High Tide: A Novella

Anna Davis
College of the Holy Cross, aedavi21@g.holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/engl_honor

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
High Tide: A Novella

By: Anna Davis
The wind blows the ends of his untucked button-down, but he doesn’t make a move to straighten it. His back arches over the side of the boat from his position on the back corner, his arms resting on the railing on either side of him. The wind whips past his ears and as much through his short hair as is possible. He just barely saves his phone from toppling to the floor of the boat as it lifts in the breast pocket of his shirt along with his butt off the seat with every wave the boat races over.

They’ve been on the water for half an hour now, and still haven’t reached the island—the little island off the coast of Maine where Sam spent her whole childhood, the one that Dan never knew existed.

Dan isn’t what you might call an outdoorsy guy. He hasn’t been camping since he was 7, but even then the luxury RV wasn’t exactly an outdoor experience. But he loves the beach. He’s lived in Manhattan his whole life, but his parents would always take him and all his siblings to Montauk on the weekends during the summer to get out of the city. They would go boating, tubing, waterskiing, jet skiing, anything you could do on the water there. So he feels at home now, on this boat traveling towards the island. Part of the allure of Montauk over the Hamptons is that it’s less busy, people flock there less because it’s just that much further down Long Island. And that’s what he always liked about those weekend getaways, leaving behind the constant crowds and the car horns honking. He’s been looking to get out of the city again, since he and Sam have been healing—diving headfirst into work in an effort to ignore what they’ve been through, though Dan has only been a reluctant participant in this coping mechanism—so even though the circumstances aren’t pleasant, he lets himself relax as they approach the island.
Despite the number of people in New York City, he has always felt alone—a sole voice in a sea of many, hurrying around him. His thoughts echo loudly in those busy streets, in his law firm, in their penthouse and he can feel his thoughts getting softer with each wave they hop over.

He falls to the side as he moves his hand again to save his phone from falling out of his pocket. The flimsy hull feels like it’ll crack every time it catches air. If it were Dan’s choice, he would just ditch the boat and swim to shore—if not for his nice boat shoes and their bags which he would prefer to stay dry.

The boat jerks him halfway off the bench as they take a sharp turn around a buoy and his gaze is brought towards his wife. She sits on the other side of the boat, her elbow leaning heavily against the railing, her fist propping up her cheek. She’s facing away from him, staring out to the left, not looking toward the land they’re approaching. Her shoulders are rigid and one knee is crossed under her, her other knee bouncing to an unknown, anxious rhythm. Sam closes her eyes, her fist opening to massage her forehead. He tracks his eyes along her body, taking in her dark blonde hair tied up in a twisty bun, loose strands blowing with the speed of the boat. Her cream and flowered dress sits high on her leg, her knee bent slightly. She made a point of wearing a hoodie—grey, with a white and blue lion, and Columbia University inscribed around it—to cover her, even though the 70 degree weather doesn’t call for it. He can’t tell if she’s just being stubborn, hurting herself because she’s scared of being free here, or whether she’s cocooning herself against what she believes might hurt her here—because she never answers him when he asks.

“We’re almost there, Miss Taylor.”

Her eyes open and she rolls out her shoulders, only glancing back at Dan. “It’s Mrs. Wright, but thanks Stoney.”
Captain Lance Stone, “You-can-call-me-Stoney,” only knows his wife as Miss Taylor. It doesn’t bother Dan that he calls her that, but she hasn’t stopped correcting him the whole way there—like she’s separating herself now from herself before, the self that used to live here.

Dan reaches out for the first time since they left and squeezes her giggly knee. She doesn’t look back at him, her eyes now firmly focused on the approaching island, but she reaches down to squeeze his hand back, anchoring them both.

The boat hits the side of the dock as Captain Stoney pulls up to it, dislodging their hands. The boat jumps in the waves as they make their way off it, picking up their bags and holding on to the side so as to not lose balance. Sam steps onto the dock with her bag slung over her shoulder without missing a step, turns back, and reaches out to help Dan onto the dock with his carry on rolling suitcase.

“See you in a month, Miss Taylor.”

“No, Stoney—,” Stoney revs his engine and cuts off her response and Dan’s concern. He speeds off with a wave, the waves lapping up to drench Dan’s shoes. There’s a moment of silence as they watch Stoney drive away. Sam sighs, shaking her head, her tongue in the side of her cheek.

Dan reaches for the strap of her bag and lifts it onto his own shoulder. “A month?”

She shoves her hands into the pocket of her hoodie, starring at the beach, blinking rapidly.

“That’s his normal route, once a month. But he’ll come back for me—or we’ll catch a ride on the shipping plane after it has been unloaded. Whatever it takes.”

He makes a move to walk towards the shore but stops just in front of Sam when she stays still. She stares straight ahead and takes a deep breath, in through her nose and out through her mouth. Her shoulders press down and she walks past him towards the end of the dock. He
follows behind her, unable to say anything to reassure her because he doesn’t know why she needs to be reassured in the first place.

Dan’s shoes squish and his suitcase clunks against the dock.

*Squish squish squish. Clunk clunk clunk.*

“This is gorgeous,” he says, looking around the beach as sand invades his boat shoes. She stops, her wedges sinking into the dry sand. Her face remains long, passive, and every breath she takes is deep and strained. “That used to be my favorite place, that field of flowers.”

To Dan’s left, the beach contracts, rounding the left side of the island until the forest and the ocean are all he can see of that side. To his right, the beach opens up to a field of long grass and flowers that sways in the wind. Following the shore line past that is a paved road, down which he can see the beginnings of the town to the left, followed by more forest. Out a few miles to the right, the sand beach turns into a rocky coast with a slight cliff which joins with the forest to the left, giving the impression that the island is enveloped by the trees.

Dan stands with her for a minute or two more, then places his hand on her shoulder, her body pulling away. “Aren’t you gonna give me the tour?” He smirks to try and relieve the tension and she gives him an embarrassed smile.

“Right—yeah, let’s—let’s go.”

*Squish squish squish.*

He follows along behind her, dragging his suitcase through the sand. She runs her hand along the tall grass to her left, walking slowly and fluidly across the sand, even in her wedges. He feels like he’s interfering on a private moment, but he can’t look away. He doesn’t want to look away. He wants to be let in. “Why was this your favorite place?”
The waves crash in tranquil repetition as she pulls her hand away from the hibiscus and bellflowers, tucking it back into the pocket of her hoodie. Delphinium brushes their cheeks, drawing his eyes to their place to their left, clouding his vision in their color-saturated blues and purples.

She bites her lip, pausing at a standstill for a while longer. “It was my mother’s favorite place.”

Dan can feel the dark emotions radiating off of her. Her mother died when she was six and from what he knows, she’s actively been avoiding everything related to her ever since—ever since she could move from this place and never come back. Until he found out about it and she couldn’t hide it anymore.

Before he can say anything she pulls her gaze away from the flowers and walks them toward the one paved road that runs through the island.

*Click click click.*

Her wedges click against the pavement as she walks, picking up speed as she gets closer to town. “They originally made this road through the middle of the island because you used to be able to see the ocean through the trees on either side.”

*Squish squish squish.*

She looks back at him briefly, eyeing his shoes. “If we hurry, we can get to the house to set them out to dry in the sun before you blister.

He slows down. “I’m good to take my time.”

She stops and looks him in the eye and breathes out, her shoulders falling slightly, her throat working. “Right.”
He gestures for her to continue in front of him, staying just behind her as she tries to keep her steps slow.

*Click—Click—Click—*

Houses start to pepper the side of the road. All of them pretty small, mostly one floor. The first house on the road is the biggest, the only two story house he can see, with brick walls and a white picket fence. It has a manicured yard—with a whale pinwheel and a classic wooden windmill—and its right on the beach. Each house after then looks slightly decrepit by comparison. There’s houses on each side of the road, a red house with stacks of lobster traps in the shape of a little tree, a bright yellow house with dark windows blocking any light in, two pale green houses just a little further down that look identical.

She looks towards each, maybe trying to place them in her mind, maybe realizing that they’re smaller than she always thought they were when she was younger, but unless he opens her head he’ll never truly know what she’s thinking—because she never tells him.

But he wants to try.

“What lives around here?”

She keeps her gaze moving from one side of the street to the other. “These are all locals. Most of these houses have been passed down through generations, it’s not often that anyone comes—.”

“Or goes.”

Her shoulders pull back and she stands straighter. “Right. You see the same people every day, everywhere. It’s really…”

“Homey?” he responds, when she stops with no sign of finishing her thought.

She purses her lips, looking over to building to their left as they approach. “Oppressive.”
The houses blend into a little downtown area, with a dirt road leading off to the back side of the island to the left.

“Where does that lead?”

She looks back at him as he comes up to stop beside her and gestures toward the road.

“That’s the fishing road. All the people who work on boats, which is pretty much everyone—they keep their work stuff down that way and there’s a commercial dock out there.”

Dan hummed in response. “So that’s where your dad worked?”

She bites her lip and nods, not having to be prompted to continue forward.

All of the commercial buildings are almost as small as the houses. There’s a church building that lists times for each of the different types of worship on the weekend. Behind it is a wooden deck with outdoor tables and closed umbrellas on top that leads out onto the last parts of the sandy beach. Further down the road there’s a building that looks like some sort of thrift shop with lots of things scattered in through the open door and by the outside. He can see a lamp with a ceramic fish as the base and an old rocking chair that’s missing some rungs in the back. There are boots lining the wall and stacks of clothes hung as well as piled on a table—with a shirt on top that says “Dear Cod, I laughed so hard!” with a cartoon laughing codfish. A pile of old lobster traps spills out of the door onto the front porch and there’s a rack of brand new bikes parked next to it.

She looks back at him looking intently toward the bikes when he stops for a second.

“People ride them around, it’s kind of an unspoken rule that whenever you’re not using one you leave it for someone else to take. It’s honestly just a miracle they haven’t been stolen.”

“What would someone do if one of the bikes went missing and no one would admit to it?”
“If anyone were to steal them—if anyone does anything—everyone would know who did it.” She eyes them herself, tilting her head and pushing her hands further into her pocket.

“So everyone is really close here?”

She purses her lips and looks over to their left, towards the biggest building on the road. Sally’s Diner. “You could say that.”

He looks towards the houses, wondering if everyone is at home or out on the water, if that is why the town looks deserted. There isn’t any life in the houses that he can see, except for the bright yellow house. He looks back on an older woman peeking out of her window past the curtain at them. When she sees him looking back at her, she leaves the window abruptly, the dark curtain billowing back into place in her wake.

“Where is everyone? Out working?”

“It’s 11, so they’re all in there, like clockwork,” she gestures towards the diner, “that’s where everyone eats. You can technically request groceries too if you want to cook yourself, but most people just eat there.”

She peels her eyes away from the diner and doesn’t look back to see him eyeing the yellow house. When she moves to keep going down the path, he lets his mind come back to her.

“So we’re just not gonna get food?”

She stops, but only briefly. “Not now. I’ll get it later.”

He waits for her to stop again when he doesn’t follow her. “Don’t you think it would be easier to get groceries before we get to the house so we can focus on unpacking and getting settled in?”

She keeps her eyes ahead of her, still refusing to look back. “No—it’ll be easier to get them later after we’ve unpacked.”
He steps closer to her, lowering his voice. “Tell me why then—.”

“Fine.” She stalks past him, and he catches her muttering about “causing a scene.” He stalks after her towards the door of Sally’s Diner, indignation burning up his throat. She doesn’t look back at him until the rumbles of the suitcase against the wooden ramp leading to the door alert her of his presence. He gestures towards the bags and she eyes them, taking a breath before focusing back on him.

“Leave em. Like I said, we’ll know who did it.”

*Squish squish squish.*

Everyone looks up as they walk in, an audible hush coming over the inside of the diner. No one moves for a moment, until an older woman and man behind the counter stop their conversation and look towards them. The man behind the counter stands up straight, but his face remains neutral. The woman, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to try and contain her surprise, her mouth gaping as she stands off her barstool. No one moves to continue their meal, watching them unabashedly.

“Samantha?”

Sam goes rigid at the woman’s voice and he feels compelled to brush her back gently with his hand.

“Helen… and everyone.” Sam eyes the rest of the patrons, but none of them take their eyes off of her in return.

The woman, Helen evidently, walks towards Sam, looking her up and down, not noticing or addressing him. “You didn’t tell us you were coming,” she says, speaking slowly, her brow furrowing, but the tilt down of her mouth feels forced.

“I don’t believe I owe you an explanation.”
Helen doesn’t stop at Sam’s slight hostility, moving to stand in front of her and put her hands on her shoulders. His hand and the door at their backs is the only thing that stops her movement away from Helen’s touch.

Helen looks posh even in khakis and a long blue button up. Her long hair is half up in a small bun on the back of her head, the rest of her hair flowing down—darkish grey. She doesn’t look especially malicious, her eyes neutral and rather cool, despite how much her face is trying to look warm and sympathetic. The tension in Sam seems misplaced. Maybe it is the gaze of the other islanders, each seeming to follow them as Helen moves towards her, waiting for something from her—approval?

Or maybe it’s just something else from her past Sam won’t show him.

The rest of the diners seem to get the impression that they shouldn’t be listening in on an obviously private conversation, so they look away. Or rather, they sneak looks at them every few seconds then quickly look away, like they think they’re being sly.

“You look—good. Healthy—Happy?” Helen looks ready to embrace her, but she doesn’t, probably noticing the same uneasiness in Sam’s demeanor that he does.

Sam lowers her head and speaks softly. “You—you do too.”

“Well, how long are you here for?” Helen rubs her hands up and down Sam’s arms before Sam rolls her shoulders slightly—slowly, as if she doesn’t want to but can’t help herself—and dislodges them. Helen mouth turns up watery, her eyes beseeching Sam’s.

“Just for the weekend.”

Helen’s mouth turns down at that and she steps back from her, turning her eyes towards Dan and he can feel the rest of the diner turn their eyes toward him in turn. She turns her lips up in a smile, her fake hospitality making Dan want to look away.
“And your guest?” She stays looking at him but directs her question towards Sam.

Sam speaks a little louder. “This is my husband, Daniel—Dan.”

The room grows even quieter than before, the clinking of silverware on plates and cups on the table ceasing, the town forgetting for a moment that they’re supposed to be pretending not to be listening.

“Anyone else with you?”

Sam furrows her brow. “N-No.”

Everyone is awaiting Helen’s response, their heads all turning back towards her at the same time. Dan reaches his arm around from Sam’s back to squeeze her hip. Helen moves her gaze to watch the movement and then turns back to Dan.

She reaches her hand out to him and he hesitates at the show of geniality, but shakes her hand. “Daniel, it’s very nice to meet you. I hope you enjoy your stay here in my little town.”

Her grip is sharp and she keeps shaking his hand until he is forced to dislodge first. His eyebrows hitch slightly. “Your town?”

She raises her hands out to either side, glancing towards the rest of the diners. “Well, ours, of course, but I am the mayor. So if you ever have any questions, I’m happy to answer them.”

He nods slowly, “Of course—Madame Mayor.”

She smiles and finally lets her gaze leave him, turning back to the man behind the counter. “Dave. Make something special for our guest, it’s not often we get to have someone new to show off for.”

*So that’s Dave.*

Dan’s hand goes slack at Sam’s hip.
Dave’s eyes cut towards Dan and he smiles slightly from behind his white scruff. He pulls his towel from its perch on his shoulder and he pushes the folded sleeves of his blue and black striped flannel further up his forearms. He only makes a slight move back towards the kitchen before Sam cuts him off and he stops, moving back towards the counter, almost anticipating her disapproval.

“No, Dave, we’ll—we’ll be eating ourselves, we just stopped for some groceries.”

Dave and her share a look over Helen’s shoulder. Helen tries to keep the sting of the comment off of her face, but Dan can see it. She shrugs toward him. “You should come for dinner then.”

“Maybe, we’ll have to see if we feel up to it after unpacking,” Dan answers before Sam, wanting to save Helen another blow, feeling bad for her for some reason. Sam looks toward him sharply in response. Dave moves back into the kitchen as Helen smiles, looking between both of them.

“Excellent.”

The three of them, and the rest of diners, linger in the awkward silence, but Dave returns quickly with a little cart of groceries, a carton of something on top, as well as a bottle of champagne—too quickly for him to prepare all of it right then. Sam’s hand grazes the bottle when Dave wheels the cart to them, his gruff, crackly voice piping up softly for the first time since they entered the diner.

“Congratulations—to you and the mister, Mrs. Wright.”

Sam shares a long look with him before she sighs and hugs Dave tightly, and while he doesn’t look like the type who would receive a hug well, he wraps one arm around her shoulders
and her shoulders relax just slightly into his broad chest. Dan watches Helen behind them, her eyes flashing and her lips pursing in jealousy. Jealousy?

Sam whispers something in Dave’s ear that he doesn’t catch as they part and he grips the groceries tightly, not meeting Dave’s eye when he nods towards him, before he heads back behind the counter. Dan’s eyes can’t settle on one thing as he rolls his shoulders, antsy to leave the diner that he wanted to see in the first place.

“More coffee, Helen?” Dave asks, grabbing the half full coffee pot from its spot on the coffee maker, pulling Helen’s gaze toward him. Sam grips his arm hard and takes that moment to leave, but not before Helen reminds them about dinner slightly desperately as they exit, the rest of the dinners remaining silent until the moment they leave.

Sam closes the door behind her snugly and stands stock still for a moment in the doorway. Dan takes a deep breath and nods to himself. “That’s…like…”

“A fish bowl. That’s what I call it—and you made me dive back in.” She pulls the groceries from him and doesn’t look at him as she continues down the road, not waiting for him to catch up as he struggles to grab their bags and follow behind her. 

*Squish squish squish.*

He breathes fast when he catches up beside her. “What do you mean, ‘I made you’? You ran in there in huff after I simply asked why you didn’t want to go in there—you were the one who wouldn’t answer me, who wouldn’t just tell me why you were being unreasonable.”

“Can’t you see I’m trying, Dan? I’m here, I am putting myself through being back here for you, when I never intended on ever coming back. Is that not enough for you?”

“Why would you even ask me that question? I didn’t make you come—you said you’d rather show me than tell me why you kept this—everything—from me for so many years, from
your own husband, Sam. You’re always more than enough, and yet you continually keep things from me because—why? You don’t think I can handle it?"

As they near the end of the pavement, the downtown morphs back into houses scattering the wood line. They veer down a dirt road leading off to the left of the pavement, the groceries and suitcase rattling on the uneven ground.

“No, I just—wanted to put it all behind me.”

“Well it isn’t all behind you.”

Her steps hitch slightly, but she continues without replying.

He grips her bag on his shoulder tighter and continues. “So that’s him—Dave?”

*Dave.* The one she spills her secrets to, the one she opens up to—not him.

Her shoulders slouch in towards her body slightly. “Yes, that’s him. That’s—the one I still talk to.”

“Why don’t you talk to anyone else?”

She fully stops this time, right at the edge of a clearing in the trees, the dirt road opening to wooden steps, though he can’t see what is on the other side of them as he stops just behind her.

“Because I—,” she pauses, her mouth opening and closing, struggling with her words for some reason. He has to force the little voice whispering—*Because she doesn’t want you to know. Because she’ll always be keeping things from you*—to the back of his head, letting her gather her thoughts. “Because I wanted a fresh start. I wanted to forget all of the memories of my Mom. I was closing the door on that part of myself, the part that would always be the grieving, abandoned daughter.”
He narrows his eyes at her back, wondering why her answers always just lead to more questions, but before he can ask one of them, she continues, pushing forward into the clearing. “Let’s just get these groceries in, I don’t want anything to go bad.”

The wood house starts to crest over the horizon, all the thousands of square feet are illuminated in the sun that’s barely peeking through the trees. Its three stories of dark wood, with the sun giving the windows and the structure a yellow hue, making the scene look euphoric.

“You’re so secluded.”

She looks up at the house as he does and her eyes glide down each long line of the structure. “Legend has it our ancestors were superstitious and wanted to be as far away from everyone as possible when vampires came to town, that’s why they moved out onto the island in the first place. But I think they just wanted to be on their own part of the beach.”

He scoffs and she cracks a smile for the first time since they’ve been there. “Yeah, maybe they knew property prices would benefit.”

Her smile drops slowly as she finally moves towards the stairs that lead to the mahogany door. “No, they never intended any one to sell this place—or leave it. It’s a Taylor legacy.”

He feels her regret low in his gut. “You know, you never said your ‘tiny’ beach house on a ‘tiny’ island off the coast of Maine was actually a mansion.”

They pull the suitcase and groceries up the steps to the long porch, which houses a rocking bench and an outdoor table, both looking long unused and slightly faded from long sun exposure.

“I never said the house was ‘tiny,’ in fact I never described the house in any way at all. You just assumed.”
She pauses at the lock on the door—long enough that he wonders she doesn’t have keys—or lost them or forgot them. Her hand shakes slightly as she unlocks the deadbolt. She does a special giggly maneuver to unlock the door, though he thinks she didn’t even realize she remembered it, so he doesn’t remark on it.

_Squish squi—_

She stops short in the doorway, letting him bump into her back just outside. Her eyes rove the space and she stays put, so he squeezes past her with their bags, closing the door behind them and even that noise doesn’t rouse her eyes from their frantic gaze. The longer she looks, the more confused she seems, her brow furrowing further and further. He flips a light switch by the door, illuminating the places of shadow in the space. The inside is similarly wooded and he finds himself contented with how modern the ‘old’ house seems. They stand in a spacious living room, kitchen, and dining room open floor concept with high vaulted ceilings. The steps to the second floor lead to an open hallway, so he can see parts of the upper floor, though the steps end at the second floor, so he has no visual of how to get to the third. He looks back at her, still unmoving, her breathing slightly heavier now.

“What’s wrong?”

Her mouth opens but nothing comes out, her head shaking as she swallow’s thickly, taking a moment to gather herself. “I—its.”

She takes a step forward, letting go of the grocery cart, and stepping onto the crinkly welcome mat on the floor slightly away from the door. Her hands fist tightly, her house keys surely cutting into her skin.

“Someone’s been here.”
Those extra locks my father placed on the door are still here, disorienting me as I enter the house—but not enough for me not to notice the differences, the subtle differences in the space I lived in for 17 years. The crinkling of the welcome mat makes goose bumps come to my skin—because we’ve never had a welcome mat in my life. There’s no dust either. I expected the house to be dark and dank, that we’d have to air it out all night in order to walk around without coughing. But there’s no particles floating through the patches of sun coming in through the windows.

It’s clean, impossibly clean.

Something’s missing.

Dan’s presence at my shoulder is encroaching, and I expect him to lean in, to turn my body towards his, the vein in his head accentuated with the furrow of his brow, demanding more. But he doesn’t, he pulls our bags to his side, further away from me. If I had the mental capacity to pull away from what’s in front of me, I might analyze it more—his deliberate distance.

“What do you mean, ‘Someone’s been here’?” He lets my bag drop from his shoulder and crosses his arms in my peripheral vision.

I clench my fingers around the sleeves of my hoodie. “It’s—clean. No one has been here since my dad died, it should be…,” I shake my head, “I don’t know, I told Dave to come turn on the electricity and the water, maybe he just wanted to make it a little more inviting—but a welcome mat?”

Dan’s lip curls slightly. I don’t think he knows he does it whenever I mention his name. If it weren’t such a touchy subject, I would torture him more over the fact that he’s jealous of a 60 year old man. Even though I know that’s not the true reason Dave bothers him so much.
“Dave. Right.”

*Squish squish squish.*

He doesn’t ask me anything else, he just makes his way to the back of the house, onto the porch that leads to the beach. Beyond him is the grass that I used to dig for worms in, which gradually blends into the sand I used to bury myself under after attempting to make a castle I could never get to stand up right. I can hear the sound of the waves without the door open, but the more distinct crashes lull me back to younger days, always leaving the house with a bathing suit under my clothes because I never knew when I might get into the water. My ill attempts at trying surfing, my fruitful attempts at trying waterskiing. Pruned fingers and toes, sunburnt skin, and wind brushed hair.

“There are ducks back here.” Dan’s figure has moved from the door, giving me a clear view of the break in the trees leading to the shore and the ocean. I hear the distinct ruffle of feathers and quack of the ducks over the crashing waves.

“That’s Bernard and Eunice. Well, it might not be the same Bernard and Eunice anymore, but there’s been a family of ducks who have come up here since I can remember. My mom and I named them Bernard and Eunice and their ducklings. They love eating the plants along the side of the house. We used to feed them, to keep them away from the plants, but that just kept them coming back. My mom always loved those ducks. I’m glad they’re still here.”

I watch them waddle, the new Bernard and Eunice and their 4 ducklings, across the sand and back through the clearing to the water, before Dan blocks my view. He comes back in barefoot and slides the door closed again, the length of the first floor separating us—each at our own door. His feet splat against the hardwood floor as he moves to stand in back of the couch in the middle of the space. He stops and looks around, feet planted and hands balled on his hips, his
insecurity over his surroundings manifesting itself even in his posture. “Should we start unpacking? Or do you—want to wait?”

My heart clenches for a second, uncertain. “I need to look upstairs—and call Dave, see why he would have done this. If he did this.”

“So Dave might have cleaned and put out a welcome mat? That doesn’t explain why you’re so freaked out.”

“I just have a bad feeling Dan, I need to figure it out.”

“Ok, but I can help—.”

“Just put away the groceries. Hopefully Dave plugged in the fridge.”

Dan rolls out his shoulders and purses his lips, but stays silent. He makes a beeline behind me while I eye the stairs, still unmoving off the welcome mat. *A new welcome mat.* Dave would never get me a new welcome mat.

He tugs the cart from behind me and it nudges me forward, towards the stairs right in front of me. I look back at him and he isn’t looking at me, so I can’t tell if he meant to do that to help me or if it was just a necessity.

“How is your kitchen almost the size of our apartment?”

I scoff only slightly in jest. “We live in an apartment in New York City.”

He purses his lips back at me, probably only slightly in jest as well, but I start towards the stairs before he can offer a retort. The older wood of the stairs creaks exactly at the third step, just like it always has. I memorized the pattern when I was in high school, so I wouldn’t wake my dad up after I spent all day out of the house. I trail my left hand along the wood panels and imagine myself hopscotching up the steps at one in the morning, only to be found out by Dad anyway. The punishment was never pleasant but I never stopped. I unclench my sweater sleeves,
hyperflexing my fingers, and I push my mind back further. I can imagine myself before, when I was little bouncing up the steps, keeping my hand on the wall so I wouldn’t fall, trying to avoid knocking over some of the low hanging pictures.

The pictures never changed for as long as I can remember—and yet there are some missing. There’s still the picture of my dad and me at the beach, photos of town picnics, photos from my swim meets.

But none of Mom.

One that my father loved, that held the prominent place right near the top of the steps, is even missing. Dad wouldn’t have let anyone move that photo if he were still alive.

And I can’t believe Dave would do it, whether he knew its significance or not. I turn to stop on the staircase and brush my fingers over the spot, a slightly darker rectangular patch of wood, much like the places where the rest of the missing photos resided—the other parts of the wall lighter from color fading after all this time.

It was a picture of my mother, my father, and I in a blue frame. I don’t have any memory of the actual event, but I remember the picture with intense clarity. My parents are couching next to me, and little me is laughing towards the camera, holding Lei Lei, my old stuffed elephant that must still be up in my old room somewhere—because I didn’t take it with me. My mom is looking down at me, laughing, her hand bunched on my belly, tickling me to make me smile. We look so similar, but her hair is a little darker, pulled away from her face and clipped in the back, her bangs hanging over her hooded eyes. My father and her are wearing hiking gear, their heavy hiking boots planted under their bent knees. My father is the one taking the picture, holding the camera so his arm is out past the edge of the frame. He and I have the same eyes, light brown, sometimes people say they’re green in the right lighting. It brought a smile to my face when I
saw it, despite the pang in my stomach I got whenever I thought about how we could never take pictures like that anymore.

Dave would have wanted me to see it.

I push my hand off the wall, giving myself a nudge to continue up the steps. The sun shines through the tall window at the landing, the leaves of the trees creating dancing shadows on the hardwood as they move in the wind. The last few steps bring me to the long hallway that connects the upstairs, partially open, overlooking the downstairs and I can see Dan already getting to the end of the groceries.

Dave plugged in the fridge.

To my left is the guest bathroom and the guest bedroom, with another long window at the end of the hall. And my father’s old office tucked into the right corner.

To my left is our rooms, my old room on the left, my parents’ room at the end of the hall, and my mom’s old art studio to the right.

I stuff my hands into the pocket of my hoodie, questions propelling me forward. All of the doors are closed, and my hand automatically reaches out to my mother’s old studio as I pass it—wondering if it still hurts me to go in there, to feel her presence so intensely while not being able to have her there—but I pull my hand back and head to the end of the hall. I twist the knob with both hands, wrenching it until I hear the hard click and the door creaks open. I stay by the door, barely taking one step into the room. If I step in any further, I’m afraid I’ll step back in time, to when I would barge into the room in the mornings when I was little, wanting breakfast as soon and as fast as possible so I could go outside. The sun shines in from the left wall of the room, floor to ceiling windows spanning the whole wall with glass doors in the middle leading
outside to the wraparound balcony overlooking the ocean. I trace my hands over the dresser to my left, following the ornate designs on the sides.

But mom’s paintings are gone.

My mom’s paintings used to hang on these walls, one in particular just above the dresser I used to be transfixed by. I have a faint memory of watching her paint it, sitting just outside the back porch with the doors open behind her, looking straight ahead at the clearing in the trees, the woods on either side of the shore. I used to stare at it when I was young, finding the shading along the trees dark and morose, compared to the sunlight on the beach. The indistinct pattern of the shadows giving no indication where the sunlight might be coming from.

And yet, it’s gone. They’re all gone.

My father refused to remove them my whole life, even though he was hurting no one but us.

Dave would have no reason to come into this room.

The picture of my father and I is still on the bedside table—but the picture that belongs next to it of my mother and my father on their wedding day is gone.

I breathe deep, trying to keep the foreboding feeling from enveloping me. I take measured steps to the closet and pull open the two sliding doors—to find my mother’s clothes gone. My breath hitches and I have to stop myself from falling backwards—catching myself with the handles of the closet doors.

I hear the steps creek under Dan’s fast footsteps and his suitcase rolling along the hardwood, hitting every plank with a soft clunk. The clunks come slower and softer as he gets closer to me.

He stops just inside the room, eyes going straight to the view.
“Wow,” his voice dips wistfully. He gravitates towards the windows, but the suitcase drags as it hits the carpet and he is pulled out of his trance.

Dan sets the bags by the drawers and comes to join me in front of the closet. “Find anything?”

“My mom’s clothes are gone.”

He tilts his head. “Your mom’s clothes were still in your dad’s closet?”

I speak breathily. “Yeah, he refused to move them—and now someone has.”

“You don’t think maybe your father moved on when you left? Maybe tried healing after he lost you?”

I start shaking my head before he’s even done. “I know my father—he didn’t move these clothes.”

He nods and nudges my hands to close the closet. “So you think Dave moved them for you?”

“I—no, I mean, I don’t know who else would, but Dave wouldn’t have any reason to touch her clothes, and not my dad’s? And all of my mother’s pictures are gone.”

He nods and gestures back to the hall. “Is there anywhere else they might be? Maybe your father just stored them away”

“I think there are old pictures in my room, boxes of things.”

He keeps looking at me as he makes his way past me towards the door. “Should we go look?”

I take a deep breath, and follow him down the hall. I pass around him toward the door on our right. Sammie is written in bright green wood block letters on the outside of the door.
“Little Sammie’s room?” he asks with a slight overdramatic flare, moving to lean against the door frame next to me so he can look me in the eye with his funny smile.

My mouth lifts in spite of myself and I try to hide it by wedging myself between him and the doorknob to open it. I walk in first, hit with a wave of familiar smells and sounds, the slight seaweed and fishy smell, mixed with the salt water air and the crashing of waves. I rush over to the widow on the right side of the back wall, cranking the lever to close the window, pushing down once or twice before the window fully locks into place.

“How long was that open do you think?” I see Dan has moved into the middle of the room when I look back quickly.

“Not long, nothing is wet or blown away—that I know of.”

“Dave left the window open?”

“The window has never locked well so it can open with the wind.”

I look back to see Dan nodding but his eyes are already taking in the room. The green pastel color, the picture of old album covers on the walls: Aretha, Ella, Leslie, Nina, all the way up to Prince, Whitney, and Bowie. When I started high school, I got a queen bed with a generic white bed set and green decorative pillows to match. The one that sits there now.

There were two of my mother’s paintings that hung on either side of the bed that are gone now. They were just scenic portraits of the island, but I always liked the simplicity of them. I didn’t have to think about my mother when I looked at them, I could just admire the art, the island. And someone took them.

But the wall on the right is still covered in a mural my mother painted, a dark red and white accented scene of twisted trees and dark night sky forest views. The trees and shadows encroach every free space on the wall.
“Wow.” Dan moves closer to the right wall. He walks slowly to sit on the side of the bed in front of the mural. “Did you paint this?”

I take in a big breath slowly. “No. My mother did, she—I think she started it when I was born. She finished it just before she died.”

“I’m so sorry.” Dan turns back towards me, his brow furrowed in pity, but I keep my eyes on the wall.

I picture my mother with her paint and her brushes, making progress over the years in fast motion, her long shirt getting covered in more and more splotches of paint. I remember I used to read on my bed while she painted for hours, looking up and watching her make progress, but I can’t tell if I’ve implanted these memories or if they were real. As it is, sometimes my mother’s face is hazy in my mind, just a generic woman’s body accompanied by a feeling of torment, of wanting and of abandonment. And sometimes her face is so vivid and I can’t get it out of my head, how she looked then, how she could have looked now. I picture her finishing the painting, one last brush stroke, one last shadow, and then she turns towards me, her eyes piercing and her face straight. I blink away the picture and turn back toward Dan.

My mouth tips down. “I always found it so dark, almost scary when I was small—after she died.”

Dan shakes his head. “Really? It feels hopeful to me, the sun rising behind the trees.”

I roll my shoulders back and turn away from the mural. “I never took the time to analyze it, all I know is that I grew up without a mother and it constantly reminded me of her.” I clasp my hand together low in front of me and push them against each other, hard. “I stayed out of the house all day to get away from this painting—this house—and when I did have to see it, to see
all of the reminders of her here, I put it to the back of my mind. I didn’t know it at the time, but my whole childhood was keeping my head down until I could leave.”

I turn back when I hear the creek of the bed, Dan standing slowly, his hand pressing down his bunched up pants.

I unclench my fingers, tucking them into the edge of my hoodie, the heat inside overwhelming and I’m desperate to take it off, but I revel in the deliberate comfort. “Let’s just keep going, I want to make sure nothing else is—different.”

Dan stops in the middle of the room while I’m halfway out the door. “What about the pictures?”

I lean heavily into the door frame. “Not now, Dan. They’ll be here anytime today and all weekend for you to look at, you can have them if you want, I don’t give a shit.”

He stutters for a second, but I turn my back on him and step back to face the door to my mother’s studio, where I stop short. I am unable to move while he takes his time following me—probably taking one last look around the room, trying to catalog it all into memory. He’s observant, too observant. If he hadn’t gone looking on my computer, he wouldn’t have found my emails in the first place, he wouldn’t have had to know about this island in the first place.

He steps behind me and sets his hand on my back. “Do you want me to—?”

“No.” I put my hand out to stop his reach and take a breath.

It’s really my fault for keeping secrets in the first place, so I have to try to let him in this way, at least until I can come up with the words to explain why I never gave him the full story—but I have to explain it to myself first.

He’s slowly losing his patience with me, I can feel his fists clenching behind me. I need to keep going before he actually stops himself from responding.
I turn the knob, trying not to let my hand shake, and push the door open all the way, letting it hit the door stop on the other side of the wall. He gives me a minute to enter first, but I stop short at the yellow light radiating out of the room—that’s not supposed to be there. His face goes slack as he takes it in and he passes by me to walk in. My confusion spurs me toward him, because there was never anything special about the room.

It’s painted all white, and when my mother would paint, she would put sheets on the floor to keep the original hardwood protected. There are big long windows in the room, making it almost too bright in the sun with the light bouncing off the white harshly. When my mom died, I didn’t have the heart to go in there much anymore, and neither did Dad—because he wouldn’t touch it, wouldn’t move her stuff out of the room. There are probably still art supplies lying around, but nothing to explain Dan’s awe.

I step into the room, almost having to shield my eyes from its brightness, the sunlight illuminating every corner—but the walls aren’t white anymore, they’re yellow. My face goes slack too and I try to control my breathing as it hiccups, faster. He looks around the room, smiling just slightly. On the wall next to the open door is the closet, which used to remain open, filled with paints and brushes, and is now closed. The right wall of the room is completely bare, save for the new color. In the right corner of the room, there is a short, antique drawer set. I remember seeing the drawers somewhere, but I don’t remember where. I don’t remember if they were the white they are now. I don’t remember where I saw the changing table next to it either—white with no supplies on it yet. I move past the old wooden rocking chair in the corner, knowing damn well where that’s from, and my eyes settle on the white crib with a moon and stars themed mobile hung from the ceiling above it. Hung over the side is a thick cream colored crocheted blanket, the letter S.M.T. cross stitched into the corner in red swirly, cursive writing. I can still
feel the yarn on my skin, crying into it as my father told me my mother killed herself. My throat is tight and I try and swallow through it, breathing heavier through my mouth.

I turn forcefully away and my gaze falls on the top of the drawers—where a little stuffed elephant and a wooden box are sitting.

My mother loved elephants. I took on that love myself—especially with Lei Lei as my comfort object. Someone brought her out of the back of my closet to use in this room—why?

The box pulls me out of the doorway—because it’s the one thing of my mother’s that’s still here. This was her jewelry box that my father made for her for an anniversary. My mother didn’t wear much jewelry, she’d rather not have to remove lots of things in case they get dirty while she worked—but she kept this box in here just in case. After she died, I found her necklace in this box. It was a pair to mine, two little elephants with interlocking tails that we could each wear. I took mine off after she died and put it in this box with hers—but there was something comforting about knowing they were in here, a continued connection that didn’t overwhelm me.

I trace my hand over the varnish of the old box and can’t help but open it.

But it’s empty.

They’re missing. Something’s missing.

My arms curl into my stomach, my abs clenching as I bow forward, unable to fully keep myself upright.

“This is gorgeous. Did you tell Dave to do this? I have a hard time believing he’d be able to plan this all out himself—this just seems so much like your taste, classic and bright and warm.”

“I-no—I didn’t…” My arms come out to catch me on the doorframe as I trip out of the room.
“Where are you going?” his voice slightly desperate, tilting upwards at the end.

“I can’t stay in there.” I’m already halfway creaking down the stairs when I hear him come after me. I go to head straight towards the door when I step off the stairs, but Dan grips my arm, turning me back towards him.

“Why are you so spooked?”

“Cause I don’t know who’s been in my house. Who set up some creepy nursery… my old rocking chair, my own baby blanket? I—I can’t be in here, I need to take a walk.”

I need to be out of this house, I need to figure out who wanted to change it—who wanted to remove my mother from every corner. And left the locks on the door my dad put in to keep me from sneaking out when her presence got to be too much. And left the mural I had to stare at every night as I went to sleep. But took her photos and her paintings, even the ones that didn’t hurt to see. All of her artistic presence in that room replaced with a nursery that just reminds me of what I’ve lost.

And my necklace, my mother’s necklace, but not her jewelry box. It doesn’t make any sense.

Something’s missing.

Dan’s grip on my arm loosens, rubbing his hand soothingly down my arm. “Ok, great, let’s take a walk—.”

“Not with you,” I pull my arm out of his grip and keep my eyes on my feet, only able to see his fists clenching in reaction. “I have to talk to Dave, I have to—.”

“Oh of course, talk to anyone but your husband. Is that not the exact reason why we’re here in the first place?”
I jerk my head up. “That’s what you think those emails were? I wrote to Dave as the one source of my past I could talk to without all the hurt coming back to haunt me. It had nothing to do with you.”

He steps closer into my space. “You know that wasn’t just it.”

“I can’t have anything in this marriage that doesn’t involve you?”

“You know that’s not why I have a problem with it.”

I turn around and scoff, shaking my head and throwing my hands out. “Why don’t you just tell me your problem with it, since I seem to be having such a hard time with—.”

He rounds on me, his voice low. “You talked to him about losing our baby instead of me.”

My face goes slack and I close my eyes against the memories, breathing sharply through my nose. I swallow and look down, my hands burying in my pocket. “You saw—.”

“Yes, I saw, and you knew it was wrong and you did it anyway. I had to sit here while you were comatose, unable to say anything for weeks, because we lost our baby. And I felt for you—.”

“You were the best, you were nothing but good to me when we—.”

“Then why did you write to him grieving when I was right beside you?”

I breathe slowly through my mouth, blinking fast, eventually forcing my gaze back to his hand pulling across his mouth, his cheek sagging and making him look older than he is, accentuating the faint lines starting to form on his face. “I couldn’t—I didn’t want to put more on you, we had just lost our baby, it was easier—.”

His face hardens in front of me. “Easier, right. It’s always easier to talk to someone other than your husband.”
My shoulders roll back, my lip curling. “You want me to talk and then you interrupt me—.”

“You know, for all I know, you told Dave to put that nursery together, to take out all of the memories of your past because you didn’t want me to see. Using a nursery as a way to distract me.” He breaks our stare, brushing past me to move towards the windows.

“You’re being ridiculous, do you think I would react like this if I had planned it? I don’t even know if I want kids anymore!”

I breathe in sharply as he whips back towards me. I’m just as surprised as he is that I said it—that I mean it.

His brow furrows after a minute of stilted silence. “You don’t want kids at all?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “I—no. I mean, I can’t rule it out yet, but maybe.”

Betrayal coats his face before he turns to the windows. Outside bright green leaves swing from their branches. His fingers bridge in front of his nose as his eyes close.

I shake my hands free of my sleeves, pushing them up to my elbows. “You’ve been striving towards partner at your law firm and I’m not settled at my accounting firm yet, you said that yourself. And it’s only been a year since we lost our baby, we have time to—.”

“You weren’t ever going to tell me if it didn’t come out by mistake, were you? But I bet you told Dave all about it.”

He says this all to the window and I know he’s trying to push my buttons and I shouldn’t rise to the bait, but—“You know, did you ever think that maybe I discuss these things with Dave because I know you’ll react like this and I don’t want to have to face your judgement every time I’m thinking about something, something that I’m not sure of, that I might not even really feel.”
His back muscles tighten and his shoulders hunch. “What have I ever done that would make you think I would judge you like that? You could have told me you were worried, that you were having doubts. I thought this whole time when you were dodging my questions—our whole relationship—you were just keeping to yourself. But it was worse, you were going to someone else—someone you trust more, making a decision to completely forgo kids without consulting me at all.”

I breathe out a scoff, crossing my arms. “You’re being unreasonable, I just said I hadn’t decided.”

He turns and gestures outwards with his arms. “Well, you’re not getting any younger.”

“I’m not even 30 yet, and you’re just lashing out because you’re scared. You’re scared you don’t know me, you’re scared you won’t be a good father, you’re scared of what another pregnancy might do to me and you, and you’re scared of saying all of this to me because I was the one who had to give birth to a baby who was already dead. You’re scared of feeling helpless? Well get the fuck over it.”

He stands toe to toe with me now, rising up in front of me. His voice is low and I know he’s aiming to hurt me back before he does. “You’re the one scared that your uterus is useless because we’ve gotten pregnant twice and you haven’t been able to keep either of them.”

My chest feels uncomfortably tight as images of blood and pain flit past my mind, unbidden. I run out the door and take off on a thin dirt path to the right of our clearing, through the woods.

My mom used to keep it up, and after she died it became my responsibility. Thus, since I left, it has started to get overgrown, the branches brushing my face, exposed roots breaking the smooth path, and dead leaves littering the walkway. The best thing about this path, why I kept it
up and why I use it, even when other ways might be faster, is because my dad didn’t know about it. Or didn’t care to remember it. He probably knew about it at one point, but it was always mine alone.

Dad died a year before we got married. And I only saw him once after I left and before he died. He was in a nursing home on the mainland because his memory got too bad for him to live on the island any more. The nurses called to tell me he wouldn’t live much longer, and I told Dan I had to go alone. When I got to the room and sat by his side, he perked up, opened his eyes for the first time in a while, and called me by my mom’s name, Liz.

“Liz, you came back to me. I knew you wouldn’t leave me.”

Those words would have applied more to me than to Mom, but he said her name, so I let him have his hallucination. I had things I wanted to say, to apologize for, to rant about, to clear the air, but if he thought I was mom, I didn’t want to tarnish his memory of her.

He kept speaking, so I just held his hand and let him believe what he wanted to believe.

“I’m sorry for what I said to you—on the day you left. I’m so glad you came back.”

I didn’t know what he really meant by that, whether he was talking about the day I left or the day mom—the day mom died.

I can’t help but think about her mangled body being pulled out of the water, pale as it dripped onto the sand before they put the white sheet over it. She had jumped off the cliff and died as soon as she hit the water. And I wasn’t supposed to be seeing her body, but I hid, I had to know, and now I can never remove the picture from my mind. I remember her bare left hand dropped off the rolling gurney and if I wasn’t hiding, I would have run to hold it, run to get one last touch.
I didn’t know if I could go through with sitting in the hospital with my dad again, for the last time, but in the end I couldn’t leave him like she did. He died with my hand in his.

His funeral was on the island, but I didn’t come back for it. I had already done what I needed to do, I had already said goodbye. I had Dave sell his boat to John, one of men he used to fish with. I had Dave lock up the house—just as it was. I didn’t want what I left behind at the house, but I couldn’t bear to get rid of it. So I boarded it up, along with the memories. Being away, I could think of them happy, together. I could think of Mom without thinking of her dead body, of how she left us, left me there alone.

But being back on the island, in that house, walking this path, it’s all that I can picture.

Shortly after my father’s death, I found out that I was pregnant. Dan and I had always wanted children, and I was desperate for them, desperate to give our kid a life with two parents. We were happy. But I miscarried before the end of the first trimester—the first time I lost a baby.

On the path, I reach a break in the trees to the right, giving a view of the backside of the island shoreline. Here lies my parents’ memorial, supposedly the place where my father proposed to my mother. Though their graves are with the other island residents in a cleared part of the woods in the middle of the island, Dad set up the memorial for Mom here when she died, and Dave set up a memorial stone for him in my honor right next to hers when he died. I bend down and run my hand over them slowly, kissing the tips of my fingers and touching them to both.

I don’t let myself linger, continuing on the trail. I cross the dirt road that crosses the path, leading down to the dock. Now, only one boat is still docked, the *Samantha Marie*. I don’t let myself look for more than a few seconds.
Dan and I got married not even six months after that miscarriage, but losing that baby brought us closer, it solidified our thoughts about children, and we felt more ready than ever to settle ourselves down together. A little while after our first anniversary, I found out I was pregnant again.

We were happy—again.

But then I started bleeding, so much so that I passed out at work. I pause on the trail while thinking about it, closing my eyes against the nausea. I was having another miscarriage, but they caught it early this time. They gave me medication and put me on bedrest. I stayed in bed for weeks, only barely getting up for bathroom breaks. Dan worked from home as much as he could, only went in to work when there was no other option, got me food and watched the entirety of Grey’s Anatomy with me—he couldn’t have been better. But it didn’t matter that I didn’t move, it didn’t matter that I could feel the baby starting to move, even though Dan couldn’t quite yet. I found blood on the sheets and Dan physically carried me out to the car and drove us to the hospital again. They said they wanted to keep me for observation for a few days, which turned into weeks. Every time they suggested sending me home, they would find another bleed, another dip in the baby’s heart rate, another dip in my blood pressure—more complications, more reason to keep me confined in that narrow little room, with cramps and nausea and a sick little voice in my head that told me I wasn’t a good mother, that I would never have a child, certainly not this one.

The baby was stillborn at 27 weeks.

It’s been just over a year since and I thought I was starting to feel like I could finally breathe again.
And then Dan found the emails I wrote to Dave, the emails I had been writing since I left, since before I met him.

I continued to email Dave from the moment and I left, and I used to hate myself for it. Not because I hated Dave—he was the only thing on this island that I wanted to take with me—but because I told myself I would leave the whole island behind, everything and everyone on it, all the awful memories and it felt like I was betraying my own convictions.

But I was alone in New York and I couldn’t give up the one connection I still had to family.

And now that’s biting me in the ass.

I veer off the trail to the left, weaving through the trees in my wedges, crunching the underbrush, the sound echoing against the quietness of the island. I hear a whisper behind me—my name—and I turn fast, back through the trees behind me, and then in a circle, still hearing and seeing nothing. No one is there, just trees rustling in the wind and the waves crashing, all the sounds you take for granted until you finally hear their constant roar.

Desperation pushes me forward through the forest. I am desperate to find answers. I am desperate like I was when I left the island last time, like I was when I was trying to keep a baby that was already dead inside me.

I need to find out who has been in my house.

I swerve to meet a clearing in the trees for a little house, purposefully cut off from the town center. I spent many a day in this house, in the kitchen cooking, at the kitchen table reading and finishing homework, in the living room watching old movies on the oldest TV I had ever seen.
The navy door opens quickly to my knock, Dave standing on the other side, as if awaiting my arrival. And now that I think about it he probably was.

Or was he?

“Dave, we need to talk.”
Dan watches out the window long after Sam has left, not expecting her to come back, but struck by the words in their fight he’s desperate to take back. He uncrosses his arms after a while and sits on the couch, his hands gripping his knees and his heel bouncing jerkily. The only thing he can cling to in an effort to forget about their argument is everything Sam is keeping from him—which he has all at his fingertips here if he can just find it.

Sam grew up here, the remnants of Little Sammie are everywhere, things maybe she didn’t even notice. The framed drawings that line the staircase, the young adult novels stashed under the side tables in the living room, the school photos hung up on the fridge—even long after she left. Her last honors report card is hung up on the fridge too, obviously her father left it there to remember her by.

He remembers when her father died four years ago; at that time he didn’t even know her father existed, because she never talked about him. Dan assumed he had already died. But she told Dan she had to go see him before he died, and that she had to go alone. Dan assumed it was because she was too raw, that their situation was too complicated.

Why else would she leave her father, the island, never to come back?

Looking more closely, he finds a newspaper article hung on the fridge as well, talking about the honors students at Columbia. Sam’s dad must’ve kept track of her, probably wanted to keep in touch, but she must’ve not let him.

How did they leave things off? Did she sneak away in the middle of the night, did they have intermittent conversations if only just to make sure they were each alive, did they exchange Christmas cards?
Sam didn’t seem to have an aversion to family, just her own. He remembers when they met his family for the first time. She was reserved at first, in a way he had never seen her before, but after a little bit of finagling on his mom’s part, she was just as brilliant as she always was. Dan’s mom invited her to Thanksgiving dinner and she gladly accepted, thus started the tradition of holidays spent with the Wrights. He knew her mom had died when she was young, she had shared that early on, but when he asked her, afterwards, if she had other family who would feel bad that she wasn’t spending the holiday with them, she said they never spoke, that they hadn’t spoken since she left home for college.

She said she didn’t like to talk about it because it brought back bad memories.

And he left it at that, he didn’t need her to tell him all of her deep dark secrets from her past when she was his future, and she seemed content to live in the present with him.

Then they lost their baby. And six weeks later he found an email from someone named Dave—emails shared over years, before he had ever met her. She had been talking to Dave this whole time, he was the only one she wanted to vent to when he had barely gotten three words out of her since they left the hospital. He had been miserable, in his own little silent hell, reaching out to her with no response, and he thought she was in her own silent hell too—but she was actually talking to him—to Dave. Talking to him about this house, which he didn’t know existed, an island, he didn’t know existed—all to a man he didn’t know existed. They talked little about her seemingly fraught childhood, but Dave obviously knew it all anyway, in an intimate way he never got to experience—and she would never tell him. Bad Memories.

She kept everything from him, and he was content to let her because he believed she only cared about what lay ahead. But they never talked when things got heavy. They never talked about her first miscarriage, she said she would rather keep moving forward, toward their
marriage, their future. Then when they had the stillbirth, he thought she would take up the same mindset—even if it was unhealthy.

But she talked to Dave about all of it.

So he asked—he demanded: tell him what she kept from him this whole time, tell him why or—

He can’t keep a marriage with someone so unwilling, unable, to trust him, to communicate with him.

They’re here now and even still, she doesn’t trust him enough to believe he’ll still be here, no matter what she reveals about her past.

He eyes the downstairs, trying to see it with her eyes, see what she might have seen, what might have made her want to get away so fast.

It looks like a beach house, a family home—a very tidy home. Not lived in, no newspapers left on coffee tables, no shoes left under the sofa, no jackets by the door. It’s almost staged—a manufactured invitation of what could be. The framed drawings and pictures on the wall above the staircase hang in a perfectly spaced pattern, the novels under the side tables are stacked and color coded. The things on the fridge are all hung with “Welcome to Maine” magnets, not slanted or overlapping, certainly not overflowing like his fridge at home used to be—still is.

Up the steps, the drawings are placed in between photos of Sam and her dad—Sam as a baby, toddler Sam with bright blonde pigtails holding on to a finger as she walks through the woods in little hiking boots, child Sam in a bathing suit and towel cooking a s’more next to two other kids, child Sam in the same bathing suit with the whole town in back of the church on the
deck, pre-teen Sam holding a lobster with her father on a boat, teenager Sam in her graduation cap and gown. She grows as he goes up the steps.

But there are no photos of her mother. Nothing of the whole family.

Sam said her father had left everything the same her whole life, that he would never take anything down or remove anything after she left—but she’s biased, he could have removed the pictures of her mother from the wall.

He doesn’t stop at the top, going straight towards their room, her parents’ old room. On the dressers, on the bedside tables—there are no pictures of the whole family, and only one picture in the whole room. Sam looks to be a teenager in this photo, her hair slightly darker than the blonde her younger self sported, and it’s long and wet in the picture, gathered over her shoulder on one side. They’re standing on a dock, though not the one him and Sam came in on. She’s holding onto her father’s arm loosely as he’s gripping one of her hands in response. Sam is in a modest one piece suit and her father is wearing orange rubber overalls and heavy work boots. Her father’s face sports a modest smile, and Sam’s face might look happy to someone who doesn’t know her, but he can tell she’s not as fine as she seems. Her skin is pale, her cheek bones are pronounced, and her eyes are shadowed, but it’s her forehead that tips him off. Even after all this time, when she’s stressed, she gets a little divot in her forehead, her veins slightly more defined from the tension she holds there.

Dan grabs the photo and brushes his fingers over them. He knows something about his wife.

He already knows Sam’s mother’s clothes are gone from the closet—but that also could have been her father, finally trying to find peace after Sam left. He puts the photo back on the
bedside table, trying to keep the frustration at bay—nothing else in this room giving him any more information about Sam.

But he thinks the nursery, her mother’s old studio, might.

The door to the nursery creeks as he pushes it back open to its stopper on the wall. The sun is slightly lower in the sky now. Still, the yellow hue envelopes the room, making the lines of the furniture hazy. There are shuttered sliding closet doors that he didn’t notice before right behind the door.

His eyes follow the blank wall to the chest of drawers, a little stuffed elephant and an ornate box on top. He tips his head and moves to the box. It’s old wood, with a glossy glaze on top. There is a place where a lock could be, but the wood is hollowed out, allowing him to open the top easily. Inside is nothing but an inscription, *To Lizzie, may we stay together forever*.

Was it the inscription that made her run? Was it the box itself?

He shuts the box with a heavy clunk. He continues around the room, brushing his hand over the changing table. He tips the rocking chair with his foot and watches it rock back and forth, just far enough from the corner of the room to avoid hitting the wall.

This might not be in his future—no rocking their babies to sleep, no early morning feedings watching the sun crest over the horizon, nothing.

He runs his hand through his hair and moves out of the room—he isn’t getting anything from this, especially not when he’s just guessing.

He pushes the door to her childhood room open—there will be no little baby Wright’s name to put in block letters on their door.

The mural on Sam’s wall is all encompassing, he wonders if she ever got used to walking into her room to see it, if she ever was able to not stop and stare. But if he stares he’ll become
preoccupied with what she sees when she looks at it—the darkness that he doesn’t see, that he
doesn’t comprehend.

It’s a beautiful view of a forest to him, the brown trees are accented in white, the
branches intertwining. The orange and yellow maple leaves seem to move on the tree, some
hanging in air and some having fallen to the ground. Between the leaves and the white accents,
the trees seem to radiate out from the navy background behind them. And on the horizon, the sun
crests just slightly, its yellow glow lighting up the scene. The juxtaposition between the moon
and the stars still visible with the sun makes the image ethereal, mystical.

Perfect for a little girl with the love for art and the outdoors.

But it’s dark to her—maybe because everything associated with her mother is tainted
with her death.

But again, he’s still just guessing.

He moves towards the right wall, the dark tall dresser next to the door, but his eyes stay
on the armoire to the left. He opens the door and its creak echoes loudly in the silent house. On
the shelves are stacks of books, evidently the tall bookshelf on the other side of the room wasn’t
enough storage. The top shelf, however, features leather binders, photo albums, which he
greedily grabs, bringing all three with him to sit on the bed. The first is bound with brown leather
and gold trim and its binding cracks as he opens it, almost like it hasn’t been opened in years.

And yet, when he flips through the pages, the album is empty, little rips on each page
marking the places where someone had ripped the pictures out. He holds the empty pages in his
hands staring for a few seconds. He slowly closes the album, clenching the binding before he sets
it aside on the bed.
When he grabs the next one, it has little headers marking the stages of what he assumes to be Sam’s life—“Newborn”, “6 months”, “First Birthday”, and all the way to “4 years old”—but it too is empty of any pictures.

He lets the album fall to the bed in his haste to pick up the last album, and yet, its navy leather binding is also empty, but a spark of color pulls his attention. He flips back a few pages from his spot and finds a small piece of the one of the photos that was left behind, the right corner of a photo with a woodsy background and the face of an unknown woman.

He gingerly unsticks the old glue holding it to the page and lets the album slide to the floor. He keeps the photo in one hand as he checks the armoire unproductively to find more—to find the albums Sam must’ve been referring to when she mentioned them to him. His brow furrows—did someone remove these photos too? Did her father?

Or is this another way for Sam to keep him in the dark, to mention photos that weren’t real?

He breathes out a puff of frustration and stalks to the closet, jerking open the sliding door, revealing a teenage Sam’s clothing and excessive shoe collection. On the top shelf are boxes of board games which pique his interest, but when he pushes aside Monopoly and Chutes and Ladders, he finds nothing but Sorry and Guess Who?.

He swallows thickly, crossing his arms and pressing the picture into his elbow. He nods to himself.

“She’s never once been honest with me.”
Dave looks at me critically before he opens the door wider and I slip in past him.

The front door opens up into the kitchen, the place where I spent years learning to cook from the best. The kitchen takes up the majority of his house, and he designed it himself, so everything is right where you want it to be and easily accessible, with no empty or unused space. I remember Dave’s house used to be one of the only places I could stand being inside on the island, other than the diner. Otherwise, I spent all of my time outside, and most of that time was spent in the water. Once my dad knew I could confidently swim, he trusted that nothing would happen to me on an island of people he knew, not that he could have stopped me if he did have objections.

I can’t help staring across the bar to the kitchen, remembering how I learned to chop without cutting myself, to curl in my knuckles and chop slowly until I got more practice at it. I’m brought back to Dave hovering over my shoulder as he taught me his best dishes. But he was never too close, never encroached on my space and never seemed worried that I would make a mistake—and his confidence gave me my own. When I got older, we still cooked together, even when he didn’t have anything more to teach me. I wonder if we can still move together in the kitchen as we used to, even after being apart for so long.

Past the kitchen is his living room, and it’s like time stood still—where his kitchen has been dutifully updated with the best appliances, his living room has stayed exactly the same. That old, red couch is the same one I used to sleep on when I was too angry to go home. The boxy TV where we used to watch old movies when it was rainy outside and I couldn’t, didn’t want to, go home. The coffee table is where I used to do my homework, sitting either on the couch or on the floor—working harder than I needed to because it was all I could do that would
let me forget, forget my mother, forget everything. Nothing in this house reminds me of her and my shoulders relax with my next breath.

I turn back to Dave from my spot between the kitchen and the living room. He hadn’t looked all that much older in the diner before, but now I can see the lines on his face that have deepened, the new ones around his eyes and his mouth. His hair was greying when I left, but it’s fully grey now, along with his beard. He never used to have a beard. And yet, he still wears his wedding ring on his left hand, as a widower tends to do. He still carries his pad of paper and pen in the pocket of his flannel shirt, despite never needing to write down an order in my 27 years of knowing him. But that might have changed too, in the years I’ve been gone, and my stomach dips uncomfortably at the thought.

I tilt my head. “Is that pot roast I smell?”

He smirks slightly, and moves into the kitchen, already grabbing a knife to cut me some. “You smell correctly. It’s supposed to be my lunch for the week, but I guess I can cut into it early for you.”

I move to the bar and sit on the stool, now noticing the pot roast resting on the stove behind the top of the bar.

Dave keeps his eyes on the meat as he cuts two pieces off onto plates for us both, spooning the vegetables and juices from the bottom of the pan over top of each of them. “What’s up? What’s that look on your face?”

I stay silent, looking down at my hands, because now that I’m here all I want to do is bask in the good memories, not go back to the bad ones.

Dave sits down on the stool next to mine, placing the plate with a fork and knife in front of me. “Is it about Dan? Where is he?”
I scoff and start to cut a piece of pot roast, as it falls apart easily at the touch. “Dan is still—in the dark, I didn’t do the situation any good by starting a fight and storming out before we could even finish. I also brought up—stuff I didn’t even mean to.”

I trail off and Dave cuts a piece of pot roast himself, picking up a piece of potato as he takes a bite. “He did seem distant at the diner.”

I chuckle over a bite. “That’s because he’s jealous of you.”

Dave raises his eyebrows and lets out a laugh, low and raspy, but familiar, the same way he’s always laughed and I smile along despite myself. He reaches behind the counter and grabs two napkins. “You did tell him I am double, almost triple, your age, right?”

“No right away.”

Dave tilts his head and his lips purse in judgment.

I roll my shoulders back and try to justify myself, “He went through my private things and made an assumption that clearly revealed his distrust in me. I was just letting him revel in his own misery for a minute. Plus, it’s not really that type of jealousy and we both knew it. He’s just jealous that I was talking to you and—not to him.”

Dave’s tongue rounds the inside of his left cheek. “And this distrust wasn’t at all justified by the fact you had never told him about me, about the island, about your past?”

“Why should I have to? It doesn’t affect us,” I blurt out, not even needing to look up from my plate to feel the disapproval radiating off of him. “It didn’t anyway, not until he found those emails, not until I got here and saw everything that made this place—close in on me. But then, I go into the house, expecting it to be a time capsule of everything I’ve been trying to get over, and things are missing, it’s—different. The house is different.” I swing to the side of my stool, bringing my plate further in front of me to take another bite.
“Sam, your father lived there for a few years after you left, you don’t think he moved
some stuff around before you locked it in place in time, preferring to forget that part of your life
existed?”

I lean forward with my elbow on the bar, shaking my head. “Not this much, all of Mom’s
pictures are gone, it was like every obvious influence of hers was removed, and her studio—.”

I can feel my heartrate picking up so I stop to take a big breath and a bite of pot roast,
half of mine left as Dave finishes his, putting his napkin onto his plate and leaning back on the
stool, his eyes squinted in thought.

“You don’t think your Dad might have changed all of that once you left? He was angry,
Sam, when you left like you did. I wouldn’t be surprised if he just couldn’t take your presence in
the space anymore.”

Not my presence at all—just Mom’s.

I stare at Dave for a long second. The way he’s questioning me, the way he automatically
assumes my father did it—it doesn’t make sense.

Something’s missing.

He knows how much I had to get out of that house—because of my dead mother haunting
every corner.

Dan assumed at first that it was Dave who moved things and I couldn’t believe it.

But Dave would be the only one who knew we were trying for a baby before—and yet he
knew we lost that baby too, so how could he ever build a nursery knowing that?

But what if Dan is right? Dave’s the only one who would have any reason to put a
nursery into that house, even if the reason makes no sense.
And suddenly, I have to know for sure—something about being here again, with Dan, is making me question what I thought I knew about this place.

I take another bite, chewing and swallowing slowly. “Did you do it?”

Dave’s face remains neutral at the question, something he has mastered in my time knowing him and something I have always envied and, yet, appreciated. “What makes you think I did it?”

I swallow thickly, looking out the window and away from him. “Because you’re the only one who would know about us losing our baby, about us being pregnant before at all.”

Dave sits up, leaning forward to touch my wrist, moving his head to broach my eye line as I cut my eyes toward him. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“Someone turned my mother’s old studio into a nursery, Dave. They painted over her paint splattered white walls to make a bright yellow nursery, they brought all of my baby stuff out of storage. I walked into that after I lost my baby. This wasn’t something Dad knew about, he was already dead—and he’s done a lot of things, but this isn’t something he would do even if he were alive to know. And by the look on your face, it isn’t something you would do either.”

His face is slack, his forced neutrality unable to overcome this particular news. “A nursery?”

I nod slowly, still trying to process it myself. “A nursery. Made out of my old baby things.”

Dave hesitates. “That makes no sense.”

“Exactly, so if you didn’t do it, and my dad didn’t do it, who did?”

His hand moves from my wrist as he sits back in his chair, propping his head on his fist and looking distantly out the window. “It—It would have to be someone with a key, I guess.”
I finish the rest of the pot roast on my plate and crumple my napkin and place it over my plate. “You’re the only one I gave a key to.”

He eyes me for a second before he gets up, reaching for our plates and rounding the counter to toss the napkins and go about placing the dishes in the dishwasher. I furrow my brow as he takes the time to rearrange the dishes already in the dishwasher, placing the plates from biggest to smallest, and so I clear my throat before he starts color coding rather than answering me.

“Dave.”

He closes the dishwasher and leans on both hands on the counter, only slowly bringing his eyes to meet mine. “You know the only other person who could have a key to your place?”

It comes out like a question, but I know he’s not expecting me to answer. Because I already know, and I should have figured it out before I even came over here. Maybe I did, but I had almost hoped Dave was actually the one who entered my house.

“No—she’s not, why would she put a nursery into my house? She had no clue I was even coming back, that I was—.” I stop short of saying pregnant, but the sentiment is there.

“I know, no one has a reason to—put in a nursery—but it wasn’t me, it wasn’t you, and you claim it wasn’t your father. He would have given her a key—if she didn’t have one already. You know they were close.”

I step off the stool and am halfway to the door before Dave can make it around the counter to try and block my way. But I brush past him and have my hand around the doorknob before he can get a word out.

“Sam—.”
The slam of the door cuts him off as I stalk back towards the path, then think better of it, knowing the fastest way to the middle of the town is to book it through the woods. I reach the clearing just before the diner and head right, to the biggest house on the main road, a two story brick cottage with a white picket fence and manufactured landscaping. It’s the first house on the main road, right on the beach. I flip through the gate and stand in the middle of the stone path that leads up to it.

“Helen!”

She appears irate from the other side of the house, holding a spade out to her side in question before she sees me and perks up slightly.

“Samantha. I was just pruning out back if you want to join me.”

“You were—were you in my house?”

I watch her as she tries not to react to my response. The straw hat she’s wearing shields her eyes, but not enough for me to miss the quick raise of her eyebrows before she furrows them and tilts her head just too far. Her fingers twitch around her spade and her weight shifts from one foot to the other.

“I don’t understand the question.”

I tilt my head, my mouth turning down in disapproval. “I think you do. Were you—did you go into the house recently?”

She takes a deep breath and furrows her brow further, her long greying hair whipping in the wind behind her. “You locked it up after your father died. You didn’t have the decency to go through the house beforehand, to even show your face at the funeral.” She crosses her arms and sighs, the rolled up sleeves of her bright button up cutting into her forearms from the looks of it,
her spade pointed up, cushioned in her elbow. “And now you think I’ve been in your house since then, when I didn’t have any clue you were coming back, because why?”

I stand up straighter at her needling, but I manage to keep the shame of being scolded off my face. “Because there are things missing, photos of my mother—other things of hers. And we both know how you loathed her.”

“Only ever for you. Because of how she left you—and your father. Because of how much I could see her death hurt you,” she visibly relaxes her shoulders, “And as for the ‘missing things’, your father spent five years there without you. You’ve been gone a long time, Samantha. You can’t have actually expected the place to be exactly the same as you left it?”

“This is more than that.” I can’t stop myself from stepping further towards her, for the slight whine of desperation in my voice. “Dad wouldn’t have done all of this. He was dead, he had no clue—.” I twist my jaw to keep myself from revealing too much.

Helen’s eyes spark slightly under the hat. “No clue about what?”

I shake my head and press my lips together. I don’t know how to ask her if she knew about the baby without revealing it to her in the process. And if she doesn’t already know, I don’t ever want her to know.

“Fine. Don’t answer. It’s your choice to cut me and everyone else you used to call family out of your life. I didn’t know if you’d ever come back. And I’m so glad you’re here now, but I really never thought it would happen. But your Dad—he was convinced. He really believed he’d see you get off of Stoney’s boat one day, after you went to college and realized your family, your place, was here. So whatever he did, he did it with the intention of you coming back. And you’re standing here telling me you aren’t actually a little relieved your mother’s things are gone from
that house? When you and I both know how hard it was for you, when, according to your father, that is the whole reason you left?”

I squint my eyes and watch the ocean behind Helen, rather than looking at her directly.

“This—this is different.”

Helen hums, nodding slowly, blinking fast. “Because despite how much you love this place, for some reason, you’ll always find an excuse to leave.”

I clench my hands in response, but stay silent.

“Well, good, you can leave on Monday like you planned. But you don’t have to work against your own desires if you don’t want to. It might help you and Daniel if you didn’t.”

I snap my eyes back towards her, taking another step towards her. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing, truly Samantha. You just seemed distant from each other in the diner—and I know how you are. You can’t forget what truly matters. I think you need to think of your marriage—.”

“You know nothing about my marriage.” I can’t stop myself from snapping, cutting her off, my breath accelerating.

“I know the look of two people on the brink of losing everything. I know the look of two people unhappy—with each other, with themselves—it’s the same look your parents had just before your mother—.” Helen closes her mouth harshly, and shame drips down her face, but I turn and stride away before she can try and take it back.

She calls after me, but the pounding in my ears blocks it out. My vision spots with my harsh, rapid breaths as I pass through the gate, not bothering to close it behind me. I turn left and my feet take me back to the edge of the beach, my shoes sinking into the sand as I stop, trying to
match my breaths to the crash of the waves. I press my palms to my cheeks, extra warm, and I bend at the waist in hopes of calming my breath. I brush my hands up through my hair, tied tightly before I take it out of my bun, letting it blow in the light ocean breeze. The heat makes my hands clammy, making them stick in my hair. I rip my hoodie over my head. I put my hand to the middle of my sternum, closing my eyes, but my heart doesn’t still, doesn’t slow down. I stare straight ahead, focusing on a boat on the horizon in front of me, but my throat burns with lack of oxygen. I pull the straps of my wedges and step out of them. I kick up sand as I walk, hitting the boards at a jog. I grab the hem of my dress as I approach the end of the dock and pull it over my head in one motion, leaving it on the wood behind me as I dive into water.

The cold hits me as it always does, fast and sharp, leaving me gasping as I immediately go back up for air and warmth. I tread water a few feet from the dock, warming my limbs and calming my breaths, reveling in the chill of the water. Once I’m not gasping for air, I don’t give myself a break as I turn away from the dock and swim as hard as fast as I can. I pump my arms, breathing deeply every few minutes, but I still feel out of breath, my muscles burning. As soon as I feel too exhausted to continue, I come up from underwater to the surface and ride the gentle waves, treading water to keep myself from moving back towards shore.

Despite my effort to keep my mind blank, Helen’s words distract me from my breath, from the feeling of my body, my limbs uncoiling in the water with each passing second. My relationship with Helen has never been straightforward or easy. Most of the first memories I have are of her scolding my parents for letting me run around the island unsupervised and then my parents scolding me in turn, after which I did it all over again. She never liked what I would get up to while I was allowed to run around. I was the de facto leader of the other kids on the island and let’s just say that anything that got us in trouble was usually my idea. She also didn’t like the
sort of influence I had over the other kids, especially her daughter, Gabby. Gabby was a little older than me, but she was very shy so I took her under my wing. One time we convinced one of the younger fishermen to take us tubing on the back of his boat and Gabby fell off onto a rock and broke her arm and Helen threatened to take the man’s fishing license away. I can see now how her influence of the island was a weapon when she chose it to be, but she was also good to the island—even after her marriage crumbled because of it. Helen’s husband divorced her when she wouldn’t move with him to the city. Gabby chose to go with him. She would come back during the summers sometimes, but less frequently as she got older and eventually not at all. Shortly after Helen’s divorce, my mom died and I think Helen and I bonded through some twisted need for each of us to have a surrogate mother and daughter. She would take me out and teach me about the flowers and the trees on the island, about what we did for the local ecosystem and what we could do to keep it clean and fruitful.

And I liked learning from her—I asked her to let me help, to teach me how I could help the island, the place where I could get away from the house that felt more and more like a prison of the worst memories of my mother—reminders of how she chose death over me. She taught me appreciation for the environment, but eventually the island wasn’t enough to keep me here.

The house, the island, the people, it all suffocated me and I had to cut it all out—I couldn’t stay here anymore.

And I know she sees Gabby in me—I know she feels betrayed all over again, and she’s lashing out because of it. I know she didn’t mean it either—but I’m scared she’s right. That we’re unhappy. That my parents were unhappy and that’s why—

I can’t let my marriage end like Helen’s—certainly not like my parents’.
I turn back to the island, the dock just a speck on the shore far away. There’s a buoy to the right, a few hundred feet closer, that I must’ve passed without noticing. I lean to float on my back, looking up at the sky, watching the sun inch towards the horizon as evening approaches.

Maybe Helen isn’t lying, maybe Dan and Dave were right, maybe my father really did remove my mother from the house after I left—after it was too late.

The sea air feels cold on the top of my body floating out of the water. I right myself in the water to stay warm. I dive down and keep my eyes open, despite the stinging. It’s dark, but clear. I have to squint to see traces of sea life below me, the bottom past my field of vision. I come up for air once before I dive back down with my eyes closed, feeling the water around me. My eyes squint and I swim downwards, towards something that caught my eye, a speck of light. Before I can get there I hear something in my ear, over the pressure of the water, the rushing of wind—a whisper, a voice calling me. I rush to the surface and turn towards the island, hearing nothing. I feel a slight breeze and do a 360 in the water—but find nothing amiss, no one around.

The fog of freedom broken, I take this as my cue to make my way back to shore—slowly this time, gliding through the water and letting it push me forward rather than propelling myself. When I get back to the dock, I lift myself to sit on the edge, the air bringing goose bumps to my exposed skin. I leave my feet dangling in the water, keeping one part of me warm while the rest of my body acclimates. My underwear clings to my skin and I try to lean back towards the rays of the sun not blocked by the trees of the island to soak up heat.

When I start to feel the cold of the water again, I pick up my dress off the dock and put it back on. It sticks to the wetness of my skin and quickly becomes soaked. My hair drips steadily onto the back, even after I wring it out. I rush across the sand to grab my hoodie. With it on, I
grab my shoes by the straps to hang onto them, rather than put them back on. The sand coats my feet as I stay in place, shift my gaze from the ocean to the main road and back again.

Maybe Helen isn’t lying about the house, maybe she isn’t lying about me and Dan—but I know I can’t find the answer from here.

So I head back up the road, my shoes dangling from my fingers.
On the sofa in front of the big window, Dan watches evening settle on the island. He is waiting for Sam to walk back down the driveway. Not leisurely, but out of necessity—because the worst, most masochistic parts of him are pumped for another fight. The pasta he made for dinner out of guilt is congealing on the dinner table, the tossed salad soggy and wilting. He prematurely poured the champagne bottle that Dave gave them and their champagne is sitting flat in their glasses. The carton Dave included was of two slices of blueberry pie, and luckily he left that in the fridge for later—but it’s also still sitting there waiting. When he finally left her room, recovered from the shock of yet another lie from her, he desperately wanted to try and follow her—not to apologize or to ask for an apology, but to stalk in anger, to demand an explanation. But he didn’t and when the shame settled again, he took it out on the vegetables for shrimp pasta primavera.

Ever since he set the table and plated dinner, he hasn’t moved from the couch. His posture has slowly folded over—from sitting with his back straight, arms crossed to hunching over, his elbows jutting into his knees and his hands clenching in his hair.

He has made slight moves to get up and go to dinner at the diner with Helen countless times, only to sit back down more uncomfortably than before. It is from the most uncomfortable position yet that he doesn’t notice her coming, his eyes on the floor.

She comes through the door soaking wet.

Her dripping hair, her shoes clutched in her hands, the sand on her feet, the wet dress clinging to her frame under her hoodie—it all shocks his system enough that he remains silent, though he does stand in response to her entrance. But neither of them move, each standing still and taking the other in. Or he presumes that she’s doing the same thing as he is.
Her dress is wet, but not soaked—so she probably didn’t just jump into the ocean fully clothed. Which he guesses is good, considering. Her toes clench against the wood floor and he presumes she didn’t just take her shoes off outside the door, so she must’ve walked in her bare feet here—probably all the way from the beach. Which doesn’t fill him with ease, considering.

Honestly, he probably would’ve dived head first into the ocean if someone had called his uterus useless too.

His fists unclench and he breaks his staring contest with her, clearing his throat. But he can’t even make the first move as she gingerly puts her shoes down next to the door.

Her eyes flick behind him. “You made dinner?”

“Yeah. You went for a swim?”

She nods, swallowing visibly. “Yeah.”

He nods and flounders in the absence of a response, but she saves him from needing one, sighing and heading back towards the stairs. When she looks back at him, he follows behind her. They creak up the steps and she continues towards the nursery, only pausing once at the entrance, with her hands on either side of the door, holding her out of the room, before she breaks her own hold and shuffles uneasily out of the doorway.

She stands in the middle of the room and her eyes rove from right to left before she cuts her eyes back to the chest of drawers, with the stuffed elephant and wooden box on top. “I regret saying that I don’t know if I want kids, that’s not true. I have been having…feelings, guilt left over from the baby we lost. I mean, just being back here reminds me that I never had a good mother figure in my life, how am I supposed to be a mother to someone—when I can’t even carry them to term?”
His breath hiccups and he swallows in an effort not to cough. His heart pulls and he makes a move to touch her, to comfort her, but his hand clenches and he lets the question hang, no doubt hurting her further.

He reaches for the elephant and squeezes its plush belly. It has a little white bow wrapped around its neck. The rest of the body is even softer, but not fluffy, nothing on it that could come loose or fall off. He runs his fingers across the stitching, the grey ears with pink insides, and its little trunk. He takes the little elephant with him, skirting around Sam, stopping in front of the rocking chair and sitting down heavily, almost tipping the chair back into the wall of the corner. He doesn’t look up as she turns to face him. He continues stroking the elephant.

“You kept passing out—in the hospital. On bedrest. And I’d call in the nurse and they’d check your pulse and it would be weak and thready and the bab—,” he clears his throat and blinks a few times, “they couldn’t find the baby’s heartbeat and I—I couldn’t breathe. No matter how many times it happened.” She steps just one step towards him and he doesn’t have to look up to know she’s about to speak, so he cuts her off. “And then its heartbeat would echo through the room, not ever very loud, but I could hear it, clear and fast. And then you would wake up never having known, always checking on the baby. And somehow, I would regain all of my hope in that moment. I never ever thought we would lose that baby.” His voice peters out, rough and choked, and he tries to swallow. “And when they told us that our baby was gone. I just, I didn’t understand. I couldn’t see it, I hadn’t even felt it move. I didn’t know it to be anything but what I imagined inside my head and having it ripped from me—I was just in a state of shock. And then you woke up and asked about the baby, again, as you always did. And I had to tell you our baby was gone.” A tear stains the little elephant’s cheek. “You said you could still feel it moving, that the baby was still there, that we were wrong. You started speaking nonsense, talking about how
she didn’t die. She wasn’t supposed to die. ‘Someone killed her, she wasn’t sick.’—But then you had a hemorrhage and lost consciousness. To save you, they couldn’t wait until you went into labor. While you were unconscious, on oxygen, I held your lifeless hand behind a curtain while they cut you open and took our stillborn baby out of you. I held it in my arms and it was almost like in my head, our baby alive and well and…there, but in real life, it was blue and cold already—and so small.” He clutches the little elephant tight around the belly and he finally looks up to see her wet face also staring at the elephant, before she looks up to meet his eyes again. He keeps her gaze as he continues. “It felt like a lifetime, but it must’ve not been more than a minute or two, because I hadn’t even had a chance to look back at you, to check in with anyone, before they were taking the baby away. Machines were beeping and they were frantic behind the curtain. They were dragging me out of the room and I swear I was clawing back, I probably scratched those nurses trying to stay with you. They were taking you and the baby away. As I turned back, I saw blood dripping from the table onto the floor and that’s the last picture I had of the both of you while I was stuck in the waiting room,” he gestures with the little elephant, “And as I sat there, not knowing if I would lose both of you that day, just waiting to hear if my whole world had collapsed, I blamed myself. I wanted—I don’t know what I wanted as I was sitting there, festering in guilt. After they came back and told me you were okay, that they stopped the bleeding and you were going to be just fine, I vowed I would never put you in danger like that again.” He drops his eyes but she takes the remaining steps to him now, kneeling in front of the rocking chair and clutching the stuffed elephant with him. She doesn’t say anything, but he can tell she wants to, so he has to breathe through the feelings and make himself finish, before he loses his nerve. He looks into her lowered eyes through her eyelashes. “But it isn’t going to happen again. It was a one in a million chance, the egg implanted badly. It was—our baby wasn’t
ever going to live.’” He squeezes her hands in emphasis. “It took me months to fully come to
terms with the fact that I wasn’t to blame. And I would never want to try and get pregnant again
if I didn’t know, if our doctor didn’t tell us to our faces that there’s no reason to believe our next
pregnancy won’t go off without a hitch.”

Sam sits back on her bent knees and disconnects their hands, staring at hers in her lap. “I
had a miscarriage before too, Dan, maybe this is a sign that I’m just not fit to be a mother.”

He tries to look down enough to catch her eye. “Only you get to decide whether you feel
fit to be a mother. But if you’re asking me, I already know you are.”

She lifts her gaze to his, but doesn’t respond.

“The way that you fought tooth and nail—suffered, put yourself in danger—for that baby,
you would have gone to the ends of the earth to keep it alive. Every time you woke up, the only
thing you were thinking about was how the baby was.” He gets up with her, pushing himself off
the chair slowly. “I’m not expecting an answer. But you can’t make this decision because of your
mother—because you’re more than her influence on you. And you can’t make this decision
based on our last baby—because it isn’t your fault. And it isn’t my fault. And maybe if we had
talked, maybe if you had reached out to me instead of Dave, maybe we both would have realized
that sooner.”

She keeps her back to him, moving towards the crib and running a hand across the baby
blanket, her old baby blanket, the first thing she chose to touch herself. “It was wrong of me to
tell Dave about how I was feeling about losing our baby before you. And I’ve apologized for
that, and I’ll keep apologizing for it. But eventually, you’re gonna have to figure out if you can
forgive me or not.”
He looks down at the elephant, running his hand over its little arms. He sets it back on top of the dresser, arranging it gingerly to sit upright and righting its crumpled bow. “It would be a lot easier to forgive you if I didn’t feel like you were still keeping things from me.”

He turns back towards her. She doesn’t take her eyes off his as she moves one step closer, her hands dangling at her sides. “What do you want to know?”

He takes a step towards her too. “Where are the photos that were in the photo albums?”

She shakes her head, her eyes squinting. “What do you mean? Photos are in the photo albums.”

“No, the photo albums in your old room are empty, Sam. Are there other photo albums I should have been looking for?”

She furrows her brow, her mouth opening and closing. “No—I, they should all be there.”

He runs his fingers harshly through his hair. “Dammit, Samantha, why even bring them up if they didn’t exist?”

She takes a step back, crosses her arms, scoffing. “They did—they do, Daniel.”

“Then why aren’t they there? What, did they just disappear?” He waves his hand sarcastically. He sighs, his hand flopping to his sides. “Why lie, Sam? Why even tell me there were photos when there weren’t? Were you trying to distract me—distract me from the fact that we’ve been here a whole day and you’ve barely spoken to me?”

“Because there were photos there,” she insists, her bare feet taking a few steps towards him.

He leaves the room in a huff, holding up his hand to shield himself from her lie.

“Dan, if they’re gone, someone took them, just like they took all of my mom’s photos off the walls, just like they turned her studio into a nursery as some twisted gift—.”
He stops abruptly on his way down the steps. He turns, his brow furrowing, his eyes skeptical. “A gift? Why would it be a gift?”

“I left because my mother was everywhere here, and my father refused to change anything. I couldn’t stay in this house anymore and I think Helen thought she was making this place—homier. But she stole my mother’s necklace and she made my mother’s studio into a nursery, and don’t you find this at all violating?”

He turns back to her standing still at the bottom of the steps. “Helen? As in the mayor? What do you mean, she stole your mother’s necklace? Your mother’s necklace is gone?—Sam, how am I supposed to know these things when you don’t tell me anything? How am I supposed to feel violated when I have no clue what you’re thinking, what you’re seeing that I’m not?”

She takes a step towards him. “I think Helen might have been the one to change this place. She and I, we—let’s just say we have a complicated relationship. She tried to be something of a mother to me, it was sort of twisted—but she always hated my mother for leaving us. And I don’t know why she would turn my mother’s studio into a nursery or think that taking her stuff away would help me—I mean, she didn’t even know I was coming. I’m not trying to be evasive. I just, I have to find out—it’s eating me alive not knowing.”

He stands and takes a moment to breathe. “We were supposed to spend this weekend talking, coming back together. So tell me why I should believe that this—your mother’s things being missing, this whole business with Dave, or Helen, or your Dad, or whoever—isn’t just another thing you’re using to avoid talking to me.”

She flounders, her eyes looking distantly away from his. “I—I don’t—.”
He works his jaw and nods his head, turning his back to her and slamming the door behind him. He takes the dirt road at a jog and doesn’t slow until he nears the middle of town, calming his breathing down as he approaches the diner.

He stops just before the walkway, when he notices someone in the woods just behind the diner. It’s a woman, by the looks of it, carrying a shovel. The shape of her frame and the long, grey length of her hair looks familiar. Helen.

“Daniel, I’m glad you came. Where’s Samantha?” Helen’s bright face looks behind him.

He cringes slightly. “Actually, it’s just me.”

Her face dims and her voice gets wispy, “Well... why don’t you come in then and we’ll find you some grub?”

Everyone looks up at their entrance, but instead of staring at him, they immediately go back to their meals, and Helen doesn’t seem to notice them at all, bringing him straight to the counter—somehow he feels ushered into a position of privilege and he’s unsettled by it.

Dave comes out of the kitchen in response to the jingle of the bell and Dan sits up straight on his stool. Helen flicks her eyes between them both. “David, give Daniel something special, something to represent our island.”

Dave throws his towel over his shoulder and doesn’t nod or give an affirmation, but goes back through the kitchen doors.

As soon as Dave is out of ear shot, Helen angles herself towards him. “So, Daniel, how are you settling in? I know the island is much smaller than New York, so I won’t blame you if it’s not to your liking.”

Dan forces his eyes away from the figure of Dave’s back through the window into the kitchen. “No, the island is gorgeous—I actually love the quiet.”
“Oh, better than the Big Apple?”

He chuckles, “Yeah, the Big Apple is—noisy and dirty.”

She tilts her head in acceptance. “So you don’t like living there?”

He breathes in slowly and grabs his napkin, twisting it thoughtfully. “I do, it’s where I grew up. And Sam likes it.”

Helen nods slowly. “Sometimes Samantha doesn’t know what she likes.”

Dan keeps his eyes on his fingers, twisting the napkin back and forth, unwilling to bad mouth Sam in front of anyone.

Helen cuts her eyes to Dave through the kitchen window and back to peer at Dan through her eyelashes. “I know you’ve noticed Dave and Sam’s connection, but Sam didn’t stay here for him. She left him just like she left all of us. The only person she’s never left is you.”

“It’s not,” Dan sighs, “I’m not bothered by Dave and Sam being close, I’m bothered that Sam talks to him and not to me. And that—.” He stops and clears his throat, turning himself away from Helen.

Helen raises her eyebrows at him and waits.

“I trust Sam, but sometimes I wonder whether she’s really as committed to our marriage as she needs to be, as committed as I am. I mean, the whole time we’ve been here she’s been so focused on—other things.”

“What other things?” Now it’s Helen’s turn to watch the counter in front of her and avoid Dan’s eyes.

“She thinks that some things are missing from her house.” He scoffs. “And she won’t tell me why—why she thinks it’s not just her father changing things up, why she thinks it’s your
doing. I mean, how am I supposed to think it isn’t just another way of deflecting—of hiding herself from me?”

Helen’s face morphs from feigned disinterest to determination, her eyes squinting and her mouth puckering slightly. “She’s right.”

Dan stops, dropping his utensil he was twirling with a clunk and turning slowly to face Helen directly.

“I was the one who went in and changed her home.”
I stare at the door for only a second after he leaves before I take the steps two at a time towards my childhood bedroom. Somehow I still think Dan was lying or mistaken, despite the voice repeating Helen’s name in the back of my head. But when I enter the room, I see albums strewn on the bed, one having fallen to the floor. The door to the closet is open, as well as the dresser. I slowly walk over to pick up the discarded album, which is as empty as Dan said. I trace my hand over the etching of my name in the leather on the bottom or the binding. I set the album back on the bed and pick up the other ones, each empty with the same etching on the bottom of the binding.

Something is missing.

I methodically rub my hand over the leather binding, feeling the rough ridges against my fingers. I quickly put them back up in the dresser and shut the doors, leaning against them on my hands for a moment to catch my breath. I push off the dresser and set my eye on the open closet to the left.

The clothes staring back at me remind me of high school, complete with low rise jeans and chucks. My old prom dresses are still hung there, along with the silver heels I wore that almost broke my ankles—everything that wasn’t essential, that I didn’t need, I left. But something else grabs my attention—or rather, the lack of something. For as long as I can remember my closet was full of boxes that forever riddled my already very little closet space—more things my father could never part with. They were full of old clothes of my mother’s, labeled “Mom’s sweaters” and “Mom’s dresses.” I used to move them from the closet and stack them in front of his door when their presence would get too aggravating, when my closet was bulging to the point where I couldn’t close the door. Eventually, when my father would get home
for the day, I would find them back in my room, back in my closet, where my father would have kindly removed some “unnecessary” clothes of mine in order to help with my space issue—but no boxes are here now. Not stacked on the floor, not packed into the shelf on top. Instead, I find boxes and boxes of board games that I don’t remember ever owning. I stand tall and attempt to move the boxes out of the way to find the real boxes I know should be there.

There is nothing behind any of the board games and in my struggle to move them, Sorry falls to the ground, but rather than game pieces scattered on the ground, there are thin canvases. As I sift through them, pictures of my mother painting them flash in my mind. None of them can be actual memories, because each is a piece she painted—some probably well before I was born. But I don’t understand why they’re here—why they’re still here in the house, why they’re stuck in board game boxes, as if hidden away. If Helen was trying to rid the house of my mother, hiding her work in board game boxes wouldn’t solve that, not forever anyway. At some point, Dan and I would have wanted to play Clue, but instead would have found art with the initials E.S.T in the corners.

I reach for another box. Inside Connect4 is more art, most of these sketches, some done by a childhood me by the looks of the crayon scribbles. I fully drop this box on the ground and struggle to bring down Monopoly, because it is heavier than the other boxes. As I open it, I expect to find the largest haul of art, but instead I find just one full size canvas. I drop the box and grip the side of the painting tightly, slightly mesmerized.

Two female silhouettes are outlined in yellows and oranges, one inside the other like nesting dolls. Their brightness then seems to mellow out slowly from their bodies into lighter pinks and greens, graceful strokes, until there is almost no color at all near the edges. I stare at the picture in an attempt to understand, to figure out why or when my mother would feel
compelled to paint this. My thumb traces over her initials in the corner with a little date half
smudged, leaving just the first three numbers of the year, 199.

   My mother committed suicide in 1999.

   If this was near her suicide, they why does the picture of the women seem so hopeful in
the center? Why are there two female figures so entangled—when she was thinking about
leaving? When she had depression and couldn’t think of anything, anyone, but herself?

   I don’t even know if I’m interpreting the painting correctly and all at once I get angry at
everything: at my mother, at Dan, at my dad, at Helen, at myself for being so cut off that my
marriage is falling apart, at this whole goddamn island.

   Something is missing—this can’t just be Helen’s twisted welcome home present. When
she didn’t even know I was coming home. *I can’t remember.*

   I throw the canvas to the ground and reach my arm up into the shelf in the closet and
sweep it across. Half of the game boxes come crashing down, and with it paintings slide across
the ground and hover briefly in the air. I waste no time sweeping my arm again to bring the rest
of the board games down, pushing tears from my eyes as I grab the bottom of a box and whip it
back into the room towards my old bed, sending papers flying. Before I can grab another box, the
window across from the closet blows open, the wind sending the pictures blowing back towards
the closet and towards me. I stand still only for a moment, my mouth open and breathing heavily,
before I slip through the pages and struggle to crank the window back closed against the wind. I
lean against the window as it finally cranks shut, triple checking the old lock to make sure it
won’t open again. Outside the windsock on the water sits barely fluttering at its post.

   When I can finally shift my gaze from outside, I lean my back against the window to
survey my destruction of the room. Most pictures were blown back into a haphazard pile in front
of the closet, leaving just the canvas in the middle of the room. I lean down to pick it up just past my feet and I hug it against my stomach, looking towards the wall she painted.

Although Dan mentioned it, I’ve never seen the glow behind the trees as hopeful. I always focused on the dark green twisting vines, the entangled trees that seem to let no light in. But they do let light in, the yellow hue behind them, the white shadows that soften the harsh edges of the branches, the faint stars in the dark blue sky above the trees. The dull white glow of the moon always seemed shadowy—like night fall, but the brightening yellow and orange on the horizon—that’s like daybreak.

She painted a sunrise on my wall and then committed suicide, it doesn’t make sense.

Something is missing.

And the paintings—they were always kept in the attic.

If my mother’s paintings aren’t in the attic, then what is?

I stop in my tracks in the middle of the hallway, staring at the tall window at the end of the hall, until I find the nerve to actually walk forward towards it. My father’s office is on the right at the end of the hall—and that’s the only way to get into the attic. The big brown door always intimidated me. When I was little, I used to think the door was monstrous, towering over me to the point of childish nightmares, like believing the basement was haunted or the vacuum was a flesh eating machine. When I saw Dad go in there every night, I never knew if he would come out again, until I saw him making coffee in the morning, getting ready to go out early to check on his traps. When I got older, I understood all he was doing was balancing budgets. He liked math too, how the numbers always have to fit together—it’s one of the only things we really had in common. I think we both liked the equity of it all, how everything was explainable
and one side of an equation always had to equal the other. Thus, I went into accounting when I left, one thing that I actually wanted to take from my time on the island.

My hands shake slightly as I grab the old door knob and open—nothing. I hit resistance and try turning the knob again, but it’s locked.

Never in my life has my father ever locked his office.

I never wanted to go in there when I was little, and when I got older, I did think he locked the door. I assumed he wouldn’t want me to go in there, but he never said I couldn’t and he never told me it was locked. When I was finally fed up enough with him, with the way he and I were forced to live in a prison of our past, just before I left for good, I tried to pick the lock—only to find it unlocked, with a key to the door in one of the drawers of his desk.

He left the key on the other side of the door—and he never locked it.

So why would Helen lock it?

If it was Helen.

I slide down the door and bang that back of my head against it, staring up at the ceiling.

I know it’s Helen that did all of this—but Dave and Dan both seem to think it was my father.

So maybe it was? I was gone for years, and he had to live here knowing I was never coming back—whether he chose to believe it or not. So maybe he did change things, but he never did while I was here, even when I begged for it.

I can hear Dan in my head, asking me to be honest with him, to tell him why I am the way I am—to tell him why this is something more than the secrets I’ve been keeping this whole time.

But I can’t answer him until I know myself.
“You—you did go into Sam’s house.” Dan says the words slowly, letting them settle in his mouth. “And everything she said was different—changed?”

“That was me, yes.” Helen nods, her lips tipped slightly into a frown. She looks down at her plate, looking unsure for the first time. “When Samantha was young, she was a Momma’s girl, through and through. She adored her mother—they spent every second together. When she died, a part of Samantha seemed to die with her. She felt betrayed, she closed herself off. I tried to help, I thought if I could be a good female role model in her life, she might be okay—she might be able to grieve and live without the shadow of her mother hanging over her. I thought I was helping her—and she was helping me too.” Helen’s eyes twitch towards his.

“How?” Dan’s eyes are narrowed, but his cheeks are slack, his mouth not cut in such a stark frown.

Helen runs her finger around the rim of her glass, turning her gaze back toward Dan. “My daughter, Gabrielle, she and I are—estranged. Right around the time she and her father left the island is when Samantha’s mother died. It made sense that we would gravitate toward each other. I mean, before then, I sort of thought she was a brat.”

Helen laughs and Dan gives a half-hearted chuckle over the uneasy ache in his gut.

Helen nods, her lips turning up. “Whenever she wasn’t with her mother, she used to run around the island, devil may care, she used to rile up the other kids. It wasn’t something that I condoned, that’s for sure. Anyway, after her mother died, she was never the same happy go lucky girl—I almost wished she would run around the island, feeling free, like she used to. She spent all day out of the house, but she never ran around the island. One day shortly after her mother died, she was swimming and I was working near the shore, removing some rocks that had
come up in rough waters the night before. She swam to shore and asked me what I was doing. When I told her, she asked if she could help. After that day, I showed her how to take care of the island. I really thought she would take my job someday, I was so ready for her to be the next mayor—but I didn’t know what was going on at home.” Helen stops as Dave comes back out with his food.

He brings Dan a bowl of mac and cheese with what look to be lobster chunks folded in. Dave smiles at him slightly and leans in, speaking softly. “That’s Sam’s favorite.”

“Brilliant, David. Thank you.” Helen cuts in, with a smile just too big to be genuine. She nods at Dave, not explicitly telling him to leave, but he lowers his head and goes back through the kitchen anyway—because the message was there.

Dan takes a bite of the mac and cheese having to suppress a moan at its taste despite himself.

Helen smiles. “Good, right? Samantha’s version is just as good too, even if she doesn’t want to admit it.”

“She’s never made it for me.” Dan takes another slow bite, shaking his head. Because he can’t be annoyed about it now, not when he has this foreboding feeling in his gut, not when the woman who caused it is right there in front of him—not when he refused to listen to Sam when she was right this whole time. He swallows harshly. “What was happening at home?”

Helen keeps her gaze on Dan. “Samantha’s father was hit hard by Liz—her mother’s—death. And evidently he coped by keeping everything the way it was, he wouldn’t let Samantha move anything of hers, he was loath to buy new clothes because they weren’t the ones Liz had known—and her clothes still hung in his closet. It was—it wasn’t healthy. And I think part of him wanted Samantha to stay the same too—as all father’s might, but even more so because
that’s how he chose to cope. And when she grew up, he had a hard time with it. And it hurt
Samantha—naturally. And it pushed her away.” Helen drops her gaze back to her own food
briefly. “So when Dave told me that Samantha was coming back, I didn’t want her to come back
to that—I didn’t want to push her away again.”

Dan seizes with his spoon halfway towards his mouth and has to focus intently on
continuing to take his bite. He chews mechanically and narrows his eyes at the few bites of mac
and cheese he has left, nodding slowly. “That—that makes sense. You were just trying to make
her feel at home here—feel comfortable in a place with so much trauma attached.”

“Exactly.” Helen smiles genuinely, taking a bite of her food—a plate of salmon with a
horseradish pistachio crust on top of a bed of couscous—which remains largely untouched.

Dan takes the last few bites of his mac and cheese, letting the silence hang while he
contemplates how he might get out of the diner the quickest. He finishes his food and sets his
fork back down on the counter. “Why didn’t you just tell Sam what you did and why?”

Helen smiles self-deprecatingly. “She didn’t tell me she was coming herself and I didn’t
want to let on that Dave had told me. Plus, I thought it would help if she saw it and thought her
father had actually moved on after she left—that maybe he had even done that for her, in case
she ever came back. Their relationship wasn’t doing well when she left, but he loved her—I
mean, in his closet, he had this big box, a stockpile of her achievements: middle school report
cards, her newborn portraits, and he had her honors announcements from college on the fridge,
even after she left him with no way to contact her. I wanted to help her, but I also wanted to
show her that he loved her—her whole life, all he wanted was for her to be happy, for them to be
a family—even when she didn’t have her mother.”
Dan turns fully on the stool and props his cheek on his fist, fully facing Helen. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

Helen takes another bite of her salmon and chews slowly—the more controlled she gets with her movements, the more flustered she seems—taking longer than she needs to put down her utensils and swallow. “I know you didn’t believe Sam—I know she’s kept things from you, because that’s what she always does. But now you know it was true, and that she doesn’t need to worry about a random stranger stealing her things—she can be focused on you.”

He has more to ask, more to know—like why she would not just remove Sam’s mother’s things but completely renovate a room in the house into a nursery? But he doesn’t know what he’ll get out of her if he keeps pressing her.

Dan crumples up his napkin and tosses it onto his plate, forcing a smile onto his face as he goes to grab his wallet. “Thank you, for telling me.”

Helen stops him with her hand. “It’s on the house.”

His mouth twitches down before he corrects himself. “I need to get back to Sam, she and I didn’t exactly leave things on a nice note. Give my compliments to the chef. And thank you for inviting me, this was—illuminating.”

Dan starts inching towards the door.

Helen smiles wide and fake. “Of course, you’re welcome to join us for the bonfire at dusk.”

He stops in his tracks and turns back, his body still pointed towards the door. “Sorry—the bonfire?”

“Yeah, we gather almost every clear night behind the diner around the fire, there’s beer, coffee. Just gives everyone a chance to relax after a long day.”
“That’s—charming. I’ll probably be spending time with my wife but, thank you for the invitation.”

Helen tips her head. “Of course, just know you’re both welcome.”

Dan smiles slightly and it looks like Helen is about to say something else, but another islander calls her from the other end of the bar, so he takes his moment to leave, the little bell on the diner door jingling his retreat.

He takes the stairs of the diner down mechanically, his joints stiff and the hair on the back of his neck standing on end as he can tell Helen is watching him as he leaves. He doesn’t look back at her, tries to keep his face neutral as he takes a left on the road back towards the house. Once he thinks he’s far enough away that Helen couldn’t see him he cuts back towards the clearing behind the diner—thinking it’ll be the fastest way to get back to Sam, to apologize, to tell her.

“Dan.”

He whips back toward the diner to see Dave lifting a bag of garbage into a small dumpster.

“Dave.”

Dave puts his hands into his pockets casually, his brows furrowed. “What are you doing back here?”

“Oh—uh, just heading back.” Dan looks quickly back behind him at the forest.

Dave nods and lets the silence settle between them. Dan feels the urge to talk rising out of him—and he can see how Dave would evoke that same feeling in Sam, even with her reticence to talk. But he doesn’t let himself, he doesn’t let the myth of this man he built in his head intimidate him—he raises his head and crosses his arms.
Dave takes a look back towards the door before he takes a step closer to Dan. “Listen. I know I should leave this between the two of you, but I know you and Sam are on the rocks—.”

“You do. Because she tells you everything—even everything she won’t tell me.”

Dave’s face stays neutral. “Yes. But not because she wanted to keep things from you, because she doesn’t know how.”

Dan scoffs. “Then she needs to learn, Dave. When she agreed to come here, she was agreeing to be more open and honest with me—to answer me when I ask her simple questions.”

“She agreed to come so she didn’t lose you, not because she suddenly knew how to open up. What might be a simple question to you brings back everything she’s been trying to run away from.”

Dan uncrosses his arms and takes a step towards Dave. “Ok, but why is she running in the first place? Her mother committed suicide and it deeply affected her—I can never know what that’s really like, but I get it. I get it as much as someone who has never been through it can get it. But she doesn’t talk about her father either—I didn’t know he was still alive until she told me he was dying, and she never let me meet him. And now we come to this island, this house, this whole part of her life I never knew existed and she still refuses to talk to me—I’m supposed to be the one she opens up to, not you, I’m her husband—.”

“The fact that she told me about your baby doesn’t mean she opens up to me either.”

Dan shutters at the mention. “She told you that’s one of the main reasons I was angry and frustrated, didn’t she?”

Dave steps forward, his face reflecting emotion for the first time. “She came to my house almost every day for a year before she uttered more than two words to me—and even after that year, she was never open. And after she left, she told me she was leaving the whole island, her
whole past, behind her. So when she emailed me out of the blue, I was just grateful she still wanted to stay in contact. Ever since you came around all of her emails are telling me about you. After that, I knew you were important to her. And I knew and saw how ready she was to leave this place behind when she graduated high school, some people believed she’d be back but I knew differently. So the fact that she came back for you, that means more than anything.”

Dan muscles relax and he blows out a breath. “How am I supposed to trust that—trust us—when she doesn’t talk to me? When she emails you about losing our baby instead of talking to me, the person right in front of her who’s going through it with her?”

“Trust that she brought you to the one place she would never come back to—not even for her father’s funeral.”

“But why didn’t she go to her father’s funeral? That’s a huge deal—and yet, she never mentions not liking her father, I assumed he died before she told me she had to go be by his bedside just after we got engaged.”

Dave sighs. “Why are you really so insistent on knowing her past?”

Dan lets the silence linger. “Because it affects our present. It affects our communication—or lack thereof. It makes her more likely to confide in you then in me. And if she won’t tell me why then I’m going to figure it out myself—.”

“Or enlist the likes of Helen.”

Dan looks only slightly abashed but doesn’t say anything—not to Dave. Dan wants his unfiltered thoughts.

“Helen might be much more ‘open’ than Sam, but that doesn’t mean you should trust what she says. Only Sam can tell you about her past and how she feels about it.”
Dan tips his chin up. “And yet every time I’ve seen the two of you together, you’ve been whispering all buddy-buddy—you don’t seem to have a very positive view of her.”

Dave crosses his arms and nods slowly. “I’ve lived here my whole life and even when Helen and I were young, I knew I didn’t want to be on the wrong side of her. It’s easier to keep the peace.”

“So she’s not your—confidant?”

Dave chuckles, low and raspy. “The best piece of advice I could give you is to not keep Helen as your confidant—I certainly don’t, not for anything I don’t mind her potentially using against me later. Let’s just say she never forgets.”

Dan breathes in deeply, nodding slowly, his eyes focused on the main road. “I have to go.”

Dave takes two steps back towards the diner backwards and in lieu of a goodbye, he simply says, “Talk to Sam.”

Dan breaks towards the main road, taking a wide berth around the diner just in case Helen is watching, when he hears the solid clunk of the back kitchen door closing behind Dave. He really wanted to stay longer—to probe more, but he knows he won’t get anything out of Dave. And he respects that.

Dave wouldn’t tell Dan anything that Sam revealed to him in confidence.

So Dave never would have told Helen that Sam was coming home.
Dave opens the back door of the diner to me when I get there, knocking urgently and just hoping that none of the diners spot me on the way. But they should all still be finishing up dinner, and Dave should be off duty.

Dave looks behind me distantly for a second before he actually focuses on me. He takes one look at me and unties his black apron from around his waist. “Do you want a towel?”

I shake my hair out self-consciously. “No, I’m mostly dry now.”

He gestures behind me and shuts the door quietly as he follows me out. We walk from behind the diner into the woods and I slow down, letting him take the lead. The sky darkens as we walk, dusk turning to night fast.

Dave shoves his hands into his jean pockets. “So I take it you spoke to Helen?”

“Yeah, didn’t go so well.”

He smirks slightly. “Did she shove you into the ocean?”

I chuckle half-heartedly. “No, I jumped in—after we talked.”

He nods slowly. “Did you get the answers you were looking for?”

I cross my arms. “No. I never thought I would, really.”

“But you still think she was the one who went into your house?”

“I—,” I pause, kicking up leaves and branches on the ground, “Yes. But I can’t—Dave, my marriage is on its last legs, and I don’t want to lose him.”

Dave stops. “And you will if you keep pursuing it?”

He looks over at me but I keep my eyes on the ground at my feet.

He starts forward quickly. “Follow me.”
He veers off to the right, and I have to jog after him in my wedges. He stops abruptly and gestures up at the tree to our left—the biggest tree on the island with lots of load bearing branches. Naturally I had to make a treehouse on it, I called it my woodland fortress.

I stare at it and blink only once before I shove off my shoes and start the climb up, the shoes dangling by their straps in my tight fist. The ladder up is just planks of wood nailed to the side of the tree, wrapping around the tree like a spiral staircase. There’s barely enough room for a foothold with my big feet now, but it was just right when I was younger. Dave helped me make it—only after he found out I had stolen his tools and wood Helen had cut for the bonfire to try and do it myself. I wanted it to be my project, but nothing I could have built would have been able to stand on its own, so it became our project and turned into my sanctuary. Of the very few people who found out about it, none of them were allowed up here. This is probably the first time even Dave has been up here since we finished building it. I felt like I ruled over the other children from up here. I could see everything—everyone, from almost anywhere on the island. And I could see ocean from a break in the trees, watch the boats on the back side of the island.

“Can you even make it up here anymore, old man?” I look down to see him keep up with my pace step for step.

He chuckles breathily but doesn’t respond.

When the staircase meets the fortress, there’s a hole in the floor with a bar to pull up on. The floor and the roof are not connected by full walls, only railings and wood pillars, making for the most visibility possible without being unsafe. I used to keep lots of books and personal things up here, but I moved them out before I left—when instead of feeling high and mighty up here, I felt lost and alone. I came up once before I graduated high school and took everything out and I haven’t been back up here since.
The structure shakes slightly as we get up it.

I carefully make my way to lean against the edge of the railing, looking out at the setting sun, the moon starting to become visible, its faint shine reflecting off the waves. “I guess we’ll need to fortify the structure at some point.”

Dave sits back against part of the tree, just beside the entrance. “From your emails, I know Dan makes you happy. Your happiness is the only important thing. If you’re not happy, you should do everything in your power to fix it.”

“Sometimes I work against my own happiness, and I don’t know how to stop.”

Dave doesn’t answer, so I turn back towards him and sit down against the railing, my legs stuck out like his with my shoes set beside me.

He eyes me, his arms crossed. “What does Dan want? What are you working against?”

I look down at my hands in my lap, crossing my legs at my ankles. “He wants to know about my past. He wants me to be open with him—but what if it’s none of his goddamn business? None of that matters to us, to our marriage, it didn’t affect us until he brought it up.”

“Or does it?” He tries to meet her gaze. “You need to lay it all out for him, Sam. So he wants to know about your past, so what? None of it is sinister. It’s just painful. You were coping by staying away, by keeping it from him. He’ll understand, but only if you tell him now.”

I breathe deeply, hearing the leaves rustle through my ears. And below it just slightly, are voices, indistinct and not understandable.

Something is missing.

“Do you hear that?” I turn back to the right, eyeing the leaves and the ground below.

Dave points back to the left. “People gathering at the bonfire, just like normal.”
I peek through the branches towards those already at the fire pit, lighting the brush and passing out beer, wine, coffee—but the voices, the whispers, were to the right. “Right.”

“Sam, you came all the way out here for Dan, to show him you were serious about your marriage—and we both know how much it meant that you came back. So why are you hesitant now?”

I shake my head leaning it back against the railing to look up through the branches at the faint stars starting to sparkle in the darkening sky. “I—I don’t know.”

Something’s missing.

Dave makes his way to standing, pushing back against the tree, and holds out his hand to me. “Why don’t you go find him and talk to him then instead of sitting here with me?”

My lips turn up slightly as I stare at his hand a moment before taking it and standing myself. Dave starts back down slowly. I cast one last look off to the right, the branches swaying and the waves crashing. I grab my shoes and follow him down.
The minute Dan opens the door back at the house, he can tell Sam isn’t here. He takes a minute to breathe, leaning against the closed front door—because he ran here and his chest feels like it’s caving in on itself. But not from the running, mostly from the oppressiveness of the house—now that he knows Sam was right.

Helen went into her house when she somehow found out she was coming home and stole her mother’s things. Or maybe she never found out and they just happened to come home so she had to come up with a story to explain the disappearances.

But she told him—and he should have believed Sam the minute she mentioned it. She knows Helen and he doesn’t, she knows this island and he doesn’t, she knows this house and he doesn’t.

Why did Helen tell him? To get him on her side? He hasn’t seemed very keen to be on Sam’s side if he’s honest with himself—but he’s always on her side.

So he has to do better—now. Sam said her mother’s photos were missing from the walls, from the bedroom. That her clothes were missing from the bedroom closet.

Her photos—all photos—from the photo album are gone, ripped out. Why all the photos?

Her mother’s necklace was gone from the nursery.

The nursery.

Dan takes the steps up two at a time and lets the door to the nursery knock against the wall behind it as he steps into it—the room dark and shadowed now that the sun has started to set.

This was her mother’s art studio—and Helen turned it into a nursery?
Everything is tainted now, the golden hue of the room turned burnt and rusted. The stuffed elephant eyes him judgmentally from the right side of the room. He moves from the doorway and grabs the baby blanket that’s hanging on the crib with the letters S.M.T. stitched on the corner—Sam’s initials on Sam’s baby blanket.

Helen turned her mother’s art studio into a nursery made of her old memories—and thought this would help Sam alleviate the trauma associated with her mother’s death?

He grabs the baby blanket and holds it to his chest, backing up to sit back in the rocking chair—but he misses the seat and slips onto the floor banging his head back onto the wood of the seat. He holds the blanket between his stomach and his bent knees and bunches his hands in his hair.

Sam had to walk into this room and find it littered with her nursery furniture, the crib she slept in, the rocking chair her mother rocked in, her baby blanket, and he was mad she bolted?

But why did Helen do this—all of this? She turned a room that reminded Sam of her mother into a room that reminded Sam of her lost childhood, of being abandoned by her mother. She made it worse.

It doesn’t make any sense.

Unless she found out that Sam was pregnant.

Dan raises his head slowly and shivers at the realization—did Helen put a nursery in the house because she found out that Sam was once pregnant? But what sick person would make a couple who had just lost their baby a nursery?

He knows Helen is smart and calculated—just from what little he’s heard and the day he’s spent with her. If she did this, she thought she could get away with it, that she was doing it for a good reason—a better reason than simply helping Sam’s view of her father.
He closes his eyes and tries to think back on everything Helen said. She said she felt guilty over things that were happening at home that she wasn’t aware of. What was happening at home? Why would she feel guilty?

Sam and her father didn’t seem close—she barely mentioned him before he was on his deathbed, but was there something more going on?

Helen said her father didn’t cope well, that he wanted everything to stay the same—but that he loved Sam and kept track of her even after she left, kept important memories stashed in his closet.

His closet.

He pushes himself up with the seat of the rocking chair, taking the baby blanket with him and leaving the chair rocking in his wake. He is about to make his way to the master when something catches his eye from the doorway to Sam’s childhood bedroom. He turns back towards it and finds a pile of papers and crushed board game boxes on the floor, the closet open but the dresser and the albums he had pulled were put back in their place and closed up. The papers are a blur of color—red paint, blue colored pencil, green crayon, grey pencil sketch lines. But he is attracted to a canvas lying in the middle of the floor next to the bed. He crouches down next to it and traces the yellow silhouettes, the bright colors.

Sam’s mother’s initials and a year are smudged at the bottom. Probably all of these are hers—put up in board game boxes in Sam’s closet? Was this Helen’s doing? It seems unlikely, seeing as her goal was to get rid of Sam’s reminders of her mother, though he doesn’t trust her motives so he takes her words with a grain of salt.
They could have been stored there regularly for some reason and Helen had missed them because they were hidden. But what reason would someone have to put artwork in board game boxes in the first place?

He grips the baby blanket and stands up to survey the damage. Sam did this, after he fought with her over something she didn’t actually lie about. Guilt settles low in his gut and he pushes the art into a neater pile near the closet door, trying to stack the boxes but feeling an urgency to find answers. He’ll fix them later—they can hang them in the studio, they can repaint it and remove all the furniture, burn it if Sam wants. Anything to clean this house of the impression she’s had since childhood, the artificiality Helen tried to place on it, her creepy sheen left in that room and in every bit of changes she made to this house.

He closes little Sammie’s door and even stops to close the door to the nursery, because neither of them need to be reminded of it. Their room is dark now, the trees that shaded it now casting shadows on the room. The closet is the same as all of the other closets in the house, with sliding wood slat doors built into the wall, but it is much bigger, with two sliding doors instead of one. He slides both doors open and finds a half empty closet, men’s work clothes only on the left side, with exactly two pairs of work boots on the floor.

Next to the boots is a fireproof box with the key still in the lock—the box Helen must’ve been referring to. His face scrunches up as he unlocks the case with the key and he grunts slightly with the effort. There are more report cards and photos of the two of them. One photo of Sam in the water, holding up a gold medal—it makes sense now why she goes to the pool to swim laps almost every day. He pauses at a picture drawn by little Sammie and goes to pick it up, before finding another right underneath it, one drawn a little more deliberately. He sets the blanket aside and reaches in to pull them both out—a small yellow envelope that was
sandwiched between them falling to his lap as he does. He sets the drawings on top of the blanket and opens the envelope to find a key, with a little tag labeled “Office”. He looks at the drawings—at the pictures, and he could analyze them forever.

But he’s more interested in what’s in the office and why it has a key hidden in a fireproof box.

Did Helen know this key was there when she mentioned the box? It seems a little too conspicuous that the box key was waiting for him already in the lock—but the office key was hidden at the bottom of the box in an unlabeled envelope, so she could have missed it. She could have also told him too much in an effort to save face—in an effort to win him onto her side.

He gingerly pushes the pictures and the baby blanket into the closet and closes it before he stalks out the door of the bedroom, almost at a jog, going right past the stairs and across the open hallway, looking down at the dark living room and dining room now that the sun has set, the table still set for the dinner Sam hasn’t eaten. He finds a guest bathroom, a guest bedroom, and a laundry room—as well as a closed heavy ornate door located right at the end of the hall, which has to open to the office. His hands gingerly grasp the doorknob and try turning it, hitting resistance.

So someone locked it, whether that be Helen or someone who didn’t want to let her or anyone else in.

He puts the key into the lock just under the doorknob and it’s a perfect fit. He takes a deep breath and turns the key and the doorknob slowly. The heavy click makes him release his breath and close his eyes before he creaks open the door to reveal the small room with the mahogany desk and bookshelves lining the walls.
He scans the bookshelves but figures that anything useful is bound to be in the desk that looks like it came directly out of the west wing itself. The top of the desk is too neat—unused. There is a computer on top that has to be over a decade old and a cup of pens and a printer on a small filing cabinet beside it. He starts with the filing cabinet, but that’s newer and seems to be full of mostly financial documentation when he looks in the drawers. When he moves over to the desk, starting with a big drawer on the bottom right hand side, it is locked and when he tries the office key in vain, he finds it doesn’t fit. The other two drawers on the right side are not locked, but they are only full of typical office supplies. The long thin drawer that spans the middle of the desk seems promising in his search for a key, but it is empty except for a folded piece of paper. He opens the piece of paper to find another drawing by little Sammie. It pictures the family swimming with a dock and a boat and a big sun with the yellow rays sticking out like most young children do. The child in the photo he assumes to be Sammie is smiling with her mother on the left side of the page, closer to the dock. The man in the picture, who he assumes is her father, is farther out to the right side of the page, farther out into the ocean, with a flat face and his stick arms in the air. The bright blue of the marker ocean bleeds heavily through the page and seemingly over flows the ocean depths to blend into the sky and the whole rest of the page—it can’t help but look like they’re all drowning, whether young Sammie intended anyone to drown or not. He set the picture on the top of the desk and moved to the left side drawers. The top and middle drawers were again all standard office supplies and the bottom drawer on this side is also locked.

He sits back on his feet and sets his head heavily against the edge of the desk. He sits a few seconds, internally debating whether it is even worth it to continue or if he should just find Sam and beg for her forgiveness.
He turns his head to the books that line the walls, ready to succumb to his desperation.

He moves from behind the desk and skims his hands across the bindings, from the likes of 1984 to Peyton Place. By the time he reaches the bottom shelf, he grunts and hurls Along Came a Spider across the room. He sits heavily on the floor with his back against the bookshelves. When his head hits the edge of a bookshelf, he looks up at the ceiling, at the old wooden boards with an uneven panel in the middle of the room. He has to roll the office chair around the desk in order to precariously climb on top of it, taking a moment to balance on the spinning seat. The unevenness appears to be a handle for something and when he pulls it, a pull down ladder comes down just behind him, leading to an attic.

He coughs as he climbs up the ladder. The light of the moon getting brighter as it gets darker outside does nothing to illuminate this room. As soon as he gets his bearings, he steps gingerly, only to run into the metal cord that turns on the lightbulb that lights the room.

He takes stock of the newly lit room in stages, his brain only comprehending one part of the room at a time. He notices the pieces of furniture with sheets over them on the right, then the stacks of quilted containers to hold find china further back. In the back left corner of the attic are stacks of cardboard boxes and he steps hurriedly toward them. They’re labeled in sharpie with family photos, old mementos, and childhood memories. His knees hit the wood just in front of the boxes with a thunk he feels the reverberations of through his legs. He rips through the first box, almost taking the side of the box down in his haste to see.

But the box is empty.

His heart sinks as it speeds up.

He tries another box, but it contains no road trip photos like it claims. Same with boxes of “newly wed bliss” and “school uniforms”.

93
Every box is empty.

His breathing is harsh and ragged as he closes his eyes and shoves his hands through his hair. He pushes himself from his knees and lets his frustration out on a box of “Memories of Mom and Dad”, kicking it into the corner of the attic.

He sighs and slowly walks, defeated, back down the ladder, closing up the attic.

It seems Helen had gotten her hands on stuff in the attic—all of Sam’s memories of her mother, even happy ones, gone.

But that also means that Helen had no reason to lock this room. So why did she?

He closes the door soundly, making sure the key to open it again is still in his pocket. He stops in the middle of the hallway when it hits him.

There’s something in that room she didn’t want them to find, something she couldn’t get rid of. So he needs to find the key to those drawers.

And to do that he needs to find Sam.

- ~ -

He shines the flashlight from his phone on the path, but hasn’t found Sam all the way from the house. He doesn’t know where she would hide out, knows nothing of the island that she hasn’t shown him—and frankly, he was too self-involved in his own problems to pay enough attention to what she was showing him anyway.

And now he regrets it, because he just wants to find his wife and tell her he’s been an idiot—but he can’t do that until he finds her needle in an unknown island haystack in the middle of the night.
He can see the bonfire through the trees as he approaches the back of the diner and it takes his gaze away from the path for a second. When he turns back, his lights shines on the shadow of a woman.

“Dan.”

He tilts his head. “Do I know you?”

The woman twists her fingers, leaning in. “My name is Heather. I’m an old friend of Sam’s mother and I have some things I need to tell you—,” a yell from the bonfire interrupts and draws her attention, “but not here.”

“I can’t, not now—I have to find Sam.”

“Dan, this is important, about Sam’s—.”

He puts his hand up. “Then it can wait until Sam is here.”

“There’s a safe in her father’s office, the combination should be Sam’s birthday—you’ll want to come and find me afterward, I’m in the yellow house near the beginning of the road.”

The woman, Heather, slowly retreats further back on the path, past the view of his flashlight—leaving him gaping slightly, more than slightly irritated.

He takes only two steps to follow her on the path before he jumps at a crunch in the brush behind him.

“Dan?”

He whips around to shine his light on Sam and Dave coming to stand behind him. “Sam, I’ve been trying to find you.”

“You were? I was just coming to find you.”

They stand close together for a second, neither speaking even with the urgency Dan feels on seeing her.
Sam makes the first move. “Why don’t we head ba—.”

“Well, isn’t it a party back here?” Helen emerges from the forest as well in the glow of the fire and Dan has to force his face to stay neutral.

“Yes, Helen, Hi. Why don’t we head on over to the bonfire?” Dave says, taking a step back towards the woods to the fire illuminated through the trees.

“Why don’t you all join us? Come on, Samantha, it’ll be just like old times—I’ll let you have your old spot.”

“We’ll be there in a minute,” Sam responds.

Helen raises her eyebrows, the smile expanding on her face. “Perfect, come on, David. We need more beers from the back.”

Dan lets Dave and Helen get a good few feet away into the trees before he turns back towards Sam, about to let everything spill—before he sees her face. The longing in her eyes, the hopeful smile on her lips, illuminated by the soft yellow and orange flicker of the bonfire. Her drying hair has curled and he is momentarily caught up in her—he doesn’t think he’s really looked at her since they’ve been on the island, since he found those emails, continually avoiding her gaze.

Sam grasps both of his arms and pecks him on the cheek. “Listen, I am in this, Dan. Let’s go to the bonfire and have the other islanders tell you stories about when I caught my first lobster and I’ll tell you anything you want to know. I can’t guarantee that I’ll be good at it—but you’re too important to me to let other meaningless things get in the way.”

Dan again opens his mouth, the words on the tip of his tongue—Helen, the nursery, her mother, her father’s office, some woman named Heather—but he lets his mouth close. Because
this is what he’s wanted the whole time, her commitment, her trust, her effort. Does he really want to throw that away because of some comments from Helen of all people?

“Dan, will you just come roast a marshmallow with me?” Sam chuckles self-deprecatingly.

She lets her hands run down to his hands and tugs him after her as she walks backwards in her wedges and turns away from him to jog towards the clearing and the fire.

He jogs after her, grabbing her arm just as they clear the woods. “Wait, Sam, I—.”

“Oh love birds, you want wine? Beer? Coffee? Hot Chocolate?” Helen cuts in from her place on the bench closest to them with a cooler beside her.

Sam squeezes his bicep, keeping her eyes on him and ignoring Helen’s comment. “Yes?”

He sighs, letting a small smile onto his face. “It can wait until tomorrow.”

She mirrors his smile and tugs him with her into deep white picket chairs across from Helen.

She hasn’t looked this happy in a while—long before he knew about the island.

It can wait until tomorrow.

Dan is sandwiched between Dave and Sam, with a prickly tree branch tickling his back and the smoke and woody smell of the fire disorienting him. Movement to his right catches his eye but he can’t see anything through the thick brush.

He’s only brought back to the bonfire when Sam tugs on his arm because Helen greeted him.

Dan forces himself to give a self-deprecating smile. “So sorry.”

“I was just telling Samantha I’m glad she chose to come sit with us and bring you along tonight so we could—get to know you.” Helen smiles, her lips lifting halfway, the concealment
of their conversation clearly emphasized. “And of course, tell you embarrassing stories about her growing up.”

“Helen, be gentle.” Sam gives Helen a pointed look.

“I’ll be ladylike, but that doesn’t mean I’ll be gentle.” Helen tilts her head meaningfully.

Dan eyes Sam and Helen in their staring contest before he grabs Sam’s hand and laces their fingers. He pushes a slight smile onto his face. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Sam puts her hand on his knee and squeezes in approval.

Dave offers them both a beer from the cooler between him and Helen, but Sam declines, even though Dan knows she likes beer, so he declines too, assuming Sam wants to keep a clear head so he should too.

Helen stands and claps. “Okay, who wants to tell a little Sammie story first?”

Helen sits back down in her chair and winks at him as the rest of the islanders vie for their turn.

He repeats the mantra in his head: *It can wait until tomorrow.*

The conversation goes on around him, but he keeps his eyes on Helen.

- - -

Dan sits up in bed, watching Sam sleep beside him in the dark. The room is illuminated only by the moonlight and the dull light of the TV on mute, shadowing her face from him. She sleeps on her stomach, as always, with her hand reaching out to him, tucked just slightly under his thigh. He watches the man on the screen selling a red set of pans to fellow insomniacs who are also watching him on mute. His t-shirt and boxers cling to his body in the heat of the summer, the cool sheets pushed to his side.
The time is illuminated by his phone, the white numbers taunting him: 3:58 AM. He hears the trees rustle outside and the faint sound of waves through the wall of windows.

He flips the little piece of picture that he saved from the albums over and over in his hand. He took it out of his pants pocket when he changed into his pajamas and has been looking at it the whole night.

He thinks the woman in the photo is the same woman that approached him in the woods—Heather. He doesn’t know that the connection is real or if he’s looking for links that aren’t there, but it kept him thinking back to what she said—kept him from falling asleep. Because he can’t think of anything but that safe she mentioned.

He was trying to make himself fall asleep for a while, to keep his vow—it can wait until tomorrow. But he gave up about an hour ago and has been working up the nerve to get out of bed without waking Sam up.

He used to be that person who always had to get up to get a drink in the middle of the night, but every time he did that in the earlier part of their relationship, Sam would be awake the moment he shifted off the bed. Ever since, he made sure to get two glasses of water to set on his side table before bed just in case.

His two glasses sit full on the table next to him tonight. Because he’s too focused on Heather, on Helen, on the safe, and on finding a way into those drawers.

He waits until he hears the little ripples of her snoring and moves slowly to the side of the bed. When he swings his legs over, she shifts slightly and he stops until she settles. He grabs his phone and the key to the office and tucks them into his pockets with the little corner photo of the woman—of Heather. He slips on his shoes and moves out of the room tentatively, but is able to
reach the door without her waking. He gives one last look at the shadows of the trees across her slack face and goes towards the office.

He pulls the key out of his pocket and feels the satisfying click of the lock, taking a second to see if he hears movement from Sam before he opens the creaky door to the office again. He finds the office chair still sitting in the middle of the room in front of the desk and rolls the brown leather chair with him back behind the desk. He spots the book he threw still lying on the ground and goes around to pick up the book and sets it on the desk, leaning against the wood on both his hands.

Where would someone hide a safe in this room that he hasn’t found already?

He eyes the attic entrance—but he swore he saw nothing up there that resembled a safe, nowhere someone might hide one either.

But he doesn’t see anything in this room either—it can’t be a floor safe then. It could be a wall safe, but every wall is covered with bookshelves.

Could it be in the bookshelves?

He starts scanning the books on the shelves he hasn’t checked yet—finding nothing.

His hand skims across books on fishing, on boating, and just as he hits the section on sea life, down on his knees on the bottom shelf of the bookshelf across from the desk, his hand catches on a seam—in the middle of the binding in one book. He tugs on the leather seam and a flap opens. He pulls the other flap and takes in the safe, his adrenaline rising in actually finding it.

A safe hidden by fake book bindings.

“So Cool.” He whispers despite himself.

And now he knows that he can believe Heather—at least in this respect.
Which also means whatever is behind the door to the safe is as important as she said.

His hand shakes slightly as he types in Sam’s birthday, the safe beeping and the lock disengaging.

Inside he finds a stack of cash—was Sam’s father loaded?—a small gun that he carefully avoids touching, and a stack of passports. He picks them up because there are three, one for Sam, that she seemingly got when she was young based on the photo, one for Sam’s father, and one for Sam’s mother—which her father apparently kept.

None of this is especially important and he starts to let himself believe Heather was wrong, that she was some islander who had been stuck away from the mainland for too long and had gone a little insane.

But there’s one more thing in the safe—a large yellow envelope.

He places the passports back and takes out the envelope. He unfastens the metal clasp at the top and pulls out dissolution of marriage documents.

Divorce documents—for Sam’s parents.

They were getting a divorce?

Does Sam know this? Know that they were unhappy?

She’s never mentioned so to him, he only knew of her mother’s death.

She filed for divorce before she committed suicide?

He needs more information.

He keeps the papers out and closes up the safe, the bookshelf back to just a bookshelf again.

He stands with the folder and looks around the office, desperate for something else he can use—something that’ll give him answers without having to go to Heather.
But he doesn’t have a key to those drawers, and Helen took everything else of value.

So searching this room again with no key to open the drawer is useless.

He turns his head to eye the moon bright outside the window now.

He can’t go back in that room to watch the pan seller on mute and he can’t stay here for no reason, the locked drawers mocking him.

So the only other place to go is out.

The flashlight of his phone illuminates his path as he heads down the path, only now regretting not trying to get changed without waking Sam before he left in his underwear to wander around the island like a maniac.

He doesn’t quite yet know what he’s looking for, as if he’s doing anything but avoiding going to meet Heather—in the yellow house—but he stops in the middle of the path, only a few feet from Sam’s house, and stares straight ahead in the darkness. The white ring of light only illuminates a few feet ahead of him, but he can see a break in the woods, the moonlight shining through the thick brush. When he gets there, he sees two stones on the ground—a memorial for Sam’s parents. He wonders who added the stone for Sam’s father when he died—if Sam wasn’t the one to request it. It could have been Helen, or maybe Sam’s father himself wrote it in his will. The break in the trees reveals the ocean and the moon slowly setting with the sun starting to peek through the horizon. He kneels in front of the stones and traces his hand over their names and their birth and death dates.

He wonders if little Sammie ever came here to grieve her mother—in a place that wasn’t a glaring reminder of bad memories.

“Hi stranger.”
The hairs on the back of his neck stand up and he scrapes his bare knees as he turns quickly, still kneeling on the ground, shining the light to his left on Helen with an ax slung over her shoulder. He eyes the ax and she chuckles, lifting it with her shoulder in gesture.

“Don’t worry, I’ve just been chopping wood. Someone needs to supply wood for the bonfire every night.”

He nods for longer than necessary or normal and says nothing in response.

She looks him up and down critically. “I’m an early riser but I’m assuming you’re not.”

His eyes widen and he slowly stops nodding. “I’m—I just couldn’t sleep so I thought I’d get some fresh air.”

Helen’s eyebrows jump up and she tries to hide a smirk unsuccessfully, twirling the base of the ax around on her shoulder leisurely. “In your underwear?”

Dan looks down at himself and embarrassment colors his cheeks. He scrambles up and brushes off the dirt on his legs to stand straight, using his height in an effort to appear taller in her presence—hiding as much of the folder in his arms as he can, hoping she doesn’t know what this folder is, what it contains. He clears his throat and opens his mouth, hoping for a retort but the silence lingers.

She twirls the ax to the beat of his heart, squinting her eyes at him in question, her smile turning confused. “Right. Well. I’m gonna get back to work. Let me know if you need anything.”

She swings her ax off her shoulder and takes one last long look at him and turns back the way she came.

“Wait, I did have a few questions.” He doesn’t trust her, but he wants her answers anyway—whether they’re truthful or not.
She looks back at him just slightly and places her fake wide smile on her face. “Of course, walk with me.”

“What do you know about—Sam’s parents relationship?”

Helen takes an abrupt left through the trees and off the path and Dan is forced to make a gap through the branches to follow. The crack of sticks echoes under her boots while the low hanging branches scratch at his legs. She brushes a pine tree branch back and he only just keeps his distance to avoid getting wacked in the face.

“They were—they seemed to be happy. Liz, Sam, and Tim—a perfect trio. But Liz had clinical depression—and you know the rest.” She stops to look back at him and he furrows his brow once she turns away from him again and continues to follow her, clutching his phone as he struggles to keep finding her with the flashlight, the cresting sun doing nothing to help his vision around the trees. His boat shoes do nothing to help him climb over the woods floor and his underwear does nothing to protect him from the stabbing of branches against his legs.

“Yeah, but what about Liz and Tim?”

She shrugs her shoulders, not turning back to him to respond. “No, they seemed in love—in love with raising Sam together too. They never even fought.”

She reaches the clearing and there’s a subtle haze of smoke over the bonfire that settled over the area from the night before. He straightens subconsciously, automatically preparing for something to emerge from the haze as the hair on his neck stands at attention. A tree has already been cut down to the side of the bonfire and Helen goes over to it and brings the ax down to settle its cutting edge on the tree.

Dan hesitates in asking his next question. “Were you and Tim close?”

*Thwack.*
Dan breaths in sharply as Helen’s ax sticks in the tree.

She puts her boot on the trunk of the tree to help leverage it out. She lets the ax rest by her side as she chuckles. “We were friends, nothing more.”

“But good enough friends that he would have told you if he and Liz were having issues?”

Dan takes a small step towards her, but stands taller as Helen brings the ax up over her shoulder.

*Thwack.*

Helen repeats her motions to retrieve the ax from the tree. “Yes. And he didn’t.”

*Thwack.*

He prides himself on not flinching this time when her ax strikes the wood.

She grunts as she pulls the ax out of the wood. “What is this about? Did Sam say something? Are you two still fighting? I thought you seemed better, closer last night—was I wrong?”

His abs clench and he holds the folder closer to him. “It’s not about—.”

*Thwack.*

His body jerks at the interruption, but he pushes on: “It’s not about Sam and me. I just thought you’d know a little bit more about her parents’ relationship than she would.”

*Thwack.*

She lets the ax settle upside down, leaning on it as the top of the blade lies against the ground, facing him. She wipes her brow with the back of her other hand.

She squints at him and furrows her brow. “I do. But like I said, everything was good between them. And Liz seemed ok—but deep down she wasn’t. And Sam and Tim paid the price. Where did you get the idea that they were having problems?”
He runs his tongue over the front of his teeth and shrugs. “Something someone said in passing at the bonfire last night—no big deal. Guess I just…got the wrong impression.”

She slumps harder into her hand on the end of the ax, smiling questioningly. “Well you know I’d tell you if there was anything to that—comment. I’ll have to find out who’s gossiping. Anyway, shouldn’t you be back with your wife right now, fixing your marriage?”

He puts his hands in his pockets and pinches the corner picture of the woman—Heather—between his fingers tightly. He breathes in deeply and brings his phone in front of him to turn off the flashlight as its finally light enough outside to see without it. He puts it back in his pocket and finally looks back at Helen, who is eyeing him, despite the relaxation in her posture against the ax. He plasters a self-deprecating smile on his face.

“You know,” she waits as he turns back towards her, “distractions aren’t always a bad thing. Sometimes they point you right back in the direction you need to be.” She picks up the ax again and readies it on her shoulder. “But be careful that distraction doesn’t make you miss what’s right in front of you.”

_Thwack._

He turns away with a jerk and makes a bee line for the road.

_Thwack. Thwack. Thwack._

The sound of the ax and the beat of his heart get softer the further from Helen he gets, so he walks faster until he nears the end of the road. There are two houses on his left and with his adrenaline pumping, being so close, he forgets which house she said was hers.
The red or the yellow house.

He eyes them both until he sees the ripple of one of the dark curtains in the yellow one-story. *The nosy shadow*. The one he saw when he first got there—watching him and Sam. The person who is pictured in the torn photo he has. The person who might just have the answers he’s been looking for. The person he now knows as Heather.

He knocks fast on the door with the yellow folder tucked tightly against him. The door opens to an older woman fast, no doubt she had been watching him the whole time.

Her short grey hair remains unruffled and her face firm but resolute. She doesn’t look him over like most of the other islanders do upon meeting and interacting with him. She keeps her eyes on his and takes a deep breath.

“Come in.”
The click of the door shutting jerks me awake and I press my hand to my heart to try and calm my heartbeat. I reach towards Dan—only to find an empty place in bed next to me, the sheets still warm to the touch.

I turn the TV off, the reflective glare stinging my eyes in the still slight darkness. I check my phone for the time: 4:08 A.M. Early. Much too early for Dan, the late morning sleeper if he can help it.

I call for him as I reach the hallway, but receive no response. I’m about to start down the stairs when I see the light coming from my father’s office—the door that’s supposed to be closed and locked somehow open now.

I feel my body seize despite my urge to walk—run—towards the office. Towards answers?

But I should find Dan first, because that’s the commitment I made to him and to myself last night. That I was going to open—focus on healing us.

But Dan could be in there. Dan has to have been the one to somehow get the door open.

I walk as I convince myself.

The door is wide open and I walk slowly through it, the wood cold against my bare feet. I walk up to the mahogany desk I used to have to stand on tiptoe to see over, on top of which are only a book and a picture I don’t ever remember drawing.

Dan somehow got in here for nothing but some light reading?

I don’t think so—I think he got in for the exact same reason I wanted to get in before. For answers.

Something is missing.
So I’m going to find it.

The moon shines off of the wood and illuminates the room with its striking white reflection. I walk behind the desk to the right side dragging my left hand along the varnish. I kneel down next to the big leather desk chair my father built and upholstered himself and drag my hand down the drawers. I try the bottom drawer first, but it won’t open. I brush my fingers over the lock on the bottom one.

I try each drawer in turn and find the bottom two drawers are the only one’s locked—the rest with simply old office supplies in them.

My brow furrows in contemplation as I push back the chair to get to the big drawer across the middle of the desk. I pull it out slowly—but my father’s old key to the office isn’t in there, the whole drawer is empty. That isn’t even the key to the drawers, but having it in the right place would have at least been a start—it would have helped ground my memories. But it’s not there. Did my father move it somewhere else?

Something is missing.

I open the middle drawer further, something telling me to search the whole drawer. My hands scratch against the old wood. I’m likely getting splinters from the rough shards. My fingers graze the back of the drawer and I close my eyes, deflating slightly. I press my hand along the sides of the drawer and across the top of the drawer—where a key is taped.

A key I didn’t remember existed until I was reaching for it.

I pull down the key, my breathing picking up as I peel off the tape. I turn it in the lock.

With the click, I breathe in sharply and pull open the drawer to find a pile of pictures strewn about. The top picture, the only one that’s fully visible, is one of my mother and I
walking hand in hand down our path in silhouette, her looking down at me toddling next to her. I make no move to pick it up, nor to close the drawer or to move at all.

Because these pictures don’t belong here.

I snap out of my half trance and pull myself to the other side of the desk, using the chair as leverage. When the key clicks for the bottom drawer on this side, I open the drawer to find a mound of fabric. I pull out a small green shawl with silk edges first. I put it up to my face and smell the lilac and earthy tones that automatically bring tears to my eyes. I hold it against my stomach and breathe through the autonomic memories. Me running through the flower field with my mother, unable to take off the shawl she made for me even as it got dirty from playing outside and digging in the dirt. Painting in the shawl out in the yard, splotches of pink, blue, and purple staining part of one corner. I flip it over and find navy stitching along the silk border: *my heart* – *Samantha*. I immediately flip it over and blink past the moisture in my eyes.

Instead I focus on my confusion.

Because I swear these were in the attic, where they had been my whole life since her death.

I carefully fold the shawl back into the drawer and lock it tight, doing the same to the drawer on the right, avoiding looking at the pictures too closely. I push myself up, using the chair as leverage, and push it over to the middle of the room to pull on the cord leading to the attic.

When I get up the ladder and turn on the light I see the boxes ripped and smashed in the corner—all of them empty.

So Helen got to these too.

But kept some things—locked in my father’s desk?

Something is missing.
Why can’t I remember? Why do I remember one thing and find another?

I give one last glance to the rest of the attic before I turn the light back off and head down the ladder again, the desk key cutting into my palm.

I get back up onto the desk chair to close the attic before I roll it back behind the desk and slide the key into the long desk drawer again for safekeeping and push myself out the door of the office.

Because I can’t get into this when I promised Dan I wouldn’t.

But I also can’t get it out of my mind.

~ ~ ~

I’m dressed, out of the house, and walking up to Dave’s door before I realize why I need to see him—to get a push in the right direction, to keep me on track, like he’s my sponsor or something.

Dave opens the door in a red and black flannel with black jeans. No matter the temperature or the time of day he is always wearing a flannel and jeans.

He opens the door wider for me to come in. “Breakfast?”

I take a step past him through the door and wait for him to close it behind him. “Only if you haven’t eaten.”

He steps up behind me towards the kitchen counter.

“Only if you help me,” he says, handing the carton of eggs to me across the counter. I join him on the other side, turning on the burner and waiting for the pan to heat up.

We go through the motions together, I’m cracking the eggs into a bowl to lightly whisk while he starts on the hash, dicing the meat and the veggies to go with the shredded potatoes. We
move seamlessly around each other in the kitchen, having done it for years. Dan and I are similar, it’s one of the things that drew me to him in the first place.

“So,” I start as I season the eggs and hover my hand over the pan to check the temperature. “Dan left early this morning—and he wasn’t on the path on the way here, so I have no clue where he is. But he got into my dad’s office—somehow got it open.”

Dave nods slowly and he quickly dices some onion and colored bell peppers. “Okay, and you’re worried because you don’t want to be tempted—and you don’t know why he is.”

I stay quiet for a second while I chiffonade the spinach. “Here’s the thing,” the pan sizzles as I add half the eggs into the pan, “there’s—there’s something more.”

I stop and focus on the eggs, circling the pan to create a thin circular egg shape. Dave drizzles olive oil in the pan next to it and tosses in diced mushroom and onion, waiting for me to add my spinach.

“What if I haven’t been keeping things from Dan on purpose?” I stand in front of the spinach and stare until Dave grabs it between his knife and his hand and tosses it in with the mushrooms and onions.

He goes back to finish dicing the veggies. “Of course you didn’t keep things from him on purpose, not being ready to share things, even with the people we love most, isn’t anyone’s fault.”

I pause with the fridge halfway open and only slowly reach for the feta cheese after a little while of just staring into the white light. “That’s not really what I mean.”

Dave offers the pan of now completely sautéed veggies with a neutral face only he can muster. “What do you mean?”
I take the pan and a rubber spatula and evenly layer half the spinach mixture onto the egg and dump the other half into a bowl, offering the empty pan back to him. “When I left—I never looked back. And my intention was to never come back. But now that I’m here, things are different than I remember—and it’s not just because of what Helen might have done. I feel like I’m—misremembering some things.”

Dave’s pan sizzles as he adds a touch more oil and slides his veggies to the pan, getting to work on peeling the potatoes, his face hardening in response to my statement. “You’re—misremembering.”

“Yeah. Today I went into the attic and there was nothing up there, nothing was where it was supposed to be—and previously the door to the office was closed, which Dad never did. And there were other things in the house in weird places. And I’m trying to think back to when I or Dad might have put them there and I just come up blank. And these are things Helen would have no reason to touch—not if she just wanted to get rid of my dead mother’s presence.” I crumble feta onto the egg and fold it in half twice with the spatula, easily grabbing a plate and plating it before starting on the other. “And—sometimes, before, when Dan would ask me questions about my past, it wasn’t even that I didn’t want to answer him, it’s that I—couldn’t.”

Dave’s pan sizzles again as he grates the potatoes into the pan with the veggies. He sighs as he sets the grater down. “You mean,” he turns back towards me as I circle the pan again with the rest of the eggs. “you aren’t evasive because you don’t want to talk about things, you avoid them because you’re.. unsure?”

I set the pan back down on the burner harder than I intended. “I don’t remember some things that I should know about my childhood. Some of it is—hazy or even incomprehensible.”
Dan adds the meat to his pan and tosses it a few times. He pulls out seasoning from beside the stove and seasons the hash liberally. “When you were young, after your mother died, and you came over here or you stayed in the back at the diner, you hardly ever spoke. You were just this quiet little girl, either reading a book or digging in the gardens. I could tell you were whip smart, you were so methodical with everything you did, but you would never talk about what happened at home. But you never seemed to want to spend much time there.”

I pause with spreading the rest of the veggies onto the second omelet. “I never think of it quite that way.”

He grabs the spatula after I eventually finish with the veggies and stirs the hash, going to grab a bowl and a spoon start on the sauce. “How do you think of it?”

I shrug slightly, crumbling the feta into the omelet. “I try not to think of it. But, I mean, my mom died and I felt abandoned—it made me this sort of sullen reclusive kid. I liked being in the kitchen with you and I liked doing math in school and when I graduated high school, it was just time for a fresh start. The island—that house—it reminded me too much of my mom.”

“You never think about your father?” Dan asks, quickly stirring the ingredients for the light orange sauce.

“I—,” I stop and finish folding the omelet and placing it on a separate plate, shutting off the burner and placing the pan on a cold burner. “He refused to move Mom’s things which drove me bonkers sometimes, but that was his way of coping. Otherwise, we were sort of just two ships passing in the night most days. And when I got older, we had disagreements, I knew he wasn’t going to let me grow up here, be on my own here. But I don’t really remember much about him and my childhood.”
“And you never wonder why?” Dan turns his burner off as well as I offer the plates for him to top the eggs with hash. He spreads the sauce artistically and I bring the plates around to the bar while he grabs utensils. I set the plates down with a clunk but make no move yet to sit down on the stool.

“I—I guess once I left, it really didn’t matter,” I say slowly as Dave sets the bar and takes a heavy seat to my right.

“You remember how you were in such a rush to leave though? You graduated a year and a half early by sheer force of will.”

“Is there something that you want to tell me?”

Dave leans back and raises his eyebrows, his mouth twitching.

I turn away, lifting my shoulders at his look, and take a slow bite of egg and hash, chewing automatically and steering clear of any potential flashbacks to the past at the sweet familiar taste.

He takes a bite from his own plate and waits until he’s fully done chewing to speak.

“Your father and I never interacted much, I always assumed that’s because he preferred it that way. He was close with Helen, but as soon as I would come around he would hush whatever he was saying to her. And I never liked the way you used to be around him. It’s like you were a totally different kid, not just quiet, but reserved and never as excited and keen as you were when he wasn’t there. And whenever I asked you about him, I’d get the same silence I always got.”

“And you never wondered why?” I play with the hash on the plate, my stomach turning hollow.
Dave sighs and dabs his mouth with his napkin, already halfway through his omelet.

“You remember when I told you that you could come to me if you were ever in trouble, no matter what? And you said—.”

“My dad told me not to,” I interrupt, looking from him down to my plate, only just realizing I remembered what I said as it came out of my mouth.

Why would my Dad say that?

This was when I was younger, maybe 9 or 10, wouldn’t he have trusted any of the other islanders to help me if I needed it?

Dave chucks his napkin onto his already clean plate, while I’m still barely halfway finished. “Exactly. And I said, screw what your father said, you can always come to me,” he pauses and I take a big bite of my omelet in an effort to finish it before it gets cold, “but you never did.”

I swallow thickly and look back at him. “How do you not know more? Everyone knows everyone here, the good, the bad, and the ugly.”

Dave takes only a moment to catch my eyes directly. “We think we know everything about everyone. But as soon as the doors to these houses close, we don’t really know anything about anyone. Unless you’re behind those doors, you’re left with just an impression.”

Behind my door—what was behind my door? The memories of my dead mother haunting me, my strict, stubborn father who would never let me chase them away. The locks that kept me in that house—until I broke myself out.

“Thank you for breakfast—and for always letting me in.”

“Where are you going?” Dave asks, having gotten up just off his stool by the time I had already made it to the door.
“To find out what I don’t know.”

I leave the door ajar without looking back.

~ ~ ~

The door to my father’s office is still left open and the house is still empty—Dan off doing whatever it is he’s doing.

Hopefully not getting on a boat and leaving—cause I just need a little more time.

I can’t tell him my truth if I don’t know it yet.

But I will go through every single inch of this office to find it. I start with the two long filing cabinet drawers. I swear my father took me through these before, when he thought I would join the lobster business, and they’re all financial documents that aren’t even relevant to the estate anymore. I open the top drawer and I pass through the 1970s and 1980s quickly, going a little more methodically through the 1990s, when mom and dad met and got married.

Through the early 1990s, there’s nothing but monthly budget statements for dad’s lobster, clams, oysters, and other assorted seafood that tend to get caught in his traps. Several months in, there’s a thick piece of paper, backwards in the file cabinet. When I flip it around, it’s my parents’ marriage certificate, behind which is a blown up picture of them on their wedding day. My mom in her knee length white satin dress and my dad in his suit, looking at each other, big smiles on their faces. My lips tip up involuntarily at their happiness and I keep both out of the cabinet while I keep looking. A few months later is a document that seems to detail the joining of my parent’s financial affairs in my quick scan of it, and I leave that out too. Many months of budget reports later is my own original birth certificate with a picture of me while I was still in the hospital, with a multicolored background and me in a bright white onesie with my hospital
bracelet still on. Not much else for quite a few years until I see a discoloration in the normally
white lines of paper, a thin yellow receipt for “Family Lawyer Services”.

*Family Lawyer Services?*

I move to open the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet, but it doesn’t budge and only then
do I notice the lock underneath it. I sit back in a huff. It looks to be the same size as the locks on
the desk drawers, but the odds aren’t in my favor. I open the middle desk drawer for the key and
try it on the bottom drawer. It slides in chunkily—but I deflate in relief at the click and I pull it
open to find—more random documents. But I check them all anyway. I find my father’s will and
prepaid bills for his funeral and his medical expenses, as well as a copy of the deed to the
house—the official copy he gave me in person on his death bed. In his one lucid moment, he told
me I would always have a home here, a family here. It meant something, knowing that he was
handing me the deed himself, even though his will already gave me everything.

I carefully pull up a thick file folder labeled 1999 and sit back hard onto the floor.

Once I find the courage to open it, I find a document on top detailing a custody battle
after a divorce—between my father and my mother.

*Divorce?*

No, they were happy. My mother was clinically depressed, but not because of anything
between them. They weren’t fighting, they weren’t divorcing.

Were they?

It must’ve been what the Family Lawyer was for.

I flip through the other documents, and I have to stop and cover my mouth, bile rising, at
one document—my mother’s death report.

Behind which are two handwritten reports, that I slide out and scan.
My wife jumped from the cliff side...

I witnessed it...

Tried to talk her down...

Major Depression...

Suicidal thoughts and ideations...

Links to Personality Disorders...

Put my daughter at risk...

I swear by this report under the law, knowing full well I could be charged for perjury if anything I’ve claimed is unduly reported.

Signed by my father.

I take a moment to breathe through the nausea. Slowly in through the nose and out through the mouth.

I close my eyes and try to remember. My father never told me he witnessed her death, just that the police said she jumped and he had to identify her body.

Something is missing.

My eyes squeeze so hard I see stars inside of my eyelids. I open them, but the headache already starts forming.

I pull out his report and set it aside to read the next one.

I am giving a report on the suicide of Elizabeth Taylor...

History of suicidal thoughts...

Previous suicide attempts...

She endangered her daughter...

Those of us in our community know...
She jumped...

I swear by this report under the law, knowing full well I could be charged for perjury if anything I’ve claimed is unduly reported.

Signed by Helen.

I have to blink through the red that floods my vision.

I stand, intending to storm out, before I see an envelope addressed to me laying next to the drawer.

_Sammie Taylor_ is written on the front in my father’s chunky cursive.

I stop and look at it for a long second, desperately wanting to open it. But the letters—_Helen_—is more important.

I’ll come back to it when I find my answers.

I retreat out of the office, breathing heavily out of my nose as I run to find Helen. I take the main road towards the diner, the sun fully up for the day now.

I see the front door of the diner and maybe for the first time in my life, there isn’t a little voice inside that’s telling me to avoid it all together.

Desperation.

Something is missing.

I wrench the door open, jerking the little bell back so hard, the ring is choked by the swing of the door.

“_Helen._”

Everyone’s eyes fall on me, the fisherman lining the bar, having just finished their morning route, turn away in an effort to avoid my gaze. Helen takes up the last spot at the bar.
She looks at my fist of paper and turns back to her plate, taking one last bite. She wipes her mouth, and lightly chucks her napkin on top of her empty plate.

“I’ll take my coffee to go, Dave.”

She slowly walks towards me and reaches towards my arm but I step back and put the papers between us. She lifts her chin in response. “Let’s take this out back.”

Dave doesn’t move to stop me, but looks at me like he wants to say something. I gesture for him to stay silent as I brush past him and out through the kitchen to the fire pit, walking around it to the right.

“How could you?”

“Samantha…”

“You wrote lies in this police report about my mother. Why did I never know about this?”

Helen crosses her arms, talking slowly, as if to a child. “I didn’t lie. Your mother was sick, she jumped from that cliff to her death, we’ve told you this.”

“For all that she was, she wasn’t a danger to me. I was never in danger with her.”

“That’s not true, but how would you remember anyway? I hear you’ve been having some memory issues lately.”

I pull the letters back in to my stomach, betrayal sitting low in my belly. “Did Dave tell you that?”

“No—Daniel did,” she stops as I furrow my brows, letting my arms fall to my side, “He’s come to me quite a few times just in the day I’ve known him because you were being evasive—you shouldn’t keep secrets Samantha.”
I scoff. “Secrets—you’re one to talk. I remember the important things, I remember that I was never in danger in my mother’s care.”

Helen breaks her stance and move towards me slowly, as if approaching her prey. “Oh really? So you remember when she tried to drown you along with herself? You remember how she would leave you crying in your crib for hours while she locked herself in your closet?”

“I—That’s not,” I stop and look down at the ground, images of water invading my sight. Gasping breath. The feeling of water running down my throat, choking me. My flailing arms and legs. Sinking farther down, my eyes slowly closing.

I squint my eyes and put my hand up to my sternum, trying to calm my racing heartbeat. The few memories I have of my mother are all good, full of the happiness only an unburdened child could have. She never hurt me, never did anything bad—until she left me.

But her and my dad were getting a divorce—if they were unhappy and I didn’t know, do I remember anything from my childhood the way it actually happened?

Something is missing.

I shake my head, unable to decipher if my memories are real or if they are implanted.

“That—that can’t be true, I’ve been swimming since before I could walk.”

“You’ve been avoiding the trauma your mother caused you, she was sick. She wasn’t just depressed, something was mentally wrong, her whole personality changed. And then she expected to be able to claim full custody of you and take you from the only stable family you had.”

I step into her space, pointing the papers in my clenched fist back towards her. “As if I turned out well living here— I’m still trying to figure out the damage my father did, I never wanted to come back here.”
“Because that’s what you do, Samantha,” Helen’s voice turns stern and she steps closer to me as well, her work boots almost stepping onto my toes, “You didn’t want to talk or think about your mother and that house reminded you of her, so you avoided it. Eventually all of us and this island reminded you too much of her so you left us too, never to return. And then you waltz in as if you hadn’t burned all of the bridges you made here, no explanation as to why you were back or if you would stay at all. But we take you back in, cause that’s what we do with family.”

My eyes squint, my teeth clenching. “You think you’re doing me a favor? I got a degree and a job that I love and yeah, I got a husband that I love and you were the only one who felt betrayed and that’s because your daughter left you and then I left you too. Ever wonder if it’s you that’s the reason?”

“Everyone might act like they’re understanding, but they’re not. You’re either one of us or you’re not, you can’t toe the line and expect our loyalty.”

“Is that why you went after my mother, because she didn’t have some family legacy here, she wasn’t ‘one of us’ so she must’ve been the one that was crazy?”

Helen takes a big breath and puts her hands on my shoulders. “Do you hear yourself? You know that’s not true, Samantha. Your mother was sick—.”

“Says you,” I take two big steps back, “and I don’t believe a word you say.”

“I don’t know where the little Sammie I taught to garden is, but I—we protect our own. We protected your father and we’ll protect you too.”

I turn my back on her and walk further toward the woods, yelling back to her, “I don’t want your protection.”

“Well, you don’t have a choice.”
I look back at her quickly as I reach the edge of the tree line, my mouth turning down and my chest clenching. I see Dave coming out the back, looking toward me with the door open, but I turn back and walk quickly through the woods toward the back side of the island, feeling the need to check behind me every few seconds to make sure nothing and no one is following me.

I hit the path and start running to the left on the more even ground, veering off at the break in the trees onto the back dock where the commercial boats are—I gotta get away, I gotta get out, I gotta get off this fucking island.

Something is missing.

I don’t know if John will be here or not on the weekend, but as I approach I can see him washing down the deck of the *Samantha Marie*.

“John.” I have to yell over the spray of the water.

He looks up and stops what he’s doing, his bright orange rubber jumpsuit and the slick, shiny deck making the reflection of the sun getting higher in the sky hit my eye just right to the point where I have to shield my eyes and look straight down in order to avoid the glare.

“Sammie Taylor, as I live and breathe.”

“Hey, John, you busy?” I speak fast, only looking at the boat rather than him chucking the hose off the boat and stepping off the deck and onto the dock.

“Nah, just routine, she still runs like a beaut.”

“Yeah, can I take her for a spin?” I don’t let him even respond before I start onto the deck.

He looks at me sideways and speaks slow in response. “Uh yeah, of course. I won’t even ask if you need a brush up—.”

“I remember.” I cut him off and start the engine with the key he left in the ignition.
“Just bring ‘er back in one piece,” he yells over the roar of the engine. He moves around to the front of the boat, unhitches her from the dock, and pushes me off. I cut the wheel in order to right myself towards the ocean as I move backwards. As soon as I’m clear of the dock and other boats, I gun it, and Samantha Marie lifts out of the water. The wind blows my hair back and almost me with it, as I take a step back, holding onto the wheel. When I right myself, I clip the papers onto the dashboard so that they don’t fly away. I follow the horizon for a few minutes and the urge keep going, follow it towards that infamous something that lies on the other side, is too tempting, making me wrench the boat back to the right to control the urge. Back when I was little, this water was always full of buoys with traps at the end waiting to be checked. Now everyone switched to using rope less traps that can be brought up off the sea floor at the push of a button—the most high tech this island will ever get. But that’s why I can drive faster this close to the shore than I ever have before, though it’s also due to the fact that no other boats are out today on the weekend—so I push the throttle to the very top, having to actively hold on or else risk being taken away with the current. I follow the coastline from just a few hundred feet away towards the house, but that’s not where I’m going. Just between my parent’s memorial stones and the house, the edge of the coast juts out and turns rocky.

As I near it, a black and white bird flies past the window of the boat and I can see the flocks of them huddled on the rocks.

Puffins.

The orange, black, and white tips of their beaks are what distinguishes each Puffin, their numbers vast, yet dwindling as they grow more and more endangered. I slow down the boat as I approach their home and the rocks, both not wanting to disturb them and not wanting to damage Samantha Marie. I let the boat idle as close as I dare to get while not disturbing them and
sending them flying. The one who flew in with me has landed and is delivering food to two of
their baby puffins. A look back out towards the ocean slightly shows another puffin diving for its
own food.

When I was younger, I remember swimming out here when the boats weren’t out, or at
least when my father’s boat wasn’t out, and treading water to watch the puffins, the rocking of
the waves lulling me into a trance, as it does now.

I’ve never almost drowned in my life.

Something is missing.

I slide off my sandals and step onto the right side of the boat, holding onto the structure
as I keep my balance on the right side railing, trying to get a better view. From this angle without
the boat blocking, the wind lifts my hair just lightly off my neck, relieving the slight heat on my
nape. I close my eyes from the view of the puffins, holding on harder at a slightly larger sway of
the boat. But I hear something, a whistling through the trees, yet I can hear it over the crashing of
waves against the side of the boat, even as I’m hundreds of feet from shore. I open my eyes and
jerk my head to the right, following the sound, the calling sound.

Something is mis—

With the slickness of the deck and my bare feet I slip backwards off the side of the boat.
My gasp is the only thing to break my fall as I hit the water backwards, the skirt of my white
dress billowing around me. As my skin hits the surface, images come into my mind of another
time I fell off this boat.

Jumped off?

It was one of the only times my father and I spent time on the boat, just the two of us
alone, without the other people who worked with him slinging lobsters. I remember feeling
confined, something I had never felt in the water before. And I wasn’t standing on the edge. So how did I fall? I struggle to remember while the sensory similarities are still there, lungs burning, falling deeper and deeper as I keep myself from going back to the surface yet.

I remember my father mentioning a late night run for last minute trap pickups. I don’t remember why I had to be there, but I was there. It was heavy dusk, the sun just barely visible on the horizon, and we were nearing the traps by the puffins. I remember we couldn’t find a lifejacket and my father told me to sit in the corner away from the railing sides so that I wouldn’t fall off. But when the boat was idling and my dad was pulling a trap, I got up to see the puffins.

Did I jump in?

Or was I pushed?

My held breath makes my body automatically fight for survival, wrenching me toward the surface. But I push back, just one more minute of memory.

I do remember falling in and flailing—in shock?

Yet I remember the feeling of calm when I hit the water simultaneously, like I wanted to sink to the bottom and never come up for air again.

Was there a push? I remember yelling, but did he push me? Did he push me off?

I come up to the surface this time and take a deep breath, looking around to gather my bearings, where I am in relation to the rest of the world.

I remember gasping when I came up for air then. And I was flailing. And there was yelling.

I don’t remember how I ended up in the water.
I paddle back over to the boat now and have to dive back down in order to gain enough momentum to push myself back up to catch the railing. I lift myself up to sit with my legs dangling over the railing still, each breeze bringing a chill to my drenched skin.

I may not remember how I got in the water, but that’s the only time I’ve ever almost drowned. And one thing is for sure—

My mother didn’t try and drown me—she couldn’t, she was already dead.

But my father was there, and he saw the whole thing.
The inside of Heather’s house isn’t half as vibrant as the yellow outside. The blackout curtains are drawn tight, resulting in shadows in every place there isn’t an artificial light shining. The walls inside are wood panels that drown out any bright color that might exist if the accent color was white. The closed floor plan of the house leaves Dan with a very limited view of the rest of the house, giving him a very brown and beige view of Heather and her tastes.

She ushers him in and shuts the door tight, looking out through one curtain just beside the door before letting it swoosh behind her, much like she did when he first came to the island. He’s still holding the piece of picture, squeezed between his fingers.

She pushes her hands down her khakis and avoids looking at him. “You want some coffee? You look like you could use some.”

He automatically reaches up to brush his fingers through his hair. “I probably could, but I really just came here for answers.”

“Nonsense, I’ll get coffee. Scones?”

His nails press into his skin as he clenches his fists. “No, I—.”

“Alright then, I’ll be right back, make yourself comfortable.” She escapes through the one hallway towards the back of her house.

He eyes the plush tan carpet and the wood panels of the wall. Each corner is dark, to his left the room is entirely dark, though he can see the outline of a TV, along with shelves of books and knickknacks on either side. There’s only one picture on the walls in the room, right above the TV. He instinctively goes to look at it. It’s a beautiful frame, heavy by the looks of the sizes of the screws needed to hold it up. Inside is a picture of a man and a woman, the woman in the photo is the same one in his photo, the same one he can hear prattling on in the kitchen getting
coffee he doesn’t want—Heather. The man looks to be her husband, or her partner, his arm
wrapped around her waist and hers wrapped around his, with her other hand holding a soda can,
balanced on his stomach, while his other hand holds a beer bottle out to the side in what seems to
be celebration, a jovial, half-drunk smile on his face. Her smile is much more subdued, her face
pointed up at him. They’re wearing what could be wedding attire, her in a white, long sleeve
jumpsuit with a slight V-neck, him in a button down shirt with a blue patterned bowtie and black
slacks. They’re on the beach, the sun bright in the horizon. He looks down at the corner of the
picture in his hand, the same woman as in the picture, but the years turned her face to stone, her
mouth only just slightly smiling.

He turns back to the other side of the room when his eyes are tired of straining in the dark
of the dusk light and the blackout curtains. He takes a spot on the couch before she comes back
to find him snooping in her stuff. This side of the room seems well used, the couch cushions
sinking in slightly as he sits down.

Heather comes back and sets down a tray with coffee and scones. She reaches for her
coffee and holds it against her sternum and an awkward silence settles.

“You said you had something you needed to tell me—well, I’m here.”

She takes a sip from her coffee slowly, her hand curling around the generic white mug
with purple flowers on vines decorating the top. “Yes, and you’ve found the divorce papers,
which is why you’re here at five o’clock in the morning in your pajamas.”

He clears his throat. “Pajamas, right. I—.”

“I found you because I have information about Sam—about her mother’s…death.”

“And you knew I was her husband—because you’ve been watching.”
She shrugs slightly. “It’s what I do,” he squints his eyes at her, so she continues, “I try to keep track of people who are new here.”

“Why do you do that?” He pushes his hands down his slick thighs, the corner of the picture between his thigh and his palm.

Her face goes slack and she sits forward. She looks at the photo on the other side of the room.

“Because my husband was an outsider and I’ll never see him again and I never want that to happen to anyone else.”

“Your husband left because the town drove him away?”

“No, my husband disappeared and I’ll never know what happened, but I think the town had something to do with it.”

“So you don’t think your husband left of his own free will?”

She immediately stands up off the chair and moves towards that picture. “Whatever happened to him, he isn’t alive to come back to me.”

He watches her shoulders curve in, like a cat that’s been kicked one too many times waiting for the next blow. He presses the pads of his fingers into his knees, watching the blood under his skin pool under his nail bed, the white turned to bright red.

“Just like what happened to Sam’s mother.”

His gaze startles to hers as she turns around, her shoulders falling to their relaxed state, her hands lifting her mug casually to take a sip of her coffee.

“Sam’s mom committed suicide.”

She smacks her lips and steps slowly toward him. “Right after she filed to divorce her husband. Does that make sense to you?”
He worries the piece of picture between his fingers.

Because she’s not wrong.

“What is that in your hand?”

He stands off the couch and hands her the corner of the picture in the hopes she can’t notice how he coated it with his sweat. She examines it, brushing her thumb over her younger face.

“Huh, I don’t know where you even found this. This must’ve been from their wedding. That’s one of the only times I’ve been around for pictures since my husband died,” she pauses, her thumb rhythmically swiping over her younger face to some unheard tune in her head, “The only reason I was there was because Liz and I were friends. She had been coming here every summer since she was a teenager, her dad was a researcher, like I am, but he wasn’t full time, only stayed to collect samples and data on the puffins in the summer and went back to teach during the school year. I sort of thought everyone on the island liked them, never viewed them as anyone trying to encroach on their space. But when Liz and Tim got together, people on the island weren’t happy about it. At the time, I guess I was naïve. I should have protected her more—.”

“Protected her from what?” He bites his lip to stop from interjecting further.

“Tim, little Timmy, he never seemed like a bad boy. And he and Liz seemed good together. And as long as he loved her, I thought she would be protected from the town. But they had—issues, after Sam was born. Or, I think that’s when it started.” She looks up from the photo to stare distantly, her finger moving over the picture, back and forth. Then she cuts her eyes over to him, and murmurs to wait, while she retreats into the depths of her house.
She comes back lugging a file box that she lets drop to the floor with a thunk. She stands and breathes, just looking at it for a second, before she gestures for him to have at it. His legs unstick themselves to round the table swiftly and his knees fall to the ground in front of the box. He lifts the top and dust plumes.

“I have only opened it once since she gave it to me for safe keeping. That’s when she told me about the safe and the divorce papers—she was planning to confront him about the fact that he hadn’t signed it.”

“Who?” he asks absentmindedly, slowly pulling the cover up to reveal the stacks of papers inside.

“Liz.”

He thumbs through the documents, finding more information on Sam’s parents’ divorce.

“She told me not to open it, that it was just insurance. But after she died, I knew they meant something. Even when she gave them to me, just days before her death, I had a pit in my stomach. I couldn’t get the last words she said to me out of my head. ‘I’m gonna finish this.’ Those were my husband’s last words to me. I rationalized, she couldn’t have known, but it wasn’t a coincidence. They never are—.”

“But what do these mean?”

Why would Sam’s mother need insurance? Why would she give the documents to Heather? Does this have to do with her suicide?

Does Sam know about it? Did anyone think of her during all of this?

He finds a handwritten statement that he stops on, pulling it out to read fully.

“I am requesting a divorce from my husband on the bounds of distress... The island was claustrophobic, an unhealthy environment... I wanted to leave, I wanted us all to leave...He
refused…He started putting restrictions on my time outside of the house…He regulated how I spent my time at home as well…He started putting extra locks on the doors, on the windows, to lock me in, not to keep others out…The minute he started criticizing my daughter’s behavior as well, I knew I couldn’t stay in this environment, in this relationship, any longer and am therefore asking the court to grant me temporary sole custody of my daughter as we come to an agreement on the dissolution of our marriage.”

He goes back to the rest of the documents, flipping forward and finding no response. “I don’t understand,” he says slowly. “Did they get a divorce? Did she get sole custody?”

“She died.”

He nods slowly, finding a picture of scribbles in amongst the box. “She killed herself because no one believed her? Because everyone rallied behind the man they knew?”

“No possible.”

He jerks his head back, his neck straining with the movement. He lets the statement fall back into the box and stands tall in front of her. “She didn’t kill herself, is that what you’re saying?”

Heather crosses her arms in front of her and steps back a foot or two, biting the inside of her cheek. “Just a day or two before her death, she brings this to me with the intention of coming back to get it. She was going to confront Tim, confront the town, show them who he really was. She had a plan to get Sam and get out. And all of a sudden she kills herself, leaving Sam with him.”

He advances again, pointing toward her. “You saw something.”
She bites her nail and looks towards the window, as if she could see anything through her curtains. “Nothing I could use, I don’t even really know what I saw, I—it wouldn’t have been enough for the police.”

“Not only did you have evidence that could have helped Sam that you never used, but you saw something on the day of her mother’s death and you said nothing—not even to her, you kept this from her.”

He doesn’t wait for her response, he bends back down and pulls out as many documents as he can and shoves them into the yellow envelope with the other divorce papers. He pauses at pictures he finds drawn by little Sammie and picks them up. He blows a breath out quickly and tucks them into the envelope safely.

“Keep this safe, Sam will want to see it.”

He steps around the box and grabs a scone as he makes his way to the door.

“What are you going to do?”

He turns back to her just briefly, peering just over his shoulder to find her shame visible on her face, but the fear in her eyes just as palpable. He fiddles with the lock on the doorknob, never looking away from her.

“I’m not gonna fail her like everyone else did.”

- ~ -

He checks back at the house, but finds her gone, no longer asleep. The sky is gray today, a slight fogginess to the air, hiding the tree line. He follows the path from the house farther than he ever has, but he hasn’t found her yet. He’s only lucky that everyone, including Helen, seem to be working or at least busy enough to not have to watch him stumble his way across the roots on
the trail as he goes deeper into the forest. There’s a fork in the trail on what seems to be the back part of the island and he goes to the right first.

Only several feet later and the trail ends on the other side of the island on a slight rocky slope leading into the ocean. It’s windy and he can’t see too far out into the ocean, but the waves lap up onto the rocks heavily, the spray coming up onto his shoes. He takes a moment to feel the wind blowing back his hair and his shirt. He sees those puffins Heather was talking about. They dive into the spray, into the lapping waves, and come back out again, content to fly into the deep with no fear.

He back tracks and takes the left side of the fork that he should have taken before. Dirt shifts under his feet as it molds into sand. The ocean is still shrouded in fog and the high tide laps ever closer to his feet, the beach dwindling. He walks along the strip of sand still visible. When he looks back toward the island, the fog encapsulates the outer edges. The field of flowers sways softly, even as the wind whips the water towards him. He lets one arm drop from its hold on the envelope to flow through the flowers and weeds beside him.

He feels a slight pang at the “what if” of his attraction to this place. If it were different circumstances, he would be fighting for them to stay. The wind whistles past him, like a whisper in his ear, and he turns quickly toward it, back facing the length of the beach.

*Something is missing.*

His eyes are drawn to the break in the beach. The cliff spans his vision, the top just shy of the fog line in the sky.

And that’s when he sees her—it can only be her—standing on top of the cliff in a white dress blowing steadily in the wind along with her hair. She’s back from the edge luckily,
standing by the tree line. The water below hits the rocks lining the cliff side, sends spray in an arc into the air, and back into the ocean.

He takes off on the main road because he doesn’t see any other way to get there. Running in his boat shoes causes his freshly healed blisters to peel with each bound on the pavement. He can only imagine what he looks like to the people in the diner as he runs by, past Helen and Heather’s houses and the others on the main road, past the church, the community center, and the thrift exchange. Nearing the tree line where the road continues into the woods towards Sam’s house, he veers to the right, across some grass that grows into a hill, leading up to the cliff. He goes up along the tree line before he has to cut into the woods, each tree whizzing past him. He just barely blocks branches from hitting him, checking every few seconds to make sure the envelope is still intact. He’s just up the hill, near the top of the cliff, when he sees her. She’s lying back against a tree, her hair pulled back and wet, her dress damp, already drying. He comes out from the trees early a few feet to her right, trying not to scare her, to spook her, to make her run away, even just metaphorically.

He knows she can sense him, but he doesn’t move closer yet. The fog is heavier up here, pushing down against them, hovering over them. “Sam—.”

“I thought—I’ve been hiding things from myself, not just from you. And I don’t even know what I’ve hidden, what I don’t know, what I don’t remember. I never…I never intended for you to feel as though I didn’t want you to know things about me, about my past, I just shut myself off from—from all of it. I never thought it would affect our marriage either, I thought it was done and I could forget about it and move on.”

Her speech is smooth, but she speaks slowly, as if she’s still trying to piece it together herself.
He steps forward slightly and leans his elbow against the tree next to hers. “I know, and I think I know wh—.”

“I found a bunch of paintings and artwork in my room, hidden in the game boxes up in my old closet. One she painted just before her death. I didn’t even know these existed—or if I did, I don’t remember them ever being there, being in game boxes in my closet. And I don’t know why she would paint that... so close to her death. And yet she failed as a mother, how—how am I supposed to do this with everything working against me?” She looks forward, out at the horizon, her eyes hazy.

“Sam, I don’t need you to explain, I kn—.”

“I’m pregnant.”

His mouth dries and his thick swallow scratches its way down his throat. He breathes quickly, puffs his breath out through his nose, his mouth curling slightly before he can void his face of emotion again. She twists on the balls of her feet and leans her shoulder against the tree, facing him.

She stares him in the eyes, not shying away from his confusion, his happiness, his nerves.

He can’t ask the questions he has, the worries, after she claimed she didn’t know if she could be a mother, wanted to be a mother.

“I should have told you the minute I suspected. But I was scared and I didn’t want to jinx it, I at least wanted to make it out of the danger zone. I found out so early, every little bump worried me, I didn’t want you to have to deal with that again. And I—I didn’t know if I could do it, if I could be a mother, if I was fit. And then our whole world blew up when you found those emails, I—I just wanted us to be ok before I introduced this. Because—I need you in this. I don’t know if I can do it, if I should do it, but I know for sure I can’t do it without you.”
He steps away from the tree and away from her slightly watery eyes seeking absolution and walks further onto the cliff side, sliding his way through the wet grass to stare at the horizon, the wind flowing around him. “How far along?”

“10 weeks,” she replies from behind him, though he can’t tell if she’s moved from her spot or contented herself to stay resting by that tree.

He watches a boat cross far in front of the cliff, checking one of the only buoy’s he can see on this side of the island. “Your first instinct is always to turn away from me instead of to lean on me. But that’s what being married is about—lifelong partnership, Sam. The good, the bad, and the ugly. The past, present, and future. Can you start doing that?”

He turns fully back to her and steps forward to meet her in the middle. He breathes out deeply and rests his hand against the side of her stomach. She meets him there, clutching his hand to her. He can feel a slight bump, one he surely should have and would have noticed if he wasn’t preoccupied.

“I will—I want to.”

“And I think I can help. This whole time, I wanted to know what kept you from being open with me, what in your past made you cagey—and I think I have some answers, if you want to hear them.”

She strokes his hand as he removes it from her stomach and clutches her hand before she can pull it away. She looks down at his hold on the yellow envelope and steps away slightly even if she didn’t intend to put space between them.

“If I want to hear them…”

“Helen told me—that she was the one who removed everything of your mother’s from your house. You were right, and I should have believed you, should have known you weren’t
lying to me. But as I was going to tell you about it, a woman named Heather stopped me near the bonfire. She said she had information for me, but I was too focused on Helen and you—and then when I saw you so happy—so determined at the bonfire, I couldn’t bring myself to tell you about any of it. But I couldn’t fall asleep last night thinking about it.”

She pulls her hand out of his grasp and moves her eyes away from his, her brow furrowed. “Heather? I don’t—I don’t know a Heather.”

“She lives in the yellow house on the main road but she doesn’t gather with the town. She implied that people on the island wouldn’t let her.”

She smirk slightly in confusion, “Everyone is allowed to do whatever they want on the island.”

“Your mother knew her.”

Her smirk vanishes. A bird flies out of the trees behind her and she whips her head in that direction, staring at the sound, missing the bird flying above her head. He reaches to pull her back to face him and she startles back to him, taking a step in the opposite direction, her breath falling faster with her chest rising and falling.

“Your mother and her were so close that when your father and your mother were getting a divorce, your mother gave her a box of documents for safe keeping, I have some of them here—.”

“Stop…” she whispers, not moving away from him, but putting her hand up, a barrier between them.

“Sam, if you just look at it, you’ll see why you wanted to get away so badly, why you never wanted to talk about it before—.”
Tears wet her eyes but none fall, her eyes unfocused on some far off distance to his side. “Something happened. Something’s missing. There’s something I can’t remember.” She closes her eyes against it, but he can tell she knows if she wants to remember it.

“You said so yourself, Sam. When you were in pain, when you were in the hospital, I told you, you kept repeating that “she” wasn’t sick. That “she” was your mother, and you knew when you let yourself remember that she wasn’t sick, that she didn’t kill herself, that she didn’t want to leave you.”

She swallows thickly, keeping her eyes closed. “He called her crazy, he said she was endangering my life—Helen said she almost drowned me, and herself, but I remember—he was the only one there. He watched me almost drown.”

He stops, letting the new information wash over him. “Your dad watched you drown?”

She opens her eyes wide and pushes past him, walking closer to the cliff edge and he has to stop himself from grabbing her and pulling her back. “Do you hear that?”

She clenches her eyes and shakes her head, turning slightly back to him.

“You’re remembering, Sam. And I can’t imagine how hard it is to remember the trauma you’ve tried to put away, but there’s more to it. Your mother detailed it right here, your father was trying to hold her here. He wouldn’t let her leave. And he—he put extra locks on the doors, the windows, he regulated everything she did until she couldn’t take it anymore and she was going to take you and leave. And it seems like you knew, so you need to try and remember, because I think something happened to your mother that people knew about and did nothing, tried to cover up—.”

“No, that—,” she turns back to him, her breath coming out in staggered breaths now. “Dan, I can’t.”
He steps toward her forcefully now, gripping her arm and staring, willing her eyes to open. “Yes, you can, Sam. You can’t push it away anymore, it’s just hurting you. Look at this picture.”

She keeps her eyes closed while he pulls out the picture that forced him back to her, that he couldn’t leave with Heather, that he had to take to make her remember. He shakes her slightly, encouraging her to open her eyes. She settles her breathing slightly and looks at the sharp crayon slashes of the picture. The black border encases a red room, with darker red slashes splattered throughout it. Slightly off to the left of the room is a dark black figure hovering over a person, a woman, lying, cowering, on the black border. He flips the paper over to show her the back, her eyes tracking the picture, her mouth open in deep gasping breaths. On the back, is the outline of the other picture shining through from the other side, as well as a little person, a child, hunched over in the middle, covering their ears. They are surrounded by dark circles permeating out from them, advancing towards them. The red slashes show through from the other side, making the advance toward the child look even more menacing, one slash breaking through the paper, leaving a cut through part of the child.

“You knew, Sam. You were so smart, you knew it all. And you buried it so deep down that you couldn’t remember and you couldn’t heal.”

Sam grabs the picture, almost doubling over toward him in pain, face contorting.

“I’m right here. And I have evidence your mother gathered if you want to look at it, but you don’t have to. Because you remember it all, you just need to allow yourself.”

He half picks her up by her shoulders, kissing her head and letting their temples touch.

Her eyes stay closed for a long time, her breathing slowing down, despite the tear he feels fall from her cheek to his. “I can’t do it without you.”
He grips her shoulder. “You don’t have to.”

She shakes her head in doubt, pulling away slightly.

She stops moving but he hears the grass behind him squish and Helen stands by the tree line with her ax dangling next to her.

“Samantha, I don’t know what Daniel has told you, but you don’t know the whole story—neither of you do.”

Dan grips Sam. “We’re not interested in your explanations.”

He eyes the ax and she sets it again a tree, holding her hands out. He blocks Sam with his body, but she steadily ignores him, looking solely at Sam. “You don’t want to know why we wrote those reports, Samantha?”

He cuts his eyes to Sam—the pages she is holding. “She doesn’t need your tainted opinions, she remembers herself—.”

“Why did you write them? Why did you falsify the information?” Sam asks, cutting him off.

Helen takes small steps towards them and they back away from her—until they reach the middle of the cliff and stop, keeping away from the edge.

“Your father—he loved your mother. So much so that after she died he spent his whole life alone, living trapped in a house of her memories. But when she filed for divorce—he couldn’t reconcile that love with his crumbling marriage, he—.”

“He kept her a prisoner.” Sam steps out from around his arm letting her hands dangle. “And then he did the same to me—when I wanted to leave.”

“What?” Dan brushes his hand on her arm but she keeps her gaze on Helen—who looks equally as surprised.
“The locks on the doors, the windows—monitoring and controlling how long my mother could spend in the house, what she could do and who she could interact with. He did the exact same thing to me. But he didn’t kill me, I got away before he did.” Sam’s stone face doesn’t let one tear fall from her watery eyes.

“He didn’t kill your mother, Samantha—.”

“But she didn’t kill herself.”

Helen breaths for a second, stopping her advance with a few feet between them.

“No.”

Sam’s lip quivers before she swallows her tears thickly. Dan comes up behind her, trying to communicate to her his support without touching her—interrupting her. Because this is her choice, this is her battle, but he won’t let her fight it alone.

“Why did you lie? Why did you both lie?” Sam’s voice is gravelly and low, her pain hitting Dan in the pit of his stomach.

“It was an accident, Samantha. Your mother’s death was an accident—.”

“Then why did you lie? Why did you lie for so many years—make me believe that my mother left me, abandoned me, chose to leave me with him?”

“Because he was there—your father was there and everyone on the island knew they were fighting and it wouldn’t take Sherlock Holmes to put two and two together—to assume that your father killed your mother, but he didn’t. Your mother, she confronted him, said she was taking you away and things got heated. I didn’t even notice them up here on the cliff until I saw you at the tree line, crouching behind a tree. She tripped and fell—off the cliff. And you saw it—I had to do something, protect you from becoming an orphan.”
Sam gasps, breathing in and out heavily. “You concocted that story, her suicide—for no reason. How—no one on the island would have suspected him, Helen, you and I both know that, why—.”

“Because you would’ve.”

Silence hangs between them as they regard each other, Sam in her bare feet, her wet white dress and long, water tangled hair, her posture slightly slouching, defeated and Helen, in her work boots, khaki shorts with a button up tucked in and her hair wrapped in a tight bun, her posture held back, ashamed. He tries to make sure Sam can feel his presence, even as he feels an outsider, watching them deal blows to each other while he’s on the sidelines.

Helen breathes deeply. “Because you would have resented him, you would have thought him guilty, and for what? For being a good father, for wanting to keep his family together instead of breaking them apart? He didn’t deserve that, so I made sure it didn’t happen.”

“But it did!” Sam steps fast towards her. “I did resent him after all of that and he did it all by himself, he didn’t need you or anyone’s help.”

“When I found out what he did, Samantha, I tried to reverse it. When I found out you were coming back, I tried to remove the memories of your mother, the burden he put on you in that house—.”

“I don’t believe you—you left things of hers still there.”

“I removed everything I could get to, but there were locked portions of your father’s office I couldn’t get in, so I locked the office.”

“But you created a nursery after I—after we—.”

Dan steps up behind Sam and settles his palm on her back, trying to channel his strength into her—not that she needs it, but it’s the only thing he feels he can do.
Helen reaches across the space between them but Sam and Dan step back in unison. “I didn’t know you had lost the baby, not until you got here without one. I found—I found out you were still talking to Dave. Exchanging emails, and I saw one after you just found out you were pregnant, talking about how it was making you think of your mother, your father, of your family here. And you said you were thinking about bringing the baby here when it was born—.”

“What?” Dan whispers at Sam’s back, backing up from her as she turns towards him, her posture now resembling Helen’s own shame.

“Dan…”

“I don’t remember reading that—I read all of them, I remember them all—.”

“I deleted that one.”

Dan’s face hardens and his breathing accelerates. “Why? You were keeping them from me anyway.”

“Because I didn’t want to see my confession, my lack of conviction, I regretted ever thinking about coming back here, especially with our baby—.”

“And without me. With our baby, and without me is what you were going to say. Even as the father of your child, you still couldn’t be honest with me, even hypothetically—you were going to bring our baby here, my baby here, and you were going to keep me in the dark again. Where does that leave us now?”

“Dan, I—I was never going to bring the baby here, I never would have come here in the first place. I was feeling nostalgic, wanting our child to know where I grew up, but I never would have gone through with it, not without you.”

“Will you always be keeping things from me? Can you ever stop yourself?”

Sam grips his arms. “I already have.”
Dan closes his eyes, unable to reach out to her. “I don’t know if I can believe that.”

Sam shakes him, and he opens his eyes to see her wet face, her lip trembling. “None of this matters—nothing matters unless you believe that.”

Dan takes a step back, just out of her grasp. “I—.”

“How’s please,” Sam begs, crying now in earnest.

He takes one more step back from her—but his foot hits air.

He doesn’t have time grasp for Sam, for any sort of footing, and his stomach falls as he feels the air flow around him—off the side of the cliff. He can hear Sam’s scream echoing over the rush of air in his ears. His arms fly out, the envelope falling from his grasp, the contents spilling into the air around him. His whole body feels like lead, collapsing in on itself. He can hear her shouts in the moment before he hits the water, thinks he can see her reaching toward his plummeting body—Helen holding her back. He tries to yell back to Sam, he doesn’t know if anything gets to her:

_I love you anyway._

_I still love you._

_Sam, I lo—_
Epilogue

My parents went up to this very spot. To the top of the cliff. If I had my memories, if I didn’t bury them like a coward, if I wasn’t so stupid—I never would have come up here, not where bad omens live. He would still be breathing.

I jolt awake from Diana’s cry in the crib just next to the rocking chair I had crashed in, wiping at the tears I didn’t realize I had shed during my sleep. She reaches for me as I pick her up and rest her against my chest, bouncing her from side to side as she quiets slightly, whining until I grab her bottle from beside the rocking chair and sit back into the chair to feed her. She grips my hand with her own as she eats and I rock her rhythmically on autopilot.

In the same chair where my mother held me.

I have been having that recurring dream more and more lately, up on the cliff side, my ghosts haunting me even in my sleep. It doesn’t help that I’ve been reading my father’s letter every night before bed.

I reach down to pick it up from where it fell on the ground.

It took a year—but I finally got up the courage to read it.

Miss Sammie,

I know you’ll find this letter someday—and I hope it’s sooner rather than later. I hope I can give it you myself when you come back—but the time for that is dwindling. I also know I don’t deserve it—I don’t deserve the opportunity to right my wrongs.

I didn’t learn my lesson with your mother—I pushed you away too. And I don’t expect you to forgive me, but you at least deserve to know the whole story.
I know Helen will get rid of everything in this house when I leave—so I’m going to try and save as much as I can. Hide it, lock it away. While I’m having a good day, while I can still remember documents, memories—evidence. And in this letter will be your mother’s necklace, because you deserve to have it, whatever I can give you.

You deserve it all.

I grip the little elephant adorning my neck, twirling it as I read it—before I set the letter aside.

Diana struggles to get the last of the milk out of the bottle and I grab a burp towel and throw it over my shoulder before I take away her bottle and pat her back, her head against my shoulder.

I stand as I stroke her head and speak to her rhetorically: “Now what were we doing before I fell asleep with you, huh baby? Where were we?”

“Ah yes,” I stop slowly bouncing and spinning around the room, facing back toward the right wall, still blank—still yellow.

I kiss her head and cradle her in my side as I grab a brush and dip it into the black paint can sitting on the sheet covering the floor in front of the empty wall.

“It’s just you and me now, Diana.”

She looks up to me, her eyes still groggy from her nap, and I see Dan in her face.

I slash black paint against the wall, already knowing my plans for her mural must start now.