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## Take What You Can Carry: a Novella

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**TAKE WHAT YOU CAN CARRY: A NOVELLA**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication  
of the University of Mary Washington  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Maggie Stough

April 2015

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Maggie Stough  
(digital signature)

04/30/15

Take What You Can Carry: a Novella

Maggie Stough

*the same--different--the same attributes,  
different yet the same as before.*

-- H.D., "Tribute to the Angels"

PROLOGUE

Mary Jane stood in front of the entire church congregation. The pews were so packed they had to open the overflow section. She was wearing a white headpiece and a light blue gown with a pillow stuffed up it to make her look pregnant. She'd been cast as Mary in the Christmas Eve pageant. The kids dressed as sheep were singing "Away in a Manger." She was supposed to pretend to give birth, remove the pillow from her dress, and retrieve the baby doll wrapped in a dish towel from below the manger. Charlie, the boy who had been cast as Joseph, looked at her expectantly. He was the cutest boy in the seventh grade. Despite Mary Jane's hopes that being cast as The Bible's favorite couple, her chances with him were waning every second more she failed to act as she was supposed to. She felt the eyes of everyone in the audience looking at her. Maybe even the eyes of God.

A month earlier, when Mary Jane found out that she would play Mary in the Christmas pageant, her mother had reminded her that Mary had one of the most important roles in The Bible and that being cast as her in the Christmas pageant was not something to be taken lightly. Mary Jane tried to treat the role with reverence, working hard each night to memorize her lines and practice switching the pillow for the baby. She had really wanted to be a sheep or an angel.

She knew her best friend, Korina, would have been better for the part, but she also knew that Mary wasn't black and the director said it would be sacrilegious to make her so.

Mary Jane had befriended Korina at Jesus Camp that summer. They were attending a two-week drama camp. Korina had landed the lead atheist role in the musical the camp director had written herself; Mary Jane had been cast as the atheist's sidekick. Korina and Mary Jane would practice their best sneering-at-Christians faces in the mirror every night after they took their showers. There was something fun about pretending to be bad, knowing that in the end they'd end up being good.

Besides learning lines, songs, and dance numbers, they were attending daily Bible study classes and worship services in the morning and evening. Meals were their only break, or the closest they came. They sang songs as a blessing for the food and were encouraged not to waste food so as to help starving kids in Africa.

There was also a Tenebrae service. Korina and Mary Jane didn't know what this service was and when they asked a camp counselor, the boy--a high schooler in a tie-dyed camp t-shirt--described it as an extended Communion. Mary Jane and her peers were led into the main room of the lodge they stayed in. The lights had been dimmed. A card table was set up in front of the fireplace, covered with a purple cloth. A loaf of bread and two chalices rested on the table. They were instructed to sit in a semicircle on the floor. Mary Jane put on a reverent face, listening as the camp director and some of the counselors read from worn scripts, reenacting the Last Supper. The reading paused and two counselors, dish towels draped over their shoulders, made their way down the row of kids from opposite ends with buckets of warm soapy water, meant to mimic Jesus washing the disciples' feet. The counselor bent before Mary Jane and picked up her hands,

gently dunking them in the lukewarm water, massaging the soap into her hands, and gingerly patting them dry with the towel.

When everyone's hands had been washed, the reading continued. The camp director broke the loaf of white bread and raised the chalice of wine, repeating Jesus' words. The chalices and loaves of bread were passed to either end of the semicircle. The boy beside Mary Jane held the bread and chalice for her. She broke off a chunk of bread and dipped it in the chalice. He whispered to her as she did this, "The body of Christ broken for you. The blood of Christ poured out for you." She placed the wine-soaked bread in her mouth, surprised that Christ could taste so acrid. She then took the chalice and bread from the boy and turned to Korina, letting her do as she did, hear the words that she had, and taste the same blood and body of Christ that she had.

When the last supper concluded, the counselors herded the campers down the gravel path cut through the woods to the sanctuary by the river. It was dark. Only the wooden cross was illuminated. The camp director and counselors read from the script, recounting the events up to Christ's crucifixion. Mary Jane sat on a wooden bench beside Korina, both of them staring hard into the dark, trying to make out their surroundings. As a counselor pounded a piece of wood with a hammer, the sound resonating through the still night, counselors walked around with tiny boxes of nails. A counselor came to Mary Jane and took her hand, placing a small nail in her palm so the tip poked into the skin. He closed her hand tightly so the tip pressed into her palm harder. Tears welled in Mary Jane's eyes, and when the counselor had moved onto Korina, Mary Jane wept silently.

After the service ended, they were instructed to walk back to the lodge in silence and not talk for the rest of the night because they were mourning Jesus. When hand gestures, rudimentary sign language, and furious scribbling of words into notebooks stymied

communication too much, Korina and Mary Jane resigned themselves to their bunks. Before turning out the lights, Mary Jane looked at her palm where the nail had been pressed into her skin. There was a red mark.

The next morning, they awoke to pounding on their doors and counselors screaming “Jesus is alive! Jesus is alive!” Groggily, Mary Jane sat up in bed. She glanced out the tiny window in their room; the sun had barely come up. A counselor pounded on the door before opening it. She motioned for them to come outside. Mary Jane located her flip flops and joined the train of campers outside onto the dew-covered field. A large wooden cross with a piece of white fabric draped on it stood before them. They were handed hymnals and led in worship, singing acapella songs such as “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,” “Lord I Lift Your Name on High,” and “Lord of the Dance.” To each song they did the hand gestures and dances they’d learned over the years.

When the service had ended and they were making their way back to their bunks for two more hours of sleep before breakfast, Korina shot Mary Jane a worried look. Mary Jane picked up her hand and squeezed it; they were sisters in Christ, an unbreakable bond.

On stage, Korina led the rest of the sheep in the final verse a second time. She shot a look at Mary Jane, urging her to give birth. Mary Jane looked helplessly at Charlie, his fake beard making it hard to gauge his expression. Charlie suddenly reached up her gown and yanked the pillow out before grabbing the Baby Jesus minus the dish towel and plopping him in the manger. Shocked, Mary Jane just stared at him. Charlie shrugged, helpless in the situation. Korina’s voice rang out and soon the rest of the cast joined in, singing “Joy to the World.” Mary Jane mouthed “watermelon” over and over again to look like she was singing, because she knew she wouldn’t be able to make a sound. She was too ashamed to feel like celebrating Jesus’ birth, even if it was

one of her favorite hymns. When the hymn ended, they exited the stage, disappearing into the choir room to remove their costumes from over their Christmas Eve outfits. Korina met up with Mary Jane on her way back to the sanctuary, picking up her hand and giving it a squeeze.

The car ride home from the service had been quiet, as if it was actually the Thursday of Holy Week and Jesus was dead. Mary Jane knew she'd disappointed her mother, been sacrilegious like the director had wanted to avoid, and upset the audience despite all of them telling her she did a good job after the service had ended.

When they walked in the front door, her mother made a beeline to the kitchen to prepare the hot chocolate and frost the birthday cake for Jesus, as was tradition. Her older brother, John, plopped down on the couch to watch *A Christmas Story*, which TBS always played for twenty-four-hours straight and he somehow never got tired of watching. Usually her eldest brother, Thom, would be there too, but he was a father now, so things were different. On her way inside, Mary Jane paused at the side table by the front door where the nativity scene was set up. It looked so perfect, everything in its place. She wished she could be that Mary, having no other choice but to stand there and wait for the Baby Jesus to be placed in the manger before her.

## ONE

It was an evening in early September in Salem. MJ McCormick paused on the sidewalk while the three Yorkshire Terriers, Duffy, Foster, and Webster, investigated a nearby bush. Zoey West, MJ's favorite client, had called an hour earlier and requested she take her dogs for a walk as she was caught up at the architectural firm per usual. MJ didn't mind. Zoey always gave her a hefty tip whenever she requested an extra walk for her dogs; she was afraid that these requests were impinging on MJ's social life.

Unbeknownst to Zoey, all MJ would be sacrificing would be more time toward watching NetFlix with Oreo and Willie, her two Black Labs of murky lineage, curled up on either side of her. Or maybe she'd be missing out on another night of staring into the void of a blank Word Document, a bottle of wine uncorked and set beside her laptop on the table, waiting for the right idea to arrive. Sometimes none did, and other times, the stories poured from her fingertips into a bulleted list on the computer screen. But none seemed inviting, or maybe they all did. Maybe it just wasn't the right time to settle down for the long haul with one story, one character, and believe that she'd be different when it was all typed out.

The dogs, upon finishing having their way with the bush, continued trotting down the sidewalk, their short legs moving quickly. MJ scanned the path ahead and noticed a kid smacking an empty refrigerator box that was sprawled across the end of his driveway with a wooden sword. A blue towel was tied around his neck and a bike helmet brandishing a fake mohawk rested on his head, the unclipped straps moving with every swing of the sword. Duffy, Foster, and Webster froze for a moment, their tiny bodies quivering at the sound of one particularly loud WHACK that left the box shivering.

"It's okay," MJ told them, giving the leashes a gentle tug and continuing to walk toward where the kid was. Despite the tired, ramshackle houses and ignored lawns running rampant with ivy, the neighborhood wasn't unsafe. It was on the verge of a revival, or so Zoey had once told MJ. Her street of crisp, modern townhouses was only a few blocks away. The architectural vision seemed almost possible. Zoey would wave her wand over the surrounding streets and they'd change from black and white to Technicolor. The corner gas stations where stabbings had occurred would become neighborhood co-op groceries. The empty field below the power lines

would become a community garden and a graffiti-free playground. There'd be a nice gravel path for walking dogs.

The dream flickered as a rusty pick-up with its bumper duct-taped on drove by, the engine sputtering and irritable. She reined in the leashes as an added precaution when they were one house away from the kid. Hoping to pass by unnoticed, she adopted a confident stride. The dogs didn't notice, as they held their ground on the sidewalk by the edge of the driveway, and began to bark and growl.

The kid stopped, raising his head to look at them. MJ saw his cheeks were stained from tears. He dropped the sword and ran behind the dumpsters parked beside the back door to his house, peering over them occasionally.

"They won't hurt you! Their bark is worse than their bite, I swear!" MJ called to the kid. He continued to hide. The dogs continued to growl and bark. She turned her attention to them, and said, "C'mon, guys. There's nothing to see here." She felt like a high school cafeteria monitor during a fight. They were still riled up, so she scooped Duffy and Foster up in her arms, knowing Webster's jealousy would get the best of him, and soon had them on her way again. By the time they had reached the street corner, the kid had returned to slaying the refrigerator box.

The dogs had taken interest in the weeds surrounding the stop sign, and as they all took to marking the sign's post, she glanced back at the driveway, recalling the afternoons of her own childhood when she'd pick up her oldest brother's long abandoned hockey stick and hard rubber ball to strike against the line of garbage and recycle bins she'd chosen to represent everything that had made growing up confusing and frustrating. She'd promised herself that she'd produce no spawn of her own until she could guarantee its freedom from arguments in Walmart aisles and dinners marinated in the silent treatment.

A tug on her arm pulled MJ back to the present, moving her forward into the evening as the Yorkies trotted onward, fearless. She was happy to be twenty-six and on her own, and responsible for no one but the dogs she regularly cared for. The sense of freedom carried her through the rest of the walk. When she returned, she was surprised to find Zoey's Prius in the driveway.

"Ohmygosh, thank you so much, MJ," Zoey called from the kitchen as MJ hung the dogs' leashes on their respective hooks by the front door. Duffy, Foster, and Webster had already hustled into the house, eager to investigate the smells wafting from the stove.

"Oh, no problem. I love these guys." She scooped Webster up in her arms like she would a favorite nephew.

Zoey handed her a glass of water and an envelope with a check in it just as the music changed from some indie band with a female singer to what sounded like a pipe organ in an old church.

"Frederick must not have liked the music," Zoey explained.

Frederick was the ghost who had taken residence in her house. He had died long ago in a battle nearby and had grown fond of her. Zoey thought one of her past selves must have been his lover. This had become more plausible when his destruction of her landscaping had turned into leaving roses on the welcome mat. Being a romantic, but without any time to sustain a real relationship, Zoey had no other choice but to let him inside. It had surprised her how respectful he'd been of her locked doors and windows, as if forgetting he was more ghost than human.

MJ had struggled to believe in Frederick's existence at first. The upheaval of Zoey's yard could have just been rebellious teenagers. Zoey had fought hard against her skepticism, pointing out how a couch cushion was dented ever so slightly, the pillows slumped to suggest the space

was occupied. It wasn't until one afternoon when MJ returned from the pantry with treats for the dogs that she saw a translucent figure seated at the breakfast bar wearing a Civil War era uniform. He smiled at her, as if to announce his harmlessness. She had set the handful of treats on the counter while internally renegotiating her belief system and how she might defend herself if his smile gained more malice. Her thoughts were then distracted by the sight of him collecting the treats from the counter and offering them to the dogs, who had gathered at his feet, their stubby tails wagging. MJ decided she didn't mind him.

“So work is getting crazy, huh?” MJ asked, exchanging Webster for Duffy who had been pawing at her.

“When isn't it? But yeah, especially now that my plan for the Armstrong Tower has been chosen.” She gave a small smile, turning her attention to Foster who had been circling her feet.

“Wait, what?” MJ asked, the information finally clicking. “A skyscraper you designed is going to be constructed?!”

“Yeah!” Zoey squealed, clapping her hands in excitement.

“Ohmygod! Congrats!” MJ returned Duffy to the floor.

Zoey pulled her in for a hug. When they pulled apart, she said, “They're going to throw a reception at the end of this month once it's finalized to celebrate. You'll come, right?”

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Zoey stood by the glass wall of the hotel's banquet room, looking out at the city's skyline, the skyline her building would alter. She wanted to believe the altering would be for forever, a forever like the post 9/11 skyline seemed. She knew better, though. This was America: they would rebuild and keep rebuilding, renovating, recreating, reimagining. She began to wonder who had stood here a hundred years ago wanting to believe they'd achieved their own

architectural greatness, when some friend of a friend of a colleague placed a hand on her shoulder and congratulated her for being the first female architect to design a skyscraper worth building in this fine city--or at least that's what she took from the way the congratulatory remarks oozed from his lips, barely making their way from between his slimy smile and polished persona as he looked her up and down. She wanted to wash her hands after shaking his, rid herself of these interactions where she was still a female, still just a body, but she was unable to escape as she found herself caught in a thicket of men in suit jackets who wanted to talk shop with her.

MJ watched from across the room as the chestnut colored head of Zoey bounced around the cluster of architects in their suits, holding glasses of something alcoholic and masculine on the rocks. She felt out of place in this crowd of professionals with their impressive degrees and their architectural terminology. Zoey didn't look much more like she belonged: petite with a nose ring, floral dress, and combat boots. MJ knew Zoey's attire had always brought contention to the workplace, but her architectural prowess could not be passed up. Much like athletes with drug habits and sexual assault charges, the firm had learned to look past the unsavory details in exchange for her above-average abilities. Of course, Zoey's frowned upon lifestyle choices were mostly just her desire to be true to herself and not give into the stifling business suit uniform.

“So how do you know Zoey?”

She turned to see a guy who was too short to be a male model, but attractive enough to land the lead role in a Lifetime movie without having to utter a word. He seemed vaguely familiar, like she'd seen him in passing at a take-out Chinese place or caught a few seconds of a laundry detergent commercial he'd starred in. Maybe it was just how at ease he appeared. He wasn't wearing a suit jacket, and the sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled up to his elbows.

A waiter walked by with a tray of wine glasses. MJ grabbed one and took a large gulp before replying, "I'm her dog walker."

He shook his head, half-smiling. "That's Zoey for you. I don't doubt she'd also invite the guy who works at the taco truck or her dry cleaner."

"I wouldn't doubt it either." She started to think she would have been better off sending a generic greeting card and the cheapest option from Edible Arrangements, but stopped herself, mentally stuffing away the fear that being lumped with those people made her even less deserving to be part of this crowd. "So what great architectural accomplishments are under your name?"

"Do Lego towers count?"

"I don't think so?"

"Then none."

MJ smiled. "So I take it that you feel just as out of place as I do here."

He shrugged. "I'm not new to the press racket, but architecture is way beyond me. Fake it until you make it, right?" He laughed. "For tonight, we can pretend we belong..." His voice was warm and deep. Another glass of wine and she'd be ready to fall asleep in it.

"Easy for you to say."

"It's not so hard." He straightened up and cleared his throat before adopting a snobby tone. "I don't know about you, but the Smith-Reynolds Tower is absolutely tacky and completely detracts from the infrastructure."

There was no Smith-Reynolds Tower as far as MJ knew. She cracked a smile, but quickly put on a straight face before saying, "It can't be as hideous as the Wright-Jones Business Complex. I'd love to know what puzzle book they stole that maze of a blueprint from."

Absolutely vile.” She let out a cluck of disapproval, a noise she’d learned from her mother’s incessant use of it during her childhood. *Why won’t you wear tights to church? Cluck. Those skinny jeans are a little inappropriate, don’t you think? Cluck. Why did your friend dye her hair black? She looks like a drug dealer. Cluck.*

He smiled at her, and picked up her hand, leading her across the room and over to the large window Zoey had been looking out earlier. Zoey was nowhere to be found, presumably lost in the crowd of big businessmen who’d funded the construction of the city and would be funding her amendment to it. They stood for a moment, his hand resting on her back, as they looked out at the lit-up skyline.

“This skyline will be even more impressive thanks to Zoey,” MJ said, unsure whether she was still pretending or speaking earnestly.

He had returned to his normal voice when he said, “I don’t know if anything could be as aesthetically impressive as her dog walker.”

MJ smiled, trying to hide her surprise. The last time she’d worn this dress was to a college friend's wedding. The dress had never seemed to fit her quite right and the friendship had waned with her friend’s onslaught of mommy-centric posts on Facebook. MJ was a big believer in second chances, so she’d donned the dress for tonight’s festivities and made a note to send her friend a message.

“I’m flattered,” she managed to reply after sifting through the queue of comebacks she’d learned from Netflix’s collection of indie rom-coms. Her mind drifted to how this moment should go, per movie rules.

He’d pull her close. She’d close her eyes just as his lips pressed against her. She’d run a hand over his hair, which was buzzed short on the sides and left a little longer on top. Her

fingertips would nestle in the longer bits. He would kiss her slower. It would feel like they were having a breath-holding contest. She'd rest her other hand on his arm, feeling the muscles move beneath his shirtsleeve. He'd continue to devour her body with his hands before they escaped off to a desolate coat closet or janitorial storage room where they'd have the best sex of either of their lives.

MJ wished it would happen; it had been a while since she had gotten any action. A few months ago, she'd found herself making out with the landscaper for one of her clients in the client's guesthouse. Despite the crowbar-like boner the handsy landscaper was sporting through his dusty jeans, MJ hadn't been able to keep her mind off the howls coming from the door. Rufus the Doberman's separation anxiety was nothing new to her, but the fact that his owner, Josie, was out of the house was. The howling had turned to whimpers from outside, and MJ pushed the landscaper away, apologizing for not being able to get into it.

He let out his own noise of displeasure, but quickly collected himself, saying, "Yeah, it's hard to get in the mood with that beast crying. Josie usually has you take him for a walk while we bone."

Giving him a disgusted look, MJ hurried out of guesthouse. She retrieved a milkbone from her pocket and tossed it to Rufus before she went through the gate by the side of the garage. Josie was just pulling up in the driveway and rolled her window down, "Sorry I'm so late! There was a horrible accident on the freeway. I hope he was well behaved. He gets a bit beside himself when he's alone for too long."

MJ gave her a slight smile, and shrugged. "Well, dogs will be dogs." Silently she swore never again to get handsy with anyone even slightly associated with one of her clients.

“Jacob! There you are!” Zoey was headed toward them. Jacob turned toward her.

MJ leaned against the wall, unsure of her place in the conversation. She began to slink away, realizing that she could fake belonging only for so long.

“MJ, have you met Jacob? He’s my brother. He plays for the Brigade.”

MJ was pretty sure that was a soccer team. She turned to Jacob. “Nice to meet you, Jacob,” she said, extending her hand. Maybe faking it wasn’t so hard.

“It’s a pleasure,” he replied. His smile seemed genuine, almost bursting as if he was going to laugh at the fact that Zoey hadn’t noticed they’d been talking for who knew how long.

“Anyways,” Zoey said, “the speeches and stuff are about to start. The press requested you be there too.” She let out an exasperated sigh, before grabbing Jacob’s arm and leading him away.

MJ watched them walk over to where the press had gathered in a corner of the room, a small cluster of people in formal wear wielding cameras and tape recorders. Jacob stood smiling beside Zoey, playing a First Lady like role. It was strange to see the two fabled West twins together. They’d gone to the public high school, so MJ had never had anything to do with them, but she could remember their parents had made appearances in the news every so often for their own athletic accomplishments. Their fame had died out in recent years and it had taken a while for MJ to realize who Zoey was when she’d first started walking her dogs.

Suddenly aware of how she was just a dog walker, MJ headed for the opposite end of the room where the bar was. Alcohol was a great equalizer. Unfortunately, she realized, she would have to forgo another glass of wine as she remembered she’d driven here, a precaution against the muggers who’d started to plague the city. She didn’t know the exact details. The news had only been relayed to her by the wife of the police chief when she’d come to walk their two

pomeranians. The case was in its infancy; the details were hush-hush; and the most the police chief's wife could do for her was to give her a pink can of pepper spray--"For Breast Cancer awareness," she'd said in explanation of the color, adjusting the scarf covering her bald head.

MJ looked up to see Jacob place a hand on Zoey's shoulder, say something, and then leave the halo of lights, heading in the direction of the bar.

"Sorry about that," Jacob's voice greeted her.

"No worries. I take it your presence is no longer needed?"

He shrugged. "I figured it was best if I gave Zoey the limelight she deserves. I never intended to steal it from her."

"Soccer, right?"

"Yeah, but my talents are often unnecessarily lauded." He shrugged. "Can I get you a drink?"

MJ looked at her watch. "I should probably head home. I need to walk my dogs."

"Are you just making an excuse to get away from me?"

"No," she said defensively. "I have my own dogs who need one last walk before bedtime. But it does make for a great excuse."

"Well, excuse or not," he said before deepening his voice into the jokingly snobby tone he'd used earlier to say, "do let me walk you to your car."

MJ played along. "That would be very nice of you, good sir. Thank you."

He offered her his arm and she looped hers through it. When they passed Zoey, she looked at them, their passing distracting her mid-sentence. MJ was unable to tell if it was a positive or negative reaction.

When they were outside on the street standing by MJ's car, a few blocks from the venue, Jacob asked for her number. "You know, in case I need a dog walker."

MJ began to search for a spare business card in her clutch.

He smiled. "I'm kidding. I'd like to see you again, when you don't have any dogs to walk."

She closed her clutch and leaned against her car. "I'd like that."

He handed her his phone and she added her number. He returned the phone to his pants pocket before saying, "Good night."

"Enjoy the rest of the party!" She got into her car and started it, the headlights illuminating Jacob.

"I'm not sure I'm going to go back to the party. I might just walk home."

She rolled down her window. "What about the muggers?"

He shrugged. "Do you really think that's something I need to worry about?"

"Oh, right, I forgot. Male privilege. Enjoy your freedom."

He walked back over to her car and leaned on the window. "I will." He gave her a warm smile. "But it has its limits, you know. My hands are tied if anyone says I've fathered a baby."

"Well, you don't have to worry about me filing for paternity. We haven't even kissed." She looked him in the eyes. Before she could think of how it would play out in a movie, he leaned through the car window and kissed her.

## TWO

The leaves had started to change. The evenings were cooler. The remains of back-to-school supplies had been replaced with all things Halloween. Zoey had left a voicemail for MJ the day after the party to say there was a family emergency and she'd be boarding her dogs and

thus would not need her services for a while. Jacob hadn't called either. Maybe he'd had second thoughts. It had been over two weeks since then.

In the meantime, MJ had taken to spending these now free nights to wander around downtown. The historical downtown separated the neighborhood she lived in and where Zoey lived. There were a lot of bars and a few music venues, but she never went in them. She just walked the streets, looking at the neon lights and revelry, her cheeks flushed from the cold air. She would have taken Oreo and Willie, but they were socially anxious. The alone time was nice, even if it was a bit risky on her part. She'd finally caught the news clip about the muggers. The police had acquired enough evidence to determine they were a duo of postmenopausal women, which the media had quickly dubbed "The Hot Flash Muggers." It seemed like it was mostly a political thing about healthcare and prices of medication. MJ couldn't help them with that. Besides, the attacks had all occurred in the city, not here in the suburbs.

It was a Friday night, and she was walking her usual route while waiting to meet up with her half-brother, Thom. She was about to pass the convenience store, and up ahead the music venue called Tunes. It was an innocent stretch of street with a fro-yo place, pizza parlor, and several boutiques; all were aimed to lure in the teenagers before they went to see a concert. She remembered when she frequented this area, a twenty folded in her pocket that felt like it held all the possibility of a golden ticket. Life had seemed bearable in those moments, free of judgement beyond pizza topping choices or which musicians you thought were hot.

This morning she'd taken a pregnancy test in the bathroom of her favorite local coffee shop. It wasn't how she'd wanted to start her morning. The test had shown a plus sign, but that didn't add up. She'd discussed the results by a dumpster out back with her friend and favorite barista, Eric, during his break.

“Why’d you take the test anyways?” He’d asked.

“My period’s late.”

“But you haven’t slept with anyone in months, right?”

“Yeah. But what about the Virgin Mary?”

“Like you still believe that bullshit.”

It was true. In college, MJ had grown skeptical of the beliefs she’d been baptized in from a young age. Still, it was hard to shake the emphasis her mother had put on the Virgin Mary’s birth story, as if it were the best text to draw upon for sex education purposes. The Christian school she’d attended hadn’t been much better, pushing for abstinence and prayer to resist the urges of the flesh. Still, she figured that if Jesus was supposed to come again, then certainly a virgin could get pregnant again. But she wasn’t a virgin.

“You’re right,” she said to Eric. “My body’s just being its usual weird. The test is faulty, definitely.”

Still, she couldn’t shake the thought. The world was a strange place. Bodies had a way of forsaking you, rewriting the rules you must live by.

“MJ!” Thom called out to greet her.

She turned to face him. “Hey! How are you?”

“Oh, you know, same old, same old.” He shrugged. She didn’t believe him. In the past year she’d watched his appearance grow progressively scragglier, his hair curling over his ears, his face rarely clean shaven. She couldn’t remember a Friday night he hadn’t smelled of alcohol.

The sixteen-year age gap between her brother and her made it difficult for MJ to say anything. He’d been absent for the majority of the first twenty-two years of her life, too busy with high school, college, medical school, marriage, kids, and the nine-to-five grind. He’d

always seemed exponentially wiser in MJ's young eyes. He was consumed in fatherhood by the time she'd reached her confusing teenage years; their preoccupations becoming increasingly different, so that it only seemed right to call upon him as a last resort. They'd only reconnected when his wife Jamie had called MJ to care for their Labradoodle named Louie while the family vacationed at Disney World. Jamie hadn't even realized she was employing Thom's half-sister until Thom answered the door and let out a sound of surprise. Upon returning from vacation, he'd proposed they see more of each other. She agreed, and they saw each other monthly at first, each's busy schedules getting in the way. Now that Zoey had boarded her dogs and Thom had gotten an administrative job, they had taken to spending their Friday nights together.

"Shall we get a drink?" He asked, motioning to the sign for Tunes.

"It looks like you've gotten a head start," she half-teased.

"TGIF!"

MJ rolled her eyes. "Skipping out on another high school football game?"

"They're not expecting me."

"Just because they're not expecting you doesn't mean they don't still hope you'll show."

She gave him a knowing look, remembering how every birthday she'd blown out the candles wishing her father would show up. Each year, the wish diminished, finding herself content with the idea of receiving a letter, a picture, a name. By college, she'd given up, deciding he was just some childish fairy tale her mother had cooked up when she'd become jealous of Thom and John's father.

"I have three more years to watch Trevor play varsity football. I just want some Friday nights to myself. Is that so bad?"

"Yes, because I don't want to wait until the Christmas poem to get the details."

The annual Christmas Greetings poem with the tired ABAB rhyme scheme that Thom's wife wrote and mailed out along with a picture of the family in matching clothes taken on their annual Nags Head beach trip was the one of the few links MJ had to his family. Jamie had never warmed up to MJ, whether because of the age difference or that she'd wasn't Thom's full blood relation she wasn't sure. Jamie was known for getting wrapped up in the minutiae of life, whether a flower arrangement, placement of a picture, or blood relations.

Thom held open the door to the venue for her. Inside, it was dimly lit. The bar was empty. The bartender greeted Thom by name and nodded at MJ. All the attendees were gathered by the small stage at the back of the room where some screechy local band that didn't look old enough to drink was performing.

Thom ordered a drink and then MJ asked, "So how are the other two kids?"

"Liam is still into reptiles. Aubrey's going to see Taylor Swift for a friend's birthday party tomorrow night."

"Seven-year-olds sure know how to party."

"The life-size cutout of Taylor was enough for me. I can't imagine forking out that kind of money to take a daughter and three of her friends to a concert."

"You could bring your kids here."

"Oh man, that'd be great. Show them some real music."

"I bet you'd be one of those concert dads who gets totally hammered."

"And that's exactly why Jamie would never let me take them to a concert."

"How are things with Jamie?"

He made a noise like a tire squealing. "I've been staying at Nana's."

MJ winced. "You haven't told Mom, have you?"

“Why would I do that? She’s trying to keep up her 1950s fantasy even though it died when she up and had you at the ripe age of forty. I’m the good kid.”

“By default. Her other son’s autistic and I’m the one that fucked up her marriage.”

“So if I get divorced and you never get married or have kids, John will be the best by default.”

“I mean, he lives with her, which is closer than either of us do.”

“He’s also way more religious than either of us.”

“But that’s kind of his thing.” MJ shrugged. She could only frown upon John’s interests so much; some autistics fixated on trains or Jeopardy, John fixated on God. “Let’s save the family drama for Thanksgiving.”

“When have we ever had a Thanksgiving together?”

“Exactly.”

Thom motioned for another beer. “You drinkin’, sis? I’m buying.”

“I’m not sure if I should...”

“You don’t have to babysit my ass, you know.”

“No, it’s not that.” She took a deep breath. “I took a pregnancy test and it was positive. But it was totally a fluke, right?”

“Yeah, that can happen...”

“Thom, I haven’t slept with anyone in months!”

“I wasn’t asking.”

“But you know me, I’m not looking to have kids. Not yet, at least.”

“Then why are you freaking out about it? Why’d you even take a pregnancy test?”

“Mom’s sex talk was always weirdly Virgin Mary centric. More of that ‘it’s all in God’s hands’ bullshit. Call it PTSD. Didn’t she ever give you that talk?”

“Yeah, sure, but it’s not like Joseph’s dick was ever put into question.”

“How is it possible to become a worse parent the more kids you have?”

Thom shrugged. “Call it a midlife crisis.”

Thom looked at the guy performing now. He looked almost as old as MJ. The teen girls were screaming the words to every lyric he crooned. Thom remembered when he’d entertained that dream as a freshman in college. He’d grown out his hair, taken a poetry class, and declared himself a music major. In the poetry class, he’d been enraptured by Jamie and the next semester found himself enraptured once more, but this time by the tiny living things he’d glimpsed at beneath the microscope during a biology lab. His future had come into focus then. He knew what to do: marry Jamie; become a doctor; give her the family she always wanted. It seemed so easy and enticing then, fully believing that a little hard work could get him there. But like so many things, it was hard to stay there.

“You should take another pregnancy test,” he advised MJ.

“You think so?”

“Yeah, we can get it from the convenience store down the street.” He paid his tab and they headed out of the venue and down the street. Stopping her outside, he asked, “Get me a forty will you?”

“You gonna pay me back?”

“You owe me.” He gave her a look, reminding her of the one time he bought her alcohol for her and her college friends because no one else had a cool thirty-four-year-old brother. She

wished she could show those girls what a sad forty-two-year-old he had become in the years in-between.

“Fine,” she said. “Wait here.” He settled onto the curb below the convenience store window.

When she placed the forty and the pregnancy test on the counter, the clerk said, “You know those two don’t mix well, sweetheart.” He let out a wheezy laugh, revealing his yellow, crooked teeth.

“They’re not mine,” she mumbled, handing over the cash. It was the same excuse she gave to anyone who complained about the behavior of one of the dogs she walked.

When she emerged from the store, she handed the forty to Thom. “I should take you home so I can get home and walk my dogs.”

“Not home, to Nana’s. You can take your pregnancy test while you’re there,” he corrected.

“Is she even going to let me in the door?”

“You got some beef with her that I don’t know about?”

“Nah, but Mom banned her from seeing me after the argument they had at my fourteenth birthday party.”

“And you’ve never tried to contact her since then?”

MJ shrugged. “I guess I never learned how to rebel against Mom and by the time I’d gained my independence, reconnecting with Nana wasn’t on the list. It’s not like she fought to see me either.”

“Fair enough. But don’t worry about it.” He waved it off. “She’ll be cool with it.”

“If you say so... My car’s just down the road.”

Thom tottered beside her as they headed down the street to where her car was parked. When they were in the car, she asked, “What’s Nana’s address?”

### THREE

The headlights glided over a gravel driveway emerging from between two overgrown hedges. MJ turned onto the driveway, her car bouncing with the ruts rainwater had run through the road. The night was quiet on the outskirts of Salem; the sound of the tires crunching over gravel and the tossed up pebbles bouncing off the underside of the car felt deafening. At the end of the driveway was a modest log cabin. MJ parked beside the red pickup truck. It seemed like everyone who lived out in the country drove a red pickup truck.

Already this was much different than her memories of visiting Nana as a child. Back then, Nana had lived in an apartment downtown over a bar. She’d always been an energetic woman who never seemed to sit still. It was hard to believe that a one-bedroom apartment could contain her as she tidied up the small messes people made as a sign of their existence, a symbol of their contentedness with the living space.

MJ could hear dogs barking from inside the house. A light was turned on in the front room, glowing through the blinds. As they walked up to the front door, it opened. “Thom, do you need money for the cab?” Her petite, hunched frame filled the doorway. A dog sat on either side of her.

“I didn’t take a cab,” Thom said. “MJ drove me.” They looked up at her from the bottom of the steps.

“MJ?”

“Mary Jane? Your granddaughter?”

“Hi, Nana,” MJ said, offering a slight wave. Her other hand held the plastic bag with the pregnancy test.

“How’d you manage that?” Nana asked Thom.

“We met up in town, like we do every Friday. She was kind enough to be my designated driver this evening.”

“Are you just dropping him off?” Nana asked.

MJ just stared at her.

“MJ needs to take a pregnancy test, Nana. Hopefully you’ll let her use the bathroom?” He clasped MJ’s shoulder, staring straight ahead at Nana.

MJ sighed. It felt like a stand-off. She wished the alcohol hadn’t made Thom so loose-lipped. She could have just excused herself to the bathroom, claiming she’d eaten something that hadn’t agreed with her. Her first interaction with her grandmother following the twelve-year break didn’t need to make it seem like she’d become promiscuous and reckless in the intermission.

Nana moved out of the doorway.

“Thanks,” MJ said in an almost whisper, stepping inside past Nana.

Nana nodded. “The bathroom is through the living room and to the left.” She disappeared into the kitchen, Thom following her.

MJ nodded and paused to bend down and pet the two dogs who now greeted her, their tails wagging. “Oh, hello, hello,” she said to them in the higher pitch she reserved for dogs. As she scratched their chests, she found their tags and read the information on them. The border collie was named Josh and the chocolate lab was named Esther. After giving each of them a pat on the head, MJ stood back up and headed for the bathroom.

The light flickered on, illuminating the rose-colored walls. The white porcelain sink was cracked and there was a ring of rust around the drain. The shower curtain and toilet lid cover were pink and frilly, some doily hybrid that seemed to appear in every grandmother's house.

MJ dumped the pregnancy test kit onto the counter. She picked it up, and ripped open the cardboard flaps. The test and instructions clattered onto the counter. She picked up the instructions, unfolded it, and read them over. The process was still fresh in her mind from this morning. As she squatted over the toilet, holding the pregnancy test under her, she felt slutty, dirty. If this one showed a plus sign, she might as well appliqu e it on to all her clothes, her own scarlet letter. This morning in the coffee shop she hadn't felt like this. Coffee shops were places of relative anonymity; she felt like she could be anyone in its mocha-colored bathroom. The pregnancy test couldn't stigmatize her.

She set the test on the counter and then set the timer on her phone. She flushed the toilet and washed her hands. She held her gaze on the test, waiting for the minutes to pass. It was starting to feel like forever. The bathroom felt small and stuffy. She opened the door to let some air in. Josh and Esther jumped to their feet; they'd been camped out in the hallway. She sat down on the linoleum bathroom floor, leaning against the cabinets. The dogs crowded around her, their tails knocking at the towels on the rack. MJ rubbed them behind their ears, talking to them in an almost whisper. Esther licked her face.

It was like she was a kid again. This had always been her move at whatever strange social situation she'd found herself in: a work party for her mother; a birthday party for a classmate; a visit to a distant relative's house. She'd always wandered off to some corner of a vacant room, hunkering down near a dust-covered piano (growing up, everyone seemed to have one), and petting the dogs. When she was younger, it felt like she was part of some secret club made up of

all the dogs in the world and her. She was part of their pack--born a human by mistake--and she knew they would always welcome her with wagging tails.

Her phone's alarm went off and she pulled herself up. Taking a deep breath, she looked at the pregnancy test. It was one of the nice ones that was blunt about it; no more of those lines or plus signs. MJ needed to see the words. All that she saw was the word: Pregnant.

"Got a verdict yet?" Thom appeared in the doorway.

"Yeah," MJ said, her voice wobbling.

"Still says you're pregnant, huh?"

MJ hung her head in defeat before scooping the test, its box, and the directions back into the blue plastic bag. "I should probably get going."

"Maybe you should talk to Nana first." His frame filled the doorway.

"Why would I do that?"

Thom shrugged, but she could tell he knew something she didn't. "She might be able to help. With age comes wisdom."

MJ gave him a skeptical look.

"I might be the outlier for that statement."

MJ sighed and followed him out into the living room. The room had acquired a pungent smell, like an animal had died in her absence. To her right was a floral-print loveseat with an afghan over the back tucked catty-corner between the archway to the hall and the fireplace on the adjacent wall. The fireplace was covered in red brick with a slate hearth and curved, wooden mantel lined with picture frames. Two large, plaid dog beds were parked on either side of the fireplace, a wicker toy basket tucked in the corner. There was an armchair by the door. On the

wall opposite the fireplace, Thom had sat down on the aboriginal-print couch beside Nana who was smoking a blunt.

MJ gave her a concerned look. “Is it okay for your health?”

“I’m eighty. I can damn well do what I please. And you’re welcome to a brownie, if you’d like.” She motioned to a plate on the table.

Thom stopped her. “You probably shouldn’t. You’re pregnant after all.” He took one for himself.

“Bullshit. Your mom turned out... well, me being fourteen and having a toke now and again isn’t what’s to blame.”

MJ exhaled sharply. “Whatever. You guys can do whatever. I don’t care. Thank you for letting me use your bathroom. I’m gonna go now.” MJ headed for the door.

“Hold it, missy,” Nana’s voice called out. “We need to talk first. Have a seat.”

MJ sat in the armchair by the door. It was covered in blue corduroy and accented with a pillow that in faded cross-stitch read *Grandmas give the best advice*. She felt like she was being scolded, living out the rebellious teen years her God-fearing mother had scared out of her.

Nana took another hit before continuing. “I understand you’re with child.”

“Yes...”

“And you haven’t slept with anyone lately, yes?”

“Yeah...” MJ wasn’t sure why she was bothering to answer or why Nana was even asking, as Thom had most likely filled her in already.

“You remember when your mom and I had that fight on your fourteenth birthday?”

“Of course.”

“It was about this happening.” She paused for a moment. “It’s a genetic thing. We had a doctor confirm it when you were just a tyke. But the family history is a bit murky.” She looked at Thom who had sunk into the couch cushions, his eyes closed, somehow peaceful amidst their family’s turbulence.

“Getting pregnant? A genetic thing? Isn’t that a living creature thing?” MJ didn’t want to believe this WebMD-like response had any grounds in reality. Besides, she didn’t remember seeing any doctor other than her pediatrician.

“No. The Virgin Mary Syndrome.”

“*The Virgin Mary Syndrome?*” MJ thought it sounded like the title of a religious film made in response to one of those horror movies about giving birth to the devil.

“It was easier before my time. Most women got married and had kids starting in their teens. The Second World War disrupted that. I wanted to be a working girl, like Rosie the Riveter. I didn’t want to get married just yet. I still liked to have a good time, I just wasn’t going steady with anyone. But I became pregnant anyways. As you know, I was fourteen.” Nana stared off across the room.

Nana thought of her teenage self looking at her reflection in the mirror over the dresser. She’d aged exponentially in those months, acquiring the curves and glow of a woman. The dresser was tall enough that it blocked her from below the chest. She wished everyone else could only see this much of her. But they could see it all. They could even see her feet, which she was losing sight of more and more each day. She wished she could say that the baby had a father, that the war was what left her to raise this child alone. She’d even dreamed up the story: a handsome soldier and his plane shot down over Europe. That fantasy of her girlhood seemed impossible, foolish though. Growing up didn’t work that way; there was nothing fair about it. She’d only

ever been kissed once and it was lackluster, neither of them had known exactly what to do nor were they confident enough in their abilities to keep trying until it felt right. She'd never felt a man run his hand along the inside of her thigh, tug at her panties, fill her with his fingers nestled in the wet and warmth and musk. She wanted a man to fuck her. Even if it was the worst thing she'd felt, she wanted to feel it just so the baby had been earned. She stared back at her reflection in the mirror, tucking a strand of hair behind one ear before adjusting her posture. She hoped she wouldn't lose her breasts with the baby. But no matter what, once the baby was born, she would go about earning it.

“So you're saying Mom having me at forty was the same thing? It just happened?” MJ prodded her.

Nana nodded slowly. “Yes, ma'am.”

MJ laughed loudly, breaking the lull that had fallen over the room. “Right.”

“It's true. I knew it would happen to you too. Fourteen. Forty. Somewhere in-between.”

MJ didn't want to believe it. Nana would have sought her out before this, regardless of her mother's wishes. Her body would have given her more signs, made her hallucinate an angel delivering the diagnosis, not let her pothead estranged grandmother share the news. “Nana, this is absolute horseshit. You are fucking stoned. And it sounds like you've smoked enough that your memory must have plenty of potholes.” MJ stood up and headed for the door.

“Maybe I am some senile druggie grandma who's got one foot in the grave, but I know what I know to be true.” Her voice came out raspy, her tone dulled.

MJ let out an exasperated sigh. “Whatever, Nana. Maybe Mom had a point keeping you from me.” She let the door slam behind her as she walked briskly to her car.

A mile down the road, MJ pulled over. She slammed her fist into the steering wheel, her jaw clenched. Her mother, and now her grandmother, seemed to keep truth at arm's length. The only explanation they seemed to think was worth giving was one wrapped in religion. MJ began to scream. She wanted the noise to fill her, fill the car, fill the road around her. She could hear her mother's mantra: *God won't give you more than you can handle. This is all part of God's plan.* She let the screams rip through her, wanting them to illuminate what was ahead of her, strike what was behind her. She wanted the sound to blanket her, wrap her, hold her, cradle her. She wanted to purge herself of those words, every last one of them.

She stopped to catch her breath. Feeling dizzy and overheated, she got out of the car. She retched into the grass. Leaning against the car, she began to take slow, deep breaths. The cool air stung her cheeks, but each breath felt richer than the last. Another of her mother's mantras floated into her head: *God willed it, so be it. This is your cross, so carry it.* MJ stood up slowly and got back in her car.

#### FOUR

The autumnal early morning sun shined through the cracks between the curtains. MJ shifted in the nest of blankets and sheets. Willie and Oreo were sprawled on either side of her, just as reluctant about getting up and starting the day. She sat up slowly, pushing back the blankets. It was Sunday. She had no obligations or tasks to check off her list. The owners were home to care for their own pets; no one needed her while they were on vacation. She relished these days, rare and perfect.

Still, there were rituals to be kept. Feed the dogs. Breakfast. Shower. Dress. Put on the dogs' collars (purple for Oreo and orange for Willie). Walk around the block with the dogs. Drive downtown with the dogs. Walk them around the streets. Do it leisurely. Let them sniff

anything and everything. Console them when a baby's cry caused them to cower. Help them learn that people are nice. Stop at the coffee shop. Get a latte from Eric, favorite barista, cherished friend. Walk around the back of the building where the parking lot was. Meet Eric by the dumpster.

Eric lit a cigarette. "What's up?" He was leaning against the dumpster, his long legs stretched toward her. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up sloppily, one slightly longer than the other. A chunk of his brushed-back black bangs had fallen forward over his slender face.

"I'm still pregnant or so sayeth the tests." MJ was sitting cross-legged, staring at the cracked pavement. Oreo and Willie were curled up on either side of her, enjoying basking in the warm sunlight.

"I wish it were like the SATs and I could tell you that it didn't really matter," Eric said.

She shrugged. "Neither gave me the results I wanted."

He knew that already. They'd known each other since freshman year of high school when Eric moved to Salem with his mother after she got a new job. His dad had been a deadbeat who worked the docks in Baltimore Harbor; he'd gone to jail for dealing drugs on the side when Eric was six. Ever since then it had just been him and his mom, so he'd relished the friendship he'd found in MJ.

"How many times you'd take it?" He held his gaze on her so she knew he wasn't asking about the SAT.

"Twice last Friday. Four times yesterday. Six times total. Positive. Every. Damn. Time."

"Good to know you're capable of out-peeing a territorial male dog." He smirked.

MJ cracked a smile. "I'm not sure that's the correct approach."

"Did you talk to Thom about it?"

“About the peeing?”

“No. About the pregnancy. He’s a doctor. They’re supposed to be able to help with that.”

“*Right.* No, he just told me I needed to take another test and we somehow ended up at Nana’s and then it was just a shitshow.”

Eric rubbed his hands together excitedly. “Oh, don’t hold out on that family drama. I’ve been jonesing for the good stuff.”

“Have you run out of your own supply?”

“Rhonda the day nurse and Wendy the night nurse sleeping with the same guy could only last for so long.” He let out a sad sigh.

“Bummer. Well, my reunion with Nana left little to be desired.”

“Shame.”

“Apparently she’d a major stoner. She was smoking a blunt and Thom was eating some pot brownies that she made.”

“She sounds like an incredible woman.”

“She makes for a good story.”

“So did you just shoot the shit all night or what?”

MJ recounted the events of Friday night, excluding the part where she screamed in her car as neither of them liked to dwell on their weaker moments.

When she’d finished, he asked, “But it’s the only possibility, right? You never hooked up with Jacob.”

“Yeah. Still haven’t heard from him either.”

“Well fuck that guy.”

“I wish.” She let out a groan.

A gaggle of baristas emerged from the back door lugging coolers and a folding chair, which they set down on the opposite end of the parking lot. They waved to Eric. He nodded back.

“What’s that about?” MJ asked as the noise had caused Oreo and Willie to stir. She slowly stroked their backs, hoping to calm them.

Eric shrugged it off. “So you’re pregnant with like a clone baby or something.”

“Who said it was a clone?”

“Well there’s only one set of DNA involved...”

“Nana and my mom and I look nothing alike.”

“Medical advancements... hair dye... popular clothing styles... weight gain...” He ticked off the reasons on his fingers.

“No one has ever compared me to my mother.”

“Just because no one’s done that doesn’t mean you’re free of her genes.”

MJ sighed. “Ugh. You. Why are you so smart for a barista?” She flashed him a smile to show she was only joking. “I’m pregnant. So what am I going to do about this?”

Eric gave her a serious look. “Get out while you can.”

“You think so?” MJ had never thought about what she’d do with an unwanted pregnancy. She’d never let it be a possibility before, making sure the necessary precautions were in place.

“MJ, don’t take your exits for granted. You know I’d do the same if I could.” He stubbed the butt of his cigarette into the pavement.

She looked away from him, suddenly ashamed of how lucky she was. But was it luck or just opportunity? “Could I really though? Mom didn’t. Nana didn’t.”

“Cause that wasn’t a thing you did. And look how fucked things became for them. Don’t do that to yourself. Don’t carry it if it’s just going to screw you over in the long-run.”

“Are we actually discussing abortions by a dumpster behind a coffee shop?” She let out an exasperated sigh and put her head in her hands.

“I’m not handing you a coat hanger and telling you to do it yourself. I’m telling you to hold onto what agency you have over your life.” He held his gaze on her.

“I know, I--” MJ’s phone rang from inside her purse. “Hello?” she answered.

“Mary Jane, I need you to drive me to church.” John’s voice stated loudly over the line.

“Why can’t Mom take you?”

“She’s vomiting and has diarrhea.”

“Oh.”

“I can’t miss it, I can’t.” He sounded anxious. “That’s a sin.” He let out a low humming noise, some hybrid of a running dishwasher and radio static.

“Why don’t you call a cab?” She knew it was a stupid question, but she didn’t want to miss an opportunity to remind John that there were other ways of getting places.

“I can’t, Mary Jane, I can’t.” He sounded flustered. The humming noise returned, this time louder.

“Fine. I’ll drive you.” She let out an exasperated sigh and hung up.

Eric looked at her, waiting for an explanation.

“John needs me to drive him to church. You know how family is.”

Eric nodded. “Don’t keep him waiting.”

“We’ll continue to talk about this later?”

“You know where to find me.”

MJ roused Oreo and Willie to their feet. They stood hunched, their tails tucked between their legs, aware of her malcontent. She bent down, placing a hand on each of their chests and stroking them slowly. “You’re okay. Everything’s going to be just fine, boys.” She looked up at Eric one last time before leading them away.

Eric turned to head back inside, but paused to watch his co-workers. They had changed into shorts and t-shirts. The brunette stood on a folding chair holding a bucket of ice, ready to tip it over on the head of the blonde who was talking to the iPhone pointed at her by the black haired girl standing a few feet away from them. He watched as the ice and water were dumped on the girl and she shrieked, jumping then dancing around. Soon she was handed a towel and began to dry herself off. Eric pulled out another cigarette from the pack in his pocket and lit it. He hated how the Ice Bucket Challenge had gone viral, clogging up his Facebook newsfeed with these slacktivist publicity stunts that barely grasped at what the cause was. He hated how they thought ice water could get the point across. Nothing could, nothing would except watching your fate play out in your grandmother, your mother, and then hearing the same fate delivered to you by a doctor, the message bound in terminology he’d learned the definitions of at a young age. It didn’t even feel like the disease was his, even if it would eventually own his body; it was Lou Gehrig’s after all. Why hadn’t he been bestowed a tragedy fit for his sins; why not lung cancer for the smoking or HIV for being gay? He’d rather the church smite him. He knew the verse, how his body was a temple, not a prison. But it would be. Slowly, until nurses were hired to fold his body into clothes, chairs, hospital beds like he was origami, something ornate and delicately crafted, not faultily designed. Two to six years of that and then they’d tuck him into his coffin. He lifted his cigarette halfway to his mouth and paused to look at his hand, already beginning to atrophy.

He had been born this way, the invisible disease resting inside him, and he knew he could not lobby for an escape.

MJ sat in her car for a moment after turning it on. On either side of her, Oreo and Willie hung their heads over her headrest. They panted loudly. The car was stuffy. She reached both of her arms behind her to pet them. It was hard to think that they were three years old already. She'd known them since birth.

It was during MJ's post-grad stint as an animal care technician at a SPCA, cleaning cages and herding the animals from one confined space to the next. A Lab mix with red fur had been dumped in one of the outside pens the previous night. Her belly was swollen and ready to give birth. They took her in, named her Raven, and gave her a cage in the room with all the pens of puppies shrieking, whining, and slamming into the aluminum covered cage walls. MJ had kept a careful watch over Raven, as she'd seen other unprepared mother dogs smother their babies shortly after giving birth.

When Raven had gone into labor, MJ spent the night with her. She had prepared herself for this moment, having previously read up on dog breeding and birthing. It was a bloody, messy affair. There had been no glamor in it as Raven panted, pushed, and shrieked. Nothing MJ had witnessed in the shelter prior to this could have prepared her. The tiny bodies of the puppies had spilled out into the world one by one, their bodies hitting the cold, newspaper-covered concrete. They were a motley crew of fur shades, indicative that there had been more than one father in the mix. She birthed seven puppies total: a male and female with red fur; three brindle females; and two black males with white on their paws, chests, and bellies.

MJ watched them grow. Ruby and Ronan, the spunky redheads, were the first to be adopted by a family with a rowdy bunch of kids. Rosie and Roxie, two of the brindles found

homes several months later. A nice elderly woman took in Raven. River, the last of the brindles grew shy like her two black brothers, Roscoe and Romeo. A man had seen River's story on PetFinder and fallen for her, eager to take on the work of making her less fearful of humans. Only Roscoe and Romeo remained, fearful of the caged world they'd been born into. MJ grew fond of them, watching them grow and grow. When she'd look out into the play yard and see them ignorant of humanity, their ears up and their heads held high, she saw what beautiful, muscular gentlemen they were growing into. When she left the shelter to start her dog walking business, her heart broke leaving them behind. She checked the SPCA's Facebook everyday to see if they'd been adopted. It was only a month later that she saw a picture of her smiling face with her two shy boys, which she promptly renamed Orville and Wilbur (Oreo and Willie for short), on the SPCA's page announcing that the last of Raven's litter had found their way home.

MJ returned her hands to the steering wheel and maneuvered the car out of the parking space and onto the street. It was time she found her way home.

## FIVE

MJ pulled up outside of the brick townhouse her mother and John lived in. It was located in a new development where shopping centers, townhouses, apartment complexes, and community parks intermingled. Zoey had expressed her derision of it multiple times. The narrow streets, professionally landscaped grounds, and uniform exteriors made it seem like some futuristic retirement community. Those were the exact reasons MJ's mother had found it so appealing. John liked order, patterns, and all things nonchaotic; this was his utopia. The only downside was that it was no longer in walking distance of the church they had grown up attending. This detail along with the mere idea of a change as big as this had sent John into a

downward spiral. All moves were difficult, but this one had added a new level to Dante's Inferno.

It had occurred a few months after MJ had settled into her townhouse and adopted Oreo and Willie. Much like being a new parent, the first few months with her new dogs had been full of sleep deprivation, poop in unexpected places, and questioning whether she was really cut out for this. One afternoon, her mother had called to ask for help with the move, MJ had accepted, despite her desire to spend the time and energy catching up on sleep. When she had arrived at her childhood home, it looked just as it had every other day of her life: the chipped black mailbox, the slightly overgrown lawn, the green mold stains on the gray siding, the faded maroon shutters, the decrepit wicker furniture on the front porch. The only difference was that there was a large orange moving van in the driveway.

She brushed past the maze of boxes and partially disassembled furniture. Her mother's voice called to her from the kitchen.

"What can I do?" MJ asked, expecting to be directed toward a stack of boxes or a linen closet that still needed to be packed.

Her mother frowned. "John is upset about the move. We have a situation." MJ waited for her to elaborate. "He's locked himself in his bedroom closet and is reciting Exodus."

"What chapter is he on?"

Her mother glared at her before saying, "I thought since you've always had a special touch with him..."

"I'm just patient and trying to see things from his perspective."

"Well you speak tongues or whatever to those pound dogs. Clearly God gave you some kind of special skill."

“John’s not a dog.”

“I wasn’t implying that,” her mother replied defensively.

MJ gave her a look, unwilling to entirely believe her.

“Just go and get him out, would you?”

MJ sighed. “Sure thing.” She turned on her heel and made her way to John’s basement bedroom. Along the stairwell were pictures of Thom and John at various ages; Thom with a goofy grin that slowly developed into an irresistible smolder while John always appeared straight-faced, never looking directly at the camera. At the bottom of the stairs, MJ’s growth was summarized in a framed collection of her school pictures from kindergarten to senior year.

John emerged from the front door wearing his usual suit. He strode stiffly to her car and yanked open the passenger door. “Good morning, saints. Good morning, sinners,” he greeted loudly, getting in. It was how the pastor had addressed the congregation at the beginning of every service. John had opted to use it as his only greeting.

“Good morning, John. Please speak quieter. Did you let Mom know that you were leaving?”

“She said not to bother her.”

“But the rule is that you let her know whenever you leave.”

“This was An Exception.”

MJ huffed. “I’ll text her and let her know.”

“Text her when we’re at church. We’re going to be late,” he whined, eyeing the clock on the car’s dashboard.

MJ put the car in drive and glanced at the back seat where Oreo and Willie were sprawled out, dozing. Despite John’s loudness, they’d grown accustomed to him, loving him for the times

in the nearby park when he'd sit on a bench, petting them and reading to them from The Bible or singing his favorite hymns.

As they made their way out of the development, MJ scoffed. Too many poorly designed intersections and roundabouts that only magnified the lack of driving etiquette people had.

"I'm going to miss the Call to Worship!" John said, pointing at the clock.

MJ nodded, and pressed her foot down on the accelerator. "I'm sure God will forgive you."

"What if I'm so late I miss the Prayer of Confession? I'll have to wait a whole week for his forgiveness!" He started to rock back and forth in his seat, humming. It was a mechanical hum, a song of refrigerators, lawn mowers, and dryers; a constant, calming purr with which he underscored the unavoidable crises.

"John, forgiveness isn't a once-a-week-kind of thing, right?" She was thankful that despite her lack of faith, she'd held onto a vague knowledge of Christianity, if only to reason with John.

"Yes." It came out strained.

"You can go to God anytime and receive his forgiveness, right?" MJ longed for logic to work for once, but it never did.

"Yes." He continued to rock. Intermittent with hums, he quoted, "'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.' First John chapter one, verse nine, New International Version."

"Yeah, exactly." MJ slowed down to turn into the neighborhood that served as a shortcut to the church. "We're almost there. Traffic wasn't bad at all."

"You took a shortcut!" John continued to rock.

“I thought you wanted to get to church on time!”

He hummed and rocked for a while as MJ continued to weave through the quaint residential streets, before finally asking, “Why do you hate God, Mary Jane?”

“I don’t hate him; I just don’t agree with him.”

“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.’ First John, chapter two, verse eighteen, New International Version.”

MJ let out an exasperated sigh. This discussion wasn’t uncommon between them, but today it left her feeling nauseous. She rolled down the window. “John, I’m not discussing this with you. It’s okay if we don’t believe the same things.”

“How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from God?’ John, chapter five, verse forty-four, New International Version.”

“I understand that Christianity provides you with certainty and structure and all the other things you like, and that’s fine. I am different than you.”

“Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue--”

“John.”

“--in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching--”

“John.”

“--has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching--”

“John.”

“--do not take them into your house or welcome them. Anyone who welcomes them shares their wicked work.”

“New Rule: When you are with me, we do not discuss religion.”

“Second John, chapter one, verses nine through eleven. New International Version.” His rocking subsided.

MJ pulled into the church parking lot, and found a space. “Okay, we’re here,” she said, putting the car in park. She looked at him to make sure he understood.

John got out of the car and slammed the door behind him.

“Hey!” MJ stepped out of the car. “Where’s my ‘thank you?’” She felt the sun beating down on her.

He paused on the sidewalk that led to the side entrance of the church. He didn’t turn to look at her. “It’s against the rules,” he mumbled.

“What rules? Mom and I never made a rule about that.” She was standing on the edge of the sidewalk now, a few feet behind him. Her car hummed behind her. She could hear the faint ding that sounded whenever she left her keys in the ignition.

“Not your rules. God’s rules.”

“God’s r--” MJ suddenly felt nauseous. She lunged from the sidewalk and vomited into the bushes.

“See! God is punishing you!”

MJ took a few deep breaths and ran her hand across her mouth. She couldn’t believe this was happening. Organ music sounded through the walls. At least the congregation probably couldn’t hear what was going on.

“No, it’s nothing.” She waved it off, standing slowly.

“Are you sick like Mom is?”

“No, I just threw up.”

“Are you hungover?”

“Nope.”

“Are you bulimic?”

“That’s not how bulimia works.”

“Are you pregnant?”

“No way.” MJ hoped with all her heart that for once John’s autism would do her the favor and not let him understand whatever ounce of dishonesty her body language was expressing.

“Mary Jane, you cannot tell lies in church.”

“We’re in the parking lot.”

“God is everywhere.”

“You’re breaking the rule!”

“There’s An Exception!”

“What?”

“Mom said that no matter what, if you ever mention being pregnant, I have to tell her.”

MJ put her head in her hands. “Oh my god, you’re in on this too?”

“Mary Jane, you cannot take the Lord’s name in vain!”

She held up her hands in defeat. “I can’t deal with this right now. Go to church, John. Goodbye.”

Before disappearing into the church, he yelled, “I’m telling Mom!”

John walked down the hallway to the narthex. “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” was being played on the organ. He sang along as he collected a bulletin from the table by the doors that led into the sanctuary. He entered through them and made his way to the second pew from the front on the left hand side. The congregation knew John always sat there, so they had left a space for

him. The organist liked to play the music loudly, hammering down on the keys. He did not like this normally, but this was in praise of God, so he allowed the music to throb through him as he sang along from memory, feeling yellow, like the sunlight coming in through the windows behind where the choir stood in the maroon and white robes. He looked up at the wooden cross that hung above the chancel table set for communion. He was a radiant yellow now or maybe a light green. He could not be both. He had to choose one. He was green, he finally decided when he sat down in the pew and the pastor began to read from the Old Testament. He listened to the scripture, reciting in a whisper the New International Version as the pastor read from the King James Version. Then the pastor led them in the Prayer of Confession, and John felt purple as he silently recounted his sins to God. He was sorry for being late and sorry for his sister's behavior; he wished he could confess her sins for her. When the pastor delivered the Words of Assurance afterward, he felt light green again. Light green was a good feeling. It meant God was in control of everything, and because God was in John, then John was in control of everything too. John was light green like the altar cloth and everything was okay.

When MJ returned to the car, Oreo and Willie stuck their heads around the headrest of her seat. She scratched their heads, her fingers feeling that their ears were pulled back in fear. Undoubtedly, the yelling match had upset them. "I am so sorry you had to witness that, boys. You do not deserve to have that happen to you." She gave each of them a one-armed hug.

Her ringtone began to play, causing them to jolt in her grasp. MJ let go of them and picked up her phone from the cup holder. The caller ID said *Zoey West*. "Hello?"

"Hi, MJ," Zoey greeted. "I am so sorry that I've been out of touch with you for so long. I must apologize for the way I left things."

"It's fine. Are *you* fine?"

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. There was just a bit of a family emergency. I didn’t want the press to get all over it, so I’ve been trying to lay low and take care of things.”

“I’m not looking for answers, Zoey. Don’t worry. You don’t need to explain it all if you don’t want to.”

She let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you, MJ. You’re so understanding. I feel like I’ve been recounting the same details over and over again.” She took a deep breath. “Anyways, my boys are back home with me, so I’d like you to resume walking them. I also have Jacob’s dogs at my place, so they’ll need walks as well. I’ll pay you extra, of course.”

“Can you tell me what breeds his dogs are?”

“Yeah, Lucy is--” Zoey paused. MJ could hear a faint voice in the background. “Oh god, sorry, I gotta go!” She hung up.

“Bye...” MJ said to the dial tone before setting her phone back in the cup holder and turned to look at Oreo and Willie. “That did not sound good.” She shrugged. “But there’s nothing we can do about it now, so how about we go to the dog park?” Oreo pressed his wet nose against hers as if to agree. Willie wagged his tail.

## SIX

The next afternoon, MJ arrived at Zoey’s house. Her Prius was absent from the driveway. She unlocked the front door and stepped inside, calling into the empty house. “I’m back, boys! How have you been?”

Instead of the usual skittering of nails on the hardwood floors from Duffy, Foster, and Webster collectively clambering to greet her, a large, black and white spotted Great Dane

appeared in the archway between the foyer and the kitchen. It let out a deep woof, but wagged its tail.

“Hello, there. You must be one of Jacob’s dogs. Do you want to go for a walk, too?”

The dog tilted its head as she spoke, but gave an excited jump at the sound of “walk.”

MJ smiled and offered out her hand for it to sniff. It bent its head down and investigated her hand, its large, wet snout pressing into her palm. “What’s your name?” she asked, reaching for the tags that jangled from its collar. “Nice to meet you, Sgt. Pepper.” She gave him a scratch on his chest and he leaned into her, enjoying it. She tried not to topple over from his weight. He wagged his tail when she stopped scratching. “How about we go see where everyone else is?”

She walked into the kitchen, Sgt. Pepper at her side. The kitchen was vacant as well as the dining and living room, which were visible from over the island. The silence of the house was rather startling as she was accustomed to three small dogs incessantly barking at her while she got them ready for their walk.

“Hello?” A voice called from another room. It couldn’t be Frederick. She’d never heard him talk.

She wandered around, discovering a door to the backyard and the laundry room. MJ had never been this far into Zoey’s house before; she’d never needed to. She heard scratching and yipping coming from behind another door, and opened it to find Duffy, Foster, and Webster in a bathroom. “Why are you in there?” she asked them. They scuttled out excitedly, running in all directions.

“Who’s there?” she heard faintly through the bathroom wall.

There was a second door in the bathroom. She opened it and found herself in a small hallway. There was an open door to her right.

“Hello?” She peeked into the room. Sgt. Pepper and the Yorkies were gathered by her.

The room was illuminated by a large TV screen. A soccer game was paused on the screen. Across the room from the screen was a hospital bed with someone lying under several blankets. She could just make out the shape of a dog lying on the floor by the bed.

“MJ?” The voice responded.

She found a lightswitch on the wall and turned on the overhead light. “Jacob?” she said with surprise. She could tell there was some bruising on his face. There was a brace on one wrist and his right leg appeared larger under the blankets, as if it was in a cast. Between the faded Nike *Just do it* shirt, bedhead, and unshaven face, he looked worlds different from when she’d seen him at Zoey’s reception almost a month ago.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he greeted.

“What happened to you?” She remained standing in the doorway, unsure how to proceed. Over the past few weeks, she’d been disappointed that he never called, her desire for him never fully waning since the kiss. She wanted him still, but the intermittent time had apparently rattled his life too, making her unsure if the promise in their first meeting was still possible.

The other dogs hurried into the room. Sgt. Pepper rested his head on the edge of the bed so Jacob could pet him. Duffy, Foster, and Wallace explored under the bed. The dog lying by the side of the bed had moved to its feet, and made its way over to her. It was a tan-colored greyhound. She read the tag on its collar, saying, “Hello, Lucy.” She gave her a gentle pat on the head.

“You should probably take a seat,” Jacob said. “Not the one by the wall. Frederick’s sitting there. We were just playing a game of FIFA.”

MJ gave him a quizzical look.

“I’m on a lot of painkillers. They’ve done wonders for our friendship.”

She saw that there was an Xbox controller resting on the armrest of the chair. She sat down on the chair in the corner next to the TV screen. The Yorkies ran toward her, the three of them managing to pile onto her lap. She pet them absentmindedly, waiting for Jacob to respond.

“The short of it was that I was mugged.”

“The Hot Flash Muggers?”

“The police aren’t sure, but it looks that way. The security camera footage from nearby stores didn’t really show much.”

“Is there any hope they’ll catch them?”

Jacob gave a slight shrug. “I’ve just gotten a lot of excuses about there not being enough evidence or that police work takes time.”

“That sucks. When did this happen?”

“Walking back from Zoey’s celebration.” He looked down. “Sorry for not calling. My phone was smashed.”

“Why not ask Zoey for my number?”

There was silence for a moment before he responded. “Equal parts afraid that I’d taken too long to call and that it would be douchey of me to ask my sister who’s taking care of me to set me up on a date.”

“She does seem to be taking very good care of you.”

“Almost too good. There’s a nurse that comes. She locks up Zoey’s dogs--she hates them.”

“Ugh. People.”

Jacob gave her a slight smile. “I keep telling Zoey that she’s overdone it, but she won’t chill out. It was hard enough to get her to go back to work.”

“I didn’t realize you two were so close.”

“We haven’t always been, even though we’re twins. Now that both of our parents passed away, she tends to have trouble not acting like she’s losing her other half whenever something happens to me.”

“I can imagine. I bet she hates every girl you’ve shown interest in, too.”

“Yeah... she’s been known to take a while to warm up to them. Then again, I haven’t always had the best taste. But you...” He stopped his sentence.

MJ could tell he was nervous to finish it. She wasn’t sure if she could handle however the sentence ended anyways. “I have some dogs to walk,” she said, standing up. “How are your dogs on the leash?”

“Sgt. Pepper’s an old man and Lucy’s retired, so they’re happy for a walk, but they won’t pull any moves.”

“Lucy’s retired?”

“From racing. I drove down to Florida a couple years ago to pick her up from one of the organizations that rescues retired racing greyhounds.”

“That’s really awesome. Anyways, I’ll be back in a bit.” She headed for the door, but paused. “You want me to get you anything?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

MJ nodded. “Let’s go for a walk,” she said, and all the dogs followed her. The Yorkies were distraught when she didn’t hook leashes on them. “I’ll be back for you, boys, don’t worry.”

Just as Jacob had said, Lucy and Sgt. Pepper were well behaved on the leash. They wandered the streets for a while before heading back. A wave of nausea hit MJ as she was unclipping their leashes. She bolted for the bathroom near Jacob's room and threw up the contents of her stomach.

"How've you been?" he asked when she finally appeared in his doorway. The Yorkies were curled up around him.

MJ wasn't sure how to respond. "It's been... crazy?" She leaned against the door frame.

"Are you okay? I did just hear you throw up, right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." She waved it off. "So how long until you're back on the field?"

His expression waned. "Maybe never."

"That bad, huh?" She felt bad for asking.

"Yeah. Doctors are amazing, but the body can only do so much."

"You'd be surprised." She looked around the room, trying to rest her gaze on anything that wasn't him. "I need to walk the rest of the gang."

"You're sure you're okay?" he asked as she collected the Yorkies from his bed.

After putting on their sweaters and hooking on their leashes, she led them out the door and around the streets. All the while, she wanted to believe this was just another afternoon. There was no Jacob in Zoey's house. There were no muggers. There was no friendship with Zoey. She wanted to unwind all those complexities, remove them from her life. Dog walking was never meant to be this emotionally complicated. She just wanted to walk dogs, take them down the same streets, feel like there was some pattern to things, some consistency that she could depend on. But that was a lie she couldn't let herself believe. Even the dog walking routes had to change to keep things interesting.

When she returned, Jacob called out her name. She dropped the dogs' leashes and hurried to his door. He was lying on the floor by the bed. "Are you okay?! What happened?!" She asked.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Just not as mobile as I hoped."

She helped him back into his bed.

When he was comfortably under the blankets again, he said, "Now I'm embarrassed." He looked down.

MJ didn't know what to say, so she just stood beside his bed looking at her feet. Finally, she managed, "I'm just glad you're okay." She began to make her way to the door.

"You don't need to leave."

She paused and looked over her shoulder at him.

"Come. Sit. Tell me what's up." He patted an empty spot on the mattress.

He was like a puppy crying from a cage at the SPCA. She couldn't resist. "It's a very complicated story."

"All good stories are." He gave her an encouraging smile.

"This isn't a story. This is real life and you've already got so much going on. You don't need a dog walker dumping her shit on you too."

"If we had gone on a date, would you have told me?"

She thought about it for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so. It would be the right thing to do."

"I still want to go on a date with you." He looked away for a moment, bashful. "So tell me."

She paused. He was so nice, the kind of nice that you didn't want to lose. She feared the next words would turn him away. "I'm pregnant," she finally said.

There was silence for a moment. Then Jacob said, "Go on."

So she told him about the pregnancy tests. She told him that there was no way there could be a father. She told him about her family. She told him that she didn't know what to do.

Duffy appeared at her feet, still in his sweater, his leash dragging behind him. Her conversation with Jacob had distracted her from doing her job. "Excuse me, I need to go undress them," she said, before getting off the bed and leaving the room.

When she returned several minutes later to see if Jacob needed anything before she left, he said, "I could be your way out."

"What do you mean?"

"I could be the Joseph to your Mary." This was not what she had expected. The world did not hand out favors like this. The trust she had placed in Jacob waned. It must be the painkillers talking.

"Why would you do that?" she asked.

"MJ, I don't know what to do either. No one wants to say it, but I know I'm not going to get back on the field. At least not for a professional team. My career is over. I need to start a new chapter."

"You can't even walk and you think you're going to be able to care for an infant in less than nine months? Get real."

"We can make it work."

"You're already making you and me a 'we?'"

"I like you, MJ. I'm bummed it's taken this long to see you again. I want to give 'us' a shot, even if it means there'd be some obstacles in the way."

He was saying everything the movies had taught her to want, but she knew it wasn't what she needed right now, let alone could handle. "This isn't a movie, Jacob. This is real life. A

relationship is hard work. Recovering from a serious injury is hard work. Raising a child is hard work. Do you really want all that?”

“I know I want to give us a shot and if helping you raise a child is what that entails, then I’m willing.”

“I don’t know, Jacob. I don’t know if you really want to commit to that.”

MJ disappeared from the doorway.

Jacob heard the faint sound of the front door shut. He let out a sigh and sunk into his pillows. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine a finish line with MJ there. Imagining the finish line, just like his mother had told him to do before each soccer game as a kid. Imagining the finish line, just like she did before each marathon. Imagining the finish line, like his father had done, but never made it, a car striking him on a bicycle before he even made it to the race. Too many times the finish line had looked like a hospital bed. His dad living his last five years in a nursing home. His mom dying from cancer three years ago. Himself waking up in a hospital bed, barely lucid, his body a dulled scream. Zoey had always done the imagining better, understanding what there was to work with and how they could make it better. She’d been drawing and redrawing cities and skylines for as long as he could remember. He wished she could redraw everything. Erase the Ford Explorer that collided with his father, make his mother’s tumor benign, reroute his night to ending at MJ’s. He had started to question the point of imagining the finish line if it never ended the way he wanted it to.

MJ felt bad, juvenile for leaving Zoey’s house like that. It felt like a movie quality storm out, and Jacob was too nice for that. She could do better than that for him. Certainly she could

find a way to be nice back. She pulled out her phone and called someone who she knew might be able to help.

## SEVEN

The next afternoon at the coffee shop downtown, MJ sat across from Police Detective Korina Stevens, who was off-duty and dressed in her workout clothes. She'd known Kori since their stint at Jesus Camp when they were twelve, but the friendship had really been founded in Confirmation Class the following autumn when they were ostracized by the rest of the group for asking too many questions about the stuff you were just supposed to believe. At that age, MJ didn't want to believe that wine was Jesus' blood. They didn't even serve wine at communion; it was grape juice. She'd learned from the youth pastor that in Africa they drank Coke at communion. At this rate, everything would have to signify Jesus' blood and that seemed like a lot of work. She didn't want to have to think about the crucifixion every time she went to the water fountain.

"What's up?" Kori asked before taking a bite of her donut. MJ appreciated her friend's passion for fulfilling many of the cop tropes.

"Any word on the Hot Flash Muggers case?"

"That's confidential." She crossed her arms and leaned on the table.

MJ gave her a look. "Like I would tell."

MJ was the first one Kori had come out to. They'd gone to see *The Princess Diaries* one evening during the eighth grade. That night when they were in their sleeping bags on MJ's bedroom floor--talking the way a dark room encourages--Kori had admitted that she thought Mia was cute, and not in the she-has-cute-clothes way, but in the she-thought-she-wanted-to-see-her-

without-clothes way. That feeling was hard for MJ to compute--not just the girl liking a girl part--but the wanting to see someone naked part. The church had always been hush hush about it, like the way MJ's mother had instructed her to be hush hush about her brother's autism. There were just things you weren't supposed to talk about. But the movies talked about it a lot and it seemed like a good thing to want a person in that way, but they were actors, so it could just be pretend. Kori didn't say much more about the topic that night, besides making MJ swear she wouldn't tell until she said it was okay. Kori didn't say it was okay until she graduated from the police academy.

Kori took a sip of her coffee. "Why are you asking, anyways?"

"I have a friend who's one of their victims."

Eric was clearing the dishes from a nearby table. He let out a laugh that he tried to cover as a cough.

Kori raised an eyebrow at MJ. "A friend, huh?"

"It's complicated what we are."

"Have you fucked?"

MJ looked away. "No."

"But clearly you've fantasized about it." Kori gave her a knowing smirk. She'd always been good at reading people; a skill she'd made useful in both work and play.

"Ugh." MJ put her head in her hands. "It's Jacob West."

Kori choked on her donut. "Shit."

"Right?"

"They fucked him up."

"I know."

“Does his dick even still work?” She looked at MJ, expecting her to have an answer.

“Kori!” MJ gave her a look of shock. “I was there to walk his and Zoey’s dogs. It’s not like I was looking to see if he was pitching a tent in his pajama pants.”

Kori snorted, but returned to a more serious face. “How’d you even meet this guy?”

MJ recounted the events to her.

“So you’ve finally reconnected and he’s still hot for you, huh?”

“Yeah, it seems that way.” She smiled for a second, still unsure if it was a good thing.

“Shit, girl! A favor is giving the man a blowjob, not using a friend for her confidential information!”

“Kori. I’m pregnant. There is no father. He offered to be the father. I thought I ought to try and match his contribution.”

Kori looked at her for a moment, like a dog tilting its head to understand the words being said to it. “Hold up. Rewind. You’re pregnant?”

MJ sighed and recounted the whole tale to her. She’d forgotten how long it had been since they’d last caught up. Kori had her life chocked full of work, spin classes, dates, book club, and other social events.

“I told her she should get rid of it before she can’t,” Eric butted in.

Kori looked at MJ to see her reaction.

“Yeah, maybe, but this thing is me and my mother and my grandmother.”

“It’s a shitty bundle of DNA is what it is,” Eric said, swinging a chair around from a nearby table and sitting on it backwards, his arms resting on the top of the backrest.

“Aren’t you working?” MJ asked.

“I’m on a break. You should be honored that I’m giving my fifteen minutes to your life complications.”

“I’m honored, really,” MJ said, despite appreciating the gesture.

“So you’re thinking you might keep it then?” Kori asked, bringing the conversation back to focus.

“Maybe. But I’d have to get a desk job and be a mom. I don’t want that. Not now, at least.”

“Why not put it up for adoption then?”

“You could actually recommend that route? The girl wouldn’t even have a relative to tell her about her condition, prepare her. I could at least ensure I’d prepare her properly.”

“You could stop this though,” Eric said. “You want to bring a kid into this world knowing that it’s eventually going to have to deal with the same fate?”

MJ sighed. “I don’t even want to be pregnant. I’m tired of throwing up. I won’t be able to walk dogs in a couple of months.”

They were silent for a minute.

Kori looked at the crumbs on her plate. She couldn’t believe she was recommending adoption, knowing there had been all those years of wishing her mother had aborted her rather than given her a chance in the world. The gesture was appreciated until child services butted in, took her away, and let her be passed around from family to family like a game of hot potato. Elementary school had been confusing. Being adopted by a nice, white family when she was ten was a blessing. They could afford for her to play basketball and they’d even showed up to her games. But they also showed her God, made that their favorite answer when she asked about her mother and her turbulent childhood. They brought her to the church’s pastor when they caught

her with her hands down her pants while watching a movie in the basement. By high school, she didn't know whether she was black or white, lesbian or Christian. Then she saw the police officers in the annual Christmas parade downtown, everyone in their blue uniforms looking the same. They were all police. She wanted her identity to be that easy.

"I don't know what to tell you," Kori finally said.

"You're a big help, officer," MJ said.

"It's your life. Decide for yourself."

"Ugh. I'm horrible at decisions."

"Parenthood is a big commitment. It's not something you can really test run without fucking up the kid."

"I know. I know. But you can't even do anything to help Jacob out?"

"Like what? He's already helped us as much as he could. The muggers are good. This case is going to take time. All we know is that their violence is escalating. I'm sorry, I really am." Kori made the face she always made when she had to break bad news to a citizen.

MJ laid her head on the table. Her phone buzzed from the back pocket of her jeans. Fuck her phone, she just wished it would stop ringing. She just wished everything would stop for a moment. She pulled it out anyways. The caller ID was a number she didn't know. She answered it anyway.

## EIGHT

It was Nana who called, inviting her for a little meeting at MJ's mother's house.

"So glad you could come, Mary Jane," her mother greeted, pushing the front door open.

"Come in, come in." She smiled, while motioning for her to step through the door.

MJ followed her into the dining room. The whole house had a colonial look to it. Lots of crown molding and dark wood. Her childhood home had been craftsman style. This felt too formal. It didn't help that the dining room set that had comfortably fit in the previous house now seemed cramped, like the walls were slowly moving in.

Nana was sitting on one side of the table. MJ's mother sat down beside Nana. MJ sat across the table from them. She never noticed that they all had a mole in the same place on their faces.

Her mother had pulled out the nice teapot and teacups for the occasion. There were even tiny sandwiches on a platter. The pseudo British spread was her mother's M.O. when it came to important discussions: church confirmation classes; taking advanced classes; having relations with boys; college decisions; post-graduation plans.

"I understand you're pregnant," her mother said, pouring herself a cup of tea. "Would you like some tea or a sandwich?"

"No, I'm okay."

"You're eating for two," her mother said, giving her a look of disapproval.

MJ sighed and reluctantly grabbed a sandwich.

Nana leaned forward. "Before we talk about your situation, we thought we'd share with you our family history, give you some perspective on where we're coming from."

MJ gave them an unamused look and took another bite of her sandwich.

Nana toyed with her cloth napkin before she spoke. "I was fourteen. I didn't know what was going on with my body. My brother's wife knew. They took me in and didn't ask questions. I was gracious, but knew I needed to be able to support myself and my baby, so I put aside everything else. That's what you do when you have a kid. You have to be willing to make a

sacrifice. There wasn't much help for girls my age having babies back then. But I worked hard and I managed. I was one of six kids; my birth wasn't suspicious. People had a lot of kids back then. And no one talked about how those kids came to be. They're all dead now. Hell, I'm almost dead now. The answers are hard to come by. But I hadn't been with a man when I got pregnant. That's for sure." She looked at MJ's mother. "Pour me some tea, would you. Two lumps and a little milk."

MJ's mother obeyed, holding the lid of the teapot on while she poured, delicately doling out the sugar and carefully pouring the milk before stirring it with a spoon and handing it on a saucer to Nana.

"I thought I was done having babies when I got pregnant with you," her mother began. "Your brothers' father didn't take it well. We hadn't been intimate in a while. It happens when you're raising two boys and one of them has special needs. I'd been running all over town consulting with specialists, pouring my soul out to them in hopes that they could help me out. He assumed I'd been with one of them. A pregnancy is very suspicious sometimes. I didn't know what to tell him. He didn't want to believe in miracles at that time. He got angry at God for not sending the miracle John's way. I don't blame him." She poured herself more tea. For a moment, there was only the clink of china. "Anyways, he wanted a divorce. Not because of John, but because of the unexplained pregnancy. I was tired of fighting, so we did. Nana'd been coming by to help with the boys and we got talking about the pregnancy. Facts didn't add up in both our cases. God works in strange ways, Mary Jane, but we can't question it."

MJ dropped her sandwich onto her plate and stared at her mother. "And you're not allowed to say that's not fair?"

“In Proverbs it says ‘Honest scales and balances belong to the Lord; all the weights in the bag are of his making.’”

MJ sighed. “So what’s the point of this meeting?”

Her mother’s expression softened. “Look, Mary Jane, I know you’re hurt that I didn’t tell you sooner. Nana wanted to tell you after your fourteenth birthday. I thought that was too soon. I thought that maybe there was a chance that it wouldn’t happen to you. Why have you spend your whole life waiting for it to happen if it might not happen until you’re forty or not even at all?”

“So instead you just make all these comments, subtly try and get my life set up so that when it happens I’m not totally screwed over?” MJ raised an eyebrow.

“Do you have a boyfriend, Mary Jane, or someone who can be your cover?”

“No, it’s just me.” She sunk into her seat.

“Have you gone to an OB GYN? Had an ultrasound?”

“No. I wanted to believe this was real first.”

“An ultrasound will make it *very* real.”

“So what’s your plan?” Nana asked. “You have eight or so months to get your act together.”

“You can’t keep walking dogs,” her mother added.

“I can’t do this.”

“Oh, don’t be a wuss about this. You’re going to mother this daughter to the best of your abilities, just like we did. It’s not easy, but there is no other way.”

“But there is another way.” MJ knew she was like an NRA member walking into a pacifist meeting by saying this. “I could get an abortion. I could nip this problem in the bud.”

Her mother gasped, but MJ just kept talking, “Why are we acting like we have no choice in this?”

Her mother leapt up from the table. “The Virgin Mary is a sacred vessel. Our savior became flesh in her. God had a plan far greater than her. We are the same as her.”

“No one in this room is Jesus. We’re just average people with a rare genetic condition,” MJ tried to reason.

“Well regardless of how you feel about it, it’s real.” She set a thick file of papers on the table before storming out of the room. A lot of their tea parties had ended with one of them leaving in a huff, but the file folder was a new one.

MJ’s mother stood at the kitchen sink and looked out the window. The leaves were changing and falling from the trees. She remembered when they’d gone to see the geneticist the autumn after Mary Jane had turned one-year-old. She’d been oblivious to the reasons for all the poking and prodding and tests, an innocence her mother had wished she’d kept. Later, when the results came in, she stood looking out the window above the sink while on the phone with the geneticist as he confirmed that all their DNA matched precisely. He was intrigued and wanted to do more tests, study Mary Jane as she grew up. Her mother refused. The geneticist was persistent. He started to call daily. She saw him in public spaces: the park, the supermarket, the library. She knew he wanted to do the tests for his own glory, but she also knew that her child wasn’t a lab rat. Her child didn’t need to have a childhood full of doctor’s visits. She was already carting one son from specialist to specialist; the doctor’s labels had already left their mark on him, disrupted his childhood from any sense of normalcy. She couldn’t do that again. She couldn’t let her daughter grow up thinking she was different, abnormal, destined for some terrible fate. Their fate was not terrible. A baby could not be a terrible thing, no matter how

difficult they made life. This was what she had made herself believe in order to keep going. It was the only way to keep going as the seasons changed and God kept throwing challenges her way. He had brought these babies into the world from her womb for a reason; there could not be malicious intent inherent in them.

MJ had paged through the file folder. The documents were legitimate, but she was no medical professional and the information on the papers was largely gibberish to her. She looked at Nana who sat sipping her tea with a stern expression. “You went to a geneticist?”

“We were curious.”

“I got tested too?”

“You were just a tyke. Damn doctor wanted to turn you into some science project. Needless to say, we skedaddled out of there.”

“What’s your take on this? What did you want to tell fourteen-year-old me?”

“I think killing babies is wrong, but I don’t think your mother is right either. There were many months I longed for an escape. Motherhood is not easy, but you’re often shamed if you don’t claim to love it.”

“I get that. But were you guys trying to accomplish something by having this meeting?”

Nana shrugged. “Look, your mother is dealing with a lot right now. I’ve reprimanded her on multiple occasions for her feigned ignorance toward your situation. We can’t change the past, so we need to move on. If we can all do that, you know maybe this baby can be reason enough for us to be family again. It could be a fresh start for us, like the Baby Jesus bringing light into the world.”

“I’m not giving birth to Jesus,” MJ reminded her.

“It’s a metaphor, sweetie.”

MJ sighed. "I know. It's just feeling like this is less and less about me and my choice."

"That's adulthood for you. The world is bigger than yourself and your problems. Your actions have greater consequences."

"I know that."

"Then act like it. Stop being selfish and get prepared to be a mother."

They sat in silence for a moment. MJ finally stood up, saying, "I need to go for a drive. Tell my mother goodbye for me." She pushed her chair back under the table and walked out of the house.

## NINE

The windows were rolled down. MJ had some CD playing that a boy in college had once made for her. She didn't remember his name, but she knew every word of every song on the CD. She'd stopped at her townhouse after her meeting with Nana and her mother to pick up this CD as well as Oreo and Willie. They had each claimed a window in the back to stick their heads out of. The parkway was nearly empty this time of year; the tourists who used it to visit the historic grounds it connected had mostly departed. The woods were thick on either side of the road, the leaves were every shade of fire. Her hair whipped around in the wind coming through the windows.

The meeting, the files, the words, the stories--they'd all come years too late. It felt like a press conference after the avoidable tragedy had happened; the damage was done. Their information and knowledge was appreciated, but it was too little, too late. She just wanted to be done with them. They'd delivered the news and the lore, but she wasn't sure they should be there

to deliver the baby. MJ wasn't sure she wanted to deliver the baby just to know another girl would have to live through the secrets and the confusion. She wished she didn't have to live through this either.

She wanted to believe that she was just a statue in the nativity scene her mother set up every Christmas on the side table near the front door. She wanted to believe that if she just followed the star, bore her burden that it would all work out. She had loved all the renditions of the Christmas Story her pastor had read over the years during the children's message at the Christmas Eve service. All the stories had made it out to seem like this baby was the best thing to happen. MJ wanted to believe this baby could be the best thing to happen.

She caught a glimpse of the back seat through the rearview mirror. She wondered if there'd be a day where she'd load up a baby and her two dogs. If Jacob would be in the passenger seat. If they'd figure a way to fit his dogs in the car too. Could they really fit that much in her compact SUV? The car salesman had been talking to her like it was possible when she bought it, and she didn't doubt that it was spacious. Maybe it was more the fear of missing the space. Maybe her life would get too full, the perpetual feeling that follows a Thanksgiving dinner. But she'd never quite reach the nap that followed, the silence of the house as everyone had simmered down. She wasn't even sure if a Thanksgiving, a real, normal American Thanksgiving was possible for her family.

She pulled into a small turn off near a large rock that jutted out across the river. She hooked leashes on her dogs and lead them down the short trail to the boulder. They took the trip slowly, investigating every step, unsure of where they were headed and how dangerous it was. The sound of the water moving over the rocky river was deafening. For once, silence was her only choice. She sat down on the edge of the rock, her feet dangling over. Oreo and Willie hung

back, but seemed content. They were sitting down behind her like gargoyles. Their ears were slightly pulled back, but their mouths were open, panting, almost smiling in a way.

MJ sat for a while just watching the water move over the rocks. She remembered going to Jesus Camp in her youth and picking out a river rock from a kiddie pool full of water set at the foot of the wooden cross in the outdoor sanctuary. The camp director had given some speech about how the campers were like rough river rocks and how over time God and the experiences he placed in their lives caused them to be worn smooth. It had moved her to tears at the time and for years she'd kept the rock on the windowsill in her room. Now, the process of river rocks just seemed like the way life worked. You were worn down until there was nothing left.

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That night, MJ sat curled up on the couch watching NetFlix with Oreo and Willie. Oreo had his head resting on her lap. Willie was lying on his back, legs up in the air, snoring. She looked around the room, furnished with hand-me-downs. She tried to picture the space with baby accoutrements filling all the crevices. She remembered when Thom had first become a father.

He'd brought a large house in the suburbs. It had seemed almost too big at first. On one of her few visits there, MJ had run around the empty rooms as a kid, enjoying the feeling of space and emptiness around her. The walls seemed to orbit the small amount of furniture with which they'd moved in. Soon the house was fully furnished and decorated extensively. Jamie had started a blog where she talked about her decorating and homemaking skills. Soon the blog became about being an expectant mother. MJ remembered pictures on the blog showing the house became fuller with each day nearing the birth of Trevor. Babies needed so much and Jamie was never unprepared, stocking the baby supplies as if the apocalypse was around the bend. Thom had grown to like the puzzle of assembling the baby's furniture and stroller. He liked to

read up on the different options in car seats, see which one really stood the test of time. The build-up of stuff had seemed slow, and then suddenly years passed and they were caught in the current of birthdays and Christmas and all the toys that came along. Three kids filled the house up. Louie the Labradoodle made it jam packed.

MJ couldn't imagine the same fate going over well in her place. Oreo and Willie filled it well enough. She didn't even know where she'd fit a crib. She only had one bedroom.

She wondered what Jacob's place was like. Zoey had probably furnished and decorated it, choosing some masculine color palette and filling the shelves with knick knacks that didn't matter. His clothes probably didn't even make it into whatever hamper she had spent time carefully picking out so that it matched the shoe rack or the color scheme of the framed urban landscapes she'd hung up in his room. It was probably a one bedroom apartment too. She couldn't imagine it any other way.

Maybe in some alternate universe there was a house the right size for the two of them, that they could come together before the baby arrived, assimilate into a life lived together. They'd go on dates to Ikea or Babies 'R' Us. Their dogs would get along and each find their space in the house. They'd have a nice backyard where one day they'd erect a swing set. They'd mix their dishes together, let their silverware mingle in the drawer. They'd have a menagerie of glasses, knick knacks, and souvenirs. They'd argue over the theme for the nursery or something even more pointless like the color of the towels in the guest bathroom. But they'd settle down and try and become a family before the baby arrived. They'd pretend that they didn't hate the other for leaving dirty dishes in the sink or leaving hair in the drain. They'd discover each other's quirks. Learn to decipher each other's shorthand on the grocery list. They'd live life in fast forward, skipping over dating, moving in together, engagement, the wedding, writing thank you

notes to distant relatives who offered their hope and goodwill for the marriage in the form of toasters and waffle makers. They'd forgo those few years to themselves, the adoption of a dog that was neither hers nor his but theirs, the late night discussions about having a family, the excitement of deciding to throw away the birth control and try and try and try. There wouldn't be a cute video announcing the pregnancy, there would be no gender reveal party, no baby shower. It would be a condensed version of all this; the celebration reduced; the responsibility and stress magnified.

MJ wanted to believe it could work for the better. That the choice to go for it, go straight to family in less than nine months would make the explanations of the child's existence easier. Making things seem more grounded, but at the same time, she felt like she was cheating herself out of all those experiences and festivities.

The credits began to roll on the movie she hadn't been really watching. She roused her dogs, hooked on their leashes, and led them outside. They sniffed around under the street lights, peeing by their favorite bushes, pausing every once in a while at the sound of something unfamiliar. When they were done, they headed back inside. She cleaned up their bowls and then the three of them climbed into her bed. Placing a hand on her stomach, which had barely a pooch to it, she tried to see if she could feel anything. She'd heard other mothers say that they could feel it, even when it was too early to really feel anything. MJ felt around her stomach, but she felt nothing.

## TEN

MJ woke up slowly, the sunlight coming through the gaps in the curtains burned. Or maybe that was the pain in her abdomen. Some kind of dull ache. She felt groggy, nauseous. Managing to lean over the railing of her bed, she threw up. It was just bile.

“You’re awake,” Kori’s voice greeted her from the chair by the window. Kori had been the last person she’d spoken to. No, the receptionist was. The timeline was blurry.

“What happened?”

“You were shot in the abdomen?”

“By who?”

“The Hot Flash Muggers.”

“At the clinic...”

Kori nodded.

The pieces were coming together. Kori driving her to the clinic to get an abortion. Eric would have, but his mom had passed away that morning. MJ had told Kori she didn’t need to come in, that she’d call her when she was ready to be picked up. Kori had sat back in the car and pulled out a book to read. MJ walked in, up to the receptionist’s window, and given her name. Gunshots. She turned to look. An indescribable pain. She didn’t know what to do. She decided to play dead, remain crumpled by the wall. More gunshots. Things got fuzzy. The police arrived. The paramedics. She didn’t know who was dead, who was hurt, who was shooting. People were shouting, crying, moaning. She was on a stretcher. They kept talking to her and she kept trying to respond.

“What happened to the shooters?”

“We shot them. They refused to cease fire.”

“So they’re dead?”

Kori nodded. “Unfortunately.”

“So the case is closed?”

“Mostly. Police are searching their house, trying to get a better understanding of what they were working toward. They were delusional though. This wasn’t some political statement that had gotten violent. Honestly, I don’t know what it really was.”

“I guess it was a good thing that you were there then.”

Kori nodded. “Yeah, very lucky it worked out that way. Of course that means I’m working longer days, trying to help close this case.”

“Do you at least get a promotion from this?”

Kori shrugged. “I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

There was silence for a moment. MJ listened to the beeping of her heart monitor, steady and unending. “Did everyone make it?”

Kori shook her head. “The receptionist.”

“I was the last person to talk to her then.”

Another silence fell over them.

“There are counseling services available. I know you have a lot to work through, both physically and mentally. But you need to rest now.” Kori stood up.

“Wait. Am I still pregnant?”

She walked over to MJ’s bed, grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze before walking out.

MJ sunk into the bed, letting out a deep breath. She felt heavy. There was too much to puzzle through and her head was too foggy.

A nurse came in and checked on her.

“Am I still pregnant?” MJ asked her.

The nurse paused, her stern demeanor softened. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, honey. It was just a tiny thing, too early on to have a chance with the trauma you experienced.”

MJ looked down at her stomach. Something had been in there. It was dead now. Gone from her. She closed her eyes, trying to make sense of what happened.

The nurse placed a hand on her arm. "I can get you a minister if you'd like to pray for the baby's soul."

"No, it's okay." She leaned back and closed her eyes once more.

"If you change your mind, just let me know."

A janitor mopped up the vomit. MJ dozed.

Later, there was a knock on the door before it opened and Eric walked in. He stopped at the foot of her bed. "Hey," he greeted.

"I'm sorry I missed the funeral." Tears formed in the corner of MJ's eyes.

"Don't worry about it." He pulled a chair over to her bedside. "I know you would have been there if you could."

"Thanks for stopping by. You must be busy cleaning out the house and stuff."

"Of course. I'm glad you're okay."

"What're you going to do now that she's gone?"

"There's a little bit of money left. I think I might use it to move to Washington."

"Washington?"

"Like Seattle or somewhere."

"Why?"

"Death with Dignity is legal there. I don't want to go like my mom did, wait for my body to decide when. I want to make that choice. It won't be for a while, but I might as well establish myself before it gets bad."

"But it's across the country."

“Yeah, I know. But I have to do this. And I’m putting some money aside for airline tickets for you and Kori. I want you there when I go.” He clasped his hands. “This probably isn’t the right time to talk about it. There’s been enough death.”

“Eric…”

He reached for her hands. “Don’t worry. I’m not leaving just yet.”

They sat in silence until MJ drifted off to sleep.

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A few days later, MJ sat on the edge of her hospital bed, waiting for the doctor to discharge her. Her mother, Nana, and John had come to pick her up. John had greeted her by informing her that God sent the shooters because she was killing a baby. Nana had told him to sit down and shut up. Her mother had been standing there with her arms folded over her chest, silent. Having them pick her up was not an ideal situation, but MJ conceded, as everyone else she knew was busy.

The doctor walked in, greeted them, and placed several x-rays on the view board on the wall.

“John, go wait out in the hallway. This isn’t appropriate for you,” MJ’s mother said. John walked out of the room, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground as he did.

“As you can see here, we were able to remove all the bullet fragments and repair the damage caused. I expect you to make a full recovery in two to three weeks. You’ll need to take it easy in the meantime. No lifting or physical strain. No vigorous exercise. Any questions?”

Her mother spoke up. “Will she be able to have children? I know the baby was lost.”

MJ glared at her mother. She felt like a kid, unable to ask the questions for herself. “Mom, that’s for me to ask and for me to know. I’m twenty-six. My body is my body. If you cannot respect that, please leave.”

Nana turned to her daughter and said, “Let’s give her some privacy.”

Begrudgingly, MJ’s mother followed Nana out of the room.

The doctor waited for the door to close. “Are you still interested in hearing the answer to this question?”

MJ nodded.

“I would assume so. There was minimal damage done to the reproductive organs. The trauma is what caused you to miscarry. I’m sorry for your loss, but I believe that you are perfectly capable of trying for another pregnancy in several months once your uterus has recovered and your period has returned.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that soon, but it’s good to know the option is there.”

“Yes, it is. And with that, I’ll discharge you.”

Once he left, Nana, MJ’s mother, and John returned.

“What did the doctor say?” her mother cried.

“We’re good,” MJ replied before putting on her coat. “Let’s go.”

“Well then,” her mother said. She didn’t say anything until they were in Nana’s car. “I don’t understand why you won’t tell me.” She leaned around the side of the seat.

MJ was sitting in the passenger seat, trying to doze. “It’s over, Mom. You don’t have anymore pregnancies to worry about. So let my body be my body.” She felt her mother sit back in her seat.

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MJ walked around her empty apartment. Thom had been taking care of Willie and Oreo while she was in the hospital and was currently taking them for a walk. Despite it being quieter than normal--there was a noise to living things, even if they didn't make any sounds--the apartment felt cluttered and lived in. This was all thanks to Thom who had quit his job, told Jamie he wanted to separate, and decided to couchsurf at MJ's until he found a new job, an apartment, and a new direction for his life.

She sat down on the couch and wrapped herself in a blanket. She didn't know what to do with herself. Maybe she'd watch NetFlix. Maybe she'd finally start writing that novel. The pregnancy, though unwanted and unexpected, had felt like a beginning. But it had come to an end. She was sad. Not for the fetus, but for herself. Her genetic chains were gone; she'd been set free, but to do what?

The door opened. Willie and Oreo bounded to their water bowls, lapping furiously while Thom unhooked their leashes. Suddenly they all realized that MJ was there. Her dogs bounded over to her and she put her hands up to protect her abdomen. They stopped at the side of the couch, their snouts twitching as they sniffed her before licking her face. She smiled and began to pet them, scratching their chests.

"How're you feeling?" Thom asked, sitting down on the loveseat positioned perpendicular to the couch she was on.

The answer felt impossible to come up with. At the hospital there'd been a chart; it had been all about the pain. But the pain wasn't really there anymore. It had lessened enough for her to have room for other thoughts. And that was what had made this question harder to answer.

"I'm alright."

"Good."

“How are you?”

“I’m alright.” He laughed. “I was responsible enough to remember that it’s Halloween and we need candy to give trick-or-treaters.”

“Oh man, yeah, that’s right. It is Halloween. Thank goodness you’re here.” She exhaled and sunk into the pillows behind her. Willie tentatively jumped up on the couch and curled up at her feet. Oreo settled down on the floor between the couch and the coffee table.

“So I’ve been thinking…”

“Glad to hear you’re not letting your brain go to mush during your mid-life crisis.”

Thom gave her a look of annoyance. “I’m trying to be serious about my life for once.”

“Well gold star for you.”

“I think I liked it better when you were in the hospital,” he teased. “But seriously, you’re currently unable to walk dogs for the next couple of weeks and I’m currently in need of something to do, so why don’t I take over?”

“Okay…? You sure you can handle it?”

“Actually, I’ve already started.” Thom pushed his sleeve up to reveal a large scab on his forearm. “Rufus went for a squirrel.”

“What? Why did you just ask for my permission?!”

Thom shrugged. “It felt like the right thing to do.”

MJ groaned. “And how did your marriage manage to even last this long?”

“Hey now. I’m trying to work on this.”

“But you’re not going to walk dogs forever, are you?”

“Are you?”

MJ shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Then I guess we’re just going to not know together for a while.”

“Okay.”

Oreo set his paw on her forearm and looked up at her. She gave his head a pet.

There was a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Thom said, getting up and trotting over to the door.

Willie lifted his head from MJ’s lap to see what was going on.

“Look who it is,” Thom said, pushing the door wide open to reveal Zoey in a witch costume cradling a brown paper bag and beside her, Jacob on crutches. He was wearing a soccer uniform. The bruising had faded and he had a less restrictive brace on his wrist.

“Thom mentioned that you were coming home today, and we thought we’d stop by. Maybe help you pass out candy to kids?”

“That’s really nice of you,” MJ said, sitting up. “But what about the trick-or-treaters coming to your place?”

Zoey waved it off with her hand. “Frederick’s got it taken care of.”

Thom shot MJ a confused look. MJ mouthed *I’ll tell you later* before offering Zoey and Jacob a seat. As Jacob made his way over to the loveseat, Oreo leapt up onto the end of the couch where Willie was, his ears back. They cowered together, watching as Jacob made himself comfortable on the loveseat.

Zoey said, “I actually need to get something from the car. Would you mind helping me, Thom?”

Thom nodded and followed her out the door.

“How have you been?” MJ asked Jacob.

“I’m getting better. How are you? I’m sorry to hear you had a run-in with the muggers too.”

“I’m going to be okay, I think. I guess the bigger thing is to figure out where I go from here. There’s not going to be a baby, but I never planned to have it. Still, things are different, you know?”

Jacob nodded. He shifted his posture and looked into her eyes before reaching his hand over the armrest to pick up hers. “MJ, I know we hardly know each other, but I care about you a lot and would very much like it if I could be a part of what’s different in your life. I’m not saying we need to consolidate our lives and get serious, but I want to take you on a date at least. Even if I have to wear sweatpants and you have to drive.” He smiled.

MJ returned the smile. “I’d like that, but a night on the town might have to wait for a couple of weeks.”

“Well, then we can just hang out, order pizza, and watch NetFlix until we’re up for that.”

“Oooh, that sounds even better. I never imagined Jacob West to be that kind of guy.”

“I don’t really know what kind of guy I am anymore. So be prepared for the emergence of Existential Crisis Jacob every so often.”

“Okay,” MJ said with a laugh, giving his hand a squeeze.

The door opened to reveal Zoey and Thom holding the leashes of Zoey and Jacob’s dogs. Foster, Duffy, and Webster were dressed as a squirrel, a turtle, and a dragon.

“Ohmygod, you brought all your dogs? How? Why?” MJ said, sitting up quickly. She winced before leaning back on the couch.

“Did you hit your head or something?” Thom asked. “Because it is very unlike you to refuse the presence of dogs.”

“We already have two here. And we need to properly introduce them, not just have some free-for-all playtime!”

“MJ, chill out. We’re not going to let things get out of hand. Don’t freak out,” Thom said.

MJ looked over at Oreo and Willie who both had their ears back and were cowering, their noses twitching as they tried to compute the new smells and creatures in their home. Sgt. Pepper and Lucy were sitting on either side of Thom like gargoyles. Duffy, Foster, and Webster were investigating the floor for crumbs around Zoey’s feet.

“It’s only going to work if you let things get a little crazy at first,” Jacob said. “And you’re not the only one capable of or responsible for wrangling these dogs.”

“Okay,” she finally agreed.

Thom and Zoey began to unclip the leashes. The Yorkies bounded about the space haphazardly, like balls in a pinball machine. Sgt. Pepper and Lucy slowly began to investigate the room, before they made their way over to Jacob and curled up on the floor near him. The Yorkies eventually made their way over to Oreo and Willie, jumping up so their heads were above the couch. Oreo watched as Willie bent down to sniff the dogs before joining him in the mingling. Their tails began to wag and suddenly Sgt. Pepper and Lucy had stood up to join in the greeting. MJ was surrounded by the dogs; she had never felt more at home.

“See? Everything’s fine,” Jacob said.

Zoey and Thom had disappeared into the kitchen to prepare dinner.

The doorbell sounded and the dogs charged for the door.

“It must be our first trick-or-treaters!” Zoey said, appearing from the kitchen with a plastic cauldron full of candy. “Anyone care to help me keep the dogs in?”

It took the rest of them to keep the dogs from running out so Zoey could hold a handful of candy through the cracked open door. When the kids had left, she said, “Well this isn’t going to work.”

By the time the next bunch of trick-or-treaters appeared--a boy dressed as Wolverine and a girl dressed as Jasmine--they’d found a system that worked. Jacob and MJ were sitting on kitchen chairs they’d moved to the front porch, a blanket draped over them and the candy bowl between them. The dogs were inside with Thom and Zoey who were fixing dinner. MJ’s house was full and chaotic, but in a way that seemed possible, enjoyable even.

Possible unlike she’d known before. The kind of possible where they could have a Thanksgiving together come November and even gather around the tree for Christmas. Still, this sense of possibility also meant they could end up in radically different places. For MJ, that felt like too much to worry about right now. Tonight, she just wanted to sit on the porch with Jacob passing out candy, join Zoey and Thom for dinner, and put on a movie and fall asleep with her dogs. That was about all she thought she could handle right now, so that was all she would do.