back down, my fingers hooking on the laces as I started to pull them loose.

I always pulled my laces tighter when I was nervous. I was waiting in a cold room with nobody around but me. I pulled at those laces over and over, stood and wandered around the bank of chairs, and sank back down, pulling my laces tighter.

A blank face appeared in the window of the door that led back.

He was dark haired and darkened under the white coat. He didn't smile. He just shook his head.

Mama was gone. Mama had lost to cancer. Mama wasn't coming back.

What did I want to do with her, he wanted to know.

I shook my head back at him. I told him I had no idea.

He patted my shoulder and said to take some time, that he'd have some people call me in a day or two.

I nodded and turned toward the door, each step catching closer to a run as I neared the exit.

I broke free into cold, heavy air. I heaved in what felt like chunks of ice digging at my insides. I looked up at the sky and then down at my feet.

Those orange racing shoes had still been pulled tight on my feet.

I looked once more at the clerk, but it seemed she had lost all interest in me since a new person had entered the store. I looked at the shoes, looked at the door, looked at my feet.

My shoes went in the box. My fingers lingered on the last sole once more before I closed the lid and placed the box back on the shelf.

My last track meet was run without Mama. I took my place on the starting line and turned to try to find her eyes amidst the other parents. It took a few seconds before I realized she wasn't there.

I tried to run fast when the bullet sounded, but my feet were slipping beneath me. I kept running, though, running around the track as fast as I could. My coach was yelling something, but I didn't hear him. I just kept running.

The wind licked tears from their ducts as I ran, circling towards the finish, completing the run that was asked of me. But I kept going. I ran past my coach, past my cheering teammates. I ran past the fences and down the road toward home.

Mama wouldn't be there when I stopped, so I had to keep on going.

I stood in the store, turned, went out the door, closed my eyes as I walked. Quickly, though, I snapped my eyes back open. Mama, with her glistening eyes, was waiting just behind my closed lids.

I could see the clerk looking at me through the window for a moment, watching me go. But she just as quickly turned back to the boxes when I smiled in at her through the window.

I shook my head, looked ahead, and turned for the trees. I ran to those trees, through those trees, leaping, jumping, making baskets, and then continuing to run.

My feet were dry and warm.

For a moment, I stopped. I let out a shriek into the darkness. I let the silence settle and then move forward again.

I could see my shoes shining in the dark, white lights in the darkness that surrounded me.

They almost knew.

Week 4

Exiting my car, I can hear screeches and screams coming from inside the rec center. There are more cars here than normal, so maybe our group bumps up against some kid event and they haven't left yet.

When I get to the doors, I hear the stampede down the makeshift court that suggests a basketball game is in progress. Opening the door confirms this. Two teams, yellow and green versus purple and black, weave around each other. The boys couldn't be older than ten or eleven.

"Why are they here?"

I jump and turn. With all the noise, I hadn't heard Darcy come in behind me. Her long hair's pulled up today, revealing blonde highlights beneath the darker hair that normally shows. She gives a half-grin when I turn toward her and then looks back to the game in front of us.

"They've got a game going, I guess."

Darcy frowns. "Well yeah, but this is our time, isn't it?"

I nod. "I'll go see what I can do."

I walk away from Darcy, but I don't know who to approach. It's not like there's some owner of the building meandering around during a kids' basketball game. I shuffle my purse in my hands, look around to see if there's anyone who looks like they might be in charge.

I decide to approach the vender's cart as the kids zip down the court behind me, ball bouncing out in front of them barely in control. If nothing else, he might have answers as to who I'm supposed to talk to. He's also in my path so I don't have to look like I'm wandering too much if Darcy is watching.

I smile as I reach the small stand of sport game food. The man smiles back and runs a large hand through his slick, dark hair.

“What can I get you?”

I shake my head. “Can you tell me how long the game has left?”

He looks at me like I’m some sort of idiot for not knowing this, and perhaps I am. He then turns to the scoreboard and back to me. I hope he won’t make me admit out loud that the scoreboard means pretty much nothing to me.

“20 minutes or so, unless they go into overtime.”

A buzzer sounds behind me as the ball makes it into the hoop. “This space had been reserved for me and my group starting nowish.”

The vender shrugs and begins to scoop more popcorn into paper bags. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

I thank the man for his time and turn back toward the door. All six of my group are standing by the door, shuffling awkwardly next to each other as wild parents rush past to capture action shots of the game on their cell phones.

“Let’s go outside for a minute,” I yell out as I reach them.

They follow me out the door. The air feels cool and quiet after the sweat and noise of the building.

“What’s going on?” Ella asks.

“I don’t know. The times overlapped somehow, and they won’t be done for a while.”

I wait for more questions, but the group just looks at me to provide the answer.

“I guess we have a few choices,” I say. “We can wait and either start later and go longer today or just make do with the time we have. We could call it now and forget group for the day. We could go someplace else.”

They all shuffle in front of me.

“Can we do group here?” Darcy asks. “It’s nice enough out.”

I look at the steps we’re standing on. The sun is out and it’s warm enough to not be a punishment to remain outside. I look back at the group. “Does that work for everyone?”

I see a few nods and take it as enough to sit on the top step. The others follow suit and sit around me in a haphazard circle.

“Let’s start with just talking this week,” I say. The manual says that Week 4 is “a good week to check in with everyone.” I hated it in my own group, but I want to give them a chance to talk. “How is everyone feeling? Anything significant that you’d like to share?”

After a few beats of silence, Paige speaks up. “I feel like crap,” she says. “I go from angry to sad to nothing at all, and it drives me crazy. I feel like I’m losing my mind some days.” She punctuates this with a little laugh as she drops her eyes.

Jessie reaches out to her and places a hand on Paige’s knee. “Me too. My husband wants to talk about our daughter so much, to make her seem alive, and I can’t. I feel closed off from him.”

Without further prompting, the group is talking to each other, sharing the feelings of loss they all have in common. Their words are flowing steadily, comforting each other, even Danny. I sit and listen, waiting for a moment to jump in if I’m needed, but it doesn’t seem like they need me today.

The conversation is interspersed with buzzers going off and muted cheers. Sometimes they pause to let the noise die before continuing; sometimes they just talk over it. The conversation slowly switches into short memories of those who were lost. Ella talks about playing on the swings near her house with her brother. Jessie recalls the first moment she felt her baby kick. She also recalls the last time. Tucker says he wants to slap anyone who tells him again that “heaven has gained another angel,” as if that would make it easier.

Nearly twenty minutes pass before Jessie looks to me. “Can you tell us a story about Hunter?”

I take in a deep breath. “Sure.”

I try to think of a story that’s not too long but gives them an idea of my husband.

“When we were first married,” I start, “Hunter had a bad habit of taking off his shoes and leaving them in the middle of the floor. I tripped on them all the time, and I got so tired of always having his shoes under my feet. I think it was our first fight and probably the fight we had most often for a while.” I pause and look around the group. They look genuinely interested, so I continue. “On our first anniversary, he laid out a bunch of shoes all over the house, and I was raging that he’d do that on our anniversary of all days. So I started to pick them up. It took me way too long to figure out that he hadn’t left them around on accident. It was a path. They led to our basement where he had set up the card table to look like a romantic dinner with candles and everything. It was pretty amazing. And he didn’t stop leaving his shoes around. They were still everywhere, but he made an effort to at least push them out of the walking path.”

I hear a few small laughs.

“Do you miss his shoes everywhere?” Darcy asks.

I bite my lip and nod. “I do. I miss that a lot.”

Tucker jumps in with a story about his brother always jumping on him to wake him up in the morning, about missing that, and the conversation continues. I notice now, though, that Darcy is looking at me a little more often. She's quieter now, too.

The final buzzer sounds with a cheer followed behind it. People stampede out the doors around us, and I guess by the crowd's facial expressions and short snippets of conversation that the yellow team won. My group keeps talking. Tucker's smile is big, and he looks excited to talk about the band he had with his brother. Paige describes the wild ride she took around town with her best friend. Darcy is still quiet, but she is attentive, listening and smiling, though she offers up nothing. I consider asking if the group wants to move inside, but I decide to let them remain, let them talk since they are doing so well.

We go over our time by almost a half hour, and while I let them know the time every once in a while, I let them keep talking. They seem happy, or maybe more so peaceful, something this group has so little of. I want to graft what little bits of peace they show onto their souls, show them there is peace to be found, peace to hold onto. When they finally slow the conversation to a good stopping point, they walk in groups to the parking lot, continuing to talk as they go. Darcy holds back.

I smile at her. "What's up?"

Darcy looks down for a moment and then back at me. "How do you deal with the absence like that? I mean, he was everywhere in your house, and there had to be signs of him everywhere." I nod and she continues. "How do I move through my house when it's filled with everything my best friend left behind?"

She looks down and I wait for her eye contact before I answer. “I guess I just created space for Hunter to still exist and made the rest of the place mine over time. There’s also the option of moving and finding a place to be just yours.”

“I couldn’t do that to Meg,” Darcy says.

“Yeah,” I agree. “That could be a hard place to leave behind right now.”

Darcy nods.

“Give yourself some time,” I tell her. “You’ll know what to do as you go. You don’t have to be all okay all at once.”

“Do you feel all okay now?”

I realize this is the place where the grief group leaders have a flaw. I either have to admit that I’m not fully okay and I still have a long way to go, thus showing that group isn’t the fix-all answer, thus risking Darcy giving up on the idea of group, or I have to lie to her and tell her that being fully okay comes with time.

Darcy stares up at me, waiting for an answer.

“No,” I finally say. “I’m not fully okay. I don’t think any of us will fully ever be okay. But I’m making it and I’m thriving.”

Darcy nods and seems to mull this over. She hesitates, breathing out a question before finally pushing it out. “Is it okay to leave pieces of them around, to make sure you remember the little things that you might otherwise forget?”

I nod back. “I think so. Everyone grieves differently, but I think it’s important to remember that Megan’s always going to be a part of who you are in some way and you need to honor that however it feels right to. I mean, I still haven’t moved the last pair of shoes Hunter left out.”

Darcy musters a small smile.

She takes a step down toward the parking lot and I follow. “It gets easier to live with the ghosts they leave behind,” I tell her. “Not easy, but easier.”

Darcy nods and turns toward her car, thanking me again.

I get into my car and watch her go, hoping I made the right choice in telling her the truth.

Still Here

“Why are you still here?”

I looked up and saw Hannah in the doorway.

“I’m grading papers,” I told her, patting the stack of essays on my desk. “I’m almost done.”

Hannah shook her head. “Darcy, it’s 7:45 at night. Can’t that wait until your planning hour tomorrow?”

I shook my head back at her. “There’s too many. Essays don’t go fast like tests, and I told my students I’d have their essays back to them by tomorrow.”

Hannah didn’t say anything, just kept looking at me. I tried to stare back, to get her to look away.

“You’re still here too,” I finally told her.

“I came back for my book so I could finish my lesson plan for tomorrow morning,” she said. “I’m not still here. I’m just here for the moment.”

“Same difference,” I told her. “I’ll leave soon though, okay?”

Hannah came the rest of the way into my classroom and stood on the other side of my desk, looking down at me.

“Do you want to come over to my place for dinner? Henry’s out of town anyway. I could use the company.”

I shook my head again. “I need to grade these, remember?”

“Darcy,” she waited until I looked up at her to continue. “You’re in your classroom four and a half hours after school let out. And I know this isn’t the first time. Kelly said she saw you

the other night here. You have to go home eventually. If that's not now, can't you at least come home with me so you're not alone?"

"I'm fine." I ducked my head back down.

Hannah knelt in front of my desk. "I didn't ask if you were or not. But that's good to know."

I kept trying to write on the paper in front of me, correct spelling and point out the good lines and the ones that need improvement. I didn't look at Hannah. I needed to get this done. I told my students I'd get the papers back tomorrow. Why didn't Hannah understand?

I waited for Hannah to say something, but she kept waiting for me. I could feel her eyes move over me, but I kept looking at the paper. My eyes caught some of the lines twice, and I felt my reading slowing and sputtering. Usually I got through each paper within fifteen minutes, but I must've been nearing the twenty minute mark at that point.

When I finally finished the paper, I looked up at Hannah.

"You don't have to wait for me."

Hannah nodded. "I know. But I want you to have some company. You don't have to be alone all the time, and I'm not in any hurry to get out of here."

"I'm fine," I told her again. "I'll go home soon."

Hannah frowned down at the ground before looking back up at me, her eyes wide, her brows crushed together in the look I had come to know as pity. "I know people stopped asking you how you were, Darce," she said, "but that doesn't mean they stopped caring. They, we, all of us just don't want to remind you of Megan. We still care."

I looked up at Hannah, waited a few seconds before giving her an answer. "It's okay that people stopped asking. I'm fine."

Hannah looked as if she might start crying. “Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because it’s true.”

Hannah shook her head at me. She pulled the pen from my hand and stood up, walking around my desk and squatting beside me. “You don’t have to pretend, okay? You don’t. I read an article a while back that said if you hold in grief, it just makes it worse. Megan was your best friend, Darcy. How could you be fine when you won’t even acknowledge that?”

I stared at Hannah. She had always been the emotional one, the one crying at graduation when her students crossed the stage, the one bringing in cookies on the days we would have school when we should have had snow days, the one people leaned into when stress entered their lives. She and I started at the school in the same year, but she knew way more of our coworkers by more than just their name than I ever did. She had often asked if I wanted to come to get-togethers outside of work, but more often than not, I had told her I was busy. She would sit with me at lunch, and I would entertain the small talk, but I kept pushing her away, not that it had fazed her much. I had Megan. I didn’t need Hannah.

When Megan died, I was in class lecturing about *Lord of the Flies*. It was the middle of sixth period, and Hannah came in. It was her free hour, and she’d come over to my class from time to time if she wasn’t grading or planning for the next day. The students never minded, and she said I had the best book collection out of all the English teachers. I had never minded much either, though I knew she hoped we could talk on those days when my students left, but I never held up my side of the conversation.

But that day, she looked so blank. Her face was vacant like she’d just come in from the freezing cold even though it was the middle of autumn.

“Hannah?”

My students turned with me even though they were supposed to be writing.

She walked up to me and leaned in close. “Go to David’s office. I’ll watch them.”

Confused, I looked at her for a minute longer. The students were all looking at us too, trying to figure out what was going on. Hannah nodded her head at me and motioned toward the door.

“I’ve got them,” she said.

Seeing Hannah like that had me running down the hall. I could hear the echoes of her voice joking about a history teacher in the front of an English class, but I missed the punchline as I turned the corner toward the main office.

I could see the principal, David, standing in the main area. Pushing the door open, I looked around, trying to figure out what was going on.

“David,” I said. “Hannah said to come see you?”

David nodded but didn’t smile. He had the same freeze-washed face as Hannah. He nodded his head a few more times before taking in a deep breath.

“There was an accident today in town. Some guy was drunk, and he ran a traffic light.”

I frowned at him. I didn’t know why it mattered.

“Your friend, Megan,” he said. He paused there and nodded his head a few more times. My heart was trying to lunge at him, to understand what he was saying. “She was the one who was hit.”

I took a step backward and stared at David, my body suctioned to the spot I stood. My breaths didn’t feel deep enough. My body felt like it was shriveling up around me.

I had finally asked if she was okay, and David could only shake his head.

I didn't remember the words after that. I didn't remember if I responded. I remembered running from the school to my car. I remembered driving toward the hospital while time seemed stuck around me.

I remembered entering the ICU. I remembered the nurses asking me questions, telling me I was the emergency contact, telling me I had to make decisions because I was the only one allowed to. I remembered seeing her body in the room, her eyes closed as a machine raised and lowered her chest. I remembered the doctors telling me that they didn't know if they could operate.

I looked down and back up at Hannah. She was still waiting, still somehow closer to tears and not crying.

"I come to school every day. I teach my kids." I paused for a moment. "Doesn't that make me okay? If I'm getting through life, aren't I doing what I'm supposed to?"

Hannah shook her head. "No. Everyone needs to grieve. Everyone needs to work through what happened."

I shrugged my shoulders. "I have."

"In two months?" Hannah asked. "Two months? Your best friend? Your friend so close you called her a sister? You've worked through that?"

I shrugged my shoulders again. I felt Hannah's eyes on me, but I didn't know what to say.

When I went to college, I tried to stay in contact with my family. My dad, the alcoholic, was the first to leave my radar. When I wasn't there for the sober moments, the drunk ones got to be too much. My mom always made excuses for him that I didn't want to hear. She tried to hold on to me, but we were always fighting. She said my dad wasn't the problem. She said I was. She

said I was the one always looking for the argument. She said if it was her or dad, my brothers would be just as unhappy as I was. She said it was just me with the problem, and if I could fix that in myself, then we could be a family. My brothers just went along with it all. They didn't seem to know better.

After two years of fighting to fit into a spot within my family that no longer fit who I was, I gave up. I had been working since high school, so I had the funds, and I cut myself out of the picture. I told my parents that the toxicity was too much, that if they were willing to change, that I would be back in a heartbeat.

Somewhere along the way, I had picked up Megan. She was a year older but we were taking a lot of the same classes. When I moved into all education classes the year I left my family behind, Megan and I were on two different tracks, but she always sought me out. When it came time to move, she asked if I needed someone to live with. We moved in together, and she became my family. I learned her family wasn't in the picture either, that her mom was in jail and her dad in rehab for the umpteenth time. She didn't have siblings. We always joked we'd have to walk each other down the aisle and be each other's' maid of honor at the same time.

My family never contacted me. I reached out once after I finished school when I was in my first year teaching alone. Megan and I had moved halfway across the country where she entered law school and I found a teaching job. I wanted to feel connected to the town, but I couldn't seem to make friends besides Megan. I called my parents to find a connection and was met with the same answer – give up who I had become outside of the house or give up my family. I hadn't opened the door again. The teachers at my school eventually became my friends, and my neighbors were like aunts and uncles. Once those areas were filled out, I knew my family wasn't going to fit right.

When Megan passed away, I tried to reach my family again. I needed someone, and they were people I wanted to lean on so much. My dad had picked up the phone, and I had spit out “Megan died, dad” before he could even get a full hello out.

He had paused when my words cut into his. “Well,” he said, “that’s pretty tough, isn’t it kid?”

I smiled then, thinking I had caught my dad sober, something that had always given me hope, and started to answer, but then he had cut me off. “Did you see that game last night? Looks like the Bulls might be going to the championship this year.”

“Did you hear what I said before?” I had asked back.

“Well, yeah,” he told me, “but she ain’t my family.”

I had made an excuse to get off the phone shortly after.

I let out a sigh of air. “Hannah, I promise if I need anything, I’ll ask, okay?”

Hannah shifted her stance. The long silences I left her with didn’t seem to make her uncomfortable, but I knew she was not happy with me. I wasn’t happy with me either.

I looked at her, but she wasn’t saying anything. She had her arms crossed and she was looking at me like she’s waiting for some reply to a question she hadn’t asked out loud.

I tried to wait her out, but she seemed to be trying to figure me out or something. I had done my analysis of her on past occasions, trying to figure out if she was really as nice as she made herself to seem or if she was really just someone who wanted to be liked. I spent some nights ranting to Megan about her, telling her that Hannah seemed so fake, but Megan usually defended her.

“She sounds pretty legit, Darcy,” she told me once. “People like that usually aren’t faking.”

I didn't want to believe her, but Hannah was the one left here waiting for me.

"I'm fine, Hannah. Really."

This brought out a scoff in her. She leaned forward onto my desk, her face inches from mine.

"Tell the goddamned truth," she says without a hint of wavering in her voice.

I looked away from her, closed my eyes and pushed the words out as fast as I could. I knew there was no other way out.

"I lost the one person who I had, okay? I made all the decisions I thought she'd need, and she still died. If I couldn't save Megan, then," I paused, "then I have to be okay without her."

Hannah was crying now. I wasn't.

"You have me," she said.

I felt numb. I pulled the papers on desk to me and started shoving them into my bag. "I have to go now."

"Darcy, you-"

"I have to go," I told her. "That's what you wanted, right?"

I pushed past Hannah and out the door. I heard Hannah's steps behind me, heard her calling out to me, heard her stop as I pushed open the front door and jogged down the stairs in front of the school.

I got into my car and slammed the door, pushing the bag off my shoulder and into the passenger seat. My stomach was twisting and I couldn't find my keys in my pocket. I felt shaky, like I couldn't catch up with myself.

I finally fished the keys out and started the car. I put the car in reverse, felt it jitter beneath me before I looked up. Hannah was on the steps watching me go.

“I’m sorry,” I said, though I knew she probably couldn’t hear me. “I’m so sorry.”

I pressed on the gas and backed out before putting the car in drive and pulling out of the lot. My body felt numb again. I barely felt myself driving. I kept whispering “I’m sorry” over and over until I no longer knew who I was talking to.

Week 5

Pushing the big doors open, I am reminded by how quiet this area actually is. With all the noise and hoopla that had been going on last week, the place seemed filled to the brim, but here, now, even the push to open the door sends echoes spiraling around the open room.

I place my things on a chair to the side and begin to make a circle of seven chairs in the center. As I pull the last two chairs toward my circle, the door opens to Ella.

I smile, give a small wave.

She walks toward me. “You’re early this week.”

I nod. “My meeting got out early.”

She plops into one of the chairs next to the two I’m setting in place. “What do you do?”

I look over at her. “What do you mean?”

She rolls her eyes as I sit next to her. “For a living. No one asks you that. Are you allowed to tell?”

I laugh a little. “Yeah. I own a flower shop.”

Ella smiles then crinkles her brows together. “What do you need meetings for at a flower shop?”

“Sales stuff. Inventory. Staffing for the month.” I shrug. “We meet about a lot of different things.”

“Did you do the flowers at your own wedding?”

I’m struck to silence for a moment. Nobody, not even in the group I had been a participant in, had asked about my working with flowers. Once they knew where I worked, it was left behind for something more interesting.

Finally, I nod. “I did. They were a mix of purple orchids and white roses.”

Ella considers this for a moment, nodding to herself. If she’s anything like the

“Do you like working with flowers?”

I nod again. “I do. It was always a hobby but making it a job makes me happier.”

Ella smiles at me. “I hope you do the flowers for my wedding one day. Of course, that’s a long time away, but I won’t forget.”

With a nod, I thank the girl. “Do you work?”

She shakes her head. “I’m in my last year of high school. My dad said grades are more important, and I play soccer too. He said with school, soccer, counseling, and this, having a job would be too much.”

“Do you agree?”

Ella shrugs as the door opens and Tucker and Paige walk in. “I don’t know. He’s always telling me what’s best, and I guess I do believe him for the most part. He’s just doing what he thinks is best.”

I nod, and before I can continue, Ella starts to rise, smiling at me. “Thank you for talking with me, even outside of group.”

She peels off her sweatshirt and walks to one of the chairs further back where she lays the sweatshirt and her bag. For lack of something better to do, I readjust the chairs in the circle, grab my bag – this week filled with pencils and small squares of paper – and then turn to the table with water and coffee.

Danny, Darcy, and Jessie walk in shortly after and lay their things to the side before moving into the circle. Danny comes to stand by me.

“Hey,” I smile toward him.

He looks over at me and smiles back. “Hey. More art this week?” He laughs a little.

“That depends,” I tell him. “Do you want to do more art?”

“It’s not so bad.” He shrugs and grabs his coffee cup, turning toward the circle.

Once we’re all seated, I grab the pencils and paper from my bag, instructing each person to take two pieces of paper.

“I want you to think of two negative emotions in your life. It could be right now, or it could be from when everything happened, or it could be a time in the middle. Write a word or a short phrase and then fold the paper up and put it in my bag, which will be in the center.”

I see a few nods as heads bow to the papers. I take the remaining pencils and papers and set them at my side, grabbing two of the papers myself.

On the first paper, I write ‘lonely’ and toss the paper into the bag. The second paper, I grasp at. My go-to emotion answer in my own group experience was ‘hopeless,’ but I always held back the one that pulled hardest. I hesitate but finally write out ‘fear,’ and throw it in as well.

After a few minutes have passed, everyone is quietly looking up and around. I give Jessie a moment to refill her water before jumping in.

“We’re going to go around the circle and take turns picking from the bag. I just want you to name a time you felt the emotion you pick and what you did that helped.”

Six heads nod at me.

“Does anyone want to go first?”

Ella leans forward, pushing her hand deep into the bag before latching onto a paper.

“Vulnerable.”

She sits quietly for a moment, eyes trained to her as she wanders through thought.

“When I first found out my baby brother died, I was shocked. I couldn’t put words on it then because I was just a kid, but now I know that along with being depressed and upset over what happened, I also wondered if something was going to happen to me. I mean, he was so little, you know?” A few heads nod. “I still can’t believe Ben’s gone some days. Sometimes I still have to remind myself. But I think I’m going to be okay. My dad, he still thinks I’m vulnerable, that something’s going to take me too, I think. But I don’t know. I just remind myself that I’ve made it this far, and I’m going to keep trying to make it further.”

When she stays quiet for a moment, the group shifts, and I see Paige reach forward. She pulls mine out of the hat – fear. I see my handwriting pressing to the back of the thin paper.

She stays silent in this moment, holding the paper loosely between her fingers.

“I don’t know how to fight fear,” she says. “Can I draw again?”

Eyes shift to me, and I don’t know what to tell them. I want to let her, but I don’t want to gloss over the emotions that are harder to deal with. I’m waiting too long to answer, but I don’t know what to say.

“Can you think of anything? I mean, it doesn’t have to be complex or anything like that.”

She shakes her head. “I want to pick again.”

We’re at a standoff, and I know the group is waiting to know if I will push or back down. They’re all silent, eyes lingering between me and her.

My voice hitches on the end of my breath in, and I know they catch the hesitation. “I know it hurts to think about these things, Paige, but just something. It doesn’t have to be much.”

Paige is staring at me now, her eyes drilling forward, the look she gave Danny a few weeks earlier. Though shorter than me, I don’t doubt she’s stronger and probably wouldn’t

hesitate to lash out. She certainly doesn't hesitate when it comes to lashing out with words. Everyone else's eyes have drifted to the floor or to the sides of the room.

“Paige.”

I don't know how to continue. She is folding and unfolding the paper in her hands now, clenching it and pulling as if she might tear it in two. When she finally speaks, there's tension pulled tight between each word.

“Fear fucking sucks, and I don't know which asshole put it in, but I don't know how to deal with it. I'm afraid of every fucking thing, of everything coming all at once, of no one being there for me like Cal was, of something happening, and I would do anything to go back to a time where I didn't feel afraid all the time, anything to bring him back and to not be afraid of losing him or myself, but I can't because I'm always afraid.”

She sighs at me in a staccato breath that echoes through the room, her words bubbled into the open enough now that she has turned the attention back to me to respond. Before I can though, another voice steps in.

“I'm afraid too, of a lot of things.”

Danny.

“I didn't have anyone but my mom, and now it's just me.”

Everyone is looking at him now.

“I don't know how to fight fear either, but somehow I do, and somehow you do too. We keep moving forward, don't we?”

Paige is frowning but she nods at him.

Danny leans back in his chair. “Then maybe the answer to facing fear is to just keep moving through it.”

“I’m afraid too,” Jessie says.

“Me too,” from Ella.

“Yeah,” Tucker and Darcy say at the same time.

“Me too,” I agree. “But that’s okay, you guys. It really is. It’s okay to be afraid. I think most people are.”

Paige looks like she might cry, but she’s staying silent, looking at the floor. I see her shake her head and try to return her expression to flat-lined lips and a frown in her brow, but her lips continue to shake even when she looks up. The rest of the group is either looking at me or quietly nodding their heads to my words.

Slowly, Tucker reaches forward. He pulls out “anger” and tells us that he channels his anger, most of his feelings, into music. He says sometimes he goes out into the middle of nowhere and screams to nothing and hopes that there aren’t hikers nearby. The group laughs at this.

“It kind of seems like I’m not allowed to hurt in the open, you know?” A few people nod at Tucker. “Even in the woods, I hope that people don’t hear me in pain.”

After everyone has read an emotion, I again pass around the pieces of paper.

“This time,” I tell them, “I want you to write about a positive emotion. Don’t throw them in the bag; these ones, I want you to keep. Think about a time that you’ve felt this emotion, before or after you lost your person. We’ll share a few before we leave today, but I want you guys to remember these positive things throughout the next week and look for more.”

Pencils immediately take to paper. I watch their heads bob as they write. In the middle of writing, I see Ella’s head pop up and turn to Paige. She reaches out and places a hand on Paige’s knee. Paige turns to Ella, and I watch Ella smile, mouth something like, “It’s gonna be okay,” to

Paige. Paige bites at her lip and gives a small smile back. The girls remain like this for a moment before they both go back to writing.

I let a few minutes more pass before starting in. “Sometimes it’s easy to get trapped in one emotion and to think that it’s the only one there, but I want you guys to see that there are many things you’re feeling and many things you’re going to feel, and that’s okay. When we leave today, I want you to hold onto the positives and know they’ll come back when they fade away.”

We go around the circle and share one of the positive emotions each. Just like on the steps last week, the group comes alive, sharing and asking questions, stories flying about the memories of those they’d lost. They like this part, and I wish I could give them just this every week, but I know they’ve got to face the bad stuff too, and I don’t want them doing it alone.

When we break for the week, Paige crosses the circle and wraps her arms around me again. I don’t know if this is supposed to happen between me and a group member, but I let it because I think she needs it more than the rules could dictate.

After a few seconds, she leans back, crying. “I’m sorry I’m such a jerk in group.” She leans forward again and hugs me tighter. I smooth her hair with one hand and hold her with the other.

“Paige, it’s grief,” I tell her. “Grief does funny things to us. I don’t think anyone’s upset about what you said.”

I feel her nod into my shoulder.

When she pulls away again, I wait for her to look at me. “Have you ever considered counseling?”

She shakes her head.

“It might help,” I tell her. “Group is good, but counseling could help even more. I don’t want you to keep hurting like this.”

Paige seems to consider this for a minute before replying. “Can I think about it for a week?”

I nod. “You can think about it for as long as you need to.”

She nods and starts to turn toward the door.

“Thank you again,” she says. “It helps to know I’m not alone.”

I smile at her. “You’re not.”

As she heads toward the door, I notice Ella standing by the entrance. She looks up from her phone as Paige approaches her and begins to talk to her, though they are quiet enough that I can’t hear what they’re saying. Ella is smiling and reaches out to grasp Paige’s hand before they walk out the door together.

I follow them out shortly after and see them in the parking lot. Ella’s hugging Paige again, and I hear her ask if Paige wants to get coffee or something. The girls are agreeing on a place when I reach them.

As I put my things into my car, Ella trots to the car next to mine and unlocks it.

“Ella?”

She looks at me. “You’re a good friend. Thank you for all you’re doing for her.”

Ella smiles back. “We all need somebody sometimes, and I guess I’m okay Paige needing someone and that someone being me.”

We exchange quick goodbyes before she gets in her car, signaling Paige to follow her as she backs out of her spot.

I shift my own car into drive and move forward, following them from the lot and down the road.

In the Fire

In what colors remained in my room, the white vanity was the only thing that seemed to be missing a scar. The green of the floor, the blue of the walls, the nature that my room all used to be was now tinted with black dust, firework displays of soot and burns flying upward through the floor. But the vanity remained untouched, white paint bright against the rest of the room.

“Why’s it look like that, dad?”

My dad graced his hand along my back. “The fire was in the kitchen right below you, kid. This is what happens when stuff burns. But the fire only burns what it can reach.”

The picture in the newspaper had shown the front of the house in the small section that had talked about what happened. In the blurry photo, there was black too, but it didn’t look like this. I didn’t know the insides could look like this.

I took a step away from my dad, shuffling my feet along the floor to check for faulty footing since everything seemed to be giving out in the places the fire was worst. My dad said things would be okay, but I wanted to be sure.

I walked to the vanity and tried to avoid the black smears of soot. The toes of my purple shoes were already turning black.

I slid my fingers along the back of the chair at the vanity. My mom and dad’s wedding picture sat in the corner of the mirror, somehow still okay after the fire. I picked it up and turned back to my dad, holding my hand out.

“You take it.”

My dad stepped forward and reached for the other end. “Thanks, El.”

I nodded to him and turned back to my desk, busying myself with looking for what else might be savable. “Mom would’ve wanted you to have it.”

We didn’t have much reminders of mom anymore. She died when I was six and Ben was really little. Since then, it had been just me and dad and Ben. I wanted my dad to keep that picture of mom so I could remember what she looked like after we left there.

I moved along the edge of the room as I looked at all the things that were there. My stuffed animals were gross and ruined, my pictures from class photo day were black on the sides, and the clothes I had left beside my bed had holes more than they had stitches.

When I returned to school last week, I told dad that I wanted to come here to see what happened since I had been in an ambulance before I could see anything before, and if I could go to school, then we could come here. I had told my counselor this, and she had disagreed so I let it go, but my dad had come back to the idea a few times and told me yesterday that we were going back.

Going back to school made my dad tell me about Ben. Before he told me, he’d let me believe Ben was in the hospital getting better. His whole body shook when he told me the truth, and I had been more scared by that than the news about Ben. My whole world was shaking. He told me that it was okay to cry. He said he knew that the teachers would ask me and he wanted to tell me first. That was four days before I went back to school. He waited a week to bring me here. Right before we came inside, he told me again that it was okay to cry.

“Are you okay?”

I turned toward my dad and nodded my head. “Can I get new clothes besides the ones you picked out?”

He smiled. “Yes, Ella.”

I walked back to my dad and then past him, crossing the lines of my green carpet to the tan carpet of the hallway to the blue carpet of Ben's room. It didn't look like anything here was burned.

"Where was Ben?"

My dad stood in the doorway right behind me, his hands on my shoulders. "He was downstairs. I think something woke him up. He was getting something from the fridge. That's where the firemen found him."

I spun to face my dad, staring up at him as he looked down at me. "Did he hurt?"

My dad shook his head and looked up and out the window for a minute. "Yes, Ella, he got hurt very badly. They couldn't do much for him."

"Dad, no," I pulled at the trim of his blue sweater, the one he always wore to church on Sundays. "Did he hurt? Did he feel hurt?"

My dad looked like he was going to cry, and I knew I had never seen him do that before. The shaking had been the closest, and even that didn't compare. I took his hand for a moment like he always had when I got upset. I gave his hand a squeeze and waited for him to smile at me because then I could tell him that things were going to be okay, just like he did for me.

He didn't smile though and didn't look at me. After a few seconds, I let go and went farther into Ben's room.

I touched Ben's bed, the still unmade dinosaurs smiling out from under his comforter. I remembered holding his hand and walking him to bed that night.

"Dad will be in to tuck you in, okay?"

Ben had smiled up at me. "Okay, sissa." He extended his arms, and I leaned down and gave him a hug and a kiss on his forehead.

I tried to lean back, but Ben held his arms, giggling at me.

A quick tickle of his sides sent his hands right into mine with lots of laughter. I gave him another kiss on his forehead before leaning back again.

“Tim too,” Ben tells me. He lifts his teddy and I give the bear a kiss on his forehead too.

“Dad, where’s Tim?”

I let go of the comforter that I had been gathering in my hand and rushed back to my dad’s side. “Where’s Tim?”

My dad shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, Ella. I guess I didn’t think about that.”

I pushed past my dad and ran down the stairs, not bothering to step around the soot. I twisted around the corner and tried to steady myself as I ran down the hallway. My dad was somewhere behind me, calling for me to wait for him.

In the kitchen, the island blocked the view of the bottom of the fridge. The place looked like an explosion. I could feel my breath get heavy with the remains of smoke around me.

I took big steps around the island and searched the soot for the small, brown bear.

Pushed to the side of the fridge behind the door that hung open without a light, I saw the leg of the bear.

I stepped toward it, pushed the fridge closed. I picked up Tim by his arm like Ben used to do.

Ben holding the bear as he waved me off to school on my first day a couple years ago, his other hand tucked in my dad’s. Ben carting Tim around the house in the quiet of the night so that he could warn Ben of any monsters that were to come.

I thought that maybe Tim couldn’t tell Ben about the fire.

The bear still smiled at me even though his bowtie was more black than red. He looked at me with the wide button eyes like he was asking where my brother was.

My knees stopped working and I fell to the floor. I held Tim against me in the tightest hug I could manage, the soot of the floor rising up around me, my breathing coming as heaving in the heavy air around me. I heard a loud scream and I didn't realize it was me until my dad was there trying to shush me and pull me into his arms.

I grasped at the bear and cried into my dad's shoulder. I couldn't hear anything or see anything because I was crying too hard.

After a while, my dad carried me out the front door and to his truck parked out front. I wanted to tell him that he never parked in the road because he said that was how cars got hit. I wanted him to tell me why that time was different. But I couldn't say anything. My tears stopped, but I couldn't say anything.

My dad placed me in the back seat and buckled me in. When he shut the door, I leaned my head against the window, holding Tim in my lap while I brushed my fingers over his furry, sooty head.

My dad kept saying that everything was okay. He kept saying that we didn't have to go back, that he wouldn't take me back anymore. I wanted to tell him that that wouldn't fix this. Not going home wouldn't bring Ben back, and we had to go back because I didn't want to forget Ben like I sometimes thought I would forget mom. I wanted to tell my dad that I loved my brother and him as he apologized a million times for making me do that. But I didn't say anything back to him.

My eyes didn't look at the trees outside my window. Everything was blurry but that could be because I was crying again. My stomach hurt and I wanted to tell my dad that I believed him when he said everything was going to be okay, but I didn't know if that was true.

Instead, I just stroked Tim's head, sucked in the scent of soot as I sniffed in breaths and hoped for, underneath, the scent of fresh dirt and clean laundry that Ben always smelled like. The road kept going by as we travelled to the motel we were calling home for the time. I cried sometimes and then it went away until I thought of Ben again.

With his best friend pushed against me, I wished I could hold Ben instead.

Week 6

It's almost quarter after when I pull into the parking lot, nearly fifteen minutes after group is supposed to start. My car hadn't started, and I had to call around until someone wasn't working and could come jump my car. My eyes are welling with tears as I slam my car door and jog toward the entrance. Reliability is one of the group leader's most important qualities and fifteen minutes late is anything but reliable.

Running up the stairs, I trip and hold my bag to me. My arm's pulsing a little, but I will look once I'm in and settled. I can't waste more time out here.

Pulling the door open, six heads turn to my entrance. They are sitting in a circle, comfortably placed around each other.

"I'm so sorry," I tell them, rushing toward them and throwing my bag down. "My car wouldn't start, and I don't have too many people I can call for that sort of thing."

The group gives me a mix of smiles, shrugs, and no change at all. I sit in the one empty chair. "What did I interrupt?"

"We were just talking about the first steps back into the world," Jessie says, "and how awkward other people are with the topic of death."

I sigh. "That's good. That's really good. Can you guys pick up with me here?"

Within minutes, I am able to sigh again as the conversation weaves between people. Ella's telling about the adults around her when she was a kid who found out she lost her mom long before her brother, and how sorry they all were for her. She says they offered her hugs and promised her that Ben was watching her from heaven. She said she grasped at what they said, because shortly after the fire, her dad closed down completely.

“We went back to the house once,” Ella says, “but my dad didn’t do well after that. It was like all that he could see was what he lost when he looked at me.”

“I got that too,” Danny continues. “I was a senior in high school. They didn’t know what to do with me since I was not graduated yet. I didn’t have anyone, so I went to a foster home for the last two months of school. They didn’t know what to do with me either. Everyone looked at me like all I was was the guy that lost his mom.”

Danny runs a hand over his head and looks at me. “How long did it take you to get back to the world?”

I lean back. “I took my sweet time. From other people’s perspectives, I was back in action within the first two weeks. I always had it together. But it took me a long time to feel connected to people again.”

Paige cocks her head. “What does that mean, though? What made you feel so disconnected?”

I smile at Paige, glad to hear her voice. She grins back in my silence, flicking her dark bangs to the side before returning to her normal scowl, and I wonder for a moment why she’s friendly with me but so reluctant with others.

“I had a lot of friends, but Hunter was my everything,” I tell her. “I didn’t know what they wanted from me and I couldn’t explain what I wanted from them, so it took some time before I could understand them.”

Paige nods and the conversation keeps moving. We were supposed to do another activity with emotions this week, but I want them to keep talking. For this week, I decide to screw the guidebook I’m supposed to follow. Again. It’s good we’re not really monitored in this position unless there are complaints made against a leader.

A part of me wonders if I am even doing this right though. This group, for the most part, seems to like each other. They talk more than my own group did, and they seem to really want to help one another, especially Ella. Paige and Danny are at least okay most of the time. And they keep coming back, which is a good sign I think.

I wish I could tell them more about what I see in them, and maybe I'll have to do that in one of the next few weeks. They are gentle and strong, people who don't seem to take much crap in life after all they've been through. There's so much confusion, which hurts us all at times, but also leads to incredible growth. They seem to be grasping things for the most part, but I wonder how they are outside of the group, whether the pieces they bring to the group are the same people who sit at home and contemplate the emptiness they now have to live with. Does Ella's smile fade? Does Paige try to hold together a tough exterior even when the only set of eyes around her are her own looking back at her in the mirror? Does Tucker talk more when he's not expected to?

These individuals keep coming back and finding each other. They're the only ones I see regularly outside of my shop, and I realize I keep finding myself here for myself as much as for them. Something about these people has shown me that, even if I'm not the most important person in the world, at least I am someone to these guys for an hour each week.

I sit quietly throughout this meeting, turning to my role as a facilitator for this week. The group talks and asks me questions, and I do what I can to answer them. The hour passes quickly as it always does on the weeks when I just let them talk.

I walk out with the rest of the group as they splinter toward their own cars or begin walking down the street. I wave and say goodbye. Ella gives me a hug as I reach my car. Getting in, I turn the key, and the car, again, doesn't start.

The engine doesn't even try to turn over when I twist the key in its spot. I stop and take a breath before trying again. Still nothing. I pop the hood and step back out of my car. Propping the hood up, I look into the tangle of rubber and metal. It will be another long wait to get to someone here to help.

“Do you need help?”

I jump at the voice and turn. Paige's hair blows all around in the wind of the evening. She waits for me to answer in silence.

“Sure. Do you have a car here?”

She nods and jogs to a Volkswagen. Driving to the empty spot next to mine, she ditches her stuff in the passenger seat before climbing back out. She doesn't say too much but reaches out for the jumper cables in my hand, her hands reaching for me as a child who's taking first steps toward a parent. I place them in her hand and walk the other end to my engine.

We tandem the connections, placing them in the order that won't cause shock. Once they're all placed, she reaches into her car and turns it on. Once it runs for a minute or so, I start mine too, and it purrs to life.

I walk to the passenger side of my car so we stand side by side. “Thank you for staying late, Paige.”

She looks at me and smiles. “We all need someone sometimes, right?”

I smile as she mimics Ella's words.

“I, um,” she continues, “I actually wanted to catch you before leaving anyway. I thought about what you said last week, about the counseling.”

I nod at her to continue.

“I’m looking into it. I want to connect to people, but my heart hurts so much that I can’t unless that person’s super understanding, like you or Ella.”

I smile. “That’s really good, Paige. Really good to hear.”

Her eyes tear up. “I just don’t want to feel so alone.”

Before she moves, I open my arms, inviting her to me. She collides into me again as I hear her take in a crying breath. We stand in the dying light of the day with our cars purring on either side of us like they’re some sort of guards. I stroke the girl’s hair as she holds onto me and cries, tell her it’s okay as she holds herself to me.

When she finally pulls away, wiping her eyes, I look her in the eye. “Do you need someone to go with you? Do you need me to do anything?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve got one appointment set up to test this lady out. I think I should be okay.”

I nod. “Okay, good. I’m here for you too, okay? So’s Ella.”

Paige nods back. “It’s actually Ella’s counselor,” she says with a laugh. “Ella says I’ll really like her.”

“Good.”

Paige looks to the side and lets out a huff of breath as if she is silencing the last of the tears for today. “I think your car should be good now.”

We shut down the engines and remove the wires that have attached the cars before starting them back up, a roar to each of the engines.

I hug Paige to me one last time and thank her for her help before we both get into our cars to go. She sits and wipes her eyes a few more times before shifting into reverse. I wait until she’s

pulled onto the road, moving on to her new destination, before shifting my own car and pulling out behind her.

How Much Has Passed

When you're grieving, people always tell you what to do. They, these people with love intact, have the answers to get over loss.

Somehow, running with a dog, a dog I didn't even have, or a friend would help me to process what I'd been through.

Somehow, moving to a new home where Cal never was would help me deal with the separation.

Somehow, coming out to coffee with those I had left would make it all better.

But there I was, day four in the same pair of pajamas, eating the last of my Moose Tracks ice cream. I kept to showering so my mother couldn't say I wasn't doing well. I also fed the cat so he couldn't tell her I'm not doing well. She didn't have to know I hadn't cooked for myself in weeks.

It had been 37 days since Cal died. It had been 36 days, 22 hours, and 41 minutes since I was called by my almost-mother-in-law. It had been 26 days since I knew she was my almost-mother-in-law. Before that, we'd only met at four holiday gatherings. Cal was never big on family except when the holidays demanded it.

It had been 8 days since I got drunk on the last of Cal's beer and threw all his clothes, all his shoes, all his crap from our room. It had been 2 days since the last time I spent the night in the pile of Cal's clothes, breathing in the last of him and twirling the ring I'd found 24 days earlier in the back closet behind Oliver's food.

On that 38th day, I promised myself for the 17th time to stop counting the hours and days. I told myself I would get to returning the phone calls I had been hiding away. I told myself I

would leave those pajamas and that apartment. I needed those things, those numbers, but maybe not that day.

Across the street, I saw my neighbor walking his dog, Sam. I didn't know my neighbor's name though. Cal probably would have. In the first 11 days, I took the trash out when Sam and his owner would walk. I could then tell my mother that I'd had contact with people.

After I shoved the last of my ice cream into my mouth, I dropped the empty container into the garbage and the spoon in the sink and stood for a moment in the big, empty kitchen. My feet were cool against the linoleum, sticking me to that spot the way my memories did so many times throughout the day. I could smell the dirty dishes in the sink, the stench of food gone bad mixing with the soap I had put in many of the bowls so they could soak. I could feel Cal's presence there, the movement of his memory around me as if he were breezing past me to rescue the eggs I was almost burning on the stove for millionth time. I could smell the eggs then too, the smell of burning cheese like a ghost dancing with Cal's. I picked up my feet slowly as if expecting them to stick like quicksand. The memories sometimes held me still, but that day, I could push forward. With that thought, I walked to our bedroom to find Oliver claiming the bed for the day.

"I'm not fighting you today, cat," I told him. "I'm going out."

Oliver's green eyes studied me for a moment, calculating the truth behind what I told him, before he returned to licking his paw to clean himself. His sleek, black coat was matted in spots where he laid in the sun too long, but he tried to make himself look presentable as if one-upping me in speed at getting over it all.

Oliver was the only consistent part of Cal's and my shared life. We were opposites colliding – Cal, a jock who loved chemistry and could build up any conversation about science to

a point where nearly anyone could be interested, and me, the book-loving accountant who stuck mostly to numbers instead of people. Cal dragged me out and made me make friends, and I valued him for it, but I wondered during those previous 20 days or so whether the friends he made for me would really be my friends with him gone. Like an earthquake pulling apart a bridge between country and city, the people who once travelled to me were far away and hard to reach now.

I stripped from my apartment attire and threw it on the bed, causing Oliver to glare at me. He would steal three or five socks while I was gone, teasing me with the loner socks whose stripes, spots, and brands would never find a match again. Oliver's way of dealing with grief seemed to be head-on; all his actions told me he knew how alone I was, and they also tell me he didn't care.

I pulled pieces of clothing from my closet, causing the hangers to clank back and forth momentarily, my work shirts shivering with movement as I grabbed for my oldest sweatshirt. I pulled the green hoodie over my head, picked up the cleanest looking pair of jeans from the floor, and pulled them on as well. The jeans started to slip right away, a surprise with all the takeout that had graced my lips in the last 37 days.

I tried to keep my momentum going and pushed my feet into the closest pair of clogs, the brown suede pair Cal got me on my 23rd birthday. I slipped my keys from their hook and said goodbye to Oliver, though I was sure he didn't care about where I may be.

Trotting down the 13 stairs, I walked away from the parking lot. I walked the 9 blocks to town so I could tell my mother I exercised too. She'd tell me that the fresh air would do me good, and all those grief experts would tell her she was right and that I needed to re-enter the world if I wanted to keep living. The world had no use for those who hid with emotions.

There was a strangeness in going down the street on a work day in the middle of work hours. There weren't any kids making chalk drawings or people in gardens or horns honking as neighbors noticed each other driving and wanted to say hello. The birds were still singing and the wind still carried the smell of pine from the logging happening just west of town, but I was alone in walking. I reminded myself then to call work when I got home and thank them for being so understanding with my random sick day usage. I passed by Cal's work friend, Ronny's house; he lived down the street from us and was almost always grilling on his front porch for dinner – the life of a 28 year old bachelor, I supposed. But he was absent that day, as was the smoke from his grill. No friendly wave, no talk of baseball, no Ronny.

Two houses down from Ronny, Karli and her two kids were also missing. Karli was the waitress at the diner where Cal and I would eat on most of our date nights. We got to know Karli from being there so much, and I'd watch her two kids on the nights she had to work late.

Four streets over, my sister went to a party at her then-boyfriend's house and got drunk. I picked her up and brought her to my place for the night so that our mother wouldn't find out.

Cal's college roommate was somewhere in a close neighborhood too. I'd only been there once, but Cal went often to play video games or watch the million sports games I wasn't interested in with someone who was.

Usually we'd see at least some of these people on our walk to town, possibly more that were out on their own walks or bike rides. There were always people here. But then, it was only me.

I picked up my pace through the emptiness and reached the main street, turning toward the diner out of habit. I immediately regretted this and started to turn but changed my mind again

and kept walking forward. I wondered if I was entertaining the shop owners as I stopped and started, turning on my heel over and over as I tried to decide what it was I really wanted to do.

Finally, I just walked forward. I pushed myself down the street and past the diner, the door shining a glare in my eyes as I passed.

Speeding past, I took the first store entrance after the diner, a coffee shop Cal never liked for their lack of fried food. The girl behind the counter smiled at me as I entered.

I walked up to the counter and looked at the choices. My sister and I had been here before, and I'd come in with friends or alone on a few occasions. They knew that coffee was best when it was mostly sugar, and I liked that.

“What can I get you?” the girl asked.

I didn't know what to say for a moment. It was a simple question, but I was dumbstruck.

“Coffee?” she asked, trying to meet my eye. She might have recognized me, or maybe she just knew that was what most people got at a coffee shop.

I nodded at her. “And a muffin, please. Whichever kind your favorite is.”

The girl nodded back and gathered my things. “How are you doing today?” she asked.

“Good. Day off work. That's always good, right?”

The girl smiled and nodded again. I gave her the money and gathered my things, walking toward the back of the small enclosure. The girl let me be, though it was just the two of us there.

At the table, I grabbed my coffee cup with both hands and held it in front of me. The warmth radiated up, and I brought the cup to my lips to taste the sweetness that overtook the bitter.

I looked up after the sip and noticed the chair across from me was pulled out and to the side. Its well-worn seat bowed in the middle where many people had slid back and forth as they

sat and stood. It wasn't often I saw an empty chair across from me. I was never one for being alone in public, my shyness keeping me cooped to my home when I didn't have a second person to offset my silence. Cal knew that and would go with me to new places if he knew I had no one else to go with. He was a creature of habit and didn't care to try new places all the time, but he knew I did, so he did. His broad-shouldered torso would make most chairs creak, his dark curls bouncing against his forehead as he smiled at my want to blend into the background. He teased me, called me the most fearful adventurer, someone always wanting more but afraid to reach for it if it wasn't guaranteed. He promised to take me on those adventures, let my wild side run just to see the passion in my eyes.

I pushed that thought away and returned to the coffee. I pulled a piece of my muffin – some cranberry thing – and dunked it into the cup. I would not dwell on Cal, I told myself.

Instead, I pulled my phone out and connected it to the WiFi in the shop. I opened up Facebook and looked at the red numbers that signaled my notifications. 23 notifications. I didn't get on much anymore, but I didn't think it'd been that long. Maybe 5 days at most. 23 notifications in 5 days? I'd never been that popular.

When I opened the notification menu, I saw that I was tagged in photos and statuses about Cal and how great he was, how great we were, how sorry everyone was for my loss. My profile had many words of sympathy. My face appeared beside Cal over and over again, playing out the timeline of our life together through the people who had made mention of me with him.

I closed Facebook after only a few minutes and set the phone on the table. I wouldn't dwell on Cal. It had been less than ten minutes since I said that before.

The front door jangled as another customer walks in. This one looked familiar, an older woman whose face I couldn't place. She ordered her things before she noticed me watching her. She smiled back and waved, and I knew she knew me too.

Once she paid and received her things, she walked to me. "You're Calum's girl, correct?"

My skin goosebumped as she said this. I nodded.

"I'm so sorry."

Suddenly this woman who I still was not sure how I knew was leaning forward and hugging me. She had me pressed awkwardly against her, my face smashed into her chest. At first I pulled away, but I felt some sort of relief wash over me, and I hugged the woman back, the first touch I welcomed since I exiled myself to my home, a place where no one but my mother had come to find me. This woman, she was warm and comfortable, she was here and she cared. She knew Cal somehow and she could relate to me in that one way. As she held me, I began to cry.

When she pulled away, I wiped my tears on my sleeve. The woman laid a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "It'll get better."

I nodded at her, smiling slightly as I met her eye.

"We pray for you at church all the time."

I looked at her again and placed the face as she gave me a sad half-smile. Cal's mother's best friend. I met her when Cal's niece was baptized a few months back. She asked me to come back to church, but I kept telling her I was too busy. Really, Cal didn't want to go, and I didn't want to go without him. I met her again at the funeral, one I didn't think Cal would like because it was back at his parents' church. But they made the decisions, and I'd told Cal I was sorry as I saw him that last time.

I thanked the woman for her prayers, and she said she was sorry one more time. I told her then that I had to go, trying to hide the half-eaten muffin in its napkin, pressing the crumbling sweet into my hand and feeling the squash of fresh-made pastry between my fingers.

I placed the coffee cup on the counter by the girl and pushed out the front door, shoving my muffin deep into my pocket as the bell jingled a quick goodbye. I could feel myself crying more as I turned back toward home. It was a stupid idea to come out by myself for the first time without Cal and I wanted to go home and maybe try again in a week or two, whenever I had gathered enough courage to ask my mom or find a friend to come along.

My mind kept lapping around Cal as I walked. Was he unhappy that he'd been brought back to the church when he no longer had a choice? Was he mad at me for letting it happen? Would he be mad at me if I went back to the church without him?

Cal never really wanted to talk about why he didn't want to go; he just said it wasn't for him. His brother told me Cal didn't like feeling controlled, that he couldn't handle a God that was always overpowering him. His brother also told me Cal thought most people in the church were hypocrites. I wanted to ask why, but Cal was closed on the subject.

I got home without much thought of my surroundings and banged in the door. I avoided the mirror behind the door since I knew my face would be blotchy from crying. Entering the bedroom, Oliver had not moved. I stepped out of my shoes and got up on the bed, pushing him to the side, setting myself back to where I started the day. Oliver glared at me but didn't make any effort to retaliate or leave his new spot. I'd pushed him to my side of the bed, had let myself fall into the cavern that Cal's bulky body had created, the place I would roll into when Cal would get up in the morning, soaking up the heat he left behind and the fresh mountain spring smell his body wash left behind.

After Cal had passed, I'd roll to his side all the same when I was half-awake in the time before dawn, and on the worst of the mornings, I would find the coolness a shock to my body, jolting me from that side, from that bed, from that emptiness I couldn't take. I tried to find what was left of him – his scent or even his hair, but the canyon he created on the mattress seemed to be all that remained.

I told myself again that I was not going to think of Cal.

I told myself that he'd be okay with church.

“Oliver, you think he'd let me go to church, right?”

Oliver didn't answer.

“I need people, Oliver. He'd understand that.”

As I tried to hold a one-sided discussion with my cat about how okay my dead almost-fiancé would be with me going to the church he didn't like, my phone buzzed.

A text from my mom.

“Stopped by your place. You weren't there. Good for you.”

I pushed the phone away without replying. It had been 38 days. Maybe 39 would be better.

Week 7

Everyone is soaked as they walk into group this week. The rain outside is coming down in buckets instead of drops at this point. They come in as groups today, huddling under umbrellas and each other's coats as they make their way inside. I give everyone a chance to shed their outer-most layer before calling them over to me.

We're not in our usual circle this week. I've pulled out the whiteboard that's used to teach the sports teams that use this gym the plays they need to know. In front of the board I've placed one chair. The group gathers around me, some still shaking the wetness from their hair.

"Today," I tell them, "I want to focus on you."

The group shuffles. Jessie bumps into Paige and the two murmur to each other for a moment. The boys shove their hands into their pockets as they wait.

"Sometimes the hardest piece of grief is seeing yourself without the person you lost. We sometimes can't identify ourselves without them. So today, we're going to find out about ourselves from ourselves and each other."

I grab a stack of plain paper and black whiteboard markers.

"Write some things about yourself on these sheets of paper. You don't have to think about it too hard. I just want you to write down some things that will help us to see you as you do. Understand?"

The group nods and I tell them they've got about five minutes or so. I write down my own words: Wife, Widow, Shop Owner, Kind, Resilient, and on. I can hear the others writing, pausing to think, and continuing on, all bent over on tables or knelt next to chairs as they write.

When we're finished, I pull them back together and ask them to stand in a circle and hold their signs in front of them.

When they do so, I give them all a minute to look at the words they've labeled themselves as.

Paige has written "ANGRY" in the middle of hers with smaller words such as daughter, sister, friend, emotional, stubborn, and so on.

Danny has also written "angry" though not in the same way she has. They are staring at each other when I notice this, and I watch their expressions come to an understanding that they are more alike than they maybe knew.

Jessie's most noticeable words are "Mom without a daughter."

Darcy's words are all over. They range from her profession as a teacher to words such as stoic and gentle. Nothing is too terribly big; nothing stands out.

Ella has written "survivor" and "fighter" in big letters on her piece. I am only slightly surprised that all of Ella's words are at least somewhat positive.

Tucker's words are all over as well, though "musician" is the biggest. He doesn't smile much, just looks around at his group's words.

Once they have all had a moment to study each other's words, I ask them to listen for the next piece. I set my paper down and reach for a camera I had set on a chair nearby and point toward the chair in front of the whiteboard.

"One at a time, I want you guys to go up to the chair and sit. We will write words that we think describe you on the board behind you. You won't see until the picture has been taken. You'll hold your own words up for one picture and take one with just the words of others. Does that sound okay?"

The group shuffles and nods.

“Anyone want to go first?”

I don’t have to wait long until Jessie is walking forward, settling herself into the chair with her own paper tucked into her lap. I let her sit for a moment before encouraging the others to begin to write their words about Jessie. I come forward myself, write the word brave so that it will show over her left shoulder, the one word I know describes Jessie, the one girl always willing to go first.

Once everyone has had a chance to write the words, I ask Jessie to hold up her sign. She does so and I snap a picture. I have her hand the paper off to Tucker and snap another of her before telling her she can turn around. The group smiles as Jessie reads through the words and reaches out to touch the words on the board. She seems particularly caught on the words “Gentle Soul” that I think Danny wrote.

After a few minutes, she turns to the group and asks for a group hug. We do so for a moment, all these people who have only known each other for two months, holding each other for a moment, before we break apart and work to erase the board.

Once erased, Ella steps up and sits. We do the same. I write quickly “resilient” behind her and watch the others write. Even though I’ve seen this done before, I am in awe by the careful way in which these young adults are picking their words for Ella. She seems so content to sit and wait, and laughs when Paige tousles her hair as she walks away from the board.

We go through the same steps again. First photo, second photo, look. Ella is about in tears as she reads through her words and we hug as a group again.

This continues through each of the group members. No one hesitates to go up, and no one even tries to say something unkind. The room is warm and comfortable, as if we've been doing this for years.

When Tucker, the last to sit, has finished, the group all turns to me.

"You're doing this too, right?" Danny asks.

I smile. "Okay."

I sit and let my group write around me. I keep stiff to keep myself from peaking. When they've all stepped away, Darcy picks up the camera and snaps the photos. When I turn around, I am left speechless. The board has many words, and by the handwritings, it looks like everyone's written at least two words for me. Words range from gentle teacher to friend. Directly above my head, the word motherly love sits like a halo.

Turning back to the group, I ask for one last hug as well. As we pull apart, the group remains close to each other.

"I want you all to think about this. We were going to talk, but we ran out of time. I'll have the photos for you next time we meet, okay? So that should refresh your memories. Be prepared to discuss this experience."

The group leaves just as they came, in pairs under cover to beat the rain. As the door opens, the scent of rain leaks in. I clean up, erase the whiteboard of my words, though I linger before erasing my halo-word. I smile to myself as I gather my supplies into my bag and follow my group out into the rain.

Out of the Woods

The fireplace was doing well to keep Bailey warm tonight, but not much beyond the dog's black body. He was just in front of me on the floor in front of the couch where I sat and seemed to be more than content to lay there and soak up all the heat.

My feet and nose were cold, and I shivered as the wind howled through the little cracks in our log cabin. Holding my coffee cup closer, I turned the lamp off next to me so I could see the snow falling outside. The house was silent beside the crackling fire and the creaking of the foundation from the wind. Bailey was snoring softly too, making up for the lack of another person's presence in the room.

On the mantelpiece above the fire sat the timeline of my life with Hunter. His smile on our engagement day through his smile on our last anniversary. I never let him forget a year.

Less noticeable to someone who didn't live there was a line of small wooden circles of wood cut from branches of trees that hung over top of a quilt my grandma had made us for a wedding gift. Four little circles were strung together, each with a small set of wings carved into the center and a name overtop. Hunter would make these during the week following each of our miscarriages. When I'd call him crying that my body was rejecting another baby, he'd come and get me, get me to the hospital, and within the next few days, we'd return home, return to a life with just the two of us. Each time, Hunter would tell me everything would be okay. The dark circles under his eyes would crease upward as he gave me a smile I knew he didn't mean before he would wrap me in a blanket and hold me until I fell asleep. Once I was asleep, he would slip back into his shoes and go to the woods. He would cut a branch from a tree surrounding our

property and use the small piece of wood to create a memorial while I laid in the quiet of a house we had hoped to fill with children.

I'd hung the last of the memorials up less than a month before. I had found it one evening when I'd come home from work on top of what I would soon know to be a note left by my husband that explained his sorrow and despair in the decision he had made in my absence. He couldn't handle the losses, he told me. Each one felt like he was letting me down. He hoped I'd forgive him. I had run through the house, calling for Hunter, screaming until my voice was cracking under the strain. Caught up in my own grief, I had failed to see that the strong hands that were holding me were becoming weaker with each loss.

I had found him that night in the workshop he almost lived in when he was working through his emotions. The place where he'd built a crib and a rocking chair, the place where he hacked and sawed at the wood he brought in from the forest until it revealed a statue or piece of furniture, something he could control the creation of. He was in the very back, his head cocked to the side as if he were sleeping. His car was parked inside that night, something he didn't normally do since it took up too much of the space he wanted to work in. It was running, the engine purring and alive while he laid there with nothing left inside of him.

I had collapsed there, my feet giving way, my hands falling to my side, gripping the small wooden circle he'd left me. I couldn't move and it took nearly five minutes before I realized I was screaming.

My body was stuck and my heart could only whisper his name as screams gave way to sobs.

Eventually, I was able to stand and trip my way back to the house. Bailey was barking, locked in our bedroom so he wouldn't follow Hunter out of the house. I had grabbed at my cell

and called 911. I had gasped details out to them the best I could. I had tried to find the words that would explain the despair I was feeling. When they came, they asked where he was, asked for his note, asked for the little circle. I kept giving them what they asked for, but all I could hear was the sound of the car echoing in the workshop.

I wanted to hide the words from these intruders in our home, hide the pain my husband felt in not being able to give me a baby, hide the guilt he had for not being able to protect his own family. I wanted to collect up the pieces of him I had left and disappear, pretend he'd gone to some convention again and would be back in the morning. But the officers kept me with them, asked me questions until I was shaking as my words ran dry. At some point, I'd collapsed on the couch. At some point, an officer handed me the small wooden circle back. At some point, I said enough and signed enough that they all left me. My family was still hours away then, so I was left alone.

As the fire continued to crackle, I got up. Stepping carefully, I avoided Bailey as I got up and flip the overhead light on. I walked to the quilt and stared at each of the circles: Baby Alex Maxwell; Baby Gillian Maxwell; Baby Arthur Maxwell; and finally, Baby Sam Maxwell. Each set of wings varied from small to big and had different sized feathers. Hunter had spent a long time making them perfectly. I had seen the attempts he decided weren't good enough in the sawdust pile in his workshop after we lost Arthur.

I traced my hands over the patterns in the quilt, different waves of purples, greens, blues, and yellows combining to make an abstract picture Hunter always thought looked like Bailey if he'd been painted by a crazy person. I always saw flowers, but Hunter said that was my job talking.

We never talked much after coming home when we lost a baby. Hunter took it so hard, but he tried to show me that it wasn't my fault, though I knew part of the problem was my body's ability to care for the child. He'd spent so much time building me up that I didn't seem him fading away.

"We'll always try again," he'd tell me. "One day, this will work out for us."

I don't know when he stopped having faith. I don't know how I missed his change.

I stepped toward the window and heard Bailey lift his head to see what I was doing. He plopped it back to the floor and sighed when he was satisfied that I was only looking. As the snow fell, I tried to see the warm light that used to come from Hunter's workshop in the yard, a detached garage he filled with wooden creations. I tried to see his silhouette bowed forward as he carved into the wood or making its way back to the house. I tried to see him coming in, covered in snow, pleased that he'd finished another piece and was taking it to town the next day to try and sell. The last piece he'd finished was a square coffee table with eight drawers, two on each side. He'd polished the cherry wood to shine bright, and the drawers opened as if they were lined with silk. He'd asked if I wanted it, and I said no, that I wanted someone else to see the beauty of this thing. Since we were so far out of town, we were rarely the ones to host any hangouts with our friends and his creation deserved more recognition than two sets of eyes could give it.

Hunter had smiled and agreed before asking me to help lift the table into the back of his truck. Two days later when I found out I was pregnant again, Hunter had a panic attack that the strain of lifting the table would make it hard for this baby to make it. He fussed over me and tried to make me stay put. It took me hours to calm him enough to help him understand that I could still do things for now, that I would keep myself safe for this baby. After that, he made sure a friend was always around when he finished a project so I wouldn't be tempted to help.

I pulled away from the window fast enough that Bailey sat up again. He looked at me and waited for my next move. I wanted to go to the workshop, though I didn't know why. I wanted to be back around Hunter.

I pulled on my boots and trudged through the snow, flashlight and dog in tow. I pushed on the door and welcomed the familiar smell of sawdust, still smelling as fresh as if he'd cut into a new piece of wood that morning. I shut myself and Bailey into the workshop and looked around. Hunter could've been here hours ago. Like he left shoes around the house, he left tools wherever he last used them. There were bits of wood that had been cast off emerging pieces of work all around my feet like landmines. It was like he'd never left.

I dug my fingers into the sawdust pile and lifted a small pile to my face. The smell engulfed my nose, made me want to sneeze, but I held it there, sucking in the scent that followed Hunter like cologne. As I let it drop, I stepped around to the other side of his main work table. Bailey had taken up a small wooden piece and was chewing under the table, accustomed to his place in that shop. I walked in circles around the workspace, pacing and touching the unfinished work, the tools, the places Hunter touched so much.

After a third loop around the table, I noticed a circular piece of a stump that Hunter had sawed away during his work on a chair he'd done for a friend last week. I walked toward it and lifted it into my hands. I didn't know what type of wood it was, if it was valuable or something he plucked off our property. Either way, the weight felt sturdy in my hands.

I laid the wood onto the table. It was about six inches tall and nine inches across, less than two inches thick. I grabbed a small knife that Hunter used at the beginning of many of his projects and made a dig into the wood. It was barely a straight line.

I dug again perpendicular to that and dug a third time parallel to the first line. An ‘H’ formed, though it looked like a first grader’s writing. I kept going, digging the letters into the wood with as much precision I could. I got through his name and noticed I had started to go down on the wood as I wrote, making the name bow more forward with each letter.

When I was satisfied with the letters I had made, I began to make small curved lines, connecting them together as best I could. I wanted these to be wings, but I didn’t know how Hunter did it. I wanted to grab another tool, but I wasn’t sure how each of them worked exactly, and I didn’t want to mess up any more than my lack of experience had already made me. I took my time and tried to make the sides even, though the right wing was curled in more than the left.

The chips of wood released a fresh perfume of sawdust, making my eyes water. I blew away the sawdust every few minutes, the progress of my work appearing underneath the dusty glow. Once the curves were there, I drilled a hole in the top where I would be able to attach my creation to the line of wooden pieces inside. I then grabbed the wood stain and a paintbrush. I mixed the stain around before laying it onto the wood, slicking my wrist back and forth until the pattern stood out against the darkening wood. The bitter smell drifted upward, coated my face with its sticky tinge. My hands quivered with the motion and I shook when I got close to the lines, worried I may go too far. I took much longer than Hunter would have.

Once finished, I took the still-wet piece into my arms and called the dog. We headed back through the snow and toward the house. I didn’t know what snow might do with wood stain, but I didn’t really care at that point. I just wanted it with me.

Inside, I stepped out of my shoes and headed toward the fire, still crackling with life even though I had been absent for over an hour. As I sat down, Bailey panted behind me, sending bouts of hot air into my ear. I laid the wood down in front of the fire, crossing my legs in front of

me. When Bailey saw that I wasn't planning to stand anytime soon, he twirled around and laid against my back. I watched the fire move in the reflection of the wood stain. I kept myself from reaching out to touch the glistening surface in hopes that it would dry fairly smooth. I traced my finger along the rim of the wooden piece, pushing it back and forth as I waited for it to dry.

My thoughts hummed between Hunter and the babies we'd lost. I never thought I'd end up alone in this place. With the thoughts I'd been having before Hunter's death, I had wondered at times if he would be the one left behind when I finally gave up. I never thought I'd have to do so much without Hunter at my side and maybe that was how I missed his despair. The anger hadn't come yet, but the counselor I saw said it would most likely come at some point. Right then, all I knew was that I wanted my husband back.

About two hours passed in what felt like minutes. My legs were hot, but I didn't want to move away. I finally reached out and touched the wood. It was still a little tacky, but it felt mostly dry. I shoed Bailey away so his fur wouldn't get caught up in the stain and reached to the top of the quilt, grabbing the line with all my babies.

I took Arthur and Sam off the line and grabbed for Hunter's piece, placing it on the line before returning my most recent babies to the line by their dad. The line was much heavier with Hunter on it, and I wondered how long it would hold on the wall. But I stood on the chair in front of the quilt anyway and lifted the line back to its hooks.

Climbing down, I stopped to look at the names in front of me. My eyes filled with tears. My heart was crying for Hunter to come back, for my babies to live, to have my family in place where I could reach them. I curled myself into the chair that sat at the bottom of the quilt and wished myself to feel the weight of my family above me.

I watched the fire crackle as Bailey came back and settled in front of me, still panting. I wasn't crying, though I thought I should be. I didn't know what to feel. I just hoped that, like their names upon my plaques, my family was now out of the woods.

Week 8

Tucker's getting out of his car at the same time I am when I arrive this week. He smiles at me and saunters toward me instead of toward the steps. He still doesn't smile much, but his frown looks less intense.

"How are you, Tucker? How was your week?"

In typical Tucker fashion, his answers are short. "Good. My band practiced a new song."

After a beat of silence, Tucker stops our walk toward the stairs. "Can we stay outside again today?" he asks.

I nod. "If everyone is okay with it."

Tucker breaks a smile and he and I stand midway up on the steps as we wait for others to arrive. The group is receptive to staying outside since it's warm again today, so we sit on the stairs, two rows higher than the day we were misplaced. I pull out the pictures I promised and pass them out. People share their photos with each other and smile at the expressions caught on their faces paired with the words behind them.

"The most surprising word I see," Danny says, "is kind. I don't feel kind." He shakes his head. "Who wrote it? Can I ask that?"

I let the silence sit to see if the writer will identify him- or herself. I see Ella glance at me for approval before raising her hand. "You apologize and try to help when you can. If that doesn't make you kind, I don't know what does."

Others jump in and second Ella's remarks. Danny smiles in such a way that I think we'd see a blush if his skin was lighter. He listens but doesn't ask anything more.

After the talk has died about this, Darcy speaks up. “I always hoped people saw me as passionate,” she says. “I want to show people the world. Megan knew that and encouraged it in me. That’s something I think I got from her.”

The group nods in silence and takes this in.

“I got my steadiness from my brother,” Tucker says after a moment. “Robert definitely knew how to hold his ground. I learned that from him, and I’m glad it shows.”

The group takes turns in asking about their photos, explaining the words they knew they’d see and the others that were a surprise. The talk is calm and spins from what we’ve labeled each other to what they’ve been called before to how they seem themselves.

About midway through the session, I see Paige pause and look at me. Danny’s and Jessie’s gazes follow.

“What words did you write for us?” Paige asks.

I smile and start with Paige. “For you,” I say, “I wrote growing, because you’re always trying to better yourself.”

I turn my torso to the left toward Tucker. “You are quietly strong. Even when you don’t say much, I know you’re taking everything in and you are going to make it.”

To Jessie, I say, “You are brave. You’ve never hesitated in going first, in taking the steps that are needed to keep you going.”

To Ella, “You are resilient. You’ve never lost your joyous spirit.”

To Danny, “You are strong. You’ve lost your only family and you keep fighting.”

To Darcy, finally I say, “You are loving. You don’t want to forget just to get better. You want to grow from it.”

The group waits in silence for me to say more, but I'm out of words for the moment. I want them to pick where we go next.

"What was your favorite word?" Ella asks.

I take a moment before answering. "Motherly love."

Ella smiles at me. "That's fitting."

I don't ask who wrote it. I let this sit for a minute before asking if there's more the group wants to do. It sounds as if they feel comfortable with stopping here today.

"Okay," I tell them. "We'll stop here then."

The group nods and begins to stand. We walk down the stairs, some stretching and some raising their heads to take in the sunshine.

As we splinter off at the cars, I wave to the ones I still see. "I'll see you all next week," I tell them.

The cars roar to life and I listen the ebb and flow of the motors as they pull away, smiling to myself at the group of us that have come together, the group of us that have remained.

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