

INHERITANCE

by

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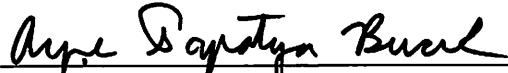
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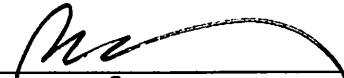
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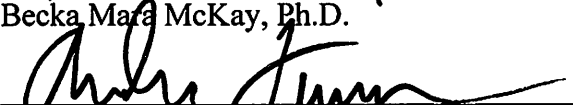
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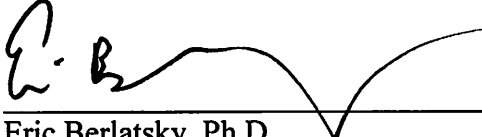
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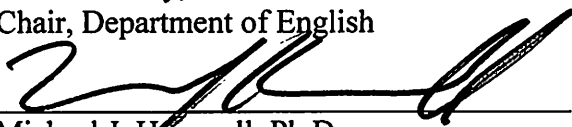
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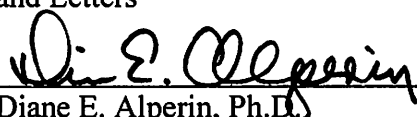

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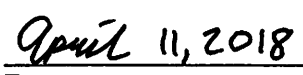

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a second draft of a novel about an orphaned girl and boy, Kate and Penn, who befriend one another on a Midwestern college campus and discover belonging and a sense of self, as well as a fantastical quality they both possess called Influence. The story explores themes of family, friendship, community, fear culture, and adult identity.

INHERITANCE

I. Home	1
(1).....	1
[2].....	13
(3).....	19
[4].....	29
(5).....	36
-6-.....	50
II. College	51
[7].....	51
-8-.....	68
(9).....	69
-10-.....	78
[11].....	78
(12).....	86
-13-.....	97
[14].....	105
(15).....	121
-16-.....	133
[17].....	134

(18).....	144
-19-.....	157
[20].....	158
(21).....	169
[22].....	185
-23-.....	193
(24).....	199
III. Spring.....	224
(25).....	224
-26-.....	237
[27].....	237
-28-.....	251
(29).....	252
[30].....	261
(31).....	274
[32].....	286
(33).....	299
[34].....	308
-35-.....	317
(36).....	318
Appendices.....	336
References.....	356

I. Home

(1)

Kate had just finished throwing up when she heard the car coming.

Its tires plowed earth in the distance, the car groaning down the dirt road that ran between towering rows of corn plants. In the wind the stalks scraped and leaves rustled, the ears of corn full and heavy, drooping toward earth.

The approaching engine made her uneasy. She'd fled her aunt's house angry, punished her eardrums with rock music as she ran full-tilt for miles, made her legs drag her away until they burned with so much lactic acid they didn't feel a part of her anymore. When her headphones slipped off she'd left them in the road, indulging her tantrum.

In the last year Kate had learned she could exhaust her body until she was too tired to care. Running—its tight clutch at her breath, slow hardening of her body—transformed the bland hurt she felt into something smaller, contained. She felt sovereign again, could reclaim the boundaries of herself even after an argument with her aunt.

She was way out past the Petersons' fields before she stopped, and only because she had to puke. Her projectile spot of choice was a lone tree that grew haphazardly between the dirt road and the cornfield. It wasn't one she recognized. Her mid-afternoon snack of oatmeal with canned pumpkin looked even worse than it had in the bowl hours earlier—yellowier and watery.

Disgusted, Kate wiped her mouth, spit, and turned to see if she could spot the oncoming vehicle. Nothing. All she could see were clouds of dirt above the cornfield that spoke of its advance. She remembered an earlier time when this view—pink sky, brown husks, dust—had taught her what it felt like to be alien. She had come to Churdan a nine-year-old girl, lonely, uncertain, sent to live with an aunt she hardly knew. Back then the corn fields were a long, empty backdrop for a child who no longer belonged to anyone, and still, eleven years later, she could feel just as alien sometimes. Alone.

The wind slowed and the plant leaves quieted to whispers. She had learned in an online college course that trees are in constant communication underground, interacting with one another through their root systems. She'd always thought of leaves being the chattiest parts of plants, and she wondered now if the corn plants could talk like trees did, if they were talking to each other now.

For a moment Kate watched, entranced, as brown puffs billowed out above the path of the unseen car, swelling upward, exhales of dust into the pink, burning sky. She wondered whose property she was even on at this point, or if she'd left the limits of Churdan altogether. The farmed flatlands of Iowa stretched out from where she stood, endless.

Deep in her still-sour stomach, anxiety crept in. Something about it all reminded Kate of a beast from a horror movie, curling its way through rural domain, stalking helpless prey...

"It's a car, for God's sake."

She'd said the words aloud for some reason. *Don't stress about it*, she countered herself, internally this time. But she thought about the news stories her aunt kept running

on the television. Most of them were urban and sensational—fear-mongering reports about a freak homicide in a parking lot far away, or a violent, late-night mugging in a major city. Churdan wasn't exactly a hotspot for bad news headlines—it was a farm town, and the closest major city was a good two hours away—but Clara was convinced of its latent potential for crime. In the city, as Clara would tell it, things were emptier now, people leaving. The news had awoken them to the danger of the world. They were trying to find somewhere safe.

But Clara hadn't been to the city. Not in years. Kate had never been, but asserted she'd have to see it before she believed. A girl could run where she liked to—Kate thought it may be the purest form of freedom.

Run in the morning, Kate. You don't have to race against the dark. Clara's voice was tinny in Kate's head. The unsolicited advice had enraged Kate further in this particular fight, driving her out the door, but now she ducked several yards into the field so the dirt road was nearly concealed by cornstalks. The car's engine was perpetual, discordant and getting louder.

Kate squatted low. She'd run back after this, she decided. The light was waning.

Her leg muscles burned. Heart pounding still, she examined the chipping nail polish on her fingernails. The sparkly gold shade was silly, a relic of her younger self. She'd found it in an old desk drawer and laughed out loud at the name: Worth My Weight. Even her nail polish had something to prove. But it didn't feel funny anymore, squatting in a corn field like a kid. It felt embarrassing and childlike. The feeling brought an old, annoying memory of her brother—when he'd dared her to sit in the dark of their parents' closet. She was nine or so, him seven. They'd been telling each other monster

tales, trying to frighten each other; he'd challenged her to brave the dark of their parents' closet. A little boy, what did he know? A small challenge, a funny little indulgence.

A rabbit chewed on a drooping ear of corn a few yards to her right. Harvesting would start here any day now. Kate thought the stalks looked tired, resigned to the weight. The pinkish light still fell prettily through them, though, pushing away the shadows between rows. She tried to guess how many minutes there were until darkness—twenty, maybe less.

She had only made it three minutes in that closet before exploding into the hallway, crying silently. They'd stopped playing the game after that. Later, after he comforted Kate with hugs and made it past their grandparents to steal some cookies from the pantry for her—Stella Doro cookies, their father's favorite—humiliation had crept in. It was a gnawing sense of shame, and failure didn't belong in their household—a household that, with its sweeping waterfront property, its many stories and its gate, was built on a hard foundation of risk, self-control and success. *Courage* was the word she thought now.

The recollection unsettled her. She hadn't thought of her brother in a while, and she thought this memory was from *the* year—if it was, and she was fairly certain it was, then that meant it was almost eleven years ago. Eleven full years ago next month, October 15. Her anniversary of loss.

The truck was close now, maybe a hundred yards from her hiding spot. Her hands were shaking a little. She knew she was being neurotic, and after hours of running no less. But the light in the corn rows had weakened to almost nothing. If this dinosaur of a car didn't pass by soon, she wouldn't be anywhere near Clara's house at dark. And as

brave as Kate strived to be, she didn't want to brave that, not with a ticker tape of bad news headlines and a memory of dark terror in her head.

She was picking at a stubborn gold fleck on her thumbnail, straining through darkness, when the engine cut. The silence roared.

The sun had gone down fast and she could no longer make out exactly where the field ended and the road began. In the absence of the engine the night was white noise, a screaming little kingdom. For a moment, her heart pumping loud in the darkness, she started to doubt her sanity, if the car had even been there at all.

The discomfort made her lean forward, urge her eyes to see.

"Kate?" A male voice called, and she startled so hard she fell into a hard row of plants.

"Kate?"

It was Will Peterson. She knew his voice. She straightened herself slowly, her legs burning from running and tingling for squatting so long. She could see the darker outline of him a few rows away, moving toward her, his gentle footfalls louder.

"What're you doing?" he laughed, and she tried to collect herself enough to speak without revealing how surprised she'd been, how afraid.

"Yeah, it's me."

Will laughed harder, the warmth of him a comfort in the midst of her lingering fear. She wanted to be angry at him, but he couldn't be more distant from the memory of her brother, had no idea what memories he was tapping into now. He didn't even know she'd had a brother.

“Do you run *through* the fields?” he asked, and she could hear the lingering smile on his face. “You’re lucky Mark’s not in his blind, you’d get shot.”

“Hadn’t thought of that,” she said, feeling increasingly stupid. She hadn’t known she was on Mark Wedge’s property and Will’s comment wasn’t entirely off-base. Mark was trigger happy and territorial, known to spend hours in his deer blind just waiting for animals to choose the wrong side of the road.

“Yeah, I can barely see you, so just come to the road. My truck’s right here.”

She listened to him walk away, a measure of rustling indicative of him running a hand along a row of plants.

“Wedge needs to harvest these things,” he said, and he was right. Will was an exceptional farmer—it wasn’t talked about, exactly, but everyone in Churdan still knew he’d brought his own father’s land back from ruin when he was just starting high school. Yet he wasn’t anything like Mark Wedge—the kind of person who counted his corn plants like money. Perhaps it was what made him so good.

Kate joined Will in the road and leaned against the cool metal of the truck door, surprised by its chill; it felt like winter came sooner each year. Her skin was hot, her head still full of embarrassments, and she tried to think of why Will was here; sent by her aunt, probably, which made her seethe again. Clara wouldn’t dare send someone after her, would she?

“Man, it’s like pitch out here. Glad I found you,” Will said, slamming the driver’s-side door. She paused a beat before yanking the truck door open to join him inside the cab.

“Why?”

Will waited before he responded, sensing the anger in her voice, she guessed. He started the car, cutting the wheel hard left to U-turn back toward town.

“Why what? Why am I glad? Why is the night like pitch?”

“What’d she do—call you and tell you I’d run away? Tell you I was going to get murdered?”

“Who, Clara?” Will said, smiling, and her anger battled her embarrassment again. She could see the kindness in his face from the dashboard lighting.

Kate inhaled and the smell of the cab was familiar and calming. The windows were down, and as they drove the night air blew through the truck, lightening its musty smell of dogs, hay, and earth. She had known this truck as far back as she could remember being in Churdan, since she had first met the Peterson boys in elementary school.

“You lose these?” he said, nodding toward the cup holder where her headphones lay, dusty black, the ear pads and wraparound plastic surprisingly unbroken.

“Thank you,” she breathed, sincerely grateful. She examined them by running her finger along the plastic and flicking the ear pads, dispelling dust. She was impressed he’d seen them from the road, but not enough to draw more attention to the fact that they were way too large to have fallen off without her knowing. Will knew her well—they’d gone to school together since she first arrived in Churdan—but her anger wasn’t something he was familiar with.

“You seem pretty pissed,” he said now, inevitably, it felt like. She studied his profile as he watched the road and realized she hadn’t really looked at him like this, closely and observantly, since graduation—more than a year ago, when they’d shared

beer at a low-key party at the Petersons' house, parents there and everything, celebrating their kids' high school conclusions. Standing on the outer rings of a bonfire crowd near the barn, she'd been startled by the details of his face—how much he'd changed throughout high school without her noticing. What had they been talking about then? Teachers? He'd laughed and she'd noticed that his soft face had grown angular, the bridge of his nose sharp and long, no longer too hard for his features. Standing so near him, she'd realized how much wider his shoulders were than hers, how much bigger his hands were around a beer can.

In the dim lights of the dashboard now his eyelashes were long and straight. He looked at her again and his eyes were soft brown, attractive.

She dropped her eyes to the headphones as her stomach tightened. She was really sweaty. Her headphones had already made a mold of her hands, burrowing thick lines into her palm from gripping them so tightly.

"I *was* pissed," she said. She loosened her grip and traced the ridges with her fingers. A stray hair of hers, long and brown, had snagged around an ear pad and she untangled it, then let it fly out the window. "Clara and I fight a lot. Since graduation. She's pushing me to go to college all the time then undermining herself by talking about how dangerous everywhere is—the crowds and everything. She goes on monologues about there being hundreds of students in lecture halls and sports games and whatnot, and the crowds being a prime target for crime. Thinks colleges and universities are big, unprepared bull's-eyes for tragedies."

She snuck a glance at Will and he looked serious. "She's not wrong." The air in the truck seemed too tense—since elementary school, this wasn't the type of friendship

they'd maintained: talking about serious things, being vulnerable. They'd joked around, kept heavy stuff to themselves.

Kate wanted to switch subjects, but she sensed he wasn't done and waited for him to continue.

"It'd be worth the risk for college, assuming you want to go," he said. "Anywhere isn't particularly safe these days, but, honestly, I don't know that it ever was. There's just different types of danger. And at the same time you'd want to be smart."

"Smart how? Stay in my room and never leave? It's college, there's guaranteed to be huge groups of people which, according to the news Clara watches, brings bombings, shootings, stabbings, all kinds of fun. She'd be calling me every two seconds."

"Don't get a cell phone then."

"I don't have one."

"I know. So keep it that way."

She thought about this—for whatever reason the option hadn't occurred to her. She'd assumed Clara would force her to get one if she left, but she was 20, two years a legal adult—she could make her own decisions. In Churdan most people had phones, although there was an expanding slice of people who had opted out after owning them for years, preferring to return to simpler times of a landline or an email address. It was something the teachers avoided talking about too much in school—too political. Kate had read about the 'Tech Transition' online sometimes, from a few sites her English teacher recommended. Kate used Clara's desktop more than Clara did, though her Aunt Clara was a technology fiend—television always on, spinning news stories or a movie or a show, Clara's smart phone regularly in front of her while the TV blared, her eyes flicking

back and forth as she compared notes about some bombing or crime report that had just aired on TV. Clara considered herself smart, Kate knew, in that she cobbled together her news from multiple places, researching every facet of an event until it consumed her. And it was this obsession that drove Kate so far in the other direction, made her proud to be pretty much off the grid.

“You’re not in college,” Kate said. Will had fiddled with the radio dial and there was low-volume classical buzzing its way out of the truck speakers.

“Observant.”

She smiled. “Why not then? When we talked last,” she thought of the graduation party, the way his eyes were starting to crease from years of laughter, the sound of heavy joy from his chest as he laughed, “I thought you were going to Alberta.”

He sat back in his seat and fit his arm into the open window frame, then swerved suddenly around a pothole. Under the guise of distraction, she looked at him an extra time, a little longer, the steep fade of his t-shirt, his brow furrowed slightly, his eyes dropping to check something on the dash.

“My dad had a health scare,” he said. “right around the time we talked, actually.”

“I had no idea,” she blurted out.

“It’s fine. Didn’t tell you.”

She realized she knew nothing about how the Petersons had been doing, individually or as a family, since that party. She hadn’t so much as checked in with Clara about them.

“Was gonna defer,” he continued, “but I started some online classes and my dad’s been teaching me everything else about the farm that I didn’t already know to run the business side of things. Physically going isn’t worth the money.”

Kate was quiet. How had she not known any of this? They weren’t particularly close, sure, but she could have made an effort to stop by, check in on things. Instead she’d been consumed by her own selfishness for over a year, her own issues. Her own secret—she’d been thinking about telling him—that she’d gotten her own acceptance letter, that she’d applied to the University of Michigan their senior year and had even been offered financial aid. That she’d deferred a year and hid the entire thing—the application, the acceptance, the deferral—from Clara.

“For me, I mean, it’s not worth the money,” he continued. “College would be great for you. What do you have in Churdan, anyway? You’ve always wanted to leave.”

It was true, though she didn’t remember telling him as much. “I could do online classes,” she said. “Feels like everyone is these days, anyway.”

“It’s safer.”

“I know.” It was a twofold reply. She thought of Clara again, another rant about the benefits of online courses and how Kate might complete her degree at a variety of universities that way—safe in Churdan, with the freedom of a college education. An opportunity to find what makes her happy. But Kate also knew it would be safer to stay because she’d tried it already. She’d taken an online course the summer after high school, when she was still planning to go to Michigan in the fall. Another secret: doing homework on the desktop late at night while Clara slept. The screen blue-bright, the house quiet, the cat scraping against things and making her jump.

She'd intended the class to be preparatory—one course before she started to ensure she was qualified. If she did well, she'd thought, then she'd tell Clara about the class and her going to college. That way it would be too late; it would be August and there wouldn't be time to argue. She'd begun with her dream course: botany. Learning more specifically about plants and leafy things had been like lifting a veil into an entire new world—one she'd coexisted with in Churdan unbeknownst to her. All the nature she loved was complex and intricate, hardly as simple as it looked externally. She'd loved the course. And she'd failed it.

"I'm not afraid of getting hurt or dying in college," Kate said. She was afraid she wasn't smart enough, that she'd fail out.

She leaned her head against the door frame, wind drying her sweat into an encasement and billowing against her worn sweatshirt. She was still overly hot, but she had no idea what things would smell like if she risked shedding the sweatshirt in Will's truck. "Don't you wish you could have had the adventure, though?" she continued, enjoying the spawning stars above them, baby's breath in the dark night. "The friends you might make and all that?" She needed to know if she was the only one who had the fear, if her fear was bigger than her desires. She wanted him to tell her what she could do.

Will pressed his palm into the top of the steering wheel and didn't answer. They were pulling in to Clara's driveway already, a guttered dirt path that led to the small, two-story house. A light was still on in the kitchen and Kate realized Will hadn't told her why he'd come. "My aunt did send you, right?" The thought of being delivered made her anger flare.

He stopped the car near the house but left the engine running.

“Yeah,” he exhaled, looking at her fully and waiting for Kate to ask for more.

Kate didn’t. “And your dad’s okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just a scare. Thanks.”

She nodded. She got out of the car and thanked him back.

“Your aunt has her own stuff too, you know,” he said, surprising her. “You weren’t here when your uncle died.”

Kate watched him fiddle with the gear shift, his hand smothering the knob. She felt caught by his words.

“You make her worry,” he said, and it increased the dread that had started to rebuild itself when they’d first pulled into the driveway, growing as the house itself grew larger.

“Sure.” She pretended to examine her headphones and turned, walking toward the house. She ought herself to prepare herself for whatever was inside it—another fight, another argument—but her attention was on the truck engine fading into the night, the words he’d said.

Detached from the receding groan, she felt more confident than when she left, better for her conversation with Will. She tugged open the thin screen door, the low-volume television reports a mumbling acknowledgement of her return.

[2]

Pennant Illyria Beckett

Penn examined the full name atop his writing assessment with a grimace. It was one of many things about himself that he’d made a point to keep private. As a personal rule, secrets were something he valued, but his name had a camp all its own.

Penny, honey, can you get your dad for me?

He'd hated that nickname. Despite how much he missed them, he'd never figured out what the hell his parents were thinking when they'd filled out his birth certificate. If they'd meant it to be regal, it wasn't. It had only gotten him picked on.

Penny. It was a girl's name. Yet he'd loved the way his mother said it, the timbre as soothing as her hand on his hair.

He smacked the wood of his pencil against the desk, annoyed. Another rule: memories were distracting and often useless—things that hampered.

What did matter was that he had twenty minutes left of this pre-req literature class and for whatever reason he couldn't finish a dumb writing assessment. It wasn't graded, just a prompt to evaluate where they were, quality-wise, with their writing. *Write about a book you love.* A stupid prompt. Something he hadn't been asked since back in prep school.

Yet his mother had loved reading. Atwood and Steinbeck and Hemingway. Novels, mostly. Some historical accounts and corporate books. He scribbled hastily, fueled by a memory of an oak-paneled library, lamps burning low, her slow, warm voice reading. If memories were going to raid his thoughts, he could at least direct them somewhere.

At two minutes past he finished a weak concluding sentence and handed the paper to the instructor. He was the last student left in the classroom.

She was an old woman, her sparsely-lashed eyes raised to his. "Enjoyed the prompt?"

He couldn't tell if it was a joke or sincere and didn't answer. Her eyes were blue. The color harkened back another memory: a picnic on the beach, small sandwiches and a sense of constancy, of quiet friendship, waves upon waves, he and his sister, their parents farther off but close enough to call to.

A sadness in him yawned wide open and he faltered, surprised by its depth.

"Yeah." His voice was weak.

Penn crossed the room, shouldered his bag and exited, struck by the emptiness of the hall. Sunshine filtered through the skylights of the old humanities building, casting its cracked walls in a dust-mote glow.

Penn cracked his neck, feeling uncomfortable. He needed to think, but was distracted by the few students who were in the hall—a familiar pressure to pay attention, evaluate, keep an eye out for strange or threatening behavior. During freshman orientation last year, the staff had presented response options for an on-campus shooter: Run, Hide, Fight, as well as the campus crime statistics, which, they reminded everyone, were surprisingly “not nearly as bad as the news says.” Still, campus was emptier than it had been, even now being the first week of school, and that seemed strange to him, illogical. In truth he was angry about it—all summer he'd enjoyed the solitude of campus, with few students sticking around for summer class like he had. But he'd banked on a resurgence come fall, hundreds of young people talking in the halls again, a few brave groups populating the lawns. This morning he'd passed maybe 200 people, max. For a campus with more than 40,000 students, historically, that number should have been higher.

A girl walked past him with her eyes carefully averted and he wondered if other campuses were functioning similarly—wary, emptying, petering out. He assumed so—if the Midwest was showing effects of pervasive fear, then other parts of the country had to be worse. Most Midwesterners he'd met in his college years were unnervingly social.

A few paces further, the hallway opened up unto a soaring atrium, skylights constituting the roof and flooding the whole area with light. Save for one boy on a bench seat, checking his phone, the atrium was empty. Over the summer the university had taken down every flat screen television lining these walls, the mounting gear still drilled into the brick. A memo had gone out about it, easy to overlook in an inbox. It was a statement from the president of the university, asserting they would not encourage a culture of fear. Penn didn't know a lot about the whole situation, but was trying to read up. From his understanding new theories were emerging about the effects of TV reporting these days—arguments about what people really ought to know, locally, nationally, or the extent of bad news the human mind should take in for optimal health. Then there were the longstanding debates about what news was true, what was exaggerated, what was worthwhile.

Penn sat on a bench seat himself and pulled out his phone, trying to suppress the memories from class. Today had been an assault from the past.

On the screen was a default image of a field, date and time overlaid garishly on the sky: September 5, 11:09 a.m. *October 15 next month*, was his automatic thought—even the future could be a reminder of the past.

He put his phone back in his pocket. It was a high end phone and he tried to be responsible about how he used it—for business headlines, mostly, and the necessity of

efficient communication. All the full-resident students at Mills House, Penn included, received smartphones as a holiday gift the winter before they left for college. It had come with a small, printed card: *For a brave and independent future. –The Staff at MHIB.* Right now Penn didn't even want to check the news, though he automatically had started to. Instead he stood and crossed the tile to a water fountain. His phone buzzed and unwittingly he pulled it out again: Text from Sean Pandey.

Done yet?

Penn texted back: *Food.* He started walking in the direction of the deli they frequented far too often. As he did he scrolled through the news, knowing it was unlikely Sean would respond. He was probably already eating.

FIRST 'WEAK': LOW ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE

"ONLINE IS THE FUTURE": HARVARD PRESIDENT UNVEILS PLANS
FOR RETURNING PHYSICAL CAMPUS TO ORIGINAL DECIDUOUS FOREST

The headlines depressed him. From a young age Penn had gloried in school, dreamt of the day when he could leave the prep school campus and go to college—out of state, anywhere but New Jersey, on his own. He intended to live out some picturesque experience with ivy-covered buildings and people who respected him as an adult, and he'd pushed himself hard to get here, to Michigan: AP classes as a high school freshman, skipping a grade, testing early. He'd gotten some of his fulfillment in his first year; he'd made friends through Sean, mostly, had intelligent teachers, applied to the business school. But he wanted more.

Maybe with these languid first school days it was still possible, he thought now, trying to be optimistic, that sophomore year could still be better.

He reached the doorway and stepped out into the cold air, the sun bright enough to make him squint. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets, still holding on to his phone.

It felt like October already. And October 15th felt like a deadline, even though it wasn't. Back in his room, an off-campus house shared with nine guys he barely knew, was his letter. He'd received it in April, postmarked on his birthday. It was strange to receive mail like that in the first place—something so physical and contained, a neat package—and poignant in its entirety. It'd been a long time since he'd received anything other than email. Inside the envelope, he knew, were the initial papers to acquire information about his entire case history. He was 18 now, a legal adult, and that meant he could finally learn about the gaps in his story.

But he'd ignored the letter for months. When it arrived it came with so much gravitas that he truly couldn't process it right away—for years he'd awaited that envelope and now he realized he'd been naïve, a boy with ideas about what he was going to find out, where he would be when he did. He remembered his parents as loving, successful businesspeople, taken from the world far too soon, had imagined it arriving not as a letter but a big envelope, thick with handwritten letters preserved from long ago. He'd imagined he would inherit money, maybe, or packets of articles about who they were, what they'd achieved as professionals.

When he'd seen the thinness of it, it had shattered his haughty confidence in his fantasy, made him realize his inventions were untrue.

He hadn't been able to open it.

His phone buzzed.

May have finished my sandwich already... Still here though

Penn minimized the text and was tempted to search for his parents' names online to pass time, but he had hundreds of times already and he knew what was there: an online profile for a different David Beckett, not his father; several articles about the wrong David's work as an attorney; and for his mother, Irene, an obituary. It wasn't even her own.

One more block to the deli. The sidewalks were relatively empty, a few students with their heads down against the wind or for social avoidance, it was hard to say. Dry leaves rattled around in the road and traffic was heavier than usual, probably for the lunch break. He saw the deli awning up ahead, striped white and blue, and felt calmer again, happy.

This was relevant, he reminded himself—a place, a friend, a destination. Something to work toward, his campus and his best reality. A moment outside of memory, physically here.

(3)

Clara was in the kitchen, probably making tea. Instead of greeting her, Kate went up to her room and slid the envelope out from her mattress. The thick white packet as enlightening to her as the day she got it in the mail.

When she came back downstairs the television was off. Clara was still puttering in the kitchen, pouring hot water into a chipped green mug.

"Tea?" she asked without meeting Kate's eyes. Kate shook her head. The kitchen was small but not dingy, painted yellow, with wood cupboards along the walls and a

ceramic rooster on a shelf above the sink. Kate sat one of the two wooden barstools and tapped the envelope against the underside of the island countertop.

“So, I need to talk to you,” Kate said, suddenly nervous. In this moment she was aware of how young she must look to her aunt, how not ready she looked for her own life—thin brown hair falling out from her ponytail, running shorts still dusty, her grey sweatshirt musty with sweat. The sweatshirt was worn thin and had a tractor company brand on its front, one of her uncle’s old things. She wiped her cheek absently with a sleeve, hoping that streaks of dust hadn’t darkened in her sweat, made her look even more of a mess.

Clara sat down on the barstool opposite Kate and blew on her tea. She looked exhausted herself, dark brown hair—almost black—unkempt in her thinning, trademark topknot. A ratty yellow sweater hung, stretched out like a blanket, from her shoulders. Over the last year the dark circles under Clara’s eyes never seemed to fully go away, and Kate couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen Clara prepared for anyone or anything. No makeup, not even on Sundays, no clothes that fit. Occasionally Clara left her hair down when she went around the house in the morning. But even that felt more memory than reality. Usually there were at least some days when Clara was up and out, her hair combed into its topknot, a wool headband on, starting outdoor chores by dawn. This year there were more bad days than good—days that drew to a close without Clara stepping outside, the day lost to watching news, or reading things on her phone. Kate did house chores intermittently and always had—fed the goats, cleaned out the cat litter. She had done some of Clara’s chores at first, then stopped after a while when she realized it wasn’t really necessary. It was an unspoken realization that those chores didn’t need to

happen. The few goats they had, the chickens, could probably muster on for a while without much care. Kate had sometimes wondered if this was what had overtaken Clara: did anything *really* depend upon the two of them? It was easy to think the animals could figure things out on their own.

“Kate, I’m spent.” Clara said, and her voice was hollow, almost apathetic. “I can’t keep fighting like this. Just do what you want. If you want to leave, leave. If you want to stay, then let’s make some rules and live by them. I’ll talk about either of those topics. I can’t make myself talk about anything else.” She tugged at the string of her tea bag. “I *know* you’re angry.” She said it the way she talked to the goats, on good days. *I know you’re cold. I know you’re crabby this week.*

“I’m not angry,” Kate said, though she was. Her aunt knew her well enough to know her anger any time it arrived, to greet it like an acquaintance from town—not glad, necessarily, or dreading it. The greeting was just something you did.

Other people in Kate’s life—teachers, friends at school, people around town—had passed her anger by, because Kate was quiet about her anger when she wanted to be, could pretend she was just shy. Now it pulsed in her again like she hadn’t even gone on a run. And it killed her to know that all of this was clear to Clara.

“I think we either need to talk about college, or talk about you staying here. And I’m not going to pick which one of those you want it to be.”

Kate thought about it, put the envelope on the white laminate. She slid it across the small countertop to Clara, who looked at it for a minute before picking it up and sliding the paperwork out. Kate watched Clara read the acceptance letter. Her lips were parted, her eyes scanning left-right, left-right.

“I got into college last summer,” *And didn’t tell you*, she thought, though it went without saying.

“Congratulations,” Clara said simply. She kept her eyes on the paperwork but sounded sincere enough. Kate watched her slide some of the papers around, lingering on the financial aid write-up, the campus security review. There were three full pages about improvements to campus safety, probably more now given the letter being a year old. Kate remembered reading it briefly, without much interest. It said something about increased student screening, reduced television monitors to foster a stronger culture of safety, in-person relationships and community.

Clara straightened the acceptance letter back on top of the stack of papers and returned both hands to her mug. “This was last year?” she asked now, and looked to Kate. Her eyes were clear grey, shallow lake water.

Kate held them as long as she could. They reminded her of her brother again, unexpectedly. Not once had she ever looked at Clara and thought of him.

“Yes,” said Kate, “last spring.” She took the packet back. “I deferred a year, but I’d like to go now. Classes are starting this week.”

Clara raised her eyebrows but withheld the judging comment Kate new was imminent. Instead she spoke slowly. “If you’re leaving, then I need to talk to you about some transactional things about your adoption.”

A twist of nausea. The old insecurity. Kate focused on getting the paperwork back into its envelope, a fleck of stubborn gold nail polish glinting in the light.

“What’s different than what you told me at 18?” she asked. A few weeks after her eighteenth birthday, Clara had given her an envelope not unlike this one, though older

and manila, retro without intending to be. It contained pages and pages of paperwork—transcripts of Clara’s official adoption statement, written and verbal, background information—taxes, pay slips, a mortgage—belonging to Clara and her late husband, the uncle Kate had never even met apart from pictures Clara left hanging around the house. He was a big man, more than a foot taller than Clara, full beard, thick limbs.

That envelope—the eighteenth birthday envelope—had cracked a disappointment in Kate wider than anything had since her first few days in Churdan. Until she’d opened it she hadn’t realized how much she’d hung her hat on that birthday—finding out something that would mend up all the cracks inside her, splinters and fissures in her bark. Instead there’d been more in that envelope about Clara than there was about her. She’d read it all and afterward her life had felt exactly the same, albeit a little more knowledgeable about Clara’s finances. She had more money than Kate thought.

“I’m legally bound to reveal several things to you when you leave my roof, not at 18,” Clara went on. “It’s sensitive information so the policy’s different.” She removed her tea bag and let it puddle on the counter. “I’ll find all the paperwork before you go, but I can just tell you the gist of it. It’s probably better that way.” Her aunt’s apathy made her wonder why her own throat had gone dry.

Clara continued without any sign of attentiveness, “Your given name is Sarah Katherine Foucault. It was legally changed to Kate DeSalles when you were adopted. Technically you were going by your middle name even when your parents were around, so the change wasn’t meant to be so dramatic. It was a safety thing—since there was no conclusive evidence of an electrical fire the court thought it best to take precautions—and it would be logistically easier, you taking my last name. I told you what you needed to

know, and you didn't need to know much; a fourth grader going by the name she's always gone by seemed fine enough to me. And you were going through enough as it was."

"It was recommended by the case agent. For safety purposes," Clara repeated. *Clara and her unending fear.* "Your parents were executives at a company that was in the news a lot at the time. I guess I wondered about what happened with the fire—your father and I didn't talk much, definitely not about his work, but that fire never seemed accidental to me—"

"Please stop," Kate breathed, trying to stop up the memories fringing her thoughts. "Is that it? Telling me about the name change?"

"No. There's more that's—I don't know, more intense," Clara continued, and for a moment Kate thought Clara might cry. In that beat of observation was the creak of the house siding in fall wind, the knock of a little branch against the windowpane. She hadn't seen Clara cry once. She was a hard woman, clear-eyed, short and strong. As a kid Kate had grown to be scared of her. If Clara ever cried, she kept it quiet—saved her tears for Kate's uncle for the privacy of her own room. A tiny fear sprouted in Kate's heart—that Clara might indeed cry, that the next sentences might be bad.

"I think we both can admit that things haven't been good since you graduated high school. I have my own things going on. I'd like it if you could remember that for me."

The only things Clara ever had going on, as far as Kate could tell, were her garden in the summer, getting groceries in town when she felt like it, and the unstructured way

she managed to take care of the animals, and that didn't even happen very often nowadays. But that wasn't the direction she wanted this conversation to go.

"What is it that you need to tell me?" Kate asked again, but Clara was already talking over her.

"Your brother's not dead."

Not dead.

Kate heard a small groan and then noticed it was a sound she'd made. Clara waited a few seconds and her grey eyes were wet, yet still clear. A part of Kate doubted that Clara was even upset, wondered if she was detached, her eyes just sensitive from the radiator. And Kate was holding her breath, she realized, waiting for Clara to react before she did.

"I know," Clara said. She blew out a gust of air all in a rush. Kate felt like she was stuck in a state of inhaling, not getting any air in.

"Let me add that honestly that's all I know," Clara said. "They didn't tell me shit beyond that."

"Who didn't tell you?"

"Your case agents. At your adoption we processed the name change, and I was given legal expectations as your guardian. They told me Atticus was living, but not where he was, if he'd been adopted."

"You let them tell you that and didn't get anything else?" Kate was lightheaded. The herbal berry smell of tea was making her sick again.

"Of course I asked questions," Clara said, her voice filling out a little with life. "I asked if I could adopt him, if I could at least know where he was so the two of you could

at least be in each others' lives. I have legal requirements as your guardian." Clara emphasized 'legal' by opening up a hand, as if she were helpless, underscoring the inevitability of the thing. "I signed contracts for you. I spent money to do it that I barely had at the time."

"Oh for God's sake," Kate said.

"When you're an adult, you can't just do whatever you want," Clara said, loud now. Her voice filled the kitchen, making it instantaneously smaller. "I have asked so little of you," she said, and Kate saw she'd started crying, her discolored skin glistening with the glaze. "I have tried very hard not to ask a lot, and you think that I would not have evaluated these choices, didn't think through what I agreed to? You think it would have been better for you to go off in some foster care system and find all this information out the same way, but from someone who may not even care, wouldn't have known your parents, or your brother, who might not even love you."

"And you just wanted to follow rules," Kate said quietly, and her derision was evident, out from its burrow. Another tick of silence and she let it go. "You're honestly telling me that in eleven years—" tears slid out past her control now too. She barely felt aware of herself anymore, like she was lost and distant in some faraway place, behind a closet door so thick she could barely hear the words coming out. "In eleven years you chose to pretend to me that my brother was dead? Because someone told you to?"

Clara had adopted her, and while Kate knew that on some level she could be grateful for it, it felt cosmically irrelevant, a topic that connected for Clara in a way Kate couldn't understand. What had Kate done to necessitate her own adoption? Clara was stupid to expect Kate to be thankful for something she hadn't ever wanted herself.

Clara's pale lips were pressed tight, her nails tapping against each other above her cup. "I am not going to defend the decisions I've made because you don't understand them." For a moment Kate pictured herself standing up and slapping Clara across the face, letting the anger exit her in the smack of skin to skin. *Understand them*, Clara's decisions, when the eleven years of confusion between them could have evaporated had Clara been honest.

Kate's first weeks in Churdan with her aunt had been wonderful, considering—deceptively so. They'd prepped Kate's room together, picked out the red quilt; she'd introduced Kate to the Peterson boys, then other potential friends at school. Clara had held her when terror overcame her at night, crying out for her parents, her brother. She was nine—a fourth grader and an orphan. She'd needed a parent then.

For the better part of a year it had lasted. Then Clara's attention to Kate expired. Clara distanced herself—gardening without Kate, explaining adults needed some times without kids, alone; Clara quiet at breakfast and dinner, uninterested, not asking Kate any questions.

So Kate withdrew also. When she was younger she thought those stretches were caused by her. That she had done something wrong to make Clara pull away. She remembered sitting in the cafeteria at school without a lunch or lunch money, afraid to remind Clara, hunger gnawing at her, dog on bone. Then she remembered packing lunches herself—whatever strange foods were at home. Pickles, hardboiled eggs, oatmeal and water.

She remembered growing into a loneliness so tenuous that when she walked out into the yard at home—Clara immersed in the garden—she kept walking until it was just

her and the trees, and felt comforted to have them next to her, present and living. Trees could live alone and thrive. Their beauty perhaps more singular, remarkable for it.

She remembered looking down the hallway to Clara's room at night, tears incessant, terror a great yawning maw. Remembered the light creeping out from under Clara's door, Kate's breath tight, stuck in her chest, Clara's door kept shut.

They'd never talked about it.

Once in a while it felt like Clara remembered to be a parent figure—usually after something traumatic aired on the news—swooping back in, overcompensating with attention and interest, almost overbearing. She'd ask questions from the second Kate got home, worried about the safety of the school. Clara volunteered at functions to evaluate it herself, just in time to convey that everything at home was alright. She kept monitoring news with a manic intensity, the television always on.

As Kate got older, braver, she tried to initiate conversation herself; she let Clara in to her struggles as a pre-teen, was ignored away. Only in the last year of high school had she decided to reflect Clara's behavior with her own, like a dance, so that when Clara was invested she was too, and when Clara started to isolate, so did she.

But now she was just angry; angry at the woman sipping her tea, trying to drink down a calm, who had messed up Kate's self worth so much, who had never owned her own issues, her ups and downs, who *still* tried to have phases of investment in Kate's life, the overbearing security, and didn't understand why it was painful.

"My whole life I haven't had a family," Kate said easily. "I haven't had anyone, not even you. I never knew when I'd have you—what I could do to bring you to me. So no, I don't understand. And I'm leaving, and I'm past the point of caring about your

worry.” She knew it was mean to say, but there were other ways of being cruel without words, and Clara had shown her many of them.

Clara wiped her face with a ratty sleeve and stood to dump her mug of tea in the sink. “Alright, we’ll talk about paperwork tomorrow then,” she said. “Goodnight.”

“Night.” Kate left the kitchen and passed Clara’s cat, Bella, lurking in the banister, its ears twitching as she walked past. She noticed a burr stuck near its armpit and picked it off before the cat ran downstairs.

In her room she put the envelope back under the mattress. It wasn’t a secret anymore, but she wanted to treat it like it was one, precious and vital. Her delicate future in a packet of special papers: She would go to college because she knew, deep down, that fear wasn’t a thing to keep her from going, and because it was the default next step—the consequence of knowing that she wouldn’t stay here any longer.

[4]

School, for Penn, was his longest and most faithful love.

School was the thing that had arguably held his life together through a tragedy-authored childhood. At seven, he’d weathered the loss of his parents and his sister with a mind that was young, but painfully perceptive. His strongest memories were of the funeral service—the three closed coffins, one smaller than the two for his parents, of flowers drowning in scent, acid in his nostrils; the concern-scrunched faces of hundreds of people who shook his hand, committed to being sad, who floundered awkwardly for words for him, who patted his uncomfortable suit. One of his father’s friends from work had volunteered to stand next to him at the front of the church, to show him how to professionally shake people’s hands.

The fire itself was near impossible to recollect. He imagined that someday the memory might reappear to destroy him in vivid detail, but until then what he remembered was the confusion, and the stubborn smell of smoke for days afterward. It had emanated from everything: stark bathrooms, strangers' cars.

He also remembered the days following the funeral, staying at a middle-aged man's apartment, another one of his parents' former colleagues. It was clean, stark. The smell of smoke faded out and was replaced by the sharp tang of lemon. He remembered asking where his sister and his parents were, the man dodging his inquiries, his face now hard for Penn to remember, the man handing him a sandwich to eat. Long, bright, empty days. The man went back to work. One day, watching a cartoon family on television, Penn collected a brand new hope: maybe his grandparents could come and pick him up. But when he asked the man for that later, eating takeout at the countertop with plastic forks, he was told his grandparents wouldn't be coming.

Penn wasn't kept in California. He was sent east to live at an exceptionally funded boarding and preparatory school in New Jersey: The Mills House for Independent Boys. The middle-aged man had dropped him off at the airport and wished him the best of luck. Penn remembered thinking, after the car pulled away, that he hadn't said thank you properly, the way his mom had taught him; he'd never learned the man's name.

Whoever sent Penn to Mills House didn't make themselves known. He assumed it was his grandparents, though he'd only seen them briefly at the funeral; they were busy then, stuck in one long, over-peopled conversation. They'd been involved in his life a lot when he was young, visiting the house in California. He'd grown up with a sense that they loved him. Although that seemed increasingly inaccurate as he aged—if they

had really loved him, he doubted he'd have grown up at Mills, and without one visit or call. As far as his reality was concerned, they'd died, too.

By the time Penn was old enough—10—to understand adults moved the life events of children, he was too young for legal access to information about his puppeteers. He visited the House office to ask if he had legal guardians; he'd overheard a boy in the cafeteria bragging about his own—a rich aunt and uncle in the city. The student director told him, without emotion, that the details were confidential until he turned eighteen.

But his eighteenth birthday had come and gone, uncelebrated save for that envelope. His seventeenth birthday had been better; he'd christened his last year of legal childhood with a Whopper in a Burger King parking lot after soccer practice, with a teammate who had no idea they were celebrating. The goalie, Sean, was a tall, sinewy kid, first-generation Indian-American. He'd ordered a chicken sandwich instead of a burger, and, though Sean had no idea of this either, it was the first time Penn had done something social with someone outside of school. Penn had asked him to get the burger after practice and, surprisingly, Sean said yes.

"Pen-Pen! Bring more ketchup!" Sean called across the dining hall tables. Here, in the vaulted grandeur of a newer campus dining hall, was a strange echo of that early memory. They'd conferred at the deli only to realize Penn was out of cash, and Sean had spent the last of his on his first sandwich. Thus, the cafeteria.

Penn turned from where he stood to see Sean sitting, two french fries sprouted from his raised fist, inspiration for the command. Penn smirked unwillingly and turned his tray toward the condiments. Even now, years later, he still relished a public display of friendship. It made him feel like he belonged and the whole world knew it.

He observed a few girls who had turned to watch Sean yelling Penn's way and felt gratified. Penn would never say it to Sean, but he'd spent years in prep school yearning for this kind of comradery, and the magic of still having it felt impossibly good.

"How wenteth the literature class?" Sean queried as Penn joined him at the long, empty table, dunking his French fries into the bloodied paper cup on Penn's tray.

"Good," Penn said, reflecting. "Professor's a bit weird, though."

Sean shrugged. Penn knew Sean likely found all his professors weird.

"What about you... chem lecture?" Penn divvied out several more ketchup cups and Sean dunked his turkey sandwich aggressively, holding it up in salute before stuffing a third of it in his mouth.

"Interesting combo." Penn saluted his own burger before taking a bite.

"Went well enough, stuff's not my favorite," Sean said. The words were garbled by the turkey and bread in his mouth.

For all of Penn's infatuation with school, Sean shared none of it. They'd come here for two different reasons: Education and Soccer.

"I'm too distracted by the Iowa game," Sean continued.

Penn nodded. It was an expo game, something to tide the team over until spring, but Iowa was usually pinned to be the biggest match-up of the season. Sean was starting. Expo or not, underneath his practiced air of nonchalance Sean was rigged like a time bomb going into games. Penn had seen his energy unleashed throughout their shared prep school career. On the field, Sean was amazing, but until he got there his brain wouldn't be much use.

“Sean,” someone called from a table near the floor-to-ceiling windows. Sean raised his head in a weak greeting, then returned to his sandwich.

“Empty dining hall,” Penn said. He checked the time on his phone—it was noon, and there were maybe a hundred people in the whole room. “You notice they’ve taken down the televisions?” He gestured toward a patched spot on the drywall near the cafeteria entrance. “There used to be a huge screen right there.”

“Weird, you’re right,” Sean said. A rare moment of critical thinking. “Not allowed to watch it anyway, though, they really don’t want us to be around screens.” Penn watched Sean’s eyes zone-out, focused on some netherworld past Penn’s shoulder. “Yeah, not in the tutoring center, either,” Sean continued. “Or in the dorm. Now that I think about it they really set that whole thing up strategically. I can’t even think of where I’d watch television.”

Penn knew Sean spent most of his downtime in athlete facilities—the locker room, an athletes-only academic center with specialized tutors, the dorm where most of the players lived. Those buildings had heightened security, but also such better amenities—remodeled bathrooms, luxury mattresses, open snack bars, an in-residence masseuse—that any athlete who chose not to live there was, in Penn’s mind, an idiot.

“We’ve still got ours at the house—you can watch stuff there,” Penn offered. Sean had yet to come over this week, but Penn knew the first week of classes was practice-heavy. He was trying not to be overly sensitive.

They ate without speaking too much, Penn enjoying the freedom to think. Despite his chatty ways, Sean never pressured Penn to talk. Over the course of freshman year, when they’d started to spend a lot more time together, having both moved from Jersey

without knowing anyone, Sean had apparently found Penn's appreciation of silence worth honoring. In his insecure moments, Penn was surprised Sean kept him around sometimes—he had the whole soccer team now. In prep school Sean was a social king despite being a day student, but Penn hoped sometimes that maybe Sean grew sick of them—all the athletes. They had to spend so much time together. Penn liked to think he offered a change of scenery.

Penn drank from his water glass, watching Sean's black curls bash into each other as he mowed through the rest of his fries.

"How's your mom?" Penn asked.

Sean stopped mid-chew and looked at him, then resumed chewing. "Funny."

"I'm serious."

Sean's mom called Sean's dorm room almost every day, which Penn knew because the phone would often ring multiple times while Penn was over until Sean finally insisted they leave and go somewhere else. Secretly, Penn thought it seemed sort of wonderful. Those exoduses from Sean's room were the closest they came to talking at length about family, but Penn had always liked to imagine that Sean might have been him in another life, his mom calling, his sister, like Sean's was, a successful businesswoman living out of state. Penn's interactions with the Pandeys had been limited to the occasional prep school game attended by Sean's parents and sometimes sister, when she was in town; he and Sean hadn't really been close then. The day students tended to have a lot going on outside of campus. Plus, any time they *had* talked about Sean's family meant they'd likely wind up talking about Penn's background, too, which wasn't something he

liked discussing. Penn preferred his silent observations, sieving them in his mind until he could envision the best moments as things he might have experienced in his own family.

“Another one?” Sean had finished his sandwich and held out his tray expectantly, as if he were offering it to Penn.

“Yeah right,” Penn said.

“I thought you’d want to serve the future all-conference goalie,” Sean retorted, standing with his tray.

“Tempting. I can’t deprive Marisa of a celebrity encounter.”

Sean laughed at that, turning to look at Marisa, the dining hall manager who frequently commented on Sean’s insatiable appetite. He ate so much she knew him by name.

Penn downed the rest of his water and reached for his bag, cracking the next book on deck for his literature syllabus. It was one he’d already read, *Great Expectations*. Yet he didn’t mind the repeat. When his homework was reading, there wasn’t much to be unhappy about.

Before he started to read he noticed the hall had emptied further, though he had a strange feeling that as people exited, they made a point to walk near to his table. It was something he’d noticed more lately, almost felt sometimes—a social draw, like he was pulling people toward him. It wasn’t something he’d mention to Sean, but he had wondered if it was something Sean was familiar with. If Sean’s ‘celebrity’ soccer status, as Sean called it, ever gave him this power of attention.

Sean returned, saw Penn was reading, and announced his departure. After he left Penn tried to count the number of people walking by. Without Sean near, the number

quickly decreased. It must have been Sean, he decided. On his own, he had never had that power.

(5)

Sarah Katherine Foucault

Kate Foucault

Kate DeSalles

The sunrise was persistent through Kate's window. She thought of her names as she watched the sun inch its way across the tree line, awakening things, and thought about which name was best. If her mom and dad had named her Sarah, there was part of her that wanted to go by it. But they'd called her Kate throughout childhood, and learning it was her middle name didn't seem to make much difference, in the end.

The trees that demarcated Clara's yard were old pines, planted long before Clara lived here. Beyond them, the fields stretched underneath the sun.

The tree nearest her window was a soaring sycamore, and these were its glory days—every year, for a short window of time, its leaves turned bright yellow-gold. The magic of it lasted only a week or two.

The house was quiet, but not silent. Downstairs the grandfather clock ticked softly, approaching its next chime on the hour. Somewhere near the stairs she heard Bella leap onto carpet—a soft tumult barely audible through the wall.

A fall breeze blew against the house, strong enough that the siding buckled, and the beeping of Clara's alarm began in the adjacent room. She remembered their argument.

Kate tossed off her quilt and changed into jeans and a sweater. Her hair was still a little damp from her shower the night before, and she raked it back into a ponytail. She wanted to beat Clara to the barn—knew she likely had 20 minutes or so of Clara scrolling through news articles before she got out of bed—to avoid another confrontation.

Outside, the air was harsh. It burned in Kate's nostrils as she inhaled, and when she slid open the barn door the wet warmth of it was inviting despite its stink. She hosed fresh water into the goat troughs, then shook out fresh hay. Once, before her uncle died, this had been a full service farm, and it seemed sad to her, watching it age out of its glory like its owners. Now it the farm was side money and busywork.

Kate stopped by the coop for chicken eggs, then walked around the house to the sycamore outside her bedroom window. She gently pocketed the eggs and ran her hands against the sycamore trunk as she had many times before. She loved feeling how alive it was, almost buzzing underneath her hands. The bark was rough and the air had her skin tight and smarting, but it was a familiar spot from which she could view the house, the land behind it, Clara's garden and its very last crops—beans, celery, zucchini, fairytale eggplant. The paint on the house siding was chipping badly—one more winter and Clara would need to address it.

She noticed Bella staring at her from Clara's window and smiled.

She'd leave in a few days, she'd decided, but not without missing things here.

She thrilled a little, remembering the conclusion she'd come to the night before. Never had she gone beyond Des Moines, and this time she'd be traversing states. She needed a car.

The screen door opened and Clara called out to her, dressed in the same ratty sweater from yesterday. “Can you come in?” she said, “I want to talk this over before I leave.”

Kate dropped her hands and headed in, assuming Clara was going to run some errands—a pleasant surprise. A pot of water was boiling on the stove.

“Oatmeal’s on,” Clara said. “I wanted you to have this before I go into town. It’s the file on your brother.” She turned quickly and let Kate pick it up in private. “I’m going to the store—need anything?” she asked.

“I’m all set, I might go into town later too.”

“Running?”

“No, I’ll figure something out.”

Clara busied herself with something in the sink. “I was thinking if you had questions, you could write them down and we could talk about them when I get back. Anything I know.”

“Thanks.” Kate noticed the water boiling and pointed automatically as Clara turned.

“D’you mind just finishing this up? I started it and realized I don’t even want any.” She grabbed a granola bar from the pantry and went to the front door, sitting on the steps to tug on her boots. “If you leave the oatmeal out, do it with a lid on it so nothing sneaks in. Mice are going to get worse.” Last year that had happened. When the combines started up in harvest season all the field mice ran, often into homes. They could show up anywhere, in anything.

Clara opened the hall closet and shrugged on an enormous leather coat that had once belonged to Kate's uncle. "I'll be back no later than noon or so."

Kate shrugged. "Sounds good."

Clara held the screen door open so Bella could follow her out. Then she stopped short and strode over to the stove to hug Kate tightly, resting her nose briefly against Kate's hair. Before Kate understood the gesture Clara was walking back out the screen door, and Kate watched her walk toward the truck in the driveway, the cat trotting behind her, surprised by the warmth Clara had kindled.

Through the window she watched the truck recede. She'd forgotten how warm Clara could be when she invited Kate in like that, before life and the straining reality of their situation, their combined loss, had worn the relationship thin.

The woman had done more for her than she probably understood.

The low garbling of a television reporter picked up in the living room, and old annoyance replaced the fuzzy kindness she'd felt. Kate groaned and went to the television, turning it off without looking at anything onscreen. She'd never understood, either, why Clara was so big on fear.

Over oatmeal she read the thin file about her brother. Like the folder she'd received from Clara on her eighteenth birthday, there was next to nothing in it. There was a typed transcript from her own adoption proceedings and an addendum she'd never seen that included a brief, typed statement about Clara's relationship to her nephew, that he was alive, and that he'd be transferred to "an appropriate location." There were two more duplicate pages from Kate's own adoption file, listing her legal name, Kate DeSalles, and Clara's address.

His name was typed out, though, in capital letters, at the top of each page like a blaring reminder: ATTICUS FOUCAULT ATTICUS FOUCAULT ATTICUS FOUCAULT.

In the folder were several articles about the media company Concordis, a series by the same reporter about its being a ‘threatening, culture-shifting monopoly’. On one article was a Post-It note in Clara’s handwriting that just said, *David*. It was Kate’s father’s name—she assumed Clara had added those papers on her own.

Clara must not have understood how significant Concordis still was when she referred to it as the place Kate’s parents worked. Kate had read about Concordis in high school—one of her teachers thought the company was the antichrist. Now she was interested to see if she could find more information about her parents through it, at least, though the media aspect wasn’t exactly intriguing. She had plenty of media exposure just living with Clara and it wasn’t something she cared about. It had little to do with her real, everyday life.

She read the written statement about her brother a second time, but its vague language did nothing for her. She wondered if Clara had any better info about where he was.

“Bella!” she called, and stood to add her scraps to the cat’s bowl. It was a secret little agreement the two of them shared.

She waited until she heard the little bell on Bella’s collar, then picked up the wall phone to call the Petersons.

Around noon, Will pulled down the driveway. She grinned at the red paint of the truck and met him halfway down the drive, jumping in with an eager hello to avoid any awkward hug or handshake.

“You’re chipper,” he said, smiling a little. He reversed down the driveway, the same classical station on the radio as the night before. Kate had thought it was a random choice for background noise, but now she wondered if he liked it.

“Michigan, huh?” he asked, and his eyes were soft the way they were when he was happy, she was learning. In the daylight, for some reason, it was harder to notice the details about his face. She bet she could learn to read it like a map.

“Michigan,” she confirmed, and the word itself made her nervous. When she’d called to ask for his help getting a car he hadn’t agreed until she’d explained why, but she also hadn’t told him about the failed class.

In fifteen minutes they reached main street and Kate scanned for Clara’s truck in the grocery lot. She didn’t see it. Will waved to someone in a passing car before Kate saw who it was, and she felt proud to be in Will’s truck, as silly as that felt; when she’d first arrived in Churdan she’d been a foreign marvel to a place that rarely saw newcomers, or at least newcomers who stuck around for long. The Petersons were a well-established family that had lived here, generation to generation, for decades. Local celebrity.

“That’s big news, Kate,” he said. “Didn’t classes already start up?”

“Wednesday,” she said.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but I’ll head out pretty quick.”

He scoffed. They pulled into Churdan's used car lot, which was owned by the Petersons' uncle. After they parked, Will walked first through the propped-open door of the sales room, calling out a greeting. When his uncle didn't emerge they kept walking. "Probably stepped out for lunch," Will reasoned. He ran his hands along a few car hoods as he walked and Kate followed, wanting to mimic him.

"I thought Cooper Harrison's dad worked here," she said, trying to prove she wasn't completely antisocial.

"Used to, now he's in sales at some media company."

Churdan was small enough that anyone her age was, at least initially, considered a friend, Cooper Harrison included in that. They all went to school together, grew up playing together, but over time she hadn't really maintained any relationships like Will probably had. She just said hi to people as she saw them. She guessed Will was the kind of guy who stayed connected without really doing it on purpose. He was thoughtful that way.

They reached the back of the lot and stopped to survey the oldest options—the cheapest an ancient Buick with some rust spots on the hood. "What's your budget like? A thousand or something?" He still carried himself with a lightness that conveyed how nice he was, but he was bigger now, stronger from transitioning to full-time farming, maybe. When he leaned across the hood to pop the latch she saw he had some dirt in his crew cut and the smallest streak of oil along his neck, a line underneath his ear.

"Yeah, or less. I have enough money though," she said, hoping he didn't think this was a fool's errand. "Thanks for coming. I know you're busy." She tried to meet his eyes appreciatively.

“Of course,” he said without looking. She placed her feet along a tire rut in the dirt. “I just have to get back by 3:30 or so. I started harvesting early and Joe’s covering, but I need to wrap up a field by dark.”

He abandoned the Buick and they kept walking, Kate eyeing prices.

“You know I still remember when you got here?” Will said. “Fourth grade. Two weeks in and you show up in the middle of math.” He stared at her, amused at some memory. “You were so cranky.” He laughed but she couldn’t join him, thinking about what that time had been for her, the little sleep because of crying, the uncertainty, the fear.

“All moody and quiet, but man did we like you.” He stopped and looked under the front of a two-door sedan. “You know your aunt said you never wanted to move to Churdan at first. That she had to really convince you to leave your grandparents to come live with her.”

Kate startled a little, grateful Will was occupied and couldn’t see her. She forgot sometimes that everyone in Churdan thought she’d moved, as if she’d had agency in it. Will, like everyone else, knew next to nothing about what had really happened—about the fire. She’d put that together when a fifth grader ‘welcomed’ to her to Churdan by telling her she was sorry her grandparents didn’t want her anymore.

Clara had told Kate that other students may not know her parents had passed away, and if they did, then they didn’t know it was recent. She explained that she’d told the school Kate’s parents had died a long time ago, that Kate had moved to Churdan after living with her grandparents, who were getting too old to take care of someone so young. She’d told Kate it was better than saying how recently Kate’s parents had died, sharing

the trauma of the fire, because when you lost someone people treated you differently, were sad and avoided you even, and Kate wouldn't be better for it. Clara told her it was a safer bet if she just moved.

"This is your winner," Will said.

"My winter?"

He looked at her funny. "No—winner. This is the one." He knocked on the hood of the sedan.

"You didn't even look under the hood." As she said it he popped the hood, propping it open with the metal rod.

"I have a sense for these things."

She stepped closer to look at the engine with him. It was dirty, but not a disaster. She'd lived through enough car talk from guys in high school to know it was halfway decent.

Kate rounded the hood and popped open the door—unlocked—and sat inside the cab. It smelled like must and wintergreen. She expected to feel some sort of thrill of independence or a moment of serendipity, but instead she felt nervous again.

The passenger door opened and Will lowered himself into the seat.

"Thoughts?" he said.

She nodded, conveying her satisfaction with her lips pursed like a businessman caricature. As she did she noticed a maple leaf—still green, marbled with yellow—caught under the right windshield wiper. *Senescence*, she thought. A term she'd actually retained from the online botany class—the growth phase of a plant or plant part from maturity to its death. The pretty yellow a flare before decay.

Will leaned over and she caught the sharp scent of him.

“80,000 miles, that’s a deal,” he said.

She was struck by how clear and distinct his scent was—like earth and sour sweat. It seemed like a smell she ought to think was nasty, but it wasn’t. He smelled perfect. It made her wonder if she smelled like anything and hoped it wasn’t something gross.

She looked at the odometer. “Yeah, if it runs long enough to rack up any more.”

Will leaned back into the passenger seat and pulled a flip phone out of his pocket. Kate was genuinely surprised, watching him punch numbers into existence on the small screen.

“Calling my uncle,” he said, then saw her looking at it. “Flip phone,” he said. “Got it for work.”

For some reason she assumed Will was disconnected from technology, like she was. Now she realized it was foolish to assume that he was like her in every way, nor did she want him to be. Still, it made her feel less certain about her choices.

She heard his uncle answer and listened to his low voice on the phone. Their family seemed close, always had. Close enough to phone up with a need like this one when the man was likely trying to enjoy his lunch break. If the roles were reversed, she doubted Clara would make a point to cut her lunch short.

“He’ll be here in a minute,” Will said, shutting the phone. He surveyed the control panel. “Remember that time we were in Jennifer Gregoire’s car and she had all those CDs for children’s musicals?” he said now. “That’s the first time I ever listened to classical music.”

She laughed. “That’s not true at all—we had music class in fifth grade and band starting in sixth.”

He looked genuinely confused, then recovered. “Sure, but Jennifer Gregoire introduced me to *quality* classical. The canon.”

She laughed so hard she snorted on accident. “Jennifer Gregoire,” she said, thinking of the pretty girl who had been nice to her early on, then melted into other friend groups as they got older. “Speaking of being well liked—”

Will grinned but didn’t say anything. Kate felt a spike of jealousy, seeing his eyes warm that way again. She wanted to take the words back.

“My brother wanted me to date her, but my parents not so much.”

“Why?”

“Not sure.” He seemed to mean it. “They just weren’t thrilled about her. I think they may have some history with Jen’s dad or something.”

Kate hadn’t dated anyone in high school. Apart from being in class, she’d barely socialized. But she’d often wondered how things might have been different had she been in Churdan with her own parents. If her mom might have encouraged her to date, her dad gotten protective in front of a boyfriend. Will was lucky.

“Did Clara talk about me a lot before I got here?” she asked.

“Sure,” Will said, eyeing her. He looked out the windshield at the lot. “Well, I guess I wouldn’t remember. I’d have been young, but—my mom’s said your aunt used to be a lot more social, before your uncle died. She had a real hard time with that, a lot of people did.”

Kate knew her uncle had died of a heart attack in his early forties. That was pretty much it.

“Did you go the memorial?” Kate asked suddenly. It occurred to her that while her dad and Clara hadn’t been close, he still might have been at the funeral. Someone in Churdan might have met her parents.

“I was too young. Parents did, though.”

She wondered how much more information about her family might have been sitting with her all these years—right within reach—and wondered again why no one had bothered to share it with her.

A car pulled into the lot and Will got out of the car to greet his uncle.

*

Driving home, alone in the new used car, Kate found out the AC was broken, but the cool fall wind was better than anything. Driving down the flat straightaway of dirt road, she finally felt a new strand of confidence. She knew she could keep driving, that she could leave and be okay.

On the way home she flicked through several radio stations, curious about classical stations, pausing for a little to listen to a station airing news. She hoped she might snag some information about Concordis and vowed to be more intentional about researching it.

Instead she got a report about a college campus shooting and turned the radio off halfway through. On the brink of her own adventure, she was starting to feel more humbled. The truth was she probably didn’t know more than Clara did about safety. Everything she remembered about cities came from memories of when she was little, the

few times her parents had taken her to San Francisco. The memories were episodic—she remembered a teddy bear factory, a bright restaurant, and walking beneath a tall clock tower. She hadn't felt unsafe then. But for the first time it occurred to her that her sense of safety might have entirely been a result of their presence.

A little fear rose in her stomach.

She willed it away.

Clara ate dinner in front of the television and her phone, Kate upstairs as she packed to leave. After a while she heard her aunt moving around in the next room, pulling down her comforter, straightening the sheets, shuffling hangers in her closet. They'd both eaten early and the sun was just setting, the sycamore on fire again. Kate imagined the sunset in Clara's bedroom, dancing around and illuminating the details that were quintessential farmhouse and quintessential her: golden yellow wallpaper with tiny daisy chain patterns, light blue carpet, a comforter with alternating floral squares and pale greens and browns. She pictured the two worn wood dressers, painted and chipping, filled with wood-smelling sweaters and musty long-sleeves. When Kate was younger she used to sneak into Clara's room whenever she left the house to run errands. Kate had been shamelessly nosy, exploring Clara's belongings and wondering what kinds of secrets she could find in her room. Now she recollected its details mostly from memory—she hadn't set foot in it for years.

She wondered sometimes if Clara ever did that with Kate—sneaking around her room, exploring her things. It's why she had hid the envelope in the mattress.

Kate stepped out of her room and walked to Clara's door, which was ajar. Clara's earlier hug had given her confidence. She knocked tentatively and focused on the light blue carpet. It was strange to know it had always been in this house, as present as other things—the sycamore, the cat, the kitchen—yet was so much less familiar to her.

“I'm going to head to bed, but I wanted to let you know I'm planning to leave in the morning, maybe around eleven.”

Bella squeezed out through the door and they both watched her go.

“Alright, I'll be up well before then if you need help loading the car.”

Kate had showed her the sedan when she brought it home, and Clara had mustered up the energy to seem genuinely excited for her, even if it was out of necessity, the presence of a new car a practical harbinger of safety and adventure, the reality of things to come. Yet the emotion of their conflict last night, over her brother, felt unresolved. She had few questions to ask after reviewing the paperwork about him; there was barely anything there, and Clara had no more information about where Atticus might be. Kate's deepest Internet searches yielded nothing. She did ask Clara if she'd added the Concordis articles herself, which she had, and after that there wasn't anything to say.

After all their years of alternating solitude and fleeting closeness, Kate felt most comfortable acting independently—sharing little save for air, the house, sometimes meals. It felt impossible to imagine her aunt as something more than a substitute—a reminder of what she'd never have, and lost. Her staying here had never felt clear to her, why her aunt had adopted her in the first place. It seemed likely it was an attempt at fixing Clara's loneliness—of putting another body in the house; a doomed effort to fill her uncle's void. But voids were frozen in the shape of the people who'd once inhabited

them, Kate knew that better than most things. There was nothing, or no one, to fill the holes they'd left.

Kate went to bed and barely slept again, the tree a dark assurance against the night.

-6-

Bill:

I'd be negligent to skip a thank you for our dinner. I know it was a hike for you to meet.

Concordis is stronger than ever. You won't regret selling... we'll prove that in Q1 alone.

In the meantime, enjoy your cut of the pig. You should take Nancy on vacation, get her out of that dismal storm we've been reporting about.

In truth,

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II. College

[7]

Sean walked lazily ahead of Penn. Sean's hands gripped his backpack straps comfortably, relaxed, but when he turned his head to speak he looked serious.

"This semester's weird, man," he began. "I thought it was just the first few weeks, off to a rough start or whatever, but I think the weird is sticking around.

"Like this weather—the heck?"

Sean raised his hands to the grey October sky like a prophet, and Penn thought everything the early ice storm had left—the skinny, drooping tree branches, brittle brown sticks escaping their ice encasements drip by drip—was perfect.

Ahead of Sean was a vast expansive of lawn, the grass frosted, and a string of campus buildings. The bell tower rose high above them all, pristine over ice and stone and brick.

Penn smiled a little, then dropped his eyes to Sean's back.

"Maybe you just don't have your social mojo or something," he offered, though he wasn't even sure what he meant by it. He didn't analyze social dynamics the way Sean seemed to, incessantly. Yes, he'd noticed fewer students, but he'd gotten over it. The buildings were still here, the classes and teachers. Just staring at the school logo on Sean's backpack was enough to stir in Penn the consistent pride he felt whenever he remembered that it represented him in some way. He was part of something—that big

block ‘M’ was proof. In his opinion there was enough unity at a university like Michigan to defy whatever went on outside of school, and more importantly, he belonged to it. He envisioned himself physically inside the logo, protected by it, the square, blue-line border of the ‘M’ an impenetrable fence around his life.

Sean turned around again, glancing in Penn’s direction briefly before he dropped his eyes to kick at a leaf encased in ice—it didn’t budge, cemented to the sidewalk in crystal.

“I’m serious,” Sean said. “No one’s reaching out to anybody—I haven’t been invited to a single party yet, and I heard someone say all the extracurricular clubs and stuff are dropping like flies. Nobody wants to get together in groups. If sports go, I go, that’s all I’m saying. Soccer crowds better be good in spring. But how could they if it’s like this, or worse? There’s barely anyone coming to my classes. Everything’s got online alternatives. I can hardly get one person to small talk without freaking them out.

“Last week I was on the intercampus bus with a guy from my freshman year orientation, we’re still friends sort of, and I was using his phone, trying to take a subtle selfie for him to send to this girl, and I accidentally had the flash on—”

“Hope you’re not getting seedy, sending selfies around,” Penn interrupted. Sean smiled and Penn didn’t. “Serious. The rule’s are the rules—you get caught by your coach using smart phones all the time and at best he’s going to pull you for a game. Don’t cry to me when it happens.”

Sean glared, cranky at Penn or the situation he was in, Penn couldn’t tell. He knew, via Sean, that athletes weren’t supposed to be using smartphones or on social media—the coaches didn’t want the news, the fear and all, to affect their play.

“So I was on the phone,” Sean continued, “and the flash goes off. On accident. And this chick next to me starts getting really weird about it—starts asking me all kinds of questions about where am I going, how long have I been on the bus. My friend’s looking all uncomfortable and shuffling around and whatnot. After a while I realize she’s freaking out thinking I have some kind of detonator or something—like I was using the phone and was about to bomb the bus.”

“Shit.” There was a pit in Penn’s stomach, but he didn’t know how to convey it. The girl suspecting Sean, the girl suspecting anything that insane at all. “That’s messed up.”

Sean was silent, then shrugged suddenly. Penn couldn’t tell if he was shivering or trying to physically shake the feeling off. He was only wearing a thin soccer jacket.

“Sounds like a bitch,” Penn added.

“What?”

“The girl on the bus.”

Sean smirked a little and shrugged, his school-branded athlete backpack moving easily with his shoulders. “Yeah, probably. Got something against me. Hey, maybe I made out with her last year—” a smile broke over his face. “Yeah. Or, like, she made out with some other hot Indian. And now she thinks it was me. You know my dadiji used to skimp on my ice cream because I looked so much like dadaji. Not much I could do about it. That’s life for you.” Suddenly he stopped, reaching for the ground. Penn stopped just before he ran into him.

“Snickers,” Sean said, returning to eye-level with a fun-size candy bar.

“No,” Penn groaned.

“What? It’s unopened!” Sean shrugged again, backpack moving easily, too easily, with his shoulders. “Plus, it’s been sitting in, like, a giant freezer. Soon it’ll go bad.”

“You don’t know when it fell there—it was basically warm a week ago.”

Sean dropped the candy, then picked it up again. “As long as it’s not from bus girl.” When he was bent over his backpack had slid all the way up behind his head.

“Do you even have anything in your bag?” Penn asked.

Sean ignored him, crinkling the gold wrapper of the candy bar. “Just walk, Penny candy,” he said. “Don’t concern yourself with these trivial things. You have plenty to think about, career-minded man that you are.”

Penn knew Sean was kidding around, messing with his ego, but it was still nice to hear Sean call him career-minded. In truth, he was trying very hard to be.

“Hey, so the business school is starting a new media concentration and I think I’m going to do it. It’s a good fit. Lots of internship options and stuff,” he said.

“Sweet,” Sean replied, his mouth full.

“Gonna get rich,” Penn added, and Sean laughed, chocolate on his teeth. “Race you.”

Penn smiled. Only Sean would respect him for saying that, though Penn was only partly joking. School had become increasingly important and he wanted the outcome to be practical. Penn had allowed himself freshman year to get his bearings and discern his interests to an extent, but he’d come to college with an idea of what he wanted to do; he thought everyone had, actually, but had learned that wasn’t the case. Other kids—often the ones with safe home lives and a subconscious backup plan: that they could fall back

on their parents if they had to—had moved into sophomore year with him but still didn't so much as commit to a plan of study. He couldn't wrap his head around it.

"So if you don't have a plan of study and you're a sophomore, what exactly are you doing?" Penn aired, partially to Sean, partially to himself. "You're still in school, taking classes, but to what end? How do you know that any class you take is actually putting you on track for something instead of adding to a pile of crap that won't make any sense or give you direction?"

Sean had finished the tiny candy bar and was unzipping all the small pockets of his backpack, looking for any food he might have forgotten. A fat squirrel was watching them from a tree they passed and for a moment Sean seemed a strange enlargement of it, pawing around for snacks.

"I dunno," Sean said, distracted or apathetic, or both.

"Can't you just do both?" Penn went on. "Commit to your degree plan first, then you know exactly how many floating credits you have to work with for miscellaneous stuff. Then you can actually enjoy yourself in those random classes instead of questioning your life choices every time you're up late studying for an exam. It doesn't make sense to do it differently.

"And also," he continued, knowing he was getting increasingly self-righteous but trusted Sean not to judge him for it. "We're not kids anymore—we're not in high school. Stop resting your back against your parents' bank account and protection and step out to control your own life, you know?" He looked for something from Sean, but Sean just shrugged again.

“Uh, it sucks, man, but I don’t think most kids are gonna rush off into adulthood the way you think they are,” Sean said. He swung his backpack behind him. “Why would we?”

Penn’s stomach clenched, understanding Sean’s implication. Many of their classmates—with Sean included in that ‘we’—weren’t forced to cut ties with their parents the same way Penn had been forced to, by circumstance. They weren’t under the same strain of pressure to graduate and start working in order to gain the comfortable brand of independence. Penn *had* to have a plan. A degree was his ticket out. And he wanted to know he was getting it as quickly and efficiently as he could.

“What’s up?” someone said, and Penn saw Sean waving happily to a short kid with gelled black hair.

“Yes! Finally! Humans!” Sean cheered.

The guy joined them and Sean pulled him into a hug. “Penn—Xiao—Xiao—Penn—” he moved his hand back and forth like a robot.

“Nice to meet you,” they both said, voices overlapping.

“Walk with us!” Sean encouraged, though Penn wished they might have kept talking alone.

“I would but I’m meeting my girlfriend,” Xiao said graciously. “Hey, we’re having a party this Friday—word of mouth—nothing on social media or whatever so it’s safe.”

Penn wondered if he meant it was safe for Sean, the whole no-athletes-on-social-media thing, or if he just meant it in general, as if it weren’t safe to have parties anymore.

“Cool cool cool,” Sean said.

“You’re in too, if you want,” Xiao added, nodding at Penn. Penn thought Xiao seemed kind of flustered, his gestures a little manic, touching his hair then a pocket then arcing his shoulders like he was stretching.

“Thanks,” Penn said, and Xiao grinned widely.

“Awesome!” Xiao said, too loudly. Penn wondered if this was the athlete magic again, though it really felt like it was directed only at him this time.

Sean looked at Penn, then back to Xiao. “Cool, well, enjoy the lady friend,” Sean said. Xiao nodded once more, staring only at Penn, then walked away.

One Xiao was out of earshot, Sean said, “Well weren’t you charming. I should have let you say your own name.”

“Nervous guy,” Penn announced, hoping to dismiss the unease he felt, and the weird attention he’d received from Xiao that Sean had also, apparently, picked up on.

As Xiao had looked at him, Penn had the strangest experience—his senses had piqued, like he’d taken a deep breath of the cold air. In that moment he’d had a deep gut instinct that Xiao was trustworthy, kind, and a little insecure, and also that he was some kind of musician. He’d had the thoughts concurrently, like the information had instantly downloaded into his head, even though there was no rationale.

“How’d you meet him?” Penn asked, the unease still sitting like a layer of bile in his stomach. He didn’t usually get random insight about people, and with Sean it felt like they were *always* meeting new people—he would have had plenty of chances to notice.

“Xiao? Friend of a friend,” Sean said. “Cool guy. He plays a bunch of instruments in this little weirdo band with a couple guys in Physics. Guitar, mostly, and sometimes

this tiny piano you blow into to make notes—” He held his fingers in midair in a squirrel-like way again. Penn still felt weird, kind of nauseous.

“It’s an instrument, I swear,” Sean said.

“What?”

Sean dropped his hands. “The little keyboard thing. It’s got this little hose—”

“Yeah, a melodica.”

“What?”

“What you’re talking about—never mind.”

“I’ll show you at the party,” Sean assured him, and Penn still felt too hill to try and correct Sean about things he didn’t know.

They turned away from the campus buildings and Penn’s house was in the distance—an old, blue, two-story place with six rooms, squat in its small, icy yard alongside other houses like it. He’d decided to push himself this year by moving out of the dorms and “off-campus.” A guy from his freshman dorm hallway had organized it—eight guys in one place for cheap rent. So far it had been stressful, crowded but livable. It was a lot of people under one roof for Penn’s taste, even though they didn’t talk much. He’d moved in over summer and unsurprisingly Sean loved hanging out there.

They finished the walk in silence, Sean sighing with joy as they walked in the front door and into warmth. Sean shuffled straight onto the carpet and sprawled out on a dingy couch, extending a long arm to grab an open bucket of Red Vines that someone had left on the floor. The grey sunlight was even weaker inside, muted through the windows’ plastic blinds.

“I’ve got some news too, you know,” Sean said now.

Penn left his shoes at the door and wrestled a few of the blinds open—the pulley systems broken so his only choice was to wrap them up like scrolls. Then he joined Sean on another dingy couch, too tired to take off his coat. He'd been holding his phone in his coat pocket during their walk and he pulled it out now, setting it on an end table by Sean's feet.

The house was quiet, which was nice. He felt calmer knowing they were the only ones at home.

Penn watched Sean gnaw on a long, stale Red Vine and wondered if the life situations were reversed, if he was Sean and Sean was him, Penn with the supportive family and financial net, if he'd feel the same drive to graduate, the same pressure to succeed he felt now. He imagined some of that would still be there—he was a pretty big planner, 'Type A as frick' as Sean called it—but it also seemed heavenly to have that kind of permission to relax.

Useless thinking, regardless—he was himself, with his life circumstances, an orphan, and it felt good to do it this way. By applying to the business school it gave him one clear road map and all he had to do was follow instructions: the degree, the internship, the job. For once his future was starting to look predictable.

“Actually, real quick—what if soccer doesn't work out?” Penn asked.

Sean took the question better than Penn expected, he'd spoken more candidly than he intended. Sean paused mid-chew and removed the red candy like a cigar. “It will work out,” he said.

Penn was quiet for a bit and Sean continued. “My parents are Indian, man, they wanted me to be an engineer. Or something in business like you.” He pointed the fake

cigar. “Soccer is cool and all, but trying to do it for a career?” He put the vine in his mouth and talked around it. “I had to argue them forever before I signed on to play here, even my sister had to call them and back my case—honestly that was probably the only reason it worked.”

“What’d your sister do?”

“It was smart, actually—she explained to my parents that you can make a great living with sponsorship and stuff, even if you aren’t a pro player. And I agreed to get a Biology major so I could go into science if I failed. Thank Bhagwan, Michigan’s a good school. They seemed to back off after that. And then my sister busted out some numbers so they understood how much they’d have to pay without my scholarship nixing the the whole bill. Then my dad gave me this really beautiful speech about how he wanted to be a cricket player once. So that was nice. His way of apology I guess. And if you’re gonna be pro, you’re gonna be pro, amiright?” he tapped his chest with his fingers. Joking in a way, but confident, too. Penn knew Sean took soccer seriously—and not just more relatively serious than other things. He wanted to succeed. It was part of the reason Penn respected him.

“I can’t afford to botch my plans up either, is all I’m saying,” Sean said. “Asian parents have high expectations. Xiao gets that—we talked about it a lot when we met. I can’t just walk in here and take art class for four years. They’d disown me.” Penn watched him thinking quietly for a second, then Sean barked out a laugh. “No, actually—like, no joke—my mom would literally move here I bet. Like she would just pack up her bags—I’d get a phone call if I was lucky, maybe a warning from my sister—and then she’d be sitting in my dorm room kicking my roommate out of his bunk bed, walking me

to class until I declared something like Finance or Pre-Med.” He cracked up again, then looked nervous. “Man that woman is crazy, though. Like, best mom in the entire planet, but holy crap—don’t piss her off.”

Penn grinned and laid back on the other couch, envisioning Mrs. Pandey flipping a switch from her hospitable, kind-mother-bear mode to no-nonsense. It was easy to imagine.

He didn’t know how to ask for more details without feeling awkward, but he liked hearing stories about the Pandeyes—their inner workings, the things they did that showed how much they cared about each other. It had always been clear how much Sean’s parents loved him, how much they just enjoyed spending time together. In high school Penn had once asked Sean what he did on the weekends when they didn’t have soccer. Sean said he just hung out with his family.

Penn imagined it was hard for them now, to have Sean all the way here and nowhere close to Jersey anymore, even if they were happy for him.

“So my news,” Sean said.

“Right.”

“I’m in love.”

“You’re always in love,” Penn said, annoyed. He realized he was sick of talking, especially if the subjects were going to be dumb. The afternoon was wide open to him, and he wanted to use the time researching a summer internship at a media company he’d learned about through the B-school. Concordis: it was one of the fastest growing companies in the U.S., and a quick online search of their Careers page had shown him they wanted the best of the best—high profile universities, top students, deep extra

curricular involvement and leadership. Most of the internships were for juniors entering their senior year, but Penn was confident he could apply early and qualify if he really worked his ass off. It may even make him look more committed to try that route.

Penn's cell phone buzzed loudly from the end table and he glanced at it reactively. Sean was uncharacteristically quiet, chawing on a Red Vine and contemplating the ceiling. He'd clearly picked up on Penn's mood.

Usually Penn could handle Sean's social drive, but paired with all the texts he'd been getting in the first week, despite campus looking so much emptier, and his upped commitment to do the business school and other schoolwork, it felt harder to manage. Everyone seemed to want to socialize all of a sudden, as if they'd been waiting for Penn to commit to his newfound career path and were emerging just in time to destroy it.

The phone buzzed again, the sound amplified by cheap particle board.

"This is different," Sean offered, bravely. He helped himself to another handful of Red Vines, the plastic bucket cradled in his arm. Two were introduced to his mouth, the other one he whipped, suddenly, at Penn.

"The hell?" Penn blurted. "Can you entertain yourself for five minutes?" He glared at Sean, expecting him to be taken aback. Instead Sean grinned, red vines dangling ridiculously from his straight white teeth.

"You are the canned goods of humanity. Socially imperishable."

"Nerdy. Look who's talking," Sean said, and nudged Penn's cell phone off the side table. Then he readjusted his legs so that his Adidas-coiffed heels were perched comfortably on the couch arm.

Penn's phone buzzed again and he picked it up and set it on the coffee table near him and away from Sean's feet. "Why do you even pretend that you're coming over to study?"

"Why do you pretend that I'm coming over so you can get work done?"

Penn sank back onto the spring-less couch cushions.

"Back to my news," Sean continued. "This girl. Not like the kind of girls you see at parties or anything. You can tell she's older, kind of a hard ass, like she dropped out of school or something."

Penn was silent, considering the obvious question—if that was something he was supposed to be attracted to. "So you met her... where... in an alley?" he asked.

"Chem class."

"So you sat next to her in lecture."

"Well, not exactly. Pretty close to that."

Penn waited for him to continue. When he didn't, he sat up on the couch to convey some interest. "A study group?"

Sean avoided eye contact now, pulling at his hair. "I just see her around a lot."

"So you... haven't talked to her?" It was an evaluation more than a question.

Penn watched Sean consider this, as if it weren't a yes or no question.

"Yeah, but I'm going to."

Penn was genuinely curious now. Sean was always traipsing around with people—no one was a stranger. But this—this was different. "I don't believe this," he said. "You're into a girl, and you're not even talking to her? Where is Sean Pandey?"

“I’ll talk to her eventually, but I’m not gonna be weird about it or anything. Have to wait for the right moment.”

Penn’s smile widened. “As you say, Casanova. So that’s your game plan?”

“Right moment,” Sean repeated, his hand cutting their air with finality. “If you saw this girl, you would get it.”

Penn shrugged. Girls weren’t really his forte at this point. He’d partaken in a few drunken party make-outs his freshman year, but school was the priority. Too often girls were always wanting more. His phone buzzed loudly on the coffee table and he reached to get it, to turn it off.

Sean jumped up and grabbed it, sliding his finger through the code, Penn’s birthday, as he sat back down. Penn stayed where he was.

“Who the heck is texting you this much? You’re not even nice to people... Unlabeled number,” he announced, then read the digits aloud. You also have two missed calls from a Jonah-question mark... you actually put a question mark in your phone entry?”

Penn shrugged. It was a kid from class who kept wanting to hang out. He didn’t remember his last name.

“... an unread text message from Kevin Fitzgerald, another from ‘Bryan’, two from a Gina Camilletti, and another missed call from ‘chatty person’.”

Sean scrolled, squinting at the phone. The red vines rested in his lap, forgotten in a rare moment of famine.

Penn watched Sean’s eyes carefully, which after a full five seconds rose to meet his own. The weight they carried was a strange one—confused, distrustful even.

“What?” Penn said. Suddenly he felt embarrassed, though for what he didn’t know. Sean liked to be dramatic, like a film star—specifically, as Sean was quick to explain, as the Baadshah of Bollywood, Sharukh Khan. But that was for fun—the only times Penn had genuinely seen him angry was over an injustice on the soccer field, and that is what he was reminded of now.

“When’d you start the publicity campaign?” Sean asked. His tone was dry.

“You realize I spend all my time with you.” At times it felt unhealthy, the two of them running around campus together, a strange loud-silent duo. “If I’ve seen them, you’ve seen them.”

The truth was, Sean hadn’t met any of those people, and Penn was just as bewildered by the social requests. In the last few weeks, it felt like everyone who *was* attending classes in-person had started to ask him to do things—study dates, homework advice, small talk conversations after class. Guys and girls. There didn’t seem to be a science to it. The weirdest piece was that Penn had nothing to go on with any of them. He didn’t really talk much in class unless he had a question about content, and as of now he wasn’t involved in any clubs.

“You’re giving me a run for my money,” Sean said. He set the phone down and looked the same way Penn felt about it—disoriented—though probably for different reasons.

“I’m sure it’s just the time of year or something,” Penn reasoned. “Back to school, people reconnecting, all that. It makes sense that some of the people who are choosing to stick around campus are really eager about it. Futile, though. We both know socializing’s not my thing.”

The back door keened open. After some shuffling through the kitchen one of Penn's roommates strode in and tugged his headphones from his ears.

"Sean, hey," he said. He was a short, strong graduate student named Vik who Penn didn't know very well but had envied at times for his dark, clean-lined beard. He hated the secret of his own age and the work it took to maintain it—dodging questions about a graduation party or senior year he hadn't had, laughing at music references that he associated more with people several grades above him. A few of his roommates were graduate students—on campus a lot since lab work couldn't be done online. He stared at Vik's beard and thought that if he could only start growing even a patch of that, then less people might suspect he was 18.

"How's it going, man?" Sean said. "Red vine?"

"Not too bad, not too bad," Vik said. In a green sweater and black winter coat, he looked significantly older than Penn felt, sitting next to a friend who housing and handing out candy that wasn't even his. The Red Vines might even be Vik's.

"Hey, Penn," Vik said, and Penn's stomach clenched. "You wanna grab dinner later? Dining hall, right? You're on a meal plan?" Penn stared at his roommate, willing his eyes to not look to Sean, who he could see from his periphery had paused with the vine outstretched.

"I can eat that," he said. The words hadn't come out right. He didn't know if he really he wanted to go, but his class wasn't until eight and he was too flustered to think of some other excuse; he'd roomed with Vik for a little over two months at this point and this was probably their second intentional conversation.

"Cool. I'm headed to the gym, but want to head out of here at six or so?"

Penn nodded. He felt a small swell in his chest as he had earlier with Xiao, a chisel in his gut, prompting him to say yes, to trust Vik's character and recognize that he was someone he should befriend. He glanced to his left to see if Sean had felt something similar, weird as the feeling was, but Sean was quiet, the Red Vine still outstretched, limp in the air, watching the interaction unfold like a stage play.

"Alright, later." Vik headed for the stairs and left them sitting in the living room as if this was a casual routine they were all regularly a part of. The swell feeling faded out.

Sean didn't say anything, and Penn tried not to overthink it. They were roommates—it wasn't unreasonable to get to know each other. And the feeling was just weird, some passing cluster of nerves or something. Maybe he'd had too much coffee.

"Penny Beckett," Sean announced, flourishing the rejected licorice in the air. "Mr. Congeniality, Sophomore Year." He laughed authentically—his trademark, high-pitched cackle that begged everyone else to join in. Penn did, chucking his pen at Sean to amplify the hysterics. Whatever this year was bringing them, it helped to laugh it off.

Penn stood, grabbing his phone and returning it to his coat pocket. If he was going to get dinner later then he wanted some time to himself. "I'm gonna head out," he said. He felt claustrophobic knowing Vik was home now, especially now that they'd made plans. He wouldn't tell Sean, because Sean didn't appreciate nature beyond the air he breathed, but he wanted to go for a walk in the arboretum, enjoy the remnants of the storm. He could pull up the Concordis internship page on his phone and think through what to write for his application.

Sean stood responsively and put on his backpack, looking furtively at the last few Red Vines as if considering whether he should take them with.

“Where you headed?” Penn asked, hoping to distract him in case those were indeed Vik’s. He didn’t want to have to explain where they went.

Sean turned, abandoning the bucket. “Bagel shop.”

They parted ways at the door and Penn walked toward the back corner of campus without passing anyone, the arboretum, when he reached it, a haven he hadn’t visited since last year. The entrance was just beyond one of the hold dormitories on campus; apparently at some point the university had needed to house upwards of its usual 10,000 dorm-dwelling students and the building had been constructed in a hurry. It was hard to envision—six floors, who knew how many hallways, completely filled with people. Now it looked dark and dead.

As he started along a trail he reflected on his lecture earlier, the business of it fascinating to him—the strategies, acquisitions, hierarchies. Every piece of it was intentional, thought through for seemingly guaranteed success. And the more Penn was learning, the more he envisioned himself a part of it after graduation—an asset, successful, inviolate.

- 8 -

CONCORDIS

For Truth: In Writing & Onscreen

A Private Media Company

Dear Ms. Bonds,

Our CEO, Jack Gadway, invites you to join us for an evening at Spruce, San Francisco, November 3 at 6pm, to celebrate Concordis' recent acquisition agreement with The Northeast Times Group, LLC. Event details, valet and travel information, and a full invitation list are enclosed for your personal use. We appreciate your agreement to maintain the confidentiality of this information.

If you would like to request a guest or require further accommodations, your assistant can reach me directly at 204.301.2990 ext. 301 or afv@concordis.co.

In truth,

A.F.V.

Assistant to the CEO

(9)

Someone was following her.

After class she had stopped to get a coffee to confirm it, and sure enough he had walked right by the window, with maybe thirty seconds' lag time behind her. She made sure when he did that she was seated at a table facing the window, ready to make eye contact and acknowledge what he was doing.

She watched him walk by, curly dark hair, a jaunty gait. The combination of his walk and features reminded her of a pony.

He must have felt her attention. He looked through the window and, meeting her eyes, startled slightly, recovered, walked on. His backpack bounced strangely, as if he hadn't put anything in it. He didn't come into the café.

She thought he was in her intro chem course—a guy she'd seen sitting in the back row with his legs sprawled out across the seats in front of him, talking with his neighbors like he was running city council. He'd looked at her once, too, and she remembered his expression. For a second she'd thought he was going to greet her—like he thought they were already friends.

Now she focused on her workspace—cup of cooling coffee, tabletop dusted in bagel sandwich crumbs, chemistry textbook, clunky old laptop the university had loaned her as part of financial aid. The morning felt heavy and the coffee hadn't helped. October 15 always seemed to be this way—at least in Churdan she had Clara there, though they didn't usually talk about what happened. Sometimes Kate had wondered if Clara even knew that October 15 had been the day of the fire, the day Kate's parents died and—at least up until this year—her brother. Today Kate felt stranger about remembering the fire, because the reality that her brother was somewhere had reopened things for her in a way she didn't know how to handle. She was no longer the only person on earth privately celebrating a macabre anniversary on this day. Yet for all intents and purposes, it still felt like she was the only one.

She closed her eyes and tried to envision Atticus somewhere, maybe on a college campus just like she was, somewhere big or somewhere small, thinking about her, though he might not know *she* was alive. She hoped he knew that they were just separated, not necessarily lost forever. He might even be looking for her.

She opened her eyes and noticed another girl seated at a booth beneath the window, just below where she'd watched the chem class boy walk by. The girl's headphones were in. She typed away at a sleek laptop, seemingly oblivious to where she

was. She wore a maize sweater that coaxed a glow from her light brown skin. Steam puffed out of her ceramic mug like a humidifier, a tea tag hanging neatly on the saucer. Her eyes were narrowed, dark lashes emphasized further with heavy makeup, her hairline dark and marked on the left, nearly-imperceptible, with a thin streak of white-grey hair. Kate wondered what she was studying and envied how glamorous she looked doing it, urban and comfortable and on track. Kate felt lost. A month into school and she was swamped, humbled more than she had been struggling along in that summer botany class. She was retaking it, but everyone she encountered seemed smarter than her, definitely more confident in academics. Yet the kids in her classes physically looked like babies—something about the way they talked, the authority they conveyed, struck her as naïve. Most of the conversations she'd overheard before and after classes were centered around guys, girls, hooking up, drinking, parties, nasty teachers, nasty tests. No one seemed to have any genuine life experience. Still, they also didn't talk about studying, so she assumed they were having an easier time than she was.

The girl looked up from her laptop. Kate averted her eyes, embarrassed, reaching for her coffee to try and normalize the exchange. She pulled open her book and tried to focus on the molecules in front of her, diagrams that reminded her of honeycombs.

"You want help?" The grey-streak girl had removed her headphones and was clutching her mug with long fingers, leaning back comfortably against the vinyl of her booth seat.

"With chem?" Kate said hesitantly, gesturing at her textbook. The girl had clearly been writing something on her laptop, not studying molecules.

“Yeah with chem.” The girl stated cleanly, raising her mug to her lips as if that settled things. Her slender fingers carried a strange elegance that didn’t fit the rest of her—her assertive, even taunting posture, an aggressive, asymmetrical face.

“Uh, sure. I mean—do you know it?”

The girl unhurriedly finished her sip, returned the mug to its saucer and slid out from her booth seat, leaving her things where they were.

“I’m not great, but I passed intro chem last year with a B. Thought I’d go into medicine at the time.” She slid into the chair across from Kate and sat without touching the tabletop. Instead she ran her thin fingers up into her hair, threading it away from her face. It fell haphazardly to her shoulders, the grey streak thinning into portions of wavy dark locks. Several flyaway hairs refused to settle, forming a strange halo of rebellion at the top of her head.

“I’m Doris,” she said.

“Kate.”

“Nice to meet you.” Kate thought Doris looked peaceful, content. “Are you retaking this or what?” She nodded at the textbook.

“No, first time.”

Doris waited expectantly, evaluating what Kate knew was her noticeably older face—something in the lines, her cheeks thinner than the other students’. Doris’ eyes willed Kate to continue. She didn’t.

“So you’re a freshman?” Doris asked skeptically, glancing at Kate’s flannel long sleeve and worn shoulder bag. She probably looked more like a blue-collar coal miner than the polished, trend-worshipping girls she’d seen so far.

“Yeah, technically,” she said. She wanted to slide over the textbook and change the subject, but didn’t want to sacrifice the moment. She considered Doris’ grey streak, wondering if they might be in the same boat.

“I didn’t go to school right away... after high school,” Kate offered.

Doris nodded, but didn’t contribute the information Kate wished for. Instead she reached for the textbook and slid it towards her, a glossy, 180-degree turn.

“You’re from around here, then?” Doris asked, and Kate resented her for a moment, that this girl would refuse responses and ask for more.

“I’m from Ann Arbor, born and raised, so I just get curious about what people think of this place,” she added. Kate’s resentment ebbed. “My dad’s your professor.”

Kate raised her eyebrows involuntarily, lowering them before Doris looked up to see. “Your dad’s the intro chem professor?”

“Yup,” Doris said, her lips smacking out the ‘p’ as she fanned through the textbook pages. “Been around this campus my whole young life.”

Kate felt her heart rate speed up a bit. She had the sense that she could mess up this encounter, and if she didn’t it might change her college career. “It’s not a bad place to be. There’s a lot going on here,” Kate said thoughtfully, and she meant it. It was gorgeous here, it really was, an ice storm having paused nature right where it was—some of the leaves like glistening beacons in their fading reds. Fall here was similar enough to Churdan to comfort her.

“I imagine it’s a pretty nice spot if you’re new to it,” Doris said, “but when you grow up in one place your whole life, it’s easy to be ungrateful.”

Kate felt stunned at the resounding understanding she felt but didn't know how to convey the strength of it, to go beyond a cheap 'yes'. Instead she studied Doris' eyeliner as she scanned a textbook page in front of her, wondering how she drew it on so smoothly.

"Anyway, you get what compound molecules are, right? That's high school. Not sure where you went, but I imagine this is basic no matter where you're from. You just got into the second module, right? Let's start there then."

Kate nodded again, suppressing a strong smile. She liked Doris—someone who didn't waste time with small talk, who talked honest, even if she seemed like she might get offensive at times. She felt like a girl Kate could trust.

They studied for a while longer, and few people came into the shop. After a few hours Doris asked for Kate's cell number.

"I don't have a phone," she said, and Doris smiled.

"Get out."

"I'll give you my email," Kate said. She could feel Doris studying her as she wrote the address.

"Are you a purist?"

"A what?"

"A purist—is that why you don't have a cell phone?"

Kate didn't want to say she didn't know what Doris was talking about, but Doris seemed to understand that anyway.

"A purist—someone who avoids technology and the news and all that because of it's 'bad energy' or whatever?"

“Uh, no. I just don’t have a phone.”

Doris studied her a moment longer and Kate felt annoyed at how intently she stared, her dark eyes boring into her. Disrespectfully, Kate thought.

“Is that not allowed?”

“Sorry, sorry, I’m being an asshole,” Doris said, and she seemed to mean it. “I just never met anyone like that, personally, who just doesn’t want a phone. I’ve met a lot of people with hard core views about this stuff.”

Kate didn’t respond and handed her the slip of paper. She hoped Doris would use it; during their time studying she’d become painfully aware of how badly she wanted a friend, something fun to do. A part of her felt that would be indulgent or luxurious—she was here to study, after all, do better than she had over the summer. She hoped Doris might help her in both arenas.

“What are you majoring in?” Doris asked.

“Not sure yet, but probably something with agriculture or the environment.”

“That’s my minor,” Doris said. She didn’t look as surprised by this as Kate felt.

“You’ll definitely want my old class notes when you take Woody Plants.”

“Woody Plants? Weird name for a class.”

“Correct. And it’s a bastard.”

They talked a little longer and Kate ran through the classes she was taking—Introduction to Chemistry, Agricultural Industry, Botany. She didn’t mention she was retaking the one. So far it had been going a lot better having in-persons lectures to guide her, but she didn’t want to tempt fate.

“I’m a Journalism major, but my true love is environmental stuff—right now I’m really into food economy and its sociocultural implications.”

Kate nodded like she knew what Doris meant, but didn’t think she did. It reminded her vaguely of something her professor said in her very first Agricultural Industry lecture. She’d expected a pleasant hour learning about things that were familiar to her—industries she’d seen firsthand in Churdan. Instead he’d talked about the world like it was some insane dystopia, about how pretty soon no one would have any labor or survival skills, like farming, and as jobs increasingly specialized they’d only be replaced by robots, which would create widespread job loss for all the people who had worked so hard to specialize themselves. *What’s left then?* She had asked—bravely, she thought, and someone in the front row had said, *Farmers?* The professor had pointed at that girl. *Exactly*, he said. And the rest of the class was spent reviewing agricultural history in the United States and the hardest, easiest-to-manage crops and animals: corn, potatoes, goats. All of it made her too anxious to bring it up again with Doris. She seemed like the kind of person who would only run with that theory, not slow it down.

“I gotta run—I’ve got a newspaper staff meeting. We’re online-only this year, doesn’t that suck? I love print. That doesn’t interest you does it—the school newspaper?” Doris stood and walked over to gather her things. The light outside seemed greyer now.

“No thanks,” Kate said, hoping she sounded polite.

“Alright, but you should come sometime to check it out still. You can read it online and get alerts on your phone—well, never mind. Just look at the website. And I guess you wouldn’t know this, but there aren’t a lot of physical group gatherings around campus anymore. People are afraid of getting together with all the crime that’s happened

in the past few years with crowds and college campuses. They get anxious, I think. Not me though. Reporting trumps fear, right? And it's neat what group dynamics can unleash—have you ever been to a concert? There's pretty fine social constructions holding that thing together when you think about it—ropes, lines, seat numbers, law enforcement. Created order. Other countries aren't like that, but they still have cultural structures about what to do, what's taboo or appropriate and all that. Like in China you can slam into people on the metro because that's necessary—there's a lot of people. Try to pull that in D.C. and it won't go over so well. Anyway, you'll get a taste of it at some point—on campus it's not as potent as it once was with the lack of social groups we have going, but there's still magic to a large group, to something en masse. You'll see.”

She seemed to sense that Kate was overwhelmed. “I'll email you, 'kay? The chem's stuff not so bad once you catch on.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“Ooh, one more place you should check out, or we could go sometime—have you been to the arboretum yet?”

Kate shook her head and Doris grinned, shrugging on a fitted leather jacket with wool around the collar. Kate thought she looked like a Latina Amelia Earhart.

“It's probably the best part of campus. You can walk there—it's right behind one of the old freshman dorms they no longer use. It's an enormous building, you can't miss it.”

“Sounds nice. I may go later.”

“Sweet.” Doris picked up her tote bag and walked toward the door, waving kindly.

“See you,” Kate said. About ten minutes after Doris left, Kate realized she hadn’t thought about loss the entire time she was with her.

-10-

To: news@concordis.com

From: kenneth9332@hotmail.com

Date: 15 October

Subject: Arboretum crime

Hello I am an Ann Arbor resident for 43 years. A young man came to my door and had been mugged by other boys in the arboretum on campus. He was on a walk. This place is dangerous and students should not be walking around even in daylight anymore. Things have clearly changed and I thank you for protecting us with your good news station.

In truth,

Kenneth Merry

[11]

When he came to an old man was hovering over him, his eyes focused not on Penn but something beyond Penn’s line of vision, and beyond the man’s face—it’s features going in and out of precision—was the sky. Grey clouds, weak and thin but stretched like an inescapable blanket, heavy with insinuation that fall was darkening into winter, that perhaps winter was already here.

The old man’s mouth was moving, a baseball bat over his head, and adrenaline shot through Penn like liquid. He tried to bring his arm up in a punch to the groin and instead watched it rise slowly, heavily, in front of him, as if it were operating in slow motion.

The old man glanced down at Penn's arm and didn't move. His features crystallized. He was not so old after all, maybe late-middle-age. He looked up again, away from Penn, then let the bat fall harmless to his side. He extended an arm to the ground—Penn realized now he was laying on it, flat on his back—next to Penn's head and took a knee with slow, cautious effort.

"Y'alright?" the man said. "Y'see my fingers?" He held up two fingers in front of Penn's face, a peace sign.

Penn didn't talk yet, trying to remember first what happened and how he got here.

"Y'got beat up, y'alright?" He lifted the right hand from the ground and leaned his weight against the baseball bat, then pointed at Penn's forehead. "Bleeding a little," he said. Penn watched him put a hand in his pocket as dizziness came over him, the man's face blending into the clouds. Penn tried to refocus and the man was reaching toward his face with dirty tissue.

"Stop, don't," Penn said, and the man stopped, his hand hovering in midair. Penn tried to sit up and as he did so felt overwhelmed by nausea. He leaned to the side, ready to puke.

"My house is right over here, you want to go over?" the man said, and his voice was loud in Penn's ears, ringing. "We can call this in to the news, they'll know what to do. Get a TV crew out here and make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else.

"You know this is what you get for walking around campus alone though, kid, all rural over here. Not a smart move, I'll be honest. You college kids think you're invincible even in the era of crime."

Penn sat up straighter and the nausea faded slowly. He looked around and noticed the shoeprints all around him, the dirt on his coat sleeves, streaks of wet, deep brown.

“I got mugged,” Penn said.

“You did,” said the man, and stood up again, slowly, then extended his right hand to Penn. Penn took it and the man made an effort to pull him up slowly, though Penn realized partway through it was really on him to carry the majority of his weight. If he leaned back far enough he could probably pull the man down with him.

The man’s baseball cap said DETROIT in big block letters, and he was wearing a sweatshirt and grey chinos. From the waist up he looked like somebody’s grandpa, ready to watch football on the couch; waist down he was dressed like a businessman—chinos, dress socks, loafers.

“You want to come to my house—right over there—” he used the baseball bat to point at a ranch house that backed up to the arboretum. There was a faded path through the yard that ended in one of the dirt paths that wove throughout the park. “We should tell the news what happened. You should do an interview.”

An interview was the last thing Penn wanted. Water might be nice, but the idea of tromping back to this guy’s house and likely deferring more interview requests made him tired.

“Thank you for—uh—intervening,” Penn said, eyeing the bat, “but—”

“Civil responsibility,” the man said. “Not gonna leave you out here to die. Nothing is safe anymore. You ought to do that interview.”

“I need to get back to my house,” Penn said. “My roommates are going to be worried.” He put a hand in his pocket and was shocked to find his phone still there.

“Seriously, thank you. I’d give you a reward or something, but—” he reached a hand to his back pocket to confirm that his wallet was indeed gone. Served him right, in a way—he was probably one of the last people his age who still used credit cards instead of paying through his phone. He’d never gotten over the idea of how vulnerable it seemed his finances would be if there wasn’t something tangible to represent them.

“No, no, no reward for being one human being to another,” the man said.

“Right, well, thank you.” Penn thought about introducing himself but decided against it, the momentum of the conversation bringing it to a natural close. The man turned away before Penn did. “Don’t be walking around here,” he said now, “Even I only go on walks here with this bat, and I was military. Nowhere is safe these days, spend your time inside.”

Penn nodded but realized that what he would have thought before—that the man was fear mongering, overly dramatic—no longer felt realistic. When he’d first seen the group of guys up the path he hadn’t thought anything of it. He thought maybe they were freshmen, or disenfranchised frat kids—he’d heard that a lot of Greek Life organizations had been disbanding. As he started to pass them on the left one of the kids had swung out in a punch, and he’d had the literal experience of seeing black and star-like fragments of light before having a disoriented sense that he’d fallen without landing. Someone had kicked him, he’d thought, and a burgeoning welt along his quad confirmed the idea, aching every time he took a step. Otherwise he seemed relatively unscathed except for the pulsing pain throughout his head. The nausea hadn’t returned, but he wondered if he had a concussion. Sean would know.

He opened his phone and dialed Sean's number. It went to voicemail. Soccer practice. Penn walked the rest of the way home and by the time he got there he was angry—at the man for suggesting such stupid interviews instead of taking him to the hospital or something, at himself for not going to his house, and even more at himself for how badly he wanted to tell the news now. There was *real danger* on this campus—his campus—and it felt like someone had robbed him of more than his wallet. School safety was fragmented in a way he couldn't deny anymore.

The back door opened before he got to it and Vik was in the doorway. "What the hell?"

Penn walked up without answer and saw Vik's eyes widen as he approached, the porch light automatically on in the darkness and illuminating what Penn guessed wasn't very pretty too look at.

"Shit, man," Vik said. Then, after Penn had crossed the threshold into the kitchen, "are you going to call it in?"

Penn thought about it, then entered one of the bathrooms and saw himself in the mirror—he had a bloody gash in his forehead, though it wasn't currently bleeding. The left side of his face was streaked with mud, and his relatively short brown hair had rubbed against the ground enough that there was dirt in it, styling it so it was pushed up above his head. His grey eyes looked dull, almost weirdly so.

"I'm going to go to Health Services," Penn said. "Make sure I don't have a concussion."

Vik stared at him for a second in the doorway. "Where were you?"

"Arboretum."

Vik raised his eyebrows, almost imperceptibly.

“What?”

Vik stepped back so Penn could leave the bathroom. “Nothing. Didn’t know you spent time there. You should really call the tip hotline though—keep people safe.”

“Who told you about the hotline?” He’d heard of it this year—a number for students to use about pertinent news events.

Vik shrugged. “Friend told me about it.”

Penn remembered now what he had been thinking about, right before he’d gotten punched. He was thinking about how small campus seemed, how empty the arboretum felt, in a way that didn’t seem explainable just by the weather. He’d thought it because when he’d first seen the group of guys, he’d been surprised by them—how just a year ago he wouldn’t have been surprised. He might have even said hello. And he’d been wondering what the arboretum and campus might have looked like in the past, the ‘60s or some other era, and if there wasn’t a friendly, open culture on a college campus, then where? He’d chosen to go to school in the Midwest partly because he’d heard about it being so communal. Yet he wondered whether that was true anymore, or if it ever had been. Maybe it had always been myth.

Later, after a quick no-concussion verdict at Health Services and yet another two people suggesting he tip off the news, Penn sat at his desk trying to ignore the pain in his forehead but too stubborn to go get something frozen to put on it. Clicking around the university website he’d opted not to report the incident to local news after all—maybe because of the hotline’s annoying, glorified presence right in the center of the University of Michigan homepage:

REPORT A SAFETY OR NEWS INCIDENT FOR CAMPUS PROTECTION:

Text or call 1-888-433-HELP or news@umich.edu

The archaic, red letters were garish next to sleek university branding. A stock photo of a girl clutching textbooks was grinning next to it, the combination like some tacky invitation to protect her, the innocent student, when the guys who'd mugged him were probably students here too.

Penn wondered who had instituted the news address at Michigan—he didn't remember seeing one last year—and starting clicking around, trying to track who managed it. He envisioned some overzealous girl in Communications Studies, trying to establish her reputation as a protector of the people while creating a nice resume line for herself.

A webpage with sparse, vague language about University Safety Services included one tiny hyperlink near the bottom of a paragraph about crime statistics: *This service is supported by the Educational Safety Division of Concordis*. He was surprised to see the company name. He clicked and was redirected to another page, this one with a branch off the Concordis.com domain. He read and clicked until his head was hurting worse than it had been and reluctantly shut his computer.

He blinked a few times, his room dark. Somewhere during his Internet surfing he'd made a subconscious decision to skip class, and he waited for his eyes to adjust before he stood up to turn on the ceiling light.

Concordis was a smart company, so at some level he felt he should trust it. He thought about what purpose a news report might serve about his mugging and realized that maybe everyone was right; it *had* happened to him after all. It could happen to

someone else, and perhaps without a middle-aged man to play rescuer. At the very least he now had a great anecdote to use in an internship interview, if he got one.

He reopened his computer and drafted an email to the tip line, with a brief message about what had happened. As he pressed send he decided that at the very least this could serve as good research—what things looked like from the consumer side. And it might give him a better sense of what made the news and what didn't.

Within a few minutes he got a reply note:

Dear Mr. Beckett, Thank you for your memo about the incident. Please respond with the following form. Your response functions as a legal agreement that we may publish your statement, in whole or in part, on the Concordis website, affiliate websites, or read it aloud as part of broadcast media:

Name:

Occupation:

Ethnicity:

Gender:

Personal statement about your emotional experience (for media use), max 500 words:

Please attach any photos and videos related to the incident, and include any relevant links to associated content below:

Penn stared at the screen for a while. There was a sharp instinct within him, similar to what he'd felt with Xiao and Vik earlier, to not reply, even as he reasoned that it wouldn't hurt to continue down this path. As he raised his fingers to the keyboard he felt a stronger aversion to typing anything out.

“Nice room,” said Vik, and Penn turned slowly, his neck stiff, to see Vik standing in the doorway, showered and in a jeans and sweater. “Sorry to interrupt, but did you still want dinner? Guessing you feel kind of like shit.”

Penn watched Vik survey the bedroom, which was in no way what Penn would call ‘nice’. It was decorated, if the word could even be used, sparsely. A twin bed, grey sheets, a desk, a lamp, a dresser. He liked his room empty, to give him space to think.

“Yeah, yeah,” Penn blurted out. He wasn’t hungry. He was glad that his body was blocking his computer screen from Vik; he felt embarrassed about what he’d been doing. Like he was tattling, turning on the campus he loved by reporting that it might be broken.

Vik didn’t move from the doorway and Penn realized he meant he was ready to leave. Penn shut his laptop, standing to join him.

(12)

Kate was sitting with her legs crossed, a tightness in her hamstrings as she studied the seat fabric on the couch cushions: bright yellow, marred with coffee stains and grey dust. She hadn’t gone for a run since her earliest weeks in Ann Arbor and she knew a run would help loosen her up. But it was hard to justify—she felt like if she wasn’t hanging out with Doris for social sanity, she should always be studying.

“You need to tone down the self-righteous monologues,” said Doris’ editor, a senior-year girl in a black t-shirt and black jeans. Kate watched Doris’ face steel itself to the feedback—her eyes focused on the computer screen both girls sat in front of. “It’s good writing, but try to shorten this—we could do something serial about extracurricular groups on campus, actually. That might work better. Our analytics last month are proof—

fewer and fewer eyeballs on long articles. We need bite-size—lists, bullet points. Spoon-feed it.”

“What about a photo series?” Doris asked. “Marcus could come get pictures of each group and then I could break my article into corresponding paragraphs.”

They kept talking and Kate tuned them out. It was her first time in the *Daily* office, and Doris had transformed upon entering. Around her editor she was quiet and respectful when she spoke, almost insecure when she suggested an idea. It made Kate realize that anyone, even Doris, had people they wanted to impress.

The *Michigan Daily* news office was an old classroom and well-lived-in, a big corner space on the second floor of the general studies building. The trash was full of chip bags and snack food cartons, whether from recent activity or neglect Kate couldn’t tell. Desktop computer stations lined the room, flanked with random mugs of pencils and pens, taped pictures of celebrities and memes, inside jokes that Kate didn’t really understand. A Post-It on the computer closest to her read: *STOP IT W/ THE SEMICOLONS. Thank u. Luv, Kurt Vonnegut*. Another computer station had been wrapped meticulously in aluminum foil, topped with an orange piece of construction paper with the words, “Happy Birthday!”

Overall the space looked loved—the way some of Kate’s lecture halls seemed to be—worn out and lived in, a place where people liked being.

Kate got up and logged on to one of the computers to check the *Daily* website and other news while she waited. Doris had shown her the website with pride and an excessive overview of its infrastructure—why they’d chosen to have an entertainment section *and* a humor section, how she’d moved up from humor writing (she wasn’t very

good at it) to an investigative reporter role, then up from that to senior investigative reporter. Her managing editor, the girl she was speaking too now, gave her deadlines but let her do what she wanted, which she liked, and in her words had made the newspaper that much better.

Kate clicked on the Business tab and Concordis was front and center. Her Agriculture Industry professor mentioned Concordis every so often in class. “Unlike what Concordis puts out about farm safety,” is what he’d said last lecture, another time in discussing the depiction of farmers in the media. No one had questioned this and she hadn’t gotten around to researching Concordis further. Now she read.

There were several brief paragraphs about Concordis’ recent acquisition of The Northeast Times Group, LLC, which, from what Kate could tell, was a large media entity for most of the states bordering New York. After a few brief searches, she learned Concordis itself was indeed still an enormous media company that seemed to be affiliated with most of the TV stations, websites, and other media she’d heard of. A tab called “Coverage” allowed her to search for local stations in her area. She typed in “Churdan,” and every one of her aunt’s favorite local outlets were there.

“Right, Thursday works then. Just get it to me before, like, 3pm. Nice to meet you, Kate!”

She turned in a rush to see Doris’ editor exiting the room, her back against the door.

“You too,” Kate said, though she hadn’t learned the girl’s name. Doris had only introduced Kate to her in passing before the two of them had sat down at a computer to work.

“We’ll be there Friday,” Doris called after the girl. The door shut.

“Party invite,” Doris crooned, shaking her hips. “Both of us.”

“What?”

“Her party,” Doris said. She pulled up a chair next to Kate. “She invited us to come. I bet it’ll be good. It’s her boyfriend’s birthday or something, word of mouth only so it’s guaranteed to be a safe gathering of people—they didn’t even post it on social media.” She looked to the computer screen without scanning Kate’s face for a reaction.

“Woof. What’re you reading?”

The screen was still filled with lists of Concordis-affiliated media outlets.

“Have you heard of Concordis?” Kate asked.

Doris laughed. “You mean satan? Yes. Know him well.”

Kate waited for Doris to continue.

“That’s kind of a dirty word here,” Doris said. “It’s an enormous media conglomerate. Sorry, I forget you probably don’t really care about this stuff, but it’s a lesson in being more media aware. Not that that’s easy to do,” she clarified. “Companies like that work hard to hide how it all works, how many things they’re behind. Gets a little uncomfortable when you start learning about that, right? Easier to feel like we all have different media stations and newspapers and nobody is putting money in their pockets—everyone keeping an eye on each other, healthy competition, that sort of thing.”

Kate felt increasingly overwhelmed by Doris’ explanation, as she often did, but wasn’t interested enough to ask questions. All she was thinking about was whether or not this Concordis was the one her parents had worked for, and some unpleasant memories of Clara watching news reports in the living room, the television droning on and on with

roller coaster changes in the reporters' tones of voice—concern, surprise, stress. It made just the act of listening exhausting.

“You’re not interested in that,” Doris said, and she seemed sincere, not condescending. She was studying Kate’s face.

“It’s interesting to me, but not so big picture, I guess. My aunt watches a lot of news—too much, sometimes, I think.” She didn’t know if her perspective on Clara’s consumption—the overuse of it, in Kate’s opinion, and the way it so often seemed to encourage fear and isolation in Clara’s behavior rather than open-minded adventure—would offend Doris. She preferred to keep befriending this girl rather than lose her already.

“Well, remind me at the party on Friday if you want. There’ll be *Daily* people there who can talk your ear off about how it works. Some of them on the psychology of it, even. I think it’s interesting. Did you sign up for inbox delivery?”

“Is that the email thing?” Kate asked.

Doris clicked to the page where Michigan students could input their email address for online delivery of the newspaper. THANK YOU had taken the place of the input box.

“Nice!” Doris said. “I feel so invested in.”

For a moment Kate smiled. It was nice to make Doris feel that way—it was how she’d made Kate feel by talking to her at that bagel shop in the first place. Like a gracious, merciful present that had found her right when she really needed it. Without Doris, she’d still be getting increasingly lonely, spending most of her time studying in her dorm room and unsure if she was learning anything at all. She’d aced her first chem quiz and was certain it was only for Doris’ tutoring. Plus, she’d just started to experience her

dorm room as less of a prison cell. For the first few months of school the silence in the mornings had felt heavy—deafening in a way. Unlike the small sounds, quiet, gentle things, that characterized mornings in Churdan, this silence had lain across her room and stirred in her a kind of desperation for movement until she got out of bed in order to create it herself. At times she'd even been tempted to dress loudly, rustling her clothes around so the plastic hangers scraped against the clothing rail in her closet, or dropping something on the crappy tile just to break the silence.

Doris smiled at her, and zoomed back to the center table on her computer chair. As she did it, Kate felt a stunning clarity of thought—like she'd inhaled a breath of the purest air and a fog had cleared from her brain. *Go to the party*, was her thought. *Introduce yourself to people there, more friends.*

She blinked hard, pressing her fingers against her forehead as if she might send the thoughts elsewhere, and Doris was shrugging on her jacket now, her back toward Kate. A list of options seemed to present itself to her next, the way things would play out if she went to the party on Friday:

1. She would meet two important boys, she knew that now, as clearly as she knew Doris' name.
2. They would befriend each other, because it was important to.
3. She and Doris would be late to the party, but it needed to be that way.

Kate tried to will herself to stop thinking. The way those thoughts poured forth in her mind overwhelmed her. Like they weren't her own.

"Are you okay?" Doris said, and she was staring at Kate while she extracted her long hair from her jacket collar.

Kate brushed imaginary hair away from her own face and mumbled, “Yeah, fine. I’m fine.” She stood and picked up her own bag strap, inhaling slowly. Her hands were shaking and she wanted nothing more than to distract herself. The way her thoughts had spun out—so random yet clear—did not feel normal.

“Let’s get lunch?” she asked.

“At five?”

Kate shook her head. She’d forgotten how late it was. “Right, sorry. Dinner.”

Doris offered to cook and they walked to her nearby co-op, which she roomed in with a band of other people who seemed to change all the time. Kate forced herself to focus on Doris’ overview of the best new tofu brand she’d discovered and tried to cast off the feelings of unease that clung to her like burrs. The clarity she felt in the *Daily* office was unlike anything she’d ever had, perhaps most similar to the clear-headedness she sometimes had after a really good run. Maybe she was just overdue for exercise—maybe her body was trying to remind her.

As they ate, Doris regaled Kate with stories about Mexico City schools until, out of nowhere, she said, “When my mom died, we really couldn’t manage living there anymore.” Kate snapped out of it and watched Doris reach for another gluten free bun. She layered a tofu patty, lettuce and tomato. “Too many memories.”

Suddenly Doris looked vulnerable again to Kate, the way she had in front of her editor—a girl who wanted so badly to be recognized for her thoughts.

“I had no idea,” Kate started, unsure how to finish.”

“About my mom? She died when I was twelve. She got leukemia, it was really sudden. Just a few weeks before Christmas.”

Kate left her food on her plate. Her appetite had left. One of Doris' roommates entered the kitchen, grabbed something out of the fridge, and left without any of them speaking.

"My parents died, too," Kate said, and it was Doris turn to look surprised. She managed it well by continuing to focus on her sandwich. "A fire. I was nine."

Doris set her sandwich down and looked at Kate so sharply that she dropped her eyes. "That's terrible," she said.

"It was." She didn't want to get into the details of it, but there was something deeply bonding in realizing that Doris had also lost a parent. Doris often spoke of her mother and, Kate could have sworn, in present tense. This entire time she'd assumed they were different that way—one of many enormous differences between them, inevitable chasms that weren't able to be crossed. And now she thought differently.

"You were close?" Kate asked.

"My parents were divorced, I think I told you that before, but yeah, we were. I think it hit my dad harder than he would have thought. There were a few times, after that, when he'd talk about mistakes, or regret. He's a pretty sensitive guy.

"But you've heard me talk about my other mom, obviously—my dad remarried a few years afterward. She's great. We're close, too. It's just one of those things that always feels strange and sad, though. It's weird—" she paused for a moment, her forearms resting against the table edge, and looked over at the kitchen counter, which was stocked with bags of onions, multiple compost bins, and a haphazard pile of overripe bananas. "Like, no one things to ask, right? They see my mom and I call her mom, so there's never really a time to bring that up—there's no past tense, even, nothing to clue

people in to what happened. And I don't know what to say, right? Like 'my first mom'? How weird is that? 'My real mom'? I don't know, it's hard to find a normal way to tell people, and yet I really want them to know. It seems important."

Kate nodded. *It is important*, she wanted to say, but instead felt unsure about how to proceed, if Doris wanted to hear from her or if the things she'd said were sacred, better left untouched by Kate's own thoughts. She wasn't even sure what she thought about it; the idea of talking openly of loss like this wasn't something she'd ever thought to do. Or anticipated doing with anyone other than Clara.

"Whew, I'm sorry," Doris said. "Are you—do you want to talk about your parents? What were they like?"

Her eyes were so caring, focused and intent, that Kate was overwhelmed again. "No thank you," she said. "I—" she stopped. Her heart was hammering in her ears. "Sorry."

"You're okay," Doris said. She stood and grabbed her plate, then reached for Kate's. "Done?"

"Yeah, thank you," Kate said. "For the food and—stuff."

Doris grinned weakly and Kate decided she really did look like things were okay, that she didn't have to talk more to make Doris feel better.

For a few minutes they were silent, the only sound Doris washing the dishes and some low-volume music and laughter from the rooms upstairs.

Doris sat back down at the table.

“I checked out the arboretum, by the way. It was so beautiful,” Kate said. It had reminded her of Churdan in all the best ways—flat expanses of grasses, dirt trails, the white noise chirping of bugs and other small noises.

“Oh shit, I meant to tell you! Did you hear that a kid got mugged there?”

“What?”

“Yeah, wow—it seemed pretty sketchy. It was after we talked and I just assumed that you’d have read about it and you wouldn’t have gone. Wow, good thing you’re good.” Doris pulled out her phone and tapped at it with her thumbs, then turned it around and passed it to Kate. “So supposedly he was just walking in the arboretum—I’m actually hesitant to believe it, but—they interviewed a middle-aged man who spent most of the interview displaying the baseball bat he claimed he used to scare the muggers off.”

Kate stared at the paused video frame of a guy in a baseball cap, his eyes narrowed as he gestured toward a baseball bat in his right hand, displaying it with an upturned left hand. Fear was in her chest to see him superimposed over the calm landscape of the arboretum, the grass and dirt path visible over his shoulders. It had felt so safe.

“Don’t worry, I really think it may be bullshit. It’s a Concordis station after all,” Doris said. “And everything they chose to air of his interview was just *so* over the top—all this stuff about how he never walks around Ann Arbor without the baseball bat anymore, yada yada yada. He’ll probably try to sell them online next. Protection bats.”

“It seems real,” Kate said.

Doris shrugged. “It may be. If you’re gonna go back there, maybe don’t go alone, I guess.”

Kate studied the phone a minute longer. She didn't want to watch the video. "It feels like you can't go anywhere," she said. "Everybody's afraid of everybody here. There weren't even people there when I went."

"Yeah, well—we're technically a city. I guess that's just part of life. Healthy suspicion or whatever. Being city smart."

Kate gave the phone back and ran her fingernail along a crack in the table. "Sort of. In Churdan it felt like seeing people was a real treasured moment, most of the time. You know everyone, I guess. It's like you have to appreciate people more wholly—every time you see a person you're forced to deal with them, so you have to figure out where they're at—emotionally, physically, whatever. In a city it's like you're allowed to just write people off." She was only realizing this now, but she wasn't about to tell Doris she'd been equally antisocial in Churdan.

Doris folded her arms and leaned forward against the table top. "Brilliant," she said, then she leaned back against the chair. "That sounds wonderful."

"There are cons, too," Kate said, tempted to snap something about Clara—what it felt like to run into people even when you wanted to avoid them. "It's hard." She looked at Doris and wondered if Doris looked a lot like her biological mom—which parts of her she'd inherited. She wished she could see a photo of Doris' parents but didn't know if that'd be compassionate or invasive. It was hard to say when it was appropriate to start asking things like that, if ever.

"This sounds weird, but your freckles are, like, magical right now" Doris said suddenly.

"What?" Kate laughed, disoriented by the attentive observation.

“Yeah, I mean, not to be insanely weird about it, but I didn’t even notice them until earlier—when I told you about that party—for some reason it was like—bam! Freckles. They’re this crazy greyish color—whatever, you get it. I only notice them sometimes—like earlier. They look like a constellation or something.” She seemed to sense how uncomfortable Kate felt and stood. “Regardless, power to the freckles. Self awareness is the key to personal revolution.”

“Ha, fair enough.” Kate didn’t really understand what Doris was getting at. Oddly, though, there had been a morning recently, brushing her teeth in the communal bathroom, where she’d looked at her freckles and wondered if they’d changed somehow. They seemed more noticeable. As if her winter-approaching paleness was making them seem darker against her skin. She’d thought it strange how her own changes could sneak up on her that way—one day you thought of yourself as the same old body, forever, and the next you were different, an evolution happening underneath the mirage of routine.

-13-

THE *DAILY* OPINION

Staying Safe

On-campus thoughts about media, fear, and how students should navigate public spaces

By Doris Suárez

This week’s report about a student mugging in the Arboretum has given momentum to a question I’ve been hearing a lot around Michigan’s campus these days: Is it safe here anymore?

While I don’t consider myself a bona fide chicken, I, like anyone else, feel afraid at times on campus. Walking home alone a few weeks ago, I had the distinct feeling that

the streets just weren't safe anymore, not only because of the news reports about crime around Ann Arbor, but also because the streets were completely empty. It was dark, cold, and I only saw one person on my way home—a man with his head bent, walking quickly on the sidewalk across the street. It felt like if anything *were* to happen, there wouldn't be anyone there to help me. I didn't feel confident that that man was looking around, taking stock of things. Even worse, I had the feeling that even if someone *did* see something happening to me, like that man on the sidewalk, per se, maybe they would *choose* not to help.

Anecdotally, many of my *Daily* staffer friends have confirmed this feeling of distrust, and I wonder why.

If we analyze it even lightly, the arboretum mugging stands in direct opposition to this; the man interviewed is commendable for his willingness to help the anonymous student in question. He not only saw something and risked his own safety to help that student, but in many ways it felt like he was prepared, and almost *watching* for it. Living next to the Arboretum, which any semi-veteran student knows is a pretty isolated places, perhaps increasingly so, he may feel compelled to take on this role. Yet he also seems to imply that there are responsibilities we should be taking as residents of Ann Arbor; he says he carries around a baseball bat everywhere he goes, and this is offered as a kind of prideful responsibility on his part—he can help others, and avoid danger himself, because he's prepared for it. His call to action is that things have changed, and thus so should we.

I for one, don't want to live in a place where danger is the expectation. It seems like in the era of technology and historically enormous prosperity, health, and wealth,

ours should be the generation that lives fully, bravely and courageously. To paraphrase the immortal words of FDR: Do we really have anything to be afraid of but fear itself?

I'm averse to putting it in writing, but campus this year seems emptier than it has been. It does feel like there is some realistic caution to be taken while walking around campus, especially if you're alone. Yet it also feels harder to find friends to walk to class with. So where do we go from here? How do we shift this sloping path toward isolation?

Recently, a friend from an exceptionally rural area, who doesn't even own a cell phone, explained that even her guardian back home is news-obsessed and lives in a constant, low-level state of fear, wondering what might happen even in a place she feels is "safest"—her hometown. This is a small place, we're talking a couple hundred residents, and this issue is there as well. It is not an urban issue—we cannot physically move away from it. It's time we face it on our own turf, and I think we certainly can.

The *Daily* staff wants to hear from you: What do you think? How do we live with realistic awareness and also fight the temptation to freak out at anything? Send your thoughts to doris@michigandaily.edu, or tweet @suarezreports.

[14]

The house smelled like cologne and liquor. Penn felt nauseous and rebellious in waves, depending on the way the scents and sounds hit him—girls' laughter and giddy yells of exemption, all fueled by cheap beer and, for anyone under 21, as Penn was, the uncomfortable thrill of circumventing the law.

Sean had led them into the kitchen, introducing Penn to several people en route whose names he'd already forgotten. Penn now found himself in a small circle of six. The floor was sticky with beer that had spilled around the keg, which was squatting in a

plastic tub of ice. Most if it had melted by now, warmed by the heat of everyone in the house. He couldn't believe how many people were here—eighty, maybe 90, and the crowd seemed to be getting denser. He hadn't been in a group this large and condensed since the Mills House dining hall had hosted a student-parent Thanksgiving dinner. But that dinner had top-level security.

Sean was reenacting a time he ate dirt—"literally, I ate it"—trying to save a goal at regionals. He noticed now that a few people in the circle kept looking to Penn during Sean's story, as if to gauge his reaction. The attention felt misplaced. Maybe they could tell he was still eighteen.

"Did you save the goal or not?" interrupted a lithe junior who looked like she might be on the crew team. She kept waving to some of the tallest party guests and wore a low-backed tank top that showed off her sculpted shoulders. She looked to Penn. "Did he catch it?" she asked. She sounded nervous.

Penn looked at her, confused. "I don't know—ask him," he said, gesturing with his cup, which was filled with soda water. Sean shot him an angry look and he knew then he wasn't being nice. But why the hell did people keep roping him into the conversation when he clearly wasn't participating? Why couldn't they just let him listen?

"Look—Suki, right?" Sean began. Unsurprising that Sean summoned her name so easily—they had just met everyone in this circle and Sean probably knew them better than their siblings already. The girl waited. "My friend here—he's not very, *knowledgeable*, per se, about socializing. He tends to spend all his time reading, so we're gonna have to help him out with this talking thing."

Sean's need to be king conversationalist was grating on him tonight. "Yep. I don't interact with people," Penn said.

One girl laughed but the girl named Suki snorted. "Clearly," she said, her annoyance sharp, unsheathed. Two others in the group sipped awkwardly from their red plastic cups.

"You need a drink," one of the guys said, his words a little slurred. His glazed eyes were on Penn but he offered his empty cup to Sean. Sean hesitated, looking to Penn as he tried to decipher the mixed signal.

"Don't we all." Sean took the guy's cup then bridged the empty space inside their circle, tapping Penn's shoulder with the plastic. "Come, my boy. Let's refill our new friends' drinks." He collected several cups from the ring.

Penn joined him. He'd long imagined this inarguable-suggestion thing Sean did was a tactic Sean had learned from his mother. He'd observed her from afar at enough high school soccer games to notice the way she still tried to guide Sean's snack choices or fuss over his knee socks, but Sean respected his mother enough, or loved her so much, that he didn't fight it, and right now Penn didn't either. This was Sean's territory, not his.

"See ya," Penn said to no one in particular, exiting the group by a push from Sean's knuckles against his shoulders. Sean held two cups in each hand without putting his fingers in them and without much apparent strain—hand mechanics befitting a soccer goalie.

"What's your deal?" Sean demanded. They stopped at an end-table liquor arrangement in another room. The fake wood was wet with booze and smelled like acrid fruit. Pop music thudded one room over, which had been cleared of furniture and was

steaming up with more loud talking and sweat. Even with all the windows propped open and cold air occasionally blowing through, the house was getting hotter as more people arrived. The largest group was in the living room now, grinding around to that music. Penn eyed a couple making out and grimaced.

“This isn’t my thing,” he stated. He wanted to go home. And he wanted to verbalize what he was really wondering about—why everyone seemed so intent on getting his opinion, or looking at him, their faces beseeching him for something he didn’t understand. But even to Sean, who was exceptionally confident and, hopefully, by this point, trusted Penn’s character, there was no way for him to say that without sounding narcissistic or delusional.

Sean handed him a cup of vodka and Sprite and filled his own with room temperature Pepsi. Sean didn’t drink during the season, but he was extroverted enough that Pepsi got him more high-on-life than college kids drinking straight liquor.

Penn sniffed the drink, then set it down.

“Not for you,” Sean chastised. “It’s that other dude’s.” He sipped his Pepsi. “I’m gonna say something weird, but I want your thoughts,” he said.

“You want to get the Suki girl’s number,” Penn said.

“Yes, and also,” Sean took another sip without pause. “I have this feeling this year that everyone is always, uh—” he averted his eyes toward the dance room, “staring at you.”

As he said it, Penn watched two girls in similar-looking dresses draw their eyes away from where he and Sean were standing. They laughed.

Penn looked from them to Sean. “It’s you, not me,” he said. “You’re the college athlete, it’s celebrity status, like you said.”

“No, it’s not me,” Sean asserted, keeping his eye on the girls. One made eye contact and sipped her drink. Sean waved and Penn let out a groan.

“No, I’m serious.” And Sean did, quite suddenly, look serious. He set his own cup on the end table and filled up another empty cup—whiskey and something in a can. “At first I thought maybe I missed something because I’m around you a lot, like maybe you grew a bunch over the summer, got ripped, and I had some mutation where I couldn’t see any change in muscle...

“Or maybe,” he went on, handing the cup to Penn, “you started to send out vibes when you hadn’t before. I’m not *the* most observant person, though I’m close. Plus, I’m not a girl, what do I know?” Sean wiped his hand on his black soccer pants, which angled in to his ankles and emphasized his lean frame. “You know what, though?” He took a big swig of his soda, paused, then filled it to the top. “It’s not just girls. It’s guys too—not, like, into you even. It’s not that.” He looked out at the dance floor thoughtfully. The two girls had danced off somewhere else, or been absorbed into the writhing mass of students.

Penn felt intensely uncomfortable now that the topic of his changing social dynamics was really out in the open. Everything Sean said was true. Now was his chance to talk it out. He could trust Sean with that, couldn’t he?

“Maybe we’re just going to our own heads,” Penn said.

Sean looked at Penn and his eyes were warm and dark. “I actually think you know what I’m talking about,” he said. “You have a lot more friends this year, based on your

phone blowing up, and you haven't introduced me to any of them. You're not gonna say anything about it, fine, but I know it's not just me."

Penn held his gaze and felt his questions. He didn't know what to say.

"Got any answers for me, Penn? We're friends, right? Friends talk."

Penn took a deep drink out of the cup he held, tasking warm, smoky liquid and so much sugar his molars ached. "Don't be weird," he said, and Sean looked at him angrily. "Sorry, I don't know what to say," he clarified. He hoped his insistent look conveyed his honesty.

"Whatever then," said Sean. "Give the other dude a drink if you're gonna take his." He strode off authoritatively, leaving two cups behind. Penn watched Sean edge his way toward the front door to get to the hallway, and as he did a group of people slid through the front door, which was offset in an entry hallway beyond dance room. Toward the back of the group two girls, both relatively tall, inched their way inside.

Apparently Sean had seen them too, because he whirled on his heel and marched stiffly back toward Penn. His face was uncharacteristically nervous, panicked even.

"Crap crap crap crap," he breathed, keeping his back to the door.

"We're good, then?" Penn asked blithely, relishing Sean's discomfort.

"That's the girl," Sean said, and Penn busted out laughing.

"Are you serious?" he laughed even harder.

"I'll get cool, I just need a second," Sean said. He set the drinks down with some clumsy maneuvers and straightened, one hand in his pants pocket, an attempt to regain his carefree posture. "I didn't expect her to be here."

“Hard to know where someone will be if you’ve never talked to them,” Penn reasoned. Sean was too distracted to retort. He took a deep breath, and as he did so the girl from earlier, Suki, joined them with a guy from their former circle.

“No drinks, then?” she asked. “Ryan was thirsty.”

Penn handed him the solo cup awkwardly. “Whiskey,” he said.

The guy took the cup and drank deeply. Somehow he seemed significantly drunker than he had even a few minutes before. Penn didn’t think they’d left for that long.

“We did find some Jell-O shots in the fridge,” Suki explained, seeming to read Penn’s expression. “Ryan took six.” Either the Jello-O shots were delicious, or things had gotten even more boring in there.

“Listen, Sean, we’re gonna head elsewhere. It was good to meet you. We should have a cross-team party sometime. No booze, unfortunately, but you know, there’s other options...”

Sean agreed and some of his former spark returned to him. “For sure, for sure,” he said, and Suki and the guy Ryan turned away, Suki seeming somewhat disappointed as she led a wobbly Ryan past the crowd.

Sean’s crush and her friend had also shouldered their way through the dance floor, and now they stood nearby, examining another display of liquors illuminated by a strand of rainbow string lights. Sean hadn’t seemed to notice how close they’d gotten—he’d dutifully kept his back to the door since the first sighting—and Penn toyed with whether or not to alert him.

As he glanced toward the girls, one of whom was pretty beautiful in a bright green dress, Penn remembered his own hands were empty and he took a few steps back, occupying them by half-leaning, half-sitting on a dirty windowsill. Sean was clearly trying to get his bearings by using only his peripheral vision—he alternated between the large inset window Penn leaned against and glancing right and left at moving people.

“See them?” Penn asked now, and he glanced beyond Sean to watch as one of them, the girl in green, poured herself a drink with one hand. She was the stereotypical campus type—hippie-esque and proud of it, with a handful of patches and buttons tacked across her jacket, a brown bomber style thing that dressed down her outfit. She had a purse on one shoulder and gestured emphatically with her free hand. Penn watched her pink lips mouth several dramatic sentences, all of them directed at her friend. He assumed this was the girl Sean was in love with, and he could see why—she was definitely hot.

The other friend was pretty plain, not as tall as the hippie chick but still taller than other girls at the party—most of whom were in heels. She wasn’t really dressed for a night out, just a black tank top, but she surveyed the room with the careful interest of someone who was new to it all, curious but a little uncomfortable. The way she looked around made Penn think of himself.

Her brown hair was restrained in a low ponytail, and when she turned toward her friend, a smile breaking across her angular face, he felt like he recognized her.

“What?” Sean asked, registering the change in Penn’s expression. “Are they coming? I think I’m ready.” He swigged down the dregs of his soda.

“Let’s talk to them,” Penn said suddenly. He was trying to remember which class he might have had with that girl. “They’re right over there.” He nodded once in their direction and Sean squared his shoulders.

“Alright my man,” he smiled. “Finally coming through.”

“I don’t really want to drink,” the girl in green was saying. “Really I just want to dance. And this playlist is super decent...”

Penn watched her friend notice Sean approaching them and heard Sean’s voice announce, “Your skin is beautiful. What are you?”

Penn stopped walking and fleetingly debated turning around leaving Sean to fend for himself. The girl in green looked at Sean with an uninhibited expression of complete aversion, her shoulders angled between them like a barrier around her conversation with her friend.

“Sorry, *what?*” She spat the words out.

“I mean—like—what are you? Like, your skin?” Sean looked like he was nine years old and about to start crying about getting in trouble.

“I’m Penn.” He extended his hand. The ponytail friend looked at him and he felt a wave of nerves. This was bad. Or good—something in him contended—exceedingly good.

The girl in green lowered her cup and turned to Sean, almost ceremonious. Penn tried to subtly retract his handshake, which neither of them had accepted, as she set her cup delicately on the table and considered Sean carefully.

“Well, what are you?” she asked, and Penn thought maybe Sean might actually get away with his question.

“Indian,” Sean said happily. “Mom and dad, both.” He reached for a full two-liter of Pepsi from the new drinks table, angling, Penn knew, his numbered zip-up jacket as a clear billboard for his role on the soccer team. “Your turn,” Sean said, and looked to the friend. She averted her eyes quickly, but it looked like she was suppressing a smile.

“No, no, don’t worry, I’ll tell you what I am—and my name’s Doris,” the girl in green said confidently, relaxing her shoulders and retrieving her cup from the tabletop. She coaxed Sean closer with her finger as Penn watched, entertained.

Sean leaned in delightedly, inclining his ear. Doris cupped her hands around her mouth, one hand still holding her solo cup. Suddenly she yelled into his ear.

“I’m a human being, you idiot!”

“What the hell—” Sean jerked back, grimacing, holding his ear in what looked like some genuine pain, be it emotional or physical.

“Don’t worry, Kate,” Doris assured her friend, talking openly. “He’s too drunk to remember that tomorrow.” She took a sip of her drink, her head cocked in thought. “But maybe it’ll just sit in there, in his head, in his subconscious—wreaking havoc on his low self esteem and identity.” She whisked her hand in the air in front of them and drank again—several swigs until her cup was empty.

Sean had recovered quickly and was smiling now. “No, no, don’t worry, I’m Shekhar, and my self-esteem is exceptional. This is Penn.” Sean curtsied and Doris laughed. She opened her mouth to say something, but clutched her purse suddenly and looked at her friend, Kate, with renewed purpose. “Phone’s buzzing—can you hang on for like, two seconds?” She turned, unzipping her bag, before Kate had a chance to

respond. Suddenly it was just her and the two of them. Penn felt the roil of awkwardness for her.

“He goes by Sean,” Penn offered now.

Sean nodded. “Shekhar—like salt shaker, yeah—that’s my given name. But you can call me Sean.”

“Nice to meet you guys,” Kate said, though Penn thought she was looking at Sean suspiciously.

“Right, so—Sean—tends to relish being politically incorrect,” Penn offered. He felt like Kate still hadn’t looked at him fully and he wanted her to be the one to explain why they knew each other. His inability to remember what class they were in was bothering him, and for some reason he felt anxious to know.

“You two know each other?” Sean asked suddenly. He was studying Penn’s face.

“No,” he said.

“Wait, have we met?” Kate asked, looking at Sean.

“We—uh—well, no—I mean yes, we—” Sean stuttered.

“Yeah, we’re in chem together,” Kate said. “That was bugging me.”

“Oh right! Chemistry, of course,” Sean said in the most stilted tone Penn had ever heard him use. “I’m Sean.” He extended his hand politely and Kate shook it, seeming unaware that this was now his second introduction. Penn stared at him—there was no way that *this* was the girl Sean was crushing on—it had to be the other girl, Doris—

“Nice, sorry I didn’t recognize you,” Kate said.

Sean shrugged. “There’s a lot of people in lecture.”

“What did you say your name was?” Kate said. She looked into Penn’s eyes and he felt super strange as she did, and for a moment he had the sense that she was afraid.

“I’m Penn.”

“Penn,” she repeated. “Got it.”

The air felt too stagnant, his throat tight.

“Like a writing utensil,” added Sean. “D’you want a drink?”

“I—no. I’m good,” she looked at Penn distractedly then toward the front door where Doris had gone. “Honestly, I don’t really drink. The last time I really drank was at a friend’s graduation party, like a year ago.” She put her hands together, behind her back, and Penn realized that up close she seemed exceptionally composed for a college party. And she looked older—Penn remembered that Sean had mentioned that, that the girl he liked was older, could probably buy them drinks. Yet Doris seemed older, too—

“Drinking time,” Doris said, emerging suddenly, looking a little shaken, upset.

“What’re you having?” she asked Kate, pulling a plastic cup from the pile and selecting a giant bottle of gin. “Gin and tonic?”

Sean sidled up to her. “I’ll help.”

Kate excused herself from the group suddenly and walked away—and Penn wondered if Sean was thinking the same thing he was—why the heck both girls weren’t staying in the same place. Maybe they liked to smoke?

Someone upped the volume in the dance room and turned off the remaining lights. People cheered.

“Where are you going?” Doris yelled.

“Bathroom!” Kate called over her shoulder.

Penn watched her climb the stairs across the house, wondering if she even knew where she was heading. A young couple passed her drunkenly on the stairs, both of them smiling stupidly. Penn watched Kate push past them until she disappeared from view.

“What’d you say your name was?” Doris said.

“Shekhar.”

“As in salt, or the religious sect,” Penn added. Sean side-eyed him.

Doris smirked. “Ah, that explains your simple outfit.”

Sean laughed nervously, looking at Penn, as if he was going to save him. Penn was liking this girl more and more.

“Call me Sean, though.”

“Why? Do you go by that?”

Sean drank. “Yup.”

“Way to assimilate.”

Sean narrowed his eyes. “Geez, lady.”

She smirked. Penn decided Doris was also terrifying, like her neurons fired with the speed and intent of machine guns.

Somehow the conversation continued, and by the time Kate returned she looked, to Penn, calmer. She’d redone her hair and now it was in a bun against her neck.

“Is campus empty this year or what?” Penn heard Doris saying. Then Kate was asking Sean what it was like, and Penn found himself monologueing about the way campus used to be—the way it was so full, even last year, and before that there were thousands of people on campus during the year.

“*Amazing* crowds at sports games here,” Sean said, “hundreds of thousands of people.” Then they were on to Sean’s favorite topic, listening to him go.

Eventually they left the party, stoked by Sean to eat “the best pizza on earth.” At one point, to Penn’s surprise, Kate brought up Concordis, and Doris explained that Kate was “new to all this,” a comment which clearly rubbed Kate the wrong way. Penn saw her glare.

“What? You saw my article,” Doris said.

“What article?”

“Never mind,” Doris said, waving it off with just enough apathy that Penn was pretty sure she was tipsy.

“Seems kind of cool to work at Concordis,” Penn offered. He’d applied for the internship that week and he hadn’t even told Sean yet. It seemed unlikely that he was going to get it. Realistically, there were too many applicants—the application counter on their website had been over 3,000.

Doris laughed, but Kate didn’t. She looked burdened.

“It’s the fastest growing company in the U.S.,” Penn continued. “They had more M&As in the last year than the next three ranking companies combined.”

“Screw Concordis!” someone yelled, running past them, and Doris shouted out, “Adam, hey! What the hell!” The kid turned around and waved at Doris, then cupped his hands around his mouth. “Concordis is evil,” he bellowed, quieter now.”

Doris laughed and Penn didn't filter his expression fast enough. "What? I mean they're pretty evil," she said, "they literally killed people who worked for them a few decades ago."

"That's tabloid reporting," Penn said. He'd read about some of that online. Conspiracy theories.

"It's on WikiLeaks. And you can't argue that they televise absolute fear mongering garbage. Kate here's from rural Iowa—ask her about it, she grew up with her aunt watching it 24/7. Total crazy lady."

"Whoa, Doris," Kate said.

At the same moment Sean said, "Exit!"

"Exit?"

"Exit! Exiting the conversation."

"He hates conflict," Penn explained, though he was, for once, in agreement with Sean's announcement. Doris seemed like an angry drunk.

"Sorry," Doris said. "I work for the *Daily*... get heated about this kind of thing."

Penn shrugged. Her acknowledging it made him want to judge her less. "I get it. At least we're not purists."

Doris laughed generously. "Totally, purists are self-centered elitists who think they can avoid the news because their little moods are more important than human lives—"

"Exit! Pizza exit next turn ahead!" Sean yelled, silencing them.

Doris checked her phone while they walked. "Oh shit," she said suddenly. "That party just got busted. Media and everything."

Penn felt like he could faint from gratitude. If he'd been MIP'ed right before his B-school transfer, right after his intern application...

"Buy me some damn pizza," Sean said. "For life." He held his arms out and feigned putting a crown on his own head.

"Wow, seriously, thanks," Kate said. Penn felt a stir of envy. "Not for me," she added. "I just turned 21—but if Doris was back there she'd have stayed for the media and probably gotten a Minor in Possession."

Doris tapped away on her phone, mumbling about people taking pictures, and Sean suddenly fumbled his own flip phone onto the pavement.

"Woop." He bent over and looked drunk doing it. Penn paused long enough to make sure there weren't cops around, even though Sean was sober. Doris could probably benefit from the humility of a night in jail, but he'd rather not be associated with it.

When he and Sean started walking again Kate and Doris were a few steps ahead.

Sean looked at Penn, smiling, and he looked elated, his brown eyes bright and curls wild. "I love her," Sean said, a whisper loud enough that Penn nervously looked ahead. He didn't need to clarify who. "She's old and wise, so beautiful, so carefree, the tank top and the ponytail." He tapped his head then did a little random dance, skipping and hopping around the sidewalk.

"Plus," he mouthed, walking backward now, his back to Kate and pointing, "If we date, she can buy you alcohol!"

"Time for pizza!" Sean said loudly, turning around to walk normally. He was thrilled, Penn knew, that he had played the role of rescuer. Kate looked at Sean and smiled, and Penn felt something like envy again. She was pretty, but beautiful when she

smiled—she made it look like she wanted nothing more than to invite you into saying what you had to say. Sean stumbled a little in his bravado. “You like pizza, right?”

“Uh, yes. We could both use some pizza.” She tipped her head toward Doris, who was resting her forehead against Kate’s shoulder, her arms around her, humming.

Doris lifted her head, teetering a little, and Kate put an arm behind her back. “Max didn’t answer his phone,” Penn heard Doris whisper, slurring a little.

“Not worth it,” Kate said.

Penn wondered if Max was Doris’ boyfriend, though it seemed like bad news if he wasn’t answering her calls. It hadn’t occurred to him that they might not be single.

“So what are you, really,” Sean asked Doris. “You’re not white.”

Doris picked her head up. “I’m half-Mexican,” she said, standing taller and rearranging her jacket. “My dad’s from Mexico City. Lived there until I was six.”

They started a conversation about foreign parents and Penn listened quietly, noticing how Kate was doing the same. His respect for her increased.

Sean gestured grandly as they approached a weathered blue awning that extended out from the long brick building they’d been walking next to. Dark storefronts and a pharmacy flanked it on either side. There was no door to go in to the pizza place, just an inset, sliding glass window, the glass labeled with big black letters: SOUTH U. Penn had been here so many times with Sean he’d lost count in their first semester.

Doris considered it thoughtfully. “I walk by this place all the time and I never knew someone actually ate here.” She walked purposefully to the window where the balding cashier was standing, scrolling on his phone. A TV behind him showed a male reporter gesturing to a car crash. Penn looked away.

“I’m getting pepperoni, Kate!” Doris announced, and ordered three slices.

“That’s very big news, Doris,” Sean said, and Penn too was starting to wonder if Doris was just getting drunker over time. He wished he could get such good ROI on liquor intake.

“It is a big moment,” Kate explained. “She’s vegan.”

Sean laughed as Doris over-explained how she wanted her pepperoni to the cashier. “That was her first mistake.”

Penn ordered after Sean and Kate and they joined Doris on the edge of a cement-walled flowerbed. It was empty, ready for the harsh winter ahead, or just neglected.

Sean and Doris were still talking animatedly, apparently abandoning any attempts to engage Penn and Kate in their conversation.

“What year are you in at school?” Penn asked her.

“It’s my first year.” He waited for Kate to elaborate, but she didn’t say more. She also didn’t ask him a question.

“What’re you studying?”

“Not sure yet, probably agriculture.”

She didn’t seem the least bit interested in him now, which was fine, but it seemed like more work to ignore him entirely rather than ask a few polite questions. Apparently Sean was the one who got her smiling. Maybe all the attention Penn was getting lately *had* been going to his head.

Sean turned, as if sensing a missed conversation with Kate. “So what’re you ladies studying?”

“Agriculture,” Kate repeated, and Doris added that Kate was going to be really good, that they could build their own agri-empire because Doris’ was majoring in Journalism and minoring in Program in the Environment.

Sean used the opportunity to discuss his own interest in such things, which was a total lie, and by doing so brought on another passionate monologue from Doris. They seemed content enough taking turns talking on and on about themselves, despite the fact that neither seemed to be listening. Kate clearly felt no pressure to speak. From time to time she surveyed campus contentedly, apparently unaware that her silence might be awkward.

Penn often yearned for people like this. He set aside his bruised pride and enjoyed the quiet with her. It was unfamiliar, but nice, to not have to speak.

“Kate grew up on a farm,” Doris said suddenly, in reply to something Sean must have brought up. Penn watched Kate shoot Doris an angry look.

“In Iowa,” Doris added. “You can tell them about it then.” She seemed to be sobering up a little. There was an edge to her voice.

“Seriously?” Sean asked, turning at the chance to speak to Kate.

Kate just shrugged. “Yep.”

The girl was a vault. Penn looked up from her stubborn face and found Sean staring at him. “Penn’s got a cool background, too,” he said.

“You grew up on a farm?” asked Doris. She examined the pizza grease glistening across her fingers.

Penn hesitated. He didn’t know these girls, and if they were going to be friends he wasn’t interested in being the person who kicked things off. If they wanted personal

information about him they could earn it over time, like any healthy person would do. He glared at Sean.

“No, I grew up on the east coast.”

“I love the east coast! New York?” Doris asked. “God this pepperoni is unreal.” She licked an index finger.

“New Jersey,” said Penn, expectant that the conversation would end now.

“Penn’s an orphan,” Sean blurted out, and an intense silence followed. Penn stared at Sean and wondered if he should walk away or just stand up and punch Sean clear into the flowerbed. What the hell was he thinking? They’d never talked about that extensively when it was just the two of them—why the hell would he tell two strangers?

Sean’s mouth closed and opened like a fish.

“Shit,” Doris said. The fact that she wasn’t talking, probably for the first time that evening, only increased Penn’s confidence that Sean had been wildly out of line.

He ventured a look at Kate and her facial expression was an entirely different one—she was staring at him, wide-eyed. He noticed she had light freckles around one of her eyes—one side and not the other. She seemed tough, strong in a way that transcended her physical frame.

“I don’t really know what to add to that,” Penn said. “Sorry, not going to get into it.”

“That’s fine,” Kate said quickly, and Doris was quiet, mopping up grease with a pile of already translucent napkins.

“We should probably go,” Kate added. Then, discreetly, “Doris had a—kind of date, I guess—and I think the fact that it didn’t happen hit her hard. Hence the drinking. And probably the pizza.”

If Doris heard Kate she didn’t seem to mind. Penn appreciated Kate’s attempt at responding in kind, with a piece of vulnerable, personal information, but he’d have appreciated it more if it was something about herself and not her friend.

“You got out easy,” he said. He expected her to be caught off guard, but she didn’t seem to be. She avoided his eyes. She stood and threw her plate away.

“Gonna regret that tomorrow, probably,” Doris said. “But I think it was worth it.”

Sean was sitting, still paralyzed, between Penn and the girls. He looked like a mourning toddler, one who knew he was in trouble and desperately didn’t want to leave.

“Sean, you wanna head out,” Penn stated. He was hurt in a way, betrayed maybe, but he wasn’t keen on staying mad. Sean’s desire to be well liked sometimes made him do the stupidest things. This was definitely an example. They both knew it.

Sean stood and made one last jaunt over to Doris and Kate, where Doris was pitching her garbage and saying something about compost. Penn watched Sean talk animatedly, regaining some of his composure, then Kate waved kindly Penn’s way.

He smiled and returned her goodbye wave with more zeal than he intended.

“Thanks for the date!” Doris called. “Let’s hang out again!” She turned and walked shoulder to shoulder with Kate—Doris’ frame leaner and longer as they faded into the night, going in and out of yellow streetlights.

Sean trotted back and was grinning as they headed in the opposite direction. Penn was intrigued by the disappointment he felt now, heading home. He hadn’t wanted to

continue the conversation, but he also wanted more of it—to keep hanging out, to get to know them more. He just didn't want to talk about himself.

“Got one email address, one phone number,” Sean shared. If he hadn't just socially bombed him, Penn knew he'd be rejoicing more fully—dancing down the street, reenacting every line he spoke, every smooth move he felt he'd made. They'd analyze the entire situation—Penn counterpointing Sean's idealism, Sean blindly insisting on his success.

Instead they bore a dense silence on the walk home.

They got to Sean's dorm first and Penn kept walking as Sean peeled off toward the door.

“See you,” Sean called. He'd trotted up the stairs before Penn had made it another several yards.

The rest of the way home, Penn replayed his own lines in his head—the things he'd said, mostly to Kate, the things he hadn't said but had thought through as they walked. He felt so drawn to her, like a best friend, like Sean, but something more than that. He wondered if he might be into her but felt a strange twist of confusion at the thought. He wasn't sure he really *wanted* her—not like that.

At home he brushed his teeth and lay flat on his tiny single bed, thin strips of orangey city light belligerent through cracks in the blinds. He could still hear the echoes of a few college voices on the street below, bonding or fighting, playing around in the night. And he couldn't shake the feeling, in some intense, big picture way, that things in his life were shifting.

She had thought maybe if she saw him again, she would know he wasn't her brother.

Penn sat across from her at the library table, Sean to his right, and any chance she could—when Sean was texting away on his flip phone, Penn focused on his laptop, Doris oblivious with her headphones in—she studied him.

When he and Sean had met them in front of the library she saw Penn was around her height, as she'd remembered—grey eyes and hair a shade of brown akin to her own. The angle of his nose was straight, his jawline sharp as well—narrow, pointed and intentional. His shoulders were narrow, too, but he was athletic in a similar way that his friend was—lithe and muscular. She knew, objectively, he was attractive, but she felt drawn to him again in another way too—something about the way he'd carried himself, the way he spoke.

“You wanna study chem?” Sean asked her, and she met his eyes quickly, hoping he hadn't seen her watching Penn.

“Mm? Yeah, sure,” she said, though she'd finished studying for chem earlier in the week with Doris. Next to her, Doris was immersed in the global politics book she was reading, her noise cancelling ear buds barring her from any conversation.

“Actually, I really don't have much to do for it,” Kate corrected. She still felt a little guilty whenever she talked with Sean since she hadn't recognized him sooner. It seemed like that had hurt his feelings in some way. It was the kind of thing she was trying to get better at—recognizing people. It was probably why she hadn't made more friends.

“This website is so fricken vague,” Penn said suddenly. He shook his head and shut his laptop slowly, then folded his grey-sweatered arms across his chest. “What’re you guys working on?”

“Chem,” Sean said, though the only thing in front of him was his cell phone.

Penn looked at Kate, and there it was again: recognition. She *knew him*—the face and his frame, the erudite way he spoke.

“Oh, I’m not really working on—I finished chem earlier this week,” she said, realizing he was waiting for her to respond. Penn didn’t seem to notice her struggle. A thought came to her: If he was her brother, wouldn’t he recognize her, too? Maybe she was having some strange emotional crisis—repressed feelings projecting themselves onto strangers that only vaguely reminded her of family.

Last weekend at the party it was Sean who she’d noticed first—the surprise that after his weird introduction he was warm, well-intentioned and kind. Walking into the party had overwhelmed her—too many people, no one she recognized, and the centrality of that grinding dance floor. Her dance experience was limited to throwing some musically-timed punches when she went running and she hadn’t expected any of it—though she hadn’t realized this until they arrived. Doris’ editor hadn’t seemed like the kind of person to rave.

In truth, she regretted the pull she felt toward Sean. Doris had spent their walk home alternately complaining about his arrogance and saying things like *all hot guys*, which from Kate’s limited experience with Doris meant that she was trying not to be into him. Plus, he and Doris seemed designed to banter with one another. She’d thought, upon meeting Sean and Penn, that within five minutes they’d be wrapping it up and she’d be

guiding herself and Doris to an exit route. Instead, here they were, the four of them studying together in the library stacks like a band of lifelong friends.

“Did Doris puke last weekend?” Sean asked, looking up from his phone to look at Doris, who was still absorbed in her book. “From the pepperoni I mean.”

Doris noticed Sean staring at her and pulled out one of her headphones. “What.”

“Are you dying?”

She stared at him.

“From eating meat?”

“Probably.” She put her headphone back in and Sean grinned at his own joke. Kate couldn’t help smiling—it was fun watching him dish it out to Doris. She felt like she didn’t have the equipment to do it herself.

“I think I’m gonna head home,” Penn said. He looked exhausted. Kate didn’t want him to go.

“I’ll go too,” she heard herself say, and before someone protested she stood up and started gathering her things.

Penn watched Kate sliding things into her shoulder bag and was too afraid to check Sean’s expression. Doris pulled out her headphones.

“You done?” she said. He thought he noticed the faintest upturn in her mouth and thought she might be happy to be left with Sean.

“Don’t kill each other,” Kate said.

Penn looked at Sean and he was obviously annoyed. He set his phone on the table and leaned back, his big hands pressing the sides of his head. “Why do you guys sit in

these rooms—its like the room is literally dead—no one’s here, no one makes noise, and now you’re going to leave us?”

The upper levels of the library stacks were one of Penn’s favorite spots on campus. The network of bookshelves was quiet, ethereal. The eastside of the building was letting in just a little more sunlight than the rest, and the way light fell across the colored book covers was nothing short of enchanting. It smelled dusty and a little dank, that enticing combination of old books and an unspoken history. Penn had always liked thinking about the thousands of people who had studied here over the years—the university had opened in the 1800s, before the state itself was officially declared a state. The university had stopped publishing attendance numbers at some point, but regardless, it felt they had won the lottery getting this corner all to themselves. They were the only ones in this room, this section—one of the few perks of an emptying campus.

Sean had told Penn, as they walked here, that Kate had been the one to suggest the stacks—Sean had emailed her about studying together the second he’d gotten home from the party—but Penn assumed it was a fib, that it had in fact been Sean to suggest the stacks. It was a surefire way to get Penn to join him for something social.

“I love it here,” Kate said as she packed up. “It reminds me of home for some reason—the purposeful quiet. It’s hard to find places like that in a city.”

Sean stood.

“What the hell, you too?” Doris said.

“No, just going to the bathroom. I’ll walk you out.” Penn surmised Sean was going to do a lap of the building to see if there was anyone on the lower floors worth talking to. The level of introversion the stacks required wasn’t exactly Sean’s natural

habitat. If he was lucky he'd run into some friends or teammates and throw some small talk around on the first floor.

Kate slid the last thing into her bag—a newspaper—and Penn pointed at it.

“Holy shit, is that archival or something?”

Kate looked at him, confused, then pulled it back out. “Oh, probably. They have a whole collection in here. I like reading papers like this. It reminds me of when I was little.”

“Dang, that’s crazy you read print newspapers, like an old man.”

She wrinkled her nose, displeased, and he regretted the words. “I mean—never mind, it was a joke.” Sean had really been rubbing off on him.

Penn’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out. New text message: *I need to talk to her, idk how*

Penn almost exhaled his exasperation but caught himself. Kate clearly wasn’t a social butterfly. If Sean didn’t know how to socialize with her, Penn sure wasn’t going to help.

Maybe try speaking to her, he typed.

Penn held his phone, picked up his bag, and started to walk out with Kate, Sean trailing behind.

“See you later,” Kate said to Doris, and Doris nodded at them, leaning back into her chair.

New text message: *I don’t think she likes talking*

Penn looked to Kate, but she'd pushed through the doors to the elevators and was separated from them momentarily. "Maybe try talking to *her*, and not her friend," Penn hissed at Sean.

Sean grinned. "Friends are not so bad," he whispered.

They joined Kate in the elevator lobby. Penn didn't understand what Sean was getting at—if he was into Doris now, too, if he wanted Penn to be, if he wanted to just be friends with the girls. Frankly, he didn't care. He theatrically shoved his phone into his backpack, zipping the compartment so he wouldn't be tempted to reopen it and Sean understood he was done. Socializing this much, and this childishly, wasn't conducive to studying—he'd doubt he'd attempt to "study" like this again. His grades would tank if he did.

"You're reading a book about the '60s," Kate said now, "and *I'm* the old man for reading about current events." It took him a minute before he realized she might be really sensitive.

"It's for class," he said. Before he'd starting researching Concordis again online, he'd been reading about historical communications and reporting, specifically the mid-1900s and nuclear war. He hadn't noticed her paying attention to the book. "Psychology of Mass Communication."

"Is that a business school thing?"

"Sort of." He shared some of the topline stuff he'd read as they rode the elevator—he wasn't that far in—that mass media and pop culture was inundated with the fear of nuclear war. It was all reporters had talked about. Even sitcoms were comedic with it, talk shows, the whole nine yards. It had shaped the American psyche so much

that people were really buying into it then. Not without reason, to be sure, since the threat of nuclear war *was* real, but it was interesting how pervasive it became.

“Point is, some of the effects seem reasonable—like students doing nuclear safety drills at school. That’s something you should probably do if you’re potential going to have nuclear war,” he explained. “Then you have less reasonable things—people built bunkers in their backyards, that kind of thing.”

“What’s wrong with building a bunker?” Sean interrupted. Penn had almost forgotten he was with them. “It’s their property right? People do weirder crap than that.”

“Yeah,” Penn agreed. “But the psychology aspect is that a lot of what motivated people to do those things was fear, and fear of things that weren’t necessarily real. If the media starts to play a role in fear-mongering, then things get kind of sticky. What’s the responsibility of the media company versus the discernment of the viewer, for example, or at what point to we observe human behavior and acknowledge that fear can drive people to do inappropriate, unreasonable things—even violent ones.”

“Dumb,” Sean said, and Penn wished he could eject him on the next floor.

“Gonna qualify that?” he demanded.

Kate spoke, “Doris is always saying certain media companies—the ones that churn out this fear mongering stuff, they’re just primarily companies. You have good journalism, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, then you have businesses that prioritize business—profit, making money. That’s why you end up with sensationalist stuff to get more viewers and, in turn, more money from advertisers. The people at the *Daily* are always saying it’s a matter of identifying and decrying intentions.”

Penn understood her points. Doris was way smarter than he realized, and for the first time he wondered more about her own interests and background. Her parents were probably intelligent and successful. He wondered what they did for a living to raise her with this kind of intel and awareness.

In the moment he wanted to tell Kate about his internship application, but thought it would be weird since he hadn't even told Sean. The elevator pinged and they exited onto the first floor, which was relatively empty.

"See y'guys," Sean said, peeling off.

Penn felt a wave of nerves at being alone with Kate. He'd wanted to help Sean's plot—first a group hangout, then single hangouts, then dinner—he'd seen him do it before. But he had too much work to do and Sean knew Penn wasn't the kind to prioritize something above school. He wanted to get home and actually work. Before that, though, he did want to get Kate to talk.

"How'd you grow up on a farm?" he asked.

"My aunt lives there." They looked at each other and he found the freckles near her right eye again. Maybe he was just getting used to them from being around her, but they seemed prominent, one of her defining features.

"I grew up with my aunt," she continued. "She lived on the farm long before I got there. Then I lived there, and she adopted me."

It wasn't often he met someone who also hadn't grown up with biological parents. He wondered if her parents had been deadbeats or something—or maybe one of them was and the other passed away. Maybe they were even alive and she knew them.

“So what Sean said last weekend—like, you also not having parents. Is that true?” she said now. They had just pushed through the front doors and the cold air made him think he’d head straight home after all—it was cold and getting dark, close to dinnertime.

Discomfort fluttered in him. He’d tried to forget that Sean had said that and he definitely hadn’t expected her to resurrect it. “I, uh—yeah, the orphan thing?” he tried to smile, to play it off, but he could feel he wasn’t hiding his desperation. “Yeah it’s true. I grew up in a foster care place. Like a boarding school with a dorm, sort of, but all guys. It was a good school so some kids just came in during the day.” He risked a glance at her and saw she was looking thoughtfully out at campus. Her distraction emboldened him. “It wasn’t the worst, I guess. We had foster parents who lived there with us—different sets of them for different groups of guys. They weren’t all bad. It was basically like what you probably have right now, like the Resident Assistant in your dorm who checks in on everybody and makes sure no one kills each other.”

Kate laughed. “Is that what those people are for?” She turned back to him. “I saw the labeled ‘RA’ door but I wasn’t really sure what that meant.”

“Did you not go to orientation or something?” Penn asked, jumping on the chance to play expert. He’d forgotten she was new to the college experience and envied her for it. “Yeah, they’re in charge of managing your floor. Some are better than others—my freshman year, our RA was a real idiot. He just played video games in his room and by the end of the term he only came out to smoke weed with some guys on the floor.” He didn’t keep the resentment from his voice—he couldn’t stand people like that, who just wanted the money and felt no responsibility to earn anything.

Kate laughed. “Smart guy, if he got away with it.”

Surprised, Penn stared at her.

“What?” she laughed again when she looked at his face. “Oh right, you’re a big ‘respect and authority’ person.” She waved her hands grandly around the words.

He wasn’t sure how to read her and wondered if he had actually misread her from the beginning. Maybe they weren’t so similar after all. He’d just assumed so because she was quiet.

“Sorry, I mean, I get it. I wouldn’t do that. Just find it funny I guess,” she clarified. “I have friends at home who sound like that. Troublemaker guys. But in Churdan I guess you don’t have the same consequences you might have here. They’re not getting paid or anything.”

“Where’s Churdan?” Penn asked.

“Iowa,” she said.

He’d meant where exactly *in* Iowa, but he let it go.

“My hometown—the middle of nowhere, basically. It’s all cornfields.” She checked her watch, which had a thin, worn leather band and a minimalist face. It was simple, but there was an aura of expense to it.

“Nice watch,” Penn offered.

She seemed to appreciate the comment. He watched her face soften, and suddenly she looked quite a bit younger, a young girl and not a hardening young adult. He was struck again by how nice it felt to be with her and had the strangest callback to a memory with his sister. He was little—as he was in every elusive memory of that time. She was getting ready to leave for her first day of school. A car was out front and their mom was walking Sarah to the door. His mother was already in her business clothes, ready for

work. Sarah was dressed purposefully—a well ironed skirt and the uniform of her preparatory school. He wouldn't be going with her quite yet, he was too young. *This is very important, so take good care of it*, his mom had said, fastening a big watch around Sarah's wrist. He remembered how jealous he'd been, how much he'd yearned to be the one going to school and taking care of an important watch. He'd wanted it so badly that Sarah'd hit it from him in her locked little jewelry box, knowing he was going to try and take it. Now he realized that neither one of them had likely been able to tell time then.

Kate cleared her throat, then looked him straight in the eyes. "Was your name ever different—than the the name you have now?"

Her brown eyes were kind but intense, and looking at them made him feel increasingly threatened, like she knew things he didn't, or was calculated when she spoke.

"What?" He was so confused by her question that she seemed to instantly regret it.

"Sorry, sorry," she said, and she was grabbing her shoulder bag and starting away down the steps. "Never mind, weird question."

Was his name ever different? For a brief moment he had the paranoid idea that she was working for someone like Concordis, researching him for internship candidacy.

In the off chance it was true he tried to be polite, grappling for some sort of response to her question. "No worries," he said, trying to be cheerful. "Uh, no, my name is my name, but I get that it's not exactly common. My parents really went for it with that one."

“I thought about changing it once,” he added. “But since my parents died, it seemed disrespectful.” She’d stopped a few steps below him; he readied himself for the response he’d always received, the pained frown, the sympathetic eye contact, the whispered declaration of, “Oh, I’m so *sorry*, that’s *horrible*.” Instead Kate zipped up her coat with the intensity of someone arming themselves for a battle.

“Right,” she said, and kept walking. “Thanks, sorry for the weird moment. I should go.” She headed off in the opposite direction, holding her arms to her against the cold.

He was so stunned, she was already down the steps before he processed that she hadn’t said anything comforting at all, and she was heading down one of the walkways before he even considered yelling after her. “What the hell,” he breathed aloud.

He stood silently for a moment, replaying everything in his mind, feeling like his consciousness was floating around in some weird alt-universe, a place with zero gravity. He felt similar to how he felt when he studied intensely and for too long—where he resurfaced from hours of thinking to feel aloof and mentally displaced. But what the hell had she been reacting to? That was not normal behavior, there was no way. He wished Sean had been there to witness it—then he might be able to laugh it off, listen to Sean’s analysis of Kate panicking, getting nervous around his good looks. Instead, Penn felt ridiculously embarrassed, ashamed, even, about what he’d shared. She’d reminded him why he didn’t share this crap with people in the first place. But something about her had been so compelling—he had the weirdest desire to just share things with her and figure out what she thought, an almost supernatural pull—a magnetic extraction of personal info. He’d respected her enough to deserve something back, hadn’t he?

After ten minutes or so he resigned to the fact that he wasn't getting anywhere anymore—studying or analysis of that exchange—and walked home.

-16-

CONCORDIS

For Truth: In Writing & Onscreen

A Private Media Company

15 December

To Mr. Penn Beckett:

It is with pleasure that we would like to schedule an in-person conversation to continue the interview process for the Concordis summer internship program, which will run next May through August at our headquarters in San Francisco, California.

In our search for five interns, you were selected from a pool of more than 4,000 applicants. As Concordis grows, our positions become increasingly competitive. You should be proud of your talent and your dedication to pursue a professional career in communications. We believe you may be the future of our company, and we look forward to meeting you in person.

Please respond by email to interns@concordis.com by December 31st. You will be contacted in the next few months with more details regarding when the interview will take place. At the interview you will receive more details about the position, including department openings, payment, travel, lodging, benefits, and other corporate events. Publication of or communication about your interview process in any form, verbal or written, is strictly prohibited. Should you fail to comply with this requirement, we reserve

the right to terminate your candidacy immediately. We are a private company and value discretion, loyalty, and confidentiality.

We look forward to speaking with you,

Jack Gadway

CEO, Concordis

[17]

“All individuals on the first floor must evacuate the Athletics Facility now. This is not a drill. Please evacuate the first floor of the Athletics Facility. Immediate evacuation required for all individuals on the first floor of the Athletics Facility—”

Penn was sitting on a worn leather couch in the lobby outside the soccer team locker room, studying the mounds of December snow through the windows, waiting for Sean to finish showering. His phone buzzed. SAFETY ALERT: *ALL STUDENTS AND PERSONNEL MUST IMMEDIATELY EVACUATE THE ATHLETICS FACILITY. PROCEED CALMLY TO AN EXIT. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.* The fire alarm started.

He sat, holding his phone, waiting for people to stampede out of the locker room doors on either side of him. He stood up and looked down the hallway—it was empty, bright with winter light from floor-to-ceiling windows and the intermittent flashes of fire alarms. The siren sounds were piercing, ricocheting around the empty hall.

He stepped back and tried to open a locker room door, but they were locked from the outside—key card entry required with an athletic student I.D. He pounded on the door.

“Sean?”

His first response was to think it was a drill for the athletic facilities. But if it was, then he didn't think he would have gotten a text message. Unless it was a geographic thing—

“Sean! Open up!”

He envisioned Sean singing too loudly or something to recognize what the hell was happening. Penn should have hung out in the locker room like Sean had suggested—there weren't a lot of people around on a Saturday morning—but he hadn't wanted to break the rules. He'd come here to meet Sean, following Sean's solo weight lift session. They were planning on getting some lunch. Now he wondered if anyone was even in the building aside from the two of them. He hadn't even seen a receptionist when he walked in.

“Sean! Open the door!”

The other door swung open and Sean stood there, towel around his waist, his hair dripping rivulets of water onto his shoulders. “Shit, is this real?”

Penn didn't know. “We need to leave.”

“Holy shit! Let me grab my—”

“No—” Penn said calmly, though he was feeling increasingly panicked. Sean's eyes had gone wide, his body taut like he was about to sprint. “Now—let's go.” He turned and walked quickly down the hallway and after a moment Sean jogged up next to him, one hand on his towel. Penn's heart rate was thudding in his ears and he started jogging too, then the two of them ran the rest of the way down the hallway and he didn't know whether he should laugh or scream—it reminded him of racing each other at practice—

Sean laughed now, but it sounded wild, slightly hysteric. “What the hell is going—”

Suddenly Penn was stumbling to the right, and for a moment he thought Sean had shoved him, Penn’s knees bending to retain some balance as his right hand grabbed hold of the empty front desk. A rumble went through the building and for a moment he just stood there, frozen, waiting. He was dimly aware of Sean to his left, silenced and still standing, though he too had apparently staggered to the right somewhat, his presence solid and also vulnerable, one hand still on his towel—

They both looked left, where the rumble seemed to have come from, though now it was quieter and physically nothing had changed. The alarm was still going off. Another hallway extended out in front of them—the other main wing of the building—two double doors shut in front of them and no one coming through them, no one else in that whole long hall.

“What—what was—” Sean stopped speaking and Penn grabbed his arm. He tugged him toward the double glass entry doors and they ran through them out onto the sidewalk, the air cold and yet unnoticeable, though Penn heard Sean inhale sharply.

“Fuck.” Sean was stamping his feet up and down, the sidewalk covered in slushy, dirty snow. Penn stared at Sean’s feet, his mind seemingly frozen, then tugged Sean further down the street. They crossed the road and one car was crawling slowly down the road to their left, the driver staring, mouth open, at the athletics building. Only when they crossed the street did Penn turn back to look, and he stopped, his arm dropping from Sean’s.

The entire back, right wing of the athletics building was billowing out smoke—enormous black clouds of it tumbling into the air above the building like a great pipe had burst open, the low roar of it like some artificial monster, something he'd seen in movies. They stood there, staring, watching, in the silence of the street. For a moment no other sounds were noticeable, just the low roar of it, the danger like a performance or some dark entertainment his brain didn't know how to process, file away.

Sean wasn't speaking. He stood in the snow with goose bumps covering his body, his mouth open, his feet turning a brownish, purple blue.

"Oh my god! The building's on fire!" Penn heard someone yell, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from Sean or the cloud, waiting for Sean to say something—to explain it—entranced by what was in front of them, what they'd evaded.

People started yelling. Penn turned and the row of houses across from the athletic center was slowly being populated with students and residents—emerging through their front doors to stare at the cloud. Many were on their cell phones, some talking, some holding their phones up to record. *Call someone!* Penn wanted to shout, but part of him held back, wanted to trust them someone already had.

"Penn, what—" Sean stopped mid-sentence again, and his eyes were misty. He shut his mouth and swallowed hard. "Was that a bomb?" he asked. His voice wavered when he said it. He looked at Penn. Penn didn't know.

"I have to—" Sean started, but Penn interrupted him. "Was anyone in there with you?" He felt like he might pass out before Sean answered the question. Sean shook his head and a tingling rush went through Penn's shoulders, he realized how tightly he'd been holding them. "In the building? Did you see anyone?"

“No, no, barely anyone comes here Saturday mornings—we’re not supposed to.”

Penn watched Sean tear his eyes away from the cloud, which seemed to be calmer now, somehow, or maybe they were just starting to process it. Aside from the smoke, it looked contained. Penn didn’t even see any fire.

Sean looked at him. “Did you see anyone?” He swallowed hard again. His eyes were wet.

“No, no one,” Penn said. He couldn’t afford to ask about the back of the building—if there were locker rooms back there, other athletes.

“That’s the indoor track,” Sean said. “And the pool.” Penn wished he would stop talking. “Swimmers are off Saturday mornings, there shouldn’t be anyone—” he stopped again.

A fire truck sounded a few streets away, and flashing lights approached from one of the cross streets. All at once Penn noticed the sound of sirens across campus.

“You need shoes,” Penn said. He turned toward the line of houses, filled with people like this was all some kind of fireworks show. He ran toward them and Sean followed, delayed, behind him.

“My friend needs shoes,” Penn said. There was a blonde girl and two others, probably her roommates, standing in blankets on a front porch. She was zoned out, staring at the cloud through the screen of her phone, recording.

“Hey,” Penn said, and she turned to him, surprised. “We were in there just now—my friend needs shoes.” She turned to them with her phone still held out in front of her and Penn pushed it away. “Phone off. Can you get me some slippers or something?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course, God, sorry—” she turned and went quickly into the house. Her two other roommates had glanced at them but were recording the cloud again, intent on their phones. The blonde girl reemerged with pink tie-dye slippers.

“Here,” she said, handing them to Sean.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll get you some other stuff, sorry, hold on,” she said, looking at Sean in his towel. Penn noticed there were little ice crystals in Sean’s hair and took off his jacket. He shoved it at Sean.

“Go inside with her,” he said.

“What?”

“Go inside—she won’t care—you’re going to freeze out here.”

Sean seemed to snap out of it for a second, a familiar grin appearing on his mouth. “This? This is like an ice bath. Good for my muscles.” But he walked in tentatively to the house, yelling “hey, can I come in here?” as he did. The two other roommates turned to Penn.

“We reported this to the campus safety line so you can interview with them,” one of the girls said. “They’re on their way.”

Penn wished he could shove them off their porch and take it over. They were going to call the news before they even asked if either of them were okay? He turned back to the athletics building and the cloud and dulled significantly, just a small bubble of grey air above the brick. Three fire trucks were elevated above the building and cop cars had blocked off all the roads.

“Who would do this?” one roommate said.

“Probably anyone. This campus is not safe anymore. My mom’s going to freak out.”

“But why the athletics building? So random—do you think the person’s still around?”

Penn watched fear wash over both of them, and one stood suddenly and looked at Penn. “Why were you in there?” she said. Her voice was shaking.

“What? My friend’s on the soccer team, he was working out—” the other girl stood and for a brief moment he was afraid, too, unsure of what they were about to do.

“You need to get your friend and leave,” one said, and the other ran quickly through the door. “Megan!” Penn heard her shriek. “Megan are you ok?”

“Please go down by the street,” said the other girl, the effort in her voice obvious as she tried to stay calm and authoritative. “Go by the street, and the news station will be here in just a minute.”

“Look, my friend’s on the soccer team—you’ll probably recognize him if you look into his face for two seconds—and I’m in the business school—”

“Get off our porch!” She’d yelled it loud enough that Penn saw, over her shoulder, a group of people look over at where they stood. He started walking, careful not to slide on the icy steps. An anger in him had grown as she spoke and now it threatened to spill out—he was afraid he really would do something stupid.

“Sean!” he yelled again, and suddenly felt absolutely exhausted.

“Thanks for the slippers,” Sean said, grinning like his normal self as he trotted through the front door wearing a bright yellow sweatshirt. He still had the towel around

his waist. Megan followed after him, smiling coquettishly, until she saw her roommate's face.

"Where's Janelle?"

"What?" Her smile faded completely. The other roommate appeared behind Megan in the doorway. "Thank God you're okay," Penn heard her say, and before he heard more he turned angrily away and started walking down the street, vaguely in the direction of home.

"Dude, where are you going? We need to stay here for the reporters—"

"I'm not fucking staying for some media circus when people aren't even human beings to one another anymore! Those girls thought we were criminals!"

Sean stared at him, looking somehow normal in his weird outfit, bright against the grey and white street. "I mean, I may have suggested doing some criminal things to Megan, if y'know what I—"

"Stop," Penn said. Sean's face fell. "Stop trying to pretend like this isn't totally messed up! It's not okay! It's not funny, or hopeful, or anything—this is miserable. Those girls aren't worth your time—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Penn." For a moment Penn thought Sean was going to hug him, but he didn't. He stayed where he was. "Forget the girls, alright?"

Penn inhaled, the air sharp in his nostrils. He felt like he was going to lose it. Just then he saw a woman in dress pants speaking with the girls on the porch. One of them pointed over in their direction and the woman started walking toward where they stood.

"I'm not doing this," Penn said. Sean looked at him funny, then turned as he heard the woman approaching.

“Hi boys, I’m Miranda Johnson with WFTV, can I speak with you about what just happened here?” She had her cell phone out and was poised with it, ready to press something that would turn all this into a narrative, some story she would craft and publish and send out through the entire city, ruining whatever remnants of this campus were left.

“No.”

“Of course.”

Penn watched her press a polished finger against her phone the second the words were out of Sean’s mouth. “Name?” she asked.

“Sean—actually, Shekhar Pandey.”

“Are you a student, Shekhar?”

“Yes, I’m a student.”

“And can you tell me what happened here? If you’re comfortable I’m going to start video recording.”

“Sure,” Sean said, and ruffled his hair with his hands.

“Excellent, step over here for me,” she guided him in front of the athletics building, the smoke fading nearly to nothing behind him. Fire trucks had arrived and white plumes of spray were visible toward the back of the building.

She held up her fingers, then gestured a countdown—three, two, one—

“Miranda Johnson here just moments after the bomb explosion in the athletics building on the south side of campus. Here is a man who was in the middle of the action. Shekhar—would you tell us exactly what happened?”

For a brief second Sean looked at Penn and all he wanted to do was convince him not to do this—to speak about this miserable thing, to encourage people to believe that

this place was in decline, that it would no longer be the safe place it had been before. But Sean was looking at the woman's phone again, and Penn felt sick. He turned and started to walk home.

"I was in the athletics building—I'm on the soccer team—" he heard Sean say, "my friend was waiting up for me to go get lunch when I was done."

He paused long enough that Penn looked over his shoulder, and the reporter was staring at him, her hands still rigid with her phone, trained to capture a little micro-picture of Sean, the building behind him, the police and the smoke. The woman mouthed something at Penn that included the word "interview." Penn ignored her. Sean looked to him nervously then looked back at the phone. "So we were getting ready to go to lunch, and then the fire alarm went off—it was *really* intense, just a real moment of life and death, you know?"

Penn's phone was buzzing wildly. He pulled it out and there were four missed calls and two text messages, two of the calls from Doris, probably doing the same thing that stupid Miranda chick was trying to do, wondering if Penn was with Sean and if Sean could use his key card to let her into the building. She was probably running down here.

His hands were shaking. He realized he didn't have his coat. He clicked through his contacts to the K's, then went through them twice before he remembered he didn't have Kate's number, that she didn't even have a cell phone. In that moment a part of him raged at her unwillingness to participate in the real world, to just be a part of things so she could actually be there when someone needed her. And at the same time he felt ridiculous wanting to call her, she barely even knew him, and yet he was confident she'd be there for him if he did.

He passed two adults standing alongside the sidewalk in winter hats, staring and murmuring between themselves, too focused on the athletics building in the distance to notice Penn walk by.

He opened his email and started a new message. *I'm coming over. Hope you're there.* He pressed send.

(18]

When she pulled open the door and saw Penn, she rushed at him.

“Hey,” he said, then grunted as she attacked him in a hard hug, his body thinner than she expected to feel beneath her arms.

“Are you okay? Where’s Sean?” she backed up into her dorm room so he could enter, then walked past him to look down the hall. “Is he alright?” The hallway was empty, though it buzzed with voices behind doors, people on their cell phones, reassuring family they were okay. Just minutes ago it had been filled with people, panicking until the RA came out and announced they were fine, it was contained, get in your rooms and please do not evacuate.

“I’m fine. Sean’s still at the building, doing an interview.”

She watched Penn eye her bed, then sit down in her computer chair.

“On television,” he added. “We were there when the alarm went off.”

Her breath went shallow. It hadn’t occurred to her how close they might have been to it—though now she recalled Sean saying, just yesterday, that he’d be weightlifting first thing Saturday morning. She’d ignored it, thinking it was just one of his humble-brags.

She reached behind Penn to pick up her open laptop. His ears were bright pink from the cold. “Doris is down there now, at the building I mean,” she said. “She said to tell her if I heard anything from either of you.”

Kate hadn’t seen Penn in over a month—not since their awkward departure on the library steps after studying together after they met. If it weren’t for Sean’s continuous outreach to her and Doris—to hangout, study, eat lunch—she would have left that day convinced that the friendships weren’t meant to be.

“How’s Doris?”

“Uh, fine,” she answered. “I think.” In the past few weeks they’d been spending less time together. She didn’t feel a need to explain that to him but she explained anyway. “We had a bit of a falling out after that article she wrote—I’m sure you’ve heard all that from Sean.” She looked at Penn and his face was blank. “The ‘rural girl’ feature thing?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Sorry, no, he—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Are you and Sean not hanging out or something?” Maybe it wasn’t just her and Doris who were butting heads.

Penn took off his backpack, which he’d been leaning against like a cushion, and set it on the ground. His sweater was thin, and the skin on his neck and hands was bright pink like his hands. It seemed very unlike Penn to be the person who bypassed a coat in December, but then again, she didn’t know him well.

“Sorry, I’ve been really busy with school,” he explained, though he didn’t sound apologetic. “There are internship programs for next summer that are competitive, and I needed to focus on those applications.”

He rubbed his hands together and Kate grabbed a sweatshirt from the closet and tossed it to him. “Where’s your coat.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said. “I’m sorry I went off the grid.”

Kate shrugged. She sat on the edge of her bed.

“I need to do well in school. I’m sure Sean has complained about that to you guys already. I know he was hanging out with you a lot. I wanted to come—I just, I don’t know. Things got busy.”

“I’m not really worried about your schoolwork right now,” Kate said, and Penn looked at her, his eyes brighter grey than she remembered. His sharp features rendered him intimidating whether or not he tried to be. She wouldn’t tell him, but she’d watched part of Sean’s interview on her computer moments before Penn arrived. There was a brief clip in the beginning when the camera focused on Penn, then bounced haphazardly back to Sean, and in that moment all she’d been struck by how intense his eyes were—blisteringly grey.

Kate exhaled. “Doris wrote an article about me. Not about me, exactly, but she mentioned me in a way that—I don’t know, I didn’t appreciate it.” She ran her fingernails in the seams of her red quilt. “It’s fine now. I told her not to do that—don’t write about me without telling me you know? As a journalist that seems like moral code.”

“That seems fair,” Penn offered after a pause.

Kate nodded. “I think we just needed a break after that.” She laughed a little. “Sounds like we’re dating or something.” She could feel her face redden. “It was funny, though, you’ll appreciate this—Sean was the one who sparked the whole thing. I hadn’t read the article, it’s really small, a little opinion blurb or whatever, and Sean brought it

up, something like, ‘Oh, it’s really cool how you write about her, Doris,’ and all that. ‘Kate, you’re her journalism muse.’ And I didn’t know what he was talking about, but Doris sort of blanched. Then the rest unfolded pretty awkwardly. Sean did a good job restoring the peace.”

Penn smiled. “He’s pretty good at that.”

Kate’s computer pinged and she lifted it from the bed, setting it on her lap.

“Doris.”

Borrow a phone? Call me?

“Penn, can I borrow your phone?”

He slid it out, unlocked it, and handed it to her. When she opened his contacts they were opened to the K’s. She scrolled until she found Doris Suárez.

“Penn?” Doris answered.

“It’s Kate.”

“Oh, right, wow, that was fast! Sean—shut *up*, two seconds. Sorry, hang on, Kate.”

There was a rustling noise and then Sean was in the background, the two of them arguing. Kate smiled and dropped the phone to put it on speakerphone. Any tension she’d been holding onto eased.

“Well tell her Penn needs someone to hang out with him,” Sean was saying, and Kate instantly regretted putting the call on speaker, but felt too trapped to turn back now. Penn’s face was strange, more unguarded than she usually saw him, his mouth slack as he listened to whatever was coming next.

“Why aren’t *you* hanging out with him?” Doris snapped.

“Because I had to do the interview!”

“You mean you had to scare the shit out of Ann Arborites by participating in a Concordis-affiliated news program.”

“You are *unbelievable*.”

“As unbelievable as that news report?”

“You haven’t even *watched* it!”

“Well I *will* watch it!”

“Doris!” Kate shouted into the phone. It bewildered her how Doris and Sean could argue so comfortably after what was happening. “Doris, finish the phone call.”

There was a rustling sound and Doris’ voice resonated through the speaker.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m just stressed out. My editor wants me to do a follow-up interview with Sean about his interview experience. She knows I know him.”

“Where are you guys?” Penn asked.

“Oh, Penn! Hey! Long time no talk,” Doris said, her voice light and friendly. Maybe Kate was the only one who had felt hurt by Penn’s unacknowledged desertion. “Penn, would you interview for this, too? You could talk about how the Concordis reporter acted and all that? The post-bomb vibe?”

Penn seemed to falter, then said, “Maybe.”

“Look,” Doris continued. “I know this was a damn payout scheme or something—there’s no way Concordis could get to it this quickly unless they knew something ahead of time. Whether that means they also got a bomb threat called in, or whatever, I don’t know. People do that sometimes—alert the news before their wacko

endeavor begins.” There was crunching snow and the sound of Doris breathing. Kate thought she could hear Sean talking to someone.

“I want to interview you for a follow-up feature on that experience with the Concordis anchor,” Doris repeated, her voice quiet now. “I want to make sure that in the midst of terrible things like this that no one gives good journalism a bad name, or vice versa. I get that Sean wanted to interview out of the goodness of his sometimes naïvely idealistic heart, let people know it was all going to be alright and all that, and I know he wasn’t making things up, plus he said he needs the publicity for sports or something, wants to build his own platform so people recognize his face or whatever—that his weightlifting session was documented on local and potentially national television, blah blah jokes, fame, sports...”

“Don’t call me when I’m famous, Doris!” Sean shouted from the background, and they all laughed, even Doris, who sounded embarrassed.

“Anyway, Penn,” she said, her voice still quiet. “It’s important that we do thorough reporting about the reporting itself, and Concordis needs that maybe more than other companies. Just think about it okay?”

Penn was silent, and to Kate it seemed he was thinking harder than he needed to—as uncomfortable as she’d felt showing up in Doris’ reporting, it seemed worth it for something as concerning as this. It was for the good of campus, and maybe more people than that—anyone who watched the news ought to get full perspective on the truth. Penn was an eye witness.

“I gotta go. What’re you doing later, wanna get dinner? I doubt we’ll be fighting any crowds,” Doris said.

“Sure, that sounds good,” Kate replied, looking at Penn. “My dining hall at six or so?”

“Yeah, that’ll give me time. I’ll share with Sean. See you guys.”

The call ended and she handed the phone back to Penn. The contacts had returned to the K’s for some reason and Penn tapped to another letter.

Kate stood and grabbed her coffee mug from the desk. “Be right back,” she said, and walked quickly down the hallway to the communal bathroom. She needed time to think and she assumed he probably did, too.

A girl Kate had spoken with only in passing stuck her head out of her doorway into the vacant hall. “Hey, are you going to be leaving?” she asked.

“The building? No, the RA said we didn’t need to.”

“No, I mean I’m leaving for the semester,” the girl said hurriedly. “I already talked with my parents and they’re calling admissions right now. It’s not safe to be here anymore.” The girl was leaning aggressively out her doorway now. “You really shouldn’t stay on campus. There’s only three weeks until the holiday break anyway. Come back next semester if you really want to. But I won’t. I’ll finish out this year online until the university improves security.”

“I’m sure it’s fine to stay on campus—it was one building—they’re definitely going to be increasing security—”

The girl’s laugh was high and mean. “Ha, right. Because, you know, a friggin’ bomb on campus is proof of capable security.”

Kate passed the mug between her hands, trying to calm the fear the girls' words had coaxed into flame. "Sorry, have to go," she said, holding up the mug as if it were an explanation.

The girl stared at her, biting her lip, then retreated into her room. Kate noticed she left the door open just a sliver—probably to listen for more prey coming down the hallway.

Kate washed the mug and filled it with tap water.

In her room Penn was holding his phone and scrolling robotically through news reports, her sweatshirt over his shoulders like a blanket. "Thousands are watching us right now," someone said from the phone, "and in Ann Arbor we're all wondering: Should they be afraid?"

She put the mug in the microwave.

"Anything important?" she asked out of obligation. She was already sick of hearing about the bomb and starting to realize the drama was just beginning.

"No one died."

"Thank God."

"Yeah, no leads. Fire's contained. No other threats to campus. Security is way up, though. One university thread speculates it may have been a former Rec employee, somebody angry they got fired—the source being a friend of a friend of an acquaintance. And classes are cancelled through next week."

"Anything about students leaving?"

"Campus? Yeah, some of that," he said. "I bet traffic will pick up as the day goes on. I don't think you have social media, but I wouldn't go on there right now. You may

want to call anybody important, though. Your aunt—right? Let them know you’re alright. If they see this news they’re not going to think you are.”

It was a smart idea. Clara would be freaking out and Kate hadn’t even thought of her yet—nor Will. She wondered if he’d be worried about her.

“Want my phone?” Penn asked without looking up from an article.

Kate thought of Clara on the phone in a high state of panic, an amplified version of the girl in the hallway. She’d need to know her position on staying or leaving the campus before she called. “I’ll email her.”

He gave her a funny look and she handed him the mug with a mint tea bag. Then she pulled open her computer and sent Clara a note, explaining she was fine, apologizing for not calling, promising she would later.

“Are you and your aunt close?” Penn asked. He had the mug in his lap and it was strange to see him draped in her sweatshirt, holding something from Clara’s—pieces of childhood. The mug was bright yellow, painted with blobby daisies in elementary school. It was the only one she’d felt comfortable taking from the house.

“Sort of. She raised me, but the situation wasn’t the best.”

Kate was compelled to tell him more even though he hadn’t asked. In the weeks since they talked at the library, she had researched everything she could find online about Penn Beckett. It was a stalker thing to do, but her conviction that he was still somehow her brother had driven her into all sorts of rationalized thinking about why it was fine to research him.

There hadn’t been much to find—a regional academic scholarship, a basically pointless listing of his name—Pennant Beckett—on the “Alumni” webpage of what she

presumed was the fancy, foster home/boarding school he went to. Once or twice she had nearly called Clara to ask her about it, but she always fell back on how candid her aunt had been right before she left—insisting the vague paperwork about Atticus was all she had been given. They had their rough patches, but Clara wouldn't lie to her after coming clean about the other information she'd withheld. She would know Kate well enough to know that Kate may not be able to forgive her twice. Real family was all she'd ever wanted.

The most surprising Penn Research discovery had been a lankier Sean in Penn's high school soccer team photo, taken after a conference championship. She didn't know they'd known each other before Michigan, though Sean informed her and Doris of this not long after she saw the picture online. It had come up organically in conversation, the three of them hanging out at the bagel shop where she and Doris first met.

Now, looking at Penn's furrowed brow, his thin eyelashes pointed toward the mug, the poorly painted daisies, she was compelled all over again to disbelieve that he was truly Penn Beckett, a stranger who grew up outside of her story.

"Do you have any siblings?" Kate asked him outright.

He turned the mug without looking at her. "I had a sister. She died when I was young."

"I'm sorry." Instantly she was reminded of the selfishness of her search—the risk of causing pain if she was wrong.

"It's alright, it was a long time ago," he said. He didn't smile, but he didn't look upset. "You?"

“I—” she wasn’t sure how she wanted to phrase it. When this came up with Doris early on in their friendship, she told her that she used to have a brother, mostly out of her old habit of using past tense. Then she hadn’t wanted to correct herself by getting into the drama of what happened with Clara; it was too recent, and she didn’t know Doris well enough then to trust she wouldn’t exploit the story for journalism. Recently that trust had only been hampered with the “rural girl” article.

“I do have a brother, but he’s estranged,” she said.

“Huh,” Penn said. “Estranged, like—?”

“It’s kind of a long story.”

He looked nervous. “Well, I’d like to hear it—sometime, I mean. Doesn’t have to be right now, but if you want to share.”

She appreciated that. Instead she told him more about Churdan, how she’d moved there after her parents died, leaving out the trauma of never hearing from her grandparents again. She explained how she and Clara hadn’t been close before she moved—she really only knew of her, her dad having mentioned his sister before but they didn’t stay close as adults. She thought again about the concept of her dad visiting Churdan for her uncle’s funeral, and wondered if she might ask Will’s parents about it after break.

As she spoke she felt increasingly warm toward Penn, more comfortable with him and less concerned about how he’d written them off. She talked openly, maybe more so than she even had with Doris, and she realized that part of that had to do with the way he listened. He was quiet but attentive, his eyes on her face as she spoke. He didn’t interrupt her but never seemed distracted by other things, either, as if there were better things for

him to do. Sometimes Doris' inattentiveness—an interruption from her phone, a wave from a friend—made Kate unwilling to share things about herself. And despite Doris' "open-book" personality when it came to her views on social justice issues, Kate had come to learn Doris was in fact very private about things she wasn't comfortable with. Notably, her own emotions.

"Are you bored out of your mind?" Kate said now.

There was a fullness in the room, almost spiritual, like they were suspended within the same, shared life instead of separated in two.

"Hardly," Penn said. He was feeling strange—there was so much about Kate's story that resonated with him beyond the information she presented. He felt like he knew her story already, like she'd been reciting familiar words right back to him.

Since he'd entered her room he'd felt welcome and warm, the sweatshirt and the tea had helped, but there was more to her than he'd anticipated and he was glad he'd risked coming to her. She'd been more comforting than he'd even expected, as if something beyond his consciousness had recognized there was more here if he pursued it.

Now he felt a swell of intuition again, was reminded of those interactions with roommates when his gut had informed him before his head had. The last time he'd experienced the sensation was months before this, probably in that interaction with his roommate.

"After we talked at the library," he said now. "What you said inspired me to pursue my own story, I guess. When I turned 18 I got a letter that I never opened. Freshman year was wrapping up, things were busy then, but—I decided I want to figure things out."

Her face was so expectant that he laughed. “Oh, the letter sucked—there was nothing in it. Just a formal letter about needing to schedule a meeting with a legal mediator in NYC, some ‘keeper of the secrets’ who can answer my questions and give me full information about my story. Who my parents are—” he halted. It was the first time he’d said the words aloud. “It feels really intense, I guess. I’m trying to make sure I don’t go in with expectations.”

“Are you going to meet with him?” Kate asked, her voice traveling between them, she felt, like a third person in the room had aired the words.

“Over the holiday, yeah.”

Someone knocked on the door and Kate turned to see a short, mousey girl from the hallway. “Oh, God, sorry to interrupt,” she said.

Kate was disappointed to have the moment stopped but waved her in. “What’s up?” She was one of the girls she liked running into now and again. She smiled easily.

“Are you guys just hanging out in here? A few of us were thinking it’d be nice to just hang out, get to know each other. No one’s really going out or studying right now.”

No one had ever invited her to socialize in the hall. To her knowledge, no one really did. Most times anyone left their door propped open it was an accident, and when she peeked in they were usually distracted, on a video call with a faraway friend or family.

“Yeah, yeah, where are you meeting?”

“Well actually,” the girl fidgeted. “Can we hang out in here? You can say no, obviously, it just seems, like, really safe and cozy in here.”

Penn grinned, “That’d be cool.” The girl was cute, and the happiness he felt talking with Kate made him feel magnanimous. “Sorry—your room,” he looked to Kate.

“Sure, yeah, of course. Come on in.”

“Great,” the girl said. “I’ll grab some friends.”

The girl’s arrival had revealed what the moment between she and Penn had become—intimacy built up to the point that it felt embarrassing to have someone else walk in on it. Avoiding Penn’s face, which she could feel was trained toward her own, perhaps watching her the way she wanted to study him, she noticed her reflection in the mirror above her desk, her face radiant with a joy that came across without a smile, the freckles near her eye a striking grey.

-19-

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RESEARCHER ID: 3349-006

RESEARCHED CANDIDATE: Pennant “Penn” Illyria Beckett

POSITION: Intern

SSID: ***_**_****

CURRENT EMPLOYER: Student (sophomore), University of Michigan

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY: N/a

RESIDENTIAL HISTORY: Boarding school in New Jersey, University dorm and off-campus housing in Michigan – see addendum

PARENT(S) FULL NAME: Irene Beckett, David Beckett – no records found, see addendum

PARENT(S) SSID: N/a

PARENT(S) RESIDENTIAL HISTORY: N/a

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS OF NOTE: N/a - orphan

INFLUENCE HISTORY / LIKELIHOOD (include all relevant resources, leads, and reasoning):

Unlikely. Few friends, no leadership roles. 1 close friend worth researching (see attachment). Unable to investigate personal history/genetics due to unavailable parent/family records

POTENTIAL INFLUENCE PRESENTATION(S) (include date, place, and brief description, you may be contacted for a full in-person description interview and subsequent research trip):

N/a, see reasons above

Close friend interviewed re: Dec. bomb threat/event (see clip).

Candidate will be interviewed at on-campus event in spring.

[20)

Penn had stepped out of Kate's room to let Sean into the building for dinner. The afternoon had dissolved and he'd barely noticed. Hanging out in Kate's room was the most communal thing he'd done since meeting Doris and Kate in the first place; over the course of the afternoon more students had trickled in, her door propped open, invitational.

The effect was exhilarating. One girl, named Tara, was coincidentally the president of extracurricular clubs on campus, and the three of them had talked extensively about starting up a group on campus. The girl was applying to medical school and was working to get as much extracurricular involvement as possible—she had a journalism minor, so Kate had told her about Doris, and she'd explained the group she wanted to start was specifically focused on media. That, combined with his need for more leadership roles to better his chances of an internship, had gotten Penn's interest. By the end of their conversation, she'd practically guaranteed Kate and Penn positions when the group began meeting next semester.

He'd connected with more people in one afternoon than he had his entire first year of college.

Outside, it was cold. The streets were dark and mostly empty now, the parking lot in front of Kate's dorm definitely emptier than it had been earlier. He wondered why some people left and why others chose to stay. It was something a few students talked about in Kate's dorm room, at one point; some of them were planning on leaving but changed their minds after hanging out all afternoon. It was certainly comforting to be with people in the aftermath of this morning. He felt like he'd lived through three days in one.

He waved, seeing Sean's unmistakable gait as he rounded a corner and approached along the sidewalk. He was wearing his trademark sweat suit, but he'd left his backpack at home. He jogged to close the distance between them.

"Yo," he said.

Penn hugged him.

“What a day, right,” Sean said. He looked tired, the faint beginnings of bags under his eyes and his hair matted in places it never was, probably from the weird freeze-drying it underwent that morning. “Where’s your coat?”

Penn waited for Sean to remember that the last time he saw his coat was when Sean disappeared with it into the house of the random girls that morning.

“How long you been here?” Sean continued.

“A while. Kate and I hung out for most of the day.”

“Oh really?” Sean asked, “Well, sweet, good timing for my question, then. I want to ask her out tonight. What d’you think? Good idea, bad idea?”

Penn blinked. All afternoon he’d been trying to sort through how he felt about Kate, why he liked her so much, but he also thought he’d have a lot more time. “After a bomb threat?”

“Right, but, she’s not someone to get freaked out by that, right? I don’t think it matters. I dunno if she’s going home early or whatever, and I leave for training in Arizona in, like, a week. So if I ask her out now, then if it tanks we don’t see each other for weeks. Plenty of recovery time.”

“Mature,” Penn joked, hoping he’d laugh, but Sean just shrugged.

“I really like her. I don’t know why I’m waiting.”

Penn scrambled for something to say. He’d seen Sean girl-crazy tons of times before, and it looked absolutely nothing like this. The sincerity of his eyes, the softness of his voice, nothing about it was familiar. He looked vulnerable.

“You might ruin the friend group,” Penn stated, a hint of bitterness escaping in his tone. He realized then that part of his discomfort with the idea had to do with how much

he liked things as they were now. Plus, Doris had clearly been mooning over Sean recently, and apparently Sean hadn't noticed, or didn't care.

"What about Doris?" Penn asked.

"What about her? I feel like she wouldn't mind us dating."

"I think she likes you."

"Ha!" Sean smacked his shoulder. "Yeah, for target practice."

"I'm serious."

"Yeah I know, that's why it's funny."

Penn's frustration must have registered on his face because Sean added, "Sorry, man, I get what you're saying, but girls being mean to you when they like you isn't exactly the college way, you know? Maybe if we were in third grade or something." He walked toward the door and tapped on it. "Open this up, would you? I don't want to stand out here."

Penn produced Kate's keycard and slid it through the reader. Sean tugged the door open and they loitered for a minute in the lobby, Sean watching the few residents talking seriously to the front desk security guard inside. Two additional security guards had taken post directly inside the doors, and they watched Sean and Penn, stone faced.

"Think he recognizes me?" Sean asked, thumbing at the guard to their right. "From my big interview? I looked epic. Did you watch it yet?"

Penn shook his head. "I wouldn't ask Kate out, Sean, not yet." He wished Sean could piece it together—pick up on how he was feeling, read between the lines for once. He'd been here all day long and Sean hadn't so much as thought of what that might mean.

Sean pulled the next set of doors open and strode through the lobby, heading for the back staircase that would lead them to the fourth floor cafeteria. “Thanks, but why? The world keeps turning and bombs go off—I gotta try my hand at love while I can.” He reached the stairs and took them two at a time. Penn refused to keep up and waited for Sean to pause on a landing. “Distract Doris for me, will you?” Sean brazenly called down. “I have a feeling it might be hard to get Kate on her own.”

“God, no, I’m not doing that,” Penn called up the staircase. He was tired and unhappy about how hard he was coming down from a really enjoyable afternoon. Sean could figure it out on his own if he wasn’t going to heed Penn’s advice.

They met on the fourth floor, Penn breathing a little heavily, Sean looked accusingly at Penn. “What’s your deal? Everything I do today just isn’t the ‘right’ thing to do?” He made air quotes with his long fingers.

“Ha! You look like a raptor,” said Doris. She and Kate were in the doorway. Sean turned jumpily and smiled.

“Nice interview,” Kate said, knowing it’d only be minutes before they talked about it anyway. Penn wished for a second he would have interviewed, too, though he was surprised she’d seen it. All day with her and he hadn’t seen her watch it.

Doris looked like she might say something, but Kate prevented it. “Hurry up, I’m starving,” she said.

Penn thought Kate looked happy—as happy as he had been to spend time with her.

“Dinner on me,” Sean said now, and instructed the cafeteria worker to swipe his ID card for guest passes. They were all on meal plans anyway except for Penn, and he found the gesture annoyingly artificial.

“You alright?” Kate said to him, and he realized he was openly scowling.

He cleared his throat. “Yeah. Hungry.”

Doris grabbed them a table and seemed in a good mood herself, humming something as she pulled some extra chairs.

“The last supper,” Sean announced as they sat down with trays of food. Kate felt so connected to all of them that she wondered if something was wrong, like she was high. The bomb had functioned as a hyper-intense impetus for connection.

“You seem like you’re doing well, considering,” she said to Sean. He looked as energetic as he always did, but she wondered if inside he was afraid, what it might be like as he kept returning to the athletics facility in the future. She doubted she could get him to talk about it.

“Gross,” Doris said, staring at Sean’s chicken nuggets. “I’ve told you guys chicken was the thing that freaked my dad out most about this country, right? He couldn’t believe all the forms you put your meat in—how you wrap it up in plastic wrap like a toy. How do you know it’s even chicken?”

“Have fun at the salad bar,” Sean quipped, though the way he said it seemed meaner than usual and Doris got a strange look on her face. Kate looked nervously between them. There had been something off about their dynamic in recent hangouts, just the three of them, like there were invisible, social weights that were shifting to change the way things were.

Penn ate mechanically as Sean paraded them through a conversation about their winter plans—soccer training in Sedona for him, a visit to Churdan for Kate, family vacation to Hawaii for Doris.

“Going east,” Penn said without effort. He was only going for a few days, a meeting with that benefactor, in and out of New York then back to campus, where he really wanted to be. He’d already told Kate about it and didn’t feel like collecting pity that he’d be spending the majority of break on campus. He liked the quiet library, the empty streets.

“You know, if you wanted to do a little road trip, Sedona isn’t so far from Tucson, which really needs some social reform,” Doris stated, stabbing at her spinach leaves with a fork. “If you get any breaks from soccer, you could really plugin and make a difference there—like lead a little soccer camp or something—”

Sean scoffed openly. “Right, because I’m going to spend my free time exhausting myself even further after I practice in 90-degree heat.”

Kate laughed and Sean smirked a little, then stuffed a whole nugget in his mouth. Penn was starting to wish their dinner would wrap up quick.

“What’re you doing in Hawaii?” Penn asked Doris.

“Helping with social reform?” Sean added, then busted out laughing. Doris was visibly angry now, not laughing. She set down her fork.

“It’s a family trip, I didn’t plan it,” she said.

Sean seemed to realize he’d gone too far. “We’re kidding, Suárez. Don’t get angry about it.”

Doris glowered into her salad and Penn watched Sean eye Kate without pretense. Luckily she was focused on her tray. If they took much longer everyone was going to be part of Sean's declaration of love, whether they wanted to be or not.

"I stole a waffle maker from here once," Sean announced, and Doris eyed him, disgusted but also intrigued. Kate didn't say anything.

"When?" Doris drawled, "Did you so arrogantly entitle yourself to a piece of well-paid for, student-funded school property?"

Sean smiled proudly, a faraway look in his eyes, as if watching the memory play out in the air above Doris' head. "Ah, a few months into freshman year. But I lost it in a euchre game with one of my buddies. I got cocky."

"Typical," Doris said.

Kate had emptied her tray of food and suddenly she felt exhausted; having so many people in her room had been bewildering and welcome, but it was hitting her now—how not used to it she was, like going for run after months of being out of shape.

"Hey, I know this was short, but I need to go finish studying for one of my finals," Kate said. "We should—uh—get a group picture before we go."

The delivery had been much more awkward than she intended. Earlier, after Penn had stepped out and she'd politely announced that she had to head out too—hallway guests hugging her goodbye and saying *we should all hangout more, just knock on my door*—she'd realized what she could do.

In her dorm room, when she spoke with Penn, she'd had the same kind of intellectual clarity come over her that she'd only had once before: back in September, that time she *knew* she had to go to the party with Doris, the party where they met Sean

and Penn, like someone had dropped a thought into her mind, as clean and contained as a coin, and there was only one thing she could do with it.

“Alright team photo!” Sean repeated, and she was thankful for his willingness to support whatever his friends wanted.

If she took a picture with Penn, she could bring it back to Clara over break. He was her brother—he had to be. His name must have been changed, just like hers had been. He was bound to find that out when he went to New York. When he got back, she could tell him the story about her own name—her *real* name—and in the meantime she could take the picture, show it to Clara. Try to confirm what she knew.

Sean walked over to two guys at the table next to them and handed them his little flip phone, asking them to take a picture. One stood reluctantly, then held the camera up to the group.

Penn was standing next to Doris, who looked as annoyed as he felt, and Kate stood up from her chair so they were all on the same level. Like clockwork, Sean jaunted over and put his arm around Kate.

“Guys,” Doris said, and her voice was uncharacteristically small, “this is so corny, but this has been the best semester of college.”

The comment surprised Penn so much he looked at Doris and was probably looking at her in the first version of the picture—the guy, annoyed, looked away from the phone.

“Are you guys ready?” the guy said. But as Doris’ words settled, Penn felt the sincerity of them. Combined with Kate’s innocent request to take a photo all together, he realized that indeed, these people were easily his closest friends.

Kate felt that clarity again—and this time it was stronger. Her face was tingling near her right eye, a pins and needles feeling, or like a kid had sprinkled her with glitter. “Agreed,” she said bravely, wanting Doris to know she wasn’t alone. The next thought she had was that next semester, when she got back, she should make a point to contact Penn right away, maybe even come back to campus early.

“Here you go,” the guy said, handing the phone to Kate and staring distractedly at her face. Then he looked at Penn and looked away, clearly embarrassed. He returned to his table and his friend was staring at the four of them, then murmured something as the other guy sat down.

Penn doubted it’d be a good photo. Hopefully all Kate wanted was nostalgia.

“Thanks. Can I get one more?” Kate posed the question to Sean without one look at the group picture. She handed him his phone back. “I need to get a picture with Penn.” She felt confident now, the residue of her clear thinking spurring her on to ask what she wanted. “I already have pictures with you and Doris,” she added. Sean held his phone up and gestured for the two of them to squeeze together. Penn put an arm around Kate’s shoulder.

Sean counted to three, but as he did so a feeling washed over Penn and he thought he saw the entire cafeteria turning slowly toward them—distracted, then more pointedly, all eyes returning to he and Kate like they were tethered and Penn held every single thread—so similar to the feeling he’d had with Kate even earlier that day—the intuition. He felt powerful, leadership intensified, like he could do anything, say anything, and people were dying to listen.

“Here,” Sean said, holding out the phone so Kate could see the tiny, pixelated shot on his flip phone screen. Penn watched her consult it and noticed her freckles again—prominent, a bright grey, almost silver, in a way he swore they hadn’t been a moment ago.

He looked around the cafeteria and the few people around were eating their food, or talking with one or two friends. Only one or two people were watching them.

“I’ll email it to you,” Sean offered, and Penn turned to see Sean looking at him without smiling. Penn realized his arm was still around Kate’s shoulders and he dropped it guiltily.

“Or, why don’t I just stop by your room quick—” Sean continued. “I can plug my phone in to your computer and you’ll have the jpeg on there, it’ll be quicker.”

“Uh, sure—” Kate said, thinking the request was a little over the top. She felt kind of dizzy—this level of socializing was exhausting—but Sean looked carefree and casual, as if his suggestion was the most natural thing in the world. She noticed Doris staring at him from her chair, her fork suspended in midair, expression empty.

“Have a great break, you two—Penny, I’ll probably see you one more time before you go?” Sean housed his phone in a jacket pocket and picked up his tray.

“Probably,” Penn said. He felt delirious and sat down hard. His concern about Sean’s pursuit of Kate felt decidedly irrelevant now.

“Have a good break,” Doris quipped, her aggravation clear. She picked up her water glass and ignored Sean and Kate, though from frustration or hurt Penn couldn’t tell. Penn waited for her to add something for Kate—plans to stop by her room, or catch up with her later. She didn’t.

Kate eyed Doris worriedly but picked up her tray and cleared it, Sean quick on her heels. Penn watched the two of them head out of the cafeteria, chatting with one another as they went, and tried to watch them covertly as they entered the hallway.

“Well,” Doris said, and his attention returned to her, her grey streak evident with her head bowed, focused on her food. “Good time for a break.”

(21)

In the dorm hallways, an RA had hung string lights and green and red paper chains for the holidays—the kind with interlocking circles that Kate remembered making in elementary school. The fluorescents were off to soften things, and Sean’s brown skin looked beautiful, even glowing. His head was tilted up to take it all in, and she admired the way the light sparkled in his eyes. He tilted his head down and she looked away, embarrassed and a little regretful that he might presume something. She knew Doris liked him. He was off limits.

“So, what does one do in a farm town in the wintertime?” he said, touching a few chains lightly with his fingertips. He was tall enough that the reach was easy, an afterthought.

Kate envisioned Will in this moment, winding down for the night, reading or watching TV with his brothers, helping his mom with some errant chore or—more likely—bookkeeping. “Same things most people do,” she said. “Hang around.”

She felt awkward being alone with Sean. It had happened before but it wasn’t so constructed. Without Doris, it was harder to fill the silence on her own.

“Are you doing alright—from earlier?” She’d wanted to ask it the second she saw him. She’d been too intimidated to ask Penn.

“Me? Yeah, I think I might have pulled something in my shoulder,” He rubbed his right shoulder with his left hand, his face serious, and she remembered he’d been in the athletics building to weightlift before the bomb went off.

He didn’t laugh. As they reached her floor two girls went hushed as Sean approached, staring at him blatantly. Kate was too confused about his answer—she wondered if maybe he was in shock—to reframe her question.

When they got to her room she noticed he was fidgeting incessantly with a zipper.

“Seems like everyone on campus is going to recognize you now,” she said, thinking of the two girls.

“What?” Sean asked, clearly pleased. She wouldn’t grace him with the answer she knew he wanted—her noticing the way the girls looked at him in reverence if not flirtatiously, one turning her head a little to look again after they passed.

A girl in her hallway who was in her room earlier poked her head out, saw them, then disappeared, and it reminded her what this might look like to someone who didn’t know her, all these boys coming in and out of her room in one day.

She didn’t understand why Sean got attention just for being an athlete—when she talked to students one-on-one it seemed like a fraction of them *actually* enjoyed sports. The rest pretended they did, to blend in or get along, maybe. In her mind Sean was an early twenties student, just like everyone else.

She turned her key in the door—an old fashioned aspect of housing that had never felt in keeping with the rest of its high-tech, key card system. She loved it.

“Casa Katherine,” Sean stated, and when he smiled at her, her stomach flipped.

It occurred to Kate that it wasn't just Sean's soccer status that drew people to him after all, that maybe the soccer was just the easiest means to approach him. He was attractive, but he was also the kind of person who felt welcoming, even if you didn't know him. If he could learn to shut his mouth for longer periods of time, he'd be even more successful with that aura.

The air was stale in her dorm room but thankfully didn't smell terrible, and aside from some shadowy piles of clothes and homework, it wasn't a total disaster. She flicked on the light and any magic holiday aura they had going evaporated instantly. She exhaled, relieved.

"Computer's right here," she said, rapping her knuckles on the lid. "Thanks for doing that." She sat on the edge of her twin bed and tried to occupy her hands by straightening things up around the room, which she never would have done were she alone. Having both Sean and Penn see her room in one day felt like a massive leap of friendship.

Sean pulled out her desk chair and sat backward in it, facing her laptop, and rambled a bit about his interview from earlier as he opened it and pulled out his flip phone, saying something about how media interested him sometimes, mostly televised sports.

Kate listened patiently, trying to reconcile the small talk with her increasing sense of dread. Doris had talked openly of her affection for Sean after a reconciliatory hangout just days ago, waxing poetic about how it didn't make any sense—what was wrong with her—the horror of falling for someone as fluffy as Sean Pandey. She and Kate had laughed about it lightheartedly, Kate thinking it wasn't really an issue, convinced it

would fade like Doris' other crushes. But if that was going to happen, it hadn't happened yet, and any self-loathing Doris really felt for herself about her feelings toward Sean didn't seem to be preventing them from intensifying. Kate didn't know which was worse: the idea of Doris truly pursuing Sean, threatening the balance of their friend group, or the concept of Sean pursuing her, Kate. She felt kind of arrogant even thinking it.

Either way, it was two ways to the same end: implosion, and she didn't want any of their friendships to suffer. All she wanted was to keep things growing upward, not together, into grater, deeper friendships.

"Kate?" Sean said, and she realized he'd turned in his chair and was readying himself for something, his feet spread wide, his arms resting on his knees, his phone already unplugged from the computer and flipping around in his long-fingered hands.

"Uh, sorry—did you say something?"

He looked at her suspiciously, but repeated his words. "Do you want to get lunch sometime, before we both head out for break?"

Her breath caught. "Another group dinner? Sure, that was fun." She knew it wasn't what he'd meant, but the words spilled out in desperation. He smiled skeptically.

"Yeah—no, not like that. Lunch together. Us two." With his right hand he made a little gun shape and rocked the gesture back and forth.

The awkwardness of it was excruciating, but she stopped herself from fidgeting too much. She wanted to stand up and run out of the room instead of answering him—the door was even ajar a little, a perfect exit route.

“I’m sort of, dating someone,” she lied, watching the door and willing someone to stop by her room. No one would, she knew that. The only plausible option was Doris, and based on her cafeteria sulk it was unlikely that wish would come true.

“You’re dating someone?” Sean’s eyes narrowed. “Since when?”

She felt a flare of anger at him for questioning her instead of just taking the blow. Was he really so arrogant that he wouldn’t get humbled by a rejection?

Before she could speak, he seemed to read her face. “Sorry, I don’t know why I said that. That’s uh—good. Cool.”

“It’s someone from back home,” she clarified, and suddenly he did look relieved, though hurt. For a moment the only sound in the room was Sean’s phone flipping open then slapping closed, over and over and over—

“Is it Penn?” he asked bluntly, and Kate exhaled her exasperation, pulling her ponytail tight.

“No.”

Here was where it would start—the implosion. She was annoyed at Sean—and Doris. She might’ve anticipated that they’d be the two to threaten a friendship ecosystem, always trying to rile things up. If they’d understood how hard it was growing up lonely, without a family, they wouldn’t handle their friendships so carelessly.

She sensed Penn understood that, too. He understood what it was like. Sean and Doris seemed to find friendships disposable enough to play around with them at the whim of their romantic interests. It stressed her out. There were things more important than that.

“You get weird with Penn—I get it,” Sean continued. “He’s a good looking guy, smart, mysterious. Lately everyone’s into him, it feels like, which is fine, I mean, he’s my buddy. That whole elusive silence thing—all masculine and sort of rude, apathetic, then unexpectedly kind. I’ve watched him reel Doris around over the last month and if it happens to her, it can probably happen to anyone. I just didn’t think it had worked on you.”

“I told you I’m not into Penn. If you don’t want to take me at my word, then that’s your choice.”

“Sorry,” he said, and seemed to mean it. “Do you realize how important you are?” he said. “God, never mind,” he shook his head, staring at the floor. “Look, maybe you really don’t like him, fine. But you both get all weird around each other, all glowy and happy, your freckles stand out,” he tapped his cheek. “I dunno, it’s weird. Like a movie.” He stood up.

“So if that changes, then just—I don’t know, tell me about it? I like you a lot, but I don’t want to pitch our friendship for it if you aren’t into me.” She softened. Maybe he did know her better than she presumed.

“It’s not a big deal if you’re not. I’ll handle it. Just don’t go running around hiding something between you and Penn behind our backs.”

“Sean,” she exhaled, willing him to calm down. Words seemed to pour out of him in tributaries. “I really like being friends with you. Really. I don’t think you understand how important our friendship is to me.” It was the best she could do in explaining how valuable these relationships were to her. She’d never had friends this

close before. The very premise of losing them made her anxious. “I just, I’m not interested in our relationship going that way.”

“But you are interested in a solo picture with Penn,” he quipped.

Her frustrated had ebbed, but now she just felt uncomfortable. Whatever was going on in Sean and Penn’s friendship, it was starting to feel beyond her. She wondered if he’d talked to Penn about asking her on a date and wondered what Penn might’ve said.

“The picture is just to show my aunt who my college friends are,” she said. That part was true, though she withheld the scheme behind it. She needed to show Penn to Clara. If he wouldn’t visit Churdan in person, then a photograph was her next best bet. If it was a picture of just the two of them Clara wouldn’t be able to feign any distraction.

“I meant what I said,” she added. “I already have tons of pictures of you and Doris.” She was tempted to laugh thinking about the first one—a shot Doris had emailed her of the three of them at South U pizza, her, Doris, and Sean, the first night they met. Doris had drunkenly asked Penn to take her picture with Kate and Sean photobombed it.

Sean groaned a little and stretched, his wingspan filling her small room. “Alright, I trust you,” he said. “Do me a favor and don’t be weird now? I really like being around you.” He turned to the door and her warmth toward him rekindled. She enjoyed Sean so much—his humor, his optimism, his social easiness. They were characteristics she wanted more of from herself. He made her want to be brighter, trusting and passionate.

“And if you change your mind,” he said, grinning as he walked backward through the doorway. “I’m totally on email.”

*

Kate turned the key in the ignition and sent the engine laboring. It whirred angrily against the cold air, which had kept it frigid for weeks. Snow covered the windshield in a bright white blanket, and outside fat flurries fell heavily. The walk to her car was treacherous enough to get her sweating. She was lucky they'd plowed the parking lot that morning.

The engine turned over and she breathed a sigh of relief, her breath frosting in the cab—if her car hadn't started, only Sean was still around, and she doubted he knew much about cars. Plus, she'd intentionally avoided seeing him during the time they'd overlapped before break. Penn and Doris had left town days ago, but after asking her out she didn't know how to interact with him, even though he'd asked that she not "be weird." She didn't want to lead him on.

She made a mental note to drive the car more often when she got back to campus. It was old enough that she was lucky it worked in good weather—Will would call her an idiot for leaving it in the snow for so long.

She let the engine run and rubbed her gloved hands together, waiting for the heater to get going before turning on the fan—the thought of even mild air blowing at her made her shiver from her bones.

She hit the radio button and a talk show deejay talked animatedly about what to buy your partner for the holidays. It was early enough that he probably had a primetime weekday audience—rushed commuters who didn't have time to make those decisions. For some reason she thought of Will. Should she have bought him something? The interaction with Sean had left her overanalyzing every male relationship she had.

She turned the radio off and put her foot on the clutch, reversing through the parking lot until she rocked over the entry ramp onto the road. The stillness of the morning calmed her, but she swallowed hard.

The last time she felt this nervous, it was right before she came to school—the encounter in the cornfield, the weeks leading up to her move here, the drive itself, on her own to a place she'd never seen before. Now she was returning somewhere she knew, but she was scared what it would look like when she got there. Her fear, one of many, was that she'd see someone like Will and judge him the way Doris tended to—writing off people's experience, favoring her own knowledge over theirs. She felt like she'd changed a lot, but wasn't sure.

Kate thought she remembered Will almost perfectly, yet wondered if she'd overwritten her memories.

What if Churdan was even smaller than she remembered, the landscape despairing and not beautiful the way she often envisioned it? Yesterday she'd considered staying on campus for the duration of break. It'd be easier, emotionally. She'd avoid a reality check and not have to confront Clara—or herself, really—about Penn. She hadn't slept well, but ultimately she knew she had to leave, go home. It was the only option she had to pursue answers.

She pulled to the curb in front of Doris co-op, and Doris emerged promptly from the side door, waving unenthusiastically with a nice-looking leather bag on each shoulder. They looked fashionably worn from traveling or other adventure.

She disappeared behind the house and Kate waited for Doris' car to inch out of the driveway—they were driving separately so Doris could head back for her family's

flight to Hawaii. Originally they'd complained about it, lamenting the lost quality time, but Kate imagined Doris was now as thankful as she was. After that last group dinner, Doris hadn't asked if anything had happened with Sean, and Kate hadn't brought it up.

They caravanned out of the city, and Kate eyed Doris from time to time, noticing her trademark intensity in the rearview mirror, the way she focused on the road. After a while the road opened up and Kate's heart calmed, the sky grey but gloriously expansive, the cornfields leveled low. For miles all she saw was pure, white snow—untouched and gorgeous, consistent. She turned the radio back on.

*

Kate turned into the driveway and felt relief.

The house was exactly as she'd pictured it—a small square of color in white context, inviting even though the lights weren't on. Clara's car was gone and there were vague tracks in the driveway, covered by a fresh coat of snowfall. She took advantage of the ruts to pull her car in, knowing Clara's truck could forge a new path. She exited the car and grabbed her bags from the trunk—her clunky computer shoulder bag and a duffel.

"Wow, this is picturesque," Doris said, extracting herself from her car, then turning in slow 360s to see the fields. They picked their way through the snow to a small, shoveled path that Clara had cleared.

On the porch, the smell of wood, tempered by fresh air and snowfall, was a much-needed, inhaled reunion. The scent made Kate feel confident again. She remembered who she was.

"I think my aunt's out right now," she told Doris. "I can give you a little tour."

Kate tugged the screen door open, propping it open with her hip, and turned the doorknob, shoving a shoulder into it until it creaked open into the warm air of the house.

Kate smiled. She let Doris in first.

“It’s just—unlocked?” Doris asked.

Kate’s smile widened.

Inside, the cat crouched suspiciously on the staircase, and Doris eyed it warily while Kate laughed out loud.

“Bells! It’s me! Your favorite!” she cried, and the cat kept still.

“Eugh, are there more?” Doris said.

“Not a cat person?”

Doris set her bags down, “Just weird how you keep animals in the house.”

Kate had heard Doris’s animals-as-pets spiel before, about how Latin Americans would traditionally never let cats or big dogs in the house, and was grateful she didn’t get into it again.

“Just one cat,” Kate said. She reached for Bella, who allowed her one pet along the nape before slinking away.

Kate dumped her bags on the floor and headed into the kitchen. Clara had left a note that she was out helping a neighbor, but would be back around dinnertime if Kate and Doris got in early. *Will’s eager to see you*, she’d written. Kate’s stomach clenched and she pocketed the note before Doris saw it.

“Aunt’s out until dinnertime,” she said as Doris rounded the doorway, taking in the country wallpaper, the old cabinets, the small roller-wheel island and barstools.

“Give me that tour?” Doris asked, and Kate obliged. She gave her the full rundown, happy to have an activity to distract them and avoid a conversation about Sean. Eventually she’d talk to Doris, she’d reasoned with herself along the drive, but she was still annoyed and she felt she shouldn’t have to be the one to bring it up.

She showed Doris the several bedrooms, her ‘own’ room, which Doris said—Kate laughing—looked like the most lackluster guestroom in a retro bed and breakfast. She showed her the backyard property with its snow-blanketed garden plots, shed, and sprawling cornfield view. Save for the snow, everything looked just as Kate had left it.

She was getting ready to show Doris her favorite thing—the walk through the trees, *her* trees, when Cara’s voice reached them.

“Hi girls,” she called, and they turned to see her in a turtleneck and overalls in the back door. Doris waved. They trudged back through their footprints and Kate hugged her aunt. Seeing her felt more comforting than she expected.

“Aunt Clara, this is Doris,” Kate introduced. Doris smiled warmly.

“Drive okay?” Clara asked. Her dark hair and strong frame seemed comforting now, stable, not intimidating. If Kate were Doris, she might be wondering what about this woman had been so very hard to live with.

“Great,” Doris chirped. “It’s so beautiful down here.”

Clara smiled wide enough for her teeth to show, which was rare—the slightly crooked teeth in her bottom row were just visible above her lip. “Thank you, I think so too.”

In the outside light, Kate noticed how bright grey Clara’s eyes were. It might have been the grey light from the clouds overhead, or the white of the snow.

Clara ushered them inside and they prepped dinner together, surprisingly without any TV. It was a hearty soup with sausage and beans. When Clara mentioned that she'd gotten the sausage from a neighbor, Doris gushed about local ingredients and organic farming and Kate didn't have to talk at all. She knew Clara disagreed with a lot of what was said by Doris, but to her credit she listened politely and engaged when their interests overlapped. It was strange to watch Clara like this—a chance to analyze some of the things she did in conversation with other people. Kate wondered how often she'd done these same things in their own arguments and conversations. She was doubting how attacked she'd felt.

The dining room table was covered with gardening journals, charts, and a few power tools, so they ate at the countertop. Clara stood so the girls could use the two stools.

“Apologies for the mess, clearly I'm not having regular dinner parties,” Clara said. Doris just laughed amiably and insisted that their set-up was fine. Kate wondered how out of Doris's comfort zone she was in reality—she still hadn't been to Doris's house in Ann Arbor. Suddenly she hoped this wasn't just a selfish Doris trip for some working class voyeurism.

“I don't want to be totally rude,” Doris said, and Kate readied herself for something intensely candid. “But I'm exhausted. Would it be okay if I just headed to bed?”

Clara looked at Kate briefly, as if wondering who Doris was asking. When she realized it was her she looked flustered. “Of course,” she laughed uncomfortably. “You

can do whatever you like, hon. You and Kate are sharing a room but there's new sheets on the bed. Kate can show you where to go."

"I know where to go," Doris nearly interjected. "Thanks!"

She thanked Clara for dinner again, cleared her dish politely, and made her way upstairs. Kate and Clara waited long enough to know Doris was out of earshot—they were well acquainted with the acoustics of the house. Then Clara dumped herself onto a barstool.

"Bedtime?" she asked Kate, who shrugged. "Funny girl, has a lot of thoughts about things, I'll give her that. Are you doing alright?"

Kate focused on finishing her soup.

"Fine."

Clara watched her openly, thoughtful and serene. Her eyes reminded Kate of Penn's.

"Tell me about school," Clara encouraged. Her forearms rested on the table and her palms were open, facing up.

Kate gave her an overview of her life—her classes, her routine, the libraries and coffee places. She mentioned her upcoming club involvement—the group the girl, Tara, had invited her into—but not its specifics as a media monitoring group. She didn't want to ruin the moment by bringing up the topic of news. Clara hadn't turned on a television or checked her phone once since they'd arrived.

As Kate shared, Clara kept nodding her head and asking occasional follow-up questions. It was a little unnerving, like she'd been studying up on how to be a parent.

"What about your friends? Aren't there a few guys in your group?"

“Yeah, they’re great,” Kate said, shoving away from the counter to get her bulky computer from the other room. “I can show you some pictures of campus.”

She started the computer and clicked open a few favorites of campus scenery that she’d taken by borrowing Doris’ phone—the central plaza blazing with golden fall leaves, the view from the window of her favorite cafe. Then she clicked through several of Doris and Sean.

“They’re together?” Clara asked.

“No.” It sounded aggressive when she said it. “Well—no, not really.”

Kate’s fingers were shaking a little and she sensed the nervousness creeping into her mind, her breathing. She knew this was her chance—Doris was upstairs, and it would seem natural in this context to show her a photo of one other friend.

She double clicked the jpeg on her desktop, where Sean had saved it.

“Here’s our other friend,” she said, the image filling up the screen. She watched Clara’s face. Clara’s lips parted, her eyes transfixed by the photo of the two of them in front of her. Kate let the photo sit, not daring to take her eyes from watching Clara. The room seemed to reverberate with her nervous energy. “His name is Penn,” Kate said.

For several seconds they sat in a vacuum silence. Time seemed to slow to a standstill, and Kate noticed the clear grey of Clara’s eyes again, trained on the picture.

Kate had rehearsed her next words but when she said them her voice was quiet, shaking. “Who is he, Aunt Clara?” Finally, their eyes locked. There were tears threatening in her eyes and she searched her aunt’s face desperately, her chest aching for the answer she so longed to hear, that seemed impossible and insanely within her reach. *Please*, she thought.

Clara looked terrified. “I—” she choked. “I don’t—”

“Clara, please,” Kate said, more firmly, an order. “Don’t lie to me.”

Clara lowered her eyes and pulled her hands onto her lap, refusing to look again at the picture. “I would not lie to you,” she said.

“But you would leave out information,” Kate said, her voice rising and shaking, now with anger. “You would leave out that my brother was alive, and you would leave out—” she felt like she was going to choke. She wanted to do something destructive, shatter her computer, scream. “How the hell, after what we talked about,” Kate began, then doubted her own conspiracy theory, the assertions she was so close to making. “Never mind, just tell me if it’s him. Please.”

Clara looked at the screen again. Kate looked too—the picture so seemingly innocuous, just her and Penn in the cafeteria, shoulder to shoulder. Penn’s short hair was tousled a little and his smile was shy but genuine, endearingly so. His tall, lean frame almost identical to Kate’s, their build similar, but disguised in the difference between their clothes. There was a power in the two of them standing together, an ease and familiarity to them that bespoke more than friendship. How grey his eyes were, exceedingly grey, so similar to Clara’s in the snow, how dark her own freckles were, as if they brought their characteristics out of each other, showcasing one another in a way only siblings could.

Clara, her eyes still trained on the picture, looked at Penn as if the similarity in their eyes had locked them together. She looked at him as she spoke. “He has to be your brother.”

Penn sat in the wood-paneled office, admiring the floor to ceiling bookshelves and warm lamp lighting. A single picture window was centered behind the large oak desk, and the view reminded him how safe he felt inside, this office a refuge from the bleary New York City winter.

He hadn't spent time in New York since a boarding school field trip in seventh grade, when their teacher was so stressed about navigating a group of boys through layers and layers of security to see the tourist destinations—the Empire State building, the High Line, Times Square—that he vowed audibly to never do it again. *New York wasn't like this when I lived here*, he'd said to them. *This is like a never ending trip through Customs.*

Manhattan, where this office was, didn't seem so bad. The subway maps clearly marked off which districts were “off-limits” without certain passes, and this area seemed fairly accessible. There were four checkpoints to get him into this building and up to this floor: metal detectors, identification, a kiosk that asked about the purpose of his visit and took a grainy printout-photo visitor tag, and a guard with a sensor badge to escort him to the correct, unlabeled floor. He'd wanted to ask the guard if this was standard procedure, but he'd seen enough guards looming in the lobbies of other buildings to assume it was.

He hoped the professionalism of the office was an indication of the nature of the information he was about to receive—that the prestigious feel of the place meant he'd find out, in writing, he was important.

He scanned the room for any personal details that might tell him something of the man he'd be meeting with—this legal warden of his entire personal background. He

found nothing—no pictures, no wall hangings. The books were far enough away that he couldn't make out most of their titles. One enormous green book read, in all capitals: *Litigating Children's Rights*. He felt deeply ignorant again and assured himself that today was the beginning of the end of all this—he'd come here to stop being a child, to take ownership over a past that had always rightfully been his. He'd be advocating for himself from now on.

He bounced his knee impatiently and took a deep breath, wanting to convey the same strength he hoped his grey business suit exuded. He tugged at his jacket, straightening it. He unclipped the paper photo badge and put it in his pocket. Then he sat further back in the chair, hoping he looked at ease.

He looked out the window. The clouds were low enough in the city today that it was hard to make out many buildings. The skyscraper next to this one was a smooth, black rectangle, disappearing as it rose into the fog, and straight across he could watch people working mechanically at desks and cubicles. In one, a cubicle closest to the window, a man and woman talked amiably, her hands around a coffee mug as she leaned casually against his desk. He gestured to his computer and she stood suddenly, walking away as he turned to hunch over his keyboard.

"Not the best view in this weather."

Penn stood, turning to automatically extend a hand to the man who entered. He was an older white man who looked to be in his sixties, his face wrinkled into a certain sternness, but the ease of his demeanor conveyed a deep experience with situations like this one.

"Penn Beckett," Penn introduced himself, and the man shook his hand firmly.

“Lief Schulte.” He walked slowly behind the desk, pulling out the large leather backed chair opposite Penn. Penn wondered how long the man had sat in this office over the years, collectively. He’d probably spent much of his adulthood in it.

Penn sat down, straightening his jacket again.

“I know you’ve received letters from me over the years,” he paused, taking his time. He brushed the seat of the chair though it seemed to be clean. “I imagine you’ve been waiting for this day for some time.” He lowered himself into the chair ceremoniously, then straightened his back and settled his elbows on its arms, his large hands folded, fingers lightly interlaced. Penn noticed the desk was bare and Lief had brought nothing in with him. He’d imagined it’d be stacked with papers, hours worth of documents for Penn to sort through.

“I was surprised you didn’t come around your eighteenth birthday. That’s often the case with clients like you.” He waited a beat, as if Penn might explain his rationale. When he didn’t, Lief raised his eyebrows slightly. “Where would you like to begin, then?” he asked.

Penn didn’t understand the question. He had virtually no understanding of his parents or past life. How was he to know a good starting place?

“Would you recommend something?” he asked hesitantly. He’d been nervous all morning, barely stomaching some oatmeal in his mediocre hotel room before walking the few blocks through city commuters. He’d barely slept. The train ride in from Jersey had been nearly as bad—he’d flown in to Newark yesterday and gone straight downtown, too terrified to risk what emotions might overtake him if he stopped by Mills House on the way. He just wanted to get going, get it over with.

“Would you like anything to drink?”

Penn shook his head, afraid to open his mouth. He felt like he was going to be sick.

Someone knocked on the door and Lief told them to come in. A young man, not much older than Penn, it looked, brought in two sleek glass bottles of water and several files, which he handed to Lief. He set the waters down and left the room.

Lief opened a water and asked Penn a few innocuous questions about school, what he was studying, if he was involved in any clubs. Penn, annoyed, told him vaguely of his high school involvement in soccer, how his focus had become more academic since then.

“I’m in the business school,” Penn added.

“What kind of business?”

The way Lief asked questions made Penn wonder why he was asking them; the man seemed caught up in some robotic protocol, sipping water, posing a question, looking away from Penn disinterestedly even as he answered.

Something in Penn made him want to impress this man in his library-like Manhattan office and dark suit. He wanted his respect, wanted to remind him that he wasn’t the only man on earth capable of doing something impressive.

“Media,” Penn said. “I’m a finalist for one of the best internship programs in the country.”

Lief wrinkled his brow almost imperceptibly, looking at him. “What company?”

“Concordis,” Penn answered proudly.

The wrinkles on Lief's forehead deepened, and Penn took it to mean he was impressed. He felt a swell of pride, that the internship was as prestigious as it was, that he'd been smart enough to make it this far, and as a sophomore.

It felt fulfilling, an act of completion, to speak with someone who understand the gravity of what Penn had accomplished, and rewarding to be able to play with the same power Lief toyed with—keeping secrets and revealing them when he liked. Not even Sean knew which company the internship was with, just that Penn had landed a competitive, in-person interview.

"Your father worked for a media company," Lief said firmly, discarding the first bottle of water under his desk with a thud and breaking the seal on the second. Penn's mouth went dry.

"He was an executive in the early nineties I believe, and your mother, too, the same company, though she left once she had children. A long running career before that." He leaned forward and opened the top file folder. "Let's refresh our memory."

Penn saw that inside were black and white pages of extensive, typed text.

Lief shifted some papers around. "Ah, late eighties, my mistake," he said. "They met each other at the company and married in 1986. They had two children, a girl in 1988 and a boy in 1990." Penn sat stunned, rendered distant in the way Lief phrased the information, the way he evaded personal language, talked about them like a glossy family Penn did not know.

"My family," Penn said sternly, trying to reassert the power he'd had even as it trickled away.

Lief glanced at him. “Of course,” he said, surprised or feigning it, Penn couldn’t tell. He slid the papers around in silence, his eyes lingering on sections from time to time and skipping over other pages entirely. The raging conflict in Penn’s head was nearly indecipherable—he couldn’t take any of this in. The fact that this man, this random man who he had never met, knew more than he did seemed impossible, inexplicably wrong.

“Can you stop?” he choked out, trying to sound confident but choking pathetically on the words. “Please stop—for a second.”

Lief looked at him absently and removed his hands from the file, his gaze evaluative and clinical. “This is going to be difficult,” he said simply. “We can take as long as you like.”

Penn stared at the papers in front of him, his head swimming. “I think I want to take a look at these alone.” He wasn’t even sure if that was allowed, but if it wasn’t, he felt strongly that it should be. He wanted to protect the papers from Lief’s entitled hands. Watching him touch the paperwork felt akin to watching him touch the members of his family.

“I can’t leave you alone with these documents, Mr. Beckett.”

The title caught Penn off guard now—a title that had very well addressed his father at one time, a business executive, someone with authority.

“I want to read them alone,” he said again. “You can be in the room if it’s required.”

Lief opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind. “I can answer any questions you have,” he said, acquiescent. Penn reached out and slid the file closer.

Penn read without speaking, the world paused, with Lief sitting quietly, watching him like a wax figure in his oversized leather chair. Any intimidation he'd felt evaporated, less important than the history in front of him. *Atticus Illyria Foucault (Pennant Illyria Beckett)* he read on the first page, too curious to ask the obvious question so quickly. *Critical client confidentiality—verbal or written dissemination of any information herein is punishable by federal law.*

He looked up briefly at Lief.

“Your name was legally changed,” anticipating the first question. “A standard procedure for client cases sensitive as your own.”

Penn's heart was racing, then tightening, strained. He kept reading, searching hungrily for details about the media company, specifically, yearning he would find the footsteps he so badly hoped he was following in.

He found no specifics other than what Lief had already read—that his parents, still David and Irene, though their last name was also Foucault and not Beckett, worked as executives at a preeminent media company and married in 1986. He slowed his pace, turning the pages more slowly as he tried to process the words, the abstract phrases.

Past several pages of legalese, he was stopped by a full-color photograph. It was a picture taken in California, at their house on the water. Someone had captured all four of them—his father stood off to the right of the frame, lean in his shorts and shirt and dark haired, looking out over the ocean; his mother in a swimsuit and jean shorts, dark hair pulled back into a low ponytail, crouched with a baby in the sand. Near the tideline his sister was squinting toward the camera, her toddler body bright in a red swimsuit, her

small arm locked aggressively, championing a red, plastic bucket. He felt a knot in his throat. It was a picture he'd never seen.

"Where is this from?" he asked without looking up.

"Check the back," Lief said.

Penn flipped it over. "Foucault home, San Francisco 1990," he read aloud. "I meant where did you get it."

"May I?" Lief's hand was stretched open toward the file. Penn nodded and Lief turned it around, paging through and reading intermittently. "It's unclear for this picture. We have a resource list for every client file—the primary contributors to yours were your grandparents—your mother's parents, that is. A few pictures are listed as coming from your aunt."

As Lief spoke, Penn's anger returned. It was infuriating that he held more information than Penn did. "Explain to me why these say Foucault."

"Foucault is your legal last name. Beckett is your given last name."

"Given last name?" Penn said dryly. "Last names aren't given, they're inherited."

Lief picked up the file with both hands and laid it back down, closer to Penn. "In some cases," he began, "last names—and first names—are changed for protection. As is the case here."

"My case," Penn clipped. The way Lief referred to him as some kind of emotionless, third party entity was inane. "Why was my name changed?" he demanded.

Lief looked at the papers but didn't reach for them. "I can tell you why after you've finished reading the first two files," he said. "It won't make sense to you yet."

“I think I ought to know why my *name* has been a total lie. I think you can tell me that now.”

“I can, but I won’t,” Lief said evenly, undeterred by the change in Penn’s tone. “You’ll respect my reasoning when you’ve finished reading the first two files, I’m confident of that. It’s more than enough for you to take in, and it’s unlikely you can process everything at once.”

“I can process all of it, it’s my fricken history.”

“You can’t,” Lief interrupted him. “It’s psychologically proven you can’t. And you won’t be attempting it in my office. With respect, Mr. Beckett.”

He hated the way Lief forced him to act like a child, restrained from information because an adult got to decide that it was wrong. He was supposed to be escaping this setup.

“You’ll have full access to your information soon enough,” Lief continued. “This doesn’t have to do with your capacity, Mr. Beckett. This has to do with experience. I’ve been in my position longer than you’ve been alive, and you can trust me when I tell you there is a best way forward in these things. You should consider the first two files of information during our meeting today, and we’ll be scheduling several follow-up appointments going forward. You have plenty to take in, and we have plenty of time.”

“I don’t live here. I flew in for this. I’m not going home just to save up for another plane ticket in order to learn my story.”

“Your finances aren’t a concern, not for the flight. In file three we’ll talk extensively about your inheritance. Again, there is no rush.”

Penn blinked surreptitiously, trying to control his breathing. He wanted to say that the rush was his entire life, that he'd been rushing toward this moment from the beginning of existence, wanting to reclaim things that were taken from him that never should've been. He wasn't rushing. He was waiting, had been kept waiting for eleven years.

Lief wasn't the person he'd expected to meet in New York City. He was cold, procedural and stubborn. If Penn hadn't been so moony about the idealistic experience he'd crafted up for the weeks preceding this moment, he might've been smarter about how he handled this. He could have brought someone, like Sean, or Mrs. Pandey.

"How did I become your client?" Penn asked.

Lief smiled a little. "Good question. I'm not usually asked that one." He took the second file from the small pile next to him, then settled it, opened, between them. A neatly typed sheet of paper had been taped to the interior front flap.

It was a contract, appointing Lief Hendrikson Schulte of Schulte & Associates as warden for the guardianship of Pennant Illyria Beckett, formerly Atticus Illyria Foucault, prior to April 3, with release of information upon or after said date at the client's initiation. It was signed by Jerome Ganzel, grandfather, October 18.

A part of Penn, impenetrable to time, remembered that loopy scrawl—pictures and treasure maps drawn at a picnic table by the water. Letters written, passed back and forth in secret mail spots decided on together, scattered throughout the big house, even though Penn didn't yet know how to read or write. He remembered waking up and running to check them all: a small envelope under the carpet runner, on the fourth step of stairs, a back corner of the bottommost pantry drawer and tucked behind cans of soup. He

remembered the devastation of not finding one, the thrill of paper beneath his fingers, his mother's smile as she watched him run around to look.

The last time he'd seen his grandfather was around that time—maybe a week after the fire itself. He remembered going to sleep in his own bed at home, nightmares and waking up in the hospital, any other recollection of the fire unavailable to him. He remembered seeing his grandmother briefly, a hazy memory at his bedside, made hazier by time and recollection.

His grandfather didn't visit him in the hospital, from what he remembered, but he had picked Penn up from it and brought him to the apartment of the family friend, the former colleague of his father's.

"I would have been with my grandfather that day," Penn said to Lief, his voice shaky despite his efforts to steady it. His finger was on the date. "That was the day before the funeral. How would he have gotten this to you?" He realized after he said it how easy it would have been for his grandfather to email something like this, from California to New York. Lief seemed to observe his quick conclusion.

"Did my grandmother know?" Penn asked.

"I don't believe that's in the files." He paused. "Your grandfather was a smart man, he acted quickly."

Maybe Lief was right, Penn didn't know. Smart, maybe, but couldn't he have been more relational about it? With a seven-year-old?

There'd been no reason, in Penn's mind, why he couldn't have just stayed with his grandparents. He'd always wanted to believe, considering it for hours on end, on his bed at Mills or walking around the campus, that their decision to send him to Jersey had

been borne out of insecurity; that they felt they were too old to raise him, thought it better for him to grow up with people who could. He'd never liked thinking about the alternatives. Or the reasons why they didn't write to him, didn't call.

Much of the two files, Penn was surprised and disappointed to find, were boring—an approved release of information to Schulte & Associates, copies of birth certificates and, slightly more appealing, his parents' driver's licenses. Photographs satiated his hunger for history more than the words he read. He spent a lot of time looking at his father's license, David Foucault's face in a grim smile. His dark eyes were intense but not unkind, yet there was a coldness to him that unsettled Penn, a coldness he recognized. It was something he'd seen in himself on occasion, in a photo or an unexpected reflection. Sean teased him about it. The determination in his dad was both impressive and intimidating. It fit with the memory he had of him—Penn knowing he was loved, but a little afraid.

“Do you have anything about my father's parents?” Penn asked.

Lief nodded toward the folder. “I believe there's a brief mention in folder two. They died when he was young. We may be able to get more information from your aunt, over time, though our offices have to handle that side of things.”

Penn thought about it. “Can I visit her?”

“Folder three. We'll talk about it then.”

Penn realized how weary he was, like he could fall asleep in this chair. He looked out the window and dreaded his walk home—the grey weather looked essentially the same as it had before. It was hard to tell how much time has passed.

“I think I'm done for today,” Penn said trimly.

Lief bowed his head and gathered up the folders. “You’re welcome to come back tomorrow, if you’re ready. Otherwise, Peter will give you a contact to schedule appointments.” Lief extended his hand. “It’s a privilege to be restoring your history to you, Mr. Beckett.”

Penn took his hand but resented the phrase, something Lief probably said to every client he had. He wondered who the others might be, wondering how they reacted, how their meetings went—if they all tended to be eighteen.

“One more thing to take care of,” Lief said, standing from his chair and clasping his hands in front of him. “It’s critical you don’t reveal this information publicly, even to friends. Your legal name in particular.” He eyed Penn carefully, then continued. “You may not have noticed this in the files, but your parents’ professional background is complicated. Even your grandparents didn’t have many details about it. They worked for a very powerful company—were significant investors in it, in fact. Your name was changed for security purposes and it would be very unwise to reveal it now, even after all these years. Please trust me on this. I recognize it’s a difficult request.”

Penn nodded, “That’s fine.” His hands were empty now and it felt strange to be leaving without anything tangible. No record of being here at all.

“This is unsolicited advice, but I’d be careful with your internship process,” Lief added. “As I’m sure you’re well aware, the media industry, like all industries, is a very political place these days. Make sure you know who you can trust, and I wouldn’t believe everything you’re told.”

Penn narrowed his eyes involuntarily. “Right.”

Lief remained impassive.

Penn exited the office and the secretary, he assumed Peter, was already ready for him, walked him quickly through next steps. He left with a passcode-protected—and encrypted, Peter assured him—app on his phone to communicate with the Schulte office.

On the main floor he started wishing he could call Sean. Yet Sean would be focused, practicing in Arizona, and he wouldn't know where to begin.

He passed the security desk and exited the building, the revolving door ushering him onto the damp street. It was a relief to disappear into the crowd again—one of the densest, at rush hour in New York, he'd ever been a part of—people walking wherever they were headed, their secrets as opaque to him as his own.

-23-

CONCORDIS

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EMAIL TAP 12-28

EMPLOYEE ID: I-0233146

Sharing of this information without written, CEO-signed consent will result in immediate release from the company and lawful persecution.

To: Penn Beckett <pbeckett@umich.edu>

From: Kate DeSalles <kadesalles@umich.edu>

Stamped: Wednesday, December 27, 3:43 p.m. EST

Subject: When are you back?

Hey – Can we meet up when you’re back on campus? Just us two. I’m coming back a little early, wanted to hear about your trip home. Hope you had a good holiday.

Kate

(24]

In the morning, Kate and Doris went into town. At Doris’s insistence, they’d gotten up early to go out for breakfast before she left, to see “the culture of the place.”

Doris was chipper and friendly, but Kate felt nauseous, either from sleep deprivation or an emotional hangover from the night before. She and Clara had talked until 3:00 a.m., and she wasn’t sure it had been worth it.

Though she recognized him, Clara said she’d never met Atticus. Or, only when he was an infant—one of the last times she’d made a point to see her brother, David, their dad. Kate didn’t remember that visit, nor any visit from Clara during her childhood. To prove it, Clara dug out several photos—a few single photos of Kate as a toddler, ones Kate had seen before, and another she had never seen of Atticus, though it captured him the way she remembered him. Despite how convinced she’d been about Penn’s identity, she was having a hard time reconciling the tiny Atticus she remembered to the adult she now knew in college. Added to this were the repetitions of hearing his name, especially from Doris and Sean: *Penn, Penn, Penn*. It felt like she couldn’t overwrite it.

Clara said the pictures came in holiday cards or an errant letter from David’s wife—“your mother,” she’d corrected herself, “Irene.” She knew their names, had remembered them from childhood, but tonight she spoke them quietly to herself long after she’d crawled into bed, Doris’s body a strong, warm presence sleeping next to her at

a time when she'd have liked to be alone. *David Foucault*. For so long she and Clara had never talked about them, and definitely not directly, by name. *Irene Foucault*. Saying their names felt like breaking a spell.

At some point, drifting into a fitful, memory-ridden sleep, Kate had realized how close she'd been to confirming the overlap with Penn all along. If she'd talked about her parents more specifically, by name, they might have figured it out sooner.

Doris drove them downtown, a straight shot from Clara's save for one right turn going south. They passed the rode they'd turn off to go to Petersons, but Kate didn't have the energy to think the option through. She waited until Doris parked and they pushed, bell ringing, into Churdan's sole diner. The waitress greeted her monochromatically by name, which Doris found exhaustingly delightful.

"This is perfect," Doris exhaled, sliding into a booth and taking pictures of the empty diner with her phone. Then, "Are you alright?"

"Mmm."

Doris watched her, setting her phone aside, but didn't press questions.

The waitress sidled over and Doris ordered several plates of house specials—ham, eggs, pancakes—citing a need for total cultural immersion. Kate just said they'd share.

Clara had said she'd only met Irene a handful of times—at the wedding, at Kate's birth, at Penn's. She claimed she'd driven all the way to California both times, every minute redeemed when she met each of them in that hospital room. She'd smiled when she spoke about it.

When Kate asked why they hadn't spent more time together, Clara said she and David hadn't been close since they were teens. She'd disagreed with the way he'd been

so quick to abandon everything and, as she told it, mindlessly went after business. They had a falling out. Clara sensed Irene was the kind of woman who didn't like the family's distance even as she honored it; she didn't know what decisions had been made in their marriage, but every once in a while Clara got a letter, or a card—an update about the kids.

“Hey, are you gonna eat anything?” Doris asked, and Kate refocused to find Doris' food was already demolished. The combination of mottled yellows and crumbs of pancake was unappetizing.

“Go for it,” Kate said, and Doris finished chewing without lowering her fork.

“What's going on?”

Kate shook her head. “I can't talk about it right now,” she said, her voice betraying the hurt she still was wrestling through. It sounded like she was about to cry.

Doris paused, just staring at her.

“I should introduce you to someone,” Kate continued. “Are you ready to go?”

Doris quickly pulled out a wad of cash and thanked the waitress profusely until she was visibly uncomfortable.

Back in the car, Kate directed them to the Peterson's house. As they pulled up, Will's brother Joe was outside shoveling the porch.

“Well, *hello*,” Doris said, and Kate laughed. Joe's conservatism was proportionate to Doris' liberal bent, but he was probably more researched than Doris was, and on both ends of the spectrum. They'd probably kill each other before they exchanged names.

He turned as they pulled up, spotted Kate and waved.

They parked the car and Kate started walking toward the shed beyond the house, as if she came here all the time; she tried not to dwell on the fact that she hadn't been here since that graduation party. She still knew where Will would be.

"This is Doris," she called over her shoulder, and she turned to avoid the scoping way she knew the two of them were looking at each other. She knew Doris wanted to linger, but it was better if she didn't. Let them imagine they were compatible in some way, a strange kindness.

"Will's out back, guess you know that," Joe called, pausing to light a cigarette. "He'll be happy to see you," the tone was cloying. He laughed at his own joke.

"Thanks. Don't want to distract you from your important business," Kate called, and Joe held up the shovel like a trophy. The Peterson boys were close, but Joe was the oldest and the most aggressive. His arrogance had always grated on her.

Kate ignored him and kept walking, Doris some distance behind her. She got to the shed and pulled open the heavy door.

Will was bent mid-pitch, forking hay into the stalls of one of their horses. One of the dogs laid comfortably near his feet. He stood and barked.

Will stood, wiping his arm to get the sweat off his forehead, he squinted toward the doorway and she realized the bright snow probably obscured who she was.

"It's Kate," she called happily. When she saw him she'd felt an almost dominating urge to run at him and tackle him in a hug. But she knew she wasn't herself right now and her inhibitions won out.

“Get out of here,” he said, grinning, leaning the pitchfork against a wall and walking quickly toward her. He enveloped her in a hug, his scent earthy and sharp. He radiated heat. She wanted to cry again and she held her breath to keep the emotion in.

“When’d you get back here?” he asked, then looked over her shoulder to Doris. She stood in the doorway grinning stupidly.

“Hi,” Doris said. Kate introduced them.

“Really nice to meet you,” Will said politely. He stood more rigidly now, uncomfortable around someone he didn’t know. Watching him sweat, Kate felt decidedly lazy and entitled for just stopping by unannounced. They had a lot to do, and she’d pranced in like a cushy college girl she didn’t want to be.

“Doris is a friend from school,” Kate explained.

“The very first,” Doris added. “Not that she needs me anymore, Kate’s too popular.”

The fringe of Will’s hair kept brushing against his forehead and he combed it back impatiently away with his hands. “Oh really? Not surprised,” he said. “Anyone else here?”

“Nope, just us,” Kate clarified, wondering why Doris would say something so stupid.

“The guys couldn’t come,” Doris said, and Kate restrained herself from looking at Doris point-blank. The last thing she wanted was Doris making it sound like she was taken.

“They’re just friends of ours,” Kate clarified. “They were traveling different places over the holiday.”

“Sounds fancy,” Will said. He wiped a sleeve against his forehead again, and Kate admired the way his muscles filled out his shirt sleeves. He looked older to her again. She was close enough to see the pads of callous on his hands as he rested them on the top of the fork.

“Kate’s kind of treasured by everyone at school,” Doris said, and now Kate eyed her decisively. She couldn’t tell if Doris was trying to talk her up or sabotage her.

Will contemplated Doris for a second, and Kate was panicked to see something like appreciation in his eyes. She forgot sometimes that Doris was truly beautiful.

“Not surprising,” he said, sounding uninterested. “Kate tended to be well liked around here.”

“Yeah, and she’s going to be the VP for a media group on campus.”

“It’s nothing,” Kate interjected. “Just a club.”

“Yeah, she’s going to lead it with one of our guy friends, this guy named Penn, they’re basically, like, a power team, a power couple or something.”

“Doris,” Kate said, and now she wished she’d told her everything at breakfast. It occurred to her that Doris, if she’d overheard even Penn’s name last night, might have misunderstood.

Before she could say something Will straightened and picked up the fork, poised to keep working. “Not surprised to hear you’ve got a big group of friends going,” he said to Kate. “She’s always been that way, though,” he said to Doris.

“We should let you keep working,” Kate said. Her face was hot from Will’s words, and her anger at Doris was escalating so quickly she was afraid what might happen if they stayed.

“Can we see you again while we’re here?” she asked, too afraid to say “I”, but Will was focused on what he was doing. “Yeah, ‘course,” he said. “It’s good to see you.”

She ached to stay here with him. For a moment she regretted inviting Doris, then caught herself in the stupidity of the thought. Doris was her best friend. She might be being a fricken idiot, but they’d work through that. She turned to lead them back toward the car.

“You like that guy or what?” Doris asked as they walked. Luckily Joe wasn’t outside. If he heard anything that good it’d be the end.

“Are you serious?” Kate slowed her step for a moment and glared at Doris.

“See ya pretty girls later,” Joe called suddenly, emerging onto the porch, and Kate prayed it snowed over all his work. Doris waved coquettishly. “I can drive,” she said. She walked over and opened the driver door.

In the passenger seat, Kate was careful to maintain a neutral expression. The car started and Doris was still making eyes at Joe. “What the hell was that?” Kate demanded.

“Oh come on, he’s hot.”

“Not Joe, Doris, the shit you pulled in the barn.”

“What shit? That guy? Will is into you and you, as usual, weren’t reading it. I was saving your ass so you don’t have to fight him off to get Penn.”

Kate was stunned.

“Anyway, about time you showed some actual feeling, I’m so sick of this zombie apathy thing you’re doing I was getting ready to rip my own hair out, just for a reaction.” She reversed out of the driveway too quickly and they slid around on the snow.

“I like Will, Doris!” Kate yelled.

Doris looked at her, her mouth open, and they bottomed out onto the road.

“Shit,” Doris yelled, then recovered as they inched along in the snow.

“There’s no way you didn’t know that by now,” Kate said angrily. “You knew what you were doing. I don’t buy it. If you’re hurt about Sean, then you can communicate it like a fricken adult. I can’t believe that after everything you want out of womanhood and all that that you’re going to be this passive aggressive to a friend, and over a boy.”

“Oh, right, that’s good, Kate. Appeal to feminism.” She slowed the car. “Where am I turning?” Kate pointed.

“You know exactly what was inappropriate about that,” Doris continued. “You’re not an idiot, either, you know I like Sean. You could have said no when he asked to go to your room. Am I supposed to believe that you guys were just ‘hanging out’? Like you made cucumber sandwiches and tea and chatted about the weather?”

“We were putting a picture on my computer, Doris.”

“What happened in your room?” Doris said coolly, ignoring the explanation.

Kate paused. She was so tired of no one knowing every part of her, different people all holding different shards of her story.

“He asked me to get lunch.”

“Lunch?”

“Yes, lunch.”

Doris was focused on the road. “I don’t know where I’m going.”

Kate pointed her left. “Next turn.” It was snowing again and visibility was rough.

“I said no to lunch,” she added.

They were silent for a moment, the only sound the crunching snow under the tires. Doris's quietness made Kate uncomfortable again, guilty even. She knew how painful this must be for her, but maybe better than whatever insane inventions she'd been building in her head.

Kate hated that Sean had created this tension, that she'd contributed to it by being so obsessed with getting that picture. She would tell Doris everything the second she could, but it didn't feel right to do that before she could confirm everything with Penn.

Still, even seeing Doris talk to Will had brought out weird, conflicting emotions inside her, the insanity that Doris, in some way, could be a threat. Kate knew, truly, that Doris would never do that to her. She was fiercely loyal.

"Sean and I aren't like that," Kate said. "He's confused."

Doris scoffed but didn't argue.

"I think he sees—" Kate stopped herself short of saying Penn's name, "—a friend in me. Someone he can talk to or feels familiar with."

They reached Clara's and ambled into a parking spot.

"And I'm familiar to him, and he likes things that are familiar. That's the logic. If he was really into me he'd just enjoy being around me. It wouldn't be so stilted. We don't even know how to talk when you're not there. It's awkward as hell."

Doris turned the car off, slouched in her seat. "Look, Kate, it's fine if he likes you. I can't care." Kate opened her mouth to argue. "What I couldn't handle—and I've thought a lot about this, so listen—was you liking him, and not telling me that you did before you acted on it."

Kate pushed her frustration into the headrest by leaning her head against it, trying to sympathize. The semantics made her want to scream.

“I don’t like him,” she said, controlling her volume.

Doris pulled the keys from the ignition and popped open the door. “Yeah, I know that now,” she said lightly. Kate watched her exit and knew what she was getting at. She felt a wave of relief. “He’s cute, that guy, Will,” Doris said. “Sorry for being the antichrist.”

Kate breathed out a laugh and relief.

“I mean it, I’m sorry,” Doris said. “I basically just did everything I hate about stupid people for the last week. Promise I won’t pull that anymore. Regardless of how Sean feels.”

Kate followed Doris toward the house, doubting the simplicity of that vow, but glad she’d gotten her friend back.

After Doris’ car was just a prick of black down the driveway, Kate walked inside and found Clara at the dining room table, sorting through papers amidst the preexisting power tools and other piles. She’d put on a folk CD and was humming to herself as she worked.

“Your dad liked this band,” she said. Kate stopped short of the table, watching Clara’s hands sort through photographs. The singer’s voice was raspy and raw, the guitar melody simple.

“This was big when we were in high school. Haven’t listened to it since your uncle was around.”

Kate approached the table and saw several pictures of a boy and a girl, the girl with Clara's distinct short build and longer, shoulder-length black hair, a bandana around her head like a headband. Old things.

Kate picked up another picture—a reserved looking man in a backyard somewhere, his back straight and his hands in his pockets.

“Can you make us some tea?” Clara asked. She looked happy, as if she were doing something she'd wanted to for a long time.

Kate obligingly went to the kitchen and filled the tea kettle, watching the stove heat it with her back against the island countertop.

It felt like she'd lived a week since last night; she'd anticipated bringing the picture home would be taxing, dramatic even. But she hadn't thought through its consequences.

She wondered if, in not anticipating any aftermath, she had really believed that Penn would turn out to be her brother. Now that it was real, that she'd found her place in the world and some of the family she'd thought she'd lost forever, she couldn't find a way to accept it.

The kettle whistle pierced the quiet of the house, and she stepped forward, pulling it from the heat and dispersing it into two mugs. She picked two tea bags from the cupboard and bobbed them patiently, uncharacteristically careful not to spill anything. After a minute she brought one to Clara, leaving her own in the kitchen to cool. They stood in the music, looking over the photographs, Clara's hands shuffling pictures like cards.

“I want to send you back with a box of these, things you can take in as you’re ready, maybe share with him.”

Kate remembered seeing some of these when she was younger. Her aunt had left a photo album out on a living room end table one morning, and it was clearly something she hadn’t intended Kate to see. Kate had flipped through it. Most of the pictures she remembered seeing were of Clara, then Clara and her husband. Kate thought Clara had been spending some private time remembering him and hadn’t commented on it. Later that day the album was gone, put away wherever it came from.

“I don’t know if I’m up for this now,” Kate said. She was so tired that reality was starting to fuzz with her imagination. It seemed believable that she might wake up in a few days and not be confident that any of this had happened.

“I’ll write it all down for you,” Clara said. “That’ll be easier anyway, something you can take with you. Go and take a nap.”

Kate obliged without speaking, heading for the stairs. When she woke later she couldn’t remember falling asleep.

*

Penn tracked through the pristine snow, noting how much prettier it was than Manhattan’s. Central campus was a clean blanket of white even in the early afternoon, protected by winter break and its habit of keeping all students away until the day right before class started. The sky felt higher somehow, an enormous, unscarred dome of bright blue.

Kate had emailed about getting together, and he was prepared to tell her everything he’d learned, though he felt a little confused about why she’d insisted they get

together just the two of them. It seemed a little off; he'd prepped a few lines he could use if she asked him on a date or something, just in case.

Now that he'd resolved to tell someone about the Concordis interview opportunity, someone trustworthy, he wondered how much time he'd have to spend small talking before he talk about what he really wanted to share. She was an orphan too, and he knew that she'd understand his position in a way that no one else could, given what he'd learned. He was going to tell her everything from New York: his legal name, his parents, that he'd found out his own parents had worked for Concordis. It seemed too good to be true: that he'd followed in his parents' footsteps before he'd even known what prints existed. She'd understand the meaning, the connection in that. It was the closest he'd felt to them in years.

His second and third visits to the Schulte office had gotten him through file two. The office was busy, and Lief let him read, virtually unattended, at a desk space next to Peter. He'd pocketed the photo of his family at the beach. File three, which Lief had stated was "highly sensitive," would be addressed at a final meeting later this semester, on spring break. Lief was right, annoying as that was; by the third visit Penn was overwhelmed, and taking a flight home before he learned every detail of his history had changed in nature, become a means of reprieve.

Penn tugged a glove off and touched his his phone awake in the cold air, checking for a text from her, then remembered she still didn't have a cell phone. He didn't know how she functioned so archaically, even respected it a little bit, but he also wasn't sure she had a lot of money. If he wasn't on scholarship, he might not have had a phone plan himself.

He stopped at their appointed meeting spot: the sidewalk in front of Fleetwood Diner. He waited, the silence of winter electric. He stared at the damp spots on his boots, places where they'd darkened from the snow. The cold made his shoulders tense up against it and he tried to relax them.

"Penn!"

He spotted her coat first, a shapeless dark parka across the road. She broke into a wide smile and he grinned back reactively.

Kate jogged across the road without looking in either direction, but there wasn't traffic to avoid. She ran up to him and snared him in a tight hug, her arms narrow pressure lines against his back. He relaxed and smiled into her hair, which was down for once, hanging damp around her face from the snow. She smelled clean, like bar soap. The smell always made him think of being a kid.

"Man, I missed you," she said casually, as if the observation surprised her as much as him. She let go and smirked, and he noticed she had light lines near her eyes, early crow's feet. He didn't know if he'd ever been this close to her. Her freckles were a darker grey, a part of her he'd grown to favor.

"Surprised?" he smiled, and any reservations about the email she'd sent evaporated. He felt so comfortable with her, so honest, it was impossible to think there was anything to worry about between them. It just wasn't the way their friendship worked.

"How was Churdan?"

"Great," she said eagerly, turning toward the door. "Do you want food?"

"I'm alright. We can get something if you're hungry though."

She let go of the door handle and turned to walk back into the snow. “Nah, ate before. Trying to save money.” Hugging Penn, Kate was so giddy with the news she had, and nervous, that she wondered how long she could keep it together.

He seemed to notice her energy and laughed a little bit.

“What?” he asked.

They walked together down the sidewalk, Kate tugging a flimsy hood up over her head and Penn made no effort to shield his own from the snow. The air was pretty warm for winter and the air made him feel awake. He could walk for hours in weather like this.

“Did Doris end up going with you?”

Kate nodded, still smiling a little. “Yeah, it was good.”

Penn wondered if she and Doris had talked to each other about Sean. Hopefully, when everyone got together again, the weird tension building before break would have subsided. Kate seemed mature enough to address things head on, and Doris didn’t internalize her feelings. It was a reliable personality combo for resolution.

“She met your aunt and everything?” Penn asked.

“Yeah,” Kate’s eyes were on the ground as they picked their way through other people’s footsteps. “They got along really well, actually,” she said. “Almost better Clara and I do.” She tamped a fresh footprint in the snow. “But, we also watched remarkably almost no TV, no news report anecdotes, nothing—she didn’t even bring up the bomb.”

“Serious?”

“Serious,” she shoved her gloved hands deeper in her pockets, willing them to warm. “It was almost strange, honestly. I thought she might be trying to make it a peace offering.”

Penn watched her go out of her way to step in the snowy space that separated a set of footprints, leveling the barrier between them. He couldn't tell if she was doing it on purpose or if it was just something she did without realizing it.

"If you don't mind me asking about it," she said. "Did you learn anything in New York?"

He watched Kate's lithe frame navigating the sidewalk and wanted nothing more than to grab her arm, pull her into some coffee shop along the street, and tell her everything about himself he'd ever thought.

"You don't have to share if you don't want to—I have, uh, things that might be—related." There, she'd started it. Her blood pressure spiked and she felt that intellectual clarity coming over her like a shiver, the next things she could say and in which order—

He frowned at her, frustrated, before he spoke. Why would she say that? If she wanted to talk about her own story, that was fine with him, but it was weird of her to not come out with it outright. He didn't appreciate her trying to relate her own story to him or fish around with idiosyncratic questions; she didn't really know him.

"New York was fine," he said, his words clipped. Any desire to share information with her had dissipated a little, and he felt the mild bottom out of returning to his earlier state—they were just friends, acquaintances even, it felt sometimes. He couldn't rely on her the way he wanted to.

"Sorry, I mean, can you tell me what you learned about? Did you find out anything—big?" She could tell she'd offended him and felt panicked. If he didn't want to have the conversation, she was going to have to get blunt, fast. In truth, she'd thought he

might even already know the situation when she arrived—that they may have told him about her.

“Why don’t you tell me more about Churdan?” he asked.

“There’s really not a lot to tell.”

He waited until she continued, and to his surprise her voice was wavering. He could see her swallow hard, and her hair was hanging so it obscured a clear peripheral view of her face.

“There is—” she stopped again and his impatience surged.

“Do you want to tell me about your aunt or something?” he demanded. “Your boyfriend or whatever?” He’d intended it to be patient but he sounded entirely frustrated. “I mean—I’ll listen if you want to share. If you learned something, whatever.”

Penn saw her shock, then she hid it almost as quickly as it appeared. He started to feel uncomfortable again. She was acting really weird.

“Let’s sit here,” Kate directed, pointing to a giant rock on a sprawling corner lawn. About a mile beyond it, a fraternity house sat bored on a hilltop, most of its windows dark except a rogue one that didn’t show any sign of life. The rock was spray painted competitively throughout the year—Penn had seen it many times walking around this area during a late night coming home from a library, and right now it was painted hot pink. Haphazard, black letters peeked out from a layer of snow, and Kate brushed some of the snow away before pushing herself up onto the rock. Penn followed suit, feeling how clumsily he managed it.

“Will is the guy Sean’s talking about,” Kate said. Before she drove back to campus she’d met up with Will one more time, and the second time she was more

forthright. She'd asked him to come visit her spring semester. *I'll sneak you into class*, she'd bribed. She knew how much he'd love sitting in on her lectures, though she doubted much of the content would be new to him. With all the reading and research he did, he could probably guest lecture a class.

"Will is great," she said. "I'm hoping he'll visit this semester, so you can meet him."

Before she left Will had asked her about the bomb on campus, told her he'd been worried and had to talk Clara off a ledge when she saw the news. Kate assured him she wasn't going anywhere, and he said he was proud. Then, as she was leaving, looking around, she said, *I miss this*, and he'd said said, *It misses you*.

Penn felt stupid talking about boys with Kate, bumbling and deferential. Was he supposed to be excited about meeting a random guy? He watched her swipe her gloves together to get the snow off, then rest her hands palm upward on her legs. She was slouched over her lap and looked uncharacteristically vulnerable, damp hair hanging from under her flimsy hood. If he saw her now, walking by on the sidewalk where they'd just been, she'd just look like a really young girl.

"What's up, DeSalles?" he bantered, trying to lighten the mood. "We can't sit here all day. I'm not interested in the popsicle scene." It felt like something Sean might say, but when he said it the effect was hardly the same.

"Yeah, I'm just gonna say it then," Kate said sternly, and Penn's stomach dropped. "You haven't ever heard me talk about my family, not really," she said.

"Yeah I have," he said uncomfortably, unsure why he was even talking, feeling the need to defend himself, "you talk about your aunt—"

“My real family. My parents who died.”

He shut up.

“My parents died in a house fire when I was nine.”

Penn felt the muscles in his face slacken, and he stared at her. Was she making some sort of sick joke? He’d told her that about his own parents a long time ago, in the stacks.

“Why didn’t you say that—” he stopped.

“You told me your parents died in a house fire,” Kate said. “I don’t know if you had a sibling,” her voice had contorted sharply and he looked over to see she was crying, her eyes were red and glistening with tears. “I had a brother named Atticus,” she said.

He heard himself laugh, the sound empty. For a moment he thought he was literally floating. The rock was under him but he couldn’t feel it, and he tried to steady his gaze on her—on Kate, who didn’t look familiar either, her hair down and her back slouched, a little girl crying over a wound.

“What are you saying?” he said, but his voice was still far away. He couldn’t see her face. He reached out to touch her hair and she didn’t pull away as he felt the strands of it, clearing a way to look at and read her better. Her tears were persistent, her hair stiff and straw like, in his hand, the feeling in his fingers separated him from numbing cold or what, he didn’t know. Her freckles were dark and he felt the edge of that same swell of power, intuition, that he’d felt before, a taking up of authority.

“My aunt told me my brother died,” she said. “He died in the fire.”

He almost laughed—he wanted to yell at her—*Are you insane?* But he couldn't do that—not while she was crying. He'd never seen her cry, not even close. He dropped his hand, his thoughts racing.

"I don't understand—" he said, his voice hollow, watching her, but he did understand. He understood how real it was, that despite the funeral he'd seen, that he'd participated in himself—that somehow this was his sister, right here. His parents weren't alive; he knew that in his core. But his sister—

"What're you saying?" he said again, shaking his head, but she ignored him so thoroughly he wondered if he'd said the words aloud.

"I'm having a hard time processing out what's real," Kate said. Her voice was even but her tears were still going, almost peaceful, dampening different spots on her coat a little darker than the snowflakes did. Penn fought the urge to join her. He wanted to think clearly, to understand what was happening—what she was suggesting, exactly, before he gave into it.

"I talked to Clara—Aunt Clara—over break," she said. She wiped her eyes impatiently and straightened. Then she pulled her hair back, away from her face and neck. "She told me she didn't know you were on campus here, but she had already told me that you were alive. It's a long story, but I think it's the truth. My legal name was changed and so was yours—"

"Foucault?"

Kate nodded.

Penn watched her secure her hair in a ponytail and even that looked unfamiliar to him, lumpy and disheveled. Though now that he studied it, it reminded him of his mother

in the photo. The snow kept on, gentle and incessant, thin white flakes peppering them both forever.

“My parents worked for Concordis,” he began. He felt so detached right now he could hardly regurgitate the information he’d wanted to share. “They met at Concordis, my parents, because they worked together. Then they got married, they had two kids.” He stared off at the houses across the street, which were all dark except for one. A minivan was parked out front.

“They were amazing,” he said. He thought of the picture on the beach, his dad’s poise, his stern authority. He thought of his mother, elegant, beautiful and steady. For the past few days he’d been spending so much time in his head glorying in ideas of them it had all started to feel completely real, like he was backfilling memories he’d deserved to have from the very beginning. He thought of his favorite memories in the library, and now they carried a stronger picture of his mother, a face to match the slow, warm voice, his head against her thin shoulder, listening to her read *Great Expectations*.

“I already had memories of them,” he said. “I have this memory of my mom in our library, this big oak library.” He wasn’t sure, thinking about that, that there was any way the memory was shared with someone else. If Kate really was his sister, wouldn’t more overlap have come up? Wouldn’t she have known those kinds of things, like he did?

He heard Kate take a sharp breath of cold air. “I have pictures of us that Clara gave me. Mom was always in that library. And grandma and grandpa when they visited us. When you’re ready I have more pictures you can look at.”

The anger was so intense and unexpected Penn didn't take a breath to distill it down. "I don't know what the hell you think you're doing," he said to her. "But you can't just dick around with people's memories like that." He tried to remember if he had shared those memories with her at some point, he doubted he had, but he must've—how would she know them?

Kate wasn't looking at him. "I'm not joking, Penn."

He wanted to tell Kate about the photograph—collateral she didn't have that he did. He could show it to her, easy, but he didn't know that he would.

He watched Kate look sullenly out over the street, staring at the same house he'd looked at himself. He remembered she didn't know anything about his meeting at all—that everything in those files might not be information she had, not unless Clara had gotten it, too.

Then he remembered what Lief had said—that he had to be careful. A tension rose in him just thinking about it—trying to decide what to share with Kate now, and to what end, especially if any of this were true, versus the counsel of someone who, as much as Penn was loathe to admit it, truly did know what he was doing.

"Did you learn anything about this in New York?" Kate asked. Based on how bad this was going, she presumed he hadn't.

"Wait, what's your real name then? Your given name?"

"Sarah Foucault—Sarah Katherine—hence 'Kate.'"

"Same last name," he said absently. She seemed to understand what was happening as she shared this and stayed silent. For whatever reason Penn envisioned a well-timed Sean jibe about this moment—some weird incest joke, if he knew the whole

story, or some mock congratulations for getting hitched. Then he remembered how hard Sean had fallen for Kate and realized he'd probably be upset.

"Holy shit," Penn breathed. There was so much consequence to all this—the truth sprawled out like a labyrinth.

They sat in silence for a while, trying, silently, to organize all the information at hand. Penn ran it through everything he'd just learned in New York—that Kate could be his sister, which meant she was Kate Foucault, whatever that meant, which meant she grew up in California, which meant she was the toddler in the picture, which meant—

"My grandparents," he said without thinking.

"There's a lot to think about," she said summarily.

"Do you want to go home?" Penn asked. Unwillingly, he'd remembered what Lief had told him just a few days ago, about psychological processing and limitations on what he could take in. It didn't seem so dumb anymore. He'd probably begun this conversation with lower reserves than he might have otherwise, had he not already been trying to understand his own life. He pondered a way to tell Kate about the psychological limit thing, but he doubted she would listen.

"Let's call it," Kate said. "Let's just take some time, and then you can email me, or something, when you're ready to go through the box of pictures that Clara gave me."

He wondered if that was a good idea. If he was going to douse himself in information this quickly, he doubted he'd be prepared for spring break.

"You can go through it alone if you want," she added, then paused for a minute.

"Look, sorry, this is so much sloppier than I even thought. I just really need to go lie

down.” She slid off the rock and landed lithely on the ground. Penn followed but landed stiffly, his knees tightening as his feet crunched into snow.

They walked back toward campus in silence. Kate seemed to be recovering to a shocking state of normalcy, but he felt increasingly awkward and couldn’t figure out how to act. Did he hug her? Comfort her? What did a brother do? And if he wasn’t a brother, which seemed pretty much impossible at this point, would this just be the weirdest friendship of his life? He thought again about Sean—he’d texted Penn earlier that morning, that he’d be back in town on Friday and was “mad prepping” to reunite. The thought of that interaction made his head spin. How the hell would he discern what he should share?

“Let me just give you the box now,” Kate announced. They were passing her dorm and it was an easy enough place to pit stop.

Penn shrugged and waited in the lobby as she ran up to her room. A few minutes later she appeared at the far end of it, looking haggard and exhausted.

“Here,” she said, handing him a heavy shoebox veiled in two plastic grocery bags. He took it.

“So I’m not sure how to go forward,” she said without looking at him. “It’s why I wanted to talk before class starts. Just—email me if you have questions, I guess.”

He watched her walk away, unsure of how to process her, how it could ever be that on this planet, in the life he’d always known, he could have a friend become a long lost sister. It was something from a period novel, something he’d learned to believe could never happen. Yet a small brightness in him seemed to encourage him to give in, to

believe it all the way through: he did have family, and he could learn to know them more now, exponentially.

He walked home in the snow with the box underneath his coat, pressing it hard against his stomach as a reality check, grateful that between the shielding plastic and his heavy coat, nothing could touch it except for him.

III. Spring

(25)

Kate sat at the front of the student union ballroom, positioned among a panel of five. They were behind a long table on a raised stage, elevated just a foot or so above the main floor, where folding chairs had been pulled together for other members of the Logos media group. The room was cavernous, with paned, floor-to-ceiling windows running along its outside wall. Rich wood paneling covered the inner walls, crown moulding and intricate wood details appearing throughout the room like frames. Penn had told her once that the Peace Corps was founded on the steps of this building, and that it was one of the oldest on campus. Until they started meeting, Kate had only been by the union a few times and had never been in the ballroom before. Yet even with the room's relative darkness, the space felt warm and familiar. In the midst of its grandeur the Logos members in front of her looked pretty feeble—thirty or so students with backpacks and spring jackets strewn out over extra chairs.

“So before next week, talk with Penn if you're hoping to have an informational interview with Concordis while they're on campus in April. Space is limited, but we also don't want to repeat ourselves. Every person speaking with them should be posing different questions. This is a professional group of adults—they should understand we're not ill-prepared or childish.”

Tara Goldstein, the meticulously put-together redhead Kate and Penn had met in her hallway the day of the bomb, was standing and speaking to Kate's left. As Logos

president, Tara had followed through on everything they'd brainstormed that day; Logos had its first meeting in January, and it was now March. Kate, appointed VP, had been both humbled and inspired watching Tara's determined, methodical process—one shared conversation about media and fear in Kate's dorm room had led to this: a new group on campus, Logos, focused on researching, watching, and evaluating media companies, large ones in particular. In the long run they'd be developing a rating system that they could apply to individual reports and articles. For now, though, they were just trying to get members.

Doris stuck her tongue out amiably at Kate as Tara finished her monologue. Had Sean continued coming, he undoubtedly would have seized that opportunity with something inane, too, like a fart noise or a nefarious giggle. Instead he'd gotten bored quickly, and it was spring, after all, so his life was consumed by soccer.

Aware of her influential position up front, Kate refrained from smiling, admiring Doris's haircut instead. She'd cut it short for the spring semester, her formerly long waves cropped into an artfully tousled bob. Doris already looked mature for her age, but the hair cut changed her into a passable thirty-year-old. Kate felt a surge of pride that she was friends with this girl, someone so adult—confident and authoritative.

“And, as always, bring any friends to this meeting—I don't care if they're that interested in what we do, we can find a role for them. Virtually anything they do with us will look good on their resume, I'll personally help them write it. The more people we have, the more funding we get from the university, and the more we can do.”

Kate always felt guilty at this part of Tara's weekly reminders; she didn't have more friends to invite, and she was part of the club's leadership. She'd invited girls from

her hall, but it seemed increasingly difficult to get a large number of people to agree to show up at the same place and time every week; people felt skittish about being so routine, so vulnerable. Plus, a sizeable chunk of the student body hadn't returned after winter break, opting to finish the year online. The *Daily* had run a few interviews with parents and students who had opted to stay versus those who had opted to go. In Kate's opinion, some people were still lying about their reasons for leaving—easier to focus online, just a season for more family time. Everyone on campus knew that even if that *was* part of it, overall, people were afraid. The coverage of the bomb had expanded its reach and poignancy into something larger than life; what had felt small, contained on campus, albeit it terrifying, became a monster that threatened every aspect of campus. She'd taken up check-in calls with Clara every week or so ever since winter break, and Clara told her that something related to the bombing ran even in Churdan for nearly three months into the new year. And much of it, including the month-long, investigative recap report on campus violence across the country, went far beyond one isolated event. So elsewhere, Kate had gathered, the bomb was perceived as one weapon in a sequence of many, a harbinger of violence.

To Kate, the reality back on campus was that security had increased, no one had died, and the bomber had been arrested back in December, within 48 hours of the event—a former employee who was upset at his boss and wanted to make a statement. Where was the coverage about that?

Doris raised her hand and Tara called on her.

“How is our Corporate Relations Chair feeling about the visit?” she asked. Heads turned to watch Penn’s response, and Kate noticed how quickly they did so, like they were eager for the excuse to stare.

If Penn was surprised by the question, he hid it well. Doris had found out around spring break that Penn applied for that Concordis internship and she hadn’t let him hear the end of it, even after he told both her and Kate that they’d dropped him from the applicant pool—something about his age—so he hadn’t made it to an in-person interview after all. Kate had been disappointed for him, because she knew how much he wanted it. At the same time, privately she felt that Penn working for Concordis might not be the best thing for him. It was intuition, really, but it felt true.

Kate watched Penn lower his chin slightly toward the microphone in front of him—something Tara insisted on, wanting to anticipate an enormous group rather than cap themselves by being unprofessional. “Good,” he said simply. A few people laughed.

Penn looked clean cut and self-possessed, as he always did, and it was hard to believe just a few months ago Kate had watched him display sloppier, unfiltered emotion, starting with the two of them sitting on that rock. Usually she tried not to think about it in public, worried her face might translate her thoughts to others, but for a brief second she thrilled in the fact that this guy was her brother. A year ago she had no one outside of Churdan; now, between Penn and Doris, she felt like the luckiest person in the room.

“Concordis has been nothing but professional over the past three months when I email them,” he added, “you’ll have a chance to meet them yourself in a few more weeks, and I think I won’t be the only one advocating for this visit then. It’s a privilege to even have them on campus.”

Tara reached for the microphone and Penn dutifully slid it toward her, Doris apparently satisfied with his response. Penn had pushed for Concordis to visit campus even after his interview fell through, and in the face of basically every Logos member vehemently hating the company. It was a case study, for most, of the kind of journalism they were working to prevent. But Penn insisted it was a smart business move, meeting with the biggest company in the industry, and Kate believed him, but his passion about it still seemed sort of—off.

“Alright, if that’s it, then, we’re on for next week for one last prep meeting before the visit, which, again, is the following Thursday and Friday. We’ll debrief after that. Vicky?”

Vicky Choe, an athletically built sophomore, spoke promptly at the far end of the table. She named several media companies and Kate watched heads nod as each research group affirmed they were on for next week, giving presentations about how each company ran, a brief history, their strengths and weaknesses in reporting. Vicky was pushing the research side because she ultimately wanted to sell the reports back to those companies—turn herself into a consultancy or something equally foreign to Kate, though she knew Penn thought it was brilliant.

“If you have questions, obviously, email me,” Vicky concluded. As she talked, quite a few students stared at Kate openly, or at Penn, observing them both with an intensity she had grown to feel comfortable under. Since they’d returned for second semester, Doris had been the one to point it out first, verbally at least, though Kate had already noticed: eyes were often on them now in a way they weren’t before.

It wasn't for a visible reason—unlike Doris, her hair was the same, her clothes the same, her habits and demeanor. But she'd grown confident since her revelation with Penn, and it had done something to her. She felt surer, bolder about where she belonged in the world. Whatever respect she'd warranted from people before, she could feel how much more she received now.

Though there was another aspect, something so weird she hadn't tried to communicate to anyone, not even Doris, because she knew it would sound ridiculous. There were times, when she was feeling close to Penn or Doris, even Sean, or when she reflected on the strength of her relationships, really realized how important they were and how incredibly powerful it felt to belong—those times, she could feel a rinse of intellectual clarity run through her mind, and she could think through, concretely, several options for how to proceed in a given situation. It was like the time she'd thought she should talk to Penn on campus before the semester started, or when she first thought he was her brother—but it had grown more organized, recognizable. When it happened to her now it presented itself in a list—clear, simultaneous options for how to proceed, like the multiple choice routes in a *Choose Your Own Adventure*. The weirdest part, though—and this is what she couldn't explain to anyone—was that when she picked one and followed it through, it unfolded exactly as she'd envisioned.

“Kate, can I steal you for a quick meeting?” Tara asked her. The group had ended and people were gathering their things, talking and laughing as they left the ballroom. Kate had wanted to spend some time with Penn—he'd been evasive ever since spring break, and she still hadn't had a chance to see how his third meeting had gone in New York. There were selfish reasons for that, too, if she was honest. She wanted to know if

he'd found out more about her—why she'd gone to Clara and him to that random, rich boarding school, why they hadn't been allowed to grow up together.

Overall Kate thought they'd recovered well, considering the intensity of January; the first time they'd reunited after the “revelation,” things had been uncomfortable. They'd spent an entire afternoon talking about some of the pictures Clara sent and hazy memories they had, and Penn was really emotional after the fact, teary-eyed and insecure, whereas Kate had gotten almost everything out on the first go—crying things out while she sat on that spray painted rock. Still, the pain that came with reconnecting had surprised her. One picture that Penn had, of their family on the beach when he was just a baby, had made her hurt so hard it took her a while to think it through—she'd felt a strange jealousy over the way he clung, a baby, to their mother, the way she was siloed, clutching a bucket on her own. And their dad—so removed. In truth it was how she remembered him, but it was a fresher pain to see it so clearly. It was easier to lean on the memories she'd invented over time—that her dad had been ever-present and kind.

Feeling that, maybe, and the discomfort of Penn crying, she'd stupidly blurted out, “What, do you want me to hug you?” which had sparked an argument bad enough to set them back another few weeks—Penn was pissed she was so insensitive, and she was annoyed he was trying to get her to drag things out, or suddenly become someone she wasn't. It felt like becoming instant siblings had brought out weird expectations—like all of a sudden Penn couldn't just let her be her. She'd processed the thing hard and moved on, wanting him to do the same, more than ready to start enjoying the benefits of having a real family member.

Then spring break arrived as they were hitting a kind of stride in late February—getting lunch every so often, just spending time together—and now it felt like things between them were regressing.

“Sure,” she said, watching Penn typing at his laptop intensely, still seated on the podium and oblivious to several people who’d gathered around, small talking in front the raised stage. Clearly they were waiting for him.

“Penn,” Doris called sharply from her seat. Penn raised his head, dazed, and Doris gestured to the group at his feet. He looked over the table edge and muttered “sorry” before one began to ask him a question.

In January, Kate and Penn had told Doris and Sean that they were siblings. It was early on, and the ideals they held then probably buffered the news enough to make it a positive experience for everyone; if they’d had more foresight, they might have recorded Doris and Sean’s expressions. It was the most speechless Kate had ever seen them.

Afterward, showing them a few of the pictures, explaining their stories, they’d all laughed so hard—frenetically, deliriously, overwhelmed—they’d cried enough to go through Doris’ entire pocket pack of Kleenex.

Past Tara, Doris waved goodbye to Kate and headed out, typing away on her cell phone. She’d gotten more responsibility at the *Daily* lately and was making more editorial decisions, but she still made a point to attend Logos; she’d brought quite a few members from the *Daily*.

Tara picked up her bag and led Kate out of the ballroom, striding toward the indoor coffee shop with more intensity than Kate exuded in a week. Tara’s sleek, nylon

shoulder bag rested lightly on her shoulder, filled with some perfect amount of cargo that didn't disrupt her poised stance and springy skirt.

"I won't steal you long," Tara said in front of the cashier, her hands and eyes busy with her phone. "Just want to talk through a few things."

They ordered food and Tara sat them at a back table, even though they were the only customers there.

"I don't know how this place keeps running," Tara said. She took a bite of her sandwich. "Probably university-funded. Anyway, so—" she set down her sandwich. "There isn't a policy on this, but I think it's important that you understand expectations for the leadership team," she said. "Next year, when I'm gone and graduated, you're free to change things if you want, but this year you're under me, and hopefully I can convince you my way's best."

Tara smiled, but Kate braced herself for whatever was coming, trying to figure out how much micromanaging control she'd have to wriggle her way out from under.

"It's better if people don't date within the group," Tara stated. She picked up her sandwich and Kate noticed her fingernails were bright blue, perfectly manicured.

Kate stared at her blankly. "Okay."

Tara looked at her, her expression unreadable, then swallowed. "So you and Penn Beckett," she began, her tone of voice suddenly more friendly, less collegial. She waved her hand at Kate as if waiting for her to finish the sentence. "You're together?"

Kate barked out a laugh and spit a piece of chewed bread onto the table between them. Tara eyed it with aversion and Kate followed her line of sight with resignation, swiping it away with a balled napkin. "Gross, sorry. No, no we're—definitely not."

Tara raised her sharply arched eyebrows and smiled a little. “I mean, I wouldn’t be so defensive about it if I were you—”

“He’s my brother.”

Tara stared at her. “What?”

“Yeah, he’s my brother.” Kate tried to say it casually, but she hadn’t said it aloud a lot and it felt like honey in her mouth. The last time she said it was when she and Penn had told Doris and Sean.

“Do you guys not tell people that?”

“No, it’s public information, I guess—” though they hadn’t really made a point to tell anyone. “It hasn’t come up.”

Tara set her sandwich down and wiped her hands on her napkin. “Wow. News to me.” After a moment she picked up her sandwich again. “Right, so—not a problem then, I guess, but just FYI, it’s just better if no one’s romantically involved within Logos. Starts to get politically weird when that happens, you know?”

Kate nodded again, her mouth strategically stuffed with turkey sandwich. She wondered how many others might have thought something similar about her and Penn—Tara had just been ballsy enough to address it.

“Man, put a word in for me after I graduate, then,” Tara said. “I’m headed to a city, New York or L.A., probably, but I’m sure before that I’ll want something fun. He’s hot.”

Kate tried not to choke but didn’t entirely succeed, a weird noise coming from her throat.

“Unless he’s with Doris?” Tara’s eyes were on Kate again.

She swallowed. “Nope, definitely not. We’re all just enjoying some old-fashioned, platonic friendship.” She sounded so unlike herself she knew Tara was probably getting suspicious. She tried to think of how she could change the subject.

“I thought you—uh—had a boyfriend,” she lied.

Tara shook her head, her pin-straight red hair swaying rigidly, like the pendulum in Clara’s grandfather clock. “Nope. Probably just saw me with my brother, happens all the time,” Tara said casually. “I guess you’d think I’d not make the same mistake with you two, then,” she laughed. “We study together in the B-school a lot, he’s everywhere.”

Kate had never seen Tara’s brother, nor did she know he existed. If he was B-school, maybe Penn knew him. “That’s cool—you guys are close?”

“Yeah, of course. He’s older than me, an MBA student, kind of a jerk about it sometimes, normal older brother stuff. But yeah, wouldn’t trade him.” She grinned.

Kate realized her mouth was open, her thoughts elsewhere. “Cool,” she said quickly. “What kinds of things do you two do together?”

Tara’s reaction revealed the weirdness of Kate’s question; she realized that Tara likely found her strange, to say the least, but she’d always been nice about hiding it if she did.

“Lunch, studying—normal brother-sister stuff, I don’t know.”

Kate felt a little relieved, it sounded similar enough to her and Penn.

Tara chuckled her napkin into her bowl and checked her phone. “I gotta head out,” she said, standing. She grabbed her bowl while Kate’s cheeks strained against a blatant smile. “Great to get dinner with you, though, we’ll start meeting like this more near the end of the semester—you’re inheriting a lot. Mostly good.”

Kate finished off her own sandwich and stood, clearing her plate then returning to her seat. She might as well stay and study for a while. “Thanks, I’ll see you.”

She watched Tara’s thin figure strut its way purposefully out the door, her skirt waving a little goodbye.

Kate dug around for her headphones, amused at the turn of events. She plugged them into her computer and turned up a song Will had sent her recently, a gravely voiced singer against the raw notes of a lone guitar. She checked her email compulsively, a little dropout of disappointment when her inbox didn’t show his name. Almost simultaneously, a new message appeared, and she smiled at the screen; she still wasn’t used to how hearing from him had started to make her feel. Lately he’d taken to sending her things, songs mostly, or news articles he thought she might like, and every time her reaction made her feel like a toddler.

Check this out—something for your next meeting? He’d written, with a link to news of another Concordis acquisition. She scanned through it gravely, nonplussed about more news of another buyout. The company was getting to be such an enormous conglomerate at this point, it seemed impossible that more wasn’t written about it. The article Will had sent wasn’t even from a major media outlet. She clicked around a bit, trying to find more intel on the acquisition.

At a recent Logos meeting they’d mapped out a web of conglomerate ownership for Concordis and several other companies—there were plenty of other players in the media industry, but Concordis was the largest by far. In the last year it’d grown to include more than 15 subsidiary entities and didn’t show signs of slowing. At the meeting, after her team pulled up the ownership web on an overhead, Doris had pushed for the group to

publish what they'd created. Tara had agreed, but they'd decided to wait until after Concordis' visit. Vicky and some other girl, a freshman, were slated to talk with Concordis' recruitment team, and they wanted to see if they could get any more information to benefit the research they'd done. If they shared how much Concordis controlled with the public, the hope was that the public might be smarter—understand that so much of the media consumed was really coming from one place, not multiple.

Kate had learned almost all of this from Penn's presentations to the group, and smaller meetings with the leadership team. For her part, she just tried to pay attention and feign more interest than she had—her sole concern was for people like Clara, viewers who deserved to get news that reflected reality. Clara was smart, but she didn't think much about who pulled the strings behind the things she watched, read, or listened to. She thought if the name of the company on the screen changed then it meant it was a new source, and the danger was in the not knowing this was not true. Someone like Clara wouldn't question her news if she didn't think there was reason to.

Kate clicked back to Will's email and forwarded it to Tara, Penn, and Vicky, careful to adjust the message so it didn't include anything about Will.

"An insatiable money maw," Doris had called Concordis just last week. She hated the company increasingly, though her resentment was more complex—as a journalist, she was both dependent on entities like it to give her a job, and disagreed entirely with the way it was run. She'd vowed to never work for them, and probably wouldn't, but at times Kate thought it seemed futile to support the smaller outlets when the future seemed so unchangeable. How could little media outlets—newspapers,

magazines, TV stations—fight against a giant conglomerate? Doris said she hoped it was David and Goliath, with the same ending awaiting them if they fought.

-26-

Dear Mr. Beckett,

We look forward to your in-person interview on Friday, April 5 at 8:00 a.m. in in the Student Union. A representative from our team will meet you in front of the Ballroom.

You can expect the interview to last approximately one hour.

If you have any questions, you may contact me directly.

As discussed, we appreciate your discretion in keeping your interview privileges private.

Best,

I.B.

Recruitment Chair

CONCORDIS

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[27]

The magic hour was settling across campus, and the stadium lights clicked on astride the green of the soccer field. Beyond them, a group of a two hundred or so people peppered the stands, the majority of them condensed close the field. The blue jerseys of

Michigan's soccer were intermingled with the red and white of the visiting team. Sean was visible at the opposite end of the field, standing casually as the ball moved between players on the end opposite him. His off-white goalie gloves were bright, hanging at the sides of his bright yellow, long-sleeve goalie jersey.

Penn watched him cup the gloves around his mouth and yell something down the field, then point the defenders further up toward the midfield line. They jogged forward a little, closer to where the ball was moving among the offense.

He jogged down the stadium seating closer to the field. He was late, but he'd come straight from lecture. The smell of mud and grass was a sharp reminder of high school, times when he'd been a midfielder Sean occasionally yelled at. There was some envy in him now, watching Sean in that jersey, in his element and thriving. He looked self-assured in a way that transcended even his best moments socializing on campus.

"You made it," Doris called. She was standing in the midst of the group and holding a large cardboard sign.

Penn wove his way closer to her and leaned forward to see the sign she held. "Slay the Badger," he read aloud. "Nice."

"Yeah, well, wish I'd thought of that one," Doris said, pointing to a girl in red spirit wear who held a sign with: MICHIGAN BOYS ARE EASIER THAN OUR SCHEDULES.

"I'm surprised they let you bring anything in here," Penn offered.

"Same. Although I went through two sets of metal detectors, and I think my sign got more wand attention than I get going through TSA."

“Kick the damn ball!” someone shrieked, and Penn looked just as a Michigan wing kicked a booming shot into the upper left corner of the goal. It was a gorgeous shot.

“Hell yes!” Penn shouted with the crowd’s cheers. The girl in red had lowered her sign and was glowering.

“2-0,” Doris announced. There were only a few minutes left in the game; a shutout—Sean was going to be happy.

“Sean said we could meet him down there afterward.” She pointed to a corner of the field, which was separated from the stadium seating by a chain link fence.

The clock trickled out and the fans cheered, Doris and Penn included. They walked toward the appointed meeting corner and talked as Sean jogged in with his team, then gathered up his things from along the bench.

As they stood there Penn noticed a group of three Indian girls, one holding a glittering sign that said: WE LIKEY PANDEY.

Penn nudged Doris as subtly as he could, then turned his head toward the field while he waited for her reaction.

“No way,” she said. Her expression wasn’t one he was familiar with on her; she wasn’t smiling, just staring intently at the sign and watching the girls giggling amongst themselves with a lingering, evaluative, gaze, like she’d stumbled on a group of friends who had met up and forgotten to invite her.

“Well, he’ll be happy about that, too,” she said, turning forcibly away to look out over the field. Sean was halfway across it, walking toward them with his head bent toward his hands and his cell phone.

Penn though Doris was still into Sean, but it wasn't something they talked about. It was like they had a gentleman/gentlewoman's agreement not to talk about emotions, which he liked.

"Hey, hey," Sean said to Doris and Penn, "gimme a second." He winked at Penn and went right first, to the group of girls.

Doris cleared her throat. "Asshole," she muttered, lowering her sign to the ground and leaning it against the fence. "Anyway, how are classes going for you? Logos seems like it's going really well."

"It is," Penn replied, agreeing, by ignoring it, not to talk about whatever was happening right next to them. "Classes are good. I'm doing better in the B-school classes than I thought, so that's been a nice surprise."

"You study all the time. *I'm* not surprised."

He appreciated the vote of confidence. Going into the semester he'd been worried the business school would annihilate him; instead he'd found the coursework to be relatively the same. Different material, same challenge.

"You?"

"Same," Doris said. "Things at the paper are going really well—I'm basically working as a co-editor now, so next year I should have a full-time editorial spot. That'll be fun, gives me more freedom to set the agenda, write about what I want."

"You'll be great at that," Penn said, and he meant it. Doris was the person he went to if he wanted to hear the latest in the world about pretty much anything—social justice, a new type of technology, movies, whatever.

“I hope so,” she said. “I just feel a responsibility to use that role a certain way, I guess. I want to make sure I’m publicizing the right things, talking about issues that matter. Especially when it comes to things that people are afraid to talk about.”

“Like dwindling attendance?” Penn laughed, but it was a dark addition. He hated how much worse campus seemed to be getting, despite the university’s obvious efforts to protect it.

“Seriously, look at this game,” Doris looked up and around the stadium. The smaller crowd had already filtered out through the stadium exits, and only a handful of people were hanging around to talk with players. Aside from the impressive seating and university branding, they might as well have been at a rural high school.

“Super fans!” Sean declared, sidling up toward them across the fence. “Where’s the other half of the Royal Family?”

Penn wanted to kick Sean for so quickly asking about Kate. He’d taken to calling them that ever since he found out they were siblings.

“Studying,” Doris said. “Woody Plants midterm tomorrow.”

“Gross. What were you saying about the game? That I was awesome?” Sean threw his duffel bag over the fence, looked over his shoulder, then quickly scaled it and hopped onto the ground beside them.

“Pandey!” his coach barked across the field.

Sean turned and waved, smiling. “My bad,” he said through gritted teeth, though Penn didn’t think he looked very guilty. He started walking and Doris and Penn fell in step.

“I was talking about the crowds,” Doris said. Penn could tell she was a little hesitant, her eyes darting furtively to Sean as if to gauge his reaction. This was new—Doris worrying about offending someone with what she was trying to say.

“Yeah, it’s shit,” Sean replied. “I get all these free tickets now, too. Those two I gave you were just the tip of the iceberg.”

Penn noticed Doris had left her sign.

“Count your blessings,” Doris said. She straightened her shoulders and walked a little taller than she had a moment before.

Sean smiled at her and Penn watched her warm underneath it, her smile widening even as she looked away.

“Seriously though, I get all these free tickets,” Sean complained, “and no one comes, because my friends are too intellectual to be obsessed with me.”

“What the hell, man, we’re here.” If this was another reference to Kate, he was starting to get annoyed and a little protective of Doris. Just like Sean to be as observant as ever in most situations, then fail to see the most obvious subtleties that were playing out right in front of him. There was also a chance he was doing it on purpose—being an asshole, implicitly, so he could avoid addressing Doris liking him head-on.

Penn realized Sean didn’t talk so much about girls anymore, and he wondered if it had changed. Hopefully, it wasn’t Kate; Penn didn’t see a future for that, the more he was getting to know her. Sean had pretty much let it drop after quickly debriefing Penn after winter break—“said no to the date, she’s got some boyfriend”—but maybe Sean was growing up. Maybe he really did like her enough to keep liking her even if it wasn’t requited.

“So, check this out—full confidentiality, alright?”

They’d rejoined the main sidewalks of campus and were alone as they walked, any crowds from the soccer game having dissipated into the city.

Sean reached into his duffel and pulled out a smooth, metal smartphone. The screen was enormous, so perfectly reflective it looked brand new. He held it out to them with both hands, like he was presenting an award.

The screen glowed and Penn saw a stack of notifications—social media updates, text messages, several new comments.

Doris reached for it. “I thought you can’t—”

“I’m not supposed to,” Sean interrupted, pulling the phone away and sliding it back into his bag. “I’m counting on you being in the friend zone right now, D—no journalism hat. Don’t rat me out.” He looked at her sternly and Doris looked conflicted.

“You should’ve asked me that before—”

“Are you ever my friend, or what?”

Doris looked hurt, and the wait for her response was a tense one.

“Ugh. Whatever,” she said finally, and Sean visibly relaxed.

“It’s not as bad as you think,” Sean said. “We’re not *supposed* to have smartphones as athletes, true, but that’s only because they don’t want the news to interfere with our game—the rule hasn’t even been around that long, maybe the last three years. It started when people started getting weirded out by group gatherings and large, public events—”

“I’m aware,” Doris snapped.

“So—the problem is, I’m a sophomore. Next year I need to think seriously about trying to get drafted. And pro sports elsewhere are struggling with similar issues of fear and all that. They want players who have a built-in platform, an audience they’ll bring to games. And if I want to connect with other people, I need a brand, you know?” He shifted his bag on his shoulders so it was out of his way, behind his back. “After that bomb interview I realized how much traction I was losing by not being on social media. People kept asking to follow me, they wanted to follow-up—and I couldn’t continue that conversation with them. So this way, I’m on there, but I’m super private, so my coaches aren’t going to find out. Plus, a few of the other guys on the team are already doing it—that’s how I got the phone in the first place.” He pulled the phone out again and opened it, swiping around until he arrived at whatever he was looking for.

Sean shoved the screen toward Penn—it was a photo of Sean lacing his cleats in the locker room before the game, apparently taken by one of his teammates. It already had hundreds of likes and comments, the most recent one a series of emoticon kissy faces.

Penn offered it to Doris and she looked at without taking the phone. She sighed. “God, your ego after this—we’ll see if our friendship survives it.”

Sean laughed, retrieving the phone. “I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said, though he already training his eyes on the screen, swiping and then commenting something back.

Penn glanced at Doris and she was looking intently at the sidewalk, her hands her pockets. He wondered if she was seeing the outcome of this far past what he himself was thinking—that, gut instinct, this wasn’t going to turn out well for them. He still didn’t totally understand how Sean had seemed to recover so easily from the bomb in the first

place; he'd been pretty traumatized by it, had trouble sleeping several nights afterward and had made a somewhat concerted effort to avoid going into large buildings when he didn't have to. Initially he'd thought it was shock, was waiting for Sean to inevitably, he thought, process what happened and start going to counseling or something. Instead, it was like Sean only saw the bomb as an opportunity—a wave he could ride to get where he wanted to go. There had been a moment or two where he almost brought it up directly, but he didn't want to fear monger if Sean really was alright; what was the point of scaring someone if they really weren't afraid?

They reached Sean's building first and he rummaged around for his ID card to swipe them all in.

"I've gotta head out," Penn said. "Congrats on the game, though—I caught the tail end."

Sean pulled his ID out and looked to Doris, though his motions had slowed significantly and Penn thought it looked pretty obvious he wasn't comfortable with her coming in alone.

"Same," she said, as if sensing the same thing. "Articles to write, yada yada."

"Cool. Thanks for coming. Seriously. You guys are the best." He slid his card through the first reader and tugged the door open. Penn started to say something to Doris when Sean rushed back to stick his head out the door. "Oh, hey—follow me!"

"Yup!" Doris retorted, and Sean disappeared again. "He could get in deep shit for that," she said. "I don't know if he realizes it. His coach could pull him for a year."

“That’s intense,” Penn said. “Seems controlling though, honestly. Isn’t part of college navigating things like that on your own? At what point to adults just get out of the way?”

Doris shrugged. Then she looked at him. “Oh, hey, I wanted to ask you—could I interview you and Kate for a *Daily* article? I thought of it last night. If I write about your newfound sibling relationship, it’d probably be a big hit. And if I write about it in the context of Logos, both of you leading or whatever, then it would publicize the group and hopefully more people would join.

“And if you don’t want me to do it,” she added, “my colleague Dezia is really good at human interest stuff—she could be the interviewer and then maybe it wouldn’t be as weird.”

Penn thought about it. The idea of being publicized was gross to him; as much as Sean wanted it, even needed it for his career, Penn was intentional about pursuing a job that would keep him operating the spotlight, not standing in it. At the same time, he had his Concordis interview coming up—it’d be a nice tag-on to his resume, especially if he could tie it to growing club numbers.

The problem, which Doris didn’t know about, and wouldn’t if he could help it, is that Concordis had no clue about his involvement with Logos. All the outreach with them he’d done for the group had been under a fake club name: The Business Research Association. He’d pitched it as a neutral “interest” group that contacted corporations to learn more about how they run. If he were Concordis, there was no way he’d talk with a student-run group that was blatantly working toward denouncing his company; it was better this way. The Logos members who interviewed with Concordis employees at the

April campus event would get more unfiltered information about Concordis, and he wouldn't tarnish his internship application by looking like a two-timing media rebel. If Doris wrote about them in relationship to Concordis, though, that would all come crashing down.

"I could do that," he said, "but not if we include Logos explicitly. I don't think that's the best idea—we're too polarizing."

Doris frowned at him. "What's polarizing about pushing for sound reporting—"

"It's definitely polarizing to some people," he interrupted, "but I think the workaround is that we can just say we met through a campus club that's interested in the way companies run, and then from there we can just include Tara's contact info or something for people who want to learn more about the group. That's safer anyway, which Tara's big on—not being naïve about telling the whole world when and where we meet and all that. She doesn't even list our meeting times on the University Involvement website."

Penn watched Doris thinking about it and tried to drum up more evidence, though if all else failed, he would just say no.

"Alright, that's fine, I guess," Doris said finally. She ran a hand through her pixie cut distractedly, as if remembering it used to be longer. When she finished her grey streak caught some of the street light and it was strange to see it so much shorter than it had been. "Are you guys even on good terms, by the way? Seems like you haven't been hanging out as much."

He was surprised she asked it, and so bluntly. His theory about their no-emotional-discussions agreement was apparently more tenuous than he thought.

“Uh, yeah, we’re fine. Just busy time of year with school.”

In truth, it had been a rough transition, gaining a sister he thought he’d lost. It had made him doubt reality in ways that were totally unnerving—he’d never liked the ephemeral way memories and the past seemed to be inconsistent with themselves, subject to change if he remembered something new, or a lie getting reinforced over time just because you had started a habitual pattern of remembering it a certain way. This had manifested in the afternoon they spent remembering things together; there was a lot of overlap, and that was comforting, but sharing memories he’d had of the library, or his parents, was fraught by Kate’s perspective. At one point she’d insinuated, even, that their dad had been somewhat aloof. He didn’t remember him that way at all, and the anger he’d felt at her for saying that had surprised him.

That afternoon, in hindsight, had felt dangerous—an endless trip back into the past, indulgent and counterproductive. After it he didn’t feel it was necessary to repeat the experience, though perhaps that was only because of the comfort he felt in having Kate around; knowing she wasn’t going anywhere, was part of his life, it was easy to believe they had all the time in the world to piece their past together as much as they needed to. It seemed like something that would just repair itself.

The other weird thing that had happened was spring break—his third and final meeting to New York had been an intense one, as Lief promised. He’d found out about Clara, which he’d already known about, thanks to Kate—her address, that she was his father’s only sibling, that his mother had been an only child. He’d also learned that his father’s parents had passed away back when his father was young—something else Kate had told him, via Clara. Records of his maternal grandparents were incomplete. The last

record of them was an address from before the fire, back out west. After that, no one had heard from them; he presumed they may have died.

He'd mentioned all this to Kate briefly after a Logos meeting when they didn't have to get into it. For some reason she'd been deeply interested in the mystery of their grandparents, basically insinuating that she wanted to find them. It was something he wanted no part of; they had clearly not wanted to be a part of his life or Kate's. Why should he care where they were?

Doris peeled off with a quiet goodbye and Penn realized they'd spent the walk in relative silence. He wondered if seeing Sean had only made things worse for her—it was strange to see her so quiet.

He walked the rest of the way to his house, dodged two roommate requests to hang out and drink, and headed for his room. On his computer, he checked his bank account.

This was the part he knew he had to share with Kate, and he had no idea how to do it. At the Schulte office, he'd found that he'd come into a sizeable inheritance—something his parents had invested a long time ago. It wasn't an insane fortune—he would still have to work—but it was enough to make him wonder what to do with it. For now, he was just letting it sit.

“This is also confidential, like the rest of what we've told you,” Lief had instructed him. By that point Penn was running the relationship with Lief the way he, Penn, wanted to—with file three he'd realized, when they had virtually no information about Kate, and much less information about Clara than what Kate had been able to share with him from her own experience—that these people didn't have all the answers. When

Lief mechanically told him that his sister was indeed alive, living with his aunt in Iowa, and had gone through a legal name change process as he had, Penn had dutifully pretended to be struck by the revelation, overwhelmed by the news. Lief had gone on to recite the things he knew Penn must be feeling—anger, grief, shock—that these feelings were normal and would be resurfacing over time. It was helpful only in the sense that he could look back and better understand some of what he’d been feeling since January.

“We’ll be able to orchestrate an in-person visit to your sister later this year, if you’d like,” Lief had said. “But we recommend waiting for that so we can moderate. There will also be the issue of finances; you’ve had very different upbringings, and your sister’s inheritance was legally managed by Clara after the adoption process. We can recommend a financial advisor for your own assets if you do not know someone personally.”

Penn had wanted to laugh then—the notion that he, an 18-year-old orphan, would have somehow formed a relationship with a financial advisor in his young life. Penn had concluded that, ironically, one of Lief’s biggest errors was in treating his clients like adults, not like kids.

Penn didn’t know if Kate knew about the money—that Clara had managed this. From what he’d learned and observed, she had worked a lot to buy her used car, was on a form of financial aid to be at the school, and qualified for the shitty, computer-loaned laptop she used for all her coursework. None of that inclined him to think that she knew about an inheritance.

As he finished his time in New York, without mentioning that he’d met his sister, or that he knew about his aunt, he felt good about his decision to withhold information.

Something about Lief's character didn't incline Penn to believe was fully trustworthy. It wasn't an ominous sense that Lief was evil, exactly, just the logic that he ran a company, not a counseling service. His motivations for servicing Penn were clearly to profit from whoever had paid him to manage this process in the first place.

Penn was learning it was often better in life, as Lief himself instructed, to be private. The information he held now was powerful; he ought to manage it, like any resource, as was best.

-28-

Join the most successful media company in America

CONCORDIS
for a

MEDIA VIEWING & JOB FAIR

APRIL 5

8:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Student Union Ballroom

at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Meet: A team of current, high-performing Concordis employees who work alongside the best journalists, producers, and tech crews in the industry to communicate truth.

Network: With Concordis representatives and other university students in Journalism, Communications, Business, and related fields.

See: Real-time reporting from around the Concordis network as you talk with employees about the behind-the-scenes intelligence that goes into each segment.

Learn: About our renowned, competitive internship positions and entry-level opportunities for the best and brightest leaders, students, and influencers.

Updated resume required for entry; only qualifying students will be allowed admittance into the Job Fair; Media Viewing is open to all registered university students and the public.

This event will be surveilled and protected by the highest level of corporate security, including metal detectors, K9, and advanced digital security technologies.

(29)

“You guys look great,” the camera girl was saying. “Now that you’re next to each other y’all totally look related. I see it now.”

Kate swallowed hard and smoothed her t-shirt down, wishing she had fallen on her sword to ask Doris for some help with makeup. She’d globbed on old lip gloss and left her hair down, but it didn’t seem like much—she hoped the girl was being honest.

“So Dezia is going to ask you questions while she takes stills, and I’m recording them,” Doris was sitting with her back against the central table in the *Daily* newsroom. She held up her cell phone and shook it demonstratively in the air as she spoke, “then we’ll edit the questions out later. If I have any additional questions, we’ll stop and start a separate cut with me talking.” Dezia was standing now, alternating between looking at her cell phone and scrolling through something with her finger, and squinting into a fancy camera on a tripod.

Next to her, Penn looked grim, albeit nice. He had a plain, green t-shirt on and she thought it looked good on him even if it was pretty much a costume, made him seem more relaxed than he actually was.

“Can we say no to questions?” Kate asked. She heard Dezia’s camera click a few times—at first she thought someone was clicking a pen.

“Yeah—your interview,” Dezia said. Then she looked at her notepad and began asking them questions about school—what classes they were taking, favorite spots on campus, how each of them and Doris had met.

Kate warmed up as she talked with Dezia, deciding she liked her, though Penn seemed stiff next to her, frozen.

“How ‘bout you, Penn?” Dezia asked. She leaned back from the camera enough to look at him with both eyes, not squinting.

“School’s good. I like Michigan a lot.”

Doris narrowed her eyes a little bit but, to her credit, didn’t say anything. Kate was tempted to explain how much Penn loved school but something about his posture made her feel like it’d be a terrible idea.

“Nice,” Dezia continued, “can you tell us how you found out you were siblings?”

Penn looked to Kate, and she waited for him to answer. “It’s a weird story,” he said. “Long time coming, though.” To Kate’s surprise, he continued to talk, retelling the entire thing in paraphrase—how he’d grown up in a foster system, Kate adopted, how when he turned 18 he was given the information about his past and Kate’s name was part of that package, how they’d already been friends on campus, entirely by coincidence.

She knew Penn wasn’t comfortable with the incidental nature of their meeting—how Kate had insisted knowing who he was before she *really* knew—by Penn’s standards, having it in writing. She’d only agreed to do the interview about their story to support Doris and to participate in what Doris was terming “dispelling fear.” She had a new theory that after the bomb threat her mission to dispel fear was more important than

ever; she thought that telling stories about relationship, and people triumphing over loss, might restore some bravery to campus.

It had been enough to get Kate on board, but she realized now that she had no idea what Doris had told Penn to persuade him. It seemed unlikely that the same premise would work.

“Honestly, it’s been the best year of my life,” Penn said to Dezia. “Kate’s already different than when I met her, too. She’s an awesome sister—really committed to school, took on a big leadership role in a club we’re both in. She’s good at it.”

As Penn talked Kate was surprised by the strength of her feelings toward him, how loved she felt by the words he said. It wasn’t new information, per se, but hearing Penn say those things about her convinced her of their truth. For the first time in months, she could sense that strange, clear thinking approaching her again—its presence some kind of invitation.

She indulged it, but slowly, envisioning she was the one behind the force of it, letting it in, like the slow tilt of a watering can. Penn kept talking and she was aware of him, vaguely, but more strongly sensed the options presenting themselves to her—the things she might say in this interview and what each choice would yield:

1. *Tell everything*—the truth about Logos, the strange draw she had felt to Penn since the instant she met him, the way being around him, connecting with him, gave her discernment, the way feeling close to him and her friends made her feel strong, capable of thinking and problem-solving to a degree she could not physically reach on her own. There was something spiritual in it. It wasn’t just logic. She could share this with whoever watched their interview, share everything about Logos: its goal to monitor

media, the time of the meeting, an invitation to join them in returning journalism to its best forms. And she knew, without any doubt, the truth of it more real to her than her than any other information she had, the outcomes of this particular path: a nearly viral viewership because of something sensed in the two of them, their partnership, a surge in Logos meeting attendance and a direct response from Concordis itself. The company displeased, publicly condemning the group by reporting about a trend of silly, liberal, biased student groups on college campuses. She and Penn would lead a response with leadership and Logos behind them, the beginnings of an uprising—but they would fragment, because Penn wouldn't agree with what was said—they wouldn't have done it together—she knew, though she didn't know why, that ultimately he wouldn't agree—

“Shit, can we just—hold up,” Doris was talking, her eyes transfixed on Kate with a wild smile on her face. The record light was on and Dezia was simultaneously recording with her phone.

“I lied, I'm talking and interrupting, but we have to video record some of this—”

“I'm running,” Dezia said.

“Do you guys mind?” Doris was looking at Kate, then to Penn. “There's something powerful about *seeing* the two of you together. You both light up like little lava lamps.”

“That's fine,” Kate asserted, her voice scratchy. She cleared her throat. She was trying to reclaim the train of thought and was distracted by processing it at the same time—the outcome she'd thought through seemed imaginative, and yet she *knew* it was real—she had stark confidence in it, enough to convince her that this really would happen if she shared unfiltered words about Logos and the *Daily* went ahead and published them.

Yet she wondered why that would be—why would Concordis ever take a little group like theirs so seriously; why respond at all, unless they had something to fear? Why wouldn't Penn agree?

The feeling was fading—she sensed her normal thinking returning to her like a bed sheet over a mattress.

“Keep going—uh, tell us about the club you're in,” Dezia prompted.

“No.” Penn's eyes were grey but visibly looked like they were dulling as Kate watched. In milliseconds they went discernibly from bright, entrancing to one note.

“I told Doris we shouldn't talk about the group we're in,” he said. “Sorry. It's not relevant.”

Dezia looked to Doris, as if for a cue.

“I'm academically driven,” Penn continued. “So at first when I met Kate it was hard to add the relationship to my life—I'm focused on school, so trying to navigate family issues was distracting. I've spent enough time doing that in the past, by necessity. College was supposed to be my time of independence—getting away and all that.”

Penn's eyes were hard now, his posture rigid. Kate felt the energy go out of her like a wind through a field.

“I know it's harsh,” he said, looking at her briefly before returning to Dezia, the camera, “but it's true. There are certain professions where, if you want to get where you want, you have to manage your relationships wisely. Life isn't one big family reunion.”

There was a pause, then a drawn out question. “So, Kate—what was it like for you?”

The question landed like a poorly tossed life preserver. Any connection Kate had so recently felt was gone and going—a tugging pain, a string pulling tighter toward breaking, like seeing Will shrink in her rearview as she drove away.

Kate cleared her throat and stuffed the hurt of his words. “I think what’s important is that we are two people who share a story, a story about loss, the kind you might see on a news report and fear—you see it, right, and you imagine it for yourself, you pray and pray it will never be your story.” She considered what she’d thought about earlier—sharing the truth about Logos, its mission, the way good media reminds its viewers that stories are complex and multi-faceted, that in the dark soils of trauma and loss there are aggressive, new saplings of hope. She remembered the outcome—Penn not joining her in what she said.

“I don’t think we’re a bad news story,” she continued. “It’s confusing to incorporate new truths into your life, yes, but I want people to understand that there are more stories behind every single news report on television or online. I want people to know that you can have versions of happy endings, whether you honor them or not.” She looked at Penn as she said it.

Dezia spoke quickly, “Cool cool cool, I’m done filming.” She looked at Doris, who was tapping her nails against her phone screen, looking down at it.

“For a headline, what about ‘Separated Siblings Reunite Through Campus Involvement’?” Dezia continued. “Catchy enough?”

“Let’s talk later,” Doris said quietly, and Kate thought she was giving Dezia “a look.” The last thing Kate wanted was pity right now. She wanted to get Penn alone and call him out.

“Thanks, Dezia,” Kate said. “Penn and I need to talk, so we’ll see you later.” She pressed her knuckled into his shoulder briefly. “Let’s go.”

In the hallway, which was empty, the result of another dull Saturday on campus, she stopped him before they hit the stairs.

“What’s going on with you?” she asked without anger.

He stopped walking but didn’t look pleased. “Nothing, Kate. There’s a lot going on with school right now. It’s just one interview, now we’re done.”

“Tell me about New York.”

“I did.”

“Not in full. What was it like? Did you learn anything new?”

“I told you I learned about you, which I already knew, I learned about Clara, which I already knew—”

“What else?”

“Nothing!”

She tried to get a sense of him and couldn’t. He was unreadable—a wall.

“I have something I’ve been wanting to ask you about,” she began. “Today, in the interview, right before they started filming—did you feel something?”

He leaned against the wall, his hands on his backpack in the same way Sean was always holding them—like he didn’t really care, was relaxed. “Like what?”

“You know what I’m talking about, I know you do.” She thought of his eyes, the weird color changing way they worked. It always happened when she felt connected to him like that, like they were operating as one influential unit.

“It sounds like you know what you’re talking about,” Penn said.

She reached absentmindedly into her pocket and pulled out an elastic, running her hands through her hair to tame it into a ponytail. “Fine,” she said. “There are times when I feel connected to you in a way that doesn’t feel normal. At first I thought it was some brother sister thing that everyone felt. I’d spent years of my life envying families—I chalked it up to some familial power she I couldn’t experience. Two or more people together, who were related, just conveyed some sort of attention or something.”

She paused and inhaled, knowing how the next part would sound.

“I think more clearly when that happens.”

“What happens?” Penn asked. His tone was dead but she thought he angled toward her slightly, like she’d surprised him.

“I think clearly. I feel connected to you, and then I think through what would happen based on decisions I make. It’s not stupid stuff—major decisions. Like what information I should share in an interview.

“It happened the night I met you, at the party. It’s happened a few other times, and I’m beginning to think it has something to do with feeling connected. Sometimes with Sean and Doris it’ll happen, and I’m learning to control it, sort of. At Logos it’s really, really strong—the last few weeks of meetings I’ve really sensed it, although ever since you’ve been avoiding me it’s weakened a lot, so there’s probably something—”

“Kate, that doesn’t make sense.” He was impassive, a foot or so between them again, ready to leave.

“I know,” she said. “But it it’s believable. There’s something about it—and it’s not just me, I’ve read things online that sounds similar, people describing random events where they had this sort of experience. A lot of the forums call it ‘Influence’.”

Penn scoffed, “Influence is a business buzzword—it’s people who have a big online platform and all that, or celebrities, people who can influence the way people think and spend.”

“No, Penn, that’s not what I’m talking about—it’s something more mystic—it’s something other people have recorded—”

“Then why haven’t I heard of it? Why don’t I know what you’re talking about?”

“I don’t know!” she felt panicked, afraid that he was going to write her off. “I’ve been trying to practice it, learn how to contain and maneuver it like a resource. It’s evasive, but it’s also ordered, I don’t know how to explain—”

“Kate, I’m sorry, but you can find anything you want online to confirm whatever belief you want to support. It’s why people love the Internet. I need to go study.”

“I’ve seen it in you too,” she wanted to raise her voice but tamed it, trying to sound clear-headed, authoritative. “Your eyes get grey, bright grey, then you speak with greater authority on a topic, you’re more persuasive.”

He laughed. “Sounds great. Can I have some for my next midterm?” Then he seemed to notice her face, her lack of amusement, and looked guilty. “I’m tired, I’m sorry. I’m glad you feel—close. I need to study, though, seriously.”

It felt impossible—talking about her experience out loud had rendered it weak. A gimpy, Frankenstein invention of her imagination, an inflated desire to have family be something otherworldly.

“I can talk more if you want another time.” He turned to leave and pulled out his phone to read as he walked, and the thought she had as he left was that despite being related by blood, she still couldn’t share everything with the people she loved the most.

His interviewer was average—average height, brown hair, a modest collared business shirt with a blue and white chain pattern and grey slacks—but she sat straight and squared her shoulders to him in an extreme way, rigid, to a degree that Penn saw her body language as a kind of threat. As he thought this he felt the familiar swell in his chest—the foreign intuition dancing around in his heart and confirming his suspicion. *Correct*, it seemed to inform him. *Be wary*.

Annoyed, he tried to ignore it. This wasn't a time to welcome that distraction. He had to concentrate. "Would you repeat that?"

"How would you describe your experience with media coverage of the bomb?" she asked. She sat across from him with her hands in her lap, the table between them glaringly empty. He'd expected her to at least have a folio, if only for show. It had been her suggestion to meet here—in the lobby of the union—steps away from the bustling Concordis-sponsored job fair in the ballroom. The same room, ironically, where Logos had met days earlier.

He tried to think strategically—had she seen the news report, Sean's interview? He knew there was a brief shot with him in it. He thought of what Doris had said about Concordis planting the bomb threat, the words she'd once spat at Sean: *you're the problem*.

"Some of my peers," he'd almost slipped up, said the word friends, "were angry about it."

Her right eyebrow peaked at this, so slight he might have missed it were it not for the intuition, rearing again, a creature within him. He was finding it hard to focus over

the monotony of lobby traffic—the space was so transitional, uncomfortable for a final round interview. Perhaps that was the purpose of her choice.

“Angry that someone would threaten to bomb campus, I mean, since it’s obviously peaceable. We’re students, not soldiers. No one is running around trying to start a war on anyone.” He was rambling a little, struggling to regain his footing. “A university this size is pretty open-minded, so I don’t know what that person would be trying to accomplish exactly.” He thought about the information his professors communicated in lecture, the positions they held, realizing it was a kind of ideological warfare, and wondered if she thought him naïve.

“I was on a news report about it, just a brief frame, not an interview,” he continued. Better to err on the side of transparency with any topic he could. “The reporter asked a similar question, but she was speaking to my friend.” He had no idea if she’d seen the report or not. “It was impressive of Concordis to report on the incident as quickly as they did. Responsible and professional. My interaction with the reporter confirmed my esteem of your company and how it handles objectivity in the face of very emotional events—trying to find the facts to report.”

Her attention dropped to her bracelet, which Penn saw glint from below the table, and she straightened it so the silver plate was centered on her wrist. He felt a twinge of fear.

Penn leaned forward, trying to see if it was inscribed with anything—her name, maybe—but she hid it again beneath the tabletop. Even in her email she hadn’t typed anything atop the Concordis signature line except her initials, and when he saw the

Concordis table in the job fair he was unnerved by how subtly, and yet deliberately, none of the employees there wore nametags or introduced themselves by name.

“So you respect media,” she said.

“Of course.” *Why else would I interview?* He wanted to say, but he wondered if that were really true.

“Let’s talk about your campus involvement for a little bit. Any groups you’re a part of? Things you do during your downtime?”

The spike of intuition. To slip up and talk about Logos would be the equivalent of declaring avid drug use and a history of unreliable employment. Logos was deliberately not listed on the student activities page any longer; Tara felt it was better to play it safe, given their somewhat controversial interests as media-related group with more “anti-media” leanings. In theory, the interviewer shouldn’t have any way to learn about Logos at all, nor what they did. He had rehearsed a few answers if she had somehow learned of it and asked him about the group directly: he was stepping down this year, he’d only joined it to get into the B-school, he’d gotten a little desperate for new friends.

Penn tried to drop his eyes enough so that if they were conspicuously grey from the intuition he’d felt she wouldn’t pay him particular attention. Ever since Kate called him out he’d been paying more attention to how he felt whenever he noticed his effect on someone, and he’d been wondering, privately, if she was on to something. A few hours ago he would have reveled in the possibility that his eyes would make him unforgettable—he’d be unique that way, an easy, memorable hire. Right now, though, that intuitive feeling was blaring like a warning siren and he felt hot along the collar on his neck. A drip of sweat slid out from under his armpit.

“I attend soccer games regularly, I played in prep school and a former teammate of mine is part of the team here now. I worked as an English tutor for part of last year, before I transferred to the business school, and I’m a member of the Business Research Association—the B-R-A—I reached out to you about. As part of that I helped grow attendance at meetings, which has really strengthened our work ethic and a team culture. Less fear, more focus on the work we do and what we want to learn. Otherwise, the usual—lots of homework, exercise, spending time with friends.”

“The B-R-A?”

For the first time he realized that the acronym he’d invented spelled out “bra.” Doris would be losing it over this.

“Yes.” He tried to say the letters as seriously as he could. “The B-R-A.”

“So you meet, what, about once or twice a semester?”

“Right,” he blurted out. “I mean, no—weekly.”

“Weekly? Good,” she said. “Concordis encourages group gatherings, particularly on campus. There *is* a lot of danger in the world, but appropriate meetings are key for social interaction and productive work. Our office in San Francisco has some of the highest rates of in-office employees in the country.”

“Really? What are the numbers like?”

“Unfortunately I can’t get into that, but we use a traditional open workspace model, with individual employee work stations and group work areas—conference rooms, lounge areas, that kind of thing. High security of course. It’s meant to feel safe, like home.”

“So you work there?”

“I work from a variety of spaces, dependent on travel.”

He was starting to see the value in some of Sean’s scorn for business—he appreciated the woman’s professionalism, but it felt like she was trying to control him with her careful questions and a one-way acquisition of info. It was an interview, sure, but it seemed reasonable to get a little more of an exchange.

“How long have you been with Concordis?” he asked, and she smiled weakly with enough teeth in it for Penn to see they were slightly yellowed. “Let’s keep the interview on you,” she said, and embarrassment bested his desire to know more about her.

“Are you enjoying your time with your sister?”

He started.

“I have to do my homework on prospective employees,” she smiled again, her teeth at-odds with the pure white in her shirt. “I read the article about you and your sister in the *Daily*. We take an interest in student publications—there aren’t many left.”

He cleared his throat as quietly as possible and forced a grin. “Right. I always forget about that article.”

“So you weren’t aware you had a sister before you came to college?”

Penn was beginning to wonder if this girl had been a journalist—the types of questions she asked reminded him distinctly of Doris: purposed, driven, hunting.

“No,” he replied.

She waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. “I just can’t get over how fascinating that is—personally, I mean. I read it and thought maybe it wasn’t real news.”

“The *Daily* prides itself on facts only, so you don’t have to worry about that with them. Several friends of mine work there.”

“Ah, so you’re pretty involved with what they do?”

He felt relief at the topic change, followed immediately by caution. “I have friends who work there,” he repeated.

A student in a red jacket walked by, looking in at their alcove sitting area, and Penn vaguely recognized him from Logos. Penn averted his eyes and tried to look as off-putting as possible—ever since the interview with Kate had run on the *Daily* website, people had been constantly approaching him about it, like they were best friends with him and Kate now that they’d learned their backstory. Kate was right, at least to some extent—there was something about the two of them together that was compelling. He’d watched their interview to make sure it was Concordis-appropriate. That’s where his concession to Kate began—he’d been struck by how weird his own eyes looked, as she’d said, how prominent her freckles were.

Thankfully, the boy—Penn didn’t know his name—seemed to sense the gravity of Penn’s meeting and turned hastily to squeak back toward the ballroom.

“I guess I’m not comfortable talking about the thing with my sister yet. It’s recent.”

“Right, of course—I shouldn’t have been so entitled. Media has a tendency to make you feel like you have a right to things, you know? As if the information is yours. I remember feeling that way with celebrities when I was little—forgetting that whatever was in an article was a part of someone’s life...” she trailed off.

“Although, they *did* elect to share it, right?” she said slowly. “So really, they *are* choosing to share it with everyone else...”

He knew what she was getting at. Penn didn’t agree, but decided against sharing his opinion, the reason why he’d interviewed with his sister: Sometimes it was in others’ best interest to share your story, even if you didn’t particularly want to. If people saw the interview and heard that the impossible could still happen in this world—finding a family member, finding togetherness—that was worth a little piece of his private comfort.

“Anyway, I think we’re all set,” the Concordis woman said now, standing quickly and extending her right hand. He stood and shook it.

“It was a pleasure talking with you,” she added. And he nodded and put on his best smile, meeting her eyes and willing a little of that spike of intuition to get his eyes fizzling. If she noticed or reacted to it, he couldn’t tell.

“You’ll hear from us in the next few weeks, after we interview other candidates. If you’re selected the note will come directly from corporate. Otherwise, have a great rest of your semester.” She grinned once more with her lips closed and turned back toward the ballroom.

Penn tugged his suit, trying to settle his nerves, until the wrinkles disappeared a little. He picked up his shoulder bag, hoping the air outside would be more refreshing than it was in here. It smelled damp, like must.

“Penn?”

He looked up to see Kate standing in the hallway, her hair in a ponytail and her short black coat in her hand. She was wearing a loose, dark green sweater and jeans. Not something she could wear into the job fair.

“Going to the job fair?” he asked, and she shook her head.

“Doris is in there—I was just going to meet her. Did you already go in?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he stuttered. “I, uh, just finished up. Just taking a break.”

“Bummer for you, a Concordis girl just walked by here, I think. No nametag.

Doris said Concordis employees don’t even wear name tags, ‘no individual identities allowed’.” She put air quotes around the phrase.

“Oh,” he said. She gave him a look. He walked closer to her and saw her freckles strengthen in color as he did. He’d emailed her a short apology about being a jerk after the *Daily* interview, said he’d just been stressed. He still hadn’t told her he’d been thinking a lot about what she’d said, that thing, Influence—trying to remember how he’d felt in the times she referenced. There *were* times he felt exceptionally powerful and intuitively aware in a way he didn’t normally, at the Logos meeting in particular, like he knew the right thing to do before he understood why. He still wasn’t sure it was anything mystic or magical though. It just felt like good leadership. The subtle, color-shifting eyes and freckles—that was the part he was failing to rationalize away.

“Probably shouldn’t hang around together,” she said, stepping away. “Unless you want to form a small crowd to make yourself look good for a certain job.” He knew she was right—Influence aside, when she’d emailed back she’d mentioned getting bombarded with emails and social requests from people who had watched their interview. Everyone wanted to know more.

She laughed at her comment, but Penn thought about it seriously—how great it might be if she would only respect Concordis a little more, how easy it would be to work there if they were together. They could lead anything.

His desire for that trumped his insecurity about being caught in a lie.

“We could go to the Concordis interview table,” he suggested, feeling the strength of his intuition guiding him to the possibility of it. He let the rationale follow: if she agreed, then that meant she’d be somewhat open to him working there, to his interest in Concordis; it wouldn’t matter if the woman recognized him and greeted him uncomfortably. The intensity of the two of them together would beat that out easily—would beat out Kate’s sweater, her clear lack of preparedness.

He grounded from his daydream and Kate’s arms were folded across her chest, her back straighter.

“No thanks,” she said.

He wondered if she’d felt the same intuitive possibility he had and tried not to harbor the anger he felt at her—that she would so selfishly dismiss that swell of intuition, and as someone who was supposedly so interested in figuring out what their strange ability could do.

He had a rogue thought to grab her arm and physically drag her in there.

Through the double ballroom doors, Penn watched a sparse group meander to and from a handful of tables, all divisions of Concordis: a transportation and logistics division, a food and employee wellness division, then the main Concordis media viewing table like an altar on the raised Ballroom stage where he usually sat at Logos, running the whole height and width of it. The viewing area was roped off from the rest of the fair, so anyone interested could go engage with it. The other division tables and the Concordis corporate station were being bounced by two people in business suits who reviewed attendee resumes to let them in.

When Penn first entered the ballroom he'd been impressed mostly by the vastness of the viewing station: small screens were mounted all along the edge of the table like guests at a banquet. Some intermittent screens displayed celebrity testimonials about the importance of quality news, while others gave narrated tours of Concordis' job perks, company culture, and employee benefits. Around 12 enormous, additional screens, elevated on ten-foot stands underneath a stark Concordis banner, aired live news coverage from around the country. On the table itself, tablets had been mounted to security hardware so attendees could pick them up and interact with articles online.

And that was the viewing portion of the set-up; for the roped-off interview station, which he'd been shown on a whirlwind tour by his interviewer before they returned to the ballroom lobby to talk—her telling him, grandly, that he was *further along in the interview process than our other candidates*—they'd set up more small screens with real-time, off-campus interviewees dialing in to speak with Concordis employees, or talk about media ideology. Each interviewee was labeled with their school on-screen—the few Penn saw weren't even from Michigan. He wondered if that was strategic, a way to light the fire of competition.

A mug shot of a balding white man scrolled down and off-screen on one of the biggest monitors and Doris was directly underneath it, walking toward them with an unabashed smirk in a silky-looking dress and black blazer. As she neared them Penn grew increasingly nervous that whatever she was about to say was going to be overheard by Concordis, but he was too late to walk away without really poking the bear; she'd know what he was doing.

"Someone's happy." Kate had apparently noticed Doris too.

“You embarrassed?” Doris asked Penn as she joined them in the lobby. “Don’t you look *guapo*.” She held two plates of food on her left hand—cheese and crackers. She handed one to Kate. “I embarrassed him,” Doris said to her, and Penn tried to keep Doris’ momentum by walking them all toward the exit.

“Why are you in a suit?” Kate asked now, as if Doris’ outfit had prompted her to pay attention to Penn’s.

“It’s a job fair,” he said.

“I think you mean *Media Viewing* and job fair,” Doris replied, a cheese cube discernable inside her cheek.

“Right, *and job fair*.” He was getting angry. When Doris was in form, it was sometimes inspiring, challenging, other times annoying as hell. And if she could shut her liberal trap for a few minutes, he’d be able to decompress from his interview. The stress of it still clung to him like heat.

“I have a presentation in class today, had to dress up. I’m on my way there.”

“Huh, good luck,” Doris said, the tone of her voice softening slightly. “Sorry, I just never really pegged you as someone interested in logistics or employee wellness, let alone for a company like Concordis.”

Doris reminded him of Sean, at times, in the way she could be so eagle-eyed and observant and other times missed things altogether; like the fact that he did admire Concordis, that he might actually respect the way they did media.

“Well I might be,” he said. He tried to avoid looking at her, in case she did something inane like roll her eyes about him to Kate. In his periphery he saw Doris shove a piece of brie in her mouth.

“This is real cheese,” she said. “No Kraft singles here.”

Penn waited for her to make a crack about Concordis’ blood money and their ability to pay for nice things.

“Well, it was the most people I’ve seen in one place since the bomb,” Doris said around the cheese in her mouth. “That was worth it. Leave it to Concordis to drum up a fear environment then reap the benefits as a healer come back to repair the brokenness they created.”

“Doris, it wasn’t a Concordis employee that bombed the school,” Penn said, working to keep his voice detached, but so sick of having this conversation that he wasn’t going to listen to it as a one-sided beast anymore.

“Maybe,” she said, unconvincingly. “And if not, the man *was* a broken human motivated by the sensationalist, glorifying media reports he saw Concordis running on television. They provide the means. They’re just as responsible, if not more so.”

“Either way, we should talk about it at Logos,” Kate interrupted, and saved Penn from a dry crack at Doris’ lack of journalistic integrity. “I told Tara we should try to meet earlier next week, gives us more time to debrief about the job fair.”

Penn trained his eyes ahead of them—the long, uneven sidewalk finally clear of snow, thin grass interspersed with mud all along the roadside, stretched out in front of the great, beige-stone buildings. He remembered Tara’s email after the bomb—from her personal account, as always. *Prioritizing the safety of our group*, she’d written. *Take notes, be a discerning viewer. Come ready to talk about your stance next week—what you think we should do.*

The girl was hard core. He didn't know how much longer he could avoid sharing that he was, in their eyes, fraternizing with the enemy.

He took a deep breath and savored the sting of air.

Penn hadn't really been paying attention to their surroundings, too deep in thought, but two students passed them on the right and he jumped a little. As they passed they both turned to look at him and Kate and their face were warm with recognition, even though he'd never seen them before. He felt the swell in his chest and smiled grandly, intuitively, trying to convey the pride in his decision to interview, to back up his thoughts that his sacrifice had been worth it.

"Hey," one of them said, waving.

"Oh *hi!* It's *you!*" Doris called, her mouth stuffed with cheese again. Penn waved back but watched their faces fall at Doris' weird, theatrical outcry.

"Thank you for your *Daily* readership!" Doris called after them. It was arrogant how she said it, the way she assumed any recognition Penn got was a result of her own reporting.

He looked at Kate and in the grey spring sun her freckles were stark brown against her skin. The unification he knew he had with her felt good. Lately, with her and Doris, it had been isolating to be so outnumbered in viewpoints and interests in Logos.

"Good for you for taking the job fair seriously, Penn," Kate offered, still holding her plate of untouched food. "I'm sure it's good practice."

He felt bad for looking down at her for being so ill prepared all the time, but it was true—it was like she still pretended to live in Churdan. She'd moved to a city, and

she needed to learn its ways. Especially if she planned on doing something significant post-graduation.

“Thanks. I’ll see you guys later,” he said, turning to cross the street to central campus and his invented business presentation. They continued on, trailing the two student strangers.

(31)

In the mirror Kate’s hair was smoothed down straight, silky from a product one of the girls in her hall had left in the communal bathroom. Some special kind of oil. Finding it left behind, sitting on the sink ledge, had felt like a good luck tip from her mother.

She’d only used a little of it and left it where it was, returning quickly to her room to work it in. The oil smelled like gardenias. Kate knew who it belonged to and it was helpful to have watched the girl apply it. They often got ready at the same time—the girl efficient but more of a beautician than Kate, with a makeup routine she flew through half asleep. If Kate hadn’t watched her before it would have been easy to use too much of the oil, grease up her hair like it was a vial of WD-40.

She took a step back in her small, 10’x12’ dorm room, her back straightening against the lofted twin bed, and tried to confirm the cohesion of her outfit. The mirror was small enough that she could only see her blouse and the top of her jeans within its frame. She’d worn the shirt that she’d bought with Clara for high school graduation, the one that had made her feel uncomfortable because of the way it hung, the light white fabric draping in a way that emphasized her small chest, and she wished she had the ability to limit the people who saw her in it. That instead of wearing an outfit every single

person would see her in, she could pick and choose who viewed her, so that the only person who would see her in it would be Will.

On her clunky laptop, the time read 13:04.

She opened her email for the millionth time, her heart racing slightly, and inside was a new message from Sean. She ignored it and shut the laptop, debating whether or not she should head down to the main floor and wait for Will there. The idea of looking for his red truck to pull in, her just sitting there like a frosted cupcake for him, made her feel stupid and insecure.

The wall phone rang.

“A guest for room 610 is present at the desk,” a girl said.

“Thanks, I’ll be right down.”

She hoped her jeans tamed the shirt a little, made her look less eager.

As she walked downstairs she tried to sift out her bad emotions—getting ready had made her wish for her mom, someone to tell her what to do and what was stupid. At times she felt she’d fully ingested the loss of her parents. Other times it felt like a ribbon of pain was always tugging along with her, presenting itself when she thought she’d left it behind.

Warmth and must and cold air hit her at once, the big arms around her shoulders and a low cheer of joy telling her it was Will before he pulled back and she took in his face, grinning like an idiot as she did.

“Hey,” she laughed out, and he tensed up a little, shoving his hands in his pockets in a way that made her wonder what to do with her own hands. She watched him look at her shirt, then down to her jeans, and for some reason she reached out and shoved him.

Her face was hot.

“Not a bad drive,” he said.

“Good!” She tried to think of something neutral, familiar. “And you even made it past Clara to get here.”

“I was on the news though,” he said.

“Are you serious?” a flare of fear went up within her, and he seemed to see it.

“No no no, sorry—bad joke. I forgot about the—uh, bomb thing. You probably don’t need to hear any news jokes.”

She exhaled. “Oh good.” As the heat in her face faded she could still feel her freckles burning. Absently, she touched them with her hand, as if she might wipe them away.

Will opened his mouth, his eyes trained where her hand had been, then met her eyes. “Anyway, you wanna show me around? I haven’t been here in forever.”

She might have anticipated that he’d been to Michigan before—there was some vague recollection about one of his relatives going here way back when, something she’d overheard at that grad party. But when he’d emailed her, asking if he might come visit, she’d assumed without thinking that she’d be the first person to show him this place, as if it were her property. She felt a little disappointed.

“Right, yeah, let’s head out.”

They walked toward the door and as they talked things settled between them, the conversation increasingly easy, light. A piece of her wanted the tension back, the discomfort and thrill of when he’d stepped back from her and gone awkward. It had felt akin to the way she was around other close friendships or a good, trustworthy group of

people, when her logic opened up and all the opportunities were laid out in front of her like hallways. Like she could influence the way things unfolded.

*

Doris approached them like a swaying palm tree, her earth-green skirt deceptive—it made her look gentle, relaxed.

She was grinning so widely, her teeth white and glaring, that Kate thought about turning around and running before Doris could say something insanely embarrassing.

“Enchanté again!” she called to them, and she extended her hand to Will in a thankfully normal manner, her smile more subdued than Kate initially thought. With the two of them near her, she felt her freckles burning hotter. She looked around and was relieved to see there weren’t a lot of people out walking around, and the ones who were were far enough away that they didn’t seem to pay the three of them attention.

“Did you just get in?” Doris asked Will, and the two of them talked easily about Churdan and the open roads of the Midwest. Within a few minutes Doris had descended into a conversation about the environment, but thankfully Will seemed unaffected, even interested.

“I did an article on the corn industry once, did we already talk about this?” Doris was saying. “Like, how cows eat all our chemical-y seed corn, then we eat the cows, so now we’re messed up, we have chemical issues, we have mental health issues, and now people are running around shooting people and bombing schools.”

“I guess that’s one view,” Will said. He met Kate’s eyes briefly but turned his attention back to Doris. His forehead was creased ever so slightly, and she noticed the crow’s feet by his eyes imprinted slightly when he was really focused.

“Well, you are what you eat, right?” Doris replied, pulling at some sections of her bob. “Sorry, I’m doing the monologue thing. I know it’s really annoying—Sean and Penn make fun of me all the time.” She said it to Kate more than Will. “But my dad’s from Mexico,” she went on, “so, like, he thinks it’s super weird how all your food comes in plastic.” Kate tensed a little. She trusted Will not take Doris’ viewpoints personally, but there were times when she just wished someone would just tell Doris to shut up. Like Sean.

“When we first came here, he wouldn’t even buy chicken breasts at the grocery store because it freaked him out. He’d be looking at the plastic going, ‘How do you even know that’s a chicken in there? That could be anything! That could be cat meat!’ so—I think understandably—that’s when I started being vegan. I mean I didn’t *know* I was vegan. I just stopped eating meat. So vegetarian, technically...” she trailed off and Kate was surprised to see Doris falter, beseeching Kate as if for an approval of some sort. Will was looking ahead, and he gestured toward the old movie theater at the end of Liberty Street.

“I remember that from last time,” he said. Then he turned back to Doris, tall enough that he had to look down a little to talk to her. “Right, but, practically speaking, there are a lot of people who need to be fed.” Kate watched Doris’ face relax, her pretty eyes engaged again.

“If you want to raise chickens in your own backyard everywhere in America,” Will said, “you’re going to need a lot of land, a lot of people training their kids how to kill a chicken, how to prepare it, how to put a fence up so fox don’t get to them. Yada yada yada.”

Kate smirked watching Doris thinking. If Doris had approached the day with an agenda of boiling it all down to romantic comedy and overeager girl talk, she'd already forgotten about it. The delight of seeing the two of them together, Doris and Will, made Kate's head clear.

"Hey, let's get lunch with Sean and Penn. Doris could you text them?" She was feeling recklessly optimistic, like this union of friends was what she'd waited her whole life for. She pictured the group of them laughing over sandwiches at that deli Sean and Penn loved; Will talking seriously about farm business with Penn, the two of them dreaming up some sort of business model that would improve things for both of them.

Doris was typing into her phone, then smiled distractedly and looked back up at Will.

"So, are you thrilled to be here with Kate or what?" she leveled her eyes at Kate and fiddled with the necklace she wore with her open hand.

Kate gritted her teeth.

"Aren't we all?" he said grandly, but didn't look at her, just continued looking around at Ann Arbor. "Do you know those people over there?"

Kate looked and two adults, exiting a used music store, were looking toward them intently. She realized her freckles felt hot again and wondered at the strangeness of it—more intense than ever, walking with Doris and Will.

"Uh, probably in our class or something," Doris offered, but to Kate the words didn't sound convincing. Suddenly Kate's mind cleared, opened up again as it had earlier when she'd first been with Will, and the logical options for their afternoon were clear:

1. The five of them, with Sean and Penn, eating sandwiches at the deli and Sean getting angry, yelling something then pushing his tray away, leaving early for practice.
2. She and Will alone. Her heart raced—slow kissing. Spring twilight. The trees around them still and warm.
3. Doris and Sean arguing on a sidewalk with Penn nearby, Penn walking away. Telling them to figure it out. A sense of Penn's sadness, frustration.
4. The four of them, her, Doris, Sean, Penn. Will no longer there. Eating sandwiches at the deli, later at night, Sean sitting next to her and grinning warmly, putting his arm behind her along the back of the booth. Penn smiling at Doris in way that made Kate feel she'd been overlooking something between them, implied. Kate feeling happy, and also a sense of absence without Will.

"Don't look like college students," Will was saying. They were definitely two older men, one with glasses, and they murmured something to each other in a way that made Kate think they were a couple. Her sense of clarity was at a height that felt overwhelming—the things she'd seen felt palpable, too real.

"Are you alright?" Doris said, and her eyes were wide. She made a quick gesture of brushing her cheek with her thumb.

Kate felt faint.

"I'll be right back," she mumbled and turned back from where they came before Will could turn and look at her. She walked quickly to the last building they'd passed—a post office—and stepped inside, seeking a bathroom. Immediately the man behind the desk turned toward her.

“Can I help you?” he asked, but Kate ignored him, worried at how strong her influence still felt in her head. She saw a restroom sign and walked toward it.

“You’ll need a security code for that,” he called after her.

She stopped at the door but didn’t turn around. “That would be great,” she said, and thankfully she heard papers shuffled, then the man reading the numbers out loud. “6-3-2-1-4.”

Before he read them she saw her vague reflection in the smooth wall tile and was comforted by how normal it seemed that way. A dull grey shadow of any sort of girl.

The bathroom didn’t have a mirror. Just a toilet and a pedestal sink.

She put the lid down and sat for a few minutes, breathing and trying to think. This was Influence, she knew it. Stronger than ever. The fact that Will had brought on a similar sensation, and so much more strongly—she hadn’t anticipated it.

She reviewed each of the four options she’d envisioned. The one she wanted was the one with Will.

She stood, held a damp paper towel to her neck to calm herself, then and returned to the street, thanking the man behind the counter as she left. Her face was cool again and she tried to focus on her emotions and staying calm. Maybe if she could control that blinding clarity she felt, prevent its momentum so it was something slower, more intentional; her first thought was of drawbridges slamming open, and she tried instead to think of the metered unfurling of a rose, or the slow unwrapping of a corn husk to check its growth.

“Sorry about that,” Kate said to Doris and Will. Doris was leaning languidly on a metal banister.

“No worries.”

The two men long gone now and the street was empty again. Kate looked to Will, who was watching her, and felt the pressure in her head to reach out and see her options again. She controlled the ability this time, reigned it in.

“Will and I are probably going to do dinner alone,” she said to Doris, who was holding her phone. Doris waved its face at Kate, reminding her.

“You can meet up with Penn and Sean, sorry for the change—I just realized Will isn’t here for long so it makes more sense if he meets them some other time.”

Doris looked part pissed, part impressed. “Right-o,” she mumbled, returning her attention to her phone. “I’m gonna head over there then. Have fun.” She smiled brightly and patted Will’s shoulder. “See you soon?”

“Yep.”

Kate was too nervous to study his face.

Alone, Kate and Will walked away from central campus, toward the arboretum. She knew the trees she’d seen.

“I read the article about you and Penn,” Will said. “It was picked up by a smaller press—a daily paper in a town near Churdan. I think they were trying to claim you as their own.”

“Weird,” she said. “I had no idea.”

“I’ve tried not to publicize it around Churdan. Didn’t think you’d like that.”

She was quiet. He was right.

“Are you doing okay?” he asked.

There had been so many moments that she chose not to email him about—at night in her room, a solitary walk across campus, leaning against a tree behind a class building—when she’d had a thought and distinctly wanted to share it with him. Or thought that if she were braver, she would pick up her phone and call him and ask him to just talk—about her fears, her desires to learn more about agriculture and botany and bring it all back to him and his business. How much she wanted to help. Yet right now all she could get out was, “Sure.”

“Are you afraid?”

She swallowed hard. She knew what he was getting at—the stakes had been raised for her on this campus. The bomb was in the past, but the fear wasn’t, and now she had more to lose. In hindsight, thinking about how she might have lost Penn with that bomb stirred an enormous fear within her: This was something that could truly happen, because it had always happened like this for her. Loss was the world’s natural pattern.

“I try not to think about it.”

“The bomb?”

“Right. Things like that.”

“Is Clara right then, you think?” he asked, his tone lightening. “All those television reports and researching...”

“I don’t think so.”

They were walking down a hill, past her dorm building, only a few lights on despite its enormity. Six stories and four wings, and likely less than 300 students inside these days, when it once housed thousands.

“Did you go to the arboretum when you were here?” she asked.

“Arboretum? No, never heard of it.”

For a beat she worried he wouldn’t be interest in it as she was—its fields of wildflowers and grasses, its chill river, the thin, skyscraping trees. It didn’t feel dangerous to go there if she was with Will.

“You’ve changed,” he said, and she wished he would stop observing her. She had forgotten about the shirt she wore but now she tugged on it absently. Her hair felt heavy and gross in the damp spring air.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the walk—a dirt path, arching down toward a valley. They went back up the hill opposite the one they’d traversed down and settled under the edge of a stretching forest. The night was humid but cooling, and Kate’s heart picked up pace again, like she was running, and something about the connection between running and this moment calmed her, reminded her of her own control.

“You’re different than you were too,” she said. “We should be.”

He was staring up at the trees. “This is amazing,” he said. “Reminds me of home.”

Her hip brushed against him and she left it there, the point between them energized. A dam of Influence was at the edge of her mind but she held it back, controlling it as best she could.

Then she leaned into Will, his face familiar yet new with less distance between them—finally less distance between them—and she kissed him, uncertain and soft.

He kissed her back harder. He slid a hand toward her hip and pulled her just centimeters closer to him, and she envisioned the space between them shrinking further, condensing everything she felt into a weapon-like force.

Will dropped his hand from her but didn't pull away.

She did, a little reluctantly. "I wanted to do that the night of your party."

"My party?" The light was nearly gone now but his teeth were white in the dusk.

"The graduation party."

"Serious? I thought I'd bored you out of your mind. Talking on and on like that. I replayed it in my head that night and felt like a total narcissist."

She laughed but felt equally stunned that he could interpret it that way.

"You know," he said, and leaned his back up against the tree. "I feel like I've known you forever."

Her heart surged and her first instinct was to kiss him again, harder, but at the same time her thoughts were inundating her with next steps—where they could go, what they could do. She couldn't discern which thoughts were her own.

"Well, compared to most people, you have."

"Then as someone who's known you forever, I really wanted to tell you on this visit, more than anything, that I don't think you should be afraid."

It was too dark to see him now, but she could feel where he was, how easy it would be to reach for him.

"You're not someone who lives from fear, Kate. What you've been through, it's already refined your courage. It just gets bigger from there."

Other people had said similar things to her about her story—Clara, Doris, Sean. Yet when Will said it, she wasn't annoyed as she had been at the others. With Doris it felt like she was a museum oddity that she could tell her friends about—rural girl Kate, the orphan. With Clara, pity. And with Sean, a lack of really seeing her as she was.

She took Will's hand and loved its coarseness, its strength. She tugged him back toward the entrance. "Thank you," she said. And she meant it.

[32]

The Influence gathering took place at 516 South Division Street, about four blocks from campus in an old house rented out by college students. It reminded him of his own place—the porch light bright, historical-looking, the yellow house paint drab and chipping.

When Penn knocked, a guy answered the door.

"Penn, right?"

Penn nodded.

"Gathering's in the living room," the guy said. His mouth went crooked when he spoke.

Penn stepped into the house, which was dark considering it was still light outside. There was a narrow staircase to his left and an even narrower hallway to the right of it, an old kitchen, no lights on, visible at the end of the hall.

He realized he wasn't sure where to go next and felt supremely awkward.

"I'm Kyle, the other members are in there already." Kyle had stepped back to hold the door open and he gestured for Penn to continue on down the hallway. Penn realized a door frame on the right opened up into a living room with quiet voices.

He walked toward it. The ceilings were higher in the living room, and another guy and two girls sat on a couple of ratty couches. There was a TV in the corner, turned off, and a couple of retro wall hangings—metal and weak colors.

They stopped talking.

Penn paused on the threshold, waiting for Kyle to come up behind him and introduce him to the group—it was Kyle who he'd emailed about attending one of these meetings—but he turned to see Kyle in the kitchen, trying to extract a bar stool from behind a table.

"You're the email guy?" said someone in the living room, a short black guy Penn thought he recognized from a freshman business lecture. The guy pulled his arm from where he'd been resting it along the back of one couch, opening up a seat.

"Yeah, Penn Beckett." He tried to smile. He crossed the room and sat down, careful not to encroach on the other guy's space.

"I'm Randy," his couch partner said, then lifted a foot to gesture toward the other sofa. "Lisa and Corinne."

Kyle entered with the bar stool. "Penn, right?" he said, and Penn nodded. "Cool. Guys, this is Penn."

Penn noticed one of the girls on the couch was a curvy, dirty-blonde with a small string of beads in her hair and thick strands of beads draped above her chest—whether she was Lisa or Corinne, he didn't know. The other was a small girl in black tights and an oversized t-shirt.

The beaded girl eyed him pointedly. "What brought you?"

Kate had, really, but he didn't know how to explain that—the nagging feeling he'd had over the past few weeks over her suggestion of Influence, all the 'what if's in his head, the possibilities if it turned out to be real.

"I saw your listing on the university groups website," Penn said.

"Do you know what we do?" Randy asked.

He looked at Kyle for some sort of backup, though he didn't know what Kyle might say. He didn't even know Penn beyond the email: *Hi, I have a friend who's been mentioning Influence and it seems compelling. I'm hoping to learn more about it.*

"I don't really know what you do," Penn said. "That's why I'm here."

Kyle settled himself on the barstool, a weak completion of their deformed circle. "Penn has a friend who talked to him about Influence," he explained to the others.

"You with the *Daily*?" Randy was definitely the guy Penn remembered from business lecture. He'd been outspoken, almost always right, compelling when he spoke. The professor called on him often, sometimes even when Randy didn't raise his hand. Penn had envied him, and that, combined with the suspicious *Daily* question, grated on him.

"No," Penn said.

No doubt *Daily* company was bad company here. He remembered that last year the paper ran one or two pieces, sort of drolly reporting on a 'mystic' group meeting for people who bought into the concept Influence. Penn remembered reading part of it—there was an overview of Influence's principles and a few quotes from the group members, waxing poetic about Influence's latent power. He'd stopped reading because he'd found it all a crock of shit.

Bead girl crossed her legs. "Frat kid then?"

"It's that polo shirt, man. It's not helping you," Randy added, eyeing Penn's turquoise shirt, and Penn might have snapped something had Kyle and the bead girl not laughed. Randy laughed too, lightheartedly.

“We had some frat kids show up earlier this semester,” the girl with in the t-shirt explained, and the way she seemed so unfazed by the harsh welcome made Penn second guess his own reaction.

“It was clearly part of their hazing or whatever,” she continued. “Pick a weird group, pretend to be interested, mock everybody. Insecure, asshole stuff.”

Kyle tottered a little as the stool legs faltered on the carpeting. Penn noticed he had a tattoo of a bird on his forearm. Otherwise, he looked pretty preppy himself—chino shorts, a striped t-shirt, hair a clean buzz cut.

Penn realized he’d expected to walk into a room filled with incense and a bunch of people with dreads, chanting around shrine or something. Sitting around the coffee table, a few cups of water the only beverages, they looked like they were just a study group.

“Let’s get started then,” Kyle said. “So, Penn, the way this works is we try to practice the power of Influence, if anyone in the group, in a given semester, feels they may have the potential.” Immediately Penn wanted to ask the obvious: did they? But the faintest gut instinct told him that might be a step in the wrong direction.

“We also talk about any Influence-related stuff we’ve experienced in life in recent weeks—articles we’ve read, people on campus or in the news whom we feel might have Influence.” Penn was having a hard time believing this wasn’t some kind of a joke, but Kyle’s face was eager and open. He went on about some resources he could share with Penn after the meeting, lists of famous people, presidents and such, who were purported to have Influence. “We’re not stalkers,” Kyle added.

Randy barked a little laugh.

“We’re basically stalkers,” said t-shirt girl, and Randy laughed harder.

“If we claim that Influence is alive and thriving,” Kyle said. “It’s important to try and observe it, like any other psychological or scientific event—you look for patterns, consistencies, indicators.”

“So for example,” bead girl cut in. “Sporting events. Everyone knows they’re on the decline. Too much danger in groups of that size. But take the World Cup last year—Cristiano Gallina? One of the most successful soccer players in the world.”

“Yeah, I know him,” Penn said.

“Right, but did you know him four years ago?”

Penn thought about it. Sean talked about Gallina all the time but he didn’t remember hearing of him in high school. “I guess not—no.”

“We’re pretty sure Gallina carries Influence.”

Penn knew what he wanted to say, but he wasn’t sure if he should say it. He tried to read the bead girl and felt she was inviting him to speak. “How is that different than any old celebrity? Gallina just got really good, really fast—he was probably already on the B-list radar five years ago, he just skyrocketed to fame once he was discovered.”

“You would think that,” she said. “In part because that’s what all the papers say, the ESPN feature, the media.”

“But we think, based on a lot of research and analysis, that you can track Gallina’s stardom to four years ago because that’s when he tapped into his Influence... something shifted for him so that he understood his own power. He started his social media accounts around that time, started growing a following even further that way, but the real catalyst was him understanding his Influence, and it strengthening, as it always

does, in a group of people with whom he had strong, honest relationships. He was selected for the A-level FC Barça training team at that point and he's been quoted over and over again saying it was his *relationships* with his teammates that changed his entire career."

Penn took it in, deciding he'd wait for someone else to speak. At the very least, it was an interesting theory, and Sean, if he ever met her, would probably propose to this girl.

Randy added that while they were talking about the Gallinga theory, by the way, it was an expectation that any new participants should respect the gathering, even if they didn't feel compelled to be a part of it.

Penn could feel t-shirt girl's eyes on him but tried to ignore it.

"So have you, uh, had any members with... it?" he asked.

Kyle shook his head. "Not yet," he said, then explained they were confident that some day they would, and in the meantime they'd continue their work in solidarity with those who possessed Influence but felt alone and misunderstood in the world, and with hope that someday Influence holders might be identified earlier and earlier in life in order to maximize their potential and serve the world for its betterment.

"Our mission is to support Influence carriers with the resources and encouragement they need to tap into their true nature."

It seemed weird to Penn that if someone really had something so powerful—world-renowned-professional-soccer-player powerful—inside them, that they wouldn't know about it, but he decided to shelf the question.

Randy shared a few updates about a stockbroker in the news who he thought might have Influence, and the bead girl, Lisa or Corinne—he still didn't know who was who—talked about a strange feeling she'd had at a crosswalk the other day, when she'd stared at a stopped car for a while and eventually felt she'd drawn the person's eyes toward her.

Right, Penn wanted to say. *You mean you're aware of your fantastic boobs.* But she said it all without any apparent reservation, and no one in the group seemed to doubt her. Penn tried to reflect their sincere expressions and hoped he was hiding his skepticism.

“Powerful, Lisa,” Kyle said, and turned to Penn before he could rehearse the girls' names and corresponding faces in his head. “We tend to feel that most people, if they nurture self-awareness, have access to brief moments of Influence. Not true, genetic Influence inheritors, per se, but it's a power that we can all tap into at some point or another. Less concentrated than a real carrier, but still something worth cultivating.”

Walking home later, Penn passed just two other students in the spring dark. The streets were quiet save for the stray garble of a television in a house, or a car or two droning down a road, and he found himself trying to restore the idealized version of campus he'd envisioned before he came to Michigan, that he'd maintained his freshman year—the one before the bomb and dismantled TVs; the one without discomfiting, weirdo beliefs of students like those four at the Influence gathering.

He had gone to challenge his own beliefs and grant Kate's questions more respect.

He had left with all his initial beliefs confirmed—that Influence was mystic drama from people who couldn't face the graver realities of the world.

He was surprised by the disappointment he felt in being right.

*

“This is a time for action, not passivity, and we have to do more than hide in this ballroom week after week as peoples' ideology fricken disintegrates!”

Several people uttered agreement but Doris didn't seem to notice. Her eyes bore down on Penn with an anger he'd never seen in her, her shoulders lowered a little so that the image she thought of was immediately a charging bull. The vibe of the Logos meeting had felt distinctly strange from its start. Penn guessed it had something to do with it being their first meeting after the on-campus Concordis event, but he still couldn't understand Doris' passion about it.

“I'm sick of being passive,” she said, punching the air with a fist, her tall silhouette decidedly impressive. “If we really believe in Logos—the importance of media, reason, judgment, words—then we need to be radical. We're hypocrites if we don't make a more public statement about being anti-Concordis. We need to publish a call to students, a call to anyone really, to stop watching Concordis stations, reading its papers, or otherwise supporting their business—whatever we end up deciding as a group, our little research presentations aren't enough anymore.”

“Doris, your position is fine, but you need to sit down and make it more professionally. This isn't a rally.” Tara's voice in the microphone was even, but direct. If she was insulted by Doris' belittling of the research groups, she didn't show it.

“Where are you getting all this, anyway?”

Doris sat down, but her voice was loud enough to still fill the ballroom easily.

“The Concordis event—anyone else go? Penn was there.”

His heart rate kicked up. He was supposed to be there, to learn more about Concordis, but he still felt nervous. Tara eyed him briefly before returning her eyes to the group. Nearly 100 people stared back at her—somehow, despite the bomb, a dwindling on-campus student body, and the reports on ‘increasing danger in campus gatherings’, Logos continued to grow.

“I went,” Tara said, surprising him. “I don’t see what about it is making you feel the need to be radical.”

Penn looked over at Kate and saw her looking out at the group.

“I think we need to be a resistance group,” Doris repeated. “Concordis literally walked right onto campus—right in *this room*, no less—set up a bunch of TVs, and broadcasted a load of fear-mongering garbage right to the student body. And, by doing it, they got the *largest, in-person gathering* we’ve had on campus in months. That’s like the biggest territory violation for us ever. There’s no way it’s an accident. The bomb was the first move—I fully believe Concordis planted that bomb and followed up with a news report about it. Now they’re moving onto campus to recruit our best students and draw them into their totalitarian crusade. If we don’t encourage students to be smart media consumers, Concordis wins. The best parts of this student body are going to the dogs.”

The room was quiet, tense. Tara was silent.

A slow anger had begun to build in Penn, but he tried to quell it. Everything Doris said was so one-sided, so righteous, he was having a hard time focusing. But what could

he say that wouldn't reveal his own loyalties? Didn't anyone else think she was out of line?

Just days ago, the day after the Influence gathering, he'd gotten his official offer call—a summer internship with Concordis, with housing and stipend, in San Francisco. And he'd toyed with the idea of telling Tara—and his friends—tonight.

“Doris, I get what you're saying, but someone has to report on things, someone has to play the media role. Our group is supposed to support positive journalism, not try to destroy it. Making ourselves antagonists against Concordis and declaring war doesn't exactly seem productive.” The comment came from a guy to Doris' left.

“Right,” Penn added, seeing his chance. The absence of his usual feeling of power—that swell of intuition—had been bothering him since they started the meeting. He wondered if it was a result of all the discord. “I had good interactions with Concordis at the job fair... and *media event*,” he added, seeing Doris eyes shoot to him. “I think they'd be open to working with people like us. They read student publications like the *Daily*. They support what we do.”

“They read the *Daily*,” Doris snarled, “because they want to make sure it doesn't threaten them. They read it to copy its best work and recruit its best reporters.”

“Do you just make this shit up?” Penn snapped, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Kate's face snap toward his. He ignored her, ignored how hollow his chest felt, how devoid of any sort of wisdom or guidance he was. “I'm serious. As a journalist, are you researching this at all? Or are you just bitter because Concordis didn't ask to interview you?”

“Penn,” Tara hissed, avoiding the microphone.

“Guess what, Penny boy, they *did* ask to interview me,” Doris said, standing.

“And I took one look at the blood-money, bribery table and said ‘Screw. You.’”

“Jesus,” someone said, and the room was completely silent.

Penn’s heart pounded in his ears and he thought he could hear Doris breathing from the table—or maybe it was his own breath—ragged. “Penny boy?” he said. “That’s cute. Imitating Sean—”

“You can both step out and sort this out alone.”

Penn turned, shocked by the sound of Kate’s voice in the microphone, her freckles invisible, her brow narrowed and her eyes on him.

Doris slouched dramatically. “Oh c’mon are you serious right—”

“Right now, or you’re out of Logos,” Kate said, her eyes on Doris. “Out in the lobby,” she said to Penn. He felt a wave of shame, convoluted with the anger that still roiled in his blood. He tried to summon that strange intuitive power, now that he needed it—to summon everyone in this room to side with him and show Doris how wrong she was, how naïve.

“Seconded,” Tara said. “Get out.”

Doris’ chair screeched against the wood flooring and her boots clopped out of the room. Penn followed her, standing as calmly as he could, trying to convey how normal he knew his position was, how confident he felt that over time people would understand what he already knew: that Concordis, as a business, was beneficial to them—to anyone—and worth respecting. Well-managed jobs and level-headed, strategic thinking wasn’t something to write off.

Doris hadn't lingered in the lobby. She was already storming down the stairway toward the door, and Penn was so angry at her he couldn't think of a single word to say.

"Screw you and your big business," she yelled, turning to face him and extending her middle finger. "And your clique with Kate and Sean, and your perfect little group—"

"Doris, someone has to work," he said, but realized belatedly the words sounded arrogant. It wasn't what he'd meant—her weird insecurity about their friend group had spun the words around before he said them.

"Right, Penn, the rest of us don't work or anything, right? We just lounge around, enjoying our wine and tapas." She'd stopped in front of a door, her head close to the top of its frame, her dark hair styled up to add more inches to the heeled boots.

You're selfish, he wanted to yell. He couldn't even share good news with her—an internship, a job, dreams for a future that he really wanted more than anything, that he never thought he'd get to have. He'd imagined receiving the phone call from Concordis over and over, dialing them all up afterward, Sean, Kate, Doris, to share the news. He'd gotten a job, and at his father's company—he'd thought he may even tell them that part. The *same company*, the same work his father had done.

"Doris, everyone doesn't want the same damn things you do," he said. It sounded more childish than he'd hoped, but she didn't say anything. Suddenly the door opened up behind her and Sean filled it, his head just shorter than hers.

"Whoa heyyyy!" he said happily, then stopped short when he saw her face.

"Oh perfect," she snapped. "Your girlfriend's up in there, in the ballroom, behind your bro lover," she pointed up to the first floor, "so the three of you can hold hands and

take over the world with princess Katherine running everything and making everyone happy.”

“What the hell,” Penn heard Sean say. From where he was standing Sean’s expression was unreadable.

“Nice social media pages, by the way,” Doris added. “Want me to report you? An exposé on athletes violating policy—tale as old as time. I’ve got that canned on my laptop.”

“Doris, stop,” Penn said, but Sean had screwed his face up and started walking away from her, toward Penn.

“The hell?” he said, his hands on his backpack straps. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m sick of this stupid, incestuous group,” Doris shouted, and her voice broke, and Penn realized she was starting to cry. “I’m sick of being the only one willing to throw my own ass out there for justice shit, to actually try and do something, and all of you just cowering away to do whatever it is you want and spend all your time together.” She shoved open the door.

It slammed shut behind her and Penn and Sean stood in silence, Sean only partway up the stairs, his body frozen, facing the place where Doris had been.

He spun to face Penn and stared at him, waiting.

“I don’t know,” Penn stammered. He felt guilty. “We argued in the Logos meeting,” he gestured over his shoulder. “She got mad. Hurt? It’s not my problem,” he said.

Sean just stared at him.

The doors to the ballroom opened and members filed out, their conversations sober and muted. It was so unlike most meeting conclusions that it took Penn a second to recognize it.

Kate squeezed out through the group and looked from Penn to Sean. “Where’s Doris?” she asked.

“She left,” Penn said.

“Crying,” Sean said, the tone of his voice posing the word as a question, like he couldn’t believe what he was saying.

Kate didn’t speak, just walked quickly past them and out the doors.

Tara was the last to leave the ballroom, flicking the lights off behind her. “Sort it out?” she asked Penn. He didn’t reply and she eyed Sean skeptically, then handed Penn a file with the meeting minutes. “Sort it out,” she said.

Penn watched her picked her way down the steps, then she left.

(33)

It’s just going to his head because you’re so popular now and that’s all he cares about, pleasing as many people as possible, quantity over quality.

Kate was sprawled out on her bed, eyes straining to count the divots in the ceiling tile. *You’re so popular now.* She raised a hand to the ceiling and put her fingernail in a divot, the short distance forcing her arm to stay bent. *And that’s all he cares about....* The gashes were only a few feet above her—the lofted twin bed meant she couldn’t even sit up fully in her room. She envisioned Doris’ face on the ceiling and flicked a fingernail against it, hard.

“Insensitive asshole,” she said out loud. It felt so good to say it, even if Doris wasn’t present. Better, realistically, that she wasn’t.

Someone knocked on her door and she ignored it.

After the Logos meeting, she’d rushed after Doris and found her halfway home. Doris had ranted, tears slipping down her face fast enough to prevent Kate from saying anything, even when she insulted Penn, Sean, called them stupid egotists and went on and on about Sean’s idiocy for loving Kate so much—how it clearly wasn’t authentic or based in reality but another warped manifestation of his desire to be popular, to be liked.

Thirteen divots, she counted. *Flick, flick, flick.*

Kate knew Doris was upset, how much she still liked Sean even if she never said the words out loud. Still, they’d parted ways last night, Doris oblivious and snotted up, and Kate had spent her own walk home wondering if what Doris said was true. *Because you’re so popular now.*

All she’d done today was skip a class and eat an early lunch. She’d stayed in her room and managed not to see anyone, ignored eleven new emails with social updates she didn’t care about, and invitations to ‘grab coffee’ that she knew she wouldn’t even read.

She’d been wanting to call Will. Ask him if that was why he’d kissed her, because she’d moved somewhere and gotten an audience.

Someone knocked again and she sat up, slouched enough to avoid the ceiling, and hopped down onto the floor. It wasn’t Doris; she’d be yelling through the door, impatient.

“What,” she said as she opened it. She’d answer a handful of trite questions—Does this skirt look good? Hey, Kate, why weren’t you in class?—and be done with it.

“Hey.” Sean stood in the doorway, dressed in his standard soccer sweats, his hands on his backpack straps. She thought she saw the door across the hall close quickly.

“Can I come in for a sec?” he said.

“Look, I’m pretty tired right now,” she started, but he waved a hand impatiently.

“Yeah, yeah, of course. Another time. I shouldn’t have just showed up like this, all weird.” He looked embarrassed, and Kate changed her mind.

“Never mind, that’s fine,” she said, and headed back into the room. Maybe the two of them could talk through a way to reunite Penn and Doris or shed some light on her own frustrations.

She pushed her desk chair toward him and sat on the windowsill, the sunlight warm, calming like a hand on her back.

Sean set his backpack down lightly and leaned back in the desk chair.

“Did Doris send you?” Kate asked.

“Doris? No. She hates me now.”

Kate opened her mouth to crack a joke about the impossibility of Doris hating Sean, but realized it’d be turning the knife back on her best friend. She didn’t want that. Didn’t want any of this childish yelling and insecurities about who liked who. It had been a year of plenty, gaining all three of their friendships, discovering Penn, connecting with Will. She was having a hard time understanding why Doris insisted on being dissatisfied.

“Me too, I think.”

Sean sighed and looked out the window. “Yeah, well.”

His stance was relaxed, but he was knocking rapidly on the arms of the desk chair, left knuckles then right ones, the pattern a manic version of his earlier knock on her door.

“So, look—” he made eye contact and sat up quickly, so fast she jumped a little. “I’m into you,” he said. “And now seems like a good time to say it. You hang out with Doris all the time. If you’re on a little, uh, break, then why don’t we spend some time just the two of us—get to know each other.”

She heard herself laugh but felt like someone had scooped her insides out and dumped them into the space between them.

“I don’t know how you, uh, feel,” Sean began, “but I think—I think we’re more compatible than you think.” He wasn’t smiling, his dark head of curls tipped toward her with intentionality, his elbows on his knees, palms open. In the moment he looked so unlike Sean, so unfamiliar to her, that discomfort made her want to get up and run.

“Sean, I don’t know that—” she began, but she didn’t know what she wanted to say. She couldn’t believe they were having this conversation again, the déjà vu. “I don’t know that I can talk about this right now.”

He kept staring at her, his brown eyes so sincere she instinctively pushed herself back on the sill. “Kate, I’ve liked you for a long time. It doesn’t have to be weird, it’s not my first date—no offense,” he grinned and for a moment the familiar Sean returned. “It doesn’t have to be public, either. I get you’re a private person. We don’t even have to mention it.”

Mention it. To Doris, to Penn.

“I’ve liked you for so long, and I always thought you would notice at some point. I liked you the first week of school. You carry yourself with so much, I don’t know, strength, I guess. I noticed you when you just walked into intro chem lecture.

“And then you ignored me,” he stopped smiling, “and I knew you were going to be hard to impress, hard to even get your attention. And then I got to know you at that party, a little, then with our friends. And you don’t even know how smart you are. The way you’re always paying attention to trees on campus, the flowers and stuff, and you don’t open up to people but you should. You’re funny, hard working, always trying to do the best thing for the group—”

Something in her stomach was twisting around. It felt like the sunlight had moved inside her for a moment, warming her. She could feel her freckles strengthening in color.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said. “And you have no idea. You don’t even think of yourself and it’s why everyone is so, I don’t know, enamored? Is that the right word?” He dropped his eyes and studied his hands, the wide brown goalie hands that she’d admired, the first time all the way back at that lame house party. The kiss with Will was in the back of her mind, but even now she was doubting that it had happened—he’d left so quickly and they hadn’t spoken since his visit. She thought she understood what was coming next with Will, what his visit had meant for them. Maybe it hadn’t meant anything at all.

“Sean, I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“Right, my point exactly—can you just think about me being right about this, then, just for a minute?”

Doris' words came back to her: *Because you're so popular now and that's all he cares about.* But Sean had seen her before she had one friend. Unless Influence had begun even then—even in the first days, in front of a large group in a lecture hall—

“I don't think what you're talking about is you liking me, Sean. Just wait—” she said, stern, as he opened his mouth to speak. It was making sense to her now. “What if it was just everything that's happened with Logos, how I've gotten more, uh, popular?” the word made her cringe. She was impressed he didn't.

“Oh my god,” he groaned. “Doris said that to you, too? I'm just so obsessed with popularity, right? Can't get enough, a sucking monster who dines on fame and glory. Straight up? Doris has been a middle school drama queen. She can talk about herself until the end of time, fine, but she needs to stop telling other people who they are.”

Internally, Kate agreed with him. After that teary walk home together she'd been mulling over the reality that Doris had had insecurities for the entire duration of their friendship, just like Kate did. And for some reason the idea dumbfounded her. It was as if Doris had hoarded all her insecurities up for months and now they were exploding across campus like pollen.

“So you feel—drawn to me,” she said, an idea forming.

He looked at her. “I think that's pretty obvious by now.”

“Right, but—”

“And not in the way I feel ‘drawn’ to other girls—I mean, women,” he added hastily.

“Right. So, how do you feel about Penn?”

He looked at her, his brow knitted. “What about Penn?”

She waited.

“You mean, like... am I into him?”

“Seriously, think about it. Do you not feel that draw to him? The way you feel to me?”

Sean was silent for a moment, a look of consternation on his face.

Kate wanted to continue, to explain her theory that she and Penn might be developing something that was creating these feelings in Sean, that it had less to do with her than he thought. That Doris was right, in a way, in that it wasn't *really* her, Kate, that Sean liked. It was the effect she was having on him.

And yet the fear of Doris being right in another way was haunting her; if it was just the Influence working, then did that mean it was also true for Will?

“So I guess, I guess yeah—maybe?” Sean stammered. “I—I think it was ever since you guys announced your weird familial ties, maybe? It's like—no, wait. I've gotten to know you more since then. I didn't really know you before and so, now that I know you, I like you.”

“Sean, what if I told you that I think what you're feeling is the result of, like,” she wanted to just say ‘Influence’, or ‘this weird spiritual power I don't understand’, but she tried to translate it into normal language instead. “What if it's just me and Penn becoming more confident and, I don't know, inspiring you with that? It's the first time he and I, as adults, have really *belonged* to anyone, or anywhere.”

Sean pulled at his curls, deep in thought, and when he finished several chunks of them stood on end. Kate laughed, but his face showed he was not on the same page.

“Sean, you know your friendship to me is important. That’s understatement. You’re one of the best friends I’ve ever had. Also, sorry, your hair is—”

He tipped back in the chair and stole a glance at himself in Kate’s mirror.

“Nice,” he said, and tipped the chair back to the ground and his face went grave again. “It’s cool, Kate, you don’t have to give me the speech. I get it. I figured you were with that guy anyway.”

“Will, yeah.”

“Childhood romance. Rahul and Anjali all the way.”

“Who’s—”

“If any of you watched some of the fricken Bollywood hits I told you about, your lives would be much richer and more enjoyable things. It’s *KKHH*, Kate, watch some movies.”

His tone wasn’t entirely comical, but she let it go. She had watched it anyway—*Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*—with Doris. And now she remembered the two main characters, childhood friends who ultimately fell in love. Doris had insisted she and Kate watch it together a few months ago during a particularly boring weekend. Now she knew why.

“You do know me, though, Sean, and I don’t want things to change.”

“They won’t. I can adult. I’ll live.”

“Thank you,” she said, and realized, stupidly, that this was exactly what she’d been wanting—to talk to someone who knew her. But she didn’t want to talk about this anymore.

“Hey, uh, can you give me your advice on something?”

“Sure,” he said, standing and shouldering his bag. “You know what, I can be Aman Mehra—rich, successful, good looking.” He trailed off. “Sorry, yeah, sure. Advice. Just don’t ask me for advice about the guy. Give me a minute on that.”

“No, no, not Will. About Logos. I’ve been thinking about stepping down.”

Sean shrugged, clearly uninterested. “Why?”

“I joined initially because I wanted to hang out with Doris, hang out with Penn. But lately I feel like it’s just driving a wedge between all of us—it’s the opposite of why I joined.”

“Okay,” said Sean, drawing the word out. “But your role in the group is pretty important. VP. And if you weren’t in Logos I don’t know that someone else could do your job.

“Plus,” he paused. “If this family juju you’re talking about with you and Penn, or whatever, is real or something, then I’d think it’s playing a role in Logos. You guys are good leaders. And what Logos is doing is important. Even if I don’t really care about it,” he added dryly.

It was the first time she’d thought about Influence as coming with some kind of responsibility—like plant energy, something she had to put in the right direction. She just didn’t know if Logos was a dead leaf.

“This thing with Doris will blow over,” Sean added. He crossed the room and hugged her, the embrace quick but kind. “Just relationships relationshiping.”

She hoped he was right. “You know Doris said something once, that there was a ‘magic’ to large gatherings. I’ve been thinking about that a lot. The way they can foster

unity and powerful healing, or bring about change. Or the way they can turn toward discord, evil.”

“Welp, sounds nice and intense, just like our dear Doris.”

Kate smiled but pressed him a little. “You know what I mean though?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, seeming reluctant. “Soccer’s like that. Sometimes the team’s in a funk and everybody’s being a jerk to everybody. We can’t play for shit. And then other times you’re at a game, and the crowd’s good, considering, and you’re in this flow, and it’s *the best thing* on this planet.” He smiled and the passion he felt for soccer was evident in his posture, his bright brown eyes. He was so handsome, honestly, Kate realized, that she considered she might be the stupidest girl on campus for telling him no, Doris’ friendship be damned.

“Anyway, I gotta run,” he said. “I wouldn’t quit the group. And if you, uh, change your mind,” he said, grinning. “Then, you know, send me one of those granny emails and I’ll get in the year 4000 when I’m a rich robo-stud soccer king and science can prove you were wrong.” He patted her dinosaur of a laptop.

“Very funny,” Kate said, but felt a little thrill at the idea of herself as some glamorous city woman, pursued by a famous soccer player, and for a moment wished she could at least consider it as a possibility.

She shut the door behind Sean and sat down in the chair he’d vacated, knowing what she had to do next. She flipped her computer open and opened two new email windows—one for Doris, and one for Will.

[34]

He'd wedged himself in a corner table in the graduate library stacks, the same floor where he, Kate, Doris and Sean had first spent time together way back when. Or around the same floor—the bookshelves and windows tended to look alike from the second floor up. It was one of the only places where he and Kate could work together and count on being left alone—almost no one came here to study, which meant almost no one would see the two of them and leech onto whatever invitational sibling vibe was happening.

A door creaked open somewhere behind him and he turned, watched a student walk slowly through the floor then exit another side door to the elevators.

He exhaled. If someone tried to small talk with him, he might snap.

Penn clicked another 'next' button on his laptop screen and held his eyes shut for a minute to wet them. He wondered what was taking Kate so long; she'd emailed that she'd join him around two or so and it wasn't like her to be late. It was 3:30 now and he was dragging; he had a headache, probably from the hours spent filling out his internship forms. Concordis had emailed him an employee portal login and the background info they requested was inane, especially considering how much info he'd already shared with an application, the in-person interview, and now this.

As part of our process we research familial ties, he read. Please list all known living relatives along with their permanent address and phone number.

He typed Kate's name and dorm address into the computer and hit 'next'.

Thank you. Please wait while we process your information. A representative will contact you shortly.

He stood up to go to the bathroom, but his phone rang. An unknown number. He answered, thinking it might be Kate.

“This is Penn.”

“Mr. Penn Beckett? I’m calling about your Concordis application.”

He paused, stunned by the fast phone call. Either he’d prompted the call by hitting the next button or they were calling about something else; his stomach bottomed out at the prospect that they were canceling his offer.

“I just reviewed your familial ties page and you listed your sister, Kate DeSalles, whom I noticed has a different last name, is that correct?”

“Correct,” he said. He didn’t feel like explaining and hoped this lady would just think Kate was married.

“And you chose not to list your grandfather’s name and address?”

The woman’s voice was so commanding, so banal in its request that it made the question sound completely legitimate. He sat back down.

“My grandfather?”

“Yes, Mr. Beckett, may I ask why you chose not to list your grandfather’s name and address? Any intentional omissions must be recorded in our system. Just standard HR policy.”

His heart hammered in his ears and his throat felt dry. Just then he noticed Kate walking in through the side door.

Penn cleared his throat. “My grandfather, right, that was unintentional.” He thought quickly. As Kate drew closer he felt his intuition pushing him toward discretion more than transparency. He chose to trust it. “You know my computer froze up on that

page so I think something might have happened when I clicked the refresh button,” he said now. “Can you see his name and address on your end?”

The line was silent and Kate sat down across from him, opening her shoulder bag and extracting her enormous laptop. He could feel a shock of sweat on his back.

“I have his address, but I don’t know if it populated from your user portal,” said the woman on the phone. Penn heard her clicking around. “Jerome Wesley Ganzel, Prince of Peace Care Center in Ellendale, North Dakota.”

Penn was overcome by dread to the point that it completely overpowered his thinking, his body alerting him to say no. He was vaguely aware of Kate reaching for him, her hand on her face, as he leaned his arms against his knees and tried to will himself not to pass out.

“Mr. Beckett?” said the woman on the phone. “Is this the name and address you typed into the user portal?”

Kate’s hands were on his wrists. He obeyed his body. “No, no it wasn’t.”

It wasn’t a lie. He didn’t know the address. He hadn’t typed it in. The last time he’d seen that name was in the office of Lief Schulte, the signature that sent him east.

“Hm,” the woman grunted, anger in the noise. “Must be another client profile glitch, this system has been off.”

He tried to laugh politely but it sounded like a bizarre croak.

“Okay, so we have your sister, Katherine, and that’s that then. Alright, thank you, Mr. Beckett, have a nice day.”

The line went dead. He had a bad feeling, too late, about having Kate’s name in the system.

“What’s wrong?” Kate asked, kneeling in front of him with stress in her face, little lines in her forehead. “Want me to get you water?”

His head was clearing but his body still pulsed with its physical protest. He sat up, trying to think himself back into feeling normal, but fear was beckoning him to give in fully to panic. Despite all the small moments of intuition he’d felt around Kate, he’d never felt anything close to what he felt just now.

“Did you feel it, the Influence?” Kate asked. Now her face was in focus, staring at him from across the table, her freckles solid brown under the fluorescent lights. She looked so innocent and concerned that he wanted to shove the table at her.

“There isn’t any Influence, Kate,” he seethed. This was hardly how he wanted their study session to go, but he couldn’t stop himself. “You need to let it go.”

Her face hardened. “Then who were you talking to?”

He faltered. He should have played the phone call off better than he had. “Just university tech. Had a computer issue.”

“A computer issue.”

“Yep.”

“The computer center calls you Mr. Beckett.”

“Yeah, customer service.”

“I heard a woman say my name,” she said.

Suddenly he realized how entitled he was being—controlling his sister, her information, in the very way he’d experienced his entire life.

He gritted his teeth. He didn’t know how he was going to tell it.

“I have to fill out some personal information for my internship,” he said.

“You got an internship?”

He imagined she might have been excited for him, had he been able to tell her in another context.

“Yeah, I found out this week.”

“Penn, that’s amazing. Where at?”

“A smaller marketing company,” he lied, “in San Francisco.”

The city had surprised her; he could tell by the way she tightened her lips.

“That’s big,” was all she said.

He nodded, and suddenly he felt so calmed by her being there, safe in the stacks, that he knew he should tell her more. He was getting so tired of secrets.

“You aren’t going to believe what they found about me,” he said.

“Who?”

“The company—HR I mean—that’s who was on the phone.”

“Oh.”

She tucked hair behind her ear and returned to her chair. He wanted to make up for the lying. “They found our grandfather.”

He let the words sit between them like magic. She looked at him cautiously, like she wasn’t sure if he was safe.

“Jerome Wesley Ganzel. He’s in a retirement home in North Dakota.”

I was right to follow in our father’s footsteps, he was tempted to say, to gloat, really. *I’ve found our family for you.*

“Penn, that’s—how? Can we go there? What’s the address?”

“I’d assume so,” he typed in the name of the place and it appeared on his screen. He turned to show her and she wrote it down on paper. “I don’t think it’s off-limits or anything.” He wasn’t sure if he believed himself. The way he’d felt a few moments ago was a crack in his certainty, threatening who he was and what he could count on himself to do.

“We have to go, Penn!” Kate’s eyes were wide now, her hands hurrying to return her laptop to its bag. “We have to visit him! This is unbelievable!” She stared at the paper in her hand like a winning lottery ticket.

He was surprised by her emotion. It was a man they barely knew, a grandparent who had basically dumped them after their parents’ death. Hardly the kind of person Penn was interested in talking to, let alone traveling to the middle of nowhere to visit.

“Penn, come with me. Let’s go this week.”

“Kate, no way—” he hadn’t expected her reaction and should have. “It’s a fourteen-hour drive without stops and I have nothing to give that man except my best middle finger. I’m not going to visit him on his death bed.”

The look she gave him made him feel like he was rotting out.

“Kate, I’m sorry, I just—do you realize he would have known where we went? He was probably the one to send us to Jersey—to Clara’s—” he pushed his palms against the table, his fingers fanning out. He wished he could send all the anger he felt out of his fingers like electric power, drain out all his circuits. “I won’t go.” He shook his head.

He knew why she wanted to—the ideals she was bringing with her. But he knew she would visit their grandfather and, if he was even senile, he would fail to answer any of her questions. Or worse, he would pretend to be some melancholy old guy who’d been

waiting for his grandchildren to find him. And he would pretend to love Kate until he got all her attention and company and, God forbid, money, the same way he had with their parents. Kate would trust him, because she was blinded by her desire for a family. She would ask him questions about Influence and he would make something up, whatever it took to use her for his own interest, then cast her off when he was through.

“Then I’ll go without you,” Kate said, standing. “If school is so damn important to you. I’ll let you know what happens. What’s the address?”

“Missing school? That’s not the reason,” Penn said.

“Fine—your big internship? Some all-important business thing that’s more important than reuniting with your family after more than a *decade*?”

“Kate,” he didn’t care now if he hurt her. Her refusal to use logic and reason would drive him insane. “You think this old man is going to salve something broken in you, that just because he’s technically your grandparent means that he has some special biological power to relate to you. But most likely, he won’t. He’s known where we’ve been for his entire life and he did nothing—absolutely nothing—to connect with us. That’s hardly an indication that he will now. And the last thing I’m about to do is take my *actual* future, with a *real* job, and a *real* organization, real friends, even, and run away from them all at the end of my sophomore year, which I’ll never get back, to reconnect with some self-centered nobody.”

“And what about Influence, then? You don’t think he might know something about it? The genetics of it? If it’s in our family line?”

Penn leaned back, exasperated. “Influence isn’t real, Kate.”

“It is,” she said, her eyes clear and her freckles undeniable, the star pattern like a constellation in the night.

“I went to a meeting,” he began.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I went to an Influence meeting. Last week. There’s this little group on the university website—”

The look she gave him made him feel satisfied; he could tell she hadn’t known about it, hadn’t thought to look it up and see if there was Influence right under her nose. And he had been the one to find it first. “They were cool people, sincere and everything, but they knew nothing.”

She stood at an angle to him, her hand in midair, en route to picking up her bag to leave. It looked like she was about to throw a punch.

“Kate, I’m sorry,” he said. “I wanted to believe you were right, but I can’t. I researched it and, from everything I’ve seen, the facts don’t line up.”

After a beat she bent, shouldered her bag, and put her laptop in it.

“I’ll go alone then,” she said, resolute. “I’ll try to call you from the center.”

He ignored her and she left, striding through the bookshelves and out through the door to the elevators.

Only after she left did he start to worry about losing her—wondered if she might just stay there and choose not to come back.

He stood quickly and rushed to her dorm room, but the room was dark under the doorway. On the way he called Sean—he’d only seen Kate earlier in the week, hadn’t

heard anything about her going somewhere. A call, then a text, to Doris, and she said hadn't talked to Kate in a while.

Only then he thought that he could have done it differently—gone anyway, if only to try to protect her, given her his own phone, told her to be safe.

-35-

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DOCUMENT PURPOSE: Any known record of Influence in family history, notes on observed potential for Influence possession, history of presenting Influence symptoms

EMPLOYEE FULL NAME: Pennant "Penn" Illyria Beckett

INTERNAL POSITION: Intern

SSID: ***_**_****

CURRENT EMPLOYER: Student, University of Michigan

HR RESEARCHER ASSIGNED: 3349-006

FAMILY HISTORY / INFLUENCE POTENTIAL:

Updated: PARENTS (2) Irene (Ganzel) Foucault, David Foucault (prev. listed Beckett, discovered as legal name change, see full history in Appendix c.), deceased. May have been carriers; prev. Concordis employees preceding Influence tracking system.

Updated: SIBLINGS (1) Sarah Katherine “Kate” Foucault (prev. listed DeSalles, adopted last name from paternal aunt, Clara (Foucault) DeSalles. (Confirmed zero Influence carrier potential for Clara DeSalles.) RESIDENCE Mary Markley Hall, co-ed dormitory, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. **On-site HR researcher needed to recon sibling Influence potential**

Updated: GRANDPARENTS (4) paternal Mathilde (Beauvoir) Foucault and Arnaud Foucault, deceased; maternal Marie (Thompson) Ganzel, deceased & Jerome Wesley Ganzel, living, 88, Prince of Peace Care Center, 201 8th St N, Ellendale, ND. (Confirmed zero Influence carrier potential for Jerome Ganzel.)

NOTES ON EMPLOYEE: Self-reported active on campus as English tutor, Business Research Association (BRA), attending soccer games, homework, exercise, friends with no notable or perceived Influential capacity (reconned by employee 8748-902, Apr 5 on-campus interview).

(36)

The Prince of Peace Care Center was smaller than she’d anticipated—a sprawling, one-story brick building with a few trees in front, a parking lot and a fenced-in courtyard, more trees and big sky and wide open fields around it.

She’d passed a few clusters of homes on her drive up to the building, but the bulk of her trip had been in a dark so encompassing it felt like she was inside something, an animal or a tree, carried along in the darkness instead of moving through it, driving, driving, driving.

The sun came up at the edge of a field so flat it reminded her of Churdan, home, the horizon a melting line, warped by the brightness of the sun.

In the parking lot she'd slept for a little, trying to ignore how dirty she was, how much she simultaneously wanted water and a chance to pee. It'd been miles since her last gas station stop and she was hungry, but she was afraid to leave the parking lot once she pulled in. Something in her was tethered to this building now. It was something she'd hunted and caught, holding it in place; if she left it, it might disappear.

At 7 a.m. an old, grey SUV pulled in to the parking lot and she watched a middle-aged woman walk inside the building. A different woman exited the building a few minutes later and got into the only other car in the lot. Kate envisioned her grandfather in the building, wondering which small, white-framed window belonged to him, then trying to remind herself that it still might all be a mistake, that he might not be here at all.

It had occurred to her, partway to the drive, that she might have called, done something more practical than driving a big scar across the country. But she'd enjoyed the drive, the wide open freedom of no people for miles and miles. And she reminded herself of the strength of reason she'd felt with Penn in the library—the confidence in her own decision, the very best option she knew she had: *Drive to see him. Go now.* The thought had been a command.

She brushed the legs of her jeans, scattering some crumbs from a gas station hot dog, and pulled down a mirror, running fingers through her greasy hair into some semblance of a ponytail. She wanted to change her underwear, but she hadn't packed anything, just her computer in its bag. She looked at it and decided to bring it in with her. Couldn't hurt.

Inside, the lobby was furnished with cushioned oak benches and side tables. A table with water and paper cups was stationed next to the front desk, where the middle-

aged woman from the parking lot sat, drinking from a travel thermos. She raised her eyes to Kate and seemed to study her for a moment.

“Can I help you, honey?”

She approached the desk but stayed a foot or so away from it. Her voice was shaking when she spoke. “Hi, I’m—um—I’m here to see my grandfather.”

She felt like the woman would laugh at her—*You? You don’t have a grandfather here.*

“Last name?”

“I, uh—Ganzel?”

The woman set her thermos down and rolled her chair back to an old PC and an expansive white notepad on the wall. “Room 269,” she said.

“Can I just—go there?”

She looked at Kate. “You want me to call him?”

“Yeah, that would be good.”

“What’s your name, honey?”

“Kate. I’m his granddaughter.” She thought of the first time she’d said “sister” with Penn. This word felt a lot easier. She’d never truly retired it.

In the silent lobby Kate could hear the phone ringing on the other end.

“Good morning, Mr. Ganzel, this is Jan. Your granddaughter is here to see you.”

Jan waited and Kate heard a low, slow voice on the other line but couldn’t make out the words.

“Yes, your granddaughter, Kate.”

Jan smiled at Kate then, smile lines like parentheses around her mouth. She hung up the phone. “He’ll have you back. Sounded so happy to hear you were here.”

Kate smiled, her breathing shallow. “Okay.”

“Right back that way.” Jan thumbed behind her in the direction of one of the two hallways, the other extending opposite the front desk.

Kate followed the hallway down and didn’t pass anyone, the empty stretch of it almost buzzing with the nervousness she felt. She hadn’t seen any televisions in the building, just an old radio on the desk up front.

Doormats and decorations marked some of the rooms, but when she came to room 269, it was a plain brown door, with nothing but the floral carpet in front of it. A small doorplate was at her eye level: JERRY GANZEL. Kate knocked.

When the door opened, she realized she’d expected an old man, hunched or in a wheelchair, a warm smile that made her know, in her bones, who she’d found.

The man in front of her was taller than she expected, athletically built even in age, with a nice, round head, smooth without its hair, bright blue eyes the color of Churdan sky in spring. They were clear, not cloudy, and the light she saw in them, the recognition, surpassed anything she could have hoped for.

“Kate?” he asked. He seemed so strong for his age, moving carefully, wide shoulders and a straight back, navy slacks and clean grey shirt. “Oh, you made it!” he said, triumphant, and the way he said it made her feel like it was a regular thing, her visiting him, something she’d done her entire life.

She hugged him without thinking, holding him tight and smelling laundry detergent, clean Ivory soap, a scent fresh like new trees—woods in rain.

She stepped back and knew, vaguely, that she was smiling. Deliriously happy. She remembered him.

“Come in, come in!” he said, and he turned into the room, leaving her holding the heavy door. It was a one-bedroom apartment, modest but well-kept, an enlarged picture of a golf course in Ireland hanging across from the bed, above a dresser. There was no television, just an old radio on the dresser and a copy of a print newspaper, *Prince of Peace Community Gazette*.

There was little in the room—an alarm clock on the nightstand, a glass of water and a watch. On a dresser: a small golf plaque; a picture frame, and in the picture her parents with two children. She stared at it.

He pulled out a desk chair for her and another folding chair from a slot between the desk and the wall. He unfolded it and sat down, then seemed to notice her face.

“Ah,” he said, reaching for the picture frame and handing it to her.

She didn’t speak.

“Sit down,” he said. “Lots to talk about.”

She sat, the frame in her hands. It was a bi-fold frame: on the left, her grandmother. The photo filling in every whitewashed memory in her mind’s eye—the cropped, light hair and bright grey eyes, the thin frame, the angles of her face pretty even in age.

And on the right: her parents, her dad caught in a laugh with Penn on his lap, Penn’s face stern and contemplative even as a toddler. Her mother, winsome, quiet in her expressions. Not withholding, just happy, content. And standing next to her, Kate, her hair in a side ponytail, a red dress she only now remembered having. Kate’s smile in that

picture made her feel like her younger self was looking at her now, a little girl in real time, happy to finally be found.

“Those are the two best pictures,” her grandfather said. “Your grandma had other favorites, but no—that was mine. Everyone happy. How it ought to be.”

She looked up at him and he looked a little nervous. “That’s how I remember you,” he said. “Look at you now.”

Suddenly she felt completely rude. “I’m sorry, I should have been dressed nicely for this—I didn’t—I just found out your address and drove, I wasn’t thinking—”

He let her stumble over her words without interrupting, waiting until she stopped.

“No, no,” he said. “We’re not at the Ritz.”

She paused, unsure of where to begin. She tried to remember the questions she’d rehearsed on the drive.

“Can you tell me how you ended up here?” she asked.

He proceeded to tell her more than she expected—starting long after Kate would have been placed with Clara in Churdan. He spoke of her grandmother, how her health declined in California and things were too expensive, painful. How they’d moved to the open air and then ultimately she’d passed from cancer. And the house had been a lot to keep up on his own, wasn’t the same without her attention. So he’d sold the house and stayed.

“She was a special woman,” he said. He didn’t ask if Kate remembered her and she was thankful—she wasn’t sure she could distinguish reality from the memories she’d written for herself. It was easier with him in front of her, bringing things back to life.

“She would have loved to be here, in this moment,” he said. “Would know a lot more what to say than I do.”

Kate was quiet, but understood.

“I’ll do the best I can.”

She took a deep breath, trying to do it quietly. She didn’t know what the etiquette was for interacting with a grandfather as an adult. “Can you tell me about her?”

“Your grandmother?”

“Something she’d want me to know.”

For a moment he just looked at her, his eyes that clear blue, and Kate looked at her grandmother’s grey eyes in the picture frame. Her mother had them, too, and Penn.

“I know about Influence,” she said.

He looked unperturbed, as if she’d just told him she was in college. “How much?”

She thought about it. “Not much.”

“Your grandmother had Influence before we met, but it took me almost nine years, six of our married ones, to buy into it. I was stubborn. The mystic things are not my cup of tea.”

“Sounds like my brother,” she said, and for a moment thought she saw a little hurt in her grandfather’s eyes. Almost like he’d known what had transpired between them.

“Family patterns,” he said. “What I know about Influence is limited to your grandmother—I don’t have it, obviously. She knew it was genetic, but not much about its patterns or the way it repeats in a family line. I always saw it as less magic than you’d think, more science—she would try and study it with different experiments. That’s how

she was trying to learn about it, control it. Her awareness of her own Influence, her authority in it, increased her abilities. Her power, I guess you could call it.”

“How did she do that?”

“Oh, lots of things, more than I knew, even, or could remember. One time, early on, she went to the post office with two of her best girlfriends. Wanted to mail a package. On the way there they got a gathering so big that more people started stopping outside the post office; they thought there was a special event.” He laughed. “Like a county fair.”

“How did it work?” Kate asked. She had expected to feel celebratory if he corroborated her theory, yet the conversation felt normal, expected. She had known it was real all along.

“Oh, I’m not sure, exactly, I’m not sure she even knew all the ins and outs of it. ‘It’s something bigger than just little me,’ she always said. When she felt it strongest, though, her eyes seemed brighter grey, not even like a human’s eyes. The first time it happened was when we were dating and I thought she was the most striking woman on the planet. Couldn’t believe she wanted to be with me. Almost scared me, the way she was so quiet, so firm under that, though, really. Tough and controlled.”

Now the only feeling pulsing through her was the ache that she might have been there for these things—what might have happened if she had been. “Why didn’t you raise us?” she asked.

Her grandfather stopped, cleared his throat. “We wanted to,” he said, and his voice was strained.

“Your grandmother—felt a lot of guilt. We visited you when you were little, as much as we could, do you remember?”

“I remember.”

“Your father said things were getting bad at their company. He was concerned and asked us to come stay with you and your brother for a little while.” He rubbed his hands against his pant legs, the way Kate had just an hour ago in the car. It seemed impossible how much was changing, taking form, how some hours held so much in them while others dissolved.

“We were coming to pick you up, your mother was supposed to be there with us, but she was still working at the company then, part-time, we’d been arguing about her wanting to stay on instead of staying home with your kids.

“She was committed to your dad. She said they were trying to restore things to the way they ought to be.

“That one night we drove up, your mother went into work to be with your father. They’d said there was a nanny with you until we arrived.

“When we got there,” his voice slowed, but Kate nodded, encouraging him. Her eyes were wet but she knew what was coming next. Remembered it all. “The fire—I don’t know if you remember it.”

She nodded again. “I remember it. You came into my room. I thought you were my dad.” She was surprised by how controlled her own voice sounded, how unaffected.

He nodded, solemn. “I got you kids. Your grandmother tried to help me, but she wasn’t doing well with the smoke; she wasn’t doing well then, I think it was the cancer, even then, but we didn’t know it at the time. I wouldn’t have her dying. She was too important.”

Kate found herself willing him on with everything she had in her, wishing she could summon her own Influence and encourage him to talk until everything resolved.

“She felt a lot of guilt, like she did this to you. I don’t think she could forgive herself for that.”

“She didn’t cause the fire—why would she be guilty of anything?”

He coughed a little, resting his hands on his legs. “Influence is not a—normal thing,” he said. “Your grandmother had her own troubles with it, in a small way. People were threatened by her popularity, maybe. Eventually she stepped out of any limelight and led a private life—part of why we moved out here. The middle of nowhere.

“Before that, though,” and his own face looked culpable somehow, “she was a nurse in northern California, closer to where you all lived. There were some injustices on her floor, she felt they had to do with women not getting paid, with race.

“She organized something, just a small thing, they would stand in front of the entrance at the end of their shift—they always worked a full shift—but the patients coming in would see them, administration got mad about that. It made them look bad.

“Some people came after us. Threw a brick at her car. I got mad then, I told her she had to stop it, that she was going to get herself killed.

“We fought about it a lot. It was a bad season. Eventually, someone else was hurt. A woman, another nurse on her floor. She was hit, beaten up after her shift. They were men, husbands of some other women, said that they were threatening the job securities of their families.

“There’s more after that, but I don’t know that it would do you any good to hear it. The point is that we realized—your grandmother realized—the power she felt was a

dangerous thing. She didn't feel confident using it after that. She was afraid, I think, that it would hurt you, hurt more people, in ways she couldn't prevent."

"What happened after that—at the hospital?" Kate asked.

"They did resolve policy, changed pay. There's a memorial for the woman, I think. Your grandmother was too concerned to keep in touch much—she was afraid something worse might happen if she was there. She just wanted the violence to end.

"I'm getting off-base, though," he said suddenly. "The point is, Influence, I know it's real, but it's a strange thing, powerful. And most people who believe in it know that to be true. It's why your parents should have been more careful working the jobs they did. Your mother—we never spoke of it, and to my knowledge I don't know if she spoke of it to your grandmother, though I assume they did. As she got older, I always thought your mother had it too.

"When they asked us to drive to you, that night they went in, there was something about her voice on the phone, something in my gut, like I knew what was going to happen. She told me, 'Dad, keep them safe if you need to. If you need them to be separate.'"

Kate realized that other residents had woken up long ago, the sounds of their voices clear in the hallway, rustling as they walked. But the room seemed suspended in time.

"Your grandmother wasn't sure if either of you would have Influence automatically. 'It doesn't work like that', she said. I didn't understand it. She said it wouldn't manifest until you were older, when you increased your self awareness and if you got to be in larger groups of people. It strengthens in groups, she thought, particularly

with strong relationships. The stronger your following, the better the relationships, the better your awareness of it, and your practicing with it, then the greater your Influence. Hence all that hoopla at the post office, way back when she was just starting to figure it out.

“She thought maybe, if we kept you separate, relatively isolated, then we could give it time. She was most worried about you. Since you were older we knew you would remember us best, wonder why you couldn’t have stayed with us. She thought if we could keep tabs on you, have the right people keep tabs on you, then if Influence would begin to make itself manifest, we could intervene. We could tell you, she could train you. Or else there was a chance that someone else would find your first.”

“What do you mean, find us first? Why would anyone be looking for us apart from you?”

He sighed, and he looked like a much older man then, tired. “It was all for your protection,” he said.

“Protection from what?”

“The world is not a kind place, Katherine.”

“And how is that true?” the comment reminded her of Clara, and not in a good way. She was getting so sick of the pessimism, the unbelief.

“There are people who are interested in a good world,” he said. “There are also people who want to win it. In regard to Influence there are individuals, some we know, some we don’t, organizations even, that have become very interested in identifying Influence carriers and ensuring that those people end up on their side. They want to use them to do what they see as best.”

“What, like take over the world?” Her own skepticism had escaped in the words more than she’d intended.

“I don’t know that it’s that simple,” he said patiently. “People tend to be passionate about what they think is best. I think, for some of those people, they truly believe that what they’re doing is for everyone’s good.”

Something about his description was reminding her of Doris, and in a way that portrayed her as far more dangerous than Kate had ever perceived. Doris had always seemed passionate, but compassionate, too. Someone who truly cared about people.

But if her grandfather’s point was valid, then who could say that Doris’ way was the right way of doing things?

She had another thought, dark. “Aunt Clara lied to me for years.”

“No, Kate, your Aunt Clara kept you safe. She’s done more for you than anyone has. And she knows almost nothing about Influence. We told her what she needed to know, and that was it. She just knew it was important she keep you hidden.”

“You told her that?”

“We mentioned that your parents’ death was suspicious, that we thought there was malintent, and it was critical that she keep you out of harms way. We helped changed your names. We paid for Penn to go to a school that we knew was exceptional in privacy, in keeping their students protected.”

“And you never reached out to us after you set everything up.”

“We had to keep you safe.”

“And when my grandmother died, you didn’t say anything?” Her eyes were wet—the conversation had twisted something open inside her and now it all seemed unfair.

Unfair that she had been denied a life she might have wanted because of more people who were just afraid.

“Why didn’t you take care of us?”

Her grandfather didn’t answer as tears streamed down her face, and she didn’t bother to wipe them. She was so tired, she hadn’t slept long enough, and so bone-tired from all this hunting, all this tracking down of information and people that should never have been missing in the first place. “I found my brother,” she said. “Did you know that, too?”

His silence made her think he hadn’t.

“We found each other, at college. I think he has Influence, too, but he won’t believe me. He was the one who found your address. But he wouldn’t come with me.”

“I know this is difficult,” he said.

She groaned, “It’s always been difficult. Every year going by without any parents, any brother. My home gone, my grandparents gone, and no one to answer my questions, no one to tell me why any of it happened and why no one had any answers to anything.”

“None of us have answers to why they’re gone,” he said.

“That’s different,” she said. “I’m talking about knowing who you are and where you came from. Knowing anything about yourself in order to figure out who you can become. You took that away from me and I didn’t even have a say in it.”

The room felt claustrophobic, the pictures indicting her from their frames.

“I need to go,” she said.

“Could you please come back? Don’t go home yet. I have so much I want to talk about. I want to hear everything about your life,” he looked so hopeful and she felt a rage

within her, at the entitlement of him wanting anything from her after investing nothing. Penn was right. This wasn't what she thought.

"I'm glad to have seen you," she said. "I don't know yet if I'll come back."

He stood without any apparent intention of what to do next—hugging her, walking her to the door. She picked up her bag and walked out into the hallway and shut the door behind her.

She drove mindlessly until she found a gas station and filled her car, feeling too sick to eat anything. She drove a few more miles and found a motel with advertised WiFi and got a room, falling asleep before she made it to the shower. When she woke she showered, washed her underwear in the sink and sat wrapped in the thin yellow top sheet from the double bed. She plugged her computer in and hated herself for not sucking it up and asking Will for his phone number sooner. If she hadn't been so stupidly afraid of his rejection, she might be able to call him now instead of sending him another pathetic email.

I miss you, she wrote. Can you send me your home number.

Her computer pinged and she clicked back into the main inbox, hopeful. It was a new message from *Concordis HR*. She opened it.

Please click below in acquiescence of a background check and in-person interview in relationship to the employment of: PENN BECKETT

Even after sleep and a shower, the email made her feel ungrounded all over again. There was no reason for her to be getting email from Concordis, let alone a background check, and no reason it should be related to Penn.

She clicked the forward button and sent it to him. *What is this?*

In true Penn form, almost always on his computer, she expected him to reply within a minute. When five passed, she picked up the room phone and dialed his number.

“Hello,” his voice sounded as tired as she felt.

“It’s Kate,” she said.

“I know. Where are you? Are you alright?”

“What is this?”

He was silent for a moment, and the distance between them on the phone made her feel utterly alone.

“Kate, the internship I told you about—it’s with Concordis. That’s the company in San Francisco. I’m leaving at the end of this month.”

“Penn, no.” She had thought it might be Concordis when he mentioned San Francisco, hoped she was wrong.

“I’m not changing my mind, Kate. I want people in my life who support what I do, not people who just condemn me for my decisions.”

“Penn, it’s not that. I met our grandfather. Today. He’s in the care center and completely lucid. He told me everything—we need to talk before you go and it’s not a good idea for you to go there, it’s dangerous—”

“Kate—”

“No please, Penn, listen to me,” she almost wished she could cry to convince him but she felt too spent to do it. “I know you don’t believe me, but I know you have Influence, I know you do, and Concordis is the last place you should be going if you have it. It’s not safe at all.”

“You know the irony of all this?” he said. “After all your condemning of Clara, you’re your struggles with her, everything you told me about her fear—you are characterized by fear. Driven by it. With Concordis, it’s just a villain to you, not even a complex entity. You’re becoming the very person you always said you wouldn’t become.

“I’m doing my internship, whether you think it’s safe or not. And I’ll see you in the fall, and we can see which one of us was right. If you even come back from North Dakota let me know, I guess, but only if you support me.”

She didn’t say anything back.

“If not,” he said, “then I’m not sure where we’ll go from there.”

Her mouth was open, ready to speak, and all she wanted to tell him was that he was wrong on this one. She knew he was.

“I’ve gotta go, Kate. Stay safe.” The line went dead.

She sat for a few minutes, alone in a motel room with no one to call.

She went for a walk, trying to identify some of the leaves that she didn’t recognize from Iowa or Michigan, afraid that if she stopped distracting herself, she might fall apart.

When she got back she was resolute—Penn hadn’t given her a real option. She needed to get to know her grandfather while there was time to, figure out what she believed. She could collect her information the way her grandmother had, quietly, with practice, intentionality.

Over time she could become discreet, stronger with Influence. She would find a way to be with people she trusted, whether or not one of them was Penn.

She opened her computer. Will had emailed her with his number. *Are you alright?*

Penn said you drove to North Dakota? What's going on?

She picked up the phone to call, to tell him she was staying.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Thesis Craft Essay

The Story of the Story / Warm Fuzzies

I was 19 or 20, a sophomore in college. I had a vivid dream of a brother and sister whom I'd never met. I don't remember anything that happened in the dream (and yes, I would still call it vivid), but I remember I woke up and thought: I need to get to know them. So, in my green-paisley-duvet twin bed, in a shared bedroom with a sleeping roommate in a crappy old rental house in Ann Arbor, I turned over, opened my laptop, and wrote.

In that earliest draft were siblings who had been separated. They had a magical component to who they were and what they were capable of—on the precipice of an enormous identity revelation—but I didn't know what the magic was. I knew their names: Kate and Penn. I spent a lot of time writing about them, mostly exploratory scenes; I enjoyed spending time with them, finding out what they were doing. (This is the kind of thing you can only say to other writers without being perceived as nuts.) They were not 'magical' characters in the sense of casting spells and hocus pocus. It was a question of essence—genetic makeup, latent influence, concealed inheritance, untapped identity. I wrote about them to find out who they were.

Initially, when I wrote, I thought Kate and Penn might be disinherited royalty, a prince and princess who had been unknowingly separated from their titles. Another draft: time traveling siblings united in dreams, who woke up, separated again, with fading bed

sheet wrinkles on their skin as a sign of transport, and a lingering understanding of where they'd been.

It has always been a story about yearning and seeking, and a story about want: reunion, friendship and love, treasured things lost then found.

At some point I closed my Kate/Penn documents, and I didn't open them for years.

I didn't abandon Kate and Penn on purpose. During those years, I took creative writing courses, wrote different kinds of stories, experimented, read a lot, but Kate and Penn didn't fade like my other stories and characters did, whether from the dying out of a concept or the natural closure that comes from finishing a story. They just hung on and waited. In 2014, when I applied for the MFA at FAU, I knew that I wanted to actually write their story, a novel, and that would be my main challenge to myself if I pursued the degree. I wanted the time to write about them again, and maybe I wanted to try and find out why they interested me so much.

By this point I had said 'interest' and about 50 pages of cohesive content. I don't know if that's really enough to try and write a novel on, but I did. When I left my job in Chicago, I focused on writing about them again instead of other stories I'd been working on in my downtime. I wrote about them privately in an unstructured way while 'publicly' writing short stories for workshop, which also interested me and were critical to my growth as a writer. I did this through the second semester of my second year, at which point it was time to face the music, buckle down, and do the thing without hiding it.

Enter the mental hurdles. I have always had a lot of self-doubt about this project, which is partially why I wanted to push myself to do it. Part of that self-doubt comes from the following:

1. Consider this subparagraph my MFA-student confessional booth. Literary or no, I have been strongly influenced as a writer, and for this thesis, by mass-popular genre fiction trilogies and series. These include: *Harry Potter* books one through seven by J.K. Rowling, *Twilight* books one through four by Stephanie Meyer, the *His Dark Materials* series by Philip Pullman, *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, the *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth, and, to some extent, *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. Their overall storylines—specifically the friendships, imaginative plotlines and themes of adventure, loyalty, and courage—compel me in a way I haven't often experienced in books. I have stayed up through the night to read these books, and they resonate with me deeply. Perhaps they're guilty pleasures. Perhaps there's real, respectable juju to why they're mass-market best sellers.
2. The more I learned in the MFA, the more I realized my understanding of writing was not thorough. I realized how genuinely bad a lot of writing is, how bad a lot of my own writing was; I realized that writing is hardly a feel-good-thing all the time and, like anything, I am going to have lows and drudgery, waves of uncertainty and frustration, and passing moments of existential despair. I realized that I really wasn't very good yet and that this would be a long-game when I wanted it to be short; that I was impatient; that I would spend my entire life trying to be better and trying to write something that satisfied me, all the while becoming increasingly aware of good

writing and what it entails and thus finding the bar exponentially raised as I continued to improve, best case scenario.

Yet somewhere in there, with the help of an invested thesis chair, smart professors, and a diverse, entertaining cohort, I also realized that all of this was okay, and not really that big of a deal. As they say, acceptance is the first step in recovery.

Process: Scheduling, Counsel, and Implementation

In the summer before my third year, I hurdled. I had learned a great deal about my process: I can generally write from 3-4 hours per day, in the morning; if I write longer than that, and I can sometimes, I will not be able to write as much the next day. If I write in the afternoon, it will not be good. Afternoons are ideally for reading, homework, and assistantship activities. Sometimes, I will have random creative bursts late at night, but those are not to be counted on and generally produce a very different style of work than what I generate in the morning. (For the novel, I have written everything in daylight.) I needed to have the courage to stop drafting when I realized I had stalled with plot. I would then need to confront my outline of the novel and think analytically and strategically about what plot points I should add, remove, and make concrete decisions about the structure and scaffolding of the book.

Structurally, an agent recommended I break out the novel into chunks based on page numbers, so I researched some of the aforementioned books (*Divergent*, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, etc.) and their page counts, sections, and structure, then set goals for myself based on similar numbers. So the scaffolding for the book was originally Sections I-III, 50/100/50pp, respectfully, but eventually became: I. Home, 50pp; II. College, 150pp, III. Spring, 70pp, based on how the content was realistically

unfolding. I would then take those page numbers and assign them to each outlined chapter of the book, with more important chapters getting more pages. This prevented me from overwriting and encouraged me to stay on-plot, based on the plot points I had in my outline.

Influence itself began as an enigmatic idea, but well into book one I realized I needed to stop writing and really think it through. I created a document with the properties and rules of Influence, some of which are discovered by Kate experientially, some of which are discussed at the Influence meeting Penn attends, and the core elements of which are summarized by Kate's grandfather in their final conversation (namely, that Influence, as Kate and Penn experience it, is something genetic, inherited from their mother's side, but must also be recognized, acknowledged, cultivated, understood, and directed, like a power; the degree of power is also directly proportionate to the level of connection the Influence carrier experiences with another person or group of people—this is why, in moments of discord, it weakens, and in moments of gatherings, collaboration, and relational connection it increases significantly). Both characters have physical manifestations of Influence (freckles, eyes, and others being drawn to them), and invisible manifestations (feelings of power, and an inversion of their natural strengths so that each sibling experiences more of the other's natural talents; Penn gains the intuition Kate usually leads with, and Kate gains the intellectual clarity Penn usually has, albeit to a greater extreme).

I also took a risk in my second manuscript draft by playing with point of view as a reflection of Influence; parentheses reflect Kate's chapters, brackets reflect Penn's, and in their most heightened experiences of connection a hybrid set of parentheses/brackets

indicates a chapter in which I expand the close-third person POV to both of them at once in a scene (or scenes). Before Kate begins to figure out that they are indeed siblings, each chapter is limited to either Kate or Penn. Intentionally, I did include scenes where both of them are physically together (like the party scene, where they first meet) but this POV expansion does not occur; this was to communicate that while they may be physically close, there is more to their connection and Influence awareness than just being in the same room. They have to reach out to one another to cultivate a shared experience. So in their closest moments, Kate and Penn experience the world together through this “shared” POV. Toward the end of the book, their conflict and increasing distrust of one another separates them again; they regularly coexist in chapters yet do not connect, and by the end of the book they have returned to the physically separate, mutually exclusive chapters with which they began. I envision the book as a bowtie—they begin apart, connect in the center, then expand back outward away from each other. The intention with this is a gesture toward the complexities of “finding” someone important; Kate and Penn have found each other, but they also have to learn how to continuously reach out with trust and vulnerability in order to stay connected, and even more so to strengthen that connection. I see this as a repeating relational pattern—I’ll call it “the bowtie”—throughout the book for many of the characters’ relationships (Penn and Sean, Kate and Doris, Kate and Clara, Kate and her grandfather, Kate/Penn and Logos members). In other words, relationships require effort—a tightening of the knot—if we don’t want them to come undone.

Regarding plot, I also realized last year that I wanted this to be a three-book series (why walk when you can run, right? Or is it: why not try to sprint in the Olympics before

you have learned how to walk 400 meters on a track?) I outlined books two and three. The short summary is: book one addresses Kate and Penn's reunion, ending with their physical and emotional separation; book two addresses the complexity of deep relationship, and reunites them after both are humbled by loss and separate experiences of failure, Kate with her grandfather and trying to 'train' herself to use her Influence in solitude in North Dakota, Penn with his internship and a burgeoning relationship with the Concordis CEO; book three brings them together, coming into their own as adults along with their other relationships, against the longstanding 'evils' of the book, namely Concordis, for a resolution.

My challenge with this has been concluding book one so the reader has some satisfaction of closure, while still maintaining cliffhangers and uncertainty. I really don't see a way to condense all three into one book without it being monstrous, but I am open to debate.

Most of my textual influences for this thesis have affected it in three areas: themes, content, and scope. *The Brothers K* by David James Duncan showed me how rich a novel can be when its scope is limited more or less to one family, yet ambitious in that it follows that family through the characters' lifetimes. I loved the way Duncan used one of the brothers, its first-person narrator, to explore the other characters, and wanted to do this twofold with Kate and Penn, with an added layer of discovering family secrets as they build out their literal family and a family of friends. Like Duncan's narrator, I also want Kate and Penn's chapters to color the other characters in the book in different ways, particularly Sean and Doris, for a picture that's only full for the reader by taking both perspectives together. Expanding on this idea of a fully characterized narrator, I hope

Kate and Penn characterize each other by looking at one another—experiencing each other one way, at times with love and at times in frustration, while at the same time seeing themselves differently than their sibling sees them. So a reader ideally learns about Kate, for example, both from her own close-third-person chapters as well as from Penn's observations about her in his.

Ambition is proving to be a 'theme' in my process as well as the thesis itself—another text that inspired me to indulge the childhood memory, experiences, and an almost 'obsession' with parents of Kate and Penn was Proust's *Swann's Way*. Kate and Penn's parents are central to them—their reclamation of that relationship, even in memory, is a key motivator in the decisions they make and how they prioritize things in their lives. Their preoccupations with parents, particularly their emotional ties to the past through their mother, is similar to Marcel's preoccupation with his mother and the way in which she is central to his childhood and his fears. Kate and Penn's mother is ultimately the one who possesses Influence, and I envision this as something Proust would understand well; the mother literally possesses a power that the other parent, the father, does not, and the children are aware of it.

Penn is also impatient with memories of his mother in a way Marcel is not, though, and all the same is prompted to think about her when he thinks about school and literature. Penn's career ambitions are in many ways an effort to follow in his father's footsteps. While there are moments where Kate misses her mother, often surprised by it when she does, she is motivated by a desire to reconnect with and establish family in her pursuit of friendship, the relationship with Penn, and, when she learns of him toward the end of the book, their grandfather.

Another thematic/content focus of the story is sibling relationship, its fraught nature and its power. Steinbeck's *East of Eden* was inspiring in this as an example of the consequences of a sibling relationship 'gone bad'. Adam and Caleb alternate between reconciliation and conflict to the extent that we aren't usually confident about how things will play out, though they ultimately sour. *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson was a case study of a 'broken' family where the sibling relationship is foundational to the characters' lives and survival—the girls rely on each other in the absence of their mother and are regularly go on adventures together even when those adventures are dangerous. I see Penn's and Kate's journeys into the arboretum as similar to the girls' trips down to the lake, or the times they play in the woods. I wanted the arboretum to be beautiful, but also dark and dangerous, as the lake is. The landscapes in *Housekeeping* are also similar to my thesis—nature, big sky, open fields. Robinson encouraged me to write about my favorite landscapes and linger in them. I see the fields and seasons of the Midwest as part of the heart and soul of this whole story, and so I spent time describing them in detail.

I'd love to get Clara and Kate's relationship, which has been a significant challenge for me, to a place where it mimics the specific, ongoing tensions in the sisters' relationships with their aunt and mother in *Housekeeping*. Robinson characterizes them all fully, often in moments of 'microtension' that occur because they are living in a shared space. In a future revision, I'd like to incorporate tinier moments of household tension between Kate and Clara, more explicitly mimicking things that could happen in a household to reflect the character's emotional state, or level of conflict. For example, in *Housekeeping* there is a scene where the house floods and they have to live on the second floor. I might have something more drastic happen like this, because it would bring action

into the opening section (which is, I think, a little slow) and give Kate and Clara an event to respond to together—an informative moment for the reader. I could also stay a little longer in moments that are already in the manuscript—like Kate’s brief recollection of when field mice overtake the house once the combines start harvesting in fall.

Regarding Duncan, Proust, Steinbeck and Robinson: Because I find I am always most interested by human relationships in a novel—platonic, familial, friendly, collegial, romantic, or otherwise—I naturally gravitate toward these books and have found them invaluable as I try to write one of my own.

For voice, Chris McCormick’s *Desert Boys* gave me ‘permission’ to try out a modern voice that is younger and more colloquial than what I would usually do. McCormick’s narrator is unapologetically young, honest, and, at times, insecure. This is akin to Kate and Penn—they’re young adults trying to find relationship, connection, and themselves in the midst of feeling untethered without a family history or confident in their social skills.

A challenge in this has been that I am writing about a sister and brother when I am not a male, and do not have any biological brothers (though I did gain four brothers-in-law by getting married). Justin Torres’ *We the Animals* was influential not only for its at times melodic prose, but in its careful scenes depicting boys and family life. After reading Torres, I paid more attention to my scene choices and realized I had previously made those decisions without much intentionality—I am now much more careful about the ‘why’ behind my scenes. Initially I had an entire chapter around Kate buying a car, for example, but then realized the purpose of that scene really didn’t need an entire chapter. Instead I could distill that to one moment (several pages) in a chapter, and use

the rest of the space for other things. Torres also made me think more poetically about imagery; his chapter, “Talk to Me”, for example, in which two brothers rehearse an imaginary phone call between their mom and dad, has stayed with me since I read it in part because it is a literal picture of failed communication and child innocence, a perfect collision of two of his recurring themes.

One of my biggest challenge in this process has been plot. I plan to read *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro (at Papatya’s recommendation) as a study in how to reveal secrets and important information. In my first draft I was guilty of withholding information from the reader, thinking that this would create suspense. I now realize that it’s not coy, it’s generally annoying; it’s usually much more interesting to reveal information and let your reader navigate the complexities of its consequences alongside your characters. So in my second draft, I moved almost all the revelations earlier in the draft, and have the characters acknowledge what they know more literally.

I also interview people who have similar knowledge to my characters as I write; as an example, I interviewed a family friend who grew up on an Illinois corn farm in order to write Clara and Kate’s life in Churdan more accurately (he’s the person who told me that in harvesting season mice infiltrate everyone’s homes because as combines evict mice from the fields. I research a lot online; I watched YouTube videos about an elementary school in Churdan, Iowa, for example, and far too many videos about augers and combines and corn farming. Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* gave me the location of Churdan in the first place (one of the farmers he interviews lives and farms there), as well as a lot of the information about corn farming and agriculture that

contribute to Will and Kate's knowledge, and fuels Doris' activist environmentalist positions.

Rebecca Makkai's short story collection *Music for Wartime* was one of the first times I read such a broad short story collection in regard to its variety of topics; she writes about immigrants, music, reality television, a love affair with a resurrected Bach—she is a generalist in the best way possible, and in a way I 'saw' myself in her writing style and content, her refusal to limit herself. The collection made me more confident in writing about a wide range of topics for characters' interests—Sean's cares most about soccer and professional sports, Penn's interests are business and self-sufficiency, Doris is a journalist with strong sociocultural opinions, and Kate values botany, agriculture, and restoring relationships. I would eventually like to develop all the characters further so that they stand even more alone in their interests, nuances, and intel. I want each to be knowledgeable and what interests them, and ideally that will require me to research even further. I appreciate books that I learn from not only for their craft, but from the content they talk about. Similarly, Lauren Groff's *Fates and Furies* did this ambitiously in its focus on the theater world, and even in smaller, quirky things like how Lotto's mother is an underwater mermaid performer at a bar in northern Florida. The tiniest details like that can stick with me long after I finish a book (as happened with *Fates*...). I hope to incorporate colorful details like this throughout my manuscript.

For media, I am often inspired by reading the news regularly. I think I tend to see everything as related to this book whenever I'm working on it, which is at times its downfall; I try to incorporate every topic of human existence into the book instead of making decisions about what to include, and sticking with them. Regardless, the

Hjelmgaard article, “Dormant Swiss Bank Account Names Published”, in *USA Today* inspired me to think about the sense of mystery that pervades our everyday lives, the secrets that we might come into or discover at any moment, and particularly through the unpredictable, ‘reveal’ nature of news (what would it be like to be someone who found out a distant relative had a Swiss bank account you didn’t know about and suddenly you came into an inheritance?). This nature of news, and a revelatory discovery (specifically about one’s identity, inheritance, power, or resources) is central to Kate and Penn’s story about who they are and what they’re capable of.

Relatedly, the DeHaven article, “Unidentified Buyer Paid \$140 Million for *Las Vegas Review-Journal*,” was a little blip of excitement in our PR firm at the time, because it took a few days for the buyer to reveal themselves and journalists were up in arms about not knowing who owned the outlet. Since media itself is obviously influential, the truth that much of it is controlled by only a handful of conglomerates is something that bewildered me as an undergraduate communications student and something I think every citizen should be aware of. My thesis was a way for me to explore some of these realities and their theoretical implications and ideally encourage readers to think about those things as well; I’m regularly surprised by how many people consume one or two forms of media (if any) without critically comparing and contrasting news, nor intentionally reading positions or viewpoints that differ from their own. So the Logos group is intended as a ‘watchdog for the watchdogs’ by monitoring media, similar to a group that began in my undergraduate time in Communications, but its members fall into oversimplification and ignorance at times; Penn, for example, recognizes that for-profit business isn’t all bad, though at times to the point of blind, misplaced trust, while Doris is

quick to demonize Concordis and point fingers without recognizing the nuance of an organization, its people, or other factors at play. Both are right at times throughout the book, but they also frequently make the mistake of thinking they know everything, which creates conflict between them and hampers their quest for justice and, in the case of Penn, literally reduces his power. Much of Penn and Doris' relationship, as with Kate and Doris and Kate and Penn, is about negotiating conflict and debate without writing people off, or failing to widen one's perspective.

The media aspect of the book has been a fraught process for me; I feel passionately 'against' sensationalist, entertainment-first journalism, and 'for' the hard, thankless work of responsible journalism. At the same time, I recognize the history of the press has always involved different types of reporting; the penny press brought news to the lower classes and found the best sales resulted from high drama stories about crime and scandal. Today, tabloids are one extreme example of sensationalist reporting, and we are also dealing with the realities of fake news and people who literally invent stories to profit off the SEO and Internet traffic of those who read it. On the other hand, during my time in PR I had multiple conversations with prominent journalists, all of whom spoke of the difficulties they faced with job security, low readership, and production expectations. One, for example, used to produce one to two articles per week at the beginning of her career, sometimes with the help of several investigative journalists. As of 2015, she was expected to produce 2-3 stories per day, as well as videos, and cultivate a sizable social media following. This was all well and good for me, since it meant more journalists were desperate for content and more eager to consult a PR person for story ideas, but at its worst it yields poor journalism and shallow reporting. As I know personally, good writing

takes time. Yet media needs a sizable audience to keep the lights on; they are under legitimate stress to produce good journalism that's also 'enjoyable' to watch in some way, in an era of fewer and perhaps disinterested readers.

This idea of media playing a 'good guy/bad guy' role in the book, and driving a lot of the fear culture throughout it, was something I wanted to do way back in college in its earliest drafts. Yet Trump's presidency made me much more hesitant to talk about media being sensationalist; it feels dangerously close to agreeing with the ludicrous things he says about media being untrustworthy, bar none. Depending on the day, I want to pull that entire plotline out of the book and choose someone or something else as its central antagonist. I'm not sure whether I will or not, but I'm leaning toward excising it. I think I may be able to come up with another, better antagonistic force for Kate and Penn without attributing that force to a literal industry. Or, other antagonistic forces already in the book—such as the information Kate and Penn don't know about their siblinghood and past, their self doubt, or more ground-level, character-specific experiences of fear (versus the 'fear institution' of Concordis)—might be enough to go on if I develop them further.

Most impactful in my overall process, though, was that last fall I had the belated epiphany that there is not 'one right decision' for every single aspect of my novel. This is not my oeuvre, it's a learning experience; I have to make decisions over and over again, committing to them in order to move on to the next decision. If I 'mess up', which I did many times and will many times in the future, I won't die, I can laugh at it, perhaps cry it out, then change it in a revision. Last fall I committed to the long game, and the resolution that this story would not be perfect at the end of year three, but I would try to

get it as close as possible and follow it through, and will follow it through long after graduation.

I finished my first draft in fall 2017. Papatya generously read my thesis during the Hurricane Irma ‘break’ and provided feedback. I then incorporated that with a revision of my novel outline and began revising from the beginning. I had also received feedback from Betsy Lerner during her visit that she loved Penn’s chapters because she’d never read a male character like him, but hated Kate’s (which was the exact inverse of other feedback I’d gotten). I had to step away from my draft for a bit, then try to make clear-headed decisions based on the reality of the characters as they read on the page, and not from the fuzzy affections I had for them from ‘knowing’ them for seven years as amorphous souls residing in my imagination. I had to trust my own decision making, incorporating or dismissing feedback as I chose. I continue to schedule my life around my writing time in the mornings, trying to secure as many 4-hour writing blocks as I can in a given week. When I can, I travel somewhere and only write and read; I think much more clearly and find it so much easier to give myself ‘permission’ to write and ignore people. In December, for example, I traveled with Kathleen to a cheap Airbnb cabin on a cattle farm in Ocala, where we didn’t speak until the afternoons and separately worked on our thesis projects, gave each other feedback after our writing sessions, and exchanged poetry and prose. It was Kathleen who recommended the essay collection *Limber*, by Angela Pelster, which became a valuable source for Kate’s affinity for trees and botany, things like the enchanting fact that some trees communicate through underground root systems, which is an appropriate echo of the book’s plotline around ‘underground’ efforts

to connect and communicate, as well befitting of Kate's interests and, in my opinion, a fun fact to learn as a reader.

I also listened to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* during my solo ride to Ocala and back for its extreme focus on character interiority, emotionality, and human relationships. Woolf encouraged me to think more intensely about Kate's point of view and the way she might see the world unfolding around her, specifically in naturalist terms and imagery. It also inspired me to attempt the dramatic imagery and comparisons I enjoy, even if I fall flat on my face in a heap of melodrama. For example, Woolf describes one character's thought life with, "All of [these thoughts] danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvelously controlled in an invisible elastic net" (25). This artistic description is fitting for the character described, who is an artist, but also revealed the dynamics of thought to me in a new and creative way. In the same way I hope that there are moments where my close-third-person character reflections and observations both characterize the person involved in that scene and instill beauty in the reader.

Overall, the revision process continues to involve: periodic updates of my novel outline; revising one chapter at a time with the outline open alongside my manuscript for reference (otherwise I'm not good at staying on-plot, I will write my way down a black hole of description, with an excess of adverbs); occasional workshops (in school or outside of it) or having readers provide feedback on chapters when I can no longer get a sense of how they're landing, or want to see if something is coming through or not; and more strategic revisions where I will remove big sections of text, merge chapters, or 'rewrite' a chapter from scratch. After my second round of the draft, I am focused on the

middle section of the book and overhauling it so it is shorter, more effective in what it aims to achieve, and still works cohesively with the beginning and end of the story. I have been doing all these revision activities intensively since fall 2017, and will continue to, ideally until I finish the books and people really enjoy them.

Why I Write

I write because it's fun, challenging, scares me, and I love doing it. Often I write about something that I am trying to figure out, or if I want to try to contain the magic of some experience or imaginative idea, like catching a firefly.

There's a famous writer (I forget who) who said that if she doesn't write regularly then she starts to get crabby—so much so that her family will notice, banish her to her office, and then let her come out once her mood has improved. I have found this to be true for me. Even if I'm enjoying other art forms (painting, music) and living a relatively healthy life of self expression (friends, exercise, adventure, travel, whatever), I will get morose and frustrated in a way that only dispels by my putting pen to paper or typing in Microsoft Word. Sometimes my mood improves just by writing a thank you note, but eventually I also have to attempt something more literary, specifically fiction.

Honestly, I really don't identify with people who say writing isn't enjoyable. Hard and challenging? Yes. Unenjoyable? No. I think if it's unenjoyable then perspective is lost, or something about the process is out of balance. I have done things that are unenjoyable and writing is definitely not one of them. I believe it is one of the greatest privileges, to read and to write, and probably one of my favorite things on this earth.

Lately I am wondering about my responsibilities as a writer, and if I should write with a greater sense of mission beyond an intuitive feeling that this is what I am best at

and most enjoy. There is a lot wrong with the world; I have heard writers and theorists argue that writing changes the world, or conversely that it can only reflect the world in which it exists. Traditionally, I have tried to address ‘wrongs’ of the world through actions apart from my writing (volunteering, giving money and time, teaching, editing cover letters and resumes or assignments—especially for those who don’t have access to education in the way I have, staying informed and spreading news about important things). My readership at *Guernica* has been a privilege because I often love the work they publish and how political it is, particularly in regard to ‘unheard’ voices, refugees, and international issues. Moving to Chicago and then South Florida has made me increasingly aware of my almost ridiculous privilege as a white, upper-middleclass U.S. citizen with good health, extensive education, and a network of supportive family and friends. I am not sure I can just keep writing about only what interests me and be fulfilling my ‘responsibilities’ of privilege, so to speak, so I have been exploring what other forms this might take. I don’t know what the best thing for me would be to do in this regard, but I have thought about a lot of options: trying to write (responsibly) outside my experience more often, ‘getting out of the way’ for other writers (Prof. Furman has encouraged me that this is probably not it, and it does sound pretty ridiculous now that I’m writing it), focusing more on a career in PR, editorial, or publishing in order to publicize other writers, being bi-vocational as a writer and some other teaching or editorial profession, continuing to be an ‘activist’ outside of my writing and trusting that these experiences will infuse themselves in my work in some way or another, strategically forcing myself to write about topics of sociopolitical importance, teaching at

specific community colleges or other institutions that uphold values I esteem, reading more writers who write from outside my own experience, etc.

I write to learn about new topics through research, I write to connect with human experience and myself. I write to encourage others—particularly young people—in the same way that the stories I read as a girl encouraged me to be confident, adventurous, and bold. I also write for reclamation—to spread the beauty of someone lost (as in the case of the character of Sean, who is based on one of my close friends who passed away), or transfer the hope of a particular experience to someone who won't otherwise see or experience it. I write because I believe story is central to the human experience, and because I think it is what I am meant to do.

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