

c. k. kelly martin



**Come See**  
**ABOUT Me**



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also by C. K. Kelly Martin

*I Know It's Over*

*One Lonely Degree*

*The Lighter Side of Life and Death*

*My Beating Teenage Heart*

*Yesterday*

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## ~One~

I can't listen to music with lyrics anymore. I can't read more than a couple of sentences from a newspaper or novel without losing focus. I've lost fifteen pounds since last January because I forget to eat, and even when I remember, I don't have much of an appetite. The first thing I do when I get up these days is shuffle out of the spare bedroom and into the bath because otherwise I'm liable to forget that too. I drop my skinny white body into the empty tub and let the warm water fill up around me so that Abigail, during the couple of weeks she spends here every few months, won't think she made a mistake in letting me stay and change her mind.

I can't have that. I don't want to go.

It was bad enough having to leave the apartment Bastien and I shared in Toronto. I should've figured out a way to stay and hang on to that little piece of the life we had together, but I didn't. I couldn't focus enough to solve that problem either.

So I've been living in Oakville, at Abigail's house, a fifteen-minute walk from the lake, for just over two months now. She swooped in and saved me when I didn't know what to do—only that I didn't want to fly home to B.C. and move back in with my parents like they were convinced was best, and that I couldn't humor any of my Toronto friends who'd offered to squeeze me into their shared apartments/houses either. People expect you to talk to them, even

the ones who tell you they understand. They want energy you don't have. They want you to care about something and I don't.

Alone is what's easier. Everyone else would prefer that I pretend my life hasn't been hollowed out. They believe their expectations should carry some weight with me. Only Bastien truly carries any weight and people try to use that fact against me too and tell me what he would want for me. Some of the things they say about that might be right, but since he's not here he doesn't get to decide how I should handle his absence.

I dip my head back into the bath water to rinse the conditioner from my hair. It's always the last thing I do before I pull the plug. I was never the kind of girl to devote a lot of energy to my appearance, but I used to at least take the time to properly rinse the conditioner out of my hair. I'm clean, though; presentable. Abigail's house is too—mainly because I've been living light. I never have people over and have barely turned on the oven. My daily menu consists of cereal, fruit, bread, and microwavable items like noodle bowls.

That considered, my grocery bill shouldn't be much more than a small domestic pet's, but too often I stop into the nearest corner store and stock up there. They don't carry bread or fruit but they have the other things, at inflated prices. When I do make it all the way over to the grocery store or fruit market it's actually because of Armstrong. Hamsters need a small amount of fruit and vegetables every day and no matter how I feel I can't let anything happen to Armstrong. I guess that means I care about something after all.

Taking care of Armstrong is my biggest daily priority, and because hamsters are nocturnal, the first time I look in on him he's usually asleep,

burrowed in his bedding or occasionally, if I've forgotten to take it out, his wheel. If I leave it in overnight he tends to run on it until he makes himself sick. Bastien was the first one to notice that. One night he was camped out on the couch composing a Chaucer essay for English class while I was fast asleep in the bedroom. The noise from the spinning hamster wheel kept breaking his concentration, so Bastien tugged on earphones and cranked up the tunes—classical music, which he always used to say was the only kind of music he could listen to while working. When he took off the earphones hours later the wheel was still squeaking away, propelled by a worn-out-looking but obviously compulsive Armstrong.

It's as though he can't help himself. He craves the wheel like some humans crave heroin or sex. So we started rationing Armstrong's wheel time for his own good, taking it out before we went to sleep ourselves. Sometimes now I forget to take the wheel out at night and wake up to the sound of Armstrong engaged in an endless marathon. His cage is in the spare room with me because I don't want Abigail to feel like I'm taking over her house, but I don't mind having him there anyway because he reminds me of Bastien. Our landlord said no cats or dogs, but he never said no hamsters and Bastien wanted a pet.

In the evening, after Armstrong's woken up and gorged himself on whatever's in his food bowl, I'll replace his wheel for him and he'll race around inside it like a junkie. In the meantime I drag my comb through my hair and head for the kitchen. Just coffee for now because I'm not hungry. I drink it with

one sugar but no milk because there isn't any. I should go to the store today. Walk into town and hit the fruit market.

First, I curl up on the couch in front of the television and click on the remote. Abigail has a really crappy cable package, which makes sense since she's never here to watch it. I didn't used to watch much TV either, but now I need the background hum and keep it on for the majority of the day. They say TV induces a trance state and that the longer you watch the deeper the trance gets. I know it's true because I live that most days. Faces morph into other faces. Two women in bridesmaid's dresses screech at each other. Another woman is found dead in bed with her bathrobe on backwards. Gordon Ramsey acts outraged and then makes crab cakes. A taxi careens into the side of a van in the pouring rain. Doctor Phil makes a tepid joke and waits for his studio audience to laugh.

Sometimes, when I've had enough of that, I watch the news all day instead. Or sports. It could be anything really. As long as it's noise and moving pictures. Something to park my skinny, white, freshly-rinsed body in front of.

Other days I can't stand the pixels and talking heads anymore and walk down to the lake to watch geese and sailboats bob along the waves. An outdoor trance rather than an indoor one.

About ten days ago, two boys who appeared to be ten or eleven years old were throwing rocks at the crowd of geese and ducks gathered in the water, and I envisioned lifting a boulder effortlessly above my head, like Wonder Woman, hurling it in the boys' direction and flattening them dead. Why not?

Weren't they demonstrating that they're destined to be serial killers or the future CEOs of soulless oil companies? No respect, no conscience.

The trouble is there are so many psychopathic kids (and parents) around that snuffing them out could be Wonder Woman's full-time job. In the old days I would have given the boys the evil eye and told them to stop—or if Bastien was with me he'd have lit into them before I'd even had a chance to open my mouth. He couldn't stand to see anything or anyone being hurt.

It's hard to rouse myself to say or do anything now that Bastien's gone. It's like fighting my way through a fog or trying to scream in one of those dreams where it's struggle enough to whisper. So I didn't say a word to them, just hated the boys silently from within my impermeable fog.

As it turned out, I wasn't the only one who disapproved. A woman clutching hands with a little girl in a sailor hat crossed towards the boys and said, "Hey there, stop bothering the birds, guys."

Her tone was dismay mingled with impatience and the boys' stunned glares made it clear she was a stranger to them. "You can't tell us what to do," the shorter one with the pinched face complained.

The woman was even more taken aback than the boys had been seconds earlier, and in the silent pause between them I broke through my murk with an unexpected flash of energy, shouting, from my place on the boulder fifteen feet behind them, "Do your parents let you throw rocks at birds?"

The taller boy's head sagged on his shoulders. He glanced guardedly at his friend as if to say, *let's go*. They dropped the rocks clenched in their fists and headed away from the water and up to the grass. The little girl with the

sailor hat turned to stare at the geese and ducks while her mother and I swapped looks of solidarity.

Who needs Wonder Woman? My lips stuck to my front teeth as I began to smile, but the woman's gaze had already shifted towards the lake.

Today I don't want to deal with kids throwing rocks at geese, but since I have to venture further than the corner store I know I'll end up at the lake. Once I'm far enough from Abigail's house the water has a habit of pulling me towards it, like it wants me in its orbit.

When you don't have a car and don't live in Toronto anymore, the distance between places proves much longer than you'd ever realized, but Abigail's Oakville neighborhood is a pleasant place to walk: well-landscaped yards attached to equally picturesque houses. There's little traffic and little noise but lots of money and political influence. In an alternate life I might want to settle down here with Bastien in our late twenties, have the kids I'd never really stopped to think about before Bastien died because the future felt both distant and so certain that it didn't seem to require any consideration.

I force myself to turn off the TV, blow dry my hair and pull on a rumpled pair of jeans and pink T-shirt. As soon as I get outdoors I'm reminded, by the strength of an early September sun which feels more like August, that I should buy sunscreen. My nose is still peeling from my last burn. It doesn't matter except that when Abigail gets here next week I want her to believe I'm keeping my head above water enough for this arrangement to be a good idea. For that, I should look the part. In control of basic health and hygiene.

Having lost her husband, Abigail understands about needing time and space more than most people, but even then there's likely a line between accepting my sadness and rejecting it as something crossing the border into clinical. There's a cultural level of acceptable grief that I'm on the wrong side of.

Sometimes I wonder how Bastien would've lived with my loss. Maybe he'd be better at losing me than I am at losing him. Or maybe he'd be ensconced here at his aunt Abigail's house along with Armstrong, in hiding from a life that had taken a permanent wrong turn.

I just *think* all the time. About him. Us. The days and nights we shared in our old apartment. The smell of soap on his skin and how still, peaceful and self-contained he appeared when he didn't realize anyone was watching him. I was amazed, when I'd see that expression of perfect calm slip over his features, that I was the one sharing his life. How could I possibly be that lucky? And then it would strike me as utterly ridiculous that I'd failed to truly notice him in all the years we were in high school together in Burnaby. We could've had more years together, even if there was a fixed end date. I should've noticed him sooner.

The sun beats down on my flaking nose as I head down Douglas Avenue, squinting against the white-hot glare because, as well as forgetting sunscreen, I've left my sunglasses behind. My cloth shopping bags too. By the time I reach Lakeshore Road my forehead is beaded with sweat. It's even more humid than I'd realized and if I don't cool down within the next thirty seconds my armpits will be wet too. Closer to the square, there's a café I've popped into a few times over the summer. A place to sit down and soak up the air conditioning.

Downtown Oakville is littered with restaurants, cafés, coffee shops and ice cream parlors, but I keep gravitating to the same few places: the lake, the fruit market, and The Cunning Café. On a couple of occasions, when I've needed to use the bathroom, I've dropped into the library too. In the past I could have spent hours there, but now it seems about as useful as your average cat might find a symphony, filled as it is with materials I'm unable to concentrate on.

I slip past the fruit market in favor of cool air and head for The Cunning Café. The décor is vaguely Mediterranean but not trying too hard to be hip. The first time I walked through the door I wondered if Bastien had ever been inside. I thought he would've appreciated the homey atmosphere, and began to construct a narrative in which I'd met up with him here after one of his classes at Sheridan College. I imagined what he would order—the meat cannelloni maybe, or veal Parmigiana. A curry chicken wrap if he wasn't too hungry.

The only things I've ordered here have been sandwiches or bagels. I could order one now since I still haven't eaten but my stomach isn't interested. *You should have something*, I lecture silently. *Between the heat and not having bitten into any calories yet today, you don't want to pass out.*

I don't feel faint but one evening at the end of July everything started to go dark for me while in the cleaning products aisle of the supermarket. Only a moment earlier I'd been steady on my feet.

I remember thinking, when I fell against the shelving unit and sent a jug of laundry detergent flying, that Bastien would've been angry at me for neglecting myself. He made me twinge with guilt from the grave. I can't keep going on with my life as though it doesn't matter that he's gone, but I can stay

alive for him. That I can do. Eat and drink every day. Sleep. Breathe. Watch TV. Watch the waves.

I pick up a tray and select a bottle of lime soda from the fridge beside the counter. Then I peer over the head of the blond woman behind the counter to read the menu. There's only one guy in front of me in line and he's biting his lip as he scans the menu too, the blond woman smiling patiently at an indecision she must witness a hundred times a day.

"Is the chicken curry wrap very spicy?" he ventures. I'm not good with accents but I can detect a jaunty sort of twang in his voice that I assume is English or Scottish, because Abigail mentioned, when she first came to pick me up and get me settled in Oakville, that there were a lot of English and Scottish people in the area.

"Medium-spicy," the woman clarifies, raising her hand in a so-so motion. "If you're looking for super-hot it won't qualify, but it's tasty."

I've decided on the egg salad but the guy's still perusing his menu options, thinking it all over, and the woman's eyes flick over to me. "I like your shirt," she says.

I glance automatically down to remind myself what I threw on before leaving the house. At the end of last summer I snapped up a bunch of T-shirts on sale at the Yonge Eglinton Centre. Bastien and I'd been living together for three and a half months and were having a stupid fight about his mother not liking me because every time she phoned and I picked up instead she sounded like someone who'd just discovered a fingernail sliver amongst her nachos. Meanwhile Bastien refused to admit his mother had anything against me. He

kept repeating that she was just a naturally aloof person and that I shouldn't take it personally.

I'd only met his mother three times in person then and didn't know what she was like with people aside from her family and closest friends. Later I learned he was right—his mother had a cold exterior that it took time to chip through—but I didn't happen to believe that at the end of last August when we stopped by the Yonge Eglinton Centre to pick up fresh bedding and food for Armstrong. Bastien couldn't handle relationship tension well and wanted me to drop the subject. When it became obvious that I wasn't going to oblige he stuffed his hands down into his pockets, rolled his eyes and said, with a finality that kicked my irritation up another notch, "You know what, why don't you take some time to cool down and I'll catch up with you later." He stepped away from me and I let him.

My heart was beating fast from being angry with him and I stomped off in the opposite direction, wondering which of us was supposed to buy Armstrong's supplies and deciding Bastien should be the one, since he'd ditched me. Then I'd prowled the mall and ended up with my arms full of T-shirts I didn't need, one of which I'm wearing today—emblazoned with the phrase "One Tough Cookie" under a cartoonish image of an outraged cookie (minus a single bite), shaking its two tiny cookie fists in the air.

The guy ahead of me in line follows the blond woman's gaze to ogle my T-shirt and then looks swiftly back at the menu as he realizes my chest probably isn't the most politically correct place for his eyes to settle.

“Thanks,” I tell her after what I realize has been an uncomfortably long pause following her compliment. Like I said, I think about Bastien and us constantly. Part of my brain still exists in a reality in which he’s alive and we’re living in a basement apartment together in Toronto.

“Better make it the corn beef and cheese on Italian bread,” the man says, returning us all to the matter at hand.

The blond woman nods. “Toasted?”

“Toasted,” he confirms, flashing the briefest of smiles.

The woman slices into a loaf of Italian bread. “I love your accent,” she says. “What part of Ireland are you from?”

“Dublin.” The man’s smile reappears, seeming more genuine this time, and their conversation ambles forward. With nothing further required from me, I drift back behind a curtain of fog until it’s time to place my order. Once I have my egg salad sandwich I take a seat near the back door. There aren’t many tables left; I’d forgotten that it was the weekend.

Chew. Swallow. Sip lime soda. *Think.*

Neither Bastien nor I really knew how to cook. We lived on frozen/packaged food and cheap takeout. I had this idea we could learn to cook together and bought a book of basic recipes. We tackled chicken quesadillas, teriyaki pork, sweet potatoes, sticky buns and cabbage rolls and then got bored and rotated the homemade quesadillas and buns into our diet of otherwise packaged food and takeout. Bastien was more of a natural in the kitchen than I was and I began to lose interest first, but the sticky buns were delicious. I can taste the memory of cinnamon and walnuts even as I swallow bits of egg salad.

The sandwich itself is fine. Good even. But I can't finish it. Two-thirds of the way through digesting another bite becomes impossible so, having cooled off like I'd intended, I wander down to the lake and sit on a shaded bench. Supervised children play in the park behind me, shrieking and laughing, but no one's bothering the geese. In fact, the geese themselves seem almost militant—not at all like creatures in need of human protection—as they march out of the lake and spread strategically out along the grass for a midday snack.

Even in the shade, the heat begins to get to me again after about an hour and I stroll back up to Lakeshore Road to visit the fruit market and buy bananas and berries for Armstrong and milk for myself. On the way to the market an old woman in a medical scooter whizzes by me on the sidewalk, stopping abruptly a few feet in front of me. She tugs gently at the long gold pashmina draped around her shoulders. It's too warm for a shawl—I don't know how she can stand it—but as I catch up to her I spy the reason she's come to a halt. One end of her pashmina is wedged under the scooter's rear left wheel.

I stop next to the woman and attempt to soften my expression as I glance down into her eyes. "Do you need some help?"

She smiles ruefully up at me. "I don't want to roll forward in case I tear it. Do you think you could try to slip it out?"

I crouch to examine the situation more closely and begin to work the delicate fabric out from underneath the wheel, slowly and carefully. At first I suspect it won't all come free and that she'll have to move forward and risk ruining her pretty pashmina.

“Is there anything I can do?” a male voice says from above me.

My fingers reclaim the final section of trapped fabric. “Oh, thank you!” the woman exclaims, beaming at me. Now that I’m really looking at her I notice she has arresting green eyes; it’s like staring into the Caribbean ocean and having it stare back.

“You’re welcome,” I say, returning her smile. As I stand, I switch my gaze to the man who’d stopped to help, the very same one who wasn’t interested in a medium-spicy chicken curry wrap at The Cunning Café earlier in the afternoon.

“She’s got it,” the woman announces gratefully, and for a fraction of a second I actually feel something other than loss: a tiny seed of pride. “But thank you both.” She knots the pashmina around her chest and I turn to continue my journey to the fruit market. Three seconds later the woman’s speeding ahead of me again on the sidewalk, waving as she passes.

“Excuse me,” the man says, sidling up to me. “Could you tell me if there’s a post office around here?”

I pause to digest the question. Someone else could probably answer in a snap but it takes me a moment to remember whether I’m in possession of the information he’s looking for.

“It won’t be open today,” I tell him.

“Right, Sunday,” the guy says, mostly to himself. “I’ll have to go tomorrow then. Can you point me in the right direction?”

The street name’s slipped my mind but I tell him about the shop with the post office counter where I’ve purchased stamps from time to time. It’s only a

couple blocks west from where we're currently standing—on the north side of one of the little side streets running just off Lakeshore. "You'll see a butcher's on the corner and there's an ice cream place down the same street," I add, pointing in the general direction.

"Thanks," he says, the same brief but polite smile on his lips that I spotted there earlier. He sets off down the road as though he intends to locate the post office now, despite me mentioning that it would be closed.

Maybe he just wants to scout out the location for tomorrow. Just to know. I used to be like that; always checking Google Maps and the TTC schedule before going someplace new.

I'd never been to Oakville before Bastien died. I was majoring in anthropology at the University of Toronto's downtown campus while Bastien's design program was split between classes at York University in Toronto and Oakville's Sheridan College. The only thing I remember him saying about the place is, "It looks like a nice town—especially near to the lake. Kinda sleepy but with some breathing room."

I would never have thought to come here if it weren't for Bastien's aunt Abigail, but when she offered me someplace to stay and I learned her house was in Oakville, moving here, at least temporarily, made perfect sense. This was a place Bastien knew, a place he'd walked and ate and painted and sketched. A place where I could live inside a trance as much as was humanly possible while still having to give directions to the local post office and consider necessities like bananas, berries and milk.

I feel for the twenty dollar bill I hope is in my pocket (and not another thing that I've failed to remember) and then step from the sticky air hovering over the sidewalk into the relative coolness of the fruit market.

## ~Two~

**M**y best friend throughout most of high school was Iliana Lazaroy. She was the vice president of the student council and passionate about politics. In one of the candid yearbook photos of Iliana she's sitting next to the mayor of Burnaby in our high school auditorium, the two of them in mid-conversation and a magnanimous smile plastered across Iliana's face, her keen gaze demonstrating that she's listening intently to every word the mayor says. The yearbook committee captioned the picture "Most Likely to Rule the World," and they weren't talking about the mayor.

When we'd first gotten close at the end of ninth grade, Iliana and I were both honor roll students without specific career aspirations. For a long time I thought that I'd pick up a BA and then, if I still hadn't figured anything else out, try for teacher's college. Iliana hit on what she wanted to do before I did and at first she tried to guide me in the same direction. I helped her design posters and buttons for her election campaign at the end of eleventh grade, but the thought of having to do typical student council things, like organize funding drives and plan pep rallies, bored me to tears.

If Iliana and I both weren't such loyal people we probably would've drifted apart in twelfth grade. People change, especially during high school. But we hung on. Busy as Iliana was, we still hung out together, and every once in a while I put my name down for council led initiatives, like the time I signed up to do the student volunteer day at our local food bank. Bastien, one of the few black students at our school, was volunteering at the food bank that day too. We sorted dried and canned goods next to each other for over an hour, until someone

asked him and a couple of the other guys from school to help unload a truck of donations in the warehouse out back.

That hour was the most interaction Bastien and I ever had during high school. We'd shared a couple of classes over the years but moved in different circles and had never really gotten to know each other. Bastien's grades were as good as mine but he was one of the kids you'd always see carrying around a sketchpad, stubby piece of charcoal and some manga novel or comic book. Our first real conversation happened at the Operation Foodshare bank. This was back when the Winter Olympics were being held in Vancouver, so all of B.C. was wild with Olympic fever. Jon Montgomery had won the gold in men's skeleton for us only the night before and Bastien and I talked about watching his final fast-as-lightning run down the track.

When Shaun White and the halfpipe came up, Bastien's eyes popped and he switched the topic to Torah Bright. Her name was on the lips of practically every guy at school the day after she won gold, so that wasn't anything new, but I teased Bastien about it before admitting that she was hot, the kind of girl who'd be hot walking down the street in an old sweatshirt but was *extra* hot because she had superhero powers on a snowboard.

Bastien grinned at me. "You know, you sound like you might have a thing for her too."

"Everybody can tell when someone's beautiful," I said. "Whether they like him or her or not. Guys can tell about other guys too. They just don't like to admit it."

Bastien, still smiling, shook his head like he wasn't going to entertain the idea. I started naming male athletes anyway, and then actors and rappers, which was when things got interesting because Bastien said he didn't listen to pop music and hip hop much anymore and didn't even know some of the people I'd mentioned. "I mean, I hear it around, you know, because it's everywhere," he added. "And some of it's all right but I prefer, like, jazz, blues and classical."

"So you're an intellectual," I kidded.

Bastien squinted at me, his smile biting deeper into his face. "Yeah, look who's talking, Little Miss Honor Roll with her best friend in student council."

"By honor roll standards I'm a slacker," I countered, my hand wrapped around of a can of mandarin oranges that I'd pulled out of the sac between us. "But Iliana makes me look good. Besides, aren't you Mr. Honor Roll yourself?"

"True," he conceded just seconds before he was called away to unload the truck. And that was pretty much it for Bastien and me in high school. I had no clue which universities he was applying to—would barely have given him a second thought if he hadn't popped up in my life again eight months later clear across the country.

Iliana got into McGill University in Montreal while I'd been accepted at the University of Toronto (I still didn't really know what I wanted to do but was curious to see what east coast life was like). We'd sworn we'd take the train out to see each other whenever we could but lost track of each other fairly quickly. My classes were okay, especially anthropology, which I later decided I wanted to major in, but all through September my roommate Marissa made my life hell

by sneaking a guy she was hooking up with into our room while she thought I was asleep. On the first occasion the sex was so swift and rudimentary—before they passed out and then both started to snore—that I pretended I was still sleeping, but that got tougher and tougher to do as they grew rowdier on each subsequent occasion until I felt like was part of a psychological experiment designed to chart people’s reactions to unwanted exposure to live pornography. Watching their sloppy sex made me want to hold on to my virginity until I was least thirty.

When I complained to Marissa for the third time she acted like I was a stuck up prude and said, with a sullen expression, that they’d try to be quieter. “Quieter isn’t going to cut it,” I said bluntly. Even sexiling me would’ve been a step up, but she’d never even tried to knock out a workable arrangement with me. “I’ve had enough. You need to go someplace else. I would think you’d want to anyway—unless you get off on being watched.”

Marissa folded her arms rapidly in front of her and scrunched up her eyebrows. “You’re just jealous. Not like you’re getting any action, is it?”

“Jealous? *Please*. More like totally grossed out, Marissa.” That’s not something I would normally say, even though it was the truth, but I was so sick of Marissa and her ridiculous fake orgasm noises (because even without any practical experience of my own I was certain there was no way that Trev, with his jackhammer impersonation, was giving her any real ones) that I could barely look at her without my mouth dropping automatically into a frown.

Several other unpleasant things were said by us both but Marissa didn’t bring Trev back to our room after that. She stopped talking to me entirely and

the unspoken tension between us proved almost as toxic as being an unhappy witness to her sex life.

When Yunhee Kang from my humanities class happened to mention that her own roommate had just dropped out and gone home to North Bay due to persistent health problems, I explained about my disastrous roommate experiences and begged her to let me move in. Thankfully, she didn't like living alone and readily agreed. By Christmas Yunhee, who reminded me a little of Iliana before she'd discovered her interest in politics, and a girl named Katie she'd gone to high school with in Ottawa became my closest friends at university.

None of us partied hard, but that doesn't mean we didn't like to have a good time. We joined the Asian Film Club, went to see bands together, and dressed up for the zombie walk near the end of October. As a zombie bride, drenched in blood and with an eyeball dangling from her cheek, Yunhee had the best costume of the three of us. She clutched a dismembered prop arm and bared her teeth as the three of us lumbered through the park amid throngs of assorted zombies—cop zombies, pinup girl zombies in push-up bras, cross-dressing zombies, you name it and they were represented in the park that day. Katie and I felt almost under-dressed in hoodies and jeans, our faces pale and trails of blood spilling from our mouths. Still, with my hair slicked back, a vacant look in my eyes and both my hands drenched in red, I would've thought I was fairly unrecognizable and anonymous.

Trying to stay in character while simultaneously checking out everyone else's costumes and zombie swagger was a big part of the fun. We lurched,

growled and contorted our bodies, our faces fastened into blank expressions as we pretended to lunge at onlookers. But it was impossible to stay zombie for the entire duration of the walk and the three of us slipped periodically back into our regular selves to make small talk. We were ambling along, having temporarily returned to our human states, when a guy in broken glasses, green face paint and torn clothes fell into pace beside me. He bent his head to look into my face and said, “Leah Fischer, is that you?”

It took me a couple of seconds to get past his makeup job. “Bastien!” I exclaimed. There was dark red makeup smeared under his eyes and his tattered navy blazer flapped in the wind. “Hey, what’re you doing here?”

His top teeth peeked out from between his lips as he smiled. “I’m taking a design program at York—living off campus with a few guys. What about you? I didn’t know you were going to school out here. You still see Iliana?”

“She’s at McGill. We keep saying we have to get together. Hey.” I grabbed Yunhee’s shoulder. “This is my roommate, Yunhee, and my friend, Katie.”

“Hey.” Bastien nodded at them. “This is the first time I’ve been introduced to zombies.”

“We prefer the term undead,” Yunhee joked, both her arms reaching claw-like in front of her as she delved back into her performance.

I spent the rest of the zombie walk talking to Bastien about our new lives in Toronto. It felt like catching up, which was funny considering we’d hardly ever spoken before. Bastien suggested that we should hang out sometime, and we exchanged cell phone numbers. Over the next couple of weeks we texted a little and then went for coffee twice. I thought we were just being friends until

he dropped by my dorm room on his way to a basketball game and casually happened to mention another girl he was hanging out with. Instantly I was jealous, which could only mean one thing: I was interested in Bastien Powell, a guy I'd gone to school with for four whole years and only really bothered to speak to once.

When had his body changed from skinny to lean but well-muscled? When had he evolved from a comic book carrying dork into a creative, independent-minded person who had confident, interesting opinions?

And did he like me back? I analyzed our hours together with Yunhee, feeling at a disadvantage because of my limited romantic experience. I'd only had one boyfriend in high school and that had lasted a grand total of two and a half short months before we'd mutually lost interest.

Yunhee advised me to be bold and tell Bastien how I felt. At first I resisted, afraid my confession could change the dynamic between us in a negative way if he didn't share my feelings. But after approximately ten days spent burning myself out with wondering whether Bastien could ever be with me or if we were just meant to be friends, I turned to him, right in the middle of the Oscar buzz movie we were watching at the Varsity theater together, and whispered, "I need you to be absolutely truthful with me about something, okay?"

He stared quizzically at me in the dark. "That sounds heavy, Leah. What's up?"

"I'm going to be okay with whatever you say but"—I focused on the screen and then back at him—"is there something going on with you and

Tabatha?” She was the girl he’d been mentioning from time to time, a fellow York U student. My left eyelid pulsed as I continued. “Or do you *wish* there was?”

Bastien tensed next to me. I felt that nearly as strongly as if it’d been my own body. Then he hunched over in his chair and said, “What do you want to hear?”

“Just the truth.”

He nodded soberly. “So it would mean something to you if there was something going on with Tabatha?”

“It would mean...” I pulled my chin close to my chest and took a deep breath. “It would mean that I shouldn’t think about you in any way other than how we are right now.”

I watched Bastien exhale. “I didn’t know you were,” he said. “I mean...I never got that feeling from you.”

“I guess I’m a little slow at figuring myself out,” I admitted. My face was burning and I was grateful that it was dark so he wouldn’t see the color in my cheeks. I could just about keep my voice steady, but I couldn’t control an embarrassed blush. “And now I think I should just shut up so we can get back to watching the movie.”

“No, no, Leah.” Bastien’s voice spiked, competing with the movie dialogue. “I didn’t mean it like that.” A lady shushed him from several rows behind us. “I meant...” He dropped to a whisper. “We can’t talk here. Come with me.” He cocked his head in the direction of the exit and was already getting to his feet. I trailed him out of the theater and we stopped in front of the

tropical fish tank in the lobby. A handful of spilt popcorn littered the ground between us. I dug my hands into my pockets and looked Bastien's way, suspense building in the silence.

"Tabatha's strictly a friend," he told me. "But you..." He tilted his head as he gazed back at me. "I've been thinking about you too. I would've said something sooner but..." He shrugged, a shyness creeping into his eyes that I'd never seen there before. "I read you wrong. I thought I was just picking up a friendship vibe from you."

Behind us a luminous yellow fish was looping around an equally colorful piece of coral. I shook my head and broke into a giddy smile. "Maybe in the very beginning," I confessed, "but not now."

Bastien smiled too. Neither of us could stop. Then he took a step closer to me and said, "So, hey, why are you still standing so far away?" He bent to kiss me and his mouth on mine felt right from the start. I threw my arms around his neck and leaned into him. We went straight back to his place, made out on top of his bed and then in it, the sound of his roommate's music thumping through the dividing wall.

We didn't go all the way, though. We held back. It turned out that I wasn't the only virgin in our relationship and we were both having too good a time exploring to rush things. It wasn't until we were home in Burnaby for Christmas, curled up on a gray flannel blanket in front of my parents' fireplace while they were at a friend's dinner party, that we actually went ahead. And when it happened it was like a floodgate had opened up. We had sex so many

times that night that we both started to feel raw and had to stop before we really wanted to.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have waited,” Bastien kidded, wrapping his arms around me and squeezing me to him. “Just look what happens when we try to exercise some restraint.”

I smiled into his chest. “So you think if we’d done it back when we were sixteen or something we’d be *over* sex by now?”

“I think if we did it when we were the sixteen the experience would’ve been over significantly faster,” Bastien admitted. “It probably would’ve been over if I saw you naked from across the room.”

“*Hah.*” I eased myself away from him and propped my head up with my elbow so I could stare into his twinkling brown eyes. “But I guess you’re right; staring at each other from across the room would’ve been a lower impact activity.” I was pretty sore right then but mostly I was just joking around.

Bastien’s face softened and then turned playful. “Show me where it hurts and I’ll kiss it better.”

I swear he loved going down on me just as much as he loved sex itself. He told me once that he thought he could live down between my legs if I let him. We practically did live like that after we moved in together that May. In the back of my mind I think I’d previously believed sex would prove overrated—not specifically with Bastien but with anyone.

It was funny to find out I was wrong about something I’d never consciously realized in the first place. I suddenly understood how people could become so obsessed with sex. If you were having a bad day it could be your

pick-me-up, and on a good day it was gravy. But more than that, sleeping with Bastien felt like speaking a secret language with your favorite person. Once we were living together hardly a day went by that we didn't find time to be together.

But the best thing about living with Bastien was plain and simple just *being* with Bastien, whatever we were doing. He was the person I wanted to speak to most every morning and every night, and even if I could, by some trick of the universe, still speak with him for just half an hour each day, I know that daily thirty minutes would be enough to make my entire life feel full. It wouldn't matter if there was no sex or that he was lousy at coping with the minor amounts of relationship tension that surfaced between us from time to time. None of that would matter at all.

It's the essence of Bastien that I miss, the guy who spent as much time in his head coming up with comic book ideas to write and draw as he did with me, the guy who made me coffee as he told me about his day and was just as eager to hear about mine, the guy who always rooted for the underdog (except maybe in the case of Torah Bright), and the guy who named our hamster Armstrong after both musical genius Louis B and astronaut Neil, the first human to walk on the moon.

"This hamster," Bastien began jokingly as he held seven-week-old Armstrong in his hands after we first got him home from the pet store, "should aspire to greatness."

In my opinion, we didn't have to aspire to greatness. We were already there.

## ~Three~

Maybe being that happy tempts fate. We only lived together for eight months but that was long enough for me to discover that most people aren't anywhere near as happy with their husbands or boyfriends as I was with Bastien. I began to notice that women constantly told jokes featuring their significant others' general cluelessness as the punch line. I heard it in movies and television and from friends' lips. Men weren't any more charitable. They often acted as if their wives or girlfriends were nags or spoiled princesses.

Real examples of partnership were difficult to find. The happiest couple I knew, aside from us, was a man named Reid and his boyfriend Michael. In the summer between first and second year of university I'd taken a job at the Royal Ontario Museum, in the children's gift shop up on the second floor. Reid worked for the museum as a graphic designer and I'd run into him in the cafeteria or hallways from time to time. By then I was becoming increasingly enthusiastic about my anthropology courses, particularly archaeology, and had decided that I wanted a career with the museum. There was so much to learn, not so much in my gift shop job capacity but in the larger world of the museum, that I found myself making conversation with other employees—everyone from the web designers to the curators—at any opportunity.

Reid was a chatty person. He'd talk to you about anything—recipes, right wing politics, the interview he'd caught on Craig Ferguson the night before—so we got pretty friendly at work. He and Michael had been together for seven years, but when I ran into them on Bloor Street one day after class, the spark between them gleamed as if they were still in the throes of first love. And the

only negative thing I ever heard Reid say about Michael was that he had smelly feet. He didn't even say *that* like he was complaining.

Love is real and real love lasts. I used to feel sorry for people who didn't believe in it—the people who were lonely with someone else or lonely alone. For a while I was one of the lucky ones.

That ended when two police officers knocked at our door at ten after eight on January eleventh of this year. I sensed something had happened to Bastien even before they arrived. That sounds like a certainty people ascribe to events after the fact, because they feel they should recognize such a momentous change without having it pointed out to them. But in my case it was the truth.

I didn't know that morning, when I left for class and Bastien was still in the shower, running late like he usually did, that he wouldn't be coming back. I didn't know that afternoon when it was pelting hail as I sprinted for the subway, my overstuffed knapsack making my shoulder ache. But forty minutes before the heavy knock at the door, I went cold and dizzy, couldn't stop shivering.

Our drafty basement apartment was always chilly and I told myself I was being paranoid. I went into the bedroom, dove under the duvet and forced myself to open my anthropology textbook and read the assigned chapter on prehistoric social organization. Gradually my fingers began to warm. I didn't call anyone or make any sudden movements that could turn my suspicions into the truth. But deep down, I knew. Out there in the world something had gone wrong with Bastien.

I didn't cry when the police told me about the accident; I just froze deeper. The female officer, who didn't look much older than me, smelled like strong coffee. The balding male cop went over the facts with an apologetic voice that was at odds with his piercing stare. Then he leaned forward on the couch, one hand wound around the back of his pale neck, and asked if I understood what they were saying. The officer had a passing resemblance to my uncle Richard, and for an instant I thought about how very far away the older people, my family and Bastien's, who would have a better idea how to handle this, were. But the next second was worse—the next second was free-fall—because I realized it didn't matter what would happen from that moment forward; no one could change the fact that Bastien was gone.

An eighty-four-year-old woman had run into Bastien when he was stepping into a crosswalk on Bathurst Street near Finch Avenue. I found out later that she'd dragged him thirty feet into the intersection, pinning his body underneath the vehicle, but all the police said on the evening of January eleventh was that he was "pronounced dead at the scene." They asked if I wanted them to make any calls for me and then proceeded to notify our parents and Yunhee, who caught a cab over and was at my door within twenty minutes.

Yunhee welled up at the sight of me, made more calls (the first one to Bastien's friend Etienne, whose house he'd left only minutes before he was hit) and slept on my couch that first night. I alternated between crying jags and numb silence. Some moments the loss didn't feel real and in others it seemed as though the world had collapsed and a hollow new one been hastily erected

in its place. I didn't want to accept that new world; while Yunhee slept I sat on top of my bed amongst Bastien's things—the sweatpants he'd slept in last night, his Miles Davis and John Coltrane CDs, his manga novels and collection of sketchpads—and refused to close my eyes.

I couldn't stop poring over them, the things in our bathroom and closet too—old running shoes that he'd held on to despite the hole in the bottom that made them unwearable except on the driest of summer days, his denim shirt, two favorite pairs of jeans (which I couldn't tell apart), the single tie he owned (plain black), his razor, shaving cream and toothbrush. The bristles on my toothbrush were always much more worn down than his. One night the previous week he'd picked up my toothbrush, waved it in the air and said, “What the hell do you do with this thing, Leah? Looks like you've been chomping on it like it's a stick of bubble gum.”

I reached out and picked up his toothbrush, the memory of him teasing me about mine reverberating in my head. The bristles were dry—the last time he'd brushed his teeth would've been early that morning. But if I hadn't washed his dirty breakfast dishes when I'd gotten home from class in the late afternoon they'd still be sitting in the sink.

I should have left them untouched.

But with so much other evidence of Bastien's existence around me, how could he be gone forever? It should take more to be banished from this life than an eighty-four-year-old woman's creaky reflexes or attention issues.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't think or sleep or eat.

Time worked differently once he was gone. Light and darkness were different. Sounds, smells, colors. Other people were a pale imitation of who they'd been before Bastien had died. That was how it seemed. It wasn't their fault—it was just that none of them were Bastien.

I couldn't imagine a future where day after day would contain no Bastien. I still can't. But the hours and days keep rolling on.

Bastien's parents and my mother flew out to Toronto the day after the accident. Mr. and Mrs. Powell had his remains flown back to Burnaby, where the funeral was held. At home in B.C., my mother fed me antidepressants "to help you through this." Our long-time family doctor prescribed them for me without even making me come into his office for an appointment. I stayed with my parents for a week and my mom pleaded with me to stay longer. But I felt further from Bastien in Burnaby than I'd felt in our apartment.

I went back to Toronto and shut down inside. In the beginning I showed up for classes but my head wasn't in it. At the museum I screwed up—cashing out with too much money, or worse, too little. Boxes of stock went unpacked. Some days I slept late or forgot to show entirely. Armstrong was the only thing I didn't completely neglect. I let Yunhee, Katie and Etienne's calls go unanswered.

Yunhee showed up in person, sometimes with Katie in tow. They'd drag me out to the movies or to eat and try to draw me into conversation.

*How are you doing? Have you called Professor Feingold for an extension on your paper? Do you need to go to the grocery store? It didn't look like you had much in the fridge. Have you spoken to your parents lately? How's work? How's*

*Hammy?* (That's how Yunhee always referred to Armstrong.) *Is there anything we can do?*

My professors and TAs were sympathetic too, but couldn't give me grades for work I wasn't doing. I was warned I could fail and didn't care. Bastien's parents generously sent a couple of checks to help me cover the rent until I could find another roommate or decide what I wanted to do. When Mrs. Powell phoned after the first one, to make sure I'd received it, I thanked her but didn't decide anything.

I couldn't leave our place but I couldn't think. It was difficult enough just to get through the day.

In mid-March my boss, Pina, at the end of her rope after I'd missed two shifts without calling in and shown up hours late for numerous others, took me aside. "Here's what I see," she said in a gentle but definitive tone. "You say you're sorry but then nothing changes." She tapped my wrist as though we were friends. "I don't blame you, Leah. I know it's hard. So what I see is a girl who should go home and be with her family. Grieve with the ones who love you and will take care of you."

I shook my head: no. Being at home wouldn't help me. I needed to remain here, the place Bastien and I had made a life together.

"You can come back," Pina continued. "Maybe in the fall to resume your studies. The city will be here and we'll be here. Your job will be here for you." Her eyes bore into mine and made me look away. "But you're not able for it now. I can't keep scrambling around to find people to cover your shifts, and

even when you're here..." She let her voice trail off. "I need someone I can depend on."

"I know," I said loudly. "And I know I haven't been dependable, but like you said, it's been very *hard*." It wasn't that I really cared about losing the museum at that point; it was the money plain and simple. I wouldn't be able to cover expenses long on just my student loans. Bastien and I used to split the rent and grocery bills and his parents wouldn't send checks forever. "I promise things will be different from now on. I need this job. I need to keep a routine and be out doing normal things."

Pina nodded, but we'd had versions of this conversation before and they'd made no discernible impact on me. The museum gift shop was easier to deal with than any of my classes—no tests, presentations or assignment deadlines—but sometimes I couldn't get out of bed. I couldn't ever forget that Bastien was gone, but I couldn't stand to have his absence thrown in my face by the outside world. Pina was doing it even now. Everyone did it, even if they'd never known Bastien and didn't know me.

If a cashier smiled at me when I went to buy groceries, they were doing it by dragging me into the here and now with them—a place and time where Bastien no longer existed. All I wanted was to be left alone, but instead Pina was forcing me to beg for a job I didn't care about.

"Do you really think this is what you want right now?" Pina asked with a level gaze.

"Yes," I lied. "Just give me another chance. You won't be sorry."

She sighed, her two front teeth gnawing on her bottom lip. “Okay, Leah.” Pina forced a smile, possibly aware that we were both only postponing the inevitable.

I was on time for all my shifts for a week and then, on a Sunday afternoon, I stalled during breakfast and couldn’t get myself moving again. I turned the TV on to *Coronation Street* and lay on the couch. When the phone rang hours later I knew I was sealing my fate but didn’t pick up, forcing Pina to fire me over the answering machine.

A few days later Reid called, having wrangled my number from her, but I didn’t call him back either. By then the only people receiving any return phone calls from me were my parents. I was vague with them, usually muttering about how busy and tired I was. Having no connections to any of the people I knew in Toronto, they accepted my version of events, a version in which I was understandably sad and uncommunicative but staying on top of things. “You really should think about coming home for the summer,” my mother pressed. “Why stay in Toronto and pay rent if you don’t have to?”

My parents hadn’t wanted me to stay in Toronto the previous summer either. It took them awhile to adjust to the reality that I was living with a member of the opposite sex, having a grown-up relationship.

“There’s my job, Mom,” I countered. “If I gave that up I probably wouldn’t get it back in the fall.”

I could hear my mother pouting over the phone line. “They’d take you back, I bet. And you’d find another job here. Besides, you won’t be able to afford to keep that apartment yourself.”

“I know,” I told her. “I’ll look for a new one. Things are too hectic for me to worry about it right now but I’ll get on that after classes are finished. There are always people looking to share. It shouldn’t be hard to find somebody.”

We all know the rights things to say, if we have to, but doing them is something else. I did nothing. *Nothing*. And then Bastien’s mother began pestering me about sending the rest of his things home. His parents had taken a few items of his clothing home with him in January but left the majority of his things undisturbed. “There’s no rush,” Bastien’s mother told me over the phone, “but I’ve priced a company that will ship some boxes. You keep what you want, Leah—whatever he would want you to have—but I know you’ll be moving soon.”

No, I wouldn’t. I kept buying time from everyone, avoiding the phone, slowly draining my bank account of what remained from my student loan. Yunhee smothered her frustration with me in concern and passed on the names of friends and acquaintances that were looking for roommates. She’d been sharing a small two-bedroom condo near Front Street with a girl named Vishaya (whose parents had bought the place specifically to supply her with a decent place to live while she went to university) since the beginning of second year. Etienne called and left a message saying there was a room going in the house he shared and that I was the first person he’d thought of.

When I didn’t call him back he got in touch with Yunhee and the two of them came to my apartment to confront me. Earlier that afternoon my grades had arrived in the mail along with a separate letter informing me that I’d been placed on academic probation, and Yunhee nosily grabbed both printouts from

my coffee table. Somehow I'd scraped by with Ds in two classes—Abnormal Psychology and The Graphic Novel. The rest I'd outright failed. Yunhee flapped the papers in front of me and said, "You have to appeal this. You have extenuating circumstances. I'm sure they'd be able to do something."

I'd never told Yunhee about losing my job; I knew she'd have lectured me about that too.

"It doesn't matter," I insisted. "I'm not going back this fall."

"Not going back?" Her eyes bulged. "What are you going to do? Did your parents convince you to go home?"

"No. I'm not going home either. I'm staying here."

Etienne, who'd just been watching and listening up to that point, said, "So you're not moving?"

"Not yet. Not now. I can't." I focused on Armstrong across the room, running a zillion miles an hour in his wheel. "I can't leave this place."

"But..." Yunhee and Etienne swapped guarded looks. "Can you *afford* to stay here? I thought money was an issue."

"I'm going to work more hours at the museum," I lied. "I've already fixed it up with Pina."

Yunhee couldn't keep the surprise out of her face, but Etienne, after a moment, said maybe it was good for me to take a break after such a life-changing loss. I was already tired of talking to them and of the way they were making me lie, and when Yunhee asked me to go out to dinner with them I complained that I hadn't slept well last night and was too tired.

"Okay, so we'll just order pizza in then," she said, not giving up.

They stayed until David Letterman came on and then each of them hugged me goodbye. “We should do this again soon,” Yunhee said. “And you have to start picking up the damn phone.”

“I know,” I told her. “I know.”

Some people don’t let go easily. If I was in Yunhee’s place I probably would’ve been persistent too, but I wished she’d be more like Iliana and fade into the background.

From then on I burrowed harder, letting knocks at my door go unanswered too. I went out for groceries from time to time, kept the apartment clean and played with Armstrong, but otherwise kept to myself.

Bastien and I (mostly Bastien) had been working on a graphic novel when he died. With his heavy schoolwork load, he hadn’t been able to devote as much time to it as he would’ve liked. He’d planned to really put a push on it this summer and finish the story and at least ten sample pages, enough to put together submission packages for Dark Horse, Fantagraphics, Slave Labor, Top Shelf and Drawn and Quarterly

Titled *Johnny Yang, Merman at Large*, the graphic novel was the comedic story of fifteen-year-old Johnny Yang, who is struck by lightning while swimming in his backyard pool and subsequently turns into a merman every time it rains. For days on end I immersed myself in Bastien’s rough sketches and plot notes. The story itself was roughly half written (I’d made contributions here and there, suggesting, among other things, Johnny’s mortal embarrassment at becoming a merperson, which he thought of as a very

feminine state of being) but Bastien had only finished inking the first four pages.

I was leafing through the pages one afternoon, more in Bastien's fantasy world than my own reality, when there was a rap at the door. I glanced slyly up through the tiny family room window and caught sight of a cab, and then my mother. My mother in Toronto, on my doorstep, without warning.

My heart sank, then raced and sank afresh. I was wearing the plaid pajama bottoms I'd slept in, and my hair, which I hadn't washed in three days (although it only took one to get oily), was lankier than my mother ever would have seen it. I sprinted for the shower, splashed soap and shampoo onto my body and dragged my razor across my legs and armpits with such velocity that my right ankle instantly began to bleed.

When I stepped out of the shower again, less than three minutes later, my phone was ringing off the hook. I slapped a Band-Aid on my ankle, wrapped a towel around myself and headed up to the door. Mom was sitting on the front stoop, her cell phone pressed to her ear and her wheeled carry-on bag in front of her. She turned and saw me just as I opened my mouth to speak.

"I was in the shower," I told her. "I thought I heard the door. What are you doing here?"

My mother frowned, probably afraid that I was constantly running for the door in a state of undress. Her dyed blond hair (mostly gray underneath) used to be the same shade of brown-shot-through-with-auburn as mine. She thought the blond made her look younger, and it did, but it also made it hard to tell her apart from the thousands upon thousands of other middle-aged

white woman who'd dyed their bobbed hair blond for the same reason. From a distance I wouldn't have been able to recognize her as my mother. She could've just as easily been a professor from school or my local pharmacist.

"I called on your birthday," my mom said. "And so many times after. You never called back. Your father and I have been so worried. I even tried the museum and couldn't catch you there." Her chin was beginning to wobble, like this might end in tears, and I retreated inside, beckoning her to follow. "You never tell me what's going on," she continued. "I feel like I can never *reach* you. Why haven't you been in touch with us?"

I didn't realize I'd let my parents' calls go unanswered for so long. I always meant to check messages but I'd procrastinate, promising myself I'd check them the next day. And the following day would turn into the day after that, which had now turned into my mother flying out from British Columbia to reassure herself that her only child was alive and well, not sprinting to the door in a towel, not pining for someone she'd never in this life see again.

I'd forgotten all about my twentieth birthday too. The phone had been ringing more often than usual lately. I suppose that—along with my parents' desperation—explained it.

"What did they say at the museum?" I asked anxiously. I needed to find out how much my mother knew.

She shook her head in bewilderment. "Nothing helpful. It sounded like a young girl on the phone. She said she'd just started there and didn't know anyone else's schedule. She told me I could call back and speak to her

manager, but I didn't want to cause any trouble for you at work, make it seem as though..."

*As though I was some kind of emergency situation. Unstable.*

Better to hop on a plane and check on me in person.

I nodded like she'd done the right thing and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know I was worrying you and Dad so much. I've been working a lot—forgetting to check messages." A drop of water rolled down my neck as I led her downstairs. "And on my birthday, Yunhee, her roommate and I went out to an all-day dim sum place and then a movie." I hadn't seen Yunhee in weeks; I hadn't seen anyone I knew in weeks.

"Check your messages from this past week and you'll hear an earful of worry," my mom said, a layer of frost coating her voice and making me bow my head apologetically. "Leah." She planted her hands on my shoulders. "You're looking so thin. Are you eating?" She threw her arms around me, crunching my bones.

My clothes had grown loose so I must've already lost weight, but Bastien and I didn't own a scale. "I'm fine," I rasped, hugging her back. "But what are you doing here?" I was repeating myself, panicking. "You didn't need to come all this way."

"What am I supposed to do when we don't hear from you?" my mom asked. "I should have come earlier. Every time we talked on the phone, I could hear in your voice how unhappy you were." I winced and folded my arms in front of me, my fingers (nails bitten to the quick) pinching at towel fibers. "Having to do your course work after what happened with Bastien—and now,

locate a new apartment by yourself—it's too much. I want to help. And I wanted to see you.”

She was staying four days, she said, and during that time we'd do whatever I wanted. She told me she'd sleep on the couch and, of course, didn't want to be any trouble. “I know you have to work at the museum,” she added. “I don't want to interrupt your schedule. Just work around me.”

Standing there in front of my mother, still dripping wet, I racked my brain for the appropriate way to handle her sudden appearance. I couldn't tell her I wasn't at the museum anymore. She'd see it as further evidence that I needed to go home with her. And I wasn't going anywhere. But I didn't want to fight about it; I didn't want her to worry more than she had to.

I said she was lucky that I happened to have the day off, and later I let her take me out for a pasta dinner, during which I listened to updates on my father, aunt, uncle and cousins. As a legal assistant my mother always has a collection of depressing tales of down and out people to trot out, yet they never seem to weigh her down. Those stories I heard over dinner too: a woman with previous prostitution charges fighting for custody of her thirteen-year-old son, two brothers with gambling addictions who had taken to robbing banks together, an elderly man with a bad heart who had his house sold from under him as part of an identity theft scheme. I told my mother she should pick one of the more dramatic cases and write a book about it (a suggestion she never gets tired of hearing).

“I should,” she agreed. “I really should. Legal fiction sells like hotcakes, doesn't it?”

Talkative as she was, I could feel her heavy stare on me, wanting me to be the Leah I used to be, or at least some kind of assurance that I would one day be that person again.

I thought things would go easier if I obliged her and played the part the best I could, so the following day I pretended to go to work at the museum. For hours I sat in the Toronto Reference Library with Bastien's iPod and *Johnny Yang* sketchbook. I intended to repeat my deceit the day after as well but couldn't bring myself to get out of bed on time and then had to fake a case of stomach flu.

My mother went out to the grocery store to buy me soup and by the time she'd returned I'd fallen asleep again, exhausted by my recent efforts to be Leah-like. While I was sleeping the phone rang and my mother answered it and had a revealing conversation with Yunhee. When I crept into the kitchen an hour later my mom was stirring a pot of minestrone soup, looking a million miles away.

She flinched when she saw me. "I spoke to your friend," she said, turning the burner down and leaving the wooden spoon sitting in the pot. "When I mentioned about your birthday she seemed confused and said she hadn't seen you in weeks."

I slumped against the counter and dropped my gaze, feeling genuinely nauseous.

"Why would you lie?" my mom asked in a pained voice. "Yunhee says she's been so worried about you—that you never return her calls, never see her

or your other friends, and that you say you're not going back to school in the fall."

I wondered if Yunhee had told my mother about my grades too. Thank God I'd never confided in her about being fired.

"I'm not," I whispered. My mother would know sooner or later anyway; I'd just hoped it would be later. "I need a break. I can't..." I squeezed my eyelids together and thought of Bastien. I'd made him tomato soup last November when he'd had a vicious cold that made it impossible to breathe through his nose. He said everything tasted bland but that at least the hot soup felt good on his throat. The congestion had made his voice deeper. I kind of liked the way it sounded—like a version of him I'd never met before, an alternate universe Bastien. "I can't just go on like nothing's changed."

My mother shook her head, a tiny bead of sweat on her chin from standing over the hot stove. "No one expects that. But you have to keep moving forward with your life. It doesn't stop because he's gone."

I smiled bitterly.

It had stopped. For me, it had. This wasn't real life anymore. It couldn't be real life without him.

"I don't want to pretend for you," I admitted, my fingers curving around the counter behind me. "I don't want to pretend that I feel better than I do and that I'm like some battery operated toy that keeps doing what it was designed to do no matter what. Maybe that's how you think life should be—this nonstop marathon where we all keep walking despite the people we love dropping next to us—but that's not how I feel."

“Honey.” My mother’s face was long. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. You don’t have to *pretend*. I know you miss him. But you can’t push people away. We all care about you—your father and I and your friends. That hasn’t changed. We still want to be part of your life.”

“Mom...” I stopped, no words left on my tongue to protest.

“I hate to think of you so far from us—thousands of miles away—living on your own this way, and now thinking of not returning to school in September. It doesn’t have to be this way. *Come back home with me, Leah.*” Her eyes were so earnest that the old Leah would’ve been swayed by them and gotten on the plane with her. “We can pack up your things, take what we can carry with us and have the rest of them shipped.”

“No.” My voice was flat. “I’m not leaving. This is where we lived together. This is where he’d be if he was still alive.”

“And he’s not, Leah,” she said. “Don’t you think he’d want you to be somewhere that you had a proper support system? Do you think he’d want you holed up in this apartment alone? Because that doesn’t sound like Bastien to me.”

“Right,” I snapped. “Because you knew him so well. You never wanted me living with him in the first place—no wonder you don’t get it.” I clasped the counter tighter. “By support system you mean, what? Therapy? Drugs? Something to make me *smile*?” I tore into the word like it was profane.

“You’re not thinking clearly,” my mother countered. “No one’s saying you have to forget, but...” She dragged her fingers wearily into her hairline. “It doesn’t have to be this hard either, Leah. You can let people make it easier.”

There's nothing wrong with that. Being with other people, talking to someone about your feelings, that doesn't make the love you have for Bastien any less."

I shook my head like she didn't know what she was talking about. "I'm going back to bed," I muttered. "Forget the soup. Or eat it yourself, whatever."

She followed me out of the kitchen and along the hall to the bedroom. "Listen," she began. "I don't want to—"

But I didn't let her finish. I swung on my heel and said, "I'm not going home with you. If that's why you're here, to try to talk me into it, you might as well fly back now because it's not going to happen."

Mom's head drooped a little in defeat. "At least don't make up your mind about going back to school yet. That's three and a half months away. Who knows what frame of mind you might be in then. And this apartment"—she tossed up her hands to motion around her—"you'd be so much better off sharing with one of your friends rather than being alone this way."

"Alone is what I want," I told her, and it felt like this most truthful thing I'd said so far. "Why aren't I allowed to want that? Why does what you and what everyone else wants get to be more important?"

*Because I was not myself. Because I was in too much pain to be objective. Because I didn't go out anymore and didn't talk anymore. Didn't care whether the sun was shining or if the city was being flooded with rain.*

My mother debated with me on and off until the morning she left. Her arguments would've had even more strength if she knew I'd been fired and had flunked most of my classes, but I still wouldn't have listened. What I was doing didn't feel like a choice.

In between debate periods (although the debate was mostly on my mother's side—I refused to say much more on the subject) my mother would slip into nurturing mode, offering to make me soup or toast and bring me beverages. There were moments—when I was lying on the couch under a blanket (supposedly still suffering from stomach flu) and my mother was sitting quietly in the wingchair closest to it, the two of us focused on some mindless TV show—that having her in Toronto was some comfort. Why couldn't she let me lie there as long as I wanted? Why was it okay for me to curl up in a ball with a physical sickness but not with a broken heart?

I thought my mother might make a scene on the morning she was due to leave, stand tearfully in my doorway and beg me to come with her as the cab driver stared determinedly in the opposite direction. I braced myself for the possibility, but it never happened. Having lost the argument I'd refused to fully engage in with her, my mother chose to tuck her deepest anxieties about me away and maintain outer calm. Only in the final few seconds in my driveway, once the driver had loaded her suitcase into the trunk, did she say, "Don't keep me guessing about how you're doing. I can't stand it. And you know, if you change your mind about anything your father and I will be there."

"I know, Mom," I said. "Thanks. I'll be better about keeping in touch." I hugged her fast, before she could really get a grip on me, and then jumped back.

My mother had said, days earlier, that I didn't have to pretend, but that was as much a lie as my stomach flu. She wanted me to be okay and even after

the doses of truth I'd let spill during her visit, I humored her by smiling and telling her not to worry, that I'd be fine.

And by the time she would've reached the Toronto airport I was back in bed, under layers of blankets, still in my clothes but with the blinds pulled down to keep as much spring daylight out of the room as possible.

## ~Four~

I tried to keep my promise to my mother. I had call display added to my telephone bill and when my parents' number came up I answered often enough to keep them from panicking. My mother would often ask, "Are you seeing your friends?" and I would reply, "I don't feel like going out much in the evenings—I have to interact with people all day when I'm at the museum."

The more my mother pestered me about socializing the quieter I became until she'd usually be forced to change topics. My father asked fewer questions but was also less capable of carrying the conversation, which meant I spent less time on the phone with him than with my mom. If there was a national news item—politics, sports or crime—that I'd happened to catch on TV I'd toss it into the conversation to give him something to mull over for a few minutes while I listened.

Bastien and I could talk all day and never run out of things to say. But when we were quiet, that was all right too. There was no need to fill up the room with words just for the sake of it. Bastien has such a steadiness about him that he made a large percentage of the population seem self-aggrandizing, superficial or like drama queens in comparison. He even made me feel like a drama queen at times and after he was gone I sometimes wondered if he would think that of me now.

The thought would make me want to argue with his memory: *Why don't you try this, if you think it's so damn easy?*

Then, in my mind, he would try to placate me. *It's okay*, I'd imagine him replying, *you don't need to act any differently than you feel, Leah. You know I love you no matter what.*

It's funny; he used to sing snatches of that Roy Orbison song for me: "Leah." Mostly in a cheesy voice but sometimes sweet. "Here I go, back to sleep and my dreams. And I'll be with Leah, Leah, Leah."

But I was the one chasing down dreams. Maybe no one person should be that important that their absence drains life of meaning, but he was. Day after day and the loss didn't get any lighter.

At the beginning of June, after paying the rent, I realized, not for the first time but with increased dread, that I only had enough left in my bank account to fund rent and other expenses through the summer. Come September, when I'd failed to enroll in classes, making me ineligible for another student loan, I would be left with only a few hundred dollars. If I was lucky my landlord, Mr. Magella, would apply my first month's rent deposit to September and let me stay until October.

And then what?

I considered calling Pina at the museum to plead for my old job. I rehearsed the call in my mind but couldn't, even in my head, force the conversation to go the way I wanted. She wouldn't have me back. I was certain of that. Maybe someday, but not so soon after I'd disappointed her, and besides, given the chance I'd likely do it again. I couldn't see how things would be any different now.

I canceled my cell plan to save myself the monthly fee and reviewed my mental map of Leaside, considering all the nearby places I could look for employment—coffee chains, variety stores, drug stores, restaurants. The more I thought about it the more exhausted I became.

Bastien's mother phoned again to ask about his clothes and other things. Her first message, the one where she was mostly inquiring about my well-being, was cut off by the answering machine. The second, left only thirty seconds later as a continuation of the first, said, "I talked to your mother yesterday and realize packing up anything could still be too much for you to cope with right now, so I hope you don't feel this is too much of a nuisance but I thought I'd send my sister by to check in on you when she's in town. And if you happen to have anything of Bastien's that she can bring home, you only need to hand it over to her."

Neither of the messages mentioned when Bastien's aunt Abigail would arrive. I listened to them twice to make sure I hadn't missed the info but the entire matter slipped my mind shortly afterwards. There were times, when I'd fall half-asleep on the couch, that I'd believe Bastien was lying next to me. In the space between wakefulness and true sleep I could sometimes feel his legs brushing up against mine, his hand light on my waist, his breath at the back of my neck. I could even hear his voice but was unable to make out his words.

Countless hours would slip by this way, with me on the couch or in bed, either thinking of him or dreaming him back into existence. When I left the apartment, mostly to buy groceries or other supplies, a tiny bit of me would imagine him waiting back there on the couch, sketching scenes from *Johnny*

*Yang.* I would arrive home with my arms full of food and he'd race towards me to gather the cloth bags, turning the months since his death into a nightmare I'd finally woken up from.

That's what should have happened.

But didn't.

And then Abigail called me from Oakville. She and Bastien's late uncle Alrick had a second home there. Bastien had gone to visit her a few times while she was in town, and on another occasion we'd had lunch with her in Toronto's distillery district. But I'd actually only met her a total of three times (and one of those times was at Bastien's funeral) and didn't want to see her now. "I'm sorry," I told her up front, "I'm not ready to part with any of Bastien's things yet."

"I told Joyce I thought that's how you might feel," Abigail said in a matter-of-fact tone. "If you were ready it would be done already, wouldn't it?" She didn't give me an opportunity to answer. "Don't you worry about that. We'll just have a visit, Leah, you and I. Joyce had some copies of childhood photos of Bastien made for you that I want to give you."

I remembered staring at the memorial collage at the funeral home. There were so many photos of him that I'd never seen before. Baby Bastien biting into a plush teddy bear that was nearly the same size as him. Bastien on a two-wheel bike, beaming with pride into the camera, making me wonder if the photo was a record of the day he'd learned to ride without training wheels. Skinny Bastien, all legs and arms, on the ferry from mainland British Columbia to Vancouver Island. Young Bastien holding a calico kitten in

someone's dazzlingly yellow kitchen. Bold Bastien with his arm in a sling, raising it up like a badge of courage. A teenage Bastien I recognized from early high school days wearing a pinstriped suit and maroon tie on what must have been some formal occasion, his little brother Jeremy standing next to him with an impish smile.

Thirteen now, Jeremy really only looked like Bastien around the eyes. At the funeral I couldn't stop staring at him.

"That was nice of her," I told Abigail, my throat shrinking. I'd been entirely absorbed in my own loss, but news of the photos made me feel momentarily guilty about not packing up any of Bastien's things for his parents. I could let them have some things he didn't care about as much; maybe the clothes near the back of our closet. "How's she doing?"

"She's a strong woman, as you no doubt know, but this is testing her." Abigail paused. "Testing the whole family. Jeremy's been so quiet. She worries about him."

Bastien has said more than once that his little brother was a tough kid. He said it with admiration—that Jeremy could break a leg and it'd be like your average kid stubbing his toe. According to Bastien, Jeremy was a complete jock whose love of basketball was equaled only by his love of comic books—the biggest thing they had in common.

"Is there a night this week that's good for you?" Abigail continued.

I didn't know what day it was. They all felt the same. "How about the day after tomorrow?" I ventured. "Around seven-thirty?"

Abigail agreed and the second I got off the phone I switched the TV over to the local news channel to check the date: Tuesday, June fifteenth. Two days later, on the Thursday of Abigail's planned visit, I went shopping and made sure the fridge and cupboards were fully stocked. I dusted every surface and cleaned Armstrong's cage with extra vigor while he roamed around the living room in his ball. For the first time since my mom's visit, I put on blush and eyeliner in an attempt to revive my washed out complexion.

I couldn't risk Abigail reporting back to Bastien's parents (which would inevitably then filter to my own) that I'd lost it. My mother would fly back across the country in a flash and next time she wouldn't be able to ignore her instincts. There'd be a bigger confrontation and still I wouldn't do what my parents wanted.

I needed to hold myself together until Abigail had come and gone; that was the easier thing. *Only a few hours*, I told myself. *You can do it*. Given that she probably wouldn't stay long I sincerely believed I could swing it, despite my looming financial crisis and everything else. I was friendly and almost talkative when Abigail first stepped into the apartment. I made her chamomile tea and offered her a hot cross bun on a caramel-colored dessert plate.

We sat on the couch together, drinking and nibbling at our buns, and I told her about Bastien naming Armstrong after the other two greats.

"So what has this one accomplished?" Abigail joked, tilting her head to indicate hamster Armstrong across the room. "Does he have any special talents?"

"I think he must be a late bloomer," I replied with a smile.

And then Abigail dug into her giant black leather purse and pulled out a floral gift bag. “This is for you,” she said, “from Joyce.”

I’d assumed I could set the photographs aside to examine later on my own, but as I opened the bag I saw that Bastien’s mother had placed them inside a beveled glass keepsake box. Within the box, the pictures (numbering at least thirty) were tied together with satiny purple ribbon. I felt as though they were designed to remain that way forever, that it was somehow wrong to disturb the ribbon, but my fingers disagreed. They began unfurling instantly.

The first photograph was of Bastien in a bumper car, smiling but unaware of the camera.

“I think he would be about twelve there,” Abigail told me.

“At Playland?” I asked. Playland was the oldest amusement park in Canada. My parents used to take me at least once every summer. When I got older I went with Iliana; we’d always ride the Hellevator at least twice.

Bastien and I never went to an amusement park together. We were supposed to go to Wonderland last September but a day-long thunderstorm broke out on the date we’d chosen. We got halfway to the park before the downpour and light show started and we had to come home. We got drenched to the skin running from the TTC to our door. I started peeling Bastien’s T-shirt off before we even got inside and he was running his hands across my breasts over my orange halter top. If there weren’t so much traffic on Eglinton, and if it had been dark, we would’ve done it there and then, against the side of the house in the thunder.

“I would guess you’re right,” Abigail said as I flipped to the next picture, a baby photo of Bastien, the left side of his face in focus and an adult hand holding a children’s book open for him. His eyes were wide with delight and his lips parted in a gregarious smile.

“He was such a beautiful baby,” I pronounced, a tear beginning to snake its way down my cheek. I set the photos back in the keepsake box and closed the lid, fighting for control of my emotions. Bastien’s smile had never really changed. When he was really happy he lit up a like a little boy.

“He was,” she agreed. She grabbed my hand and squeezed. “He was.”

My throat ached. My nose filled up with tears. A sob escape from my chest, a wounded animal noise I usually only made when I was alone.

It shocked me to hear it. I turned away from Abigail and cried into my free hand, but she held the other one tight. My ribs hurt from heaving, tears flooded my face, and Bastien’s aunt sat quietly by my side while I choked out the entire truth about failing my classes, losing my job and the necessity that I stay in the apartment that I wouldn’t be able to afford in just a few months’ time. I’d lost everything and didn’t care. All I wanted was to stay there, as close as I could to Bastien. And I couldn’t see how that would be possible.

Soon my voice was in tatters and I released her hand and reached for my tea, my fingers quivering as they looped around the cup. Abigail was looking at me with a stillness that reminded me a little of Bastien. She sipped at her own tea, her gaze steady on mine over the rim of the cup.

“When Alrick passed I lost interest in the world too,” she said after a long moment. “People grieve differently. And the people closest to you worry about you, but many of them don’t know what to do with that worry.”

“What happened to you?” I asked, setting my tea down and swiping at my tears. “After your husband died? I mean, how did you get from there to...” I pointed at her together state. She didn’t give off the aura of the kind of person who never wanted to leave the house, and I remembered Bastien mentioning that she had her own business, something to do with shoes.

“It didn’t happen overnight. I turned inward when he died.” Abigail paused to glance at her plate. “I had someone else running our business for me for almost a year. I did a lot of the things it sounds like you’re doing— withdrawing from other people—but I was in a better place financially. I could afford to do it.” She stared thoughtfully back at me. “The experts say sudden death is the hardest. Bastien was such a young man. He should’ve had more time.”

I hoped she wasn’t going to launch into one of those speeches about God working in mysterious ways or heaven claiming Bastien as one of its angels. I wasn’t someone who believed death or destruction happened for a reason.

It occurred to me that I was again being selfish—Abigail had lost Bastien too. I laid my hands in my lap, held my breath and nodded patiently.

“Leah,” she continued, “you’re not my child and I can’t tell you what to do, but you’ve said yourself the situation here can’t continue on this way much longer. And you know, all of Bastien’s family is out in B.C. He lived there all his

life except for the last few years. If you went back to your own parents there for a while it wouldn't mean leaving him."

In a way she was right, but the parts of our lives that we'd shared had occurred almost entirely in Toronto. Moving back home to Burnaby would make me feel like those experiences had never really happened. It would mean losing the only little bit of Bastien that I felt I still had. And I knew I couldn't cope with being around my parents while I was in this broken state either. Having my mother with me for four days was wearing enough; I'd slept for fourteen hours straight the day she'd left. At home I'd never get the emotional space I needed. The same would be true if I moved in with any of my friends. What they thought of as helping me would only feel like crowding. I'd end up in a straitjacket, worse off than I was right now.

My eyes began to leak again as desperation ripped through me. I massaged my temples and said nothing.

Abigail fell quiet too. She continued drinking her tea in silence. Outside, a dog barked. First one and then two. The neighbor's dogs were always setting each other off like that. If the barking went on for long Bastien would go and pet them through the fence and, having distracted them, they would often stop.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I didn't mean to lay all that on you. Please don't say anything to Bastien's parents. Or mine. It would just make things worse."

Abigail slanted her chin up as though secrecy was too much to ask of her. "Do you have some plan you didn't mention?"

“I’ll come up with something,” I mumbled, knowing that I couldn’t and wouldn’t. I was like a paralyzed person. Maybe I really was going crazy, driving myself straight into a brick wall.

“*Leah...*” Abigail sighed.

I should have put the photographs aside without looking at them. We could have finished our tarts and tea. Then I could have offered to pack up some of Bastien’s things (textbooks and old clothes I’d hardly ever seen him wear) for next time.

“I just need more time,” I pleaded, the sinking feeling inside me plummeting deeper by the second. “I’m not ready to go.”

Abigail shifted on the couch to face me more directly. “Do you think you could be ready in September?” she asked frankly.

I willed myself to nod but couldn’t bring myself to follow through. Not when she was staring at me like she could see straight through me.

“You need a little help,” she said. “There’s no shame in that. You call your parents and see what they can do.”

They didn’t have enough money to allow me to keep the apartment on my own. My mom’s salary was decent but my father had only been able to work part-time, because of his fibromyalgia, for years. My parents paid for my yearly tuition and textbooks but couldn’t afford rent and expenses too.

“It’s not your problem,” I told her. Somehow I needed to shift our visit back to the neutral territory where it had had begun. I couldn’t believe I’d all-out broken down on her like that. If I wasn’t down to the bone sad and lost I would have been mortified at my outburst. “I really didn’t mean to bring it up.

It was just...seeing those photos.” I glanced down at the keepsake box. “I’m sorry I didn’t get any of Bastien’s stuff ready for his parents. I meant to. At least a few things.”

Abigail patted my leg. “They’re all here, being taken care of. Getting them together is something that can be resolved when you’ve decided what you’re going to do. You give your parents a call within the next few days, though, okay? Let them know what’s really going on with you.”

This time I did nod. I didn’t have any other choice. I knew if I didn’t clue my parents in soon Abigail would do it for me. She kissed me on the cheek before she left, said she’d give me a call in a few days and that she hoped we could get together again before she flew back out west.

I thanked her for coming and walked her to the door. Once she was gone, the unbearable reality of my situation pounded behind my eyes, threatening to steal any ounce of self-control I had left. Quickly, I surrounded myself with Bastien’s most comforting things—his charcoal cable-knit sweater, *Johnny Yang* sketchbook, and Armstrong (who I’d always felt was more Bastien’s than mine). Armstrong wouldn’t sit still for long. I let him walk from hand to hand, rotating one under the other for him like he was riding an endless escalator. I cupped him to my chest as I put one of Bastien’s Ella Fitzgerald CDs on the stereo and turned on the TV, muting the sound so it wouldn’t compete with Ella.

That was still the frame of mind I was in—clinging to avoidance with every weapon I had—when Abigail phoned me the very next night. “I have an idea for you,” she said with a spring in her voice. “I know you really don’t want

to leave the apartment you have there—and I can understand why—but there are some things we just have to do and I hope you’ll at least consider what I’m about to say.”

She told me about her house in Oakville, a residence she and Alrick had owned for six years before he’d died. They’d started their shoe business, named Bulla, out in Vancouver fifteen years ago and then expanded to open a second store in Oakville five years later. They’d lived out there for two years while getting it off the ground and then gone back and forth between Ontario and B.C. But since Alrick had died Abigail had been spending the majority of her time in Vancouver, only venturing over to Ontario four or five times a year.

“So, you see, the house is empty the majority of the time,” she explained. “I stay here for two weeks or so every couple of months. The manager of the store here keeps an eye on it for me in between, picking up mail and flyers that come to the door, and I have landscapers to look after the lawn. There’s certainly room for you to stay awhile”—she hesitated, sensing my building anxiety—“but maybe that’s something you’d like to discuss with your parents first. I thought it through last night and I’d be happy to have you for a while. I just wanted you to know it was an option.”

If I did what she was suggesting, it would mean Bastien was really gone, but there was never going to be a better option. In real life this was as close as a person could come to being rescued by a fairy godmother. I began blinking in double-time, swallowing like there was a stubborn pill stuck in the back of my throat. *Leave our place and move to Oakville.* Pack all of our things into cardboard boxes and never come back to this apartment again. It was either

that or let myself be absorbed back into my parents' house at the end of summer, or October at the latest. Step sideways or walk headlong into the twenty-foot wall I'd been staring at for months.

"Thank you," I croaked, my throat in splinters. "Are you sure?"

"Now...I don't know," Abigail said in level voice, "could be that the very best thing for you would be to get yourself back to your parents and see some kind of grief therapist. I certainly don't want to stand in the way of anything that would be good for you, but last night I kept thinking to myself that if I hadn't had some money behind me when Alrick died, I would have been in a very similar situation to the one you are now. And I wouldn't like to be without options."

My mind was racing with thoughts of leaving, a wave of nausea gripping me, flipping my stomach upside down.

"Leah?" she ventured. "Have you spoken to your parents?"

"Not yet. I will. If you're sure..." She'd already said she wasn't but that she'd give me the chance anyway. "I mean, if it's okay with you. But...I need to bring Armstrong." I wouldn't be able to go anywhere without him; I couldn't give him away. He had to stay with me, wherever I ended up.

"The hamster? That's fine. I'd expect that you would."

"I can keep him in my room," I stammered. The worst thing in the world had already happened to me. I had to trust in something—that living at Bastien's aunt's house in Oakville, forty kilometers from our Leaside apartment, would keep me closer to him than anything else it was within my power to do.

“I won’t be any trouble,” I added. “You’ll hardly know I’m there.” And with that I staggered around the brick wall I’d been staring at for months and towards someplace new.

~Five~

**D**uring the moving process I was numb like a robot—doing without any thought beyond the task at hand. I kept Bastien’s laptop, most of his sketchbooks and his very favorite CDs and clothes, but folded the rest of his things into his suitcase and gave them to Abigail to pass on to his parents. Yunhee went to Home Depot with me to buy storage containers for the rest of our stuff. I threw out a fair amount of my own clothes, just so I could hold on to more of Bastien’s. It was lucky that we’d lived in a furnished apartment, otherwise there’d have been much more to pack—probably too much to fit into Abigail’s home.

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” Yunhee said numerous times as she helped me pack. “It’s like moving to the outer reaches of the universe.”

“But it’s rent free,” I countered. By then I’d told Yunhee that I’d been fired from work, although I’d made it sound like something that had only happened recently. The numbness had made my confession come easier. “The only thing I’ll need money for is groceries.”

“Yeah, it’s rent free and you can be a complete hermit, but, Leah”—Yunhee crouched to add my makeup bag and hand lotion pump to the storage container she was loading—“how is that going to make you feel any better?”

It seemed I’d never be able to make her understand. That was part of what was so tiring about being around other people. But at least she’d come to help me pack, despite being frustrated with me for avoiding her for so long.

“I’m not trying to be a bitch about this,” Yunhee said apologetically. “I’m just worried you’ll end up feeling even worse. I can’t believe your parents are letting you do this.”

They weren’t happy about the news of my move either. Probably the only thing that had stopped my parents from planning a full-scale intervention was that I’d be staying with Bastien’s aunt. Like with Yunhee, I’d offered my parents the closest version of the truth that would suit my purpose, which was that I’d only stopped working at the museum recently. That was enough information to put them on edge, so I didn’t explain about flunking most of my classes. They already knew that I didn’t plan to go back to school in the fall—there was no point in upsetting them further.

For once my father had more to say than my mother. “I don’t understand why you’d want to stay out east, doing nothing, rather than come home to be with your family. If you’re depressed you need to see a doctor, not become a shut-in enabled by Bastien’s aunt.”

My first instinct was to shout into the phone that Abigail was the only person who remotely understood what I was going through. I caught myself just in time and repeated, with a calm that channeled Oprah, what Abigail had said to me days earlier: “People grieve differently. And maybe I need more time and space than most people, but I don’t see why that automatically makes what I’m doing wrong.”

In the end I promised my father I would go to a doctor if my depression worsened. I wasn’t sure if I meant to it or not. My father asked for Abigail’s phone numbers (both in Oakville and Vancouver) and said he and my mother

would continue to call me every few days after the move. “If you need to come home—anytime—let us know and we’ll arrange a ticket,” he said.

Meanwhile my mom secretly wired me three hundred dollars to help with moving expenses and said she’d try to send more the following month. I apologized to Mr. Magella, the landlord, about the late moving notice and he said he was sorry too but he’d have to keep our deposit. “If I find someone to rent the apartment soon I’ll mail you a partial refund,” he said. “You were a good tenant—good *tenants*.” He shook my hand, the sad puppy-dog look in his eyes making me look away.

Etienne borrowed a van from a friend and he, Yunhee and I hauled what was left of mine and Bastien’s things to Oakville. Abigail was at work when we arrived but she’d left keys for me in the mailbox along with a note that explained, “The spare room (yours) is the first on the left upstairs. Anything that doesn’t fit there can be stored in the back room or the garage, where there’s plenty of space. I’ve cleared some of the kitchen cupboards for you too. Please make yourself at home and I’ll see you later this evening. Welcome!”

Yunhee and Etienne stayed for about three hours, Yunhee helping me unpack in the spare room and Etienne arranging boxes on the ground floor and in the garage. When they were leaving Yunhee said, “Don’t be a stranger. There’s a train to Toronto every hour. You can spend a day in the city and still be a hermit at night, you know.”

“I wish we could stay longer,” Etienne told me. “But I should get the van back. Anytime you’re going to be downtown, give me a shout and we can get together.”

I thanked them both, knowing that I hadn't been much of a friend to either of them since Bastien had died. I had no clue what was going on in their lives. Couldn't remember the last time Yunhee had mentioned fighting with her mother over the phone or expressed an interest in the Mr. Fix-It *tool-belt-wearing-with-a-hint-of-the-bad-boy* about him type of guy that she usually lusted after. Etienne had always been much more Bastien's friend than mine but he'd been there for me whenever I needed him. If I was better I'm sure there were a lot of things we could have said to each other.

Once Yunhee and Etienne had gone I sat in my new room surrounded by three beige walls and a single orange accent one (which matched the top half of the two-tone drapes covering the window) and tried to imagine Bastien there with me. I was terrified that his presence would be missing from my midway between sleep and wakefulness state from then on but he'd visited his aunt's house in the past; I wasn't entirely disconnected from him. Bastien had attended classes in Oakville as well as Toronto. This was the town he'd called "kinda sleepy but with some breathing room." *There was no reason I couldn't feel him in this place.*

We could be in this leafy, quiet place together. I tried to tell myself I'd done the right thing and that anyway, there was no other choice, but the gloom clung to me like a layer of sweat that wouldn't be cried away.

I wished Abigail had already returned to Vancouver and that I wouldn't have to face her that evening. I wished I was back in Toronto with the dogs barking and all our things hanging in the closet together, Bastien's dirty dishes still in the kitchen sink.

By the time Abigail arrived home I had a hardcore headache from wishing so hard and she fetched me the Tylenol from her private bathroom and then drove me around Oakville, pointing out the village-like downtown area, the train and bus station, local shopping mall and nearby supermarkets. Abigail didn't keep a car in Oakville anymore, instead renting a sedan whenever she was in town; she'd warned me beforehand that one of my biggest challenges would be transportation. Since I didn't really plan on going anywhere that didn't strike me as a major problem, but Abigail had thought of everything and even had a bus schedule and map for me. Emergency numbers too. The home alarm code (to be set at night) and telephone number for the security company. Contact info for countless restaurants that delivered. A current waste management guide detailing garbage and recycle pick-up days. Phone numbers for her neighbors and the manager of the Oakville Bulla store, should I ever need them. Abigail's email address.

Thank you, I told her. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. She was so good to me. And still I couldn't wait to be left alone in her house. Just me, Armstrong and the TV.

That was all I could handle.

All I *can* handle.

Those things in themselves feel like a lot. Often I don't leave the house, and often I don't eat how I should, but I nibble, I sleep, I answer my parents' calls, I clean Armstrong's cage and take in the flyers that pile up in Abigail's mailbox so her assistant won't have to. I drink coffee. Walk in the sun (sometimes). Take out the garbage. Do laundry. Stand at the shore of Lake

Ontario and stare. And always and forever, I'm thinking of Bastien—the boy I'm glad I finally noticed, even though it meant he broke my heart—and how I would give anything to wake up and hear him in the shower, running late for class.

~Six~

**W**ith Abigail back in town for eleven days starting September thirteenth, the house that I've had the luxury of thinking of as mine for the past couple of months becomes a stranger. Abigail says I shouldn't mind her and just do what I normally do, but her presence makes what I usually do seem like not nearly enough. On her first full day back, while she's at Bulla, I walk to the supermarket and buy three shopping bags full of human food. At five o'clock I cook two chicken breasts (slathered in a store-bought marinade) and leave one in the fridge for her with a container of Greek salad. I only finish half of my own chicken but eat more of the salad.

When Abigail gets home after seven she says she ate on the run while at a work and that I didn't need to go to the trouble but that she appreciates it. She's phoned from Vancouver from time to time so we're already caught up (not that there's much news on my side) but we chat further about how I'm settling into Oakville. The topic makes me nervous, because I still don't know what her original offer that I could stay "awhile" means, just that I'm not ready for it to end.

I miss our old apartment, every room crammed with Bastien memories, but I appreciate not having to worry about money so much. Being responsible for just food costs means my savings are draining at a dramatically slower rate, and on top of that my mother has been sending a couple of hundred dollars every month. There's a certain calm that accompanies this financial freedom, even though it doesn't take any of the pain of Bastien's absence away.

I do imagine him here. Feel him here. Even though we were never in Oakville together. Maybe it would've been the same in Burnaby, but for now I'm glad I didn't stray far from the place he lived and went to school. And the next several days aside, Abigail's home gives me the solitary time I need.

With her in town, though, I feel both in need of space and like I have something to prove. I stay home while she's at the store but spend more time out—by the lake, the library (where I flip through comic books but never check any out), and in various coffee shops—when she returns in the evenings. Sometimes Julie, the woman who manages the Oakville location of Bulla, or another friend comes over in the evenings. I'm polite but brief and stay out of their way. Having remembered that Bastien was in the middle of reading *The Handmaid's Tale* for an English class when he died, I begin carrying it with me everywhere, like a security blanket.

Sometimes I open random pages and read a sentence or two, which is as much as I can absorb. Tonight my eyes land on the sentence: "She said: Because they won't want things they can't have." The words mock me. I don't know much about the Aunt Lydia person who's saying them, but I've decided she's cruel.

With Abigail due home soon I walk to the lake with the book tucked under my arm. It's grown a little colder during the past couple of weeks and I'm wearing a light cardigan and black cargo pants, which used to fit without a belt but now require one to prevent them from slumping down past my hips in a wardrobe malfunction. At a glance I can see that all the nearest benches are taken, but as I wind along the path near the lake a man happens to get up

from his seat. He nods almost imperceptibly at me as he passes and I realize it's the Irish guy who was looking for directions to the post office a couple of weeks ago.

I plop down on his vacated bit of bench, next to a woman of about forty who is busy texting on her phone and chewing her lip. She seems aggravated, sad maybe. The sun's hanging low in the sky, throwing a dappled golden light in the space between shadows. Tonight there are no geese in the water, only seagulls. I watch them bob along the dark blue waves as people parade by on the path with their dogs. A skittish Chihuahua glances anxiously in my direction as it passes.

Bastien used to point out the sort of dog he hoped to have one day (he singled out so many different sizes and varieties that I can't remember them all) and when I see the shivering Chihuahua I think, *Not one of those, Bastien, too fragile for the outside world.* A gust of wind could carry that dog away and it knows it. No wonder girls carry them in purses; you'd be afraid to set it down lest a squirrel pick a fight with it.

Being near the water sometimes makes me think of Johnny Yang, who gets a swooshy feeling in his stomach whenever it's about to rain and then knows he must find water to immerse himself in straight away. At the point where Bastien left the story, Johnny, who has learned to carry an extra stash of clothes with him everywhere in a waterproof bag, is emerging from a neighbor's above-ground pool (the closest water source he could locate near his school) following a brief drizzle.

If I could concentrate, maybe I could do something about finishing the story. The words, at least. But who am I kidding; the longest thing I've written in months is three paragraphs to Bastien's mother to thank her for the photographs. She struck me as the kind of person who would appreciate a note rather than an email (and anyway, I don't have the patience to deal with the Internet anymore) and I suppose I was right about that because she wrote me back and said she was glad to hear I'd be staying with Abigail and that she wanted me to keep in touch and come see her when I'm home at Christmas.

I refuse to think about Christmas the same way I refuse to think about a lot of things. Better to think about *Johnny Yang* and the past, when Bastien was still with me. I open Bastien's copy of *The Handmaid's Tale* again and can't help feeling that either it, or Bastien, wherever he is, is reading my mind because the first thing I see is: "I said there was more than one way of living with your head in the sand..."

I laugh out loud and the bearded old man next to me (the woman had moved on without me noticing) glances surreptitiously my way, like he doesn't want to provoke me if I'm in the process of become unhinged. I wish there was someone to share my private joke with. Yunhee would understand but I've only called her once since moving and getting in touch with her again would mean facing inquiries about when we can get together.

At dusk I begin to walk back home again, and when I arrive I find Abigail sitting on the neighbor's porch with them. Though they have wicker chairs and a small oval table out front I've never noticed them sitting there, only spotted one or the other of them coming and going or opening their rear sliding door to

let their cat in. “Here she is now,” one of the neighbor ladies announces as I near the house. The two of them look a bit alike so I assume they’re related; either mother and daughter or possibly sisters.

“Hi.” I wave at them and Abigail. “Nice night, huh?”

The older neighbor nods warmly. “Early fall is my favorite time of year.”

Abigail points to an unoccupied fourth chair. “Have a seat if you like.” I hesitate, wondering how long they’ll expect me to stay and whether there will be many questions. “This is Leah,” Abigail adds for the neighbors’ benefit before focusing her attention on me again. “Leah, this is Deirdre and Marta.”

I extend my right hand to both of them in turn. “Nice to meet you.” The brevity of the introduction signals that Deirdre and Marta already know who I am and makes me wonder precisely what Abigail’s told them.

“Please join us,” Marta, the younger of the neighbors, prompts. “We were just talking about how there didn’t seem to have been as great a variety of birds in the area this summer. I only saw one goldfinch at our feeder all summer.”

I pull up a chair, feeling like I’ve waited too long to excuse myself; I don’t want to be rude to anyone Abigail is friendly with.

“I don’t know much about birds,” I say. I’d recognize robins, blue jays, cardinals and sparrows, but beyond that I have no idea. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a goldfinch.”

“I have a book,” Marta announces. “Let me show you what they look like.”

As Marta excuses herself to get the bird book, Deirdre leans across the oval table towards me and says, “You don’t know what you’ve let yourself in for now. You could be poring over pictures all night.”

I smile but I hope not.

Marta emerges from the house half a minute later with a windbreaker and a guide book thicker than *The Holy Bible*. “You were looking cold,” Marta says, handing Deirdre the windbreaker and me the book. “Oh, let me find a goldfinch photo for you,” she adds absently. “They’re the prettiest things.”

I surrender the book again as Deirdre comments, “They’re her favorite.”

Marta presents the book to me open on a page displaying the goldfinch. The bird’s sitting on a branch in profile, most of its body a strikingly brilliant yellow but its wing and the portion of its head nearest the beak as black as a country night. “It’s lovely,” I say truthfully.

“That’s the male,” Marta explains. “The female’s more of a yellowish green. But their appearance varies during the year.”

“You mean the male and female birds don’t look the same?”

Marta gives me a patient look, like a teacher often gives a child. “Mostly males are brighter and more colorful—especially during breeding season—to attract the females. But the females are often larger.”

She *sounds* like a teacher too, a good one. I begin to feel nearly enthusiastic as she flips through the guide book pointing out male and female examples of different types of birds. “I’m just showing you ones you might see in Southern Ontario,” she tells me. “That way you can look for live examples.”

I have no inkling what Abigail and Deirdre are talking about—I spend all my time listening to Marta impart her knowledge of birds. When I tell her I’ve been watching the geese down at the lake she tells me that by the early twentieth century the Canada Goose had almost completely disappeared from Southern Ontario. “The government and conservationists successfully reintroduced them and now there are so many that some people consider them pests.”

“Pests?” How can something that flies with such grace be considered a pest?

“They can be pretty aggressive at times but mostly I think people don’t like the geese droppings and the bacteria that comes along with them. Personally, I think the Canada Goose is beautiful.”

“Me too,” I agree.

Marta says I can borrow her book if I’m interested in learning more about birds. I thank her but say that I haven’t been reading much lately. I motion to *The Handmaid’s Tale* on the table. “I think I’ll still be reading that for a while.”

“One of my favorites,” Marta says approvingly.

“Yeah, I know it’s, like, a modern classic. I just haven’t had a head for concentrating lately.” I suppose I’m still yearning to share my private joke with someone and I poke one of my fingers through a buttonhole on my cardigan and debate how much to confide. “I keep picking it up and reading little bits at a time, and it’s weird; some of the things I’m coming across seem like personal messages.”

“That’s probably true of all the best books,” Marta declares. “And Margaret, she’s a genius.”

I nod. You can’t make it through high school without reading at least one Margaret Atwood novel. “Like today,” I continue breathlessly, “today I read this part about there being more than one way of living with your head in the sand and it felt like it was put there just for me. I hadn’t even read the paragraphs that came before that. Those words, they were just so specific.”

Marta’s unblinking eyes shimmer in the moonlight. “A bit ironic. If you were really living with your head in the sand, would that really resonate with you?”

I see what she means. I’m *unsuccessfully* living with my head in the sand. Maybe I shouldn’t find that funny, but I do. A bitter smile jumps to my lips.

“I won’t tell you my favorite part until I know you’ve finished the book,” she adds.

A few minutes later Abigail and I excuse ourselves. She has to get up early for work and I’m tired, but I’ve decided I like Marta. I used to really like learning things. Bastien and I were both nerds that way.

If Bastien were here I’d ask him if he knew what a goldfinch looks like and what happens next in *Johnny Yang, Merman at Large*. I can’t stop asking him questions, hoping for answers that will never come: *Bastien, is it really wrong to want to live with your head in the sand?*

## ~Seven~

The night before Abigail leaves we go to a movie, a thriller where no one's telling the truth and a string of beautiful people end up dead. It's the first movie I've been to in months, and I jump in my seat a lot but manage to follow most of the plot twists. In the morning Abigail returns her rental car and then catches a cab to the airport. I'm relieved to have the place to myself again and stay inside curled up in front of the TV for the entire day.

When I find myself falling asleep on the couch I figure it's time for me to take Armstrong's wheel out of his cage again and crawl into bed, but as soon as I get there I'm wide awake. When we moved in together it took me at least a month to get used to sleeping with Bastien beside me every night, but learning to sleep without him has been trickier. Often I'm so exhausted that I drop off with no trouble and then sleep with such profound depth that it feels more like a coma than rest. Other times, like now, there's no point in continuing to try because panic's sparking through my body, making my mind speed.

You'd think I'd just found out he was dead. It's like my cells are in shock all over again.

I go out to the back room, where Etienne stacked some of the boxes of Bastien's things, and tear one open. Bastien's charcoal spring jacket is at the top. With the kind of weather we're having lately I could almost start wearing it out. His frame wasn't really that much bigger than mine—it wouldn't look so weird on me—but I wouldn't want it to lose any of its Bastien-ness. For that

reason, I don't wear any of his clothes, not even the T-shirts or hoodies I used to borrow from him before he died.

Underneath the jacket are a bundle of sealed "Engraving Art" kits which I don't remember seeing, let alone putting in the box. Maybe Yunhee packed them, or maybe I was in such a daze at the time that they slipped my mind. "For ages 8 to 88," the packages declare. Attached to them is a yellow post-it note on which Bastien has scrawled, "Mr. D's." Bastien was doing volunteer stints at the school near our apartment every couple of weeks, teaching kids stuff like papier-mâché, origami and printmaking. "Mr. D" would be a reference to Mr. Dubonnet, the teacher Bastien was coordinating with on the afterschool program.

I slice into one of the kits with my fingernail and examine the faint illustration on the black preprinted board—a hummingbird pointing its long beak into a flower. There's a scraping tool along with the board and it seems all you have to do to achieve a shimmering copper foil image of the hummingbird is scrape along the guide lines. I take a handful of the kits (each of them picturing a different animal) into the kitchen with me and begin scraping to reveal the shining silver, copper or gold foil images beneath. It takes me until dawn to finish the first two—the hummingbird and then a panda. I'm no artist but they look pretty enough, just like the pictures on the covers.

The effort wears me out enough to sleep and I lie on the living room couch for just over four hours before waking up and realizing I never put Armstrong's wheel back and he must have been driven insane with desire for it all night long. There's not a lot he can do to distract himself—no engraving art

kits designed for rodents, no hamster soap operas, sports or reality TV to help him kill time.

But it's too late now. He'll be fast asleep and it's best not to disturb him. I go upstairs and stare at him in his cage, wishing he were awake so I could pick him up and handle him a little. He really is a sweet little thing that rarely bites, even in the beginning before he was tamed. I wish we'd bought a dog too, before Bastien died. He wanted one so badly and believed there'd be lots of time for that later.

I imagine walking the dog we never had down by the lake. In my head it's brown and vaguely terrier-like, sort of like one of the ones that lived next door in Toronto. My mind's starting to race again like it did last night. I'm spiky and sad at the same time. The two emotions don't work well together. It feels like walking around with lit sparklers poked underneath my skin. It hurts, burns, buzzes like electricity and won't stop because every bit of me knows how much I need him, and still he's never coming back.

I need to exhaust the energy somehow. Run. Climb. Fight.

Something.

I can't sit here with the feeling a minute longer.

I turn my back to Armstrong's cage, jump into my clothes and running shoes and scramble outside. I start out jogging but that's not enough to dim the sparklers; soon I'm all-out running the same as if I was being chased. My lungs aren't used to the level of activity; it's not long before I'm gasping for breath, but that only makes me run harder. Why not push myself past the limit? What's the worst thing that could happen? I sprint down Allan Street

and head for the lake, turning on to Robinson, zigzagging my way south to avoid foot traffic as much as possible. I don't want to slow down but I'm out of oxygen. Struggling like a fish out of water.

I fly off the curb near a stop sign and come down hard on the road, my right ankle flipping underneath me and toppling the rest of my body. With the wind knocked out of me, I go to pieces, my lungs screaming for air and tears leaking out of my eyes in response. It's not that my ankle hurts that much—it's the panic anyone feels when they have their breath stolen from them, only my panic's worse because I was already losing grip.

For several seconds I sit motionless, waiting for my body to remember how to breathe. Once my lungs start working again I plant my hands on the cement under me and propel myself slowly upwards, testing the weight on my right ankle. It's sore but it will take a bit of weight. I stand, my eyes draining like they haven't realized the physical emergency's over with, and having started crying, I can't stop. The endless longing for Bastien shakes in my chest as I limp along the sidewalk.

It doesn't matter that I'm outside and anyone could see. It doesn't really feel as though anyone else exists anyway. I keep moving towards the lake because I don't have it in my head to do anything else, and just steps from the path along the water the first person to lay eyes on me does a double take and then looks past me as though he's decided not to notice, which is sensible because there's no point in noticing—and anyway, from my point of view he doesn't really exist.

“Hey,” he says, defying my thoughts by suddenly coming closer. “Are you all right?”

I massage my eyelids with my thumb and forefinger. “I...fell. I’m okay. Just got the wind knocked out of me.”

My chest hasn’t stopped vibrating and I don’t sound nearly okay. Through my tear-streaked vision I see that the guy’s the Irish one I first noticed at The Cunning Café and then spotted again near this very spot over a week ago.

“Do you want to put your weight on me?” he offers, looking concerned. “We can walk you over to the bench.” He motions to the nearest one, which, thankfully, is currently unoccupied.

“Okay,” I say in a soggy voice. “Thanks.”

He bends so I can swing my right arm around his shoulders and then winds his left around me. We inch over to the bench together, where I plop down with a snuffle.

“Thanks,” I say again.

“Do you think it could be broken?” he asks. “You might want to get it X-rayed.”

I shake my head. “I doubt it. It doesn’t really hurt that bad. It’s probably just a little sprain.”

The guy nods like this makes sense, although he must be wondering why I’m crying so hard over something that doesn’t hurt much.

I press the heel of my palms against my eyes and will myself to stop crying. I've already attracted more attention than I want. "I'll be okay," I say. "Really."

The guy's standing in front of me, watching my breakdown and probably silently debating whether he can discreetly excuse himself. "Are you sure you don't want me to walk you to your car?" he says, motioning to the bench. "I don't want to leave you stuck here."

"I'm not stuck." I stand to demonstrate, only wincing a little. "And I don't have a car. I ran down here and flipped along the way." I plop down on the bench again. "It's not really my foot." I wrap my arms around my stomach and fold in on myself. "I'm...you know...I'm just not having a good day."

"I know the feeling," he says with a measure of sullenness in his tone. "I don't mean *this*," he adds hastily. "Just about not having good days in general." His lips form a grim line.

I taste the salt of my tears on my lips but they've listened to me and slowed their pace. The last time I cried like this in front of someone I barely knew I ended up moving in with her, but mostly people don't want to know what's wrong with me and I don't want to tell them. This guy doesn't want to know either, and I don't blame him because I couldn't care less about his version of a bad day.

I glance past the guy, who's about twenty-five with short brown hair and the sort of clean-cut-with-a-dash-of-urban-edge good looks that are hard not to notice, unless you're oblivious to pretty much everything, like I've been for

months. Down at the lake a lone goose is ducking its head into the water, unaware that anyone considers it a pest. It makes me think of Marta.

“I hate shitty days,” I mumble, shifting my gaze back to the guy.

“Yeah.” He squints as he turns to stare at the goose too. “I hope it gets better for you,” he says with a finality that means he’s going to leave me in peace.

“You too,” I say generously. I can afford to be generous now that he’s going. My eyes are nearly dry.

He lopes off in the general direction we came from. I stay put for an hour, until my ankle feels better and watching the waves has stabilized my emotions. The sadness never really stops but the explosive quality it had earlier fades into a dull, tired gloom. I wish I’d thought to bring *The Handmaid’s Tale* with me as a kind of protection against further interaction. People don’t usually try to talk to you when you’re reading, and now that I’m feeling level I notice hunger’s gnawing at my stomach and my thirst is even more acute. I haven’t eaten or drunk anything since last night. Didn’t take a bath this morning either. I’m not smelly or gross but I feel stale.

I head for coffee, my ankle twinging slightly as I stumble towards The Cunning Café. Inside I order a latte and gnocchi in rose sauce and seek out a table near the back of the room. Someone’s wearing lavender—copious amounts of it—and I glance instinctively around to look for the source, but my eyes land on someone else instead: that same guy I keep seeing around town. He catches me staring and I tighten my grip on my tray and walk over to him, regretting my fall earlier because it means I can’t ignore him now.

“Hi,” I say quickly. “Thanks for helping me out earlier.” I tap my right foot on the floor. “It’s much better.”

“Good,” he says. “What about the rest of your day?” He points to the empty seat in front of him. “Do you want to sit down?” He sees the hesitation in my face and starts to smile. “You’re allowed to say no. It’s just that there aren’t many empty tables.”

I swivel to do a quick visual sweep of the room and find he’s right. The only table left is one near the front door and there are two people on their way over there who will definitely beat me to it. “Sorry,” I say as I set my tray down on his table, “I don’t mean to be rude. I’m just very antisocial these days.”

“Then why are you stalking me?” he deadpans. “Sorry.” He gives a quick shake of his head. “I’ll stop taking the piss. You don’t seem like you’re in the humor for it.”

I shrug lightly and resolve to finish my food as quickly as possible. “If I were stalking you I guess I probably wouldn’t be an hour behind.” I smile just enough to make it seem like I could be joking.

“True enough,” he says, fingers reaching for what’s left of his sandwich. “Glad to see your foot’s better anyway.”

I nod and dig into my gnocchi. Bastien would love it. We used to say we should go to Italy after graduation and cultivate some serious love handles. “How about you?” I ask. “Is it a good or a bad day?” It never used to be so difficult to talk to people. Pretending to care what they say takes more energy than it’s worth.

“I’d say...” He stares over my head as he thinks it over. “Indifferent, really.”

“Indifferent is okay.” I shovel more gnocchi into my mouth. He doesn’t seem any more inclined to talk than I am, which means maybe we don’t really have to say anything, but for some reason I go on. “So you’re from Ireland?”

He nods. “Dublin. Have you ever been?”

“No. Never been overseas at all. I wanted to.”

“Wanted to?” he repeats. “Not anymore?”

I loop my fingers through my coffee cup handle. Abigail never breaks when she speaks of Alrick, although I know she loved him. I try to imagine what she would say in my place. “My boyfriend died in January,” I tell him. Hot as it is, I gulp my coffee. The heat makes one of my top teeth throb. “I haven’t really wanted to do anything since.” So far I’m doing a good job of being dispassionate—it reminds me of how I felt during the move—but I don’t trust that it can last. The faster we can change subjects, the better. “I’ve basically...crashed. Shut down. Cut myself off.”

The Irish guy shifts in his chair. “I’m sorry.” His eyes are so blue that if he wasn’t Irish I’d bet they were contacts. He stares blinkingly down at the table like I’ve hit him with a conversation killer. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

If he keeps looking so downcast my veneer of calm won’t last until I finish my lunch. Impulsively, I rap on the table and say, “So what about you? Tell me something awful.”

“Something awful?” he echoes in surprise. He shifts in his chair again, an uncomfortable look spreading across his features. I bet next time he sees

me he won't ask to me sit down. No, he'll look away, even if I'm wiping out right in front of him.

But I follow through with a nod because I need the spotlight off me in a hurry. I cross my legs under the table and go for my coffee. Every time I swallow a bit that same top tooth hurts. I've twisted my ankle and somehow ended up with a cavity. That's some kind of special talent.

Across from me, the guy sinks down in his chair, his head tipping back as he thinks it over. "There are so many things that's it's hard to pick just one." The sullenness from earlier is back in his voice and I lean closer, so I suppose I do want to know what his version of a bad day is after all.

I continue with my gnocchi as I wait for him to enlighten me.

He pushes up his left sleeve with his right hand and fiddles with his leather watch strap. "Okay, how's this then?" he begins, frowning deeply. "My fiancée cheated on me with someone I work with. And as if that wasn't horrible enough on its own, it was in all the papers back home."

"It was in the newspaper?" I set my fork down.

"Yeah, well..." He motions with his hands. "I'm known a bit there."

"Known?"

His lips are clamped shut like he doesn't want to say another word about it. "I was on an Irish TV show," he replies dismissively. "You wouldn't have heard of it—it doesn't air over here."

Somehow I'm not really surprised to hear that; he looks like someone who could be on a TV show—only a little more real, I guess. Maybe that's the way Irish TV is. His version of bad days doesn't trump mine, but I have to

admit having your fiancée cheat on you isn't pretty. "I guess it's a good thing you didn't marry her," I say. "I mean, that's terrible anyway, but marrying her would've been worse."

His forehead creases. "Believe me, it was bad enough. Bad enough that I came all the way over here to wait for the dust to settle." I was wrong in thinking that he didn't want to say more. He furrows his eyebrows and continues, "Me and the other bloke, we got into a fight when I found out. I lost the head—broke one of his arms and his nose. He almost pressed charges."

The guy keeps on going, his words picking up speed as he describes the next time he'd raised his fists to someone—a fight he didn't start and where no one was really hurt but the fact that it broke out late at night outside a bar didn't look good in the media. Then there were additional women troubles in the aftermath of his breakup. On the rebound he slept with an actress co-star from the same TV show, a woman twelve years older than him, as well as a former close friend of his sister who had grown obsessed with him and then subsequently aired what little there was to their relationship online and to the press.

All in all his life sounds like a story ripped from a tabloid—the only things missing are a sex tape and a bout in rehab—and I find myself looking at him the same way I might regard some kind of exotic zoo animal. Personally, I just don't know people that have that kind of crazy drama in their lives.

"I can't believe I just told you all that," he murmurs, driving his fingers into his short brown hair. His eyes look all the more stunned because of their shocking color. Clearly he wishes he could take the last few minutes back. I

know how that feels—if it were up to me I'd rewind my life back to the day at the food bank with Bastien in high school and attach myself to him like super glue.

“It's okay,” I say. “It's not like I'm going to tell anyone.” I finished my coffee and food during the course of his story, nodding and reacting with appropriate amounts of dismay and sympathy during the telling, but faced with the end of the revelation I'm not sure what else to say. I grab my fork and flip it over on my empty plate a couple of times. Bastien used to be the restless one. I guess the sparkler energy isn't completely dead yet, or maybe it's just the strangeness of having a real conversation with someone that isn't about birds or Bastien. “I hardly talk to anyone these days anyway. Besides, I don't even know your name.”

He smiles at the bizarreness of sharing the most embarrassing facts about his life with a total stranger. “It's Liam,” he says.

I wasn't hinting for his name. I hope he doesn't think I'll run home and Google him. “I'm Leah,” I tell him. “And seriously, if I ever see you again I'll pretend that's all I know, okay? That your name is Liam.”

“Okay.” He bobs his head and I notice that he's finished his food too; we've both just been sitting here, talking. “Thanks. I better head now—before I tell you other things I probably shouldn't.” His smile, as he gets up from the table, is both wry and embarrassed. “But try to watch your step, Leah, okay? We don't want to make a habit of these confessions, do we?”

“I'll be careful. Thanks again.” I return his smile. “It was nice talking to you.”

He smiles the biggest grin I've spotted on his face yet. "Liar."

I watch him go for the second time today. Weird as the conversation was, I've decided running out of the house earlier was the right thing to do. I thought I was glad that Abigail had flown back to Vancouver but, tiring as it was having to speak to someone every day, now I wonder if I miss it a little.