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## O is for Olive

Anna Rose Kornfeld  
*Bard College*

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O is for Olive

Senior Project Submitted to  
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by  
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# 1.

I got the call at 4:48 in the morning, when the sky is at its most beautiful. My dad had to tell me because my mom couldn't bring herself to get on the phone. My brother had killed himself; chased a bottle of painkillers with a handle of cheap vodka, and then he was gone. Simple and stupid as that.

I don't remember much of what else my father said before I hung up, except that it was a girl who found him. Someone named Mandy. That meant nothing to me. I poured myself a bowl of Cheerios and added peanut butter and jelly to it, like I always do. That was something that Scott used to make fun of me for. He was gone now.

Maybe I would fall asleep and wake up, and none of this would real. Maybe I would call Scott and tell him about my crazy dream and he would laugh and I would laugh and then I would hang up and call him again in a couple of months. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd spoken to him. I stared at my Cheerios. My Cheerios stared back at me.

My phone rang again at 5:19. This time it was Jack.

"Olivia."

"Jack."

"Dad called you, I assume." He was always so harsh, so formal.

"He did."

"How are you?" He kept his cold tone.

"How are *you*?" I didn't even want to know.



I got up and poured the cereal into the toilet. It looked like vomit. I turned on the shower and closed the door.

“I’m not that surprised, if you want the truth,” he said.

I sat on the floor, and leaned against the wall. I listened to the water pour from the showerhead. The room started to get muggy, the mirror fogging up.

“Are you?” he asked.

“Why did you call me?”

“You’re my sister.”

*Only by blood.*

I didn’t answer, but undressed instead. The tiles on the floor were cold against my naked body.

“Are you there?” he asked.

I lay down on the floor because it felt good on my back, but it was probably dirty. I hadn’t ever cleaned the bathroom, but that’s not to say that Ashton never had.

“I’m here,” I said.

“Talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to say.” And there wasn’t.

“We’re siblings, Olivia.” Jack paused. “We should talk about this.”

I was tired, sore, annoyed. I didn’t want to talk to Jack. I wanted to curl up in a ball in the shower and close my eyes. I wanted to shut them so hard that those shapes start to appear, and when I open them again it’s blurry for a minute.

“Jack, I think I need to go back to bed,” I said.

“Dad said he would tell us when the services will be held. You’ll be there, right?”

What kind of person did Jack think I was? That I wouldn't show up to my own brother's fucking funeral?

"Mhm."

"Maybe he didn't mean to die, you know?" he said.

"What do you mean?" The room was hot, and moist.

"Maybe he was just trying to get fucked up. He always did stuff like that." After a second he added, "There was no note."

"Either way," I said.

Jack sighed on the other line. He was always sighing, and I hated it.

"Either way," he repeated.

"I have to go."

He took a while to answer. "I'll see you soon, Olivia."

I hung up, and lay on the floor for another ten minutes before I actually got into the shower. I sat down in the bathtub while the water poured onto me. I wasn't going to shave, or wash my body, or my hair. I just needed to be in the shower right then. I hugged my knees to my chest and thought that I was going to cry, but I didn't.

I fell asleep for a little bit in the tub, and when I woke up I turned off the shower and wrapped a towel around me. I headed into the bedroom and got into the bed. Ashton felt me moving around next to him, sleepily cuddled up next to me and gave me a groggy kiss on the shoulder.

"Scott killed himself last night," I said calmly, my back to him.

"What? What?" His eyes still weren't fully open. "Scott?"

Isn't that what I just said?

He held me, but he was sweaty, and his dick was hard against my side, and I didn't want him touching me at all.

“Are you okay?”

I felt like I was suffocating, and someone had put a plastic bag over my head and they were pulling it tighter and tighter against my face.

“Olivia. Olivia, talk to me.”

His voice sounded as if he was speaking through water, and the bag was so tight around my neck that breathing was getting impossible. He shook me, and sounds kept coming out of his mouth, but I couldn't register what words he was saying.

And then I could breathe again, and I could feel and hear Ashton and I needed to sleep. I needed to fucking sleep.

“Olivia. I'm here for you. You know that, right?”

He was hugging me, but it was too tight and I was uncomfortable. I couldn't push him away; it was all too much. I stared at his chest in silence for almost an hour before I fell asleep.

People would always ask if Scott and I were twins. He was only one year older than me, and we were always together. We looked a lot alike. Tall and lanky with light brown hair and big eyes. The two of us were replicas of my father, whereas Jack resembled the intense beauty of my mother.

He had always been more attractive than us, with his dark features and strong jawline. Shorter, but broader, and more built. Jack was ten years older than me. By the time I was eight, he was already moving out of the house and into college. Jack was

always a temporary part of my life, only around on breaks from school, and then holidays once he graduated. He was someone I saw a couple times a year; more of a presence than a brother. He was too old to understand Scott and me, and found us amusing rather than interesting. We were his kid siblings, and not real people.

He babysat us sometimes, but only if he was promised some type of reward from my mother, who would usually begrudgingly oblige. In Jack's defense, Scott and I were hard to deal with when we were together. We had a lot of energy, and we were loud, always laughing, always chaotic. Scott and I were one entity, rather than two separate people. Growing up, he really was my best friend.

## 2.

I don't know why I did it, but it felt right at the time. When I woke up, Ashton wasn't in the bed, and I was relieved. I assumed he was in his study, reading or working. That was the thing about Ashton, he always had something to do; he was always busy. He worked in *finance*, whatever that means. I never asked. I never cared.

I grabbed a pair of scissors from my side table and made my way to the bathroom. I knew I could get there without Ashton noticing. Our apartment suffocated me. Scott insisted on the Upper East Side, where the rent is expensive, and the spaces are small. The only way I can get anywhere without Ashton noticing is when he is in his study, which is to the left of the bedroom. The kitchen, living room, and bathroom are to the right. There was never any privacy.

I wasn't going to cut that much off; just enough so that I wouldn't recognize myself in the mirror. My hair was down to my elbows. Boring and straight and side-parted. Completely forgettable. But I just kept hacking it off because it felt like it was what I was supposed to do. There was hair on the floor, and Ashton must have heard me because he knocked on the door. When he opened it, he sighed.

“Jesus Christ, Olivia.”

Ashton made me go to a professional salon to fix the failed pixie I gave myself with cheap K-Mart scissors. He paid for it, like he always does when I do anything. He wasn't necessarily throwing how much money he had in my face, but sometimes it felt

that way. Especially when he paid top-dollar for some emaciated woman with white-blond hair and a hip, expensive, haircut to tell me how fucked up mine was.

“Oh, honey, who did this?” she asked me.

She knew who did it, she just wanted to hear me say it. Wanted to make me feel even worse about the monstrosity on the top of my head. She shook her head and snip, snip, snipped.

The subway ride back was very quiet.

“You look cute.”

*Cute.*

I probably mumbled some type of thank you. I may not have said anything at all. I can't remember. Sometimes it's so hard to remember, and yet, sometimes it's too easy.

“Are we going to talk about this?” he asked.

“My haircut?”

“No, Olivia. Not your haircut...your brother...he's...”

Dead. Gone.

I wanted Ashton to say it. I wanted to hear the finality of it in someone else's voice that wasn't mine, or Jack's, or my father's. I wanted Ashton to just say it.

“He's passed on.”

Passed on. Passed on to what exactly?

“He's fucking dead,” I said.

He hugged me and I stared at the grubby, graffiti-covered walls of the subway that were visible through the sad, scratched windows on the train. I still didn't cry, though. It just wasn't time yet.

“I need you to be here tomorrow, okay? Can you do that?”

Scott had only killed himself two days ago, on the first day of October, and already everything was scheduled. The wake was in two days, and the funeral in three. My mother figured it all out, because that is how she is. She is a perfectionist, a robot woman who gets everything done, no matter what.

I could imagine her hearing of Scott’s death, and immediately going to her desk and working on all the arrangements. His body not even cold yet, and she would already have the funeral home, and the coffin, picked out. It would be a tasteful affair because my mother wants everyone to think we are a tasteful family. But her son is dead, and tasteful really isn’t that important.

“Jack is coming up around six tomorrow, with Belle and Laura,” my dad said.

“Okay.”

“I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” I said.

“Olivia.” He sounded tired and worn-down. “I can’t believe it. I wake up and I think it’s not real. He *can’t* be...”

When his voice cracked, that’s when I lost it. That’s when I cried. My father didn’t fully let go; no, he kept it together. But that one crack, the one fissure in his calm and collected façade, and that was enough to send me over the edge.

My father never had many emotions. He was always quiet, calm. A passive presence that wasn’t always detected, but was always missed if it wasn’t there. He was a kind man; there was no mistaking that. But he was also a weak man. An accessory.

Always defending my mother's actions, always calming her down. A nice man, and maybe a sad one, too. But he had good intentions, and that's what I cared about most.

He let me cry. He didn't finish his sentence, because he didn't have to. Ashton came into the bedroom and rubbed my back. Neither him nor my father were talking, and I felt like there was a hole in my body that would always be there no matter what I did. I was not an entire person anymore, and when I realized this, I cried harder. Until I couldn't see anymore, until my eyes were burning. Ashton took my phone and finished the conversation for me.

"I love you," Ashton said quietly into my ear, and it just made me feel even emptier. A big, black hole within me that was swallowing everything up. I wanted it to make me disappear. I just wanted to disappear.



### 3.

I didn't wear any makeup and threw on some jeans and a black t-shirt. I looked like a pre-pubescent boy, but I couldn't bring myself to put on eye shadow or paint a thin black line onto my eyelid. My brother's heart had stopped beating at the age of 27—makeup wasn't a necessity.

I had to drive us to Mahopac because Ashton never learned. He was born and raised in the city, a real Manhattan boy. When we moved in with each other, I wanted to stay in Queens because it was cheaper. But Ashton had money, and he didn't mind helping me out with the rent. He was nice, and cute, and had a job, and he liked me. I agreed to make the move to 118 East 59<sup>th</sup> Street, to an apartment that I didn't love, because I believed that I loved him.

After college, I lived in Queens. Keeping my car was annoying, but not impossible. Of course I mostly took the subway, but whenever I had to go anywhere far I loved getting into my car, rolling down the windows, and driving off. It made me feel free. I was going to sell my car when I made the decision to live with Ashton, but he decided that it might come in handy. He paid monthly for my car to sit in the lot attached to our apartment building. I told him it wasn't necessary, but he insisted. And so I obliged.

The air conditioning was overpowering, and the music was too loud. But I couldn't make my voice work. Driving in the city was always a nightmare, hectic and

scary. Honking horns, asshole drivers, and all of those irritating bike lanes. It's a miracle I didn't kill anyone on the way out.

Ashton tried to make small talk, but it wasn't the time for small talk. He knew that, but he did it anyway. He has always been uncomfortable with silence. I have always been someone who is not.

"I haven't seen your mother in a while," he said as he looked out the window. "It'll be nice to see her again."

Fuck you.

I didn't say it. But I wanted to. My brother killed himself, ended his own life. And yet, somehow Ashton made it about him. Somehow he has inserted himself where he was not needed, not wanted.

I fantasized about getting into the wrong lane and having a head on collision with some random car. Well, it couldn't be too random. I didn't want it to be a car full of kids, or sweet grandparents or something. Maybe someone who was like me. Maybe someone else who wanted to collide with a car at full speed. Maybe someone who wanted to close their eyes and BAM it's done. No Ashton, no funeral, no family. Just nothingness.

"How's Jack?"

Ashton's voice pulled me out of my violent daydream of broken glass and fire, of utter oblivion. I was driving ten miles under the speed limit, freezing my ass off, and I had a headache.

"How would I know that?" I asked.

"Haven't you two talked?"

Ashton and his sister, Liz, don't understand what it's like to have negative feelings for each other. They are always happy, and civil, and fake. I never have the energy to plaster a smile on my face when it comes to Jack.

By the time I was eight, he was out of the house and on to bigger and better things. Jack and Scott were never friends, never got along. He was always too hard on Scott. Scott was everything that Jack wasn't. He was lazy, and outgoing, and he drank too much. Smoked too much, too. Never did his work, never held a steady job, never had a very serious girlfriend. Jack was a prominent insurance lawyer in the greater Connecticut area. He had a beautiful wife, and his high wages allowed him a house in Fairfield and a private school education for his daughter.

But despite Scott's flaws, he was kind, and honest, and taught me things. He made me feel important. But Jack never cut him any slack. No, Scott was always a problem and Jack was the solution. I was constantly the middleman between my two brothers, two overtly different forces that shared a last name.

"He called me the night it happened," I said.

"What did he say?"

"I don't know. He told me he wasn't surprised."

The GPS informed me that we would be at my house in one hour and three minutes. I couldn't take much more of this.

"Are you?" he asked.

"What?"

"Are you surprised?"

“I’ve never seen more life in a person than Scott. I wanted to be just like him,” I said.

“This must be so hard for you,” he said.

“I wish you wouldn’t say things like that,” I said.

Ashton just nodded, as if he understood. The thing was, he would never understand. And he would never really have to understand. Because he never had a Scott that he grew up with. He didn’t have someone who he thought he would be close with for his whole life. He didn’t watch Scott become a shadow of the person he was. He didn’t see Scott disappear. He wasn’t left behind by the one person who he thought would never desert him. He would never understand anything about who I was ever again.

## 4.

Mahopac, New York. Population 8, 369. It was a strange place to grow up, beautiful with all of its trees and lakes, and yet tacky with its overwhelming amount of Guidos, nail salons, and pizza parlors. There was only one middle and high school, so everyone basically grew up together. We all knew each other.

Welcome to Mahopac! Every time I saw that sign I wanted to laugh. Mahopac, such an insignificant and irrelevant place, and yet this sign still welcomed every guest with unwarranted excitement.

Ashton had only been here a couple times, and he doesn't like it. I don't blame him. Whenever I drove down Route 6 and passed the main section of town, I felt emptiness creep in. An emptiness that made me feel like I was still in high school, and that I would always be sixteen and unsure. I ignored Ashton's never-ending voice as we passed through town and found our way slowly, but surely, to my childhood home.

My father answered the door. It was the first time I'd seen him since he called me. He looked weak, tired. He was smiling when he answered the door, which was more than I could do.

When he hugged me, I could feel all of it. Everything he wasn't going to say. I collapsed into him, but I wasn't going to cry. I was too tired from the drive up to exert that kind of energy. We hugged for a long time, Ashton standing awkwardly behind me, still in the doorway.

When I let go, my father immediately shook Ashton's hand, asked how he was. Things of that nature. But I was already walking away, walking through the front room, looking for my mother.

"What did you do to your hair?"

Her voice was shrill, angry.

"You look just like him." Her eyes were red, shiny, and wet.

She was crying. She was always crying. How had she made herself the only victim again? But God she was beautiful, she always was, with sharp features and dark hair. My father called her his raven. Eyes alert, almost black. She always hated how little I cared about my appearance, how I didn't bother with my makeup or hair. I was the only daughter she had and somehow I had failed her. She accused me of being a tomboy when I was growing up, the term coming out of her mouth like poison. I wasn't a pageant queen, or the Homecoming Queen. I was plain, and it killed her.

"You look..." She was shaking. "Why would you do that?" I didn't answer.

"Why did you do that?" Her voice was raised this time, tears spilling out of her eyes and down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry." That was what I always said to my mother when she got upset, even if I wasn't. It was always easier that way.

Ashton was suddenly at my side, and my dad at my mom's.

"Hannah...Hannah, shh," my father calmed her.

But she was staring at me with such pain; her face was distorted with it. No matter what I did, she was always mad. No matter what else was going on in either of our lives,

she could always pinpoint something I'd done, and act as if it were a personal attack against her.

"She looks exactly like Scott," she whispered, her eyes still directly on mine.

"Exactly like Scott."

"Mom," I said.

"Olivia." Ashton gripped my shoulder too tight. "Let's go upstairs. Unpack. Come down later."

He was right. Ashton was always right, wasn't he? The way they were all looking at me, like I was some major fuckup. It was enough to make me think that maybe I was the one that should have died. Maybe me instead of Scott. Like a child who'd gotten in trouble, I stomped up to my room and sat on my bed.

Ashton came in and climbed into bed with me. I could smell him and knew he was hugging me, with my face in his chest. He was kissing my head, but I couldn't even feel it. I was too busy feeling so much and so little at the same time that I didn't know what was happening.

"It's going to be okay, Olivia. You know that, right?"

"You don't understand my mother," was all I said. She would hold this against me until she found something else to hate me for.

"Let's lay down," he said.

I did what he said and somehow, amid the silence and the painful hollowness inside of me, I fell asleep. I slept so deeply that when I woke up I didn't know where I was for a minute. Ashton wasn't by my side anymore. I got up, looked in the mirror, and wished I hadn't.

I was scared to go downstairs. I didn't want to see my mother yet. I found myself in Scott's old room, which was connected to mine through a bathroom. The bathroom was clean, but it had never been like that when I was younger. Used by both Scott and me, that bathroom was always a disaster.

When we were in high school and we came home messed up from some party, we would sit in the empty bathtub and talk, until one of us started falling asleep, or we heard one of our parents moving around downstairs. I resisted the urge to sit in the tub because I knew it wouldn't feel right. It would almost be disrespectful to do it without Scott .

His room was immaculate, which was never how it was when he inhabited it. It had always reeked of a mix of cigarettes, weed, and the deodorant he wore. It didn't smell like him anymore, but instead like the sickly, artificial scent of air freshener. All the furniture was there, but it hadn't been touched in years. That much was obvious. Books still lined the shelves and I was sure that if I went through his desk I would find more of his old stuff. That was for another day.

I walked slowly to his bed. It was made. He never made his bed. I ran my hands along his comforter. I lay down on the pillow and closed my eyes. I wanted the bed to remind me of him, to smell like him. Something. But it had been void of Scott for so long that there was nothing left.

"Dad said you would be upstairs."

I didn't need to open my eyes to know it was Jack.

"I didn't expect to find you in here," he said.

"Do you remember it? Back when it was Scott's?"

"It was gross," he replied.



I smiled. "It was so gross."

"He always had so much crap in here." Jack was still standing awkwardly in the doorway. "Sometimes you couldn't even see the floor."

"When did you get here?" I asked.

"Half an hour ago."

I nodded and sat up. "What time is it?"

"A little past six," Jack said.

I had slept for over four hours.

"This doesn't feel real," I said.

"What doesn't?"

I got up off the bed and walked closer to Jack.

"This room," I said. Jack's face didn't change. "Any of it. We're going to our brother's wake tomorrow." He wouldn't look at me as I spoke to him.

"Belle and Laura are downstairs." He turned to leave. "Are you coming down?"

"I don't know if I should. Mom is...being Mom. She's really upset with me."

"You do look like him." He put his hands on my shoulders. "You always have. It's crazy."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Jack put his arms back at his side. "You act like I won't miss him," he said.

"Will you?"

I wanted to know what he was thinking, to shake him, and force him to be honest with me. To stop being so quiet, and calculated, and perfect. To be a person, instead of being *Jack*.

“He’s been gone for a while, Olivia. But he’s my brother. I won’t forget that.”

Yes, he will. He will grieve for the amount of time that is acceptable, and then he will go on with his family and the life that he has created for himself. He will forget about the family that he was forced to be a part of. He will forget about me.

“Come on. Laura wants to see you.”

Laura was pretty in the way that blonde girls with perfect noses are. Blue eyes and pink stained lips. Short, and thin, with an athletic build and an allover tan that made her look unreal.

She gave me the cordial hug and kiss on the cheek when I descended the stairs with Jack. She smiled, whitened teeth bared and straight. She probably meant well, but she was the type of girl that I have always hated, that I will always hate. The type of girl who marry men like Jack.

She was sitting on the couch, with Belle and Ashton. My father was in the leather chair, and my mother nowhere to be seen.

Belle was four years old, and she was a gorgeous child. She was a perfect blend of both her parents, with Jack’s dark hair and Laura’s light eyes. She was small for her age, and she was quiet.

“Hey, Belle,” I said, kneeling down next to her.

“Hi.” She had that little kid voice that was high and raspy at the same time. I couldn’t believe that I had ever been that tiny. I wanted to hold her hands, to remember how mine used to look like that. Had Jack and Scott’s hands once been that small?

I looked at Jack. Had he ever even been a child? I never saw it. He was grown before I knew how to say his name. Apparently, he was excited when I was born—at

least, that's what my mom tells me when she's feeling sentimental. He would want to hold me all the time, carry me around, and push me in my stroller. I don't remember that, but sometimes I wish I could.

"Sorry she's not being very friendly. She's tired from the drive up," Jack told me.

Belle was leaning on her mother, a stuffed monkey in her hands. It looked worn out and dirty, yet she still held it.

"That's her favorite toy," Laura said, following my gaze.

"Cute monkey."

"It's an orangutan," Belle corrected me, not looking up from it. "And his name is Mark."

Even a small child had the ability to make me feel stupid. She was definitely Jack's. Ashton's laugh grated against my ears.

"Smart girl," was all I said.

Ashton and I shared the twin bed in my room. We barely fit, and it was getting too warm. Neither of us could fall asleep, but we weren't talking, either. I slowly undressed, and he followed suit. I closed my eyes as our hands and mouths found different parts of each other's bodies. His breath was minty, his hair soft. And he was sweating, panting, grabbing me.

When it was done, I knew I didn't love him. And I knew I hadn't for a long time. I didn't love Ashton, and my brother was dead, and I had never felt so empty in my entire life.

After Ashton fell asleep, I got into the shower. The water poured down on me, and I scrubbed my body. I tried to wash everything off of me—Ashton, the way my mother looked at me, the past two days. I just wanted to be clean. But I couldn't get it off, no matter how long and hard I scrubbed. Everything was still there.

# 5.

The alarm clock went off at eight a.m., but I had already been up for two hours. Ashton grunted and hit the snooze button. Today was the day of the wake.

I went downstairs to get coffee. My mother was there, her hair neatly blow-dried, her makeup beautifully done. No matter what, she always looked great. Foundation effortlessly applied, lipstick the perfect shade for her skin tone. She was sitting at the dining room table, a mug in front of her. I sat down next to her.

“You aren’t ready yet.”

“No one is ready but you,” I told her softly.

“I couldn’t sleep last night.”

“Me neither,” I said.

She stayed seated. She didn’t attempt to hug or hold me because she took what happened to Scott as *her* pain, and no one else’s. I wasn’t allowed to be upset, that was her job.

“I’m sorry I cut my hair.”

She took a sip from her mug. “You look so much like him.” She wouldn’t look at me. I wished she would just look at me. “My son is gone.”

“Mom...”

“He grew in me, Olivia. I was there for his entire life. He was a *part* of me.” She pointed to her stomach. “Lived in me for nine and a half months. He always was late, wasn’t he?” She let out a dry laugh. “And now this baby that I helped to make, and

raised, and ...this baby became a man and he is dead, Olivia. He is dead because he killed himself.” She closed her eyes.

I put my hand on hers, but she removed it and stood up. She walked to the kitchen window and stared out of it. She was always pushing me away from her. Turning me down, ignoring me.

“Mom,” I said.

But she didn’t turn around, and I didn’t really expect her to, anyway.

“You should get ready, Olivia.”

“Mom...he wasn’t healthy.” I stared at my nails, which had been bitten into stubs. “Maybe now he’s finally okay.”

“It’s over,” she whispered. “It’s over.” She turned back to me. “When I think of him, I think of him in second grade. When both of his front teeth had fallen out...and he had that horrible bowl cut that your dad gave him. You two were inseparable. You were always going outside and turning over rocks, remember?”

I nodded.

“You would find all those worms together. You guys would stay out there for hours. I still have that picture of Scott, holding a slug in his hand. And he’s smiling, but he doesn’t have his front teeth. Do you know what picture I’m talking about?”

I did. It was in a frame on the desk in my parent’s room, along with other pictures from various points in all of our lives. There was my high school senior picture, where I didn’t even look like myself because my mom had insisted on doing my makeup. Jack graduating college. Scott playing the clarinet at some school concert.. Jack and Laura on their wedding day. Family vacations. Belle’s baby picture.

“I miss him,” she said as she placed her mug down on the counter. “I miss him back when he that age, back when he knew what it meant to be happy.” I didn’t know if I believed her, but I wanted to.

“I miss him, too,” I said.

She was still looking out the window as I climbed the stairs back to my room.

Ashton was awake and waiting for me.

“It’s going to be all right,” he told me, as I sat down next to him in bed.

I was glass and I was so close to shattering.

It was an open casket. No one felt the need to tell me that I would be forced to stare at my newly dead brother for however long the wake was going to be. No one thought that that might bother me. Ashton saw him before I did. I knew something was wrong because he squeezed my hand so tight that I pulled away. “Olivia…”

And then I saw Scott and everything felt so wrong that I couldn’t even make a sound. His big eyes were closed, and it didn’t look right. He was too thin, and shoved into suit that was too big—a suit that he would never wear in the first place. It was probably something my mother had picked out. His hair had gotten so long; it was past his ears. He didn’t look dead. He looked like he was just taking a nap, and would wake up soon and sit next to me. But I knew that wouldn’t happen. His hands were clasped together, his nails cleaned and shiny. Whatever they had done to him was so completely immoral, that I had to turn away. This was not Scott. This was not my brother.

Ashton brought me to the string of chairs that were meant for the deceased's immediate family. Ashton, Belle, and Laura sat behind us, where we were joined by my aunt and two uncles a little later.

The funeral home was decorated nicely, at least. Pictures of Scott were placed on all available surfaces. I was in so many of them. I had to stop looking.

"You were always together," Uncle Brad said to me quietly, right after he had paid his respects to Scott's corpse.

"Do you want to go up?" Ashton asked me. He was directly behind me, his hand on the back of my shoulder. It was still pretty early, and those who weren't directly related to Scott would be showing up in the next half hour or so.

"I need some air." I bolted out of my chair, and ignored Jack as he called my name.

"She'll be back, she'll be back," Ashton assured him.

Once outside, I walked about fifteen feet from the door and sat on the sidewalk. The last time I had been at this funeral home was the summer before my junior year of college. Morgan Farelli had died; she had an aneurism one morning while she was eating breakfast. Scott and I had come to pay our respects.

Scott was never one to get emotional, but he and Morgan were the same age. He'd even dated her for a couple months back in high school. I went with him because I didn't think it was something he should have to do alone. And now at his wake, I'm alone.

He was found in a grungy apartment building in Reading, Pennsylvania. We had no idea who his friends were, or who he knew. It was my mother who made the executive



decision to have the wake back here in Mahopac. I didn't even know who would show up. I hadn't seen Scott in close to a year. None of us had seen him in so long.

Someone called my name, and I looked up. It took me a few seconds to register that I was staring into the eyes of Kyle Manahan. They had always been so green. So light that sometimes I didn't like looking directly into them.

I dated him for three whole years of high school and one semester after I went away to college. He was one of Scott's best friends, which is how we started seeing each other in the first place. The three of us constantly hung out. We'd get high and go to McDonald's late at night. We would sit around in our living room and just talk, or watch TV. Parties and high school homeroom. Pizza and friends, and studying and tests, and it was all ours.

Kyle and I would sit in his car after getting ice cream and sometimes we wouldn't even speak, because we didn't have to. He would hold my hand and tell me he loved me, and I believed it. Because when you're in high school, you think boys are honest and perfect. I thought I was going to marry Kyle. But then I grew up, and so did he. The bitter realization that fantasy is just that, it's not realistic.

He was tall. Six foot, exactly. After we broke up, I still saw him sometimes. On breaks from school when it was late and we were lonely. Two familiar bodies finding each other in the dark, only to realize that it was mostly a dream once the light was turned back on. Two years ago I ran into him in Manhattan on my lunch break and we got food at a mediocre café. But other than that, I hadn't seen him, hadn't spoken to him.

"I'm so sorry...I...Oh, God ...I'm so sorry."

He actually sat down next to me, and put his arms around me. I was fifteen again, and he was sixteen, hugging me because I'd done badly on a science test, or had a fight with my mom, or just felt sad. Only this time I was twenty-six and Scott had killed himself, his body on display for whoever wanted to see it. I let myself go limp as he enveloped me, and I smelled him. He smelled like he always had; crisp detergent mixed with fresh grass.

"Your dad called me...I..." He was still hugging me, talking into my neck, his voice deep and sincere. "Jesus Christ. I hadn't...I hadn't seen him in so long, Olive."

*Olive.* Only Scott and Kyle called me that. Scott started it. He couldn't pronounce Olivia when he was little, and so Olive I became. And I hated it at first, I hated that I was nicknamed after a food I didn't even like. But it grew on me, and it made me feel closer to him, sealed our fate as best friends. Since Kyle was so close to Scott, he only knew me as Olive, even before we formally met. No one had called me Olive in such a long time. I wished I could be Olive forever.

Kyle still lived in the area, which was one of the reasons we broke up. He was never going to get out of here. Something about that made me want to scream. Being content staying somewhere you've always been has never made any sense to me.

I remember when we broke up. It was the only time I'd ever seen Kyle Manahan cry, and I was the reason he was doing it. I didn't know if I should be rewarded with some type of medal, or be deemed a heartless bitch for the rest of my life. I loved Kyle, in a way that requires a level of innocence to understand. I haven't felt the way I did about him with anybody else. I don't know if it was really because of him, or because of the magical, all-encompassing passion that a high school romance usually became. The way

it sweeps you off your feet at first, the way you really think it's forever. Because I'd found someone in the hellhole that was Mahopac High School, and it was the first time someone really understood me. Young love is the purest of all.

And then, just like that, it expires. You're away, and he's taking classes at the community college thirty-three minutes from your house, and something about that isn't okay. No, something about that makes you drive home one weekend and tell him you can't do it anymore. Because you got away, you're growing, you're a real person now. And he is something you've left behind, that will always be left behind. Because high school is over, and so is whatever was left of the two of you.

"Is everyone inside?"

I nodded into his chest.

"Should we go in?" he asked.

"Not yet." I was so quiet that I was surprised he heard me.

For a while we sat there, with me curled into him. Neither of us spoke because neither of us had anything to say. It was Jack who finally came to get us.

"Kyle," he said. "How are you, man?"

Kyle got up and gave Jack a strong handshake, something that I was never able to produce.

"How are you?" Kyle asked. And he wanted to know. Kyle never asked questions he didn't want to know the answers to.

"It's been..." Jack looked at me, still on the ground, leaning against the wall. "It's hard."

I wanted to roll my eyes, to fight him, to light him on fire. *It's hard. Liar. Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.*

“I’m sorry, am I late?”

We all looked at her. She wasn’t pretty, but she *was* sexy, if that makes any sense. Dyed black hair and too much eyeliner. Her lips were big, and the color on them offensively bright. She had some tattoos on her exposed arms, and a couple more on her legs and ankles. She was tacky, with her too-short, too-tight, black dress. I could imagine her picking it out that morning, thinking it was perfect, and tasteful, and *classy*. This woman was not classy. She had a small stone in her nose and earrings going up and down both ears. She looked like someone who would ring you up at a grocery store.

“Your dad told me it started at noon, but there was traffic and everything.” She was looking through her purse as she talked to us, rifling through it loudly. “Are a lot of people here already?” She found what she was looking for. Cigarettes. “You guys want one?”

Kyle and Jack shook their heads, but I gladly took one. She lit hers and then handed me her lighter. Scott used to smoke. He was never really addicted, though. He never really needed one; he just liked the taste. That’s what he used to say, at least. My mom yelled at him whenever his car reeked of tobacco. But then again, she was always yelling at him for something. She was a woman who liked to yell.

Even now, the smell of cigarettes made me think of Scott. Of that first time I ever smoked one. He had taken me to the bike path with his this new, mysterious thing and I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was in ninth grade and he was in tenth. He always had older friends that would buy him cigarettes or booze when he wanted it. Scott

was like that; people always liked him because he was laid back. He didn't give a shit until he needed to.

He told me not to tell our mother. Of course I wouldn't, it was a secret that belonged to me and him and no one else. Why would I let anyone else in on it? I hated the cigarette, and choked through most of it. But Scott was with me, and it was just turning into fall and I could smell it in the air. We sat on a rock and he told me about how he wanted to punch Eric Foxman in the face. I coughed while he laughed at me, and I just wanted him to think I was older, and impressive, and not just his younger sister. I think he understood that. He ended up punching Eric Foxman later that month, and was suspended from school for a week and a half.

I inhaled the smoke and thought of my brother. I exhaled.

"Who are you?" I asked the woman.

"Olivia!" Jack interjected. Is it rude to ask someone that?

"Oh..." She exhaled smoke. "Sorry, I'm Mandy." She took another drag. "I...uh, I found Scott."

So this was the girl who discovered his body. The one who called the cops. This tattooed creature, with the cleavage, and the hair so black it was almost blue.

"In his apartment?" That was Kyle.

"Yeah. We've been friends for a long time."

They were probably fucking. Scott was always fucking some girl somewhere who none of us would ever meet. I picked at my cuticle until I broke the skin.

"We've known each other for a couple years. We bartended together for a while."

I stared at the ends of her hair. I put my finger in my mouth and cleaned it, tasted the blood, hot and metallic against my tongue.

She seemed nervous. “I have no idea how you feel, obviously...but...” She was inhaling so deeply I couldn’t believe she hadn’t started coughing yet.

“What did he look like? When you found him?” I asked.

“That’s not really an appropriate question to ask, is it, Olivia?” Jack said.

Desperation welled inside of me. Words poured out. “Did he look happy? You know...did he look like that was what he needed to do?” My throat was burning. My insides felt like ice. “Please, you can tell me. Tell me how he looked.”

“Olivia, that’s enough!”

Jack grabbed my arm roughly and I accidentally dropped my cigarette. He pulled me away from the group outside and into the lobby of the funeral home.

“What are you doing?” he whispered. “Keep it together. Stay sane, Olivia. First the haircut, now these questions. You’re upsetting people.” He let go of me. “When was Scott ever happy? He killed himself—obviously he didn’t look happy. Besides, that girl out there...she’s trash. It’s embarrassing that she’s the one who found him. And you’re making it worse.” He rubbed his forehead. “Scott always did stuff like this. This Mandy girl is going to rub Mom the wrong way. Even in death he found a way to piss her off.”

“She’s always pissed off.”

He ignored me and walked back into the wake, and I followed behind him, as he knew I would. The blood pounded in my ears while I found my seat next to my mother.

Kyle and Mandy came in a minute after. Jack was next to me, but didn’t say anything else, and I was thankful for that.

“You smell like cigarettes,” Ashton noted.

“Yeah, I smoked one.”

He probably disapproved, and yet also got a sick, twisted bit of enjoyment at the sign of a breakdown. He was a boy who loved broken things, a boy who loved to fix the sad, the weary, the downtrodden. Being reduced to a project made me want to crawl into the coffin with Scott and close my eyes.

*Why did you leave me?* I would ask him. He wouldn't answer.

## 6.

My mother was drunk, filling up her fourth glass of wine. She was allowed to be drunk tonight. Her best friend, Natalie, was sitting next to her on the couch, filling up her glass every time it became empty. My dad and his brother were outside on the back porch, probably drinking, and trying to talk about anything that wasn't Scott.

My dad and his brother Brad barely talked, and lived on opposite sides of the country. Us in New York, and Brad and his family in California. Of course he flew in for Scott's wake and funeral because that was the courteous thing to do, and Brad was a very courteous man. Brad's daughter would be coming up tomorrow for the funeral, but his son wouldn't be able to make it. He was somewhere in China for business. I honestly didn't care. I had seen these people so few times in my life, and they would all be gone just as fast as they came. Really, none of it mattered.

The wake had been quiet. A couple of my dad's friends came and gave him stern hugs and all said something along the lines of "sorry for your loss" to all of us. Natalie had brought her daughter, Eva. Despite the fact that we grew up with each other, and that our mothers were such good friends, we were never really that close. When I saw her, she still looked like a high school student, but her hair was lighter and longer. We barely even waved.

Natalie was still at the house, probably talking to Jack and Laura somewhere, but Eva had since gone. Natalie owned the coffeehouse in town with my mother, and Eva



went back to make sure everything was running smoothly there. I wished everything were running smoothly here.

Later that night, when the house had cleared out, I saw that Ashton was on the phone. So this is where he had disappeared. I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes while he went into the bathroom to finish the call.

“Sorry. Work,” he said, when he joined me on the bed.

“Work.”

“Have you been in contact with Josie?”

Horrible, mousy, Josie. With her black eyes and her gray hair, always bossing me around, always telling me what to do. Horrible, rat-like Josie. My boss. After getting the call about Scott, I had Ashton write her an email from me about a loss in the family, about how I would miss work for a week or so. About how hard this was for me. She sent back some careless response, automated and distant. She didn’t even say sorry.

I took the job because it paid well enough, and it was easy. Filing, taking calls, making appointments. I didn’t everything Josie didn’t want to do. I thought I was an assistant, and she thought I was nothing,

“Ashton, I need you to sit on this bed with me,” I said.

“Okay.” He sat down. “Is something wrong?” he asked after I didn’t say anything.

“Is anything *right*?”

“Let me help you,” he said, putting his hand on my arm.

I shook him off of me. “You can’t help me anymore,” I said into my lap, my voice breaking halfway through my words.

I looked back up at him. Recognition dawned on his face. He knew what I had known for a long time. His sad smile should have broken my heart, and yet I had forgotten how to feel.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

“Don’t make me say it.”

He sighed. “So this is it?” he asked. “I can’t even be mad at you...you’re going through so much right now.”

I *wanted* Ashton to get mad, to yell at me and shake me. I wanted him to curse at me until I was screaming and crying and questioning my self worth. But Ashton didn’t do things like that; he wasn’t programmed that way. The worst of it all was his calmness, his inability to get emotional. I wanted to stab him just to see if he would bleed.

“I thought this was coming,” he told me. He held my hand and I let him. “I know you tried.”

I had. I had tried.

“You never really could love me though, could you?” He studied my face. “Not the way I really wanted you to, at least,” Ashton said.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“I know.”

He stayed in the bed and I went downstairs into the living room. My dad was sitting on the couch, flipping through the channels.

“What are you up to?” he asked.

“I just broke up with Ashton.”

“Are you okay?”

“I didn’t love him,” I said. “I don’t think I ever did.”

My father nodded and patted the cushion next to him. I sat down and we watched TV for hours. Eventually he went to his room and fell asleep. I stayed awake all night, staring into the big, bright, void of the television screen.

## 7.

The funeral was suffocating. Everyone said they were so sorry for our loss—they acted like they actually cared about Scott. They were all liars. Ashton came and sat next to me, because he is a nice person and that is what nice people do. When their girlfriend breaks up with them, they still show up to that same ex-girlfriend's brother's funeral. And besides, really, what else could he do?

I thought my mother would speak. Maybe my father, or Jack, or even me. Isn't that what people do at these things? But no one spoke, just some priest who had no idea who Scott even was. We hadn't grown up religious, and yet this place was drenched in Catholicism. Maybe it was my mother's last-ditch effort to save Scott from hell because he took his own life. Because he was a sinner. The priest had a speech impediment and was unable to say his R's. Nothing was right.

When they lowered his body into the ground my mother was sobbing like I had never seen before. With agony stamped on her mascara-stained face, her cries were raw and animalistic. She had transformed into someone else, *something* else. My father held her hand the whole time, but she didn't seem to notice. I couldn't help wondering if the reason she was so upset wasn't because her son was dead, but because she was scared of what this meant for her reputation. Word travels fast around here.

At one point Jack put his hand on my shoulder, a sentimental act that I wasn't used to from him, or expecting. It was only for a moment, but while his hand was on my

shoulder, as we shivered, and waited for our brother to be buried, he was something more to me than he had been before.

There was a dinner after the funeral that I refused to go to. My mom would have given me a hard time about it if she weren't so drained from the whole day. A day she had taken from Scott, and made her own. I told my dad I was driving Ashton to the train station. He didn't ask any questions, and I appreciated it.

The ride there was silent. This would probably be my last car ride with Ashton, and he finally understood the necessity of quiet. No small talk, no radio. Perfection. He finally spoke as we pulled into Croton Falls train station, which from my house.

"I don't want to be worried about you, but I am," he said.

"I am, too."

"If you ever need anything..." His voice trailed off. We both knew I wouldn't need him anymore. "Well, let me know when you want to pick up your stuff."

I knew Ashton would be fine in the apartment; he had been helping me with my half of the rent since I'd moved in about a year ago. He got his suitcase out of the backseat and gave me a weak smile.

"I just—I hope you'll be okay. I mean that."

"I know." I forced a smile. "I'll probably come down later this week, or early next. I'll have to grab everything."

He nodded and opened the car door.

"Are you going to stay here for a little? What are you going to do?"

“I think I’m just going to remember,” I said. “I’m going to remember until I can’t remember anymore. I just need to be home. I can’t do it yet.”

“Do what yet?”

“Be out in the world,” I said. “It’s too big.”

“You’re going to work it out,” he said. “Stay well, Olivia.” Then he exited the car and headed up the steps to buy a ticket.

I waited until he was safely on the train back to the city before I pulled out and headed home.

I was sitting on the couch watching TV when my parents came home from the dinner. My mother was inebriated again, swaying as she walked in, with my father helping her to the couch. He hung up both of their jackets.

“How was it?” I asked, because it was the polite thing to do.

No one answered my question, which caused me to think that maybe it *wasn't* the polite thing to do. My father finally spoke.

“Jack is coming back here, but Laura and Belle are heading back to their house now,” my father told me. “Laura has work tomorrow.”

As if on cue, Jack walked through the door, his jacket draped over his arm. I noticed a small amount of gray in his hair for the first time. He was almost 40; he was getting old. He made his way to my mother and sat by her side, his hand on her arm, his face filled with concern. He always was her favorite. Jack always knew the right thing to do.

“Mom,” he said.

She stood up and went into her bedroom. She came back out with a piece of paper and handed it to Jack, who looked at it and smiled.

“Where did you find this?” he asked.

“Kurt did,” she said, walking towards my dad, who was standing behind the couch uncomfortably.

“I was going through the attic,” he said, “to see if there was anything up there that we may want...anything that had to do with Scott.” There was an unintentional, yet painful, closing of my father’s eyes right after he said my brother’s name. “I found a box of all your guys’ old school-related stuff,” he continued.

Jack motioned for me to come over, and so I did. In his hands was Scott’s junior year report card. Straight D’s, except a B in English. All the comments said the same thing: Doesn’t apply himself, constantly late, too many absences, talks excessively in class...It was a report card that my mother had probably been upset about when she first read it, and yet now seemed to have a feeling of sentimentality towards.

“Scott never cared about school, did he?” My mom took the paper from Jack and held it like it was a newborn baby in her arms. “He was funny like that. A funny boy. A smart one, too. He just didn’t show it.”

She put her face into her hands and let out a pained sigh. My dad was at her side in a second, rubbing her arms, whispering in her ear. Was this all an act? I couldn’t tell.

“Come to bed, honey...come to bed,” he said.

He held her hand and they disappeared into the bedroom. The door closed behind them.

“I hate this,” Jack said, standing. “I hate it so much.”

“I wish I had been there more,” I said. I turned off the TV. “I don’t even think I’ve seen him in the past year.”

“Where’s Ashton?” Jack suddenly asked, finally noticing his absence.

“We broke up,” I said.

“You and Ashton broke up? Today?”

“Last night,” I said.

“Why?” Jack persisted, his head tilting to the side.

“Because...I don’t know. It was smothering me, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just drop it, Jack. What do you care, anyway?” I asked.

“Jesus, Olivia. What are you doing? You’re throwing everything away all because our self centered brother went ahead and ended his own life!”

His words were like whips. Quick, fleeting, and painful.

“I’m mad. Why aren’t you? How could he do this to Mom? To Dad? To *us*? Who does that to their family, or their friends?” Jack’s voice was raised. “Scott never cared about anyone but himself, and I guess that never changed.”

“Stop,” I said. I just wanted him to stop.

“The last time I saw him, he was on something—some type of pills. He showed up at my door saying he was in the neighborhood. It was past midnight, and he asked me for money. Idiot that I am, I gave him some. He was scaring Laura. He was scaring me.” Jack paced back and forth in the living room. “That asshole took advantage of me.”

“You make enough to have given him some.”



“That’s not the point, Olivia! Why are you always defending him? What was so great about Scott?” He was close to me. I could smell his shampoo, his aftershave. I could tell he wanted to scream at me, but Jack never allowed himself to lose control like that.

“He cared about me,” I choked out. “He was my best friend.”

“He was your best friend?” Jack’s laugh was loud and mocking. “He was never really there for you, or anyone, if we’re being honest. Everything he did just made people upset.”

Jack was even closer to me now, his face a couple inches from my own. We were the same height, our eyes at the same level.

“Why don’t you understand that? What about when he just left one day? Do you remember that? He didn’t tell anyone where he was, not even *you*.” He spat the word at me, angry and mean. “We thought he was dead. And then eight months later, he’s arrested for being high while driving around with some random girl he’s shacked up with.”

Oh, I remembered.

It was the summer before my junior year of college. I woke up one morning, and Scott wasn’t in his room. He was always out and about, sometimes even for a couple days. But he didn’t answer any of my phone calls, and he didn’t come back. We all knew he was in trouble somewhere. My parents were beside themselves, doing everything they could to find him. I went back to school, Northeastern, scared and confused, that year. Why wouldn’t Scott have told me where he was? It was the first crack in our relationship, a relationship that I thought was too strong for a fissure.

Scott was apparently so high that he was couldn't stop laughing, not even when he was being arrested, which really angered the cops who took him to the station. Once he brought to the station, the police alerted my parents, who had to bring Scott back home. Jack had gotten a friend of his, who was a good lawyer, to lower the fine my family had to pay. Scott had his license suspended for six months, and had to take classes once a week, court mandated, that dealt with substance abuse. It was the beginning of the end, and we all knew it. As punishment, my mom forced Scott to take up an internship with Jack, who was already well off at his firm. But Scott had started falling away, and there was no way to bring him back.

When I asked him why he left, why he didn't tell me, he showed no sympathy. "I just needed to figure some shit out, Olive. Needed to be alone."

"Who was that girl?"

"Just some girl I know," he answered.

"Well, why were you driving high?"

"Because I do sometimes, Olivia. God, You're acting like Mom," he said.

It was the worst insult Scott could hurl at me. He and I had banded together as kids, against her anger, her outbursts, and her repugnance in what made us who we were. She was not proud of us like she was of Jack. We were not good enough. We would never be good enough for her. I was not my mother, which is what I screamed over the phone before hanging up on him.

I was not my mother.

Someone knocked on the door. I turned away from Jack, who was still so close to me, the tension evident in his rigid stature. He let out a sigh, left me, and opened the door.

Mandy stood there in jeans so tight they looked spray painted on, and a sweatshirt that didn't cover her midriff. I noticed more tattoos on her stomach, climbing up from her pelvic region.

"Hey," she said, a slight rasp in her voice. "I'm sorry...I asked Kyle for your address so I could stop by...is this a bad time?"

"Yes." Jack's voice cut through the room.

"Come in," I told her.

She looked at Jack for a second before stepping into our house and towards me. Jack closed the door angrily behind her, but did not leave the room. He sat back down on the couch.

"So, I don't know if you guys want it or not...but I have Scott's stuff. You know, the stuff that he left behind in his apartment." She cracked her knuckles. I noticed long, fake nails. Black. "It's not a ton of stuff. But, you know."

"Where is it?" I was too eager, but I didn't care. I needed to see what he lived with, what he died with.

"My car. I have a couple garbage bags full."

"Let's bring them in here," Jack said. He headed towards the door, and I followed with Mandy closely behind.

It was mostly books and notebooks. Some clothes, too. Pictures and posters. Mandy, Jack, and I sat on the floor of Scott's old room and looked at the mess we had made.

"Like I said, it wasn't a ton. Scott never had a lot." She looked at us uncomfortably. "I mean, you know better than me."

Mandy wasn't wearing as much makeup as she was at the wake, or the funeral. She had pretty skin, olive and tan, clear and dewy. She was shorter than me, but her legs seemed longer, muscular beneath her jeans. Her bared stomach was toned and pierced, a dangly belly ring visible.

"I always loved this sweatshirt. I can't believe he still has it." *Had* it. I realized my mistake after I said it. No one corrected me, but they had to have noticed.

It was a gray crewneck that he had found at Goodwill back in high school. It had belonged to someone else, but had our last name on it: McKinley. I used to wear it all the time, and he let me, but he would always take it back. He was the one who found it, he was the one who got to keep it.

It smelled like cigarettes and mildew, but I put it on anyway. It was just as soft as I remembered.

"He wrote *a lot*," Jack said, flipping through a notebook. "I never knew he was that into writing."

"Oh, he wrote all the time," Mandy said, flashing a smile. "He was really good, too. If you ever want to read through any of it."

I picked up one of the notebooks and opened to a random page, filled with doodles of eyes and sloppily written words.

“Oh!” Mandy went to her purse, a big, pleather tote, and pulled a laptop out, along with its charger. “This was also his. A lot more of his work is on there...”

I grabbed the laptop from her and opened it.

“Wait, wait,” she said. “Scott spilled coffee on it, and was going to get it fixed at some point...but...”

So much about Scott was in my hands, and I would never be able to experience it. I wanted to read his work, listen to his music, and look at his pictures. But just as I was introduced to everything, it was ripped away from me.

“I think it can be fixed, though,” Mandy reassured me when she saw my face. “I should have gotten it fixed before I saw you, but everything happened so fast and I...” She looked at her hands, which were placed neatly on her knees. “I don’t know if I could have afforded it and...fuck.” She closed her eyes. “I can’t believe I’m never going to see him again.”

“It’s okay, Mandy. It’s okay,” Jack said, his voice gentle.

Since when did Jack give a fuck about Mandy? Yesterday he called her trash and today he calmed her? I wanted him to leave.

“He was really sweet. God, he was just so fucked up, you know? But he was brilliant. You guys know that, right? He was fucking brilliant.” She shook her head. “And I feel so guilty because there is this small sense of relief now that he’s gone. It was so hard to watch him suffer. He suffered every day. This painful cycle of anger, and drinking, and pills. He *loved* his pills.” Her voice became quieter. “He was barred out almost every other night. But now it’s done. It’s finally *done*.”

A knife had been stuck into my chest.

“I should go.” She stood up. “I’m overstaying my welcome. But you guys should look through this stuff. Some of it is pretty cool.”

“Wait.” I was a good three or four inches taller than Mandy when I stood up. “Just tell me...how did he look?”

“He looked like he was sleeping.” She was speaking so low that I had to lean in to hear. “It was the most peaceful I’d ever seen him.”

## 8.

Jack was still asleep when I woke up. I had a headache. Then again, I'd had a headache for the past week. It was early—8am. I was still wearing Scott's sweatshirt, and noticed a cigarette burn on the elbow area of the left arm. I could imagine Scott yelling at whoever had ashed their cigarette onto him by mistake

Mandy left after she said she would, and drove all the way back to Pennsylvania that night. She gave me her number and told me to call her whenever. I said I would, and I meant it. I had so many questions for her that I didn't ask when she was right in front of me. Whether I was scared of her answers, or just too exhausted to even ask, I would never know.

I wanted to know what Scott was doing with his life before he took it. Where he worked, who he knew. But I wasn't quite ready yet. No, first I wanted to look through his things, get a glimpse of what my brother had become in my absence. Just Scott and me again, no one else. Just the way it was always supposed to be. Funny how things have a way of falling apart.

The Apple store was packed, as always. Why is that? Why does it always seem like the entire world has crammed itself into these brightly lit, white-walled places? Teenage boys playing around with laptops they don't need, their girlfriends taking pictures on photobooth. Wide smiles and kissy faces. Older people who don't know how to use computers without help. Parents with screaming children. There was giggling, and

talking, and squealing, and so much noise. Too much noise. I prayed for complete silence, for these people to get away from me, to stop looking at me. To stop existing.

“Can I help you?”

Everyone who works at these stores look the same. This one was no different. He was in his early twenties, clad in a beanie and glasses. He even had a tattoo sleeve on his right arm and a lip ring. His nametag read Braden.

“I need help with my computer.” I had to speak loudly so that Braden could hear me.

“Did you make an appointment?”

“No...but—”

He smiled in a way that assured me I would be hearing bad news. “It seems that our genius bar is full right now, and for the rest of the day. What is your name? Maybe we can make an appointment for you later in the week.” His voice was sickly sweet, and he spoke too slowly. I wanted to break his legs and hear him scream.

“No...no. You don’t understand. I drove thirty minutes to be here, and it’s really important that this laptop is looked at. Today. Now.”

Another smile, and some nice teeth. “I’m sorry. I would love to help you.”

*Liar.*

“Then help me.”

“We’re totally booked.”

I started to raise my voice. “You’re telling me that you can’t look at this computer for five fucking minutes and tell me if you can fix it or not.” Tears of frustration stung the back of my eyes.



Braden's smile faltered.

"I've already told you. We can't help you today...I can try to find you something for another date..."

"Where's your manager? I need to speak with your manager." I swallowed.

"Now."

"Are you okay?"

"No!" I stared at Braden, who was a good amount taller than me. "No, I'm not okay. I need to speak with your manager!"

"Ma'am, I'm sure you're upset but—"

"Oh, you're sure I'm upset?" I was screaming now. People were staring at me. "My brother killed himself." It was quiet. I looked at the unfamiliar faces, with their eyes plastered on me. "And I need this laptop to be fixed. It was his." My voice sounded like someone else's. Shrill, desperate, pathetic. "I need you to—I need you to..." I had lost the ability to breathe, an ugly panting exploding from my mouth.

A panic attack was setting in. I hadn't had one in a couple of years. I used to get them a lot more when I was younger, but I'd mostly outgrown it. I tried to ignore the unease in my stomach, the blurred vision, the feeling that I was falling quick and fast. Sweat clung to my body. I was choking.

"This was his." I shoved the laptop at Braden, who was looking at me like I was insane. Maybe I was. "I need it to be fixed. You don't understand. You won't understand, *Braden!*" I spat his name at him. I turned towards the crowd. "What are you looking at?" Anger, nerves, tears. Braden's shocked face. "Just fix it!"

I felt my legs giving out under me, and leaned against a table. A pretty girl who looked about fifteen jumped out of my way, her Dunkin Donuts iced beverage in her hand. I couldn't see, I couldn't hear.

“Ma’am.” Braden’s voice sounded so low. “Ma’am, do you need us to call someone?”

My dad met me at the food court, where I was shoving mall Chinese food down my throat. The place I’d gotten it from was called Little Tokyo. Tokyo is in Japan, and yet this cuisine was specifically Chinese. It would have been funny if everything weren’t so sad.

“I heard you made quite a scene at the store,” My dad said, sitting down at the seat across from me.

The sweet and sour chicken was fatty and rubbery in my mouth. I fought to keep it down.

“Yeah, well.”

“I’m glad you had them call me.”

I had screamed my father’s number at Braden who immediately called it. Braden then walked me to the food court and then returned to the Apple store, where my father had agreed to meet him. I waited and stared at people who filtered in and out of the food court. Young couples, irritated fathers. Groups of kids too young to drive, figuring out whose mother was going to pick them up.

“Daddy.”

He pushed my plate of food away from me and brought himself closer. He put his arm around me.

“They’re going to look at it. Tomorrow, okay? They said they’re probably going to have to send it out. They’ll call me as soon as they know what can be done.”

I looked up at him, sure that I looked crazy. I was still wearing the same outfit I had slept in.

“Olivia, I hate to see you like this.” He looked at the food on the table. “That looks disgusting.”

He coaxed a small smile out of me.

“You have everything going for you. You’re beautiful, and smart, and nice.” His grip tightened slightly on me. “You have your whole life in front of you. Please don’t let this be the end. You have so much more to offer.”

“Dad, I’m not gonna...do what Scott did.”

“That’s not what I mean. I know you won’t. Don’t let this ruin your life, Olivia. Don’t give up on everything because he’s not here anymore. Don’t stop fighting.”

I wasn’t able to respond.

“I can’t believe it, either,” my father said.

“When is the last time you saw him?”

My dad sighed and leaned back in his chair. “It was spring I think. April. Last April.”

I hadn’t seen him since November of last year.

“He was so thin, and he looked sick. He’d called me, asked if he could come home for a bit. Said he needed help.”

He always was asking for money.

“Your mother was furious. She could tell he was using again, even though he kept saying that he hadn’t taken anything in a while.” He looked down. “He was a ghost. He’d already died, Olivia. There was nothing anyone could say to him. After I saw him for those couple of days...I knew he wasn’t going to be here much longer. He wasn’t a person anymore. He was a shell.”

“I just wish he had talked to me. I wish he hadn’t stopped talking to me.”

“He stopped talking to all of us, baby,” my dad said.

“I wish I could have saved him.”

“Some people don’t really want to be saved,” he said. He paused and turned to me. “Does that make sense? He knew that he was hurting people. His actions...his decisions...he didn’t want to upset anyone.”

“Bullshit.”

“He loved you, too. You have to know that,” he said.

“I haven’t seen him in over a year. He made it so I could never see him again.”

“He deeply pained, Olivia. At least he’s not in pain anymore,” my dad said, staring at the Chinese food on the table. He sighed, and then quietly laughed. “God, why is this conversation happening in a food court?”

The gloom and ridiculousness of the situation set in, and I couldn’t help but join him. It was weak, and forced out of me by some invisible hand, but it was there.

## 9.

Kyle's house was small. It was an unfamiliar space, with less decoration and color than the home I used to visit him in, the one he lived in with his parents. He informed me that they moved to a town close by, Pawling, and that he visited them every week or so. Kyle's house had a kitchen, a living room, and a bathroom with a bathtub that barely fit. His room was messy, dark, and cluttered. His bed was just a mattress on the floor. He had a cat named Linda who hid under his desk and hissed at me.

"It's not much. Sorry about the mess."

He attempted to fold some clothes on his bed, placing them on his dresser. On his side table there was an ashtray filled with the roaches of old joints. I hadn't smoked in months. I suddenly felt so old, so completely unlike Kyle, so completely unlike his life. A life that used to heavily involve me.

"What happened to that guy you were with at the wake?" he asked when he sat down next to me on the bed.

"Why?" I really didn't want to talk about Ashton.

"I just want to know what's happening here," he said.

"Me and Ashton broke up the night you met him."

"Ashton," he said, tasting the name in his mouth. "Hmm, did I have anything to do with that?" He asked with a sly smile.

"Shhh," I said, lying down, and closing my eyes.

Kyle lay down next to me, and we talked for hours. Still a kind boy with big hands and a lack of filter that I enjoyed. He always said what was on his mind, with a reassurance in his voice that made whoever he was talking to listen and try to understand. He didn't talk about Scott that night, though. He was insightful in that way. I didn't bring him up, and so he was not mentioned.

I learned that Kyle was a mechanic at Route 6 Auto. He said it paid well and that he liked it, liked working with his hands. Big, rough hands that showed how hard he worked, that allowed me to see the tools in his hands, the grease that had since been washed off. And yet how soft those calloused hands were when he touched me.

"I don't want to do this if you don't mean it," he said, detaching his lips from mine.

"I mean it," I breathed.

"I missed you." He was still on top of me, one hand on my waist, one hand holding him up. "I never thought you'd come back."

High and warm, he caressed me. He touched me in ways that made me remember fucking him quietly so my parents wouldn't hear, giggling into his chest, feeling mysterious and mature. Quick sessions in the back of his car before he went to lacrosse practice. Plain and masterful, familiar yet new.

The second it was over, I was antsy to leave. I wanted to forget the feelings for this man that had already been left behind, the feelings that were pulsing through me as I struggled to find my clothes.

"Spend the night," he told me as I buttoned up my jeans. "Or at least stay a while."

But I wanted to scream, to lay in a bath of scalding hot water, to drink alone and lay restless in bed until the sun rose. To fidget and remember when all I wanted to do was forget. Of course I couldn't say these things.

"I have to get up early tomorrow." I shrugged. "My mom needs my help at the coffee shop."

It wasn't a complete lie. I did promise my dad I would help my mother with the shop, but I didn't have to show up until Natalie left at noon. She wasn't going to be a very active part of the coffee shop. Not until she was done grieving. At least that's what she said to my dad. She hadn't said much of anything to me, she always used my dad to do her bidding. She forced him to be an emissary between the two of us. She couldn't be bothered to speak directly with me. She had more important things to do.

"I'm usually up early anyway." He said this, but I could feel his determination in keeping me there starting to fade. It wasn't worth the energy. *I wasn't worth the energy.*

"You're sweet." That wasn't a lie.

A smile and a wave goodbye and I was headed home with a sophomoric hickey on my neck, purple and angry, and cotton mouth from the joint we had shared earlier. I ran over an already dead raccoon right before the turn onto my road. It was either that, or swerving into the other lane where an oncoming car was passing by. I felt the thump as I crushed the raccoon, a soft thud I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't seen the body. I wondered how many times it had been run over just tonight. No respect for the dead.

I woke up to noises from Jack's room. He was packing up his stuff, not trying very hard to be quiet. It was only seven a.m.

“You’re so loud,” I said at his doorway.

He looked up, noticing me. “Oh, sorry. I’m just getting ready to leave.”

“You weren’t going to tell me?” I asked.

“I just felt bad about missing too much work,” he said.

Work. I had ignored all of Josie’s emails. I knew that this wasn’t the way an adult handles things, but this was how *I* was going to handle things. Fuck Josie. Fuck work.

“Okay, well...” I started.

I didn’t know if I should hug him, or crawl back into bed and asleep. He made the decision for me when he gave me an awkward pat on the back and started to carry his suitcase down the stairs.

“Did you say bye to mom?”

He stopped halfway down the stairs and looked back towards me.

“Me being here, or not being here, is nothing she cares about right now.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Is that a hickey?” he asked.

I instinctively covered it with my hand. Jack smirked and continued down the stairs.

Mahopac Coffee, as my mother and Natalie so creatively named it, was not very busy today. But was it ever? Natalie said there were a few regulars, but there wasn’t a huge following. I worked here in high school, so I only needed a quick explanation of how to work the machines again. I got the hang of it easily enough.



My phone rang. It was my mom. There was only one group of bored teenagers sitting at a table, all ignoring each other and smiling at their phones, so I picked it up.

“I just woke up,” she said.

It was 2:30.

“You made it there and everything, though?”

Her voice was weak, raspy from all her crying a couple days before. I had been confused as to why she called me at first, but now it made perfect sense. She wanted to see how the shop was doing, if everything was going according to plan, the way it was supposed to.

“Yeah, I’m here. Not so busy,” I said.

“Yeah, business isn’t the greatest it could be.” She coughed. “I don’t feel well. Maybe I’ll go back to bed for a while.”

“Mom, it’s late. It’s two thirty.”

“Huh. Is it?” Another cough. “What are you wearing?”

“What?” I asked.

“What are you wearing? I just want to make sure you look nice.”

*Bitch.*

“Jeans. A black shirt,” I said.

“Mhm, mhm. Makeup? Are you wearing makeup?” she asked.

I wanted to slam my phone against the counter, along with my mother.

“Yes. I’m wearing makeup.” I wasn’t. What was the point in telling the truth, when she liked the lies better?

At six o'clock, Eva walked through the door. I didn't think she was working tonight. Her hair was pulled into a messy ponytail and her cheeks were rosy from the cold outside. She looked put together, and I looked like a twelve-year-old boy.

"You new here?" she asked, with a nervous smile, when she saw me.

Eva was sweet, but she wasn't funny. That was for sure. We both worked at the coffee shop in the past, doing our mother's biddings and getting minimum wage for it.

I feigned laughter as she stepped behind the counter. She poured herself a cup of coffee.

"You want one?"

"Sure."

She poured me a cup and handed it to me. We both sipped in silence for about a minute.

"How've you been?" Eva finally asked, looking out at the empty coffeehouse that enveloped us.

"Well. My brother's dead. So I've been better."

Her eyes were wide and anxious, and it was obvious that my harsh truth had made her uncomfortable. It took her a few seconds to recover.

"I don't think I ever really formally gave my condolences," she finally said.

"It's okay," I said, taking a sip of coffee. It wasn't very good. It burnt my tongue and left it numb.

"Not really," she said, now staring into her mug. "I remember him. Way back when."

"Me too."

Eva and I weren't best friends or anything growing up, but we hung out occasionally. We had mutual friends, went to the same neighborhood parties, and our mothers were practically inseparable. Especially when the coffee shop started up.

"Funny that we're working here together again, huh?" I asked. "Just like high school."

She smiled and put her mug down. I noticed that she had already finished her cup of coffee. I had barely started on mine.

"You're lucky, you know," she said. "Lucky you got out."

I played with handle of the mug while she spoke.

"Everything is just like high school here," she said. "I see a lot of familiar faces. The same people doing the same things."

"I bet Scott killing himself is the gossip of all the people we used to know," I added.

"Probably," she said. "But they were always kind of shitty, weren't they?"

We locked eyes and both let out weak, and slightly uncomfortable laughs. But she was right. So many of the people we used to know were shitty. So many of the people I know *now* are shitty. But at least they didn't watch me grow up, watch me find my way through different stages of insecurity and self-discovery. No, I left that part of me behind, here in Mahopac.

Eva and I stayed until we closed up at around eleven, even though she told me I could leave numerous times. I wanted to be anywhere but home.

# 10.

I had a dream that I was with Scott. We were in the kitchen and he was making me an omelet, but he kept burning it. So he kept making more and more and I told him to stop but he couldn't hear me anymore.

When I woke up, his death hit me hard and fast. I wanted him to be there so bad, but he wasn't. And he never would be again. I walked into Scott's room and looked at the emptied garbage bags on the floor. I lay down on all of it. It smelled like him. A book was digging into my back, but I couldn't move. Not yet.

"Olivia."

My mother was in the doorway, staring at me, horrified.

"Olivia, what are you doing?"

"I just wanted to feel close to him," I said.

"What is all this stuff?" She walked towards me and knelt down.

"Oh... Mandy, she brought it. It was in Scott's apartment."

"Oh, that slutty girl?" she asked with ease.

I got up off his stuff and sat down on his bed.

"She's not a slut," I said quietly.

"Oh, come on," my mother said, now sifting through the miscellaneous objects on the floor. She picked up a watch from the pile. "I got him this for high school graduation! I can't believe he still had this."

"Mandy is nice."

My mom didn't seem to notice I had spoken. She dropped the watch as I sat down beside her. She smelled like booze.

"Mom, are you drunk?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

Her voice was muffled but I still hear her clearly.

"Because I don't know what else to do."

"Mom..."

"I can't stop thinking."

She stood, walking slowly around the room, taking everything in. Thinking about what, I wondered. The fact that Scott was gone, or the fact that she will forever have a scarlet letter emblazoned on her chest, as the mother of a suicide.

"You know, I heard about you and Ashton."

"Who told you?" I asked.

"Jack."

Of course. My dad would not have told my mom. He doesn't like to get involved. How did Jack even find the time to make my life more difficult than it needed to be?

"I think he was kind of perfect for you," she said.

"No. He was kind of perfect for you."

She shrugged. "A nice, attractive man with a good job and a good family. Where are you going to find another one like that?"

"Maybe I don't want a man like that," I said.

"You remind me of Scott when you say things like that," I said.

“What’s so wrong with being like Scott?”

“Scott’s dead. So you tell me,” she said, her eyes boring into mine.

I stomped down the stairs and out the front door, slamming it on the way out.

Scott used to storm out of the house. Every time he was pissed, he would just run out the door. Sometimes he would scream out something rude and hurtful, and sometimes he would just silently slink out. Usually he would just go to the elementary school near our house and sit on the swings. Smoke a cigarette or get high. Get away for a little bit. I would usually come find him, and calm him down.

It was almost always about our mother. She always said the wrong thing to Scott, to me. But I never reacted the way Scott did because it was easier to just let my mom be the way she was. I knew she wasn’t going to change. Scott always believed she would. He thought a fight with my mom might make her act differently, act kinder. But I knew better. A fight with my mother just gave her more of a reason to act the way she did towards us.

It was colder than I’d anticipated. I was just in a t-shirt and sweatpants. When I ran out of the house, I didn’t think to grab a coat. I never think. When I got to the school, Fulmar Road Elementary, I went to the swings. I half-expected to see Scott there, fuming silently. But he wasn’t there. He would never be anywhere again.

The swings were smaller than I remember, my hips digging into the metal chain. I started swinging, higher and higher. It felt nice, the cold air whipping at my face, almost

burning it. When I finally stopped, I called Kyle, happy that my cell phone had been in my pocket before I ran out. I knew he would come for me.

“What are you doing here? It’s three in the morning,” he said, sitting on the swing next to me.

“My mom was being mean.” I sounded like a little kid who didn’t get the toy she wanted at the store.

“Come on, let’s go back to my place,” he said. “It’s freezing.”

“Remember when Scott used to come here? When we all used to come here?”

He nodded, and looked at the whole playground for a minute. His eyes scanned from the swings, to the slide, to the monkey bars, and landed back on me.

“A lot of memories here,” he finally said, grabbing my hand and pulling me off the swings. “A lot of memories a lot of places.” He kissed me. “We’ll never be able to forget him, Olive.”

I wanted so badly for that to be true.

Kyle’s house was warm, and Linda was on his bed when we got back. She purred, got up and rubbed her body against Kyle’s leg, begging to be picked up. He ignored her, gently maneuvering me to the bed and pressing himself against me. Afterwards, we lay in his bed naked, sharing a spliff, passing it back and forth

“You’re pretty,” he told me.

He always believed it when he said things like that, I could tell. I just didn’t understand why. I wasn’t anything someone would look twice at. And, with my current haircut, I wasn’t anything someone would look once at.

“Shhh,” I said, putting out the spliff in the ashtray by Kyle’s bed.

“Did you ever miss me?” he asked. “After we broke up?”

“I missed who I was when I was with you, if that makes any sense,” I responded.

“That makes sense.” He pulled me closer to him. “Whenever I thought of you, I got sad.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Because we really liked each other, and it just didn’t work out. I never really understood why.”

“But I’m here now,” I said.

“You are.” His gaze lowered to my hip. “Oh shit. You still have that?” Kyle asked me, pointing to the small tattoo that I had almost forgotten that I had myself. He traced his fingers over it repeatedly.

“Of course,” I said.

It was a stick and poke, done by Scott. The summer before I went away to college, he decided that I needed something to remember him by. He had recently become obsessed with stick and pokes, and had a few shitty ones on himself—small designs, or words. They were unprofessional, yet charming.

For some reason I agreed, and he gave me a small smiley face on my hipbone. It never looked good, but now it was horribly faded. It was almost impossible to tell what it had ever been. It evolved into a mush of gray.

“It looks so bad!” I told him after I saw it in the mirror. But I didn’t care, because Scott had given it to me, and I would have it forever.

“What!” Scott was horrified that his artistic work had been questioned.



He allowed me to give him a stick and poke so that we'd be even. I barely even knew how to do it, and it took longer than it should have. I gave him an unhappy face above his knee, and when he saw it he laughed.

“A sad tattoo for a sad boy, huh?” he asked, admiring my work. “It’s not that bad, actually.”

It was that bad. The lines were barely connected and the ink wasn’t dark enough. But he never said so, he always feigned like it looked professional, defended it to Kyle and anyone else who said it looked terrible.

After college, I started to hate my smiley face tattoo. Every boy I slept with asked me about it, obvious that they found it tacky or strange. When it started bleeding into my skin, it looked even worse. Ashton disliked it more than anyone else I knew. He even offered to pay for it to be removed, but there was something about it, something I couldn’t let go of. No matter how much it bothered me, I still wanted it there. It was Scott’s signature on me. It belonged on me. And now, since Scott’s death, I’m happy it’s still there. A constant reminder that Scott existed, that he wasn’t always so far away, so gone.

I woke up to my phone ringing.

“Hello?”

“Hey. It’s me.” Ashton.

“Hey, what’s up?”

Kyle lay next to me, quietly snoring.

“You haven’t come to pick up any of your stuff yet.” He paused. “I was wondering if today would work for you?”

“What day is it?” I asked.

“It’s Saturday, Olivia.”

“Oh, right. Sure, I can leave in fifteen minutes.”

“See you soon.”

I shook Kyle awake. His eyes opened slowly, as he registered where he was, who I was.

“Want to help me out today?” I asked him.

In hindsight, it wasn’t the best idea to bring Kyle with me to pick up all my stuff from Ashton’s. But Kyle had a truck, which could fit way more in it than my Honda Accord ever could.

“Are you sure it’s cool if I come?” he asked me that morning.

He was my only friend that I had right now. I was still mad at my mom, and my dad was at work. He was the assistant manager at the CVS by my house, and worked every Saturday. He only took one week off of work when he found out about Scott.

“I like to keep busy,” he told me.

Either way, I brought Kyle.

I rang the doorbell, even though I could have just used my key. But something about it didn’t feel right. We were buzzed in, and when we reached my old apartment, Scott was already standing there with the door open. If he was surprised to see Kyle with me, he didn’t show it.

“Hey, how are you, man?” he asked, giving him a friendly handshake.

I didn't say anything, but hugged him. He was not expecting that, and neither was Kyle, who stood awkwardly next to us.

"Hey," he finally said.

"Hey."

We all walked into the bedroom and began removing clothes from the dresser. We went into the closet and got my clothes, coats, shoes. Grabbed my small bag of makeup from the bathroom. As Kyle and Ashton worked together, I snuck out to the kitchen to grab a cup of water. I filled up the cup from the sink and turned around.

"How are you?" It was Ashton. Seeing that he startled me, he added, "I'm sorry, I just...I want to know how you are."

*I am rotting from the inside out.*

"Fine."

"That's great, that's great." He wouldn't take his eyes off of me. It was silent as I finished the cup of water I had filled. "Why did you bring him?" He finally asked.

I put the cup down on the counter.

"I mean, I know we're over and all...but, really? Your ex-boyfriend from high school?"

"It's not like that. His truck has more space than my car. He's the only person I even really talk to right now."

"Oh, great. Even better. Are you guys together now? He *was* your first true love and everything," Ashton said, with slight malice. He wasn't usually like this. He wouldn't stop looking at me.

"No, Ashton."

“Look, I know you’re going through a lot right now. What happened to you was extremely tragic.”

*Extremely tragic*, spoken like a true nice guy, someone who didn’t want to step on anyone’s toes.

“But we were *living* together. And now we’re not together at all. And you come here to pack up your shit with an old flame? Olivia, come on.”

I hadn’t seen Ashton this upset in a long time. And I felt bad, I did. But it was too late. Kyle was in the other room, shoving my stuff into a suitcase we brought up with us. This apartment was so small that he could probably hear the whole conversation from where he was, uncomfortably waiting for it to end.

“There is so much going on in my head right now. But you’re right. I’m sorry. I should have thought about it.” The truth.

“Have you slept together? Since...”

“No.”

“I wish it had worked out,” he said quietly.

“No, you don’t. I’m a fucking mess, Ashton. I was, even before my brother killed himself. I’m sad, and I’m nervous, and I’m angry *all the time*. And you are none of those things.” I had to take a deep breath. “You have aspirations, and a life ahead of you, and I am so completely lost that it’s embarrassing. Add my estranged brother’s suicide to all of that and I am losing my mind. I am completely losing it. You dodged a bullet when we ended things.” The truth.

He came closer to me, arms outstretched. Before he could hug me, I put my hand gently on his forearm.

“You have spent the last three years taking care of me. Paying my rent, cooking my food, fixing everything I fucked up,” I told him. “It’s okay that you couldn’t fix me. It’s okay.” More truth. I removed my hand and hugged him, for the second time that day.

I heard footsteps approach the kitchen, and then Kyle clearing his throat. Ashton and I let go of each other. I realized this was probably the last time I would be able to hold Ashton, and the sadness that stemmed from that realization surprised me. I wanted to hug him for just a moment longer, to let him know that he was too good for me. He just wasn’t fucked up enough for a girl like me.

“What’s up?” I asked Kyle.

“I just finished,” he said.

“I’ll help you guys pack up the car,” Ashton said.

And he did just that.

Kyle and my dad helped me bring all my things into the house. My mom was out somewhere, probably drinking heavily and complaining about how *hard* everything was for her. Kyle didn’t ask me about Ashton in the car on the way back, but I could tell he wanted to. He didn’t force me to talk at all—he was used to my silence. Instead, he let me look out the window. He squeezed my hand right before we pulled into my driveway.

It *was* upsetting knowing that was the last time I would see Ashton, but at least I knew it was the last time. I wished I had known when it was the last time I saw Scott. Would that have made it better? Probably not. But at least I could have had some feeling of closure. Scott didn’t allow me closure. He didn’t allow *anyone* closure.

I lay in my bed that night, with suitcases and garbage bags filled with shit I had forgotten I owned. Stuff I really didn't need. I didn't want to unpack it, because that meant I was officially living at home. But hadn't I made the choice to do that? To throw away whatever life I'd had before and start over? I screamed into my pillow until it hurt. And when I was done I went into Scott's room, peeled the covers off his bed and got in. It felt softer in his bed than mine.

# 11.

When I woke up I had three missed calls from my dad and a voicemail. I guess he was at work, or away from the house. Scott's laptop could be fixed, but it would take up to a week. He gave me the number and all the information I needed to call and find out more about the laptop. I dialed.

I gave them the serial number and the code they had assigned our repair case. Finally, after twenty-five minutes on hold, I got a hold of someone who knew something about Scott's laptop.

"It would really be cheaper to just get a new computer," the woman's nasally voice told me over the phone. "The water damage in this laptop is extensive." She paused. "It's going to cost a lot."

"How much?"

"It'll be around 2,000 dollars once we're done with it. We need to replace a lot of parts. And it'll take a fair amount of time to be able to recover what was on the computer before it was damaged. We are going to have to send it out for repair."

I had 500 dollars to my name.

"That's fine. I really need this laptop. I want you to fix it."

"Are you sure? It's a lot of money."

"I'm sure," I snapped. "I have the money. Just fix the laptop."

"Well, all right." I could tell she was taken aback by my tone. "We will call and email you when it is ready for pickup."

“Thank you,” I replied, but she had already hung up.

That weekend was Halloween, and Eva had invited Kyle and me to her friend’s party. It was in Yorktown, about twenty minutes from my house. I didn’t want to party with people who still lived in the area, but getting out of the house and getting drunk could make me feel a little bit better. It could help me forget for just a couple of hours.

Starting at 8 o’clock, kids starting ringing the doorbell. My parents were at Natalie’s house, where she was apparently having some sort of get together.

“If you need us, give us a call,” my mom said as she left, just as she used to when I was little.

We hadn’t talked about the fight we had, and we weren’t going to. That was just how things were with us. We never resolved anything, just held onto resentment long enough until it was time to explode again. She looked beautiful, her dress clinging to her body in ways a dress could never cling to mine. She actually had hips and curves that I was not blessed with. Somehow I was cursed with being an A cup, whereas she was at least a C. Maybe the fact that I didn’t look like her allowed her that much more apathy towards me. Maybe she didn’t think of me as hers at all.

Kyle showed up around nine thirty, which was fortunate because I’d already run out of candy. My dad only got one bag of Snickers bars and some family dressed up as M&Ms grabbed the last ones fifteen minutes ago. Every time the doorbell rang, I stayed seated on the couch, willing the children to go away and find a house that was better prepared than this one.

“It’s me!” Kyle called when I didn’t answer the door after he rang the bell.



He was dressed as the Phantom of the Opera, clad in a mask and cape.

“So, what do you think?” he asked, stepping inside and doing a mock twirl.

“You look very cute,” I said.

He shut the door and looked me up and down. “What are you supposed to be?”

“Myself. I don’t know. I don’t have a costume.”

“Olivia!” Kyle shook me by my shoulders. “You have to dress up as something. It’s fucking *Halloween*.”

Kyle always got excited about things like this. When he cared about something, he went all out.

“I don’t have anything. I didn’t buy a costume,” I said.

Kyle invited himself into my room and went through all the things we had packed up earlier that week. He found a black and white striped shirt and a black beanie and forced me to be a bank robber. He also made me take my pillowcase and hold as if it had stolen money in it. I started to get dressed.

“You look perfect,” Kyle said when I was in just my bra and underwear. He came up behind me and kissed my neck.

“We have to go,” I told him. “Or we’re going to be late.”

He took my hand in his and led me to my bed where we laid together silently. I remembered soft kisses on my eyelids, the light blue sheets that I had when I was seventeen, and the breeze from the open window on my naked body. Swimming in his pool in the summers, kissing in the water until his sister begged us to stop. I remembered skin touching and words floating between us. I remembered warmth, and ease, and hands in my hair.

We stayed in my bed like that for another twenty minutes before we finally left.

The party was lame, but there was some strong jungle juice and I'd already had three cups. Kyle and I didn't find Eva for a while after we got there, because she was wearing a blonde wig and neon spandex, clad with leg warmers. Apparently she was workout Barbie. I didn't question it.

"You and Kyle are so cute," she said, drunk as all hell.

"We're not dating," I said. We weren't, were we?

She ignored me completely. "Do you want to take a shot?" Her wig was slipping off and her real hair, light brown and soft, was peeking out beneath it.

Three shots later and Eva had forced me into the bathroom with her. I had lost Kyle a little while ago, but kept checking my phone to see if he'd contacted me. I felt bad leaving him all alone at a party where he didn't know anyone. But Kyle, like Scott, was exceptionally good at making friends.

"I'm sorry I'm so drunk," Eva said, sitting on the floor next to the toilet.

"Are you gonna throw up?" I asked. I didn't realize how drunk *I* was, until I'd stopped moving and sat down next to her.

"Maybe," she said.

"Yeah, I might too," I responded.

Eva started hysterically laughing, and, after a beat, I started laughing, too. We couldn't stop—not until tears were streaming down Eva's cheeks and I was having trouble catching my breath.

“How come we didn’t really hang out in high school?” she asked. Her eyes were lazy and her mouth slightly slack. I wondered how much she had to drink that night.

“I don’t know.” The tiles on the floor were cold. “I kind of just hung out with Scott’s friends, I guess,” I said.

“Did you know that I lost my virginity to him?” she asked, her drunken eyes widening.

“What?”

She took her wig off and put it on her lap. Someone knocked on the door and Eva screamed “OCCUPIED!” before turning back to me, as if there hadn’t been any type of interruption.

“Yeah. The summer before we went away to school. I didn’t want to be a virgin in college. So I kind of threw myself at him, because I knew he kind of slept with a lot of girls.” It was true; Scott had always been popular with girls. “No offense,” she added. She started to braid some of the hair on the wig, which was still on her lap. “Anyway, we...you know...did it!”

“He never told me.”

“He was doing me a favor. I probably wasn’t worth bragging about to his friends, or his sister, or anything. But he was really nice during it, you know? I’m happy I lost it to him. He was gentle. He listened to me.”

Someone else banged on the door, but we ignored it. Eva leaned her head against my shoulder.

“I was visiting one of my friends from college in New Orleans one Christmas, and I ran into Scott again. This was, like, four years ago. I just saw him at a bar and he

recognized me, and talked to me all night. There's something special about having someone like Scott pay attention to you. He was always so *cool*, you know?" She looked up at me, and we locked eyes.

"He was cool," I said. It was true; there was just something about him.

"Well, we had sex again, and he was just as nice as the first time. You never really forget who you lost it to, do you?"

The first time I had sex, I was confused as to why people enjoyed it. Sex was uncomfortable and painful, strange and different. It almost didn't make sense. Kyle and I went from being two separate people to one connected unit. I knew that I had taken one more step towards adulthood, that I had given something away that I could never get back. Halfway through, I started crying. Kyle immediately stopped and asked me what was wrong.

"I just love you," I said, embarrassed at the spontaneous tears. "I'm happy." I let out a small laugh.

He smiled, and kissed me slowly. "I love you, too," he said.

"You never do forget who you lost it to, do you?" I said, looking at all the toiletries that decorated the sink.

"Kyle?" Eva asked.

"Kyle."

Eva and I left the bathroom and found Kyle laughing with some guy in a pirate costume

"Hey, where'd you guys go?"

"The bathroom," I responded.

Eva squeezed my hand and I squeezed hers back.

An hour and a half later, Kyle was driving all three of us home. Eva fell asleep in the car, and by the time we got to her house she was snoring. I didn't feel right about leaving her alone in this state.

"Hey, I think I'm gonna stay the night with Eva. She's really fucked up."

Kyle frowned. "You're not staying at my place tonight?"

I craved that warmth again. Those comforting, dreamlike feelings of the past that awakened something in me that had been closed off for so long. I wanted to be with him, but I couldn't leave Eva alone.

"I'll come over tomorrow, okay? I want to make sure she's okay."

We woke Eva up and she unlocked her door. I followed her inside. Kyle drove away once he knew we had gotten inside safely. Her place was nice, and neat. There was nothing of excess there, yet it didn't feel small and cheap, like Kyle's place did. Eva's was nicer.

"Thanks for spending the night," Eva said as she led me to her bed.

"Hey, no problem."

She lay down in her costume, wig and all, and got under the covers.

"You're funny, Eva," I said.

"I like you," she said, as she closed her eyes. "I liked Scott, too. After that summer, right when I started college, I really thought I was in love with him. But he was just one of those boys. You know the type, the ones that people always fall in love with." She shifted under the covers. "But he never really seemed to love himself, did he?"

I waited until she was snoring again to get under the covers. I stared at the ceiling for hours until I fell asleep.

# 12.

I knew I had to make the call, but I had been dreading it all week. The Apple store called me and told me I would be able to pick up the laptop in two days at the Danbury mall.

“Hello?” Jack’s voice always seemed so affected when he first picked up the phone. I’ve thought that since I was younger. Like he’s trying to impress whoever is on the other end for some reason.

“It’s me,” I said.

“What’s up, Olivia? I’m a bit busy.”

It was two p.m. on a Wednesday. He was probably working.

“I need your help,” I said.

“With what?”

“You know how I went to get Scott’s laptop fixed?” He was silent on the other end. “Well, I can pick it up in a couple days.”

“That’s great,” he said

“It’s going to be two thousand dollars,” I said.

A sigh. “So that’s why you called me.”

“I don’t have the money right now. And I’ll pay you back, I promise. I just don’t want to ask Mom and Dad. They already think I’m a total fuckup right now. Besides mom and I got into a fight last week, and I just really don’t want to bother dad right now—”

“I’ll pay for it. When are you picking it up?”

“Friday. Thank you Jack, I really mean it, thank—”

“Pick me up on the way there, okay? I’m coming. He was my brother, too.”

When I got to the coffee shop that night, Eva was sitting behind the counter, staring at her phone. By the time I reached her, she stopped scrolling, and placed it into her purse.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

“Thanks.” She tilted her head slightly, and shifted her gaze to the floor. “You know, for being so great the other night.”

“No problem. You would have done the same for me.”

She wasn’t so sure she would have, which was evident just in the way she looked at me after I said it. But she was happy that I had, and that I could also see.

“How long are you working tonight?” She asked.

“I’m closing. You?”

“Same,” she said. “In a couple hours we have to set up for the open mic.”

“Open mic?”

“Yeah, all of them are friends. The open mic-ers. They’re a little community,” she said.

“Since when do we do that?” I asked.

I genuinely wanted to know. In all my years working here in high school, we *never* had an open mic. A tight-knit group of failed musicians all stuffed together in



Mahopac Coffee with Eva and me. I wanted to crawl into a hole and never come back out.

It was worse than I thought. An older woman with uneven bangs and dingy, gray hair ran the whole thing, and told bad jokes as she went along. She announced the names of those no one cared about. They sang mediocre covers of songs that weren't even impressive to begin with. There was also original music, which may have been even worse.

There was a white guy with dreadlocks who played the ukulele and sang about his broken heart. There was an older man singing Celine Dion. The woman with the uneven bangs wouldn't stop coming up to the counter and telling me about her life.

"I'm a music teacher," she told me.

*Of course.*

"But I also give private lessons if you, or anyone you know, would want some."

She pulled a business card out of her back pocket and handed it to me, before announcing the next name. I looked at the card. *Melissa Hildridge – Private Voice Instructor*, it read. I threw it in the trash when I knew she wasn't looking. Eva winked at me and I winked back.

There was something so sad about these people, who *really* thought they were going to make it, who *really* thought they were good. I drank five cups of coffee throughout the two hours that they occupied the café. I wanted to do anything that didn't require me to experience the hopeful mass of lost souls who were performing here on a Thursday night.

When I went outside to bring the trash to the dumpster out back, a woman I recognized from the open mic was outside smoking a cigarette. She had smudgy makeup on that made it look like she had two black eyes.

“Hey,” she said. “You didn’t pick up one of my CDs earlier.”

She went into her purse and took out a CD. It had an embarrassing low-quality photo of her in a tight dress, posing next to microphone. Her loser boyfriend probably took the picture in her basement with his camera. She smiled, her teeth slightly crooked.

“Do you really think you’re going to do this?” I asked her, with her CD still in her hand, my voice hot in my throat. “Do you think this is what you’re going to do with your life?”

“What?” she asked, the pathetic CD still extended.

“Do you think you’re going to be *famous*?” I asked, cruel and harsh. I reminded myself of my mother.

Up close, I could tell that she was probably around thirty years old. It was too late for her. How could she not know that?

“You’re mean,” was all she said, all quiet and sad, as she put her CD back into her purse. “You’re a mean girl.” She put out her cigarette out with her feet and stormed back into the coffee shop.

Maybe I was just a mean girl. I finished emptying the trash, and left without anyone noticing.

# 13.

Jack's house has always been boring, just like he's been. Off-white with beige shutters and a nice yard that a professional landscaper was obviously responsible for. The inside was big and bland. I've only been there a handful of times. These last couple of weeks is the most I'd seen Jack in years.

I didn't want to ring the bell and deal with Belle and Laura, so I just texted him and told him I was in the driveway. Jack came out moments later, looking a bit less put together than usual. A t-shirt, worn-out jeans, and a black hoodie. Old Sneakers and slight stubble.

"You still drive this thing?" Jack asked, referring to my car.

It's true, my car wasn't the nicest, or the newest. It used to be my dad's, until he got a new one, and passed it down to me my junior year of college. But I barely drove it once I moved to the city, and it had treated me fine since I received it.

"Shut up," I said, reversing out of the driveway, and heading back onto the road.

Jack impolitely answered some business calls in the car on the way there, while I sat in silent irritation. After fifteen minutes, I finally turned to him and blurted, "Turn off the fucking phone."

"I'll call you back, David," he said, hanging up. "Well, that was rude."

"Calling people in my car is rude."

"It's for work," he said. "Do you remember what it's like to have a job?"

"I work at the coffee shop a couple times a week," I said.

“That’s not a real job.” He rolled his eyes. “Are you on some type of emotional leave from work right now?”

“What work?”

“Whatever you did in New York,” he said.

“Oh.” Josie had sent numerous emails and even called twice. I ignored all of them. Finally, last week, she sent a stern and unemotional email declaring my resignation from my position. I cared so little that I had forgotten. “I was fired.”

“Jesus, Olivia. What do you mean you were fired?”

My eyes were on the road but I could tell he was staring at me, pitying me now more than ever.

“I mean I was fired.”

“Are you living at home full time now?” He asked.

“It seems like it.” I heard him sigh. “Look, I don’t have a place to live right now, okay? Me and Ashton—”

“Broke up. Yeah, yeah, I know.” He fiddled with the heat, and turned it down. “I just wish you would act more like an adult.”

I turned the heat as far up as it would go.

Jack made a pot of coffee while I turned the computer on. The drive back to Jack’s seemed like it lasted forever. We sat in silence, with the laptop in the backseat. It was old, just about eight years. It was the first generation of Apple laptops that had a webcam on them. It seemed to take longer than usual for it start up, and I felt sweat pool on my upper lip.

“It’s ready!” I shouted. I was immediately embarrassed at how loud and excited I was because Jack seemed so calm and collected.

He sat down next to me on the couch. He set the two cups of coffee down, on coasters of course, and leaned in to look at the screen.

“Where do we start?” he asked.

We opened all the files that were on his desktop. There was a lot of work, most of it unfinished. There were mostly stories and poems, some really long, others short. There was one file that wasn’t named anything that just had a list of names. *Jamie, Taylor, Steven, Max...* The list was two pages long.

“Probably character names,” Jack said, pushing my hand off the mouse pad and taking over control. “Let’s look at his music.”

His iTunes library was selective, and I didn’t expect anything else. Scott was never fond of excess. He didn’t have a phone for most of his life because he didn’t believe in it. Then he had one of those pay as you go phones that you buy from the super market. I think he upgraded to a flip phone at some point, but he still never used it. The only reason he had a laptop is because my mom got it for him when he finally decided he was going to take classes at community college, which he only did because Kyle was doing it too. He stopped going up to them almost immediately.

Jack was obviously bored with the music collection, because he minimized the tab and opened up photos. I made a mental note to go back to iTunes library and import it to mine, so that I could listen to what he did before he died.

“Look, it’s Mandy,” Jack said, when the photos opened.

I almost didn't recognize her because she was blonde in the pictures. But that was her—same eyes, same bee-stung lips. She was kissing him on the cheek in one of the pictures, which she must have paid him to let her take, because Scott McKinley did not do cutesy things like that. Especially not on camera.

There were almost no photographs in his computer from before he met Mandy. There was the picture of Bella that Jack emailed all of us when she'd been born.

"I can't believe he kept this," Jack said.

There was also a picture of our entire family at Easter from when I was seventeen, and a picture of Scott and me from my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Then there was a huge gap until Mandy came along.

"They must have been dating," I said, as Jack flipped through more pictures of them.

Scott and Mandy smiling in bed together, Scott and Mandy at a bar, Scott and Mandy at some random diner. Then there was a picture of Mandy smiling in a small, unkempt room with beige walls and a purple rug. Her hair was the same color that it was now. She was standing next to a window. The night was so dark it looked like the glass had been painted black. She was just in a bra and underwear. And she was pregnant.

"Holy shit," Jack said, voicing my own opinion when he did. I stayed silent. He flipped through a couple more pictures.

There were some more snapshots of a very pregnant Mandy, and one of Scott touching her huge stomach. She was still skinny everywhere else, though. Arms and legs still toned, with a beach ball for a stomach. There were only two pictures left. One was of Mandy, in the hospital, holding a baby. Their baby? She was sweaty, had no makeup on,

and really needed to touch up her roots, but she looked beautiful. Her face was flushed, but she was beaming. The baby was small and red with dark hair. But the eyes were closed and it was hard to make out a face.

The last picture was taken of all three of them in the same room with the purple carpet. Mandy had her arm around Scott, who was holding the baby, looking down at him, as the baby looked up at his father. I *think* Scott was the father. Who else would be? I almost cried, but I couldn't, not with Jack sitting right next to me, with his mouth agape, and his eyes wide.

We stared at the picture in silence for longer than felt comfortable.

“Jack.”

“Don't, just...don't. I—I need a minute.” He breathed in deeply, and then out. “In fact, I need a couple minutes.” He got up off the couch, opened the front door, and walked out. I gave him about thirty seconds and then followed him.

He was sitting on the front stoop, smoking a cigarette.

“Thought you didn't smoke,” I said.

“I do when my late brother has a secret baby somewhere in this world,” he replied, taking a drag.

“It may not be his.”

“Well, then who's is it?”

It was a good question, and also one that I could not answer.

“Besides,” he added, “That word document, the one with all the names? They were probably name ideas for his baby.”

I hadn't even thought of that. Jack was probably right. I sat down next to him.

“Where did you even get that thing?” I asked, nodding towards the cigarette he was putting into his mouth.

“Well, you know I used to smoke,” he said.

“No, I didn’t,” I said. I wondered what else I didn’t know, what I would never know about my brother.

“Well recently, I’ve had a slight relapse,” he said. He looked at it, and watched it burn. “It’s gross. This is a death stick,” he said. “I used to smoke a pack a day, back when I was your age.” He shoved me, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“Back when you were my age all you did was yell at Scott every time you found him smoking...or drinking...or—”

“That’s what big brothers are supposed to do,” he said. “I wish you guys had listened to me more.”

“I wish you had been nicer,” I said. I took the cigarette from him, dropped it on the stoop, and put it out with my foot. “What the fuck do we do now?”

Mandy didn’t pick up her phone until the third time I called it.

“Hey. Look, I’m at work right now—”

“Why didn’t you tell me about the baby?”

Silence on the other end of the phone. I thought she might hang up, but she didn’t. Jack was sitting next to me, watching my face intently, even though the entire call was on speaker phone.

“The timing wasn’t right. Not right after...” I heard someone in the background. “I didn’t know what to do.”



“So the baby is his, then?”

“Yes.”

“Shit,” Jack muttered.

I rubbed at my eyes, smearing the small amount of mascara that I had put on earlier in the day.

“What is the name?” I asked. “The baby’s name?”

“Henry.”

“A baby boy,” I couldn’t help but say. “Scott has a baby boy.” She didn’t say anything. “I want to meet him, Mandy.”

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Scott told your mom about Henry when he found out. She didn’t want Henry to be a part of his life. I don’t want to involve you in something she didn’t want.”

“My mother knew?”

It took her a few seconds to answer. Finally, “That’s what Scott told me.”

“I’ll call you back,” I said.

“Wait! Olivia—”

I hung up the phone, grabbed my keys off the coffee table and my coat off of the couch.

“Olivia!” Jack grabbed my arm as I started to put on my jacket. “What are you doing?”

“Mom knew!” I was screaming. “She fucking knew and she didn’t tell us. She didn’t tell us! Who does that, Jack? Who does that? Who keeps a *human life* a secret?”

I turned to go, and Jack grabbed my arm again.

“Stop. Calm down before you head home.”

I shook him off of me. “I’m twenty-six years old. You can’t tell me what to do any more.”

I slammed the door on the way out.

# 14.

I raced home, running two red lights on the way. When I walked in the door, my parents were sitting on the couch watching Jeopardy.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I cried, storming towards my mother.

“Olivia, what has gotten into you? What are you going on about?” she asked, her eyes still firmly set on the television.

“You knew!” I screamed. “You knew about Scott’s baby, and you didn’t tell anyone.”

Her face changed, her lips tightened, her eyes filled with something I had never seen in her before. She muted the television.

“Leave the room, Kurt,” she said, quietly turning her gaze towards me.

“Scott has a baby?” His voice came out in whisper.

“He deserves to know, too!”

My dad stayed seated, staring at his hands in his lap. She stood up, but I towered over her by about five inches.

“What was I supposed to do?” Her eyes had started to water. “Scott had so many problems! And then I heard he was having a baby. And with that trashy girl, Mandy, too. They weren’t even married! They weren’t even together when the baby was born, Olivia. It was a disaster!” She turned to look at my dad, who was still staring at his hands. He seemed to have forgotten how to move. “Of course I didn’t tell anyone, because none of us needed that in our lives. That baby would have ruined things for us!”

“You mean it would have ruined things for *you!*” I shouted. “For your precious *image.*”

“Even after he died,” my dad said quietly. “Why wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Why is everything my fault? I don’t know why Scott was such a screw up! I did everything I could to help him! I wanted him to go to college. I wanted him to stop hanging out with those troubled friends of his, and to stop doing drugs! I wanted him to stop being an idiot!” She was screaming so loudly I was convinced the neighbors could hear us. “He was always doing things that made me look bad! Then he had that baby, and I didn’t want it to exist. It was going to cause problems. Can’t you see that? And then he went and he killed himself, after all I did for him. It wasn’t my fault!”

She was sobbing, still standing in front of me, as I looked down at her. She would not get my pity.

“Hannah...” My father.

“What have you ever done for *anyone?*” Me. “Bitch.”

“It wasn’t my fault! IT WASN’T MY FAULT!” Her makeup ran down her face, and for the first time in my life I thought she looked ugly. Old and ugly. A woman ravaged with rage and hate. I didn’t recognize her. I was scared of what she had become.

“It *is* your fault,” I said steadily, staring into her eyes that resembled Jack’s so heavily. Too dark, too intense. But I did not look away. “You always have been, and always will be, a self centered, anger ridden woman. No wonder Scott killed himself. It’s too bad it wasn’t you that did it. Would have done this entire family a favor.”

I felt the sting of the slap before I registered what had happened. I brought my hand to my face, where it already seared with pain and heat. I shook my head. “Fuck you,” I muttered, turning from her and running up the stairs.

“You don’t ever speak to me like that again!” She was screaming at me. “Get the hell out of my house!”

I was one step ahead of her. I grabbed a suitcase that I hadn’t unpacked yet from Ashton’s, and hauled it down the stairs with me.

“Get out!” My mom was screaming over and over again, as I headed down the stairs and out the door.

I threw my bag in my car and took a second to breathe. I needed to decide where to go. As I sat there, my father rushed out of the house and knocked on my window. I rolled it down.

“Olivia, Olivia. Calm down. Are you okay?”

“No.” I closed my eyes. “No. I’m not okay. Mom is a bad person. Can’t you see that?”

“She’s just different from you. Olivia, don’t leave,” he said.

“You’re too nice for your own good, Dad. You’re living with the fucking devil, and you want all of us to be best friends.” I opened my eyes. “I can’t just get along with her anymore, I can’t play nice. I just can’t do it. Not since she hid Henry from us.”

“It’s a boy?” My dad asked.

“It’s a boy.”

His eyes were downturned, somehow grayer and smaller than I remembered. The skin around them was slowly closing in, claiming those eyes as their own. My dad looked

so young for so long, and now, as I stared at him from my car, I saw how much he had aged. Suddenly his nose was sagging, his lips low and thin. Was it time? Was it living with my mother?

“I don’t know what to do,” he said.

“Join the club.”

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’ll go to Kyle’s for a little bit. But I’m going to meet that baby,” I told him. My hands were gripping the wheel so tight that my knuckles had turned white. “Don’t you want to meet your grandson?”

“I have a grandson,” he said, and he knelt onto the ground, grasping onto my open car window for support. “Oh, God. I have a grandson.”

“Dad, you’re better than her.”

“There’s more to it than that.” He shook his head. “There’s more to it than better or worse. She is stubborn and pig-headed, but...I don’t know. I just don’t know anything anymore.”

I knew he wouldn’t go against my mother, because it wasn’t in his nature, and no matter how much I hated it, I had to at least accept it. When I looked at him, small and fragile outside my car, I wasn’t even sure if he loved her, but he was always going to support her. It was enough to break my heart.

“Daddy, I’m gonna go now, okay?”

He nodded, got up, and took a few steps away from my car. I pulled out slowly, while he stayed in the driveway, looking painfully broken, as I drove away.

“You could have at least called,” Kyle said after I put my suitcase on his bed.

“Sorry I don’t know about my family meltdowns in advance.”

He hugged me, those big hands dancing in my hair; which had grown into an uncomfortable length in between a pixie and bob.

“Scott has a baby,” I said into his chest. He stopped playing with my hair, stopped hugging me.

“What?”

“With Mandy. That girl we met at the wake. They have a baby.”

He didn’t say anything, just walked to his bed and sat down. I was still standing next to his desk.

“Scott...he had...*has*...a child?” He looked up at me.

“My mom knew. She didn’t even tell anyone. Fucking bitch,” I said, anger still rippling through me.

“Maybe she just thought it would be too complicated. Maybe she didn’t know what to do. Do *you* even know what to do?”

“Are you siding with her?”

Kyle shook his head. “I’m not siding with anyone, Olive. Okay? Calm down. I’m just...trying to understand her. I’m trying to understand everything.”

“Well, don’t. She’s...she’s *horrible*.” I paced. “I can’t even remember the last time she told me she loved me.”

“Well, when is the last time you told her you loved *her*?” he asked, meeting my gaze.

He went to his side table, took out a small baggie of weed, and started to pack a bowl.

“Are you getting high right now?” I asked.

“Yeah. All of this is so crazy. It’s unreal.” He stopped what he was doing and stared at the floor. “I would have never thought that Scott would have a kid...he was the last person on earth who would have had one...”

“Well, he does.”

“Baby,” Kyle said, looking up at me. “I don’t know what you want me to say. *I* don’t know what to say.” He took a lighter out of his pocket. He inhaled, he exhaled. He looked at me. “The world is falling apart, isn’t it?”

“I want you to feel this as much as I do,” I said.

“Olive, I don’t know what that means.” Inhale, exhale.

I didn’t know what it meant, either. But I knew he wasn’t doing it. I took my phone out of my pocket and saw that I had a missed call from Jack and two from Mandy.

“Excuse me, I have to make a couple calls.”

If Kyle heard me, he didn’t show it. He was somewhere else, somewhere where none of this existed, somewhere where he didn’t need to deal with it. I let him stay in that place while I left the room and called Mandy.

“I’m sorry,” was what she said when she picked up. “I didn’t mean to make you upset, Olivia. I’m just...”

“I know. Mandy, I need to meet him.”



“I think I owe that much to Scott.” She was quiet, her voice distant and cloudy. “He looks like him. He looks like you.” My words caught in my throat, and all I could do was breathe in and out.

“I get out of work tomorrow at five. Do you have a pencil or something? I’ll give you my address.”

I grabbed a pen that was on Kyle’s kitchen table. “Go ahead,” I said.

“1401 Pershing Boulevard. Reading, Pennsylvania. And the zip code is 19607, in case you need it for your GPS.”

I wrote the information down on my hand.

“Okay,” I said. “I got it.”

“I think you coming will be good for me.” She was almost talking to herself. “I think I need to be around someone right now.”

“I have to bring Jack,” I said. “Can I? Henry is his nephew, too.”

“Okay. I have a futon. One of you will have to sleep on the floor.” She sounded so tired, her voice scratchy like she had been screaming. She was probably just worn down. I wanted to hug her. I wanted someone to hug me.

When I hung up, I put Mandy’s address into my phone, and headed back into Kyle’s room. He was still sitting on his bed, but he had turned the TV on and was watching intently.

“I’m going to see him tomorrow,” I told Kyle. Scott was gone, yes, but this child, this child was still here. What if the resemblance was uncanny? What if he was just like his father?” I lay down next to Kyle.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Olive?”

“He is the reason you call me that,” I said. “I’m going to meet his son.”

Kyle nodded, but I could tell he didn’t really comprehend how important this was to me. “Just don’t get your hopes up, okay? I know how you get. Just see what happens.”

“I miss him so much,” I said.

“Me too,” he said.

“Why did he have to die?” I said, almost to myself.

“Maybe he was bringing you back to me,” Kyle said.

“Maybe.”

We held on to each other for a long time, his body strong and warm against mine.

When I woke up in the middle of the night to get a drink of water, even though we had moved around since then, we were stuck together in a similar position, with him protecting me against whatever it was I needed saving from.

# 15.

I showed up at Jack's office around ten. I knew if I called him, he wouldn't come. But I needed him to come with me. I needed him to be there.

I knew where he worked because Scott interned there for a while, and I used to drop him off or pick him up sometimes. Besides, I knew the name of his firm. All I had to do was search it on Google maps, and I had the exact address in seconds.

"Hi, is Jack here?" I asked the secretary when I entered the building.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm his sister."

She looked me up and down, no doubt trying to find the physical similarity between my brother and me. It was hard to find. My father said sometimes when we smiled, our eyes looked similar, when they were crinkled up and squinted.

"I'll let him know you're here," the secretary said. "Just wait one moment."

I sat down in one of the chairs, while the girl behind the desk called Jack. In a couple of minutes, he strode into the waiting room.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Uh, no." I looked over at the secretary, who was watching us intently.

"Let's go to my office," he said, leading me out of the waiting room and into a hallway. We took a right, and then headed into an open door. I'd never been in his office before. It was clean, and uncluttered, with a picture of Laura and Belle on his desk.

He sat down, and I sat in the chair opposite his desk, as if I were a client he was meeting with.

“Do you have vacation days?” I spoke before he could ask me why I was there.

“I do.”

“Okay. How would you feel about going to Reading, Pennsylvania, and meeting Henry?”

He didn't say anything for a moment, just stared at me. I thought of my mother. I broke our eye contact and looked at the floor. I didn't want to think about my mother.

“When?”

“Today. Soon.” I picked at my cuticles.

“Stop doing that,” Jack said. “Besides, I can't go today. I'm at work. Is that the only reason you stopped by?” He started to stand.

“But Mandy said we could come visit. As long as it's after five, when she gets out of work.”

“Olivia. I can't just uproot my life and do this. Not right now.” He looked at me. “You can't ask me to do this. I have other things to do than worry about what Scott got himself into before he died.”

“You sound like mom.” Now I was the one who was starting to stand.

“Olivia.”

“You said it before, Jack. He was your brother, too. Don't you want to see his baby?”

He massaged the back of his neck and closed his eyes before he spoke. “I’m scared,” he finally said. “I’m scared of all of this. Of everything that’s happened. Of everything that can happen.”

“And you think I’m not? Jack, I need you. I can’t do this alone.”

It took him half a minute to answer. “Olivia.”

“Jack, please. You know we have to,” I said.

I sat at a nearby café with Scott’s laptop while I waited for Jack to finish a couple things up at work. Then he would go home to pack a suitcase, and double back to meet me. He wanted to drive us, so I agreed to leave my car in his office’s parking lot until we got back.

“I don’t trust your car to make a trip that far,” he’d said before kicking me out of his office. I think Jack just didn’t want me paying for gas, which was nice of him I guess.

I looked through the pictures that we’d found yesterday, over and over again. I stared at Mandy’s pregnant stomach, and then later, pictures of Henry once he had been born. The coffee I had ordered from the barista was cold and unappetizing, but I downed all of it within ten minutes of being there.

I shut the computer and stared at my empty coffee cup. It was hard to be Scott’s sister, but it was probably harder to be Scott’s parent. The amount of stress and anxiety that my mom and dad must have gone through dealing with Scott all this time. What my mother did was still unforgivable, though. Nothing would change that. *Nothing.*

Jack met me at the parking lot one hour and twenty minutes after I finished my coffee at the café. I transferred my packed bag into his car and plugged in Mandy's address into the GPS on my phone.

"You know there's no going back from this, right?" he said, looking at me, looking *through* me.

"I know."

About a half hour into the ride, and I passed out. Restlessness always wore me out, made me tired. And once the silence of the car and the movement of the wheels on the road became constant, my body caved in on itself and accepted the relief of sleep.

# 16.

It was fourteen minutes past six when we pulled into the apartment complex that matched Mandy's address. The apartments weren't nice, and it was obvious that the only reason someone would live here was because the rent was cheap. It had to be. The building was ugly and gray. It reminded me of a factory.

I called Mandy and told her we were here. She said she would meet us in the parking lot because it would be hard to find her exact apartment. It had started to rain about a half hour before we arrived, and as Jack and I stepped out of the car, I pulled my hood up to protect my hair from the downpour.

I saw Mandy before I saw Henry. She had on an oversized hoodie and jeans. She held her hands out in front of her, feeling the rain on her palms. She turned behind her, and there he was, tentatively behind his mother. Scott's son.

He was just a foot behind Mandy, with light brown hair, a round face, and a flat little nose that I wanted to touch to know it was real. He was smiling, and quite sure of himself, even though it was obvious he hadn't been walking for more than a couple months. I dropped my bag, left Jack, and ran towards Mandy. No. Not towards Mandy, towards Henry. Towards my nephew.

When I reached him, he just stood there, staring at me. The rain was steady now, and he had on a blue waterproof jacket and small rain booties. I wanted to hold them in my hands just to prove how small and light they were.

Mandy knelt down, so that she was equal to both Henry and me.

“This is Henry,” she said quietly. “Henry, this is Olivia.”

He pointed his little hand at the sky and said, “Wet.” He pointed again, and repeated, “Wet.”

And it just made me feel so hollow, with his little hand in the air, and the fact that he didn’t understand who his dad was, or that he had taken his own life, just as Henry’s was starting. *Why did you leave us?*

I could see both Mandy and Scott in Henry. He had her lips, puffy and pink. But, oh God, he had Scott’s eyes. Big and round and a brown that was so light it was almost gold. People used to say Scott’s eyes were like a cat’s because they were so close to being yellow.

I missed Scott so much and I saw him in this tiny person. I put my hands on his face, on his small, small face, and I saw Scott staring back at me.

“Why did you leave us?” I said it aloud, even though I didn’t mean to.

“What?” Jack asked.

“Why did he leave us?” I asked everyone and no one at all.

Mandy looked down at her feet and Jack slid his hands in his pockets.

“Why did he leave us?” I asked louder this time, Henry taking a step back from my raised voice.

Then Mandy was patting my back and Jack was there, helping me up off my knees, where my jeans were soaked through. And Henry was just standing there, staring at me. He pointed at my legs. “Wet,” he said again, a smile forming on his face. His little, tiny, teeth exposed.

“Wet,” I said back. “Wet.”



The apartment was small, smaller than I expected. Jack disapproved, which I could tell from the way his eyes scanned over the place with slight disgust that he didn't try very hard to hide. There was only one bedroom, and it was the room with the purple rug where Mandy had posed, half naked and pregnant, not too long ago. Henry's crib was at the foot of Mandy's bed, unmade and covered in a leopard print comforter that matched the sheets.

She ordered Thai takeout for dinner, which Jack insisted on paying for, while Henry ate some kind of soupy mixture that Mandy pulled out of the fridge and heated up. He sat in a high chair and stuffed his face while I mushed my food around on my plate. I wasn't hungry.

"How old is he?" Jack asked. Jack didn't look over at Henry when he asked, just straight ahead at Mandy.

"Oh, uh just about a year," she said.

"So, did you and Scott live here, or...?" Jack asked.

"Scott and I dated for a little over a year before I got pregnant. He was staying here with me until we split up, and then he moved to Montreal. I don't even know what he was doing there. Anyway, I realized I was pregnant a couple of months after he left, and I told him." She looked over at Henry before continuing. "It was hard to get a hold of him because he didn't have a phone at the time." She sighed. "You know how hard it is to reach him."

"Then what?" I prompted.

“And then...he didn't know what he wanted to do. But I wanted the baby, even if he didn't.” She had stopped eating completely. “About six or seven months into the pregnancy, he showed up outside my door and said he was ready to be a father.” She smiled into her lap. “And he did it. He did it.”

Mandy got up from the table, and headed to the sink to refill her water glass. She took a couple sips before returning to the table.

“He wasn't living here because we weren't really back together or anything...and...it was all so confusing. But I still loved him, you know. And he loved me. We just couldn't stay apart, but he made it so damn difficult to be with him. He was...he was so troubled.”

“I know,” Jack said.

Mandy wasn't looking at anyone, just staring at her hands, which were placed on the table. She drummed her nails against the table, still long and black, for a couple seconds before speaking again.

“But then I thought he was getting it together.” She swallowed, the lump travelling down her tanned neck as she did so. “I really did. He got a job at a car dealership, and he was helping me with Henry. I bartend on the weekends and during the week I teach a couple dance classes at this studio that's pretty close to the apartment...”

Henry had stopped eating and was now staring at his mother. She waved at him. He broke out into a smile and waved back. The little amount of food I had eaten was heavy in my stomach. It was too hot in the kitchen. It was too hot everywhere. I was melting.

“And then one day, I went over to pick up a check from him...” her voice trailed off.

I was sweating, and my breathing was getting heavier. I felt a drop in my stomach, deep and cold. A panic attack was starting. I didn't want to hear this. I *couldn't* hear this. Why did I have to hear this story? Why was she telling me any of this? Why wasn't Scott here? Why wasn't he *here*?

“And he was just there, you know? On the ground. I thought he had just passed out. He did that sometimes, if he had too much to drink. Or if he was taking something.”

“Jesus,” Jack muttered.

Henry continued putting his hands in his food and licking it off of his fingers. When would he know about his father? Mandy was speaking quietly, but her voice boomed in my ears. I was going to implode.

“But I shook him, and he wouldn't wake up,” she said.

Why was she still talking?

“He wouldn't wake up, and so I called the cops, and they sent an ambulance.”

Jack had stopped eating, too. Now he was looking at me, while I stared straight ahead at nothingness. The nothingness in front of me filled me up—created a nothingness that I had grown from the inside. I had *become* nothing.

“And when I knew I lost him, I felt so alone. More alone than I'd ever felt in my entire life.”

I pushed my chair out from the table. The noise of the wooden legs against the tile floor was louder than I expected and Henry screamed. Jack got up to follow me, but I was already headed to the couch, where my coat was.

“Olivia!” Mandy yelled, still seated.

Henry looked so much like Scott, and he had those little hands and Scott would never use his hands again. Jesus, Scott was dead and he had done it to himself. My body was numb. I was shaking.

Mandy kept calling my name, over and over, while Henry screamed and Jack stood, watching me grab my jacket and run out the door. I had finally shattered. The black hole had swallowed me up.

# 17.

I ran out the door, into the rain, and started walking. There was a sidewalk for a little while, but then it disappeared and turned into a busier road. I kept walking. After a mile or so, I was completely soaked and freezing cold. Blisters had formed on my feet and I could barely feel them because my thoughts were so far away from anything tangible. Finally, I made my way to a strip mall that contained some seedy bar. *Lola's* was illuminated on a buzzing, neon light. So I walked in and I drank.

By ten o'clock I was extremely drunk, polishing off my sixth whiskey sour of the night. I usually wasn't a fan of that drink, but Scott used to like it and so tonight I bathed in it. I let it consume me. I drank and I drank, until my words were slurred and my vision slightly off-kilter. I wasn't even sure if I had enough money in my wallet to pay for everything I'd ordered. Three missed calls from Mandy, four from Jack.

By eleven o'clock I found myself accepting a drink from a young man, or more realistically a boy, who told me it was his birthday last week and that he had just turned twenty-one. The thought crossed my mind that he could have been lying and had just used a fake ID to get in. I didn't care.

I'd recently gone to the bathroom, and seen myself in the mirror. Frizzy, still-damp hair, and barely any makeup. My skin looked shiny and sweaty from all the rain that had fallen onto it. It was stretched too thin over my face. My eyes weren't my eyes.

But it was Wednesday night and there were only three women in the bar, including me. One didn't have all of her teeth, and the other was morbidly obese. I was his best option. Really, I was his *only* option.

I can't remember what he said, but he was talking to me. He was blonde with blue eyes and cute enough. He was touching my shoulder, laughing at jokes I didn't know I was telling. Another two missed calls from Mandy, none from Jack.

His hands weren't as big as Kyle's; they felt too small when they lingered on my waist. Where was Kyle, anyway? He would be upset if he could see my now, drunkenly shoving my alcohol-sodden tongue down some kid's throat. I imagined that it was him I was kissing, but then I would open my eyes and he wasn't there. Just this boy. This boy who I wanted and didn't want all at the same time. But he kept kissing me, and I kept kissing him back.

By midnight I was in a cab back to his house. He was too young for me, and blood thumped in my ears. When I looked outside, the world was a blur. I wanted it to be that way forever. Another missed call from Jack.

"My mom's not home," he told me as we slipped inside his house.

"You still live with your mom?" I was screaming, but I didn't realize.

"Shh," he told me. "Yeah. But she's away for the week."

I didn't care, I didn't care, I didn't care. I felt sick, and scared, but I followed him up the stairs and into a dirty bedroom that reminded me of a frat boy's. He probably *was* a frat boy, home from college on some sort of break. Where was Kyle? I should have called Kyle.

His mouth was too wet, too sticky. It didn't feel right, the way his hands travelled around my body. My head hurt. My head hurt so bad that I thought it would never go away, that this incessant thumping against my brain was forever. When he tried to take off my shirt, I pushed him off of me. What was his name? I couldn't remember.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

*No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.*

"No."

He called me a cab. He walked me to the door when it arrived and slipped a twenty into my hands.

"Sorry," he said.

What was his name? I would never know.

The cab dropped me off at Mandy's apartment complex. I sat in the parking lot for over an hour and vomited. It was thick and heavy and painful. Tears streamed down my cheeks and I hated myself more than I ever had before. I was piss drunk in the parking lot of my dead brother's ex-girlfriend's house. And they had a son. I wanted to stop throwing up. I wanted to curl up in a ball and wake up as someone that wasn't me.

*Why did you leave me?*

"Fuck you," I said out loud. No, I screamed it, at the top of my lungs, the cold air burning the inside of my throat. "Fuck you!" I wanted Scott to hear it, to feel it. I was so wet and so cold, because it wouldn't stop raining. It wouldn't stop fucking raining. "Fuck you," I said over and over and over, until my throat was so dry that I felt like it would crumble completely if I spoke again.

I needed water. The door was unlocked, and I stumbled into the kitchen. I tried to find a glass in the cupboard. I dropped it, and it broke on the floor, the noise loud and jarring. I clamped my hands over my ears, but it was too late. I had already heard the glass scream out in pain. I tried to pick up the pieces, but I cut my hand. I tried again, and I cut my hand again.

There was commotion in Mandy's room. I heard movement and voices, and then Jack walked out, shirtless, and groggily turned on the light. There I was, crouched on the glass-covered floor, blood dripping from my hands. And Jack was shirtless. Jack was shirtless coming out of Mandy's room.

“What the fuck?” I shouted. “What is wrong with you?!”

For the second time that night, I ran out the door. But this time, Jack followed me out.

“Stop!” His grip on my arm was too tight, and it was still raining. Why was it still raining?

“Did you fuck her?” I screamed, wiggling out of his grasp. “You're disgusting.” I was scared that I would throw up again. I closed my eyes, tried to stop the spinning. Everything was spinning, and I was stuck there, forced to feel it all.

“It's pouring out. Can we talk in the car?” He had put on his shirt before coming outside, and it was already wet, clinging to his body.

“No. Get away from me.”

“You're drunk,” he said. “And you're bleeding.”

I looked down at my hands, the blood starting to congeal. It was beautiful and dark, sickly sweet. He grabbed my arm again, and he led me towards his car. He was



stronger than me, and even though I tried my best to get him to let go, he held on. His grip burned into my skin.

“Get in,” he said as we got to the car. “Don’t make me force you in. Please.

I sat in the passenger seat, leaving some blood on the car door, and he walked around to the driver’s side. He got in. He closed and locked the doors. Jack looked at me but I was looking out the window. The sky was angry. I was angry. I couldn’t remember the last time I wasn’t.

He opened the window and lit a cigarette. He handed me one, and a lighter. I rolled down my window, lit it, and inhaled.

“Do you want to talk, or do you want to sit?” he asked, without turning to look at me. “I’m not being condescending,” he added. “Maybe we should just...exist for a minute.”

I didn’t want to exist anywhere with him, but I didn’t say anything. I was cold and damp, fighting the urge to put my cigarette out on his arm. But I needed its warmth, the comfort of the smoke inside of me. I was on fire.

“Olivia,” Jack finally said, “Where were you?”

“Out.” I finished my cigarette and flicked it out the window, but I didn’t roll it up. I liked the sound of the rain.

“You reek like booze.”

“Yeah, well, I found a bar.” I turned to him. “What do you care what I do, anyway? You don’t give a shit about me, or anyone.” I was fumbling through my words.

“Not Laura, or Belle. Definitely not Scott. You’re disgusting.”

“I’m not,” he said. “I’m not, Olivia.”

I flung myself over the barrier between the two seats and pounded both fists into his chest while he tried to push me off of him. I wasn't strong, but I was determined. I wouldn't stop, not even as my tears blinded my eyes, not even when Jack dropped his cigarette and it fell onto the floor. He clumsily stomped it out as I continued to attack him. Finally he threw me back in the passenger seat.

“What is wrong with you?”

“What is wrong with *you*? You're so *selfish*! It's always been that way, and it still is. Our brother committed suicide and you're shirtless in Mandy's room.”

I was crying hard now—out of sadness, anger, frustration. Nothing was happening the way it was supposed to be. We shouldn't even be here, Scott should. He should be raising his child with Mandy, while Jack did whatever it was that Jack did, and I stayed in Manhattan with Ashton in a fog of half-happiness that I would never get back now.

“Is it really so hard to care about someone that isn't you?” I forced my gaze out the window. I wanted to look at anything that wasn't Jack right then. “Scott did it. He cared about people. He cared about *me*.”

Jack threw his head back and laughed. Loud and mean and sharp, his laughter took up the entire car.

“I'm so sick of you putting Scott on some type of pedestal. I'm the bad brother, the one you never liked, and *maybe* even the one you wished had died, right?” He wasn't laughing anymore. He was shoving his words at me. Using them as a weapon, hurting me. “Scott was your best friend, right? He was nice, and funny, and *perfect*.”

Jack had become aggressive. He was too close to me, too loud. Those dark eyes glaring directly into mine. His body was completely turned to me, and he was pointing in my face.

“You act like you don’t matter to me, like you don’t mean anything to me. That’s bullshit,” Jack said, reading my face. “I have been there for you. You know I have.”

The phantom weight on my chest that still woke me in the middle of the night had returned. So did the anger and the feeling of being small and unimportant. It all flooded back.

“I don’t want to talk about that,” I said. “I don’t.”

“I know. But Scott was a complete asshole that night. He was a complete asshole *a lot* of the time. But I’m always the bad guy. I’m the one you hate. I’m the one you blame.”

“That’s not true.”

The wind was loud and it was raining so hard that the water looked like it was falling sideways. I prayed for the car to flood. I wanted us to drown in this temper tantrum from the sky.

“He wasn’t there for you then. And I was.”

I couldn’t look at Jack, because I couldn’t let him know that he was right. How could I allow myself to remember, when I’d conditioned myself to forget?

I stared at my hands. I saw it happen again and again and again. Scott was there, and he watched me leave. And he was laughing—a slow, deep, laugh that he only acquired when he was truly wasted. He was beyond wasted that night.

I slammed my eyes shut, and covered my ears with my hands. I just wanted to stop the laughter. I needed it to stop.

“I picked you up,” Jack continued. “I picked you both up. Look at me, Olivia. Look at me.”

I couldn't. I wouldn't. He gently removed my hands from my ears.

“Please, Olivia, look at me.”

When I finally opened my eyes, I wished I hadn't. How could such a strong man look so fragile? His shirt was ruffled and dirty, with some remnants of the blood from my hands. His hair was wet and messy, falling in his face. At any moment he was going to break.

“I'm sorry you got hurt,” he said. “But it hurt me, too. It hurt me, too.”

“You broke his nose,” I said.

“I may have exaggerated,” Jack said. “But I punched him really hard. He bled a lot. He was cursing at me, and trying to hit me back, but I fucked him up, Olivia. Real bad.” Suddenly his lips became a thin line, his eyes ravenous. “I can't believe someone would even—”

“It was my fault,” I said.

“Don't say stuff like that. You gave all of your second chances to Scott, even when he didn't deserve them. Save some for yourself.”

I didn't respond.

“It's okay,” he said. “It's okay, Olivia.”

But it wasn't because all of it was there again. It was there for me to fully experience, for the first time in a long time. The pressure on my chest, that gnawing

hollowness that you feel when you know something is wrong. And then the numbness that follows when you realize that all that wrongness happened, and it happened to *you*, and you'd never be you without it again. I was forced to see it again and feel it again. I was forced to remember.

It was the year I turned twenty, on the day before Thanksgiving. A holiday that was always held at our house. My mother went crazy every year, cleaning the house like a madwoman. She prepped food for days, sent out personalized invitations, by mail, to numerous family, friends, and *way* too many acquaintances. There were always around thirty people each year, some faces I recognized. Most that I didn't.

The house looked un-lived in that night, as Scott and I sat on my newly made bed, discussing the party that Nicky Kennedy was throwing. My mom hated Nicky Kennedy because he dropped out of school in eleventh grade and pumped gas at the Sunoco by our house. In her defense he *was* a loser, but he and Scott were friendly enough, given the fact that they skateboarded and smoked together sometimes. They were boys and that was how so many friendships formed with boys in this town.

It ended up working in our favor that the next day was Thanksgiving. Our mom wanted us out of the house and out of her hair as she scrubbed the stove, and defrosted the turkey. We told her we were going to a friend's house. She probably knew we were lying, but that night she didn't care.

"Don't get home too late," she told us. "I have to get up early tomorrow. I don't want you guys stomping around the house all loud at some ungodly hour." She didn't

look up when she spoke, but perused the fridge, making sure she had everything she needed for the holiday.

Sometimes I wished she had stopped us, told us not to go. Commanded we help her clean or cook. But she was in another world, and Scott and I were not a part of it. We hadn't been for a long time.

Jack was home, too, and Laura was coming over the next day. She would find out she was pregnant a couple of months later, and we would all rejoice because that is what you do when your successful brother and his gorgeous wife are expecting a baby. You act like it's some sort of miracle.

"Don't get too drunk," he said to us quietly, while our mother got the wine out from the cupboard and counted how many bottles we had. "You know how important tomorrow is to her."

Scott rolled his eyes, and maybe I'd followed suit. When I was with Scott, I adopted his mannerisms.

Within an hour and a half at Nicky Kennedy's, Scott had taken a couple painkillers and downed enough beer for two people. His eyes were glazed and his movements slowed. I didn't like it when he got like that, but I was wasted, too. Becky Finney fed me shots while she complained to me about how her boyfriend was cheating on her. But my mind was working slower than usual, and I couldn't keep track of what she was saying. The blunt I had shared with Scott and some faceless boys was a mistake, the buzz inside my head increasing. The foggiest was taking over.

"We're floating," Scott had slurred, his breath a mix of resin and stale beer.

I wanted to float with him forever.

I was sitting next to Scott, when Nicky grabbed my hand and pushed me into Jared Montanaro, a boy I'd had math class with in tenth grade. I couldn't make out his face, and his words sounded like loud mush that was being shoved into my ears. Nicky was smiling, and Jared was taking me into a room. And Scott saw the whole thing. Whether he was too drunk or high, or just didn't care enough, he didn't do anything. He watched, and continued to laugh with Nicky. Their laughter followed me all the way to the door. It wasn't until Jared closed it that the silence enveloped me.

I can't remember if I said anything, but it didn't really matter because *I* wasn't there. I was still floating; high above my body while Jared lay on top of me. Then I was crashing, and there was this weight on me, so much weight, crushing my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. I was choking on air and his words that I couldn't even hear. In and out of consciousness, I didn't own my body anymore. I wanted to come to and be alone. But Jared was there, on top of me, pressing on me, pressing into me. I had never felt so insignificant in my life. While I became a small speck of nothing in the room next to him, Scott continued to float. He floated without me.

I called Jack, and he got there quickly, trying to calm me down, trying to find Scott. He had me point out Jared to him before he threw both Scott and me in the car and locked us in. We didn't speak because I'd forgotten how to use my mouth, how to form words. I still can't remember how I'd even called Jack, how I was able to use my voice when all I wanted to do was pretend it didn't exist.

Did it? I hadn't used it in that room earlier. That room that smelled like teenage boy and had posters of half naked girls on the wall. That room with all the empty beer cans and the clothes all over the floor. *I* didn't exist anymore.

When Jack came back he had some blood on his shirt and he was yelling, screaming into Scott's ear.

*How could you bring her to a place like this? Why are you so fucked up? Why didn't you help her? What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you?*

And then we were home and Scott went into his room, and Jack followed me into mine. I sat in the shower and stared at my body, or what I thought was my body, until someone had proved to me that it was theirs. The water was so hot that it was burning my skin and I was screaming. When I came out, wrapped in a towel, Jack was waiting on my bed.

"Shh," he told me. "Shh." And then, "I'm sorry, Olivia." And then, "I broke that motherfuckers nose, you know. I broke his whole smug fucking face." And then, nothing.

He sat there with me that night until I fell asleep. When I woke up, he was gone. And so was the night before.

So I put on my nice sweater and the skirt that my mother had picked out. I curled my hair and put on some lipstick. I walked down the stairs and I faced all those people, all those *strangers*, in our house. I poured them their wine, I laughed at their jokes, but mostly I stayed silent. Silence allowed for things to be ignored, to be pushed down so far for so long that they are forgotten. We allowed it to disappear. *I* had allowed it to disappear. Silence became my ally.

All I could hear was the rain and I was crying, and gasping for air. I was small again. So small that I had forgotten where I was, or maybe I had always been this lost.



“Olivia!”

I hadn't realized that Jack was holding me, just like he had the night it happened. He tried to calm me. His words flitted in and out of my ears.

“Olivia, stop. Stop.” Then, “Olivia, don't blame yourself. Don't blame yourself.” Then, “I hate this. I love you, okay? I love you. Please, stop crying.”

Eventually I did. I don't know how long it took, but Jack held me the entire time. He smelled like rain and sweat and cigarettes. But he also smelled like how he always did; like fresh cotton. I leaned into him and cried until I didn't have any more tears left. It was then that I asked.

“Did you fuck her?” I had started to lose my voice.

My mouth tasted like dirty metal and mold. I halfheartedly scanned the car for a mint or gum, to no avail. Jack lit a cigarette before he answered me.

“Yes.” He looked like he was in pain. “I'm sorry.”

My head hurt, and Jack's words pounded over and over again in my ears. He looked like a statue, sitting straight up, with a cigarette in one hand. The other hand was on the steering wheel, and those eyes that he shared with my mother were on me.

“Why?”

“I don't know,” he said.

“Why'd you have to go and do that?” I asked.

Scott had let go of me by now, and I was leaning against the car door while he blew a puff of smoke out of his open window.

“Laura and I are getting separated.” He stared straight out the window when he said it.

“You didn’t tell me,” I said.

“Before now, we didn’t really speak much, did we?”

Scott had forced us together as much as he had pushed us apart. Jack went on, even though I hadn’t responded.

“Her excuse was that I was busy all the time, that I was a workaholic. She’s right of course. But that wasn’t really why. We just fell out of love. As sad and blunt as that is, it’s true. We just became two separate people.” He shook his head, his hair still wet.

“But you gave me such shit when me and Ashton broke up,” I said.

It smelled like cigarette smoke and some type of artificial freshener in the car. Nausea overcame me. I threw the car door open and expelled whatever was left in my stomach. Jack silently held my hair back while my insides contracted painfully.

“The separation still hasn’t even been finalized yet, okay? And while I was trying to figure out what the fuck to do, Scott goes and kills himself. Laura and me...there was too much silence, too much coldness. She was miserable. I just wanted to see her smile again.” He let go of me, and slammed his hands against the steering wheel. “And now we are in bumblefuck Pennsylvania, in a car, in the rain, and you’re vomiting out of the side of my car and I don’t know what the fuck to do.”

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, eased back into the seat, and shut the car door. The scent of vomit wafted between the two of us.

“You disappeared and our brother is dead and I don’t know what the hell is happening. I was there, and Mandy was there and...”

“And?”

“And...we didn't even want each other,” he said. “We were just two fucked up people who needed to feel something.” He looked down.

“When did we all become so broken?” I asked.

Jack finished his cigarette and threw the butt out the window.

“I just can't believe he's dead,” was all he said.

“He's never coming back,” I said, hiding my face in my hands. “I'm never going to see my brother again.”

My body hated me. With my eyes burning, my hands in pain, my stomach in knots, and my head pounding, I finally knew he was gone. He was gone forever.

# 18.

I threw up a couple more times throughout the night. I slept on the couch and I Jack didn't sleep at all. Every time I woke up and ran to the bathroom, he was sitting at the kitchen table. Staring ahead, staring at his hands, staring at the chairs, the floor. Anything but me.

We left early the next morning. Jack thought it was best, and for once I agreed with him. Mandy barely said goodbye. She gave a small wave on her way to take a shower, fully dressed, with a towel in her other hand.

Henry was playing on the floor by the couch, as we headed out the door with our bags. He was ripping pages out of a notebook and crumpling them up. There was a small pile of balled up paper beside him.

“Goodbye Henry,” I said.

He looked up for a second, and then went back to ripping pages. Jack took me by my arm, just like a mother would with her child, and led me out the door and into the car. The car that we had spent most of last night in. With tears, and vomit, and memories, and truth. There was finally noise in all of the silence.

Jack spoke to me about things neither of us cared about for around an hour. Half-assed conversation to cover up the fact that we had said everything last night. My body still hated me. My mouth was permanently dry and tacky no matter how much water I

drank. My throat stung from how raw it had become. The Advil I took that morning never seemed to kick in, and my stomach was sore and painfully empty. Sleep came easy

Jack woke me up when we reached the parking lot at his office building. I opened my eyes and saw my car there, waiting for me. I undid my seatbelt.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked.

“No. Are you?”

“No,” he said.

“Where are you going to go now?” he asked me.

“Kyle’s, probably.”

“You guys have been together a lot lately,” he said.

“He makes me feel better,” I responded.

Jack accepted my answer, dropped me off, and drove away.

I drove to Kyle’s house. As I pulled into the driveway, I noticed that Kyle’s car wasn’t there. He must either be at work, or out somewhere. I knew there had to be a way in without a key.

Forty minutes later and I had climbed through Kyle’s bathroom window to get in. I didn’t know when he would be back so I left my things in his room. I undressed and noticed half a joint on his side table and a lighter on his desk. I smoked it while I sat on his unmade bed, naked and sad, looking at the spotty paint job on one of Kyle’s walls. Getting high always helped me feel less hung over after a night of heavy drinking. But today, it made me feel worse. I got too stoned too fast, and my thoughts were going faster than I could comprehend them. I was in slow motion, bare, and pale, stuck in a haze of

cheap weed and the smell of Old Spice. A foreign object in this uncomfortable bed that was not mine.

Kyle's water didn't get as hot as the water in my parent's house. I ran a bath, anyway, and sat in it as the water rose up. I wanted to sleep, or sob, or scream until my lungs ran out of air. Instead I just sat. I sat and I tried to think of absolutely nothing.

At some point, the bathroom door opened, and Kyle was staring down at me.

"I'm assuming the trip didn't go so well," he said.

He took off his clothes when he was sure I wouldn't answer, and climbed into the bath with me. With him and me in there, the water rose too high, and started to spill down the sides. I let some of it drain out. I leaned into him and he wrapped himself around me.

Every so often, he would kiss my cheek, or play with my hair. But mostly we just existed as two bodies in a lukewarm tub, comforting one another. One body mourned the loss of a brother, of the life she had before he was gone. The other mourned the loss of whatever was left inside the girl he thought he loved.

I didn't sleep well that night. Kyle was sweating onto me in his sleep and I was restless. I still had Scott's laptop in my bag, so I brought it to Kyle's desk and turned it on. I went through most of his documents, and came across one titled "O".

*O is for Olive. Olives are salty and brash. Does it take a certain type of person to love an olive?*

*If you do not love olives you do not love me. You do not know me without my O, my Olive.*

*Here is the olive branch, extended. Please take it, please take it.*

*O is for Olive. O is for Oh, Oh, Oh, to turn back time. Can I turn back time?*

*O is for Ominous, and Original, and Open. O is for all those things, but O is for Olive, too.*

*O is for Olive, mostly. Olive is the only O to cross my mind, my mind, my mind. Where is my mind?*

*Here is the olive branch, extended. Please take it, please take it.*

*O is for Ocean. An Ocean of Olives. Olive in an ocean, on the swings, in a car, on a rock.*

*Olive is all of those things, in all of those places.*

*O is for Olive. Please take it, please take it.*

I reread it five times until I knew that it had to positively be about me. I headed outside and sat on the one lawn chair in the back of Kyle's house. I called Jack. He didn't pick up. I called him again.

"It's three in the morning."

"Scott wrote a thing for me," I said. "He wrote this poem, or something. It's called 'O'."

"What?"

"I just wanted to tell someone," I said.

"What about Kyle?"

"He's sleeping," I said.

"I'm sleeping," Jack responded.

"Last night was bad, Jack."

“Last night had to happen, eventually. We had to explode one of these days.” He exhaled loudly on the other end of the phone. “I’m sorry, Olivia.”

“For what?”

“For everything.”

“Me too,” I said.

“I’m going to go back to sleep now,” he said.

“Goodnight, Jack.”

“Goodnight, Olivia.”

I drove back home two days later around lunchtime. It was Kyle’s idea. He told me I couldn’t hide from my parents anymore.

“You’re going to have to talk to each other eventually,” he said. And he was right.

That wasn’t the only reason I obliged, though. I didn’t want to rot in Kyle’s bed, too high to function, full of smoke and memory, for the rest of my life. I let him take me home.

“Do you want me to come in with you?” Kyle asked.

“No.”

When I opened the door, there they were, on the couch. Watching the home shopping network, per usual, as if nothing had happened. They turned when I opened the door.

“Don’t worry,” I said, heading towards the stairs. “I won’t be staying long.”

“Come here for a minute.” My father.

“Olivia.” My mother.



“I need to sleep. I just need to sleep.” Me.

I couldn't have another conversation today. It just wasn't in me. I couldn't talk to these people. These people that made me and Jack and Scott and threw us all into a world together. A world that chewed us up and spit us out, and then took Scott for itself. This evil place did evil things to people who did not deserve it.

I waited for a knock on my bedroom door that never came. I headed into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and didn't want to look like me anymore. I rummaged around through my things until I found a box that contained my makeup. I hadn't worn makeup in so long that it felt strange against my skin. Rough and unnatural. Thick black eyeliner, dark lipstick, blush. When I looked in the mirror again, I was only the colors on my face. I was a child in her mother's makeup.

*O is for Olive.*

My keys were still in my coat pocket. I threw on my shoes and headed down the stairs again. I rushed through the living room.

“Where are you going?” My mother.

“Olivia, come here.” My father.

I said nothing, just ran out the door and into my car before either my mom or dad could follow me out. I backed out of the driveway and onto the road in record time.

*Here is the olive branch, extended. Please take it, please take it.*

I wasn't going to give up on Scott. Not him, or Mandy, or Henry. Just because I was a mess didn't mean I would always be a mess. I didn't want to lose the one part of my brother that I could still have.

# 19.

The drive took too long. I missed two exits and had to stop and get gas at some point. I just wanted to be there. I had no idea what I would do once I was there, but it didn't matter. I needed to get out of this car, this limbo between my life back in Mahopac and the life that Scott had before he took his own.

Every time I saw my reflection in my rearview mirror, I was shocked. The makeup made me look over the top and scary. I couldn't even recognize myself. I looked more like my mother than I ever had before in my life, with this mask on, and my eyes encircled in black kohl. My car reeked of cigarettes because I'd smoked half a pack in the three hours that I had been in the car. I breathed in the poison and allowed it to become a part of me.

I called Mandy when I got close to her apartment. I was scared she wouldn't pick up, but she did.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," I said back.

An uncomfortable silence followed.

"Are you at home?" I asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"I'll be there in a little while."

"Olivia..."

"It's important," I said. "I'll be there soon."

I didn't realize my hands were shaking until I knocked on her door. It took her too long to answer, and for a second I didn't think she would. I imagined going back to my car, embarrassed and angry, driving back home blinded by my tears.

The door opened and there she was.

"Come in," she said, not allowing herself to meet my gaze.

I gave her a half smile and nodded. I followed her into the apartment and closed the door behind me.

"Do you want some coffee?" she asked quietly, heading into the kitchen.

"Yeah," I said. I followed her, and sat down at the kitchen table.

"I burned it."

A weak, and nervous, smile followed her statement. She had nice teeth and a rare kind of honesty to her, which was difficult to find in others.

The coffee *was* burnt, she wasn't lying. But I didn't care, I needed the caffeine. I needed to be awake for all of this.

"Sorry that Henry is sleeping," she said.

"It's okay. It's sweet," I said.

"He's a sweet boy." She took a sip. "I'm so sorry, Olivia. God, I'm so—"

"Shh," I said, reminding myself of Jack. "Shh."

*O is for Olive.*

"Olivia, I didn't mean it." She backed away from me. "I didn't mean to do anything with him. I just...I miss Scott so much. I don't even know what we *were* when he died. But I know I loved him."

I wanted to hug her, and tell her everything was going to be fine. But how was I supposed to do that when I didn't know if it were true? Would any of us be fine ever again?

"I thought we were gonna end up together. Just him and me. No matter what happened, I knew he was the one." She crossed her arms across her chest. "At least, I thought he was."

"I know."

She let out a breath that I hadn't noticed she'd been holding in. "Jack told me he and his wife were separating and then I told him I would never love someone like I loved Scott."

"You don't have to explain. I know what it's like to feel alone."

She nodded. "That was it," she said. "We were both so lonely. Jack was just *there*, Olivia. I feel so fucking bad about it, too. I feel like Scott saw it. Like he was in the room, and now he hates me." She looked down. "I don't even know if someone could hate me more than I hate myself, right now." She looked up at me. "You must think I'm so pathetic."

"No."

She motioned around her. "I live in this shithole with a fucking *baby*. I barely make enough money for the two of us. I am so alone."

"You're not alone," I told her. "I lost him, too. We all lost him."

We stared at each other for a few seconds. I focused on her eyes, which I hadn't noticed were blue before this moment. An electric navy that looked the way I felt.

“I can’t believe I’m never going to see Scott again. My son will never see his father.” She pushed her cup of coffee away, as if it repulsed her.

“Maybe it’s better that way,” I found myself saying. “Scott wasn’t healthy. Henry shouldn’t have been forced to experience that.”

“I just wish things were easier,” she said. The words escaped from her plush lips. Lips that held those words captive until she chose to let them out.

“Don’t we all?”

Mandy had to go to the grocery store to get food for dinner and I stayed behind to watch Henry while she was gone. He was still asleep when I went into Mandy’s room. I peeked inside his crib and looked at him, all little, and warm, and soft. I wanted him to stay like that forever—oblivious, naïve.

What was the point of growing older, anyway? As we aged, all the bad stuff in the world, stuff that we’d only heard about, started happening to us. Badness creeps in closer and closer until it catches you and claims you as its own. It forces you to suffer, along with everyone else.

But then, there was Henry. This tiny human, with deep, slow, breaths and wispy hair that didn’t even cover his scalp entirely yet. I wanted to hold him and never let him go.

There was a computer and printer on the desk in the back corner of the room. I had emailed myself some of the pictures I found on Jack’s laptop. I logged on to my email and looked through them, every so often looking back at Henry sleeping soundly. I

printed out the picture of Scott, Mandy, and Henry right after he was born. I printed it out, folded it up, and put it in my back pocket. I wanted to give it to my dad.

As I turned the computer off, I heard the door open and close, and headed back out to the kitchen. Mandy had started unpacking a couple of bags. I stayed in the kitchen doorway as she worked.

“You and Henry are the last bit of Scott that’s left,” I said, as she opened the fridge and placed the milk inside.

“What?”

“I want to help.”

She walked towards me, with her eyes wide and her movements slow.

“How?” Her hand grazed the table. There was a small, silver, bracelet attached to her wrist. I wondered if Scott had gotten it for her.

I took a step closer to her. “Let me be a part of your lives.”

“I don’t want to be alone anymore,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to be.”

It took me a couple seconds to realize that she was hugging me; her toned arms wrapped around my torso, the breath in her chest pushing against mine. She was shorter than me, and her face only reached my shoulder.

“Do you really want to do this?” she asked me.

“I do.”

## 20.

I had been in the car for most of the day, but I didn't mind. I thought of Henry on the drive home. His eyes that reminded me so much of his father, the lips that would fill out to be like his mother's. I imagined him in a car seat in the back, looking out the window. I wouldn't talk to him unless he wanted me to. We could revel in the quiet together.

I knew this would be the last time I would be in Mahopac for a long time. This place didn't have much left for me. Just memories, some I wish I could forget, and some I would cling onto forever. When Scott died, so did the place where I spent the most time with him.

I would pack my car, say my goodbyes, and head back to Reading. I thought about Henry's deep breaths, his closed eyes. I let down my window, and the cold air crashed into me.

I opened the door to my parent's house with the spare key my dad gave me when I first came back. My mother was loading the dishwasher when I walked in. I sat down at the kitchen table and waited for her to finish. Eventually, she sat down across from me.

"You're back," was all she said.

"I am. Where's Dad?"

"Out on the deck," she said. "Do you need him?"

"Maybe later."

She wasn't looking at me, but I was looking at her. She wasn't wearing any makeup. I hadn't seen her like this, so naked, in such a long time. And there I was, standing over her, with my face caked in it. Finally, she looked up.

"You look so angry, Olivia," she said.

"You're probably right."

"It gets hard being so mad all the time," she said. "Trust me."

"Mom," I said.

She got up, without acknowledging the fact that I had spoken. She walked to the sink and ran the water. Then she tore off a couple of sheets of paper towel and put it under the running water. She motioned for me to come to her, and so I did. She took the damp paper towel, put it to my face, and started wiping. I towered over her and had to bend my knees so that she would be able to reach me. Her hands were gentle and her strokes were smooth. Black covered the paper towel, with hints of foundation and lipstick. She was so deliberate in her movements, so calm. I closed my eyes while she worked. She smelled like vanilla and lilac. I breathed her in.

"You look so much like him," she finally said. After I didn't respond she added, "I'm sorry, Olivia."

She was never going to see how much Henry looked like his dad, or hold his little hand in hers. She would never see just how big Henry's eyes were, or feed him, or touch his hair. And because she wouldn't, my dad wouldn't either. At least for now. I wanted to show them what a mistake they were making and force them against their will into my car. I wanted to feel satisfied, like I had made some sort of difference. Everything had changed, and yet nothing in this house had. My father was off hiding somewhere, my



mother was still selfish in the way that she had always been, and I was making another decision she disapproved of. Yet somehow, I knew it was going to be okay.

“I know,” I said.

“Please try to stop hating me,” she said.

“I don’t hate you.”

She looked so tired and worn, in matching pajamas, with her hair pulled away from her face. She had wrinkles and fine lines, her eyes red and puffy from all the crying. I suddenly felt bad for a woman I had spent so much time disliking, a woman who I never thought I could feel sympathy for.

“Promise?” she asked.

She was still my mother, and I was her daughter, and we had both lost someone we loved. And so I squeezed her hand again and let her cry until she didn’t need to anymore.

“Promise.”

And then I kissed her forehead, and she let me, which wasn’t much, but it was something.

It was too cold to be on the deck, and I shivered as I made my way to the chair next to my dad. He didn’t look over at me, just continued looking at the sky.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked. “It’s freezing.”

He turned towards me. “Sometimes I just like to sit and think.” He smiled. “I thought I heard someone inside with your mom. I didn’t think it was you.”

“I’m not staying here long,” I said.

He ignored me and pointed at the stars.

“Look at all those. Some of these stars, they’re dead and gone, they’re not coming back. But when we look up we can still see them, because it takes hundreds and thousands of years for the light fade to completely. They show us the past, Olivia.” He looked like he was in some sort of trance, with his eyes focused on the night sky and his finger unwavering. “You think everything that happened just disappears. But you look up at the sky and you see memories.” He looked at me then. “We won’t let him disappear.”

“I know.”

He nodded and sat back in his chair, his arm coming back down at his side.

“When are you leaving?” he asked.

“After I pack the car.” I reached into my back pocket and I handed him the picture I had printed earlier. “I want you to have this.”

He unfolded the paper slowly. My father’s mouth hung open for a moment and then a soft exhale. He flattened out the folds in the paper. “Oh, God,” he said.

He held the picture in his shaking hands and stared at it, taking it all in. The smiles on Scott and Mandy’s exhausted faces. The pink, wrinkled, infant in Mandy’s hands.

“Do you have any more pictures?” He asked me.

“I can get more. I can take more.”

“I would like that,” he said. “I want to see him, even if I can’t *see* him, you know? And maybe one day she’ll change her mind...” His voice trailed off, as he rested the picture in his lap.

“Maybe,” I said, even though I knew that probably wasn’t true.

When my dad helped me pack up the car, my mother was nowhere to be found. Her car wasn't in the driveway, which meant she probably went to Natalie's. Or maybe she just went somewhere to be alone. Either way, I didn't mind. We had said what we needed to, I had seen her in a way that I had not in a long time. We would never have that tender affection other mothers and daughters had with one another, but maybe we could work towards something closer to that. Maybe not. These were things I had to accept, or else I would never be at peace.

"You're sure you want to do this?" my father asked me.

"I don't want to feel empty anymore."

Half smile, half pain on my father's face as he replied. "You're not empty, baby. None of my children have ever been empty."

"Not even Scott?"

"Not even Scott," he said. "He was just so full of everything that it was too much."

I thought of Scott, when he was excited, all rowdy and smiling, and I knew that what my father had said was true. When we were done packing up the car, we looked at each other.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

I got into the car, took a left out of the driveway, and headed towards Kyle's house. I knew I wouldn't be back home for a long time. There was relief, but there was also a vicious unhappiness within me, that seemed to ebb and flow. I sped up, and kept going.

I thought of Kyle, briefly, on my drive to his house. Handsome, and sweet, and interested in me, despite the fact that he shouldn't be. He had loved me ten years ago when I didn't even know who I was. And I had come back to him, as lost as I was back then. Did he love me now? It didn't matter, and it was too late.

I wondered if there would be tears again, maybe yelling and anger. Maybe he didn't even like me as much as I thought he did. *See you never*, he would say before pushing me out the door.

Kyle was outside his house, smoking a joint, when I showed up.

"You can't just keep showing up announced, you know," he said, putting his perfect teeth on display. He looked at my car. "Why is your car all packed up?" He offered me the joint, but I declined. "Your parents kick you out?"

"Not exactly."

"What's up, then?" He asked.

"Do you want to sit inside or something?" My voice was choppy and strange. I couldn't recognize it as my own.

"Fuck." He put out the joint and stuck the remainder of it behind his ear. "Are you leaving town, Olive?"

"Kyle, just let me explain."

He turned away from me, and headed inside. I followed him through the door, up the stairs, and into his room, where he was sitting on his bed with his head in his hands.

"Were you just fucking with me this entire time? Were you just bored and horny? Why did you do this to me a *second* time?"

“Don’t do that. Just let me speak,” I said.

“There’s something about you, Olive. I really like you. We have fun.”

“I really like you, too,” I said truthfully. I sat down next to him on his bed, and he didn’t move away. “And we do. But we’re not teenagers anymore. We can’t just get stoned and fuck all the time, okay? We can’t stay in this shitty town and live off of high school romance.”

I wanted him to understand all the thoughts in my mind. The ones that told me he was great, and funny, and good in bed. The thoughts of his stubble on my face when he kissed me and his callused hands on mine. His neck, strong and beautiful. The sprinkle of freckles across his shoulders.

But it wasn’t real. When I was with him, I wasn’t a real person. I was traveling back in time. We would sit all day and watch TV, and have sex, and talk about the past. We would forget to eat and then order pizza late at night. It seemed perfect while it was happening, but it could never be forever.

“What the hell does that even mean, Olive?”

“It means I need a reason,” I said. “Some kind of purpose. There is *nothing* here for me. Anything that was before...it left when Scott did.”

“I’m not enough of a reason?” He asked.

I stayed quiet. He looked so painfully striking, with those eyes that I couldn’t bear to look at, and those broad shoulders that took up the whole doorway. Big hands and crossed arms. That nose, that perfect nose on that handsome face. I wanted to kiss him and dump him all at once. I wanted to love him and leave him.

“Fuck you, Olive,” he said quietly. “Where are you even going, anyway?”

“Back to Pennsylvania,” I said. “Back to Henry.”

He didn’t respond.

“Kyle.”

“If you go,” he said, “I’m not an option for you anymore. I can’t do this again.”

The finality of it felt like an implosion. This was really it. It was the end of us forever, a bond that I had felt within me since I was fifteen years old, when he first asked me out and we went ice-skating. He fell down twice and bought us french fries when we got hungry. He had made fun of me for dipping mine in mayonnaise. Now it was done. Whatever it had been before was completely broken. Shattered glass all over bare skin.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But you’re never going to leave here. And I really need to.”

He shrugged and shook his head.

“Then go,” he said. “Why don’t you just go?”

“Don’t do this,” I said. “Don’t make me leave like this.”

I was so tired. I hadn’t noticed how late it was until just then. It must have been around one in the morning. I wanted to fold up into myself and forget how to feel, just for a little while.

“I don’t know what to do with you,” he said. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t have to yet,” I said.

He rubbed his temples with his fingers and looked at me. “When you leave... is it going to be the last time I see you?”

He didn’t want an answer, and so I didn’t give him one. Instead he kissed me, and I kissed him back. It was the last time I would see him this way... *feel* him this way. I memorized his body, and what he did to mine. Sex was slow and calm, sad and final.

When it ended, I cried, still on top of him. Kyle held me, and his arms enveloped my shaking body. Once I started crying, I couldn't stop.

“You cried this time,” he said. “Last time we broke up, you didn't cry.”

“That's because last time I knew it wasn't the end.”

He nodded and pulled the comforter over both of us. He turned out the light on his nightstand and the room went dark. I felt him turn away from me.

“I'm going to miss you, you know,” I said into the pitch blackness around me. “If that makes any difference.”

“One day it will,” he said.

And because it was so dark and warm, and because Kyle was beside me, even though it was the last time we would lie together, I fell asleep.

When I woke up, Kyle was still asleep, his face buried in his pillow, his hair messy and defiant. I knew I should have woken him up, but I just couldn't do it. I wanted last night to be what he remembered about me, how close we had become in our last moments before we came apart. I watched him as his shoulders rose and fell with his breathing. I slowly got dressed, and right before I left his bedroom, I kissed him on the cheek, and whispered “Thank you.” He barely even stirred. He was going to be okay without me, that I knew.

I walked out, closed the door behind me, and got into my car. I breathed in for six seconds, and out for six seconds. I repeated that a couple more times. I smelled like Kyle, and I liked that. I would be able to hold onto him for that much longer. I started the car, and I drove off.

As I left Mahopac, I thought of the gossip that would surround Scott's death. I could imagine it now—concerned mothers whispering about my brother, about my family, to one another over brunch or midday yoga. It was the small talk that made my mother so nervous, that haunted her. They would tell each other what they thought they knew about the *incident*, and they would probably be wrong. Maybe someone would correct them. Then again, maybe they didn't deserve to know the truth about him, anyway.



# 21.

It was the third time I pulled into Mandy's apartment complex that week. I parked in the same spot as I had the last time. I wasn't ready to knock on the door yet, so I stood outside of my car, chewing at my nails. I smoked two cigarettes and tried to take a couple deep breaths.

I knew I would have to call Jack sometime soon and tell him where I was and what had happened since I saw him last. But I wasn't worried. Somehow I knew the conversation would be okay, and that he would agree with what I did. I wondered about him and Laura, but I knew he would tell me when he felt ready to. We were close enough for that now.

Mandy answered the door in pajama shorts and sweatshirt. Henry was hiding behind her legs, as little kids often do with their mothers.

"Say hi to Olivia," Mandy said, moving her legs, so that he was exposed.

He walked up to me, looked me dead in the eyes, and said, "Olive." He pointed at me. "Olive."

I kneeled down and touched his face, round and red in the cheeks.

"Olivia," Mandy said above me, correcting him.

I could see the concentration on his face. "Olive," he said again.

"Olive," I said, as his little hand wrapped around my pointer finger.

*O is for Olive.*

Mandy watched intently as Henry continued to hold onto my finger, tight and secure. There was no noise in the room, and we all noticed the silence. But we welcomed it, allowed for it to be beautiful in its own right.

*Here is the olive branch, extended. Please take it, please take it.*

“Are you okay?” She asked.

“I will be.”

*Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me?*

Staring into Henry’s eyes, right then and there, I knew that Scott hadn’t left. He would always be here, with me, as long as I let him. As long as I held on to Henry, and this life, this life he left behind for me.

Maybe my mom would never meet Henry, and maybe my dad would only see him in pictures. Maybe I would be sad about Kyle for a long time, and so what if Jack and Mandy had sex, anyway? Because it all led me here, hand in hand with this child, in the home of this beautiful, damaged, woman who was just as lost as I was.

My mind was spinning, and all I could do was put my free hand behind Henry and embrace him. He obliged for a minute, but then squirmed out of my grasp, and giggling, ran into the other room.

Mandy looked at me, and I smiled, big and true, and genuine. But it was also consumed by sadness, and loss, and a bitter feeling of emptiness that I was scared would be a part of me forever.

*Here is the olive branch, extended. Please take it, please take it.*

So what if we were all a little broken? Looking around at that cheap apartment, listening to Henry's movements in the other room, I knew that this was right. And for the first time in a long time, I felt like I was finally where I was supposed to be.