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People Are Oceans

People are Oceans: A Novel

Brianna Cataldo

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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People Are Oceans

People Are Oceans

by

Brianna Cataldo

People Are Oceans

Chapter 1

My mother is the kind of woman who tells me, "that dress makes you look fat," as I walk out the door for my first date, while she laughs. She's the kind of woman who frowns at gurgling babies.

My father is the kind of man whose voice could get loud enough to shake walls, and make me cry. He's the kind of man who could slam his hand down on the dinner table so hard that I thought it would crack down the middle.

I am the kind of daughter who never visits home during college breaks. I'm the kind of young woman who will graduate college \$150,000 in debt, and have to move home.

As a trial run, I visited for the weekend.

I was fresh out of the shower and had changed into my pajamas. My wet hair soaked through the back of my T-shirt as I entered the living room. I leaned back against the weight of the laundry basket I carried, which was full of unfolded clean clothes. My father drank his hourly scotch, sitting on the far corner of the couch, watching the news. Mountains of clean clothes were spilled beside him, leaving only one other cushion open, and it was my mother's usual spot.

I dropped the basket of laundry. I sank into the cool leather, and my muscles ached with relief.

"Well that was rude," my father said under his breath.

So when I looked at him from the corner of my eye, I didn't turn my head, because I didn't want him to know that I'd heard him. I tried to focus on the news images that flashed across the screen. Snow, snow, and more snow.

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My mother turned the corner into the living room, a martini in hand. She staggered sideways and caught herself on the wall, staring at me.

“Making yourself comfortable?” she asked.

She pushed the clean clothes onto the floor and took a seat.

“Right? So rude,” my father said.

I locked my jaw. I knew that he was baiting me, that he was looking for an argument, and waiting for me to snap. I knew that I didn’t want to give in.

I don’t want to give in. I don’t want to give in.

“Unbelievable,” he said, and shook his head.

I could feel my mother watching me as I turned to face him.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“He said, ‘You’re so rude,’” my mother answered.

“Why?” I asked, and looked back at my mother. She lifted the martini and smirked at my father.

“Why am I rude?” I asked again.

“Because you took her seat!” He snapped forward and pointed at me.

“She was upstairs, and I’m folding your clothes,” I said.

“Wow,” my mother said.

My hand curled into a fist. Stubbornness sat on my chest like a rock. I thought the only way to relieve the pressure was to talk back, to yell so loud that the walls shook, to slam my closed fist on the side table so hard that it’d crack down the middle.

But then I remembered.

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My earliest memory is of both my parents crying.

We were in a church, and it smelled like old wood. The fabric of my dress itched the back of my neck, and I wondered why we were all matching in black. We sat in the front pew. When I stood up on the seat, on my tiptoes, I saw a girl asleep in the white bed.

“Who is that sleeping girl?” I asked.

Wordlessly, my father took me and sat me down. I looked up at him, and my hands went cold. His face was pinched and red, tears streamed down his face. His shoulders shook as he cried.

“Why are you crying?” I asked.

He didn’t say anything. He just stared straight ahead as silent sobs racked his body.

“Why are you crying?” I tugged the sleeve of his suit. A sense of panic swelled over me. I gripped the arm of my teddy bear. “Why are you crying? Why are you crying?”

My older sister Victoria, sitting on my opposite side, tapped my shoulder. She pressed her finger to her lips. I hid my hot face in the fur of my teddy bear, and turned back around.

“Can I go see Snow White?” I asked in a whisper, so that Victoria wouldn’t shush me again.

My father looked at me with wet eyes, his eyebrows drawn tightly over them. He choked on his words. “That’s Samantha.”

I turned my nose up and stretched to see over the side of the bed. Her eyes were closed, with a face pale as snow. I stopped for a moment, and wondered if that could have been her, my oldest sister. I hugged the bear to my chest; she had given me that bear just a few days before.

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I tugged on the sleeve of his suit again. When he didn't look up, I shoved my teddy bear into the crook of his bent arm until it fell through, onto his lap. He looked at me from behind his hands.

In a moment of confusion, he picked the bear up.

"Here," he said, and held it out to me.

The crowd stood in a wave, but my father didn't move from his seat. Everyone moved around us, as if we were rocks in a river.

I pushed the teddy bear and my father's hand, back towards him.

He pressed his lips together, and tucked the bear under his arm.

"Thank you," he said, and took me up in his arms as he stood with the rest of the crowd.

I turned in my father's arms, watching Samantha sleep as we walked away.

The first time I remember my mother comforting me I was six.

The ground was still wet from spring, and the smell of fresh mulch carried in the breeze. The pegs in my sneaker-cleats sank into the dirt of the baseball field. My T-ball jersey fell below my knees, and my baseball hat sank over my eyes. My mother stood by the bleachers with her hands in her pockets, watching me.

"Everybody ready?" The coach stood on the mound with the softball in his hand.

The young boy who stood at home base nodded. He looked like a bobble-head figurine.

I kicked at the ground, sending clumps of dirt upward.

"One..." The coach swung his pitching arm like a pendulum. "Two...Three."

He swung and hit the ball.

"Brooklyn!"

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I looked up at my coach from under the brim of my hat. I reacted slowly to the alarm written on his face, and by the time I looked upward to the sky I realized the white blur moving towards me was the ball, and it crashed into my nose.

Hot pain shot up the bridge of my nose and radiated in my skull. The feeling was almost metallic. I started to cry – or really, sob. Loudly. The kind of tears that are messy, and snotty, and hiccupy.

My mother was already halfway across the field. She knelt in front of me so that we were eye to eye.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” she said. She pulled her sweatshirt off, and held it up to my nose, letting the grey cotton of it run red with blood. “It’s okay, Brook. You’ll be okay.”

The second time I expected to see my father cry, he didn’t.

I was fifteen, and it was in the summer. The sun beat in through open windows and everything smelled like fresh cut grass. When I came out of my bedroom, my father was waiting in the kitchen, scotch in hand. Just standing there in the middle facing me, swaying like he was standing on a boat.

“I need to talk to you,” he said.

I immediately thought of the handle of Vodka hidden inside the hole I cut in my mattress. My veins itched with anxiety. I ran through a list of excuses.

His face held the oddest expression. I couldn’t place its meaning in my mind.

“I lost my job today,” he said.

I help back a gasp.

“I’m so sorry.” I closed the space between us and wrapped my arms around him.

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I waited for his shoulders to shake with silent tears. Instead, he pulled away from me, leaving my arms cold.

“Thanks,” he said in a mumble.

“I really am sorry,” I said, stepping back. I didn’t know what to say, and I don’t think he knew what to say either.

The last time I wanted to break down in front of my mother, I didn’t. I was nineteen. The snow was black with sludge from passing cars, and the weather was cold and grey. Earlier that morning I had gotten a text from my best friend, about how the boy I sort of loved had gotten himself a girlfriend over the weekend. The same boy who had told me that he didn’t want to ruin our friendship, how he didn’t want a girlfriend, and didn’t want to be a boyfriend.

I remained silent as I followed my mother from our front door to the car.

I pressed my lips together so hard that I thought my teeth might cut through them. It felt like there was a hand around my throat, squeezing tighter and tighter. I tried to breathe despite it.

When my mother stopped in front of the passenger door and turned to face me, I kept my eyes on the ground.

“You okay, Brook?” she asked. Her eyes were worriedly focused on me.

I nodded, knowing that if I tried to speak I would cry. When she didn’t get in the car right away, I felt the need to say something.

“I’m great,” I said, and forced a smile.

From that moment on, I’d keep saying that to everyone who asked me if I was okay, choking on tears that I denied were my own. I’m great, I’d say

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But, I'm sure, even they knew that I wasn't.

"Wow," my mother said.

My hand curled into a fist. Stubbornness sat on my chest like a rock. I thought the only way to relieve the pressure was to talk back, to yell so loud that the walls shook, to slam my closed fist on the side table so hard that it'd crack down the middle.

But then I remembered.

"Whatever," I said, and stood up. "I'm going to go watch T.V. in my room." I could feel my mother watching me as I walked towards the stairs. Anger formed a fist in my throat. No matter how many times I swallowed the spit in my mouth, the tension wouldn't ease up. I felt like I was carrying an extra fifty pounds as I climbed those basement stairs, and I promised myself that I would try to never look back.

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Chapter 2

The night I accidentally killed my best friend it was raining out.

The road was slick and shiny; the streetlights reflected orbs on the wet pavement. Hailey had both hands on the wheel. I pulled a blunt and a lighter out of my purse. The brown rolling papers hissed as they caught the flame, burning orange in the dark. I handed it to Hailey.

“I can’t believe we’re graduating in 10 weeks,” Hailey said.

“I know. It’s freaking me out. I’m not ready to be a responsible adult. I want to stay in college forever,” I said.

Our other roommate, Jenna, leaned forward from the back seat. Her blonde strands grazed the top of my arm.

“I don’t want to move home, either. We’ve lived together since freshman year. I’ll be so lonely at home,” Jenna said.

Home, I thought, looking out my window. Hailey held the blunt out to me.

“Hey, take this,” Hailey said. “I was looking at apartments in Boston, and a studio apartment is like, \$1500 a month. I cannot afford that. I’m so broke.”

The smoke was harsh on the inside of my throat, like sandpaper. The white smoke bloomed in the air. I imagined it doing the same inside my brain, chasing out the worries about college and moving back home with my parents. I held the blunt out to Jenna.

“I have \$120 in my savings account right now,” I said, laughing. “After graduation I’ll be panhandling on Beacon Street with a sign that says, ‘Recent college grad looking for a sugar daddy to fund living expenses, without having to give the sugar.’”

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Hailey laughed, throwing her head back. The car jumped forward. She always stomped her foot when she laughed, even when she was driving.

“Hailey!” I pulled my seatbelt across my body.

“We need to make plans for, like, every weekend. We can go out in Boston,” Jenna said. She gasped, grabbing our shoulders. “We could go to the Hong Kong for karaoke.”

“I would never sing in front of people,” I said.

“Oh, come on, Brook. The music is so loud that nobody can hear you, and it’s so fun. I love it. I’m telling you, you’ll love it,” Jenna said.

“She’s right. It’s fun! And you’ll be so drunk that you won’t even be embarrassed. You’ll feel like a rock star,” Hailey said.

“Plus we’ll be right next you,” Jenna said. She exhaled thick white smoke. The inside of the car was cloudy, and I cracked the window. The muggy air smelled like a swamp, snuffing out the sweetness of the weed.

“We’ll see,” I said. With Jenna's limitless cleavage, confidence as high as her GPA, and hips that could knock a man off his chair, I could easily put her on that karaoke stage. I tried imaging myself on the same stage, but even by the age of twenty-two I still had not come to terms with my pale skin and flat ass, and I wouldn’t be willing to put it all on display.

“We’re going out tonight, regardless. Want me to do your eye makeup?” Hailey asked.

“Yes!” I said.

“We have to blast music while we get ready tonight. Those girls upstairs were so loud last night. Could you guys hear them from your room?” Hailey asked.

“Oh my god, don’t get me started,” Jenna said.

“Yeah, but that wasn’t the worst part,” I said, looking back at Jenna.

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"Oh my god." Jenna let out a long, loud laugh, holding the blunt in one hand and her stomach in the other.

"What happened?" Hailey asked, smiling.

"We were both just on our phones, and it was dead silent. Then, right behind my bed a mouse ran through the wall. I could hear its little feet," I said, and shivered.

"I could hear it all the way from my bed!" Jenna said.

"That is so gross," Hailey said. "Hey, Jenna, quite hogging the blunt."

"Okay, okay," Jenna said. She quickly hit the blunt, and gave it to Hailey.

"I don't need any more of that, by the way. I'm good," Jenna said.

"You're done already?" I asked.

"Look at my eyes!" She flipped her hair off her shoulder, leaning forward, widening her eyes. The whites of her eyes were glossy and red.

Hailey handed me the blunt.

"I shouldn't smoke any more either, especially if we're drinking tonight. I don't need a repeat of last weekend. I was so high at the bar," I said.

Hailey threw her head back and laughed. The car jumped forward.

"You were so high," Hailey said. "You kept being like, 'Everyone's staring at us. Isn't everyone staring at us?'"

"It was so weird!" I said.

"It was definitely the crowd. We didn't know anybody there," Jenna said.

"You want this Hailey?" I asked, holding the blunt out to her.

"I don't know," she said.

"Just take one more hit and then throw the roach out the window," I said.

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Before she could take it, it slipped from my fingers, and fell into the crack between the armrest and the driver's seat.

"Shit," I said.

Hailey unbuckled her seatbelt, and sat sideways to look into the crack, steadying the wheel with the top of her knee.

"I can get it," Hailey said.

"Just pay attention to driving, Hailey," Jenna said.

"I am, I am," Hailey said. I tried peering into the crack, hoping to catch a glimpse of the white papers in the dark.

A truck horn blared.

Hailey wrenched her hand out from the crack and grabbed the wheel.

A pair of headlights. The backs of my eyes burned.

I braced myself against the seat as the car swerved back over the double yellow line. But Hailey overcorrected. A guardrail appeared in the headlights.

Hailey jerked the wheel. The car slid sideways. I fell against the door, my head bounced off the window. Hot pain shot through my skull. My side of the car plowed through the guardrail. I floated, weightless, above the seat for an instant, squeezed my eyes shut, and my throat burned as I screamed. I felt my body snap forward, and my forehead hit the dashboard. Lightning cracked behind my eyelids.

My ears were ringing.

All I could feel was the seatbelt, tight against my chest, and a blinding pain radiating through my right leg. All I could taste was the blood in my mouth, warm and coppery. Glass

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confettied the dashboard. I squeezed my eyes shut, and opened them again. Blood stained my jeans, turning dark purple where my leg met exposed metal. I tired pulling my leg away from the door. Razor sharp pain took the air out of my lungs. My hands started to shake, then my arms, until my entire body was set on vibrate.

"Guys..." I said.

Hailey was slumped forward with her head on the steering wheel, her arms slack by her sides. Blood dripped from the side of her face, down the steering wheel, and onto the floor.

I felt all the air go out of me.

"Hailey?"

She didn't move.

My face was numb.

"Hailey!" I grabbed her thin shoulder and rattled her. Her face slid down the steering wheel, and she fell over onto the armrest. Her eyes were open, staring vacantly out the open windshield.

My stomach heaved, and I vomited hot, spicy bile onto the floor.

I unbuckled the seatbelt, and fumbled for the door handle. I was breathing, but my lungs felt tight and empty. Like I couldn't get enough air inside of me.

The cold air hit me, and my lungs burned. I fell out of the car. The grass was wet under my hands. My elbows buckled, and rolled onto my back. I turned my head.

Jenna's blonde hair fanned over the grass. She was on her stomach, facing away from me. Her arms and legs were bent at odd angles, like a rag doll.

"Jenna," I tried to say. My voice was hoarse, only a whisper.

Blackness crawled over the grass, and trees, and Jenna, until I couldn't see anymore.

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And just before I disappeared completely, I realized: it was no longer raining.

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Chapter 3

I first became aware of the darkness behind my closed eyelids. Like when you stand by the light switch of your bedroom, turn it off and try to find your way back to the bed. You walk, blind, arms held straight out in front of you, your fingers hungry for those cotton sheets. Only, when I became conscious of this darkness, I could not open my eyes, could not stretch my arms out in front of me, and I could already feel the cotton sheets under my hands. I wondered, where am I?

A heart monitor beeped to the right, voices passed by a closed door, antiseptic burned in my nose. A phone rang outside the door, and a woman's voice answered.

The whiteness of the hospital room burned my eyes and I tasted vomit. Two IV bags hung on a hooked pole next to the bed. One read "Morphine" in fat block letters. The IV lines that ran down the silver pole were attached to the bend in my right arm. I shivered.

I closed my eyes. I saw Hailey leaned forward against the steering wheel, and watched her fall over onto the armrest again, and again, and again. I saw Jenna's blonde hair fanned over the grass.

Despair sat like a weight on my chest so that I couldn't breath, splintering the bones and ribs in my chest. I sobbed, loudly. The moment I handed Hailey the joint replayed over and over again in my mind. Their screams drowned out my own. As the EMTs strapped me to the stretcher, I had watched the coroners zip Hailey's body into a black bag.

A nurse opened the door and stuck her head into the room.

"It's okay, honey," she said.

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The nurse pulled a chair over from the wall. The kind of chair that I'd imagine a parent would sit in by the bed, holding your hand as you slept. Maybe not always a parent, just somebody who loved you.

My sobs deescalated to sniffles, but I couldn't stop shaking.

"Do you want me to call your parents?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Your mother did call us back."

I fought the burning tears, fought the urge to keep sobbing even though I desperately wanted to.

"I don't want to call her." I breathed deeply through my nose.

"Is there anyone else you want to call?"

At any other time I would have said yes, that there was. Not my parents or my sister Victoria because she was away on vacation. I would have called Hailey. I would have called her parents. I would have called Jenna.

"There's nobody else," I said. My voice was flat. I could hear each word hit the floor. I was sure that my face looked the same, flat. The muscles were so relaxed that I couldn't force them into a smile. Was it the drugs, or just me? It felt like a little bit of both.

"I can have the doctor come in and explain your injuries," she said.

Injuries. I threw my blanket off. White gauze wrapped the length of my leg, starting at the heel and moving to the top of my thigh.

"Your leg was severely injured when you arrived. You lost a significant amount of blood at the scene and during surgery. You have fifty-five staples in your leg," she said.

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"Fifty-five?" I ran my hand over the gauze, but I couldn't feel it against my palm or under the bandages. I wondered if that was because of the morphine.

"You can walk, that's what matters. The doctor will come in later and explain everything more in detail."

"I can walk," I said, staring at my leg. It hadn't occurred to me that I might not be able to. I saw myself in a wheelchair at college graduation, at my wedding day. Then I remembered Hailey wouldn't be there.

The nurse looked back at the door, and leaned forward, towards me.

"The other passenger is alive," she said.

"Jenna?" A cold chill ran down my back and arms.

"She's in critical condition. She's still not breathing on her own, but her heart is beating. I can't tell you any more," she said.

There was a knock on the door. The nurse jumped out of her chair, hand on the doorknob, and peeked through the crack.

"Now is not a good time," she said.

A deep voice returned. "We've waited two days, it's time to talk." The door opened to a tall, dark blue uniform, gold name plate on the chest, a gun on the hip. I pressed myself hard into the pillows. My fingernails cut into my palm.

"Hello, Brooklyn," he said.

A female officer followed, hair slicked back in a bun. Her expression was firm. The male officer took a seat.

I exhaled. Sitting down meant things were casual. Right?

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“There was no alcohol in your blood so we know that you weren’t intoxicated at the time of the crash, but there were high levels of THC.” He pulled out a pad of paper, a pen. There was a tan line around his left ring finger.

“What caused you to crash?” he asked.

I stared at the tip of the pen, poised over the blank sheet. Tears stung my eyes but I quickly brushed them away.

We just need something for the report,” the female officer said. Her expression had softened. I wished that it hadn’t.

I squeezed my hand until the knuckles turned white. I wondered if that tan line on the male officer’s ring finger meant that he’d just gotten divorced. Maybe he was just like my father, maybe whenever he came home from a shift, late at night, he would drink. Drink so much that he forgot who he was, forgot who his equally drunk wife was. Maybe she left him. Maybe she met someone else, maybe he was devastated that they were getting divorced. Or maybe he wasn’t.

“We’d rather not have to do this down at the station,” he said. “What caused you to crash?” There were laugh lines around his eyes, but I could never imagine him smiling.

I closed mine, took a deep breath, and began,

“It was raining out. . .”

*

After I’d explained the accident and the officers left, I told the nurse I wanted to sleep. She handed me the Morphine button and told me to give myself an extra pump to fall asleep, that it would help with the pain. She felt sorry for me, I guess.

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I welcomed the sleep, welcomed the darkness. I'm not sure how long I slept, but I woke to the sound of somebody opening my door. I tensed.

Whoever they were, they pulled the chair closer to the bed, and their hand wrapped over mine.

"Oh, honey," a woman's voice said. Tears pricked my eyes but I kept them closed. It was Hailey's mother. She sniffled. I realized that she was crying.

"Oh dear," she said, and rubbed her thumb over the top of my hand. I was drowning. I couldn't breathe through the lump in my throat, like a hand around my neck. I couldn't choke out the words that I desperately wanted to say, that I was sorry. So fucking sorry.

"My baby," she said.

I wanted to beg her to stop. I was guilty enough on my own. I was sure that she hated me. She wished that it had been my fractured skull, my blood clotted on the dashboard. I was sure that she wished that I was dead, embalmed and refrigerated. Why was she here? I wanted her to stop pretending that she fucking cared about me at all.

She peeled the Morphine button out of my clammy fist, and hummed me to sleep instead.

When I woke, the room glowed blue in the light of the monitors, and she was gone. Hailey sat in her place. Sticky, dark blood stained the left side of her face, and matted her hair. Both eyes bled red. Her blue irises glowed in the dark. Her face held no expression. Her eyes were vacant, dead, just like they had been in in the car after the accident.

"I'm sorry," I said. I started to cry, sobbing. "I'm so sorry."

She held the morphine button out for me, and when I took it I pumped it like the trigger of a gun.

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Chapter 4

The day my family came to take me home there was less Morphine, and more pain. As one nurse packed my clothes into the duffle bag, another held me by my arm to help me into the wheelchair. My father took up the doorway typing on his phone. The phone's light illuminated his pocked, leathery skin. My mother, thin and pale, sat on the hospital bed swaying ever so slightly, watching me settle into the wheelchair. After, I sat stationary in the wheelchair in the middle of the room while my father flipped through the channels of the T.V. I stared at the back of his head, noticing how his scalp peaked through his white-blond hair.

The doctor warned my mother, "I've prescribed Morphine, but we kept her heavily sedated, so he'll need to be weaned off of it."

"I'll hold onto them," she said.

*

My father sat the head of the table for dinner, and my mother across from me. Like a fog had settled over the house, everything appeared at a distance. Like I was in a dream, or a nightmare. Nothing felt real, always in slow motion. I pushed the rice around with my fork, speared a piece of chicken, and put it back down.

"Not hungry?" my father asked.

I propped my face in my hands, shaking my head. I felt heavy, couldn't hold myself upright, couldn't hold my head up on my own.

"Can I get some morphine?" I asked, looking at my mom.

She drained the rest of her martini, and set it down, hard. She pushed herself away from the table, and grabbed her purse off the kitchen counter. A bottle cap popped, pills rattled.

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“Here,” she said. She dropped the pills into my hand; two sherbet colored pills sat in the center of my palm.

“This isn’t Morphine,” I said. I closed my hand around the pills, wanted to crush them until they turned to powder, and sweep them down the floor vent.

“It’s Advil. You just had Morphine a little while ago,” she said. I closed my eyes, felt the pills slide down my throat and drop into my empty stomach.

"Don't forget you have that funeral tomorrow," my father said.

“I can’t go,” I said.

“You don’t have a choice,” he said. He lifted his beer, the foam clinging to his mustache. I pressed my palms into my eyelids, so hard that colors danced in the darkness.

“I can’t,” I said.

“You’re goin’ to the funeral. End of discussion,” he said.

I could feel my mother watching me, like a lioness in the grass, waiting for me to react outwardly first.

“I can’t go,” I said.

“You owe that family.” His voice had that edge, the one that let me know he was reaching his limit. An edge like the table corner you accidentally bump into, over and over, leaving bruises on your hips. I looked at my father from behind my hands. I wanted him to clutch his chest, fall out of his chair, lay flat on the floor, until his face turned white, lips blue.

“Don’t give me that look. They could send you to jail, could put you to death.”

I thought, how fucking typical. My father would exaggerate to his final breath. I knew they could never put me to death, but it wouldn’t be such a bad thing.

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He had both elbows on the table, arms flat. His glass was empty. I wondered how many he had already had. My mother grabbed the bottle of Vodka off the table and filled her glass. The ice rattled around in the glass.

My vision swam. I closed my eyes, and swallowed the spit in my mouth. The invisible hand around my throat squeezed tighter.

“It’s been a week, get over it,” she said.

I locked my jaw, ground my teeth.

“You had a full week in the hospital, while nurses took care of your every whim. You’re bein’ selfish,” my father said.

“Selfish?” I asked.

“You’re being selfish,” my mother said.

“No, I’m not.” I flexed my jaw. My hands curled into fists, still propping my head up

“Yes, you’re fuckin’ selfish. Take responsibility!” His voice bounced off the walls.

I slammed my fists down on the table. The plates and silverware jumped, and so did my mother. “I know what I fucking did! And I wish I was the one who was dead. I wish I was fucking dead.” My lungs felt tight and empty.

My father’s mouth fell open. For the first time in my entire life, he appeared to have nothing to say.

A sense of calm slipped over my mother's face, empty behind the eyes. “I wish it was you too.”

I exhaled, but couldn’t inhale. As quickly as the anger had come on, it was gone, and I was left empty. My mother laughed into her drink. Why couldn’t she love me enough? Why couldn’t he?

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I pushed back from the table. I couldn't feel my feet as I walked across the living room, to the front door. I stepped outside and the air was so muggy that it was as if I were breathing into a pillow. I shut my eyes, tilted my face upward to the sky, tried to breathe. Cicadas buzzed, the neighbor mowed his lawn. I dialed the only person that I had left. She knew how they could be.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Victoria.” I opened my eyes. Blue sky, no clouds. Only one airplane, one tiny mark, slid across the canvas.

She sighed. “Hi, B. What do you need?”

I watched the airplane. There were probably two hundred people on that airplane, all going to the same place, for two hundred different reasons. And there I was, not even a mark on the canvas, only one single woman going nowhere, for two hundred different reasons.

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Chapter 5

Cullfield, Massachusetts. The center of my hometown was crowded with family owned businesses and not much else. The cars that crawled the streets, and sat in front of the meters, never broke the model year of 2009, always with duct tape somewhere on the exterior holding something together.

When I moved in with my sister, I had scrolled endlessly through Craigslist to find a job. The result: Oakley Restaurant, jammed between an alleyway and a windowless bar with neon lettering that spelled: The Dive.

I stepped out from between two parked cars. Tires screeched, and a black truck came to a halt at my side, heat rolling off the hood. I brought my arms down from in front of my face.

“Watch where you’re fucking going,” I said. I hit the grill with the side of my closed fist. It stung, and I felt stupid for doing it. I shuffled out of the way.

The driver pressed the horn of her truck and peeled off.

The horn rang in my ears. I felt the cap of the prescription bottle, which I'd stolen from my mother's purse before I left home, inside my back pocket. The passing cars and distant voices sounded as if they were coming through three feet of water. Somewhere behind me a child wailed, and his mother shouted for him to stop. A man stumbled out of The Dive, weaving as he walked. Another man locked his bicycle to the bike-rack. I wished that he would lock the shouting mother and the weaving-man to it, too.

The sunlight was lost in the alleyway. I stepped over crushed beer cans and singed cigarettes. Two dumpsters crowded the back wall of the restaurant, flies buzzing in and out of

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the openings. Like they were swarming dead bodies; finding the soft tissue to burrow holes in, lay their eggs in, feeding on the flesh inside. I gagged.

I pushed the back door of Oakley restaurant open, and I was greeted by the smell of soap and steel cleaner. The freshly mopped hallway floor reflected the fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. I checked my phone. 10:45 AM. I was late, *again*.

I still took my time as I approached the door that led into the restaurant. I never had to worry about being late to work because of our manager, Kevin. He was balding, significantly overweight, and still living with his parents. All I needed to do was shoot him an apologetic smile, bat my eyelashes, and all would be forgiven.

Well, I guess I don't actually know that he lives with his parents, but I like to think he does. Sometimes when I'm at work I don't pay attention to what he's saying at all. Instead I'll think about what his life is like outside of these walls. Maybe he lives with his parents, like in their basement that smells like laundry detergent. And his mom brings his dinner down on trays while he sits in front of a T.V.

Or maybe he lives alone in a shitty apartment with dingy green wallpaper. In the kind of apartment that has bad fluorescent lighting, and somehow always smells vaguely of Haitian food, neighboring a family with too many kids and not enough patience.

Maybe Kevin had been married with his own kids, with a wife as fat as him that he'd met while shopping for a coffee pot at Target. Maybe he and his fat wife had a horrible, miserable marriage, and he lost her and the kids in a divorce.

But it's easier to go with the "still lives with his parents" story. It makes more sense. Mostly because Kevin has a mini action figure of Captain America perched on the corner of his desk. Mostly because my flirting works.

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“Welcome to PreMeal, Brook,” he said.

I offered him a quick smile, before entering the maze of tables and chairs. The slower I walked, the easier it was to hide the fact I couldn't bend my left knee.

I paused just before the table, mentally preparing myself for the feat of trying to sit down. I let my purse drop to the floor, and gripped the back of the chair as I lowered myself to sit. I was suddenly aware of the wetness of my palms, and the weight of my leg. The skin over my left knee stretched tight, like an elastic band being stretched to fit around a basketball. I worried that my stitches would pop. I imagined the skin would split apart, tear open, revealing the white bone.

As soon as I was settled, I found myself looking around the room, stopping at one server, then another. Wondering and wandering, creating stories and theories out of thin air.

There was Ally Kellington sitting at the front table. Ally was my age. She kept her head down, her tables clean, and her note pad neat. I wondered if she had friends. I never saw her at the bar after work. Ally seemed like the kind of girl who was probably close with her parents, and read a lot of books by old, forgotten authors. I bet she could cook.

The back door groaned opened and naturally, everyone looked up, including me.

“Harrison Grant?” Kevin asked.

“Yeah,” Harrison said, entering the room.

Harrison was probably a good five or six inches taller than Kevin, and he was way better looking. That was obvious. Hair as dark as mine, and eyes the color of – well, there wasn't really a word. A color that brought me back to memories of a dark ocean, sort of blue, sort of green, sort of... black. Like a sea that you could drown in. One that maybe I had even considered walking into at one point. Maybe.

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“Call me Kevin. Grab a seat.” Kevin let go of Harrison's hand.

Harrison maneuvered through the tables and chairs. His cologne moved with him, passing under my nose, and my mouth watered.

I turned my attention back to Kevin, but I was really watching Harrison in my peripheral. He got a notebook and pen out but stopped just before the tip of his pen touched to the paper. He stayed like that for a while. And to no surprise of my own, I stopped trying to be sneaky about it, and I looked over at him.

Harrison seemed frozen in place, his pen hovering over the fresh sheet, his eyes glued to the back of the chair in front of him. I wondered what he might be thinking about, so deeply that he didn't notice me staring at him.

Maybe he had a lot on his mind. Like maybe he'd graduated but couldn't find a better job, one where he wasn't sweeping floors and taking people's dinner orders.

Then his eyes met mine, catching my stare. My stomach flipped, but I made a point not to look away. There were a few reasons for that, the main one being that one of his eyes was a different color than the other. Nothing too obvious, both were dark, but one was more green than blue. The other reason was that not looking away when someone as attractive as Harrison caught me staring, gave me some sort of thrill, and he wasn't looking away, either.

I fought the smile that tickled the corners of my mouth. *Why was he staring back at me?*

My phone burst into song from my back pocket. I jumped. Kevin rolled his eyes at me.

"Oh shit, sorry. I'm sorry," I said. I whipped my phone out, ready to press decline.

Jenna was calling.

My hands went cold. I pressed decline. Kevin started lecturing again.

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I studied the surface of the table as if it were the most interesting piece of scratched wood I had ever seen. Each line told a story, just as every person did. But no matter how many stories I tried to come up with for every scratch, there was no relief to the invisible band tightening around my chest. I wasn't seeing the lines, I was seeing Jenna, sprawled on the grass. I was seeing her gray skin, lying in a white bed with white tubes going into her nose and mouth.

I was stuck inside my own mind, running in a vicious circle. *Hailey slumped forward on the steering wheel, rag doll Jenna in the grass, Hailey's dead expression, Jenna in the hospital bed, over and over.*

I dug the prescription bottle out of my pocket. One round white pill rolled into my palm, and I tossed it into my mouth. I ran my tongue over the smooth surface, could feel the numbers carved into its body.

All the other servers stood up suddenly. They collected their bags, and whatever else, and dispersed as PreMeal was over. I felt like I was coming out of a dream.

"Hey," Harrison said.

I jumped inside my skin.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

I paused, distracted by the slight variation of color in his eyes.

"Yeah," I said, finally looking away. I stood up, taking my backpack and slinging it onto my shoulder. "Everything's great." My smile hung awkwardly on my face. The motion was tiring.

His eyebrows furrowed, studying me again. "Are you sure?"

For a moment, I felt my smile falter.

"I'm fine. Really," I said. The band around my chest squeezed tighter.

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I could tell that he didn't believe me, but finally, he offered a smile of his own.

“Okay. I'll see you in there,” he said.

I watched him leave, with another odd, unfamiliar ache in my chest. Like I was watching a life preserver drift away from me as I drowned in an ocean.

Chapter 6

My sister's apartment had four rooms. The entirely white kitchen was one, which was a bitch to keep clean. It served as the room that we always hung out in. Mostly because the living room's grey carpet had three mystery stains, all brown, and Victoria's cable sucked.

Victoria stood on the other side of the island countertop, cooking spaghetti. I had taken a seat in one of the stools, swiveling back and forth. She covered the boiling pot with a lid and turned around.

When I looked at Victoria, I saw my mother. Another version of my mother from years earlier, when she still got me ready for school and walked me to the bus. A time when she smelled like sweet perfume, before she breathed vodka and wine. Before my father lost his job, and he started drinking with her.

"So we have a new guy at work," I said.

"Here we go," Victoria said. She was shaking her head, but I could hear the smile in her voice.

"What?" I laughed.

"You always have a new guy," she said.

"I do not."

"I think you should take a boy-break. You need to focus on you, right now."

I couldn't disagree with her about the boy-break. There was always a new Facebook notification, notifying me of a new message from an old boyfriend who I had grown bored of and neglected.

"I'll be fine. I promise," I said.

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“You *will* be fine, but how are you doing now?” She turned back to the stove.

“I’m okay.” I thought back to Jenna’s call. She had left a voicemail. I still hadn’t listened to it. I doubted that I ever could.

"Are you sure, Brook? You can talk to me. You know that," she said.

I cleared my throat, trying to breathe.

"I'm fine. I promise."

I pulled the prescription bottle out of my pocket. The cap of the bottle clicked as I opened it, the pills rattled, louder than I thought they would. Victoria span around, her eyes locking onto the pills that rolled into my palm. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“Your leg hurts?” She asked.

I swallowed two pills.

“Yeah,” I said. It did.

She stared at me for a few breaths, and turned back to the stove. Minutes passed and my face went numb. The tightness of my chest dissolved as a warm sensation rolled up my spine, and down my arms.

“Brook?” Victoria stared at me. She took a sharp inhale, the tendons in her neck strained.

I blinked at her. I was *so* aware of how many times I was blinking. I wondered if I was blinking enough, or too much. I realized my mouth was open. I snapped it shut.

“What?” I asked, and sat up a little straighter.

She turned around, but I didn't miss the tears in her eyes. She started to stir the pot of spaghetti again. It looked as if she were moving in slow motion.

When I chewed the inside of my cheek, I couldn't feel it.

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"I think I'm gonna go to bed," I said. My tongue felt heavy, and too big for my mouth.

Victoria turned the stove off and turned around. The tears that had been welling up in her eyes spilled over. She quickly brushed them away. "Okay."

I wondered if two pills at once might have been too many.

*

"Wakey, wakey!"

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and sat up in bed. My best friend from high school, Sabrina, let herself into my room.

In high school, Sabrina had buzzed her Afro, bleached it blonde, and wore pink camouflage pants. After attending New York University, she let her hair fade back to black, let her Afro grow out to its full potential, and had limited her wardrobe to anything white, black or grey, with the occasional splash of red if she was trying to impress.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Well, hello to you too," Sabrina said. "Victoria texted me and said I should get you out of bed."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Nine o'clock. I brought reinforcements," she said. She had a coffee in each hand, and took a seat on my bed. "Here."

"Thank you," I said, giving her a little bow as I took the coffee. This was our newly established ritual. I would pass out as soon as I got home from work, and she'd bring me coffee a few hours later so I'd be conscious enough to do nothing with her.

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"So, how are you?" She asked. She tucked herself into bed next to me, sitting against the headboard. The bottle of pills rolled out from the folds of the blanket. I scrambled to grab it, but Sabrina grabbed it first.

"You really need to *sleep* with these?" she asked, and held them away from me.

"I didn't mean to. I just passed out," I said.

"How many do you usually take?" Sabrina rolled the bottle over in her hand, reading the label.

"I only take them if I need to."

"That doesn't exactly answer my question," she said.

"I'm not taking too much." I grabbed the bottle out of her hand, and threw it into the drawer of my bedside table.

"Okay, okay. I'll drop it, but you have to do something for me," she said. She scooted to face me head on. She looked serious. She never looked serious. I scooted backwards.

"What?"

"*Please*, find us plans for tonight." She grabbed my shoulders and shook me back and forth.

"Watch the coffee!" I put it down on the bedside table.

"Brook, I'm dying in this dried up town! I'm up to my ears in debt. I'll be living at home until I'm forty. I need some non-classy, booze-filled fun. What are your friends from work doing?"

I rolled my eyes at her.

"I'm not saying your work friends aren't classy," she said.

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"There's no denying that they're not classy," I said, laughing. "But we did get some fresh meat who I'm pretty into."

"Fresh meat?" Sabrina put her coffee down.

"His name is Harrison, and he is gorgeous," I said.

"Here we go." Sabrina smiled, shaking her head.

"What the hell, Victoria said that too. You'll understand once you see him," I said.

"Everyone's probably going to The Dive after work. We should go."

"Do you think Allen will be there?" Her smile dropped.

Sabrina had broken up with Allen when she got into NYU, thinking that she'd never move back home or have to see him, ever again. He worked at Oakley with me, and visited The Dive *every* night.

"I don't think so," I said.

"I can tell you're lying," she said, crossing her arms.

"How?" I put my hands in the air, feigning innocence.

"You play with your necklace every time you lie!"

"Okay, he'll be there. So what? It's not like you still love him. It's been four years since you've seen him!"

She side-eyed me.

"You still love him?"

She threw the covers off and jumped out of bed. Before I could say anything else she was standing in front of my closet, swiping through the clothes on hangers.

"Do you have anything red?"

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Chapter 7

I suppose The Dive looked like any dusty, dingy version of a townie bar. Stained-glass lamps hung over a marble wood bar, their bulbs burning dimly, as if it were with their dying breath that they kept the place lit. Low, semicircle booths lined the mirror-wall opposite the bar. As we crossed the room my shoes stuck to the floor. The booths were full, and people crowded the bar. A blonde woman sat in one of the booths alone, the side of her face lying on the table while she swirled her finger in the foam of her beer.

As we sat down, the bartender put glasses of water in front of us.

“Want the usual, Brook?”

“Yes, please, Jayden.” I leaned over the bar, smiling.

“I’ll take care of you, honey.” Jayden laughed, and walked over to the beer taps.

"Yes, please, Jayden," Sabrina said.

"Shut up." I laughed.

Jayden put the beers on the bar. Foam rolled over the lip of the glass, slid down the side, bled under the base of the glass so that it left a circle mark on the wood. If my mother saw that I marked the wood, she would kill me. I lifted the glass, wiping the mark away with my hand.

I could hear Hailey's laugh. She was at the other end of the bar, talking to Jayden over the register. This Hailey had colored tattoo sleeves on both arms, and a spike through her lip. The tips of her hair were dyed bright green. She looked different, but the laugh was the same. Deep and loud, with a foot stomp, while her torso rocked back.

My chest was tight. The beer slipped out of my hand, and shattered across the floor.

"Oh shit!" Sabrina said, putting her beer down. The busboy rushed over with a broom.

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"It's okay," he said.

"I'm so sorry," I said. Tears stung my eyes.

"He said it's okay Brook." Sabrina put her hand on my arm, searching my face. I touched my purse, hanging on the back of my chair. I imagined the prescription bottle nestled between my wallet and my phone.

"All set," the busboy said. He carried the sweeper away.

"Should I give you the next one in a sippy cup?" Jayden asked.

I forced a laugh.

"I'll take it once I'm back from the bathroom. I'll be right back," I said, taking my bag.

Sabrina nodded. She glanced at my bag, clenched in my hand, before locking eyes with me again. I could see her searching my face, the cogs turning inside her brain. She wanted to know what was up.

Weaving through the customers, I held my bag tight to my side,. I pressed my ear against the door as I knocked on the door. No answer. This bathroom smelled like toilet water, and old beer. I pulled the prescription bottle out of my bag.

I wondered, could I mix Morphine and alcohol?

I rolled the bottle over in my hand, running my hand over the lettering. I popped one pill. Without water the pill crawled down my throat. I thought for a moment, *I'm choking. Finally.*

I turned the cold water on and splashed my face. I looked at my reflection. Wide blue eyes stared back at me, and I felt sorry for that girl in the mirror.

Someone knocked on the bathroom door.

I watched the doorknob jiggle.

"One second," I said, before abandoning my reflection.

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I kept my eyes on the floor as I crossed the room. Sabrina was finishing her second beer, and her ex-boyfriend Allen was in my seat. He was doing all the talking. Despite knowing that Sabrina would've wanted a rescue, I decided to let them talk. I scanned the bar, stopping at the woman asleep in the booth. She hadn't got halfway through that final beer.

She probably had a daughter waiting for her at home, who was blonde, just like her. Maybe her daughter had even cooked dinner, waiting at the dinner table for her mother, checking the clock. Maybe the daughter wanted boy advice, or wanted to show her mom her latest exam grade. Maybe that daughter would give up waiting, and wrap her mother's plate in plastic, leaving it in the fridge. All while the mother slept here at The Dive, in booth number three.

I headed for the door. When I pushed the door open, my foot caught the threshold and I fell out onto the concrete. My bad knee scraped the sidewalk, and my purse fell out in front of me. My prescription bottle rolled across the sidewalk.

"Shit." I scrambled, crawling to catch it before it fell into the street.

Somebody else grabbed it.

I halted, and looked up.

"Morphine, huh?" Harrison asked. He rolled the bottle in his hand, and smiled.

"Uh, yeah. Morphine," I said.

Harrison put the Morphine in his pocket. He took both of my hands, and helped me onto my feet. His hands were warm. I imagined them running up my arms, and wrapping around my waist. I wanted his hands all over me.

I winced as I straightened my knee.

"Did you have surgery or something?" he asked. He held the bottle out to me, and brushed his fingers against my palm as he withdrew his hand.

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"No, I was in an accident." I stuffed the bottle into my purse.

His dark ocean eyes widened, but not necessarily in the shocked way you would expect someone to look when you told them that you were in an accident. It was almost in an excited way, an intrigued way, even. It was different. I liked it.

He sucked on his bottom lip and I realized I was staring at it.

"Should we go inside?" I asked. I worked for each word, each syllable; fought the weight of my tongue as the Morphine dialed me down. I rolled my tongue around in my closed mouth, felt the back of each tooth.

"You feeling that Morphine, Brooklyn?" Harrison asked, smiling.

I pulled back, confused by his reaction, and that he'd called me by my full name. Everything outside of that moment faded. As my world shrank, so did my anxiety. I had no father, no mother, not one dead best friend. It was Harrison and me.

"Let's go inside," he said. He put a hand on the small of my back, propelling me forward, into the bar and to the two closest seats.

The second bartender, Monica, finished mixing a drink and put it down in front of the girl beside Harrison.

"Hey, Brook. What can I get you two?" she asked. Vine tattoos crawled up her arm, up into the cap sleeve of her T-shirt. I always admired her for those tattoos. I wished I had the same courage.

"The usual," I said.

"I'll take your darkest beer," Harrison said. When Monica left for the taps, Harrison glanced at me and smiled. "So what's the usual?"

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"Allagash," I said. I tapped my fingers on the bar, couldn't feel them. Monica put the beers down in front of us, knowing to put a napkin under mine.

"So where'd you meet your new friend?" Monica asked.

I knew what she was thinking. That Harrison was just some guy I'd picked up, my new distraction. A distraction from what, she didn't know, but that didn't make her any less correct.

"Harrison just started working at Oakley," I said.

"What do you think of Cullfield?" she asked him.

"It's, um, really unique," he said.

Monica snorted a laugh. "It really does have some characters. Don't have too much fun, you two." She winked at me before traveling further down the bar.

"So tell me about yourself, H," I said. I took a sip of beer and took my time setting the glass down on the bar. Gentle, gentle, gentle. Couldn't let it slip.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Where did you grow up?"

"I grew up in New Hampshire, in a town named Jade."

"Siblings?" I tipped my head back, the last of my beer funneled into my mouth.

"An older brother. You?"

"An older sister," I said, and my cheeks flushed. Two. I had had two older sisters.

"So, what happened in the accident? If you don't mind my asking," he said.

"It was... It was..." I shifted in my seat. *Tires screeching, glass shattering, we're screaming.* I thought, where was Monica with my next beer?

"It was really bad," I said. "Tell me about your family."

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"My dad is a pilot for American Airlines and my mom's a flight attendant. Now that me and my brother are older, they sold our house and never stop flying. That's why I moved here."

"That's awesome. So they just fly from place to place, vacationing in between?"

"Pretty much." He set his beer down. "So, what's your family like?" As he withdrew his hand from the glass, I realized that I had cornered myself. I ran a hand through my hair, and made a fist at the crown of my head.

"I'm not close to my parents anymore. I live with my sister."

"I'm sorry to hear that," he said. When I met his dark ocean eyes I understood he was sincere. I never knew what to say when someone apologized for something that wasn't their fault. *I appreciate your sympathy? I wish you wouldn't try to sympathize with me?*

"It's okay," I said.

"You seem to say that a lot," he said.

"Say what?"

"That it's okay when it's not," he said. He kept his eyes trained on mine. I held my breath.

"I... I don't... I *am* fine."

"There you go again," he said, studying me. His eyes reminded me of that dark ocean.

"Well would you rather me say I'm not?" I asked.

"I'd rather you say the truth. Wouldn't that make you feel better?" he asked. When I didn't say anything, he added, "Why do you really take those pills?"

"My leg hurts," I said, knowing it wasn't the whole truth. Apparently, he knew it wasn't either. He raised an eyebrow and put his beer down.

"Let me ask you a question, and you have to promise to give an honest answer."

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"Okay," I said.

"Are you okay?" Harrison leaned closer to me.

"Honest?" I asked. He nodded. "Not really. But I'll *be* fine."

He looked at me for a beat. "Just promise to always be honest with me."

I think he knew I was drowning, and he wanted me to promise to take that life preserver.

"I promise," I said, and it wasn't that difficult to say.

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Chapter 8

The sand was blue in the night and cold under my bare feet. I had left my flats on the stairs that led down to the beach. I'd come here almost every night during high school summers in search of a shooting star, but I had never seen one. Not once in my entire life.

But that night I was not wearing Abercrombie short-shorts while sharing stories with Sabrina. I wore my black dress from the funeral, and I was alone.

The dark water rolled up the sand, meeting my feet. It was so cold that pins and needles broke out across my toes. That sensation -- the pins and needles -- felt good. It just felt good to feel something other than the pain in my leg, or the pain in my heart.

I pressed play on the voicemail, and listened to Jenna's tearful mother for a tenth time.

"Hi Brook. It's Amy, Jenna's mom. She's awake. She's asking for you. We'll see you soon."

The glowing crescent moon hung in the night sky, littered with stars.

I imagined life on another planet. I imagined myself on a different planet, born into a different body, into a different life.

An old boyfriend once talked to me about his theory of the universe. He believed there were multiple universes, all mirrors of our own, just with different possible outcomes. That there was a universe where I was born into a family with all healthy children, where my oldest sister Samantha didn't die. There was another universe where my parents never became alcoholics or emotionally abusive. Another where I never convinced Hailey to take the joint and never dropped it. Another universe where she didn't die, but I might have.

I wasn't sure what I believed.

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I stretched my hands out to touch the charcoal black horizon. I couldn't see where the water's edge met the sky. It felt like I was standing on the edge of the universe. I was so aware of the immensity of space. How small I was. How insignificant. I believed that the universe would not care if I drowned myself in that ocean.

Would my mother? Would my father?

No, I told myself, they wouldn't. And neither would I.

The ocean waves lapped my feet and ankles, as if it, too, wanted me to enter the water. I imagined the weightlessness of being under water. The ocean would chase out the oxygen in my lungs, and the pain in my leg.

The events in my life flashed through my mind. My sister Samantha's funeral. My mother laughing as my father berated me. Hailey lying in the casket, the makeup unable to hide the purple bruises on her face. Her mother had hugged me; I was surprised how strong she was, her wire arms like shackles. She held my face in her cold hands, telling me, "I love you, honey."

I did not want her to love me.

I turned my face up to the sky, heart open. Give me a sign, I thought. A sign to stay alive. A sign that things would be okay, that I would be okay, eventually.

A shooting star streaked the sky, so quickly that I almost missed it. A sign.

I stepped back from the water's edge, and the wave receded from me as well.