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THE FORMER LIVES OF BUILDINGS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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in the College of Arts and Humanities
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ABSTRACT

The Former Lives of Buildings is a novel about thirty-one-year-old architect Adelle Corey. Adelle is a woman in denial. A nightmare figure called the Baron steals memories of her closest relationships and most poignant experiences. He hides the memories in Adelle's dreams, where he reconstructs them into buildings. The only way she can recover the memories is by cutting or tattooing these buildings into her skin. Adelle uses notebooks, mnemonic devices, and academic trivia to keep track of her daily routines.

The novel takes place in contemporary times and opens in the burn unit of Bridgeport Hospital, Connecticut, where Adelle has been recovering for two months. She does not remember her stay prior to the opening day of the story, but she retains her memories from this day forward. Adelle's parents, her husband, and the mysterious woman Celesse St. Armand, who has been given charge over her care, refuse to allow Adelle to see her six-year-old son, Ben, until she can recover the missing days.

Adelle suspects that something has happened to Ben. She seeks the help of Sam, her tattoo artist, to recover memories. The search uncovers painful truths about Adelle's childhood and marriage, ultimately forcing her to face that the Baron is a device she created to protect herself, not an outside force acting upon her. Adelle goes from a lonely, untrusting existence to a willingness to form deep friendships. She gains the capacity to face the whole truth instead of selecting only the comfortable parts. She does not find her son in any of the buildings. However, confronting the experiences hidden there gives her the strength to accept that she has passed her memory problems on to her son, who has not been able to remember his family since the fire. Although their marriage does not survive, Adelle and De learn to work together as parents.

For Leife

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Without the following people, this story would have been thinner, more confusing, and a lot less exciting to write.

It may be out of fashion, but I must begin by thanking my God. Adelle's story evolved out of a question that terrifies me: What does it mean to lose a child? I've done a lot of footwork on this project, but only with assurance that a power greater than myself would use the process to grow me into something more than I was when I began.

Jamie Poissant, thank you for directing my thesis and treating me more like a colleague than a student. Your willingness to let me try things out, even when you thought they might not work, gave me the freedom to find Adelle's story on my own terms. Your honest feedback provided signposts that helped me see when I was straying from that story.

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Introduction: Writing Life Essay

I am twenty years old, thumping across the cobbles of the Charles Bridge, or, in Czech, Karlov Most. I am alone. Snow drifts down, sparse gray static against the pale night. I'm moving toward the Old City, where fairy-tale roofs and foot traffic mark one of the few European capitals that has never seen a building destroyed by war. I've designed portable art and writing classes for the semester, so my scholarships are paying for this backpacking adventure. After two long months of round-the-clock companionship, my traveling partner has finally made a friend and begun to explore without me, gifting me with this chance to wander among the shops of hand-carved marionettes until I get to the Astronomical Clock.

The Astronomical Clock is a cross between Big Ben and a coo-coo clock, dressed in zodiac symbols. It marks the center of the Old City, a spire rising above the stone streets where the open-air market sets up shop on weekends. I want to draw it. Ever since Seville, I've been recording elements of space: Moorish influenced ceramic tiles, onion domes in the Jewish quarter of Frankfurt. I'm trying to find a way to make my artwork matter. It bothers me that when I'm writing or painting, I work alone, serving only myself. I want to make an impact on the world, but I don't know how to live in it without creating. The use of space has struck me since the very first night. The way different cultures design, decorate, and arrange their buildings, streets, and outdoor spaces determines how people will move, see, and think. Terra cotta courtyards, bathroom sinks shaped like fountains, the wood and leather interiors of Italian trains—all of these are new to me. I find myself in perpetual reorientation, and I think, perhaps, I've begun to enter the path to making my work meaningful.

#

In the summer before ninth grade, I read *The Great Gatsby*. I was spellbound. When I came to the end of the book, I sat thinking about it for a couple hours, and then opened it up and read it again. I'd never read anything like it before, so simple and so complicated at once. I'd never read anything that

introduced me to myself as a writer, or, at least, as the writer I wanted to become. Until then, I'd written stories to entertain myself, to reimagine myself in other lives. After *Gatsby*, I knew that wasn't enough.

We studied Fitzgerald's work as literature in my freshman English class. It wasn't until years later, when I wanted to explore Fitzgerald's process as a writer, that I learned how he thought of his own work, what his goals were. He said in a letter to Maxwell Perkins that with *Gatsby* he wanted "to write something *new*--something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned" (Mangum). He wanted the work to be sophisticated and complex, but to subvert these qualities by crafting a story entertaining enough to attract a mass commercial audience (Mangum). He succeeded so completely in this that, upon its first printing, most critics failed to see the literary significance of the novel. Only decades later, after building a widespread, loyal audience, did the book make its way into the literary cannon as the quintessential example of the American novel.

I've read it two more times since then, most recently in August, 2011, the month that I began writing *The Former Lives of Buildings*. Fitzgerald's plot is nothing like my plot. His characters, on the surface, are nothing like my characters. But the goal is the same. I want to write something new. I want that extraordinary simplicity and intricate patterning in my work. I want to write a story that the lay reader can enjoy and the academic reader can find worthwhile.

#

I am shivering and my feet hurt, but I can see the Gothic trapezoid roofs of the towers spiring above the other end of Karlov Most. I'm past the halfway point. People in coats shuffle along, pausing to examine the tourist-priced artwork and the folk musicians lining either side of the bridge. As I move through the darkness, a glassy, haunting sound stretches toward my ears. The notes draw out across the air, singing slowly so that it is several more steps before they've arranged themselves into something familiar: Beethoven's *Fur Elise*. I know it, but not like this. What instrument is it? The music wraiths around the huddle of people to my right. The crowd packs a tight wall between the sound and me. I cannot see its source. I move through snow flurries and hats and elbows, snaking between the onlookers.

The crowd is thick, but people give me my inches, responding to my prodding like a good dance partner. It is the last line. I press between two bodies, and I am at the front.

Under a scant tent, yellow light pours into a hundred water goblets, laid out in tiers on a folding table. Above them, a man in fingerless gloves circles tender hands around the rims, and in they love him back with singing. The goblets shame the orchestra. Their single warbling voice mocks the brass and drums. Even the piano, *Elise's* mother instrument, can't touch these ghostly notes. I am warm. The crowd is my family. We listen with one soul. There is no other place on the earth right now outside this light and sound.

#

In eleventh grade, we read Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I came to understand that a ghost story does not have to be a Ghost Story, that a slave story does not have to be a Slave Story, that genre is an artifice we can stretch to serve our characters. We do not have to sacrifice them on the altar of formulaic conventions. It was then that I heard the term magical realism for the first time. My English teacher, Rosalie Gwinn, sifted words like a Rusher panning for gold. I learned to see colors in story, to move forward and back in history without losing sight of the narrative, to notice the way one character could have accord with another simply by sharing the same mannerism or gesture. I learned that my eyes are small, but if I open them widely enough, I can see through my own experience and into someone else. Rosalie Gwinn, Ma Gwinn to me, was my first writing teacher, even though she only ever taught me how to read. She gave me my first critique, at my request, on a collection of poems I'd written on my own, outside of class. I went home and cried because I'd only ever heard praise before, and what she gave me was honesty. I owe her every solid word I've written since.

#

I go back to the bridge the next night, slip behind the tent, sit down on the cobbles, and lean back against the stone wall that runs along the edge. The water-glass melody swirls around me, this time a composition I do not know. I open my sketchbook and watch.

#

After Ma Gwinn, my college literature and writing courses were a blur of disappointment. They seemed to be mostly about being smart, and not so much about the mystery of great writing. I could do smart, but this was not why I had come.

I continued to write on my own after leaving school. I'd planned to transfer someplace with a stronger arts and writing program, but got married instead. By 2003, I'd finished a rough draft of my first adult-market novel, a character-based exploration of how terrible it would be to have what most consider a superpower: the ability to hear others' thoughts.

That year, my husband, baby daughter, and I boarded a small plane for the Bahamas along with seven other people. We made it three quarters of the way there. Seven miles from shore, after the right engine came apart midflight, the pilot ditched our Cessna in the waves. It sank within five minutes. We had begun the trip as ten; eight of us survived. One woman injured her head in the crash. She lived long enough to get her son and daughter into life vests, then floated beneath them until the helicopters came. A four-year-old child in a handmade dress drowned. Her body drifted away from us as we waited, clinging to our vests and to each other.

My daughter lived.

Ma Gwinn called me that week. She'd seen the news reports. I hadn't spoken to her since early college. "You were one of the special ones," she said. I didn't know how important this statement would eventually become to me.

#

I watch from the shadows as the crowd gathers itself into the light of the glass harp. The musician wears a fur-lined hat with earflaps. After each song, he pauses, holds an eyedropper over the goblets, and tunes his instrument. The audience breathes one breath. They are in the same space, the same world, even though each of them bends toward the music out of his own, imitable self. The musician caresses the glass rims. The water vibrates. The sound rises. I watch the newcomers, teeth knocking in the cold, elbow their way through the crowd, striving forward like I had. I watch them as they make it to the front, and the last

obstructing shoulder moves out of their way. I see their faces. The cold has left them. The light shines yellow over them, and the glass and water have cast their spell.

#

Halfway through the rough draft of my next novel, a coming of age story that navigates religion, art, and sex, and the magic that binds all three, I brought the work-in-progress to Ma Gwinn. She'd retired the year before, and we'd fallen out of touch again. It occurred to me that she was getting older. I'd known I wanted to dedicate the book to her from the beginning, and I was worried that she might not live to see it finished and published. She wasn't old, exactly, but I didn't want to take chances. I didn't tell her this when I brought twelve chapters to her door. She must have thought I wanted a critique again, because a week later, when she invited me over for lunch, that's what she gave me.

#

We are on the bridge together, although they cannot see me. The yellow light shines on them. The music hovers above. Their faces are my face. They are each themselves, and they are each all of us, when we encounter the divine. It's an old convention, out of fashion since the post-modernists, but ever since the water and the glass, I've been convinced that good art is divine. It transforms the cold, tethers strangers with intimate bonds, and makes us recognize ourselves in what we once saw as foreign. Good art makes us generous, teaches us who we are, and forgives us for pushing others out of the way to see it because it knows that afterwards, when we walk away, we'll move with kinder steps. It lets us be selfish and lets us come to our own epiphanies about our selfishness. Through art, we can confront all that is fearful and broken in ourselves. Art is necessary. I serve the world when I make it.

#

I finished the first draft of Ma Gwinn's novel on October 20, 2007. I didn't want to show her the rest until I had revised it. Her critique had shaped the process, and much of it was stronger than when I began, but it was still a rough draft. I didn't know how to hold that many pages in my head at once. An essay, a chapter, yes. But hundreds of pages were too many for me to see. I knew it had strong moments, but I didn't know how to hone in on them, put them in the right order, transition among them. I knew I

could not go further on my own. In 2010, I applied for grad school, to start in fall the next year. On November 3, 2010, Ma Gwinn died of lung cancer.

#

I read the guidelines for the MFA. The thesis, they said, had to be developed during the program, through the workshops. So I set aside Ma Gwinn's draft-novel. I began Adelle's story, *The Former Lives of Buildings*. It grew out of a simple question: What scares me most? The answer: The loss of a child. I hadn't lost my daughter in the plane crash, but another mother had, a mother who wasn't even there to see her go. It had stayed with me. Ma Gwinn's own daughter, Gaye, died of breast cancer. Ma Gwinn survived her by a handful of years. Ever fearless, my English teacher faded to a skeleton, but, when I visited her, she didn't complain. She said, flipping her hand in the air, "I have a tingling in my feet." She observed her body's decline as an outsider, and I imagined that there was some comfort for her in the pain, the knowing that in this way she still held something of Gaye with her.

My protagonist, Adelle Corey, is not so fearless as Ma Gwinn. Adelle has spent her life in denial and must fight through this coping mechanism to recover her memory of her son, Ben. Adelle is an architect, and hides her painful memories away in buildings in her dreams so she doesn't have to face them. This city that she's constructed looks like Prague to me, the skyline of the domes and spires rising through the twilight from the Old City, as viewed from the middle of the Charles Bridge. I have Czech postcards taped around my workspace to remind me. Her world draws on the magic of dreams, but this is not a science fiction formula. It is the same sort of cultural magic that Toni Morrison brought to *Beloved*, except that Adelle's culture is the modern United States, where we value science and technology over the divine. Her magic, therefore, comes from the field of psychology. Jung's concept of archetypes and of the function of dreams plays a big role in how Adelle's memory works. Her dreams steal memories from her, protecting her until she's ready to integrate the life-shaking experiences into her waking mind. Like Fitzgerald, my hope is that the pacing and nature of Adelle's experience will draw in readers who have no interest in studying literature and give them an entertaining ride, while at the same time examining themes

that run like currents through who we are as humans, enough so that the academic would find it worth investing the time to follow along as well.

#

Art causes us to confront ourselves.

In my first graduate workshop, I wanted to get away from writing as an act of therapy, to focus instead on writing as an act of creation and craft. In writing the story of Adelle, a woman whose life is so unlike my own, I believe I am accomplishing this. But, through this process, I have learned that I am not the kind of writer who can build a story without confronting myself and my own humanness. If this is not the definition of therapy, then it should be.

I began this project with a question that grew out of my own fear, a fear reinforced by the plane crash. It's forced me to confront emotional experiences in my life that parallel Adelle's. I have not lost a child to death, but I've lost one to divorce. My stepson, Leife, and I both graduate this spring, he from high school and I with my MFA. I spent ten years raising him, but we've barely spoken since 2009. With all the good that's come of ending my marriage with his father, I'm forever pulling these years up at the waist, trying to make them fit. They're more comfortable than what I wore before, but they'll never be perfect. I could not write Ben without confronting my part in this estrangement from my stepson. Thinking about things does not make them right, but it makes room in our minds for possibility.

#

At Ma Gwinn's funeral, another of her former students spoke. He read from a letter he'd sent her shortly before her death.

He said, "You matter. I suspect I will spend the rest of my life trying to matter as much as you."

Hundreds of us sat in the pews. I believe he spoke for us all. I believe my search, twelve years earlier, for a way to make my art matter, grew largely out of knowing Ma Gwinn. I realize now the value

of what she'd said to me, after the plane crash, when I was too numb from the trauma to hear it. She was telling me I mattered.

I hope that my writing motivates readers to look more closely at the people in their own lives and realize the same thing: what a sacred thing it is to walk in each other's flawed and precious presence. We have only so much time.

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The Former Lives of Buildings

Part I

Chapter 1

Awareness rises through the cold soup of her brain. She had no dreams; her leg burns.

It is a blue box of a room. The light is muffled, impure. The quiet air smells sterile.

Ceiling tiles blare down at her, white. They are the cheap mineral wool ones, pockmarked like bleached pancakes, ready to be flipped. *Pancakes are the oldest form of bread in the world*, she thinks, *all the way back to Ancient Rome. Alita docia, they called them*. She doesn't cook much. Her mother saw to that. But she makes pancakes. She mixes them from scratch on the weekends for Ben. He eats with pudgy hands and leaves maple fingerprints that blend with the blond walnut table.

She turns her head and tries to lift it. A bandage runs like a zipper down her left side, armpit to waist. The skin beneath it wrenches when she moves. She catches the whimper in her throat and closes her mouth around it, stops moving, and scans the room as best she can from her pillow. Two navy chairs with wooden frames sit beneath an aluminum sash window. Three empty gurneys share the space, white sheets made with crisp edges. Ben is not here. No one is here but the white and the blue.

Her leg burns. She tries to remember. *I am Adelle Corey*, she tells herself. *I am Ben's mother. I am De's wife. I am...* but the itching begins, crawling like ants beneath her. Adelle twists herself for a scratch. Pain rips at her bandaged side. A wail rises in her throat, but she tenses around it, and it comes out as a stifled creaking. Her leg is an anchor, bound and heavy under the sheets. Her zippered skin feels like a stripe of needlepoints dancing down her torso.

"You're awake," says a blur of cornflower scrubs in her peripheral vision. The fluorescent lights flick on and a woman with auburn hair in loose curls approaches the gurney. She wears a nametag: Maude. Maude pushes a button and the bed begins to rise toward a sitting

position. The shift of Adelle's weight, the downward pull of her heavy breasts, wreaks stinging agony beneath the bandage. She concentrates on Maude's crows' feet and papery skin as fissures open up beneath the bandage, the scabby ravines breaking forth from the itch on her backside, the fire creeping across her braced leg.

"Catch your breath," Maude says. She lets go of the button for a moment.

With the back of her hand, Adelle pushes away the tears bulging under her eyelids. The bumps of a familiar scar graze her cheek and she freezes, realizing what she's done. What if Maude sees? Adelle switches hands, sliding her branded wrist under the sheets as casually as she can, hiding Simonides. His name wreathes around her arm in a permanent bracelet. When people are around, she covers the brand with long sleeves or bangles, her only jewelry besides the wedding ring. Sometimes, the costume slips. A savvy secretary once raised an eyebrow and whispered, *Ex-boyfriend?* Adelle had simply nodded. People have no imagination.

Maude presses the button and the bed is on the rise once more.

Adelle inhales the astringent air, breathing like she had when Ben was born, trying to mute the pain. She begins, again, to remember. *I am Adelle. I am Ben's mom.* The throbbing spreads from her center out under the wounds and into the stretches of her limbs. Her leg burns. She closes her eyes and focuses on Simonides' name under the sheets.

She'd learned about Simonides during her first year at Columbia in Professor Moore's lecture on Memory and Place in the Ancient World. In the fifth century B.C.E., Simonides wrote a victory song for Scopas, the military tyrant of Thessaly. At a banquet in Scopas' palace, Simonides performed his ode, honoring the gods for their mystic part in the battle. But Scopas was no lover of the divine. He awarded Simonides only half his pay, instructing the poet to bill the gods for the balance.

A messenger entered the banquet hall to summon the poet: two men waited for him outside the palace. Simonides went. As he looked up and down the empty street, searching for the men, Scopas' palace crumbled behind him. The gods crushed the tyrant and all his unbelieving guests for their pride.

Adelle remembers Simonides. She is a storehouse, an encyclopedia, of information that doesn't matter. This is why she burned his name into her wrist. There will never be a day when Simonides matters enough that Adelle will forget him. When she looks at his name, even if she doesn't remember her own, she knows what to do. Simonides instructs her. As the only witness to account for the faithless dead, he built a memory palace, the first one in history, by imagining the halls of Scopas' great house and walking through them in his mind. In this way, he identified the unrecognizable dead, down to the last man.

Adelle remembers that Ecuador has an area of 176,204 square miles and uses the U.S. dollar as currency. She remembers that giraffes communicate at frequencies beyond the scope of human hearing and set up day cares, taking turns watching their calves. She remembers the first one hundred twenty-nine digits of π . She does not remember if she's been to Ecuador. She thinks she hasn't but she does not know. She does not always remember how old Ben is. She hopes he is still six. That's the last age she can recall his butterscotch eyes sparkling up at her. They crinkle at the sides like he's laughing even when he isn't. She thinks she spent the day with him yesterday, at the Build-a-Bear in the Westfield Mall in Trumbull, where he stuffed a brown spotted puppy. But if that's true, how did she end up in the hospital?

The bed continues to rise. Adelle grits her teeth against the movement and wonders, what kind of hospital is it? She has wounds. She must be here for her body. She can't afford to assume

the alternative: that the forgetting is the reason. Adrenaline pulses through her. How much does Maude know?

Finally, Adelle is sitting up and the bed comes to a stop. She can feel Maude watching, but does not open her eyes.

I am married to De. I am thirty-one years old. But she cannot confirm it. She doesn't know how long she's been here, so she cannot know her age. *De?* De is not here. What husband lets his wife wake up alone like this? When they first got married, he wouldn't leave her side. He would have slept in those awful vinyl chairs under the window and in the morning he would have chased down memories with her, examining her dreams and reminding her to breathe.

Ben is not here either. But she will always be his mother.

“Going back to sleep? Can't have that. You've got visitors coming today.”

“De?” Adelle scowls at her own carelessness as his name leaves her lips. She knows better. Questions surrender power. She never asks strangers a question until she's recalled all that she can on her own.

Maude's papery face goes smooth. She nods. “Yes, De. And someone new.”

Adelle considers her short list of facts. *I am Adelle. I am Ben's mom.*

Had she woken in the rich softness of her own bed, surrounded by clouds of cream and burgundy duvet, she would have turned to De's shirtless back, placed her naked Simonides hand on the column of his spine. She loved to watch the contrast of her pale fingers against his cinnamon skin, rising and falling to the rhythm of his sleep. She would think of the memory palace and close her eyes, match her rhythm to De's, in and out and in and out, the world dissolving into slow-moving air and the architecture of the last night's dreams.

This is where her memories go when they want to hide: a City of synapse and sleep, where nothing lives or moves besides Adelle and the Baron. He is the dark one, sifting through her days, plucking away her years and minutes. He is the nightmare that visits when she dreams. The Baron purloins first kisses and first cuts, the stubs of cigarettes against stomach skin, a bright red bow she always hated, and the rare look of beautiful fear on her mother's face. He cements them into City, the place—the only place—Adelle goes in dreams. And there they stay. There is Bridge and Tree House, an apartment that levitates four stories above the ground, Beach House glittering beside frozen waves, a tower made of moonflower vines. There are more.

The Baron is a thief. He steals her memories while she sleeps and leaves her waking mind a ghost town, littered with tumbleweeds of academic minutia. Each structure in City houses something that he's seized. He does not care for Ecuador's square mileage or Simonides' song. He leaves these behind as scraps for Adelle to make what she will of them. It is the meat he wants, the matter. Whatever matters most to her, that matters most to him. City grows larger while she sleeps. Every morning is a question mark: *who am I? how old? who do I love, and where, and why?*

She would catch herself and breathe with De once more, her cream hand and his brown skin rising, falling. She would quiet the questions and study her fingers for the answers.

Most days, when Adelle is at home, she is as old as she thinks she is. While the water heats up, she studies the ink and scars of her tattoos. St. Luke's Fortress dominates the heavy curve of her left side, its black stippled stones rising in towers that spire like a swordfish's snout to just beneath her breast. She'd had Sam ink it in with the drawbridge open, spanning almost to her middle, covering two scarred circles the size of raindrops in the sand. Mother Stairs, a whirling set of steps, spirals up her right side, with lanky dark figures frozen mid-climb at

different heights. The Bridge Master's Bascule House is the smallest building on her skin. It hides in heavy cleavage, just over her heart. And further down, below, scars from brands and razors bubble with moments she sometimes wishes she could lock away once more.

But even before she undresses to shower, before this daily examination of the map on her torso and the study of the exact firmness of her skin, even before this, Adelle knows or can guess her age. She watches her hands and has seen their skin go from lustrous smooth to a webbing of faint lines, deeper around the knuckles. It still stretches firmly and has good color, no age spots. There is no sagging about her elbows yet, in spite of the padded softness. At home, she lists her facts and they calm her: *I am Adelle. I am 25, 27, 31.* She reaches for her notebook. She opens it to the next blank page.

Under the cedar beams of her vaulted bedroom ceiling, she pauses, letting her City bloom into itself inside of her. A leaded window, a board and batten corridor, Stadium, Bridge and Beach House. They shiver through her mind awake. In dreams these structures are solid, ancient. But awake, she has to concentrate, weld them together at the seams. She starts this way each morning, remembering her way through the Baron's cobbled streets to see if he has built anything new while she slept.

But here is Maude, the nurse, and not De. Here is a pancake ceiling pressing down on Adelle, a metal tray stand with badly done fake wood grain where her notebook ought to be sitting on a cherry nightstand. Maude is nodding, waiting for her to say something. About what? De is coming. And someone new. Adelle surveys the blue room one more time, looking for her notebook. If she's been here long enough that anyone can be old or new, there will be one, full of the notes, floor plans, and instructions she writes to herself every night before bed.

There is none.

Adelle frowns, thinking of De's jokes about it, how he teased because it always had to be the same notebook: a Bloc Rhodia No 18, eighty sheets with 5x5 squares graphing squares, how she always began by creating a checkerboard pattern over the orange "O" on the front cover as a signal that this was, indeed, her own Rhodia. How she always started each page with her name, his name, and Ben's, and their roles in the family, how they met, when Ben was born, and drawings of all the building in her dreams. *God forbid I get you a Rhodia No 16, Mrs. Jones*, he would say. *You might never believe I was your husband again, even in your own handwriting.*

Adelle would laugh along with him and whip it out of the package he'd handed her, keeping her smile fixed while thumbing through a corner to make sure the grid squares were the right size. He was right; she almost never forgot him, or much of anything else since they'd gotten married. But if she did, and if he handed her a notebook she didn't recognize as her own, well, she preferred not to imagine the suspicions that would breed within her.

De was the first important thing in her life that she remembered. Almost the first. And, since she'd married him, the Baron had stolen less and less. After so many anniversaries with only one great memory loss early on, the Rhodia became more ritual than necessity. De could smile at anything, and all the darkness ran from him.

Without her Rhodia, she has no way of knowing how long she's been here, who her doctor is, why her leg is braced. If it's been brief, there's a chance the nurse doesn't know about her memory. They've seen the tattoos, whoever they are that got her into the cotton hospital gown. But lots of people have tattoos. She wants to know what happened. She wants to know when it happened, and why she didn't dream last night. She wants to know if De is bringing Ben when he comes, but Adelle chooses her next question more carefully.

"May I have a mirror?"

Maude smiles. She has one in her hand. She passes it to Adelle.

Adelle shifts a few locks of oily brown hair around, making a show of arranging herself for visitors while hunting her reflection for clues to her age. Her face is broad and heavy, skin more ash than cream. But the lines about her dull brown eyes are no deeper than on her yesterday, the day of Ben's stuffed dog. And the half-moons below her eyes don't crinkle or droop, even if they are weighty with purple exhaustion. People look tired in hospitals. It doesn't make them older. The heft about her jaw has good tone, does not sag and sway as it would if she'd lost years. Thirty-one, Adelle hopes. Maybe thirty-two or three, but with all the tread that comes with a night on a gurney, thirty-one is still a possibility. Yesterday might still be yesterday.

She lowers the mirror. Maude stands still, back a few steps, hands folded and lids low. Adelle can see her watching from under her lashes, like Ben tries to do, but he always gives himself away when he forgets to be sneaky and smiles when Adelle starts making faces at him.

"Thank you." Adelle holds out the mirror to Maude. Maude wraps pruny, violet-nailed fingers around the plastic handle. Adelle does not let go. Maude looks up with hazel eyes, meets Adelle's gaze. "Do you always carry one with you?"

Maude pauses. "It's a new habit."

"How new?"

Maude's eyes slide toward the double doors, propped open on their stops, then back to meet Adelle's gaze. "Sixty-eight days. Give or take." Her voice is quiet but matter-of-fact.

Trembling washes through Adelle, drowning the itching, the burning. Sixty-eight days since Ben stuffed his puppy. His perfect eyes, butterscotch like his daddy's, smile up through her thoughts. She wonders how much they've changed. Kids grow fast. Missing a day with a child is

like missing a week with an adult. Two months... she'd lost half his summer vacation, his first day of first grade, Open House, new friends, their daily commute into the city, her favorite two-hour round trip. Adelle wonders how much his face has thinned away baby fat, if he's lost any teeth yet, if he plays with the stuffed puppy, if his clothes still fit. A lump rises in her throat. She swallows it.

#

Adelle gave herself her first tattoo when she was nine.

It was mostly by accident. She fell off her bike. The scar up on her right thigh traced the shape of the roof of Cathedral in a thin, white line. Adelle didn't know about real tattoos. Her parents were not the inking kind. She just saw that she was cut like Cathedral, and then marked with its roof forever after.

The night before turning ten, Adelle finally screwed up the courage to sneak upstairs and pilfer her father's spare straight razor, the one with the plastic handle that Mom had replaced for him with a horn-handled beauty two Christmases earlier. The spare probably hadn't seen the strop since, and was dull as Bobby Kinney, the oafish bully in her class. Adelle didn't know how to sharpen it, or that cutting into her flesh with the equivalent of a butter knife would be so much more painful than a quick edge. She sawed through layers of skin, back and forth, clenching her jaw, until the rest of Cathedral bled like an unskilled monochrome on her thigh.

That night Adelle dreamt her way through Cathedral, the longest visit she'd ever made to her favorite building in City. She saw alcoves and icons and carvings she'd never seen before. Her long-time favorite: the gold-gilt Mother Adoring Baby – the one where Mother looks at her blue-eyed newborn with a love so tender Adelle's heart wants to crack – it was nothing

compared to the beauty of Mother Feeding Toddler or Mother Holding Child's Hand to Cross a Crowded Street.

Adelle's new favorite became a white marble that didn't even include Daughter. The stone Mother sat at a familiar table, an old landline phone beside her. One hand clenched in a fist in her lap, enough tension and fear and life in those fingers to shame Michelangelo. Her frozen face perched at the back end of youth, beautiful in its fine features, yet fretted through with creases at the joining of the eyebrows and in lines about the lips. Mother Worried.

Adelle passed through two of the three iconostases that hid the forbidden altar. The first she had seen before, not up close, but from a distance. Mother had her back turned in those paintings, the icons hinged together to make a folding screen to block the way. Mother's back was turned, but she looked over her shoulder, unable to resist a final glance at Daughter, who was old enough to have grown into her brown eyes and psychologist-approved toys for optimum development. There were three screens:

1. Mother Watches Daughter Play
2. Mother Turns Away, Daughter Looks up from Vocational Play
3. Daughter Searches for Mother; Mother Retreats

Neither ever sees the other looking after her.

Adelle's heart pounded as she climbed three steps and approached the screens. She had never been this close before. She studied the final panel and noticed, in the depths, a shadowy man she'd never seen before in Cathedral. The Baron.

The Baron lurked in City.

The Baron rearranged windows and doors.

The Baron pushed Adelle into one house, pulled her out of another.

Adelle did not like the Baron in Cathedral. She worried: Did Mother not see him? She was walking right toward him.

Adelle reached out to pull back the holy screen. Would the Baron be behind it?

His dark figure rose up high. He had no face. His fingers reached out toward her. He was a painting, an icon so big that he took up all three of the panels on the second iconostasis.

Something moved behind the screen. Adelle could hear it.

She couldn't believe he was here. She couldn't believe he got into this holy place. Her skin sweated out fear: would he put her out of Cathedral? Would he pull Adelle away and remake the great wooden doors so she could never get in again? Or rearrange the architecture so she didn't even know when she was passing by, searching for it, that her sanctuary stood beside her?

Not this time. This time, she would stop him. Adelle would ignore how big he was, how dark and strong and how he could pull her like a vortex away from what she needed to know. He wasn't going to take Cathedral. Adelle wouldn't let him have Mother.

Her hand trembled toward the left panel. *Ale lwen!* Adelle practiced in her mind. She would scream it at him, if he were back there, behind the screen. *Go away!*

“Adelle?”

The Baron swelled up suddenly, so big, out of the icon screen, filling Cathedral to its vaulted ceiling.

“Adelle? Wake up birthday girl. It's time to play Who Are You.”

The Baron, Cathedral, Mother hung like smoke around Adelle for a final moment before dissolving into a woman's always voice. Birthday girl. Play. Wake up.

She opened her eyes. Her mother's face was very close.

“Try to remember,” Mother said. “Who are you?”

“Adelle.” She smiled. She always got this one right. “I am Adelle.”

Mother’s head inclined toward her. “Now, look closely.”

The hollow cheeks, the lake-blue eyes, the sparrow-brown hair. Adelle’s brain searched for context.

“It’s important that you remember today. I’m your –”

“Mother.”

Mother’s face relaxed, except her lips. They made a straight line, like they wanted to smile but couldn’t quite. She nodded once and stood.

As she moved, Cathedral’s icons flashed and twirled in Adelle’s brain, suddenly coming alive. A hundred people in her head – but they were all Mother and Adelle, at different ages, all crowding and talking and happening at once, like a room full of TVs playing different scenes from the same movie.

The fingers of Adelle’s mind swooped and grabbed, but the images were moving too fast to get hold of one. Then, finally, she did.

“Wait!” Adelle would tell her about the street. She would tell her she remembered.

But Mother was already leaving. She closed Adelle’s door behind her.

#

The doctor wants to get started, but Maude suggests it might go better with the patient’s husband there to comfort her. They must know Adelle can hear their conversation. She’s always bewildered at how people are willing to fool themselves. Maude and the doctor turn their bodies sideways, one a pillar of cornflower scrubs, the other a column of white, and speak as if the mere act of ignoring Adelle makes her deaf to them, though she’s only three feet away. Adelle begins

to run through Connecticut state regulations on mental patients' rights in her mind, just in case. But it's not really Maude and the doctor who concern her. In the corner, by the sink, stands a thin woman, all sticks and joints, with wide eyes that pinch at the ends. Her skin is the color of raw almond skin. She's dressed too casually to be a doctor. She's wearing a cerulean blue cardigan and jeans that fray at the cuff. She does not speak. She watches.

Maude and the doctor are having trouble convincing each other, and the doctor keeps glancing sideways at Adelle. His bushy eyebrows remind her of Sam Eagle. Maude puts one purple-nailed hand on her hip and gestures to the almond woman. Dr. Muppet stops talking. The woman looks from him to Maude and gives a sharp nod. Maude's lips gather into a pursed smile. Dr. Muppet slumps across the room, plops himself in a blue vinyl chair and rifles the papers on his clipboard.

"We'll wait until Mr. Jones gets here," Maude says, as if Adelle had not already heard.

Mr. Jones. De had stopped letting people call him that when Adelle had insisted on keeping her own name. He didn't want to go through the business of always having to explain that, yes, she was his wife, but it was Mr. Jones and Ms. Corey, every time they got introduced to someone new. Adelle's stomach went soft each time he waved away the formality, saying, "Mr. Jones is my father. It's De. De and Addie. Don't that have a nice ring?" The truth was, he loved being called Mr. Jones. His shoulders straightened each time someone addressed him with the title. After growing up in public housing with six killed or dropped-out brothers, being called Sir or Mister was as good as coming home with a holiday bonus to De.

The first couple months, he called her Mrs. Jones anyway when they were alone. *Put on something fancy, Mrs. Jones. I'm taking you to dinner. Or, Mrs. Jones, that is a mighty fine house you've designed for us. And, Look at that belly, Mrs. Jones. You sure you aren't cooking*

up an extra bun in there? Sometimes, he still did. After weeks of late nights working in the city, falling into bed without energy to ask about his day, Adelle would be doing her morning make-up in the bathroom mirror and see De's dark figure move behind her, a shadow against the butter-colored travertine. She would watch the muscles of his thighs flex and rest as he came close. *In 720 B.C.E., Acanthus of Sparta was the first to run naked in the ancient Olympics.* Adelle imagined he must have looked a lot like De, his body fluid confidence. De would stop barely an inch away from her, his head hovering above her, flecks of freckles under the cinnamon skin of his cheeks reminding her of stars skittering across the sky. *Mrs. Jones*, he'd say, stooping toward her ear, and she'd smile and call out sick from work.

Mr. Jones. Adelle hated taking that away from him, but she was afraid if she changed her name, she might wake up one day and not remember the new one.

Beside her, on a metal chest of drawers, an oblong phone rings, pulling Adelle back to the hospital room. For a moment, all four of them stare at the boxy thing, but when Adelle lifts a hand toward it, Maude takes a couple lunging steps and answers it. After a few quick nods, she holds it toward Adelle.

"It's for you."

Adelle resists the urge to roll her eyes and accepts the receiver.

"Hey, baby."

A smile washes through her, but then she remembers. "We're all waiting for you."

She mouths, *It's De*, to the others in the room.

Dr. Muppet glances at the nut-skinned woman, who nods again. None of them do Adelle the courtesy of leaving the room. Maude moves away from the bed, at least. She sits beside the

doctor and joins him in shuffle through papers, not talking. The darker woman stares out the brown tinted window, casting a shadow over the room. Her hip and shoulder jut toward Adelle.

“I’m working, Addie. I couldn’t get off.”

“You’re the slickest talker there. You can always get off.”

“Not this time, baby. Not again.” He hesitates. “How did you sleep?”

Her throat tightens. “No dreams.”

De doesn’t answer.

She lowers her voice—“What can you tell me?”—the almond woman turns to face her, becoming a silhouette with a cold glow where the dull sun shines through the edges of her blue sweater.

“Listen, Addie, I can’t keep coming. I’ll lose my job.”

“Come when you get off work. Bring Ben.”

Ugly silence fills her ear.

A loss of thirty decibels in three frequencies constitutes sudden deafness.

De says, “There’s a woman there. She’s an old family friend.”

Adelle knows who he means. She studies her, trying to place her. “Your family or mine?”

“You’ll like her.”

“Why aren’t you answering me, DeAngelo?”

“I’ll come when I can. Listen to Celesse. She knows what she’s talking about.”

“De?”

“I’ve gotta go. Customer.”

The standard cell at Alcatraz is five feet by nine. Adelle counts the linoleum tiles against the opposite wall and estimates her room at twenty feet.

Maude takes the phone. She rolls a tray table holding bandages and creams and a basin over to the bedside, looks at Adelle with apologetic eyes. “We have to change the dressings.”

Adelle nods.

For a moment, Maude is still, her lips pressing into a line. Dr. Muppet gives a huff, and Maude begins, gently raising Adelle’s thick left arm above her head. She shifts away the flower print gown, piling it in folds on top of Adelle’s large breast and full stomach, then pulls back the adhesive strip at the top of the zipper bandage. Dr. Muppet starts to say something, but the woman cuts him off.

“Eske ou sonje m’ konsa?”

Adelle turns away from Maude’s working hands at the sound of a language she understands but cannot name. She studies the pinched eyes, the smooth, high arch of her brow, her almond skin stretched over proud cheekbones. Did the woman really speak, or did Adelle imagine it?

“Eske ou sonje m’ konsa?” She asks it again: Do you remember me?

Adelle shuffles through a small collection of mental movies, memories that have not been locked in dream houses. She looks for eyes that corner sharply at the edges with wide lids and high brows. She searches for cropped hair, oiled to smoothness, and long dark arms.

The strong hands rise to the surface of her thoughts, offering a plate of cake. It was at Stuff of Heaven, a bakery downtown painted with celestial blue and golden stars.

She was too thin. That was De’s crazy reason for not choosing her. They were sampling wedding cakes at two small bake shops in Fairfield. Both offered the standard flavors: white, chocolate, red velvet, and so on. Both had competitive prices and lavish, custom options. But there was something about the ones at Stuff of Heaven, a spice, a scent, a flavor under flavors

that felt like more than just cake to Adelle. It felt like someplace she had been but, like so many others, a place that she could not remember.

She had wanted that cake. De could pick whatever design he wanted.

“Never trust a skinny chef,” he’d said.

She thought he was joking.

Maude pulls away the gauze, opens her up. The air-sting along the strip of her side yanks Adelle from the mirage of cake and disappointment.

Her skin is gone.

Strawberry pulp, cut in the perfect geometry of a rectangle two inches wide, runs the length of her torso. The red underskin weeps its way down almost to her hip.

Adelle clutches her stomach, begins to gag. The convulsions rip new webs of bleeding into the open wound, wrack waves of torture through her bound leg. Her head swims and, just as the bile rises, Maude puts the blue plastic basin under her chin, catching the acid and rage with a practiced hand. The baker--Celesse, De called her--watches the performance. Her face goes slack for a moment, soft. Dr. Muppet just looks tired.

“Ms. Corey, you’ve suffered deep-tissue burns on your right calf and—”

Adelle can barely hear him through the bloodless tingle in her brain.

“Give her a minute,” Celesse interrupts. “Let her catch her breath.” Adelle gulps at the air. She closes her eyes and floats in an ocean of confusion.

It is not the blood. Adelle is not squeamish. She once bandaged Ben’s arm all snarled with red and clumps of pink tissue after a dog bite, singing “I Am Not Your Broom” by They Might Be Giants the whole time to make him laugh.

Someone stole her tattoo. This asshole doctor stole St. Luke's Fortress right off her skin, leaving only the first stone turret and the faint line of road that once led to the drawbridge. With eyes closed, Adelle imagines running through the church, the feet of her memory swift past the cold, carved statues of dream language mingling with the flesh and bone of remembered Ben, sputtering and purple, mostly submerged in the baptismal. The priest's hands are wood. Father is a dream icon, and her real baby Ben is drowning.

She opens her eyes. The nurse, the doctor, and the rejected baker watch her with no glimmer of surprise.

She knows this is not the memory. She knows she was with him yesterday, stuffing the nappy little brown dog. But it is also not the dream. Dreams are still and lifeless. No one moves in her dreams, except Adelle; no one drowns or lives or loves. This is not all dream, and so it scares her more. She tries again, and again the priest is wood, again her baby gurgles deadly water, and she cannot get the dream-memory-mix to move forward. She cannot breathe.

She stares down at Simonides, abandoning any thought of hiding his name, branded on her wrist. She knows her baby lived. She knows she saw him yesterday. But the christening is lost to her. His baptism is unending hell.

The smell of hospital, astringent and silvadene, brings Adelle back to today, whatever day today might be, an unknown distance from her yesterday. Burning pain returns and sears up her skin. The ant itch swarms beneath her once more. Celesse comes closer, strokes Adelle's wrist with an index finger, tracing the swirls of Simonides' name. Maude has rolled netting over the pulpy rectangle and is securing it with heavy gauze and white tape.

Adelle stares at the almond-colored finger traveling the branded letters. The touch is oddly calming.

“Why are you here?” Adelle asks the baker.

“You remember nothing about me, my sister?” Even Celesse’s English has traces of accent. French?

“I remember the spice,” Adelle says.

The woman’s finger stops. “In the cakes?”

Adelle nods.

Celesse steps back from the gurney. “And nothing before that?”

Adelle’s leg really hurts now, and a buzzing has started in her head. Maude lifts the sheet and rips open the Velcro on the brace. Adelle watches as the nurse unswaths the misshapen calf beneath. It’s lumpy and dented, and it feels like someone is boiling her leg. The heat worsens where Maude touches it, but she’s good at her job and Adelle winces only at the very last layer of gauze before the adaptics come off.

When Maude removes these, awe and repulsion fill Adelle’s chest. Her leg is a pulpy collage, a tattered map of a foreign land. Hunks of skin bulge over her shin, pretending to stand in for the missing muscle underneath. The thicker patches are uninked, probably from her backside. Around these, at the edges, run thinner strips of skin, mottled with black ink. The pillaged turret and west wing of St. Luke’s have been butchered beyond recognition, and pasted out of order across her quilted leg. The tattoo was run through some kind of meat tenderizer; it has a perfect pattern of diamond punctures. What is left of red clumps of tissue peek out through the holes. Adelle bears down and clutches the side guards on her gurney as Maude spreads silvadene over the mottled artwork and ass skin.

“Anything else?” Celesse asks again. “Do you remember anything beside the bakery?”

For a moment, the fresh, sick scent of oatmeal cookies fills Adelle's nose. She fights the rising nausea.

"I want to see my son." Adelle's words come like a growl through her clamped teeth. She pants against the fire of Maude's touch.

"Your tibia had to set before we could do the skin grafts," Dr. Muppet starts again.

"Call De. Tell him to bring Ben."

"When the grafts have taken, we'll start PT to get you walking again."

"Who the hell are you? Doctor what?"

"Wyndham. I'm Dr. Wyndham. After PT we'll move you to—"

"Call him. Call De right now, Dr. Wyndham."

Dr. Wyndham glances at Celesse before continuing. She gives a slight shake of her head.

"It may be a while," he says.

"I don't care how long the grafts take."

"I mean about your son. It may be a while."

Adelle's heart pounds like horse hooves. A while? How long has it been since he last saw her? She misplaces days, but Ben never does. She's made sure of it. When he was forming in her stomach, heredity became her constant fear. What if he were like her, building-shaped holes all through his memory? As he grew and remembered normally, each morning put another inch between Adelle and her fear. But she would not take chances. There are calendars in the kitchen, the home offices, the family room, Ben's room. Together, they mark them and journal by them, weaving their days through them. So far it had worked. Other kids say last week for last year, yesterday for last week. Not Ben. He is growing up in time. He knows that yesterday was yesterday. He knows five minutes is 300 seconds and that when Adelle says tomorrow it does

not mean in a month. Does he miss her? Is he riding in to school with De? Does De know to pack him smile notes? Adelle pictures him opening his Transformers lunch box every day looking for one. They pass them back and forth. Adelle draws crazy eyes, sometimes with big loopy eyelashes, sometimes with three pupils in each one, and pop it in the front pocket. He scrawls in a mouth or a nose and puts it back in the lunch box. They go back and forth with hair, ears, chins, working on a new one each week. He keeps them in a secret stash in a shoe box under his bed that she's not supposed to know about. Does De know about it? Adelle's chest tightens when she thinks about Ben opening up his lunch to nothing but food.

“What's wrong?” she asks. “How long is a while?”

Dr. Wyndham looks past Adelle to Celesse.

She answers Adelle in her rich voice. “Imagine what it must be like for a child to be forgotten again and again, over and over, every day. Do you really want to put your son through that?”

“Why are you here?” Adelle asks her again.

Celesse opens her mouth, but muppety Dr. Wyndham speaks first. “It's not uncommon to experience post-traumatic memory loss. I'm sure it will come back to you when the time is right.”

Maude finishes with Adelle's leg and smooths the Velcro shut. Hunger wakes in Adelle's belly. Her body feels too heavy to move. She tries again to remember something of this Celesse woman from before the bakery. But the Nefertiti forehead, pinched eyes and raw almond skin are nowhere. She's not in Adelle's classes at Columbia, not in weekend barbeques at De's mother's place, not anywhere.

She wants to demand to know why the baker is here, but she suspects it would be fruitless, and her voice is getting weaker. “I’d like you to leave.”

They stare at her.

“All of you,” Adelle casts her gaze across the room. “*Ale lwen*,” she says, a phrase she uses in her dreams, when she is brave enough. Usually she runs instead, when Baron looms above her, stirring all the darkness in her stomach. But sometimes, when a memory is worth reclaiming, she stands her ground. *Ale lwen! Go Away!* And she realizes that this is the language Celesse began with, a language Adelle had forgotten was a language at all, outside of her City, because nobody has ever spoken it to her.

Celesse’s face is a mean Mona Lisa: she has a secret but no smile. She nods at the others. Maude and Dr. Wyndham file from the room, the dark baker slow behind them. At the threshold, she turns once more to Adelle.

“*Bay kou, blye; pote mak, sonje.*” And then she walks away.

Adelle closes her eyes, letting the words soak slowly through her mind: *Deal a blow, you forget; bear marks, you remember.* And then, there is Ben, rising up from the darkness, his baby brown skin going blue as he screams and chokes for the priest’s wooden hands to save him. Her eyes fly open. She can’t breathe.

I am Adelle. I am Ben’s mom. I am thirty-one. I am—I think I am—married to De.

She is an encyclopedia of worthless knowledge. She remembers that in 1401 C.E. Lorenzo Ghiberti won the commission to decorate the doors of the baptismal building for the *Santa Maria del Fiore* by politics more than by skill. She remembers that his rival, Filippo Brunelleschi, came back in 1419 C.E. and bested him in a competition to design the cathedral’s dome by smashing the bottom of an egg on a table to get it to stand upright.

She does not remember her own son's baptism. Did the priest bless him? Did she hold him there, by the altar, or did De? The memory has been butchered away with the tattoo that held it. In her mind, he is forever dying in the waters of eternal life.

Chapter 2

On July 18, 64 C.E., Tacitus, future historian of Rome, was nine years old. Three years older than Ben is now. And on that day, and for about five days after that, the boy Tacitus survived the Great Fire of Rome. Watching the flames lick at great houses, and swallow them whole, must have had much to do with young Tacitus' determination to translate life into words, to try to hold people and places hostage in words on a page and in the minds of those who read them and shared them. Buildings burn. Books burn. Words passed down are eternal.

Seneca was already a man that day, and watched his city burn with adult eyes. A stoic philosopher and advisor to the emperor, Seneca, too, sought to capture the lives and days the ashes had held in their former lives as buildings. He wrote the Great Fire into words in a letter to the apostle Paul, claiming almost ten percent of the city had burned.

On July 13, 2010 C.E., Adelle survived a fire that she does not remember. It consumed nine percent of her body. In order to rebuild, Dr. Wyndham raided her tattooed city for skin grafts. The square scab on her bottom came out first. She had no buildings there, and the doctor would have taken the other grafts from that region as well, except that it became infected.

She is allowed to know this, and writes it in her notebook. It's a new one, sterile as the hospital room that will be her home until she recovers. The black spine crackles when Adelle opens it. A Rhodia. De must have told the baker. She had brought it. Her name is Celesse. Celesse St. Armand. Adelle is allowed to know that, too. She lists it on the second page with sketches of cakes and moons and writes Maude's and Dr. Wyndham's names there, too.

She is writing when Maude comes in.

"You'll want these." The nurse hands Adelle a twelve-pack of Prismacolor soft-lead pencils. Her favorite kind. She uses them for everything but the buildings. The buildings are

black and white. Adelle opens the black cardboard flap and slides them halfway out, onto her lap. The orange, red, and blue are worn, but the other colors still have their factory-sharpened points.

“I’ve used these before.”

Maude glances at her sideways. Adelle runs an index finger over the dulled leads.

“Mmm-hmm,” Maude says, and turns away again to open cabinets and count the bottles and swabs inside.

“Sixty-eight days,” Adelle says.

Maude does not answer. She touches each jar and box with a purple fingernail. Adelle watches, weighing her words. Every question, her whole life, has exchanged a measure of her autonomy. Asking for information, things any normal person would know about themselves, leaves her that much more dependent on the good will of the person who answers. But these people, the muppet doctor, Celesse, Maude, they already know. *Imagine what it must be like for a child*, Celesse had said, *to be forgotten again and again*.

Adelle runs through her facts: *Sixty-eight days. Ben is not coming. De is not coming. Burns and a broken tibia. Celesse St. Armand*. Adelle hesitates, and then includes: *Damaged tattoos make damaged memories*. Her stomach tightens around all she does not know. She watches Maude, moving slowly from cabinet to cabinet, taking mental inventory, not marking down a single number on the paper charts taped inside each door.

“They want you to keep an eye on me.”

“There’s a lot of patients in this hospital. You’re not that special.”

“How many boxes of gloves in that cabinet?”

“Four.” Maude raises her other hand and taps the door of the next cabinet over, the one she hasn’t opened yet. “There’s ten in this one, and thirty boxes of swabs. Same as yesterday, same as the day before. You’ve had this place to yourself for a couple weeks now. Seems like I don’t even have to count them anymore, we use them up so slowly.”

“With so many other patients, why take the time if you already know?”

“If I stop paying attention, I might miss something.”

“I didn’t dream last night.”

Maude opens the next cabinet, the one with ten boxes of gloves. Adelle waits, but the nurse doesn’t say anything.

“Why is Celesse St. Armand here? Why not De?”

Maude points them, one at a time, as she speaks. “Mr. Jones has got his hands full with Ben.”

“Has it been very hard for him?”

Maude’s hand pauses midair. She turns her head to look over her shoulder at Adelle.

“Has what been hard for him?”

“Me forgetting. That’s why I can’t see him, right?”

“I reckon he knew something about this when he married you.”

“Not De. Ben. How long was I here before I started forgetting?”

But Maude has gone back to counting and does not answer. Adelle watches her tick off the boxes and close the cabinet door.

“Still ten?”

“Still ten. But who knows? Maybe tomorrow will be different.”

#

Adelle opens her eyes. The room is blue, the ceiling white and pocked like pancakes.

Her leg burns. The quiet air smells sterile. She rubs her Simonides wrist to retrace last night's dreams. But she had none.

Why isn't she dreaming?

The pancakes remind her of Ben, the streaks of his sticky fingerprints a maple syrup Jackson Pollock over the walnut grain of the table. She runs through the rest of her facts. *I am Adelle Corey*, she tells herself. *I am Ben's mother. I am De's wife. I am...* but the itching begins, and she can't think beyond it. She twists her body toward the tray table beside her gurney, where a Rhodia rests. It is hers. She can see the checker pattern that she always draws over the orange O on the cover. She reaches for notebook. Pain rips at her bandaged side. A wail lodges in her throat. Her braced leg anchors her, and the long stripe of bandage zipping up her side can't stop the stinging from the missing skin underneath.

Adelle pulls her arm inward to ease the stretch against tender skin. She gauges the distance between her fingers and her Rhodia, moves more slowly this time, absorbing each new millimeter of pull before pressing through the sting for more. Her fingers land on the cover at last, drag the tablet toward her inch by inch. She fumbles. It slips, a flutter of pages winging downward. She lurches for it, a reflex, but pain rips up her body and halts her mid-lurch as the pages splay out across the industrial tile floor with an airy smack. The Rhodia is a black and orange butterfly, landed, wings spread, paper guts folding beneath it, and Adelle is sucking in air against the screaming of her skin.

"You're awake," says a blur of cornflower scrubs in her peripheral vision. The fluorescent lights flick on, and Maude approaches the gurney.

"I dropped my notebook."

The nurse scoops up the Rhodia with her free hand. In the other one, she holds a mirror. She puts the notebook across Adelle's thighs and presses the button to sit the bed up. Adelle grits her teeth against the pain.

When the gurney stops Adelle holds a hand out for the mirror. Maude passes it to her, watches her with hazel eyes.

"Sixty-nine," Adelle says.

Maude's papery skin crinkles up into a smile. "You've been studying." She taps the Rhodia in Adelle's lap.

Adelle shakes her head. "Too clumsy. I didn't even get to open it."

Maude's smile freezes. Her pupils go large, pushing back her golden irises.

"I have to call Ms. St. Armand," Maude says and shuffles out the double doors.

Adelle smiles. *Today, she thinks, I will see Ben.*

#

Adelle watches the bit of green hallway that she can see through the open wooden doors. Occasionally a white lab coat or a couple sets of blue scrubs pass, padding by on rubber-soled shoes. There is no clock or calendar in her room, so she draws a grid on the fifth page of the Rhodia. She fills in the days, beginning with July 13. She lists her facts: *I am Adelle Corey. I am Ben's mother. I am living on a gurney in Bridgeport Burn Center. Today is September 20. I remember yesterday.* She stops. Last night she had no dreams, so of course the Baron did not come last night. But yesterday she'd woken from dreamlessness, too. She flips back through her first four pages. Names, a sketch of the hospital room, the date of the fire, and no dreams. How did the Baron snatch away all that came before yesterday without a dream to reach through?

Adelle closes her book. She turns her body carefully and lifts the flower print gown to see her zipper bandage. She tries to ignore the fire-ant itch on her backside, growing stronger now that she's paying attention to her wounds. That scab will heal soon, she knows, if she can keep from scratching. She concentrates instead on the gauze at her armpit, pulls the tape back with her fingers, and stares at the pulpy red geometry underneath. The half-memory rises: the baptismal, baby Ben screaming through bubbling water, the wooden hands. She shuts her eyes, feeling the burn of her leg creep up into her lungs, like she's the one drowning, like she's the one under that holy sea.

Adelle stares again at the empty hall, a bleak relief from the images in her head, then looks back down at the graft site. She pulls the rest of the bandage away. The image of Ben pawing for air flashes through her mind. Adelle concentrates on seeing her own mottled skin. She uses the mirror Maude left behind to examine the skin of her side. The strawberry strip is about two inches wide and stops just above her hip. The rest of St. Luke's—the Crooked Cross, the drawbridge, the six remaining stone turrets inked in tiny black lines and stipple—all of it is there, starting at that part of her waist where she loves De's hand to touch her, and wrapping around to stretch from shoulder blade to kidney.

It's nothing like the real St. Luke's. Dreams are like that. The mind builds spaces to mean what they mean instead of spaces to look how they look. City made a fortress of St. Luke's, complete with castle walls and arrow slots in the heights of the towers. The Crooked Cross marks the entry point, where the drawbridge lands when it spans the moat. The cross is where thieves are hanged.

The real St. Luke's is a building with an identity crisis, a cobbled box, with its Bauhaus form dressed in a brownstone attempt at quaintness. The hodgepodge of stained glass windows

are a swirl of Medieval Art Deco, if such a thing is possible. Father Michael laughs at all the wrong moments when delivering his commentary on the liturgy, and the garish choir robes remind Adelle of neon-colored tourist traps that litter the landscapes of America's raunchier beaches.

Adelle takes her time, lingering over every stone of the reflected tattoo. The other memories are still there, she discovers, as strains of The Beatles' *Blackbird* sing through her mind. The interior of Jay Jay's Used CD Shack rises in her mind. She remembers the rows of CD bins that ran like shallow mountains in lines down the length of Jay Jay's Vintage Music. They started at waist level and rose up to a low ridge in the center, then graduated back down on the other side. Adelle had been flipping through the foothills of the bin marked "A" while "Blackbird" played quietly through the store.

"And what can I do for you this lovely afternoon?"

Adelle had looked up from the used CD's. Across the bins of music, in the next aisle over, stood a tall young man with nubby hair and a broad how-may-I-help-you smile. Behind him, torrents of rain beat against the shop windows.

"*Lovely* afternoon?" she asked.

"I do love me a good storm now and then. Don't you?"

Adelle noticed faint freckles under his cinnamon-colored skin. The ones on his left cheek looked like a map of the Big Dipper. She smiled.

"I'm DeAngelo Jones. De for short." DeAngelo Jones extended his long arm across the CD rack and Adelle shook his hand. "What are you looking for?"

“I don’t know if you have it.” Adelle went back to thumbing through the row of jewel cases in front of her. “It’s an old soundtrack with Louis Armstrong and Danny Kaye. They sang a medley together with Su--”

“Susan Gordon. *Pennies from Heaven*. 1959.” De crossed his arms over his chest. The sleeves of his royal blue shirt pulled up to his forearms, straining the buttons.

Adelle thought it must be hard for him to find shirts with long enough sleeves. “You know it?” she asked.

“Of course I know it. My daddy played sax. I grew up on Charlie Parker and Louis Armstrong. Question is, how do you know it?” De leaned forward. His body was long enough that he could bend over the landscape of CD’s on his side and rest his palms on the ridge that ran down the middle, bringing his dark face close to Adelle’s.

She studied his brown eyes, paler than her own. The light got trapped in them and seemed never to come out. They roved over her pink cashmere sweater, the only thing she had clean that day, the previous year’s Christmas gift from her mother. De’s smile tightened at the edges.

“You don’t much look like someone who knows the blues,” he said.

“Do you have it?” she asked.

“Yes. No. *I* have it. The store doesn’t.”

Adelle caught herself starting to slump and straightened back up.

“Tell you what,” De said, “you let me take you to Jack’s for dinner Thursday, I’ll make you a copy, bring it with me.”

Adelle pressed her lips together. “I don’t date.”

“Whoa,” De said, waving his large hands in front of himself, “who said anything about a date? I just want to hear how a pretty little white girl ends up listening to Satchmo. Two blues lovers. That’s all.”

Little. Adelle had smiled, looking down at herself. She was shaped like a squatty pear. No one ever called her little.

#

Adelle traces the rest of their early life together in the remaining stones of her tattoo.

They’d said they’d been waiting until Adelle’s thesis was done, to tell her parents, that they’d been quietly engaged for months. Mother stood rigid, a crusted form with no substance beneath. Dad’s eyes flicked down, pausing on Adelle’s stomach. When he looked back, up, he wore a smile that strained only a little across his tanned skin. He turned to Mother. Adelle could tell he wanted to get her in on the act by the way he said, “Well. This is good news.” He was speaking to Adelle and De, but looking at her. Mother’s face was blank as a statue, the ones from Ancient Greece with blind eyes. No pupils, no irises, just smooth white globes tucked into stone lids.

“Missy?” Dad said.

“Why are you doing this to me?” It was her always voice. Her statue eyes bored through Adelle.

Here it comes, Adelle thought.

“Nine days. It’s as good as eloping. I can’t send wedding invitations in nine days.”

It was better than telling her Adelle was pregnant. She’d figure that out soon enough. That would send her into delusional fits about her reputation. As if she had one worth saving.

“No one would come, anyway,” Adelle said.

“What about DeAngelo’s family? What will they think, that their daughter-in-law’s parents can’t hold a proper wedding?”

“Call me De,” De said. “And you don’t have to worry about my family. We can celebrate on no notice at all.”

Mother’s lips made the line that she used as her smile. “De. You do know what you’re getting?”

De looked right back at her. There was muscle in his stare. Adelle could stand beside that strength. She could be safe in it.

“Mrs. Corey, I know exactly what I’m getting.”

Mother looked away first.

Tingling bursts exploded through Adelle’s body, confetti at a victory parade.

Mother exited the kitchen. Her muffled footsteps ascended the carpeted stairs.

Dad looked at De and shrugged, palms out, face sheepish. De’s upper lip went tight, and the rest of his face slipped into his salesman grin, like that first day she’d met him at Jay Jay’s. Above them, in her parents’ room, drawers thudded at irregular intervals.

“Congratulations,” Dad said at last. He thrust a hand across the walnut table for De to shake.

De stood, his chair scraping the tile. He took Dad’s hand in his. The muscles running through each of their arms tensed and softened, as if searching for just the right grip. And then they had it. The clasp settled into something comfortable, natural-looking. Adelle watched them from her seat. Their smiles, they were right this time. Her dad’s eyes crinkled at the edges and De’s lip had relaxed into a genuine smile. Adelle realized they were the same height.

Dad crossed the kitchen, opened the cabinet over the fridge, and flipped on the stereo receiver they'd installed during Adelle's first year away at school. Jimmy Buffet filled the kitchen, not knowing where he was going when the volcano was blowing. Dad shimmied around from cabinet to cabinet. Three of Gran's crystal flutes appeared in his hand. De started beating out rhythms on the yellowing table. Adelle almost couldn't hear her mother's upstairs rampage over the music.

Still dancing, Dad pulled a bottle out of the countertop wine cellar, shaking his backside comically as he poured. He paused long enough to throw back a glass, then poured himself another before filling the other two. He fit the stems between his fingers and served them to De and Adelle.

"It's just sparkling wine," he said. Adelle loved her that her dad could apologize for not having champagne without reminding them that they hadn't given him a chance to prepare. He raised his flute. De and Adelle did the same. Soft light bounced off the blushing bubbles of the rose`.

"To sons," Dad said, "and, of course, to daughters."

They touched glasses and sipped. A final, loud thud resounded above.

Mother returned to the kitchen, arms laden with scraps of cloth. She draped some over Adelle's shoulders and held others next to her face.

"What are you doing?" Adelle asked.

"Choosing your wedding colors." Mother took Adelle's champagne and finished it in one swallow. "Nine days to make a dress."

She handed Adelle the empty flute. The design cut into the crystal shot miniature rainbows onto the maple table. Adelle smiled.

#

Under the fluorescent hospital lights and the sharp smell of antiseptic, she studies St. Luke's turrets and remembers wearing the creamy yellow empire-waisted dress, holding De's hand, coming down the steps under a shower of rose petals into the sea of Joneses: three of his brothers, his mother, cousins, uncles, aunts, a gaggle of kids, all cheering and waving arms. And the two pale faces of her quiet parents. Sam was there, too, quiet, in the back, standing with his arms crossed.

She remembers De's young hands on her young skin, black fingers roving over white stomach, breasts, and thighs, tracing the lines of buildings both inked and scarred into her flesh, no pulpy rectangle running down her side. No St. Luke's there either, not yet, not that night.

Her mind wanders. Tanned hands, swirled with black inked cats, hover over her, holding the tattoo gun to that same skin while she holds her breast up, out of the way, with one hand and covers the naked nipple and curve with the other. *Don't worry, Corey, says Sam, the artist, I'll behave.*

Adelle blinks and returns her attention to the building on her belly, admiring the details. Every stone is shadowed perfectly with tiny stippled dots. She remembers other, older hospital lights beating into her eyes when she opened them between contractions, concentrating on keeping her breath even and pushing and holding and pushing and holding. She remembers Ben's scrunched latte skin, scrubbed clean of birth, against her sweaty cheek and De looking on with worn eyes, the bassinet, the park, the nanny. De's face full of clouds when she went back to work, De's face full of freckles and smile when he watched her nursing their son. Moving their small family into the brick Tudor-style country house Adelle designed herself. All these flashes

of their early life together are there, in the ink on her skin. Muppety Dr. Wyndham managed to leave the majority of St. Luke's treasures intact in the wake of his scalpel.

Where are they? She wonders how many minutes have passed since Maude left to tell Celesse St. Armand, and surely Dr. Wyndham, too. Would she tell De? Would De bring Ben? If Adelle was remembering again, maybe he would.

Then Adelle remembers one more thing from yesterday: the phone beside her bed.

#

By lunchtime, Maude still hasn't returned. An orderly with a face solid and silent as a granite mountain delivers a tray of nondescript provisions. He leaves Adelle alone with the rubbery gray food. She pushes it around with the fork and thinks about the voice message she left for De. *I held onto yesterday. I need to talk to you about the dreams.* She had paused, wanting to ask him to bring Ben, but afraid it was too soon. Afraid he might not trust her with their son just yet. *Give Ben a raspberry for me. Right in the middle of his belly.*

She thinks of what Maude said. *De has his hands full with Ben.* If it's true, it means her parents are not helping. Adelle wonders if they haven't offered, or if De has not accepted. Her hand moves out of habit to a scar on the lower right of her belly. A simple fort of cardboard blocks she'd had Sam burn in with a cauterizing iron. It had mortified De when he saw the angry red lines, so bright against her pasty stomach.

"It's nothing", she had told him.

"It's right above your parts," he'd said.

"There's something here I need to know, if we're going to have this baby."

She woke up to vomit late that night, and the bile kept coming. Her lurching woke up De, and he squatted beside her, pulling back locks of her chestnut hair. He tried the running joke

they'd used about the sickness that came at all times of day: "Tell that baby go back to sleep. It isn't morning yet."

Adelle sputtered and spat into the toilet and looked up at him with sallow eyes. "My Mother," she said, "is not allowed to babysit."

Over the next few days, the burns had scabbed, and they couldn't make love, not even from behind, because his body or the bed or her own thighs holding her up would rub against it too much and make it weep pus and blood. Finally, it faded all to silver-white, even paler than her skin, a child's block fort with a levitating roof.

#

Sometime after lunch, Celesse St. Armand walks through the double doors. Adelle closes the Rhodia. She's been filling it with sketches of the buildings of City, ghosts rising reluctantly from the cold ground of her mind. It has been hard for her to concentrate; they are so insubstantial, as if leaves and grime and history have layered over them, dream-graves undisturbed for too much time. She's sketched out the towers at Entry Bridge, but the middle, where it wavers in her mind, is barely a smudge on the page. The football stadium on the far end of town—so small it fits in the palm of her hand, so large that if she leans over to look, its open-air top becomes a mouth that swallows her whole—it has become a black and white photo of itself, blurry around the edges. The beach house that sits to City's south shimmers up before her, and then dissolves like vapors. By the time the baker arrives, Adelle's own skin is itching all over, crawling with ants even where there is no wound. She wants to bolt out of the gurney, chase down her dreams until they stand still and explain themselves. She glares at the orange O of her Rhodia, which she's decorated with a checkerboard pattern. How dare they run from her, her dreams?

Celesse St. Armand gives Adelle a nod, walks over to a blue vinyl chair, and sits down. She pulls a book out of her yellow hobo-style shoulder bag and begins to read.

“Good book?”

Another nod, this one without looking up.

Adelle watches in the silence.

Celesse turns a page.

“Slow at the bakery?”

“No.”

She turns another page and angles her body away from Adelle, who suddenly longs to be back in New York, at her desk, doing her own work. As a MArch student in the architecture program at Columbia, Adelle would never have expected to end up specializing in prisons. Or, if she did, to love it. She almost turned down the first prison project, would have if she had any tenure at all. Emil Heinlein, the first partner at Axes Architectural Solutions, had made it sound like a gift: she had complete freedom within budget and code. They both knew that what he was really saying was that she was going to do it and would have to find a way to enjoy it if she could. There was never room in a government budget, or prison codes for that matter, for creative license. But Adelle knew that buildings had souls, that while form should follow function, the function could be more than a storage vault for whatever activity went on inside, whether it was corporate takeovers, family life, or, in this case, punishment. She convinced herself that places could be part of rehabilitation instead of just holding patterns. Buildings could educate. A building like that could store what is terrible long enough for it to evolve into something useful and productive, or, in those rare cases when a prisoner is incarcerated for

breaking a law that should be broken, the right space could be a sanctuary until society evolves enough to welcome her back.

“If I give you a list, would you bring me some books?” Adelle asks the baker just as Dr. Wyndham comes through the doors,

Out of the corner of her eye, Adelle sees a hard grin cross Dr. Wyndham’s face. Ms. St. Armand must see it, too, because she turns toward him and asks, “Is something funny?”

The doctor glances at Adelle and away again, shifts his weight.

“Please explain,” Ms. St. Armand says.

“With Mrs. Corey’s condition... one book should be enough.”

“And why is that?”

“Never mind. It’s not important.”

Adelle watches the doctor look down from Ms. St. Armand’s gaze.

“Adelle,” she says, “What’s the last book you read?”

“*Imagining the Penitentiary*. Why?”

“And how many pages does it have?” Ms. St. Armand’s words come thick with island French, arching in the middle like a cat ready to strike. The doctor crosses his arms over his chest.

“Three hundred thirty-seven.”

“What’s on page one hundred twenty-one?”

“Read it yourself.”

Dr. Wyndham smiles again and shakes his head.

“Humor me,” Ms. St. Armand says.

“I’m not a circus act.” Fucking De. He obviously told the baker about her memory, too, the parts that work. First the Rhodia, now this. What else had he told her?

“Do you know what’s on page one hundred twenty one?” Dr. Muppet asks.

Great. Now the doctor wants to know. “Sure,” Adelle says. “Yes. I know what’s on the page.”

They’re both staring at her, so she rolls her eyes and says, “Last two plates of Moll’s story do not show forcible institutions, but, as Paulson observes, the walls close in her, ultimately forming--”

“Page 273,” Dr. Wyndham says. His eyebrows have squiggled together like a poisonous caterpillar.

“I’m doing the whole book. Get a library card.”

“Adelle, what happened yesterday?” Celesse St. Armand sounds smug. So this is what she’s after.

“I woke up here without my husband or my son or my memories.”

“And today?”

“I remembered.”

Adelle watches Celesse St. Armand’s face while Dr. Wyndham fumbles through his examination. Celesse St. Armand watches everything. She holds her book in front of her, and her eyelids lowered, but she’s looking up through the lashes, like Ben does when he wants Adelle to think he’s fallen asleep.

“I remember a lot,” Adelle says when Dr. Wyndham shuffles out.

Ms. St. Armand doesn’t answer.

“Not just from books.”

The baker turns a page.

“I remember right up to the fire. I took Ben out at the mall in Trumbull.”

The baker stares into her tome, but her gaze is still, not the side-to-side motion of reading.

“I don’t remember you. De says you’re a family friend. Why is he lying to me?”

Ms. St. Armand snaps the book shut. “De’s right. It’s far too soon to let you see Ben.” She crosses the room, her canvas sneakers making rubbery sounds against the thick linoleum, and stops beside Adelle’s gurney. She takes Adelle’s Simonides wrist and turns it over to expose the bulging brand, tapping the N with her finger. “You have a lot of work to do, my friend.”

#

“You’re here late.” Adelle watches Maude shake the pillow out of its case and transfer it to fresh linens.

The nurse tucks it back under Adelle’s head and says, “Mmhm.”

“How long is your shift?”

“I doubled up today. Traded with Betty.”

“That was nice of you.”

The left corner of Maude’s papery mouth pulls up. “It was nice of Betty.”

For the first time since waking up yesterday, Adelle’s stomach relaxes. The itching beneath her is not so bad, and the itching down her side is only just beginning. The edges of that rectangle grew crusty scabs over the course of the day, and the new healing pulls at the tattooed city surrounding it. But the crusting hasn’t reached the middle of the wound yet, and so it is just a gentle pull. Adelle stares at the blackness beyond the window, its brown tint obscuring any stars that might be out and blurring the stark lights of the other buildings of the Bridgeport

Hospital complex. Occasionally, red and white lights streak across the bottom, doctors and nurses coming and going. Visiting hours have passed.

“How long will it take?” Adelle asks.

“I imagine you can decide that better than the rest of us.”

“I’m not dreaming.”

Maude lays out gauze, sponges, and creams on the tray table.

“I don’t know how I’ve been forgetting. That’s where the memories go, into my dreams. Without them, I shouldn’t forget.”

“We all have something we want to forget. It doesn’t take dreams for that.” The nurse wheels the tray over to the gurney and gestures at Adelle’s cotton print hospital gown.

Adelle raises her arms carefully to avoid pulling at the new scabs. Maude lifts the gown and pulls back the bandage. She sponges off the crusted yellow pus and stale ointment that has gathered in the trenches of the new scabs. “It would be best for it to get some air tonight.”

“I should sleep without the bandage?”

“Well that depends. Will I need to leave you a vomit bag?”

Adelle remembers discovering the strawberry stripe the day before. She can hear Ben’s gurgling wails in her ears. Today, she knew. Maude had stood by with the pan, but Adelle never filled it. Would she know tomorrow? If she did have dreams tonight, would today disappear into City, become a blue-walled cube or a tower made of flabby pancakes?

Adelle feels Maude’s hazel gaze. The nurse’s eyes have sharpened, and Adelle wonders for a moment if Maude can see past her forehead and into the cavern of her mind.

“How about we wait one more night,” Maude says.

Adelle nods. She watches Maude stretch new gauze along the rectangle.

“Maude, did De hire Celesse St. Armand?”

The nurse’s features harden as she tapes down the edges. “Your mother sent her.”

Adelle’s stomach cramps back into a cold, tight ball. Her fingers move back to the branded block fort and travel slowly up her skin to two oval scars, each the size of the dent that a raindrop makes when it hits the sand. “If I forget tonight, will you remind me?”

Maude’s smile is thin. “Good night,” she says, and leaves Adelle alone with her pock marks and tattoos.

Adelle watches the blue scrubs dim when the nurse flips the light switch, and then disappear behind the double doors. The room dissolves from her sight as her hand roves over the cardboard bricks burnt into her belly flesh. She is seeing through a space between two of the blocks: one blue, one yellow, spying on her mother, moving in and out of view through the kitchen doorway, wearing her Yachting Look.

Dad had given Adelle the cardboard building blocks with brick print patterns in blue, red, and yellow. If she held one upright, level with her chin, it soared inches above her three-year-old head. Adelle surrounded herself in walls with no windows, peeking between the stacks to watch her mother in the kitchen. When she’d woken Adelle up that morning with the Who Are You Game, Mother hadn’t tried to smile. Now she was cursing at the stove and the black smoke billowing from it. She was bent over and Adelle could see her Best Side, where Dad would have smacked her if he walked past, especially when she wore her red dress that had ruffles at the knees. He spanked Adelle with a belt when she was bad, and she didn’t like it, but her mother always giggled when he called her a naughty girl, so Adelle don’t think he hit her hard enough.

This morning, Mother isn’t wearing the red dress. It’s scratchy blue jeans and a white blouse with flat, Sensible Buttons. She has her hair tied in a kerchief, her Yachting Look, she

calls it. Adelle's family doesn't have a Yacht. Just a Yachting Look. Adelle's is a dark blue dress with a square collar in white and stripy pantaloons to match. Mother likes to put the giant red bow in Adelle's hair with her Yachting Look, but she always pulls too tight and it feels like fire on the top of Adelle's head, and then Dad tells her to take the ridiculous thing out because Adelle doesn't have enough hair for it anyway. He's right. Adelle's hair is pixie hair. It's short like a boy's, but boys aren't pixies, and Adelle's is pretty when she wears a dress. But not a ridiculous bow. Then it's just ridiculous.

Mother was trying to cook London steak. It was her practice one. Mother always cooks a practice one first while Dad's at work so that when he comes home she can cook the real one and it almost tastes good. Adelle is not allowed to tell about the practice one because Dad says they don't need to buy food for two families and Mother says Dad doesn't understand the value of an investment. It's their little secret, the practice one. Mother and Adelle have little secrets.

"Shit, shit, shit," Mother says. Maybe she says more *shits*, but Adelle doesn't hear them because a screaming beep fills all the air in the house over and over like it's beeping out bad words on the TV. Adelle crouches lower in her brick fortress and watches her mother stomp to the pantry and yank the door so it bangs the wall, and she comes out with the broom and pokes the ceiling until the beeping stops. Adelle closes her eyes and it's quiet and then there's the clattering from the broom. Mother threw it on the floor. She always throws it on the floor. Then she yells. "Addie!"

Adelle lays down flat in her fortress and puts blocks on top of herself. Her heart is like a train in a tunnel, but she keeps putting the blocks on slowly so that they don't make scratching sounds against the wood floor and tell Mother where she is.

"Addie!"

She's stomping again, up the stairs this time, and Adelle is very still, even her breath, because if Mother turns she'll see Adelle, like Adelle sees her, with her straight nose like a statue, because the fort is right underneath her and Adelle didn't build a roof. The bricks don't stay in the air for a roof. They're on Adelle's stomach and she has to breathe now because her lungs are choking and she opens her mouth and sucks in a bunch of air, but it's too fast and she feels the blocks start to slip down the sides of her belly and she snatches at them with her hands to hold them still and they fall off her shoulders and they knock into one of the walls and they all come down on the wood floor and on Adelle. They make empty cardboard sounds everywhere.

Mother turns her perfect head. She looks down on Adelle. Her eye is twitching around the edges like Adelle's lip is twitching under her nose and her stomach starts to cave in like if it runs away into a hole behind Adelle, it can pull the rest of her in, too, and she will disappear, but it doesn't work. Adelle's stomach keeps on pulling, but it and she just stay there, flat on the floor while Mother comes down the stairs.

Mother pulls her Virginias out of her jeans pocket, and the lighter, too. She is not stomping now. Adelle watches her put the Virginia in her lips and hold it with long French fingers and light it. She stops on that step, halfway down, to suck in the Virginia, and the tip glows red. Mother blows out fiery smoke and looks at Adelle from the side of her eyes and smiles her scaly smile. Adelle's twitching goes from her lip to all over her and she lets go into her big girl panties, hot and wet. It always happens this way, Mother and her Virginias, hotter than a ridiculous red bow.

#

Adelle lies in the sterile darkness. *Mother has changed*, she tells herself. Since Ben was born, Mother had remade herself into Missy Nana, a swaddling, doting force in her grandson's

life. She turned the prim spinster of a house Adelle had grown up in into a crystal wonderland for Christmas and Easter, ushering Ben through a maze of packages and chocolate rabbits, enough to make him sick for a week. The first time they saw it, Adelle and De, she watched her husband's face sustain the first chip in the dam that had held back all her demons when he watched her, eyes full of liquid brown light. They came through the door into hand-blown globes swirling from the ceiling, an arch of red and white balloons ushering them to the living room where the sixteen-foot tree pedestalled a dark-skinned angel with piercing eyes. De placed Ben down gently under the arch and watched with a dazed smile as their son wobbled, fell to his butt, and crawled over to the twinkling train winding its way around the coffee table. *Are you sure they're not just dreams*, he'd asked later that night, lying beside Adelle, their own packages wrapped and waiting.

Adelle considers calling, again, but can't see the clock and somehow knows he won't answer. It would be worse to call and have him not answer than to just not call. *He has his hands full with Ben*. Of course Missy Nana isn't helping. Of course De knows better. Her fingers skate across the vast landscape of her belly, an advantage of her largeness: she will never run out of space to trap her memories. If it begins getting crowded, this tattooed shadow of City, she only needs to eat a little more for a little longer, and the canvas will expand. But now, after two months on a hospital diet, she finds the skin loose beneath her touch, a blanket wrinkled over the organs inside. She is shrinking.

Chapter 3

Waking to the dead blue space stops surprising Adelle, and she learns not so much to ignore as to stop hearing the raspy demands of the itch and heat. They, in turn, shrink back a little each morning, giving way to fresh mottled skin cells that cling together to form a delicate seal across her broken body.

She keeps her Rhodia under her pillow so she can always reach it in the morning. But she waits until Maude gets there before slipping it out. She loves to see the nurse's papery skin break into a smile, wider each day that Adelle remembers: seventy (three), seventy-four (seven), seventy-six (nine). But just before four, when Celesse St. Armand comes every day, Adelle slides the tablet of graph paper back under her pillow. That first day, Celesse had surprised her, and Adelle didn't like the way she looked at the black and orange notebook with her pinched up eyes, or the way she watched Adelle flip it closed and tuck it away. The baker's gaze was too sharp, unblinking, like an owl watching a rat run along a fence, gauging the best moment to swoop.

And each day that passes she boils with anger at De ignoring her messages. How dare he leave her here like this, dreamless and without Ben? For all his talk about family, he's being a rotten father. No child should go this long without seeing his mother. She'd forgotten in the beginning, but now she's nine days in with memory. There's something he's not telling her.

"What am I on, Maude," she asks while the nurse counts boxes.

"All kinds of stuff. A whole cocktail. You know that. They bring you a cupful every night."

"I mean for the dreams."

Maude closes the cabinet and moves to the next one.

“I know you heard me,” Adelle says.

Maude puts her hands on her hips. “Why does it matter?”

“If it doesn’t matter, why won’t you tell me?”

Maude goes back to counting.

“It’s the St. Armand lady, isn’t it? She doesn’t want me dreaming. What is she, a psychiatrist in her spare time?”

“She’s a baker.”

“Why won’t they let me dream?”

Maude finally faces her. “Don’t you know?”

Adelle looks at Simonides. What difference does he make, if she has no dreams to search? He’s no more than a bracelet.

“If I dream, I might find Ben,” she says.

The nurse’s eyes soften. “You won’t,” she says. “You didn’t.”

Adelle closes her eyes, tries again to recall City, but its walls are thin as vapor. “How long have I been on it?”

“You know the answer to that one, too.”

Nine days, Adelle thinks. She knows she’s right.

#

On the tenth day, when translucent white flesh has closed the meat grinder holes in her tattoo collage, hiding the strawberry-red pulp beneath, Adelle begins physical therapy. Maude and Jeff, a young guy with a streak of bleached white hair running through his natural blond, hoist her into the wheel chair, cover her legs with a blanket, and roll her down the hall.

“Man, they really skewered your tats, huh?” Jeff has his arms crossed over his chest and leans to one side as he examines the postmodernism of her leg. Adelle scowls. “Too bad, too. Looks like it was good work. Got any more?”

She doesn't know what to say. Adelle doesn't show off her tattoos. That's not what they're for. But Jeff is scrunching his sleeve up to show her his inner arm. On his skin a woman inked in profile rests long-fingered hands on her abdomen. Her black hair swirls around her and becomes the ebony keys of a piano, intermingling with the ivory. Her face is still, surrounded by floating music.

“Got this when my sister died. Ovarian cancer.”

Adelle's fingers move to the hem of her hospital gown. She doesn't know why she's lifting it over the pudge of her belly for a stranger. She doesn't do this. But like a movie of herself, there she is, watching her hands expose her secret city and the sunless white flesh beneath it.

“Whoa. That's definitely good work. Who does them?”

Adelle smiles and shakes her head, covering her stomach back up as Maude pushes her down the hall in her wheelchair. One secret is enough. Sam is hers. She will not share him.

#

Samuel Crossing transferred to Ellsworth Prep in their freshman year after the first marking period, when Matt Richardson lost his scholarship. Sam came gangly with awkward angles and sandy blond hair that blended him to invisible with his pale skin. He sat in the back of first year Biology, one seat up from Adelle, so she could look over his shoulder and know he was brilliant by glimpsing his test scores, even though he never spoke or opened a book in class. When they had their Health and Human Anatomy unit, Mr. Sheehan had them pair up to practice

proper hand positions for the Heimlich maneuver. No boy had put his arms around Adelle before, and she hoped Sam didn't noticed her quivering under his spidery fingers, or the way her skin bulged above and below her bra strap when he moved close behind her. He was almost a foot taller. Adelle felt the caution in his placement, thumb at her sternum, fist rolled under beneath her diaphragm, arranged just so that he did not accidentally touch too much. They didn't speak, but when they were finally instructed to release their stiff rehearsal, Adelle snuck a glance at him and saw his smirky grin.

She smiled back, but her face got hot, so she stared at the floor.

"All right, Corey," Sam said, and returned to his desk.

Their sophomore year, they had no classes together. They haunted the halls in silence, locking eyes for the briefest and calmest of moments whenever they passed each other, a secret handshake of freaks.

Adelle noticed when Sam dyed his hair black as charcoal. It bled out the scant color he'd had in his face and looked ridiculous with the starchy Oxford shirt the boys had to wear. He kept the hair through junior year when they watched each other from across the gym. By the time senior prom came around, Sam had filled out enough that it was the shirt looking ridiculous instead of the hair. He'd shot up another foot or so, and when he sat straight, his shoulders spread taught beneath the crisp cotton. He mostly slouched, though, pulling his breadth inward. When he walked, it made him look like he was cutting through the air head first. When he sat, he resembled a lonely turtle.

For four years, they drifted, silently enduring a class together here and there, while Tammy's parties catapulted her to triumph in campaigns for Homecoming Queen and, later, Prom Queen. With an agenda like that, Tammy's guest list had to be exclusive. Adelle wouldn't

have gone anyway. Her stomach always twisted up when Tammy was around. Even if Tammy was behind Adelle, unseen, Adelle always knew when Tammy entered the room because of the cramping.

Their moms had once been best friends. That didn't make it any less of a shock when Mrs. Craven rang Adelle's doorbell on a Thursday morning while Adelle was home recovering from the flu. She heard her mother's Garden Club greeting, "Anita, what a surprise," and crept from her bedroom to the top of the stairs.

"Hello, Missy. How are you, darling?" Mrs. Craven sounded like an accidental sharp on a flute, but Mother kept her voice smooth as a marble slab.

"Well, to be honest, it's been a long eight years. But I understand you've been busy. Let me take your coat and we can catch up."

"There's not much to tell. Has it really been eight years?"

"Adelle turns eighteen in a month." They moved toward the kitchen. Adelle padded as softly as she could into her parents' room. The master bath was right above the breakfast nook, and if she put her ear against the plaster beneath the pedestal sink, she could hear their voices like tinny ghosts.

"What a lovely young lady she's turning out to be."

"And how is Tammy?" It was Mother's always voice.

"She's so beautiful sometimes I think she could be a statue. She's a finalist for prom queen, did you know? Reminds me of you. I wouldn't say this to just anyone, but sometimes I feel a little jealous, looking at her. Remember when we were all perky like that? Now that gravity's had its way, we wives live through our daughters, right? Well, look at you, though, you're still gorgeous."

“If you’re living through Tammy, you might want to rein her in a little.”

Adelle clamped her mouth closed, silencing her laughter. She’d always wondered how Tammy got away with the parties. She didn’t have to go to know about the hookups and the dope. It was always when her dad was out of town and Mrs. Craven was never there. The rumor was a maid would come in the day after to clean up, but it seemed weird that her mom never got home before the maid left.

“What do you mean?” sang the sharp flute.

“It’s quite an age difference between Tammy and Mercer.” *Mercer?* Mercer was their next door neighbor. He and Adelle’s mother flirted over the rose bushes along the thigh-high fence that separated their yard from his. “How’s your tea?”

“A little cold.”

“I could warm it up for you.”

She couldn’t believe they were talking about tea when her mother had just told Tammy’s mother that her daughter was screwing Mercer. He had to be almost fifty. There was a faint clinking.

“You’re my oldest friend, Anita. You know you can come by for tea any time. Sometimes a wife just needs to get away her husband. It’s important we live our own lives.”

#

The next Monday, while Adelle was passing Sam in the hall, doing their silent greeting, her stomach seized up. She turned around, and there was Tammy, passing out pink slips of paper with Hershey’s kisses taped to them. She fluttered about the hallway with a small entourage, talking and laughing over her shoulder, a beauty queen politician on speed. She almost bumped into Adelle before turning to look where she was going, bringing her dark brown eyes level with

Adelle's. It's funny, Adelle had thought, Tammy had always seemed the taller one, but she wasn't.

Tammy's smile curled too high on one side, and she reminded Adelle of a wolf, but then then the snarl was gone and Adelle wasn't sure she'd actually seen it because her face went so bright.

She grabbed Adelle's hand in both of hers. "I'm giving out kisses to people who'll vote for me," she said. Kayla Wheelwright held out one of the pink papers and Tammy placed it in Adelle's hand and kissed her on the cheek, leaving behind sticky lip prints. Adelle held her stomach while they flurried away. Sam stood across the hall, staring. He had really black hair. It looked funny with the Oxford shirt and embroidered school crest.

"I guess that means we can't be friends anymore." He winked a green eye and her stomach loosened.

She wiped Tammy's kiss from her face. Sam had been at Ellsworth Prep long enough to know she didn't have friends. He didn't either. "I won't forget you on my way to the top."

"That's what they all say," Sam shook his head solemnly before giving a crooked smile. "See you around, Corey."

Two weeks later, Adelle's mother hung up the phone in the kitchen and handed her a glass of milk and two underbaked oatmeal cookies. She hated oatmeal cookies.

"That was Anita Craven."

Adelle gulped her milk.

"She's invited you to an after prom party for her daughter Tammy."

"I'm not going to prom."

Mother balled her hands into fists at her side. Her voice went chipper and plastic. “I told Anita you’d be there at midnight. It’s a surprise celebration, so don’t tell Tammy.”

“Tammy’s prom queen. She doesn’t even know who I am.” That was a lie. In tenth grade Adelle was about to flush the toilet in the girls’ restroom when she overheard someone say her name and giggle. Tammy Craven’s voice answered with indignant authority: *No, she’s not retarded. She’s nuts.* A third girl chimed in: *A total whack job.* Then Tammy again: *I heard she got locked up for it in fourth grade, in an insane asylum. She was, like, committed. I bet they used that electric shock therapy on her. I bet that’s why she can’t remember anything normal.* Adelle didn’t flush until after the door slammed behind them and she had recited the elements of the periodic table three times, giving them a chance to move away down the hall.

“Well, she’s about to find out who you are, isn’t she? Eat your cookies.”

On prom night, Mother zipped her into the plum colored cocktail dress she’d bought Adelle so she’d match all the kids who had gone to the dance, and then pushed her out the door at eleven-thirty so she wouldn’t be late to Tammy’s. Adelle’s dark hair was stacked in a ridiculous tower of ringlets that teetered as she wobbled on her heels toward the car. She felt like a purple cow. She waved her pretend-to-be-graceful wave and smiled her I’m-your-daughter smile and then drove three miles out of her way to Walgreens.

She bought witch hazel and ducked into the bathroom to wipe away the second skin of make-up Mina had applied that afternoon. Adelle had never looked more like her mother, and never less like her, either. As if she’d dressed as Mother for Halloween. She had the same smoky olive eye shadow, same crook arching exactly one third of the length into each eyebrow. She and Mother had the same color skin, fresh milk, so Mina had used the same foundation and creamy pink blush. But Mother’s complexion diffused pale light, like a silk curtain hiding a chandelier.

Adelle's was dull. She had no acne, but that was where the mercy stopped. With hair a shade darker than Mother's light brown, Adelle's skin looked pasty by contrast. And Mother had lake-blue eyes.

She wiped away her mother's colors and watched them stream in rivulets down the Walgreens bathroom sink. She yanked the bobby pins from her hair and changed into the frayed black skirt and T-shirt she'd stashed under the passenger seat.

Herself again, but for the curly hair, she came out of the restroom with the dress and hairpins smooshed into the Walgreens bag. Sam stood at the cash register, tall and gangly in a leather collar and faded flannel. He was sliding his ID back into his wallet while the balding guy behind the register rang up a pack of Marlboros.

Adelle was half out the automatic door when he caught up to her.

"Hey Corey. Prom not your thing?" He smacked the pack against his palm a few times, pulled one out, and lit up.

"Yeah. Right."

"What are you doing this fine evening?"

"Tammy's party. My mom's making me go."

"Dressed like that? They're going to love you."

"No more than they do already."

"Why not just skip out?" He took a long drag. The ash stretched out and curled like a witch's fingernail.

"You don't know my mother."

Sam looked her up and down and she could feel the little rolls of fat around her middle try to flatten themselves into an impossible anorexic runway waist.

“So who’s your date?”

Adelle laughed out loud.

“What, Mom got you the hair and the dress...” his hand gestured a circle in the air, a question about her face.

“And the make-up.”

“...and the make-up, which you look better without, by the way. So she got you all that but no date? What kind of shitty disguise for a popular kid is that?”

She chuckled, a little. Sam took a last puff off his Marlboro and let it drop to the tarmac, crushing it with his boot. He turned his head and blew a stream of smoke. They watched as the wind made a dance of the wispy cloud before carrying it off to infinity. Then he bowed at the waist and extended his hand her way.

“Miss Corey, I would be honored if you would accept me as your fake prom date, with all the fake responsibilities and fake privileges that implies.” He straightened and met her naked eyes. His were rimmed with eyeliner. “I can’t promise I’ll improve your popularity. You might have to delay that trip to the top.”

“If I ever made it to the top, I probably wouldn’t remember it in the morning.”

He smiled a crooked smile, but didn’t ask, not till later.

They left her car and the purple haze of a dress in the Walgreens parking lot. Sam drove back through the winding suburbs until they found the Cravens’ stone-front colonial house. They dodged beer-stinking varsity lacrosse players acting out their moments of glory in the melting snow. They trudged past a dormant cobblestone summer kitchen and ended up getting turned around on the walkways, entering through though the unlocked French doors in the back of the

house. Inside, the vast rooms were infested with gowned and tuxedoed teens, sweating, fever-eyed. They gawked at Sam and Adelle's black tattered clothes.

"What's everyone staring at?" Tammy appeared, wrapped in silk that went from blue to green like a mermaid's tail. She was still wearing her rhinestone crown. "Oh, Addie, you made it!" Adelle sniffed, but there was no alcohol on Tammy's breath. Her eyes were clear and focused. "And your boyfriend, too. Sam, right? Welcome." She held out her long, perfect arm to Sam, who raised an eyebrow. The corner of Tammy's mouth curled back. "I've always wanted to ask you how you get your eyes just right. Any tips? No? Well, we all have our secrets, I guess." She met Adelle's eyes when she said this and Adelle's stomach twisted right up like threading on a screw.

Tammy sashayed away and the murmurs crescendoed back to the roaring sounds of a party. Sam led Adelle in the other direction, through the oak paneled living room where kids were too busy dancing to notice them.

"Addie?" he asked, facing her.

Adelle shrugged. "It's the first time she's talked to me in my life."

"Second," Sam said, putting his heavy hands on her shoulders. He leaned in softly and kissed her cheek right where Tammy's lip gloss had left its snaily tracks the other day. He smelled of cigarettes and possibility. "Remember?"

Adelle looked at the floor, mosaicked with Dorito crumbs and napkins, and nodded.

Sometime in the night, they made their way into a smoky side room, a card parlor from when the house was first built, and took a few hits off a bong: just enough to hover, not enough to soar. It was easier to dance after that. The fuzz spread out, an atmosphere over her brain, muting the sideways glances from classmates that had been stiffening her nerves. The sharp

angles of the room softened. Sam's broad fingers felt hot through the fabric of her T-shirt, and Adelle stopped worrying about if they squeezed too hard would fat ooze between them like blubber. He moved a little slower and a little closer, and she smiled until she had to pee.

"I'm going with you. What? You can't leave me alone in a crowd like this."

So she and Sam giggled themselves upstairs and into one of the Craven's seven bathrooms (which reduced to five and a half since three of them were only half baths, but they found a whole one), and took turns looking the other way and listening to each other's streams splashing into the toilet bowl. She leaned against the wall, dizzy from the bong, while Sam washed his hands. He gave them a downward shake, sending water drops hurtling back into the sink, turned slowly, and faced Adelle. The corners of her lips pulled into a smile she hadn't planned to give him. Then he came at her, sandwiching her between his body and the hard, straight wall. She wanted to giggle again because it reminded her of the men in her mother's soap operas. But then his tongue was in her mouth and his dick pressed against her crotch. Adelle felt her weight squishing around him, pillowing him into her. She licked back at the heat. His hand began the journey up the skin of her right thigh, and it was then that he finally asked.

His fingers brushed along the ancient wound. They paused. They hovered. They crossed the territory again, over and over, till he forgot to concentrate on the kiss. Adelle opened her eyes as Sam pulled back. "What's this?" He squatted down and lifted her skirt just enough to examine the crude outline of a church cut into her skin, healed over badly with bubbly, bulging scars.

"Nothing."

He gripped her thigh with both hands, long fingers firm and hot. "It's not nothing. You cut."

“It’s old. It’s nothing.” She tried to pull her skirt down, but Sam held it there and stared at her face, waiting. Her skin burned, but he wouldn’t look away. Finally, Adelle met his eyes. Their blue had gone deep, almost swallowed by hungry black pupils. Light glittered off their dark surface. Adelle’s pulse thumped. She watched Sam’s mouth open, too wide for a kiss. He leaned through the air between them, slow as the moon, not losing her gaze. And then he bit.

Adelle didn’t know teeth could be gentle. They grazed along the hideous scar lines like tall grass scratches at wind. He watched her, he watched her, and his teeth scaled her skin. And then he didn’t watch. He closed his eyes. He gave himself to the bite and it was sharp and it was deep. Adelle yelped, panting at the sudden pressure under the vise of Sam’s mouth. He didn’t break the surface, but Adelle could feel it almost there, the gush of blood to air, and she began to twist and pull away, pushing at his shoulders with her hands. But Sam hung on, tightened his grip, moved the bite to untouched skin, going deeper when she yelped again. One hand crept upward, inward, moving aside her panties. Adelle’s fingers went limp. She tried to look away, but they were in front of the mirror, so there he was again, reflected, kneeling at her side, making love to her scar like he was praying to a fat angel. There was nothing else to look at, so she closed her eyes and let herself move with him, his beautiful teeth and the trembles vibrating through her.

#

“I have these dreams. That’s where my memories go when they disappear.”

They were lying together, clothed, in the dry bathtub. Sam had one arm around Adelle’s shoulder. She rested her head on his chest, listening to his slow breath as he took a drag off a Marlboro and turned to blow the smoke into a hazy firmament above them.

“Will you remember me tomorrow?”

Adelle watched the spiraling cloud. “There’s this nightmare I always have,” she said, “the Baron. He builds buildings and hides my memories in them.”

Sam waited.

Adelle toyed with one of the clear plastic buttons of his flannel. “I don’t know.”

Sam brought the cigarette to his lips for another pull. He lingered through it, held the cloud in his mouth for several beats before exhaling. His free hand travelled down Adelle’s short waist to the tender scar. The skin around it was still raw. Adelle shivered, and Sam pulled back, letting his fingers hover close above the old wound so she could feel their heat. Adelle thought of his face, its tortured expression when he first saw the damage.

God, he’d whispered. He’d pulled back and opened his eyes and Adelle had watched his ghostly skin go taut across his skull. He tested the red-purple wreckage of her thigh with a frightened fingertip. It was a landscape of pulpy bruises trailing down from her bubbly scar to just above the knee, and then around, up again, on the tender flesh of her inner thigh. The coming down had left Adelle sensitive, and where the gnashing of his teeth had never seemed quite sharp enough when his fingers had moved inside her, his tiny touch now made her start. *God*, he’d said again. *Let me fix it.*

His head and upper body had disappeared into the carved wooden cabinet beneath the hammered copper sink, hunting gauze or Band-Aids. Adelle heard the hollow tang of cans knocking over and Sam’s muffled cursing from within. She put a hand on his back. The plaid green flannel was soft. He went still for a moment and then pulled out, lines across his pale forehead. The leather collar seemed to choke him. Adelle reached down and around, behind his neck, and undid the clasp. She laid it on the marble counter.

Breathe, she’d said.

He'd moved to get another look at her battered scar, then met her eyes. *You sure?* he'd asked. Adelle smiled. Sam shook his head. *Damn, Corey.*

She smiled again, thinking of it now as they lay in the tub, the heat of his gentle hands hovering above the mauling he'd given her. Above the scar.

"This is one of the buildings?" He asked.

"Cathedral."

He nodded. "Yeah. I could see it. It looked like a church."

She pulled her head back and lifted herself up on her elbow, careful not to bump around in the cramped bathtub, so she could see Sam's face. She thought about how awkward he always looked in his Oxford and khaki school uniform, how the leather collar and the eyeliner, now smudged under his left eye, suited him. She thought of the Walgreens parking lot and how funny it was that he liked her better without make-up.

"When I woke up the next day, after cutting it in, I remembered." Her voice sounded small. She'd never told anyone before.

"Everything?"

"Everything that was in Cathedral."

"So what was it? What happened in there?"

Adelle closed her eyes. Marble statues of her mother, transforming to flesh like Pygmalion's perfect lady, flashing through her mind. She never could remember the birthday party, only the dream that came before it. She wondered sometimes if it were a trade: one memory for another. The next thing for her was going to school and discovering she'd lost two weeks to the Baron after stealing back Cathedral.

Adelle shook her head. Sam didn't ask again. He took a last puff and reached out to flick the butt into the open toilet, a plunk and tiny hiss. He pulled her face down and kissed her bottom lip between his, heat and stale smoke. "So if I want you to remember me, I have to carve myself into you?"

Adelle tensed. She studied Sam's serious face, the blue eyes burning into hers. Then he smiled and hefted out half a chuckle. "Relax, Corey. I'll behave." And he shook his head and kissed her some more.

#

Adelle pulled onto Pine and stopped to let Mercer out of his driveway, wondering where he was going so early on a Saturday. When they passed each other, she saw it wasn't Mercer. It was Anita Craven.

#

Two days later, Sam called Adelle's house, but her mother picked up.

"You're that make-up boy, aren't you?"

Adelle flinched at her mother's voice. She concentrated on her calculus homework resting on the walnut table. It didn't fool Mother.

"You're not to see that boy again. Anita tells me he wears eyeliner." She pointed at the math book. "When you're done with that, I want you to run down to The Pantry. I ordered one of their lemon coconut soufflés."

"What's the occasion?" Adelle tried to sound interested, but everything felt flat to her.

"You never know when you're going to have house guests. And none for you. You know you need to go down three sizes before graduation. It's too late to return the dress."

That evening, Anita and Tammy Craven came for dinner. Mother chattered about a gallery opening downtown while Anita twisted her wedding band around her finger in a continuous series of revolutions. Tammy moved the soufflé around on her plate, the soggy coconut shavings forming ragged confetti. They stayed in the Coreys' guest room, but after two days Tammy declared it too cramped and she and her mom rented rooms at the Econo Lodge in Norwalk.

Sam sometimes walked with Adelle to class, but her stomach would always cramp after just a few minutes and there would be Tammy, still looking perfect in her fresh-pressed Ellsworth Prep uniform. Her dad must have agreed to pay to let her finish out the school year. Adelle pictured her standing on the drab Econo Lodge carpet, ironing her own clothes, and smiled. Dethroned for keeping her mother's secret, the apparent price of all those parties, Tammy skulked around the school stalking Adelle, looking for revenge. Their mothers were, once again, best friends, and Tammy made no secret of her suspicion that it was Melissa Corey who'd told her dad about Mercer. Adelle would have defended her mother, but she suspected Tammy was right.

And now Tammy was watching her all the time, especially when Sam was around. So she watched him from a distance, let the distance grow. She looked down when he asked how she was, how her dreams were. She didn't answer when he invited her to the movies. She kept walking when they passed in the hall.

#

On the way back to the Burn Center, Adelle bounces in the wheelchair as Maude guides her over a bump. Her braced leg slips from the foothold and catches against the tarmac. A primal scream rips out of her as the pain tears up her leg. Maude is a flutter of apologies. Jeff comes

around to face her. He scoops a warm hand under her bare toes and steadies the brace as Maude backs up slowly.

“Ready?” Jeff asks, and lifts her foot with gentle fingers. “That’s what you get,” he teases, “for keeping a good tattoo artist to yourself.” Adelle twists around to look at Maude, who rolls her eyes, and asks if she’s all right.

Adelle nods. The scabs over the graft sites are nearly gone now, smoothed by new scar tissue. It’s only the leg that hurts, though that’s bad enough on its own.

The physical therapy building is across the street from the main hospital. This is the first day that Adelle has been outside since she got here. The brick medical complex looms over her on all sides, but it can’t smother the whole sky with its height. She stares up at the blue. All she did was bend her knee and straighten it, with Jeff guiding her through the movement. The tedious hour seemed worthless, but now, under the open sky, she thinks of Ben. She is one step closer to walking again, one night closer to going home to him. De had better start working on his excuses. It’s going to take a hell of an explanation to convince Adelle she shouldn’t kick him out, after the way he’s kept them apart.

Chapter 4

Jeff and Maude are joking that Adelle should redesign the beige and green hallway, and Adelle is twisted half around to see Maude's hazel eyes dance as she speaks. Jeff holds open the heavy wooden door to the Burn Center. A woman's practiced voice drifts out, round with vowels but full of sudden stops.

It is the always voice. Adelle swivels her head toward the familiar sound. Her mother's perfect straight nose and deep eyes hover above her egret neck. A white cashmere sweater hangs loosely over muscles that cling to mother's bones, holding her in. She looks up from the black and orange journal splayed open in her bony hands.

"Mother," Adelle says with her ancient voice, her perfect voice. It is the voice of debutante balls after debutante balls were dead to the world, of straight A's in spite of drifting to sleep at her desk after nights of alternate insomnia and terror. It is the voice of her parents' daughter.

Dr. Wyndham and Adelle's father are there, too. And De. All three of the men are crowded around Mother as she reads from the Rhodia. When Adelle speaks, De shuffles back a step from where he'd been craning his neck to see the pages over mother's shoulder. Behind them all, at the window, obscuring the light, Celesse St. Armand has her arms crossed over her chest.

Adelle's muscles tighten with rage. She'd lunge at them all, fists and fingernails flying, if she weren't crippled in her chair with thirty-one years of practice behind her. Instead, she clamps her jaw and holds out a trembling hand for her Rhodia.

Mother flaps it shut, but keeps hold of it, lowering it to her side. "The tattoos, Addie."

Adelle's skin prickles at the even quietness of mother's words. She does not answer.

“You think they’re memories?” Mother slides a glance sideways toward De without turning her head. “I’d thought it was De, all this time. That’s when the forgetting stopped, right? With De?”

Adelle does not turn from her mother’s eyes when she says, with a rigid voice, “Maude.” The nurse crosses the linoleum. Jeff follows close behind her. Maude reaches for the Rhodia, which Mother now surrenders, and delivers it to Adelle.

De begins, “Baby, we were just—”

But Adelle meets his eyes and he stops.

“Where’s Ben?”

“We needed to make sure you were ready.” It’s her father’s voice, but it’s too gentle. She looks up at him. He towers even higher over her in the wheelchair. Adelle studies his face, but can’t reconcile the gray hair and beard because twenty years ago it was red, and he will never be weak enough to be old.

“I’ve been ready for ten days. Or hasn’t she told you?” Adelle gestures at Celesse St. Armand, who hasn’t moved from in front of the window, then looks at De. “And where the hell have you been?”

“I’ve got to keep my job, Addie. I was here every day, at first.”

“Right. We’ll see what Sam’s work says about that.”

De’s eyes harden.

“Sam?” Mother asks.

“The artist,” De says, not taking his eyes off Adelle.

Adelle glares back. *In England, in the 1500's, the legal method of execution was boiling a person alive. In Ancient China, they preferred flaying. In the public square, the executioner peeled back strips of skin and hung them on the city wall.*

“The eyeliner boy?” Mother says.

“Eyeliner?” asks De, but Mother talks right over him.

“You’ve been getting our family history tattooed all over your body by the eyeliner boy?”

“Now, Missy,” Adelle’s dad begins, but her mother doesn’t listen.

She clacks over to Adelle’s wheelchair in suede gray heels. She bends, a bare-branched tree, her face inches above Adelle’s. Mother’s words become a snaky whisper. “Did he hurt you?” Her long fingers creep toward the flimsy hospital gown. “No wonder you’ve been having nightmares.”

Mother’s hands are twisting through the side ties of the gown. “Show me what he’s done to you,” her words wind out like silk while her claws have almost undone the knots. Adelle grabs at mother’s fingers, but they are lithe, determined. “What have you got on your skin?”

Maude and Jeff step forward, but mother, Adelle, and the yellow-flowered gown have become entangled. Cool air rushes at the exposed stretches of Adelle’s belly and breast. Adelle pushes against bony shoulders and arms, with one hand and struggles to keep her body covered with the other.

Somewhere in the room she hears De’s weak protest: “Mom?” and her father’s empty commands, “Missy. Missy, stop.” Her braced leg anchors her, dead weight tearing at every movement. Finally, flanking mother, Maude and Jeff each manage to hook an arm under the Mother’s twiggy shoulders and usher her backwards.

“Enough.”

It is Celeste St. Armand. She has uncrossed her arms and moved closer. One hand rests on her lean hip. Mother stands up straight. Jeff and Maude release her, and she gives her arms a snappy shake before throwing back her shoulders and swiping a tendril of light brown hair off her forehead. Her face, under the skin, looks like rubber bands stretched across the bones of her skull.

“It’s not enough,” she says. But she doesn’t make another move toward Adelle as Maude helps secure the gown. Her voice returns to its full, even pace. “Addie, it’s self-mutilation. Burning and cutting God-knows-what into your own skin. Inducing nightmares and calling them memories. They have a good program here. Dr. Wyndham has been telling us about it.”

Mother’s quiet words slam the air from Adelle’s chest. *A good program*. This isn’t about her body. She’ll be damned if they’re going to send her off to a psych ward now. There are weeks of nothing that she’s lost, gaps of nine, sixteen, twenty days or more. She has no way proof, but the whispers of her classmates had been evidence enough. She’s got to get out of here. She needs to see Ben.

“You need help.”

“I need to see my son.” Her daughter voice is gone. She and speaks through gritted teeth.

“It’s lovely that you remember the last ten days, and that someone told you about the fire.”

“Mom,” De says, but Mother raises her hand, palm turned toward him, and continues.

“Ben deserves better than that. Better than what you put me through. He doesn’t deserve to wonder, every day, when you wake up, will you remember who he is?”

Adelle’s fingers dig into the handles of the wheelchair. She could crush her mother, she could, if it weren’t for the ravaged leg, the anchor, mawed and chewed by surgical tools, too

weak with weight to move. But the image of Ben's sweet latte face all screwed up with worry makes her chest ache. The rage in her limbs sinks to the center of her stomach, where a black hole begins to form. "De?"

De looks at the floor and turns his palms out in a shrug. "What do you want me to do, Addie?"

#

"They'll be moving you out of the Burn Center tomorrow," Maude says while she counts the ten boxes of gloves. Adelle rubs her thumb over Simonides, trying to keep calm. She watches the purple nail of the nurse's index finger make its regular journey, not quite tapping each box.

"Because of the tattoos?"

"God, no. You think they want to keep you around longer?"

Adelle smiles weakly. It's not about her mind.

"You're going to a standard room." Maude sweeps a hand in an exaggerated circle and winks at Adelle. "No more Shangri la."

"Dr. Wyndham doesn't think I need help?"

"Sure he does. We all do." Maude throws a glance over her shoulder at Adelle and gives her a wink. "But it's not up to him."

"Did De really visit me every day?"

Maude nods, her auburn curls rustling with the motion. "So did your parents."

Adelle runs her fingers over Simonides' name. "How did my mother not know about the tattoos?"

"If you didn't want anyone to know, why wear it like some fancy bracelet?"

Adelle looks down and covers her wrist.

“Anyway, she did know. Saw your arm there the first day and nearly fainted.”

Adelle frowns. If Mother had known about the tattoos all along, why was she so determined to examine them today?

“But I imagine that was all she knew,” Maude says, purple nails hovering in front of the boxes. “That journal-reading stunt didn’t look like your usual way of mother-daughter bonding.”

Adelle watches the ritual. She wants to ask the real reason why she can’t see Ben, but if Maude hasn’t told her yet, Adelle guesses she probably won’t.

“What do you want to forget?”

“Hm?” Maude says, not breaking pace with her counting.

“You told me everyone wants to forget something.”

Maude lowers her arm and turns around. She leans against the counter and stares at the blackness beyond the giant window. “It gets dark early these days. It’s like it comes right up to the room and boxes you in.”

Adelle looks out the window, too. She thinks again about the sedative they have her on. It’s working day-to-day, but without dreams, she has no way of finding what the Baron’s built. She has to remember to see Ben, but she needs her dreams to remember. An new problem occurs to her. They can’t keep her on the drugs forever. The Baron always enters through the door of her worst experiences. This hospital stay without her son, this is worst. What if the Baron comes again when they finally let her dream? What if he takes more? What if he takes everything?

Maude turns back to finish her inventory. “Well, look at that,” she says, pulling one of the boxes from the cabinet, then another. She keeps pulling boxes out, and then, finally, a crumpled white bag.

“What is it?” Adelle asks.

“I don’t know; I must have missed it before.” Adelle watches the papery edges of Maude’s mouth twitch against a smile.

The nurse puts the bag in Adelle’s lap. It’s heavy paper with gray satin ribbons for handles. Adelle stares at it for a moment, then looks inside. She pulls out a long-sleeved, boat-necked top and a soft yellow skirt with an elastic waistband.

“So you’ll look your best tomorrow when you meet your new nurses.”

“Thank you.”

But Maude has gone back to her boxes, putting the ones she’d displaced back in order.

#

There is a staircase like ribbon that winds up from Adelle’s sacrum across her ribs on the right and onto her breast. She’d gotten the tattoo for De, after their first night together. It is just a staircase, and when she dreamt it into City, the façade of each step was painted with Picassos and Miros and Kandinskies. Giacometti’s lanky metal stick figures trudged up and down the stairs, neither alive nor dead, but a moving installation, icons from MOMA. On Adelle’s skin, it’s nothing like New York’s Museum of Modern Art, except the eternal spiral, the round, bulbous loops that mimic a woman’s curve and belly and defy Frank Lloyd Wright’s typical squares and rectangles.

“I know it sounds crazy,” she’d told Sam the first time she came to him for a professional tattoo. “But it has soft, drippy railings. Can you do that?”

Sam had tipped his head to the side when she’d walked in, and he was still looking at her that way, half a smile on his thick lips, light stubble at his chin, which he stroked now with a hand that had lanky cats tattooed around it. “Like Dali?” he said. Adelle smiled.

Adelle had dreamt in buildings as long as she remembered dreaming. At three feet high, she was solid as stale bread, the crusty peasant bread, not the loaf of wonder bread that other parents bought. Her mother didn't buy wonder bread. She required fresh-baked, and sent Adelle and her Dad to Morey's Baked Goods for Irish soda bread every two or three days. But Adelle liked it best when they took their monthly field trips. The second Friday of every month the three of them boarded the train at Metro-North, and Adelle had to sit still and not fidget and no, she wasn't allowed to sit on the floor and use her chair as a table for coloring like the kids across the aisle, but she could look at her animal book with the fuzzy dog fur and the bumpy plastic snake skin peeking through finger-shaped windows in the middle of the photos. Adelle liked getting on the train because it meant they'd be their City Family selves soon. She liked getting off the train because it meant the end of forever stiff backs, quiet voices, and being so bored it was almost fun to watch the graffiti streak by as they barreled closer.

New York was gray and flashing buildings and people in black and people in all rainbow colors with crazy hair, but mostly, where they went, people in black. And pizza. While Adelle's mother got her hair done, Dad took Adelle to Big Nick's Pizza Joint and they had the pizza with the cheesiest saltiest cheese and only the little bit of tomato sauce and then meatballs on top. And for Dad, also mushrooms, but for Adelle just the meatballs and the salty cheesy cheese that made string bridges from her teeth to the corner tip of the slice. The bridges bent and swayed and Adelle imagined all the meatball slices running away from her over the bridges back to the safety of the triangle of pie. But there was no escape. She smiled and chewed and let all the meatball men think they would make it. Then, just before they could get across, step over to the cheesy triangle island, she pinched the strings away from the dough, one by one, and dangled them into her mouth, the screaming meatball men silenced forever by her powerful swallow.

Adelle liked the Guggenheim building, the Museum of Modern Art. MOMA. She liked it because it was kind of like Mama, but way more fun than her mother. Adelle pretended MOMA was her mother, a giant white playmate of circles and cylinders, a spiral slide of stairs, the keeper of secrets and displayer of hidden treasure. She walked tall like Giacometti's bumpy stick people, stretching her arms and legs so thin they were just lines like from a pencil and not thick with blood and bones in them. Picasso was like a hidden objects game from her Highlights magazines. Adelle looked for the goblet, the hat, the violin. She pretended MOMA came home with her, a shrunken version of herself, and baked a Boston cream pie for dinner, holding the pans in the grooves between the bandings of concrete that circled her exterior. While Adelle ate, MOMA showed her still lifes of all the food that the Modernists painted: fruit from Cezanne, every cake from Thiebaud. She tucked Adelle in and Adelle would dream of sliding down the banister of her white and twisted staircase, circling down and down with all the colors of all the pictures blurring by like graffiti on the train ride. Adelle loved MOMA. She was her favorite.

The morning after that dream, when the sun glowed yellow, then red, penetrating the scratches of a blacked out window to enter Adelle's sleep, she kept her eyes closed, unready to exit her newfound memory into the waking world. Her bed was so soft, the day full of possibility. Opening her eyes might end that.

The dream always reminds her of their first date. Or, rather, when they were not on a date. That night at Jack's Diner.

De had recited a laundry list of food to the waitress with the neon blue hair. She shuffled off with their order. Adelle folded her hands in front of her and wondered what to say. De picked up the flatware roll and peeled away the paper tab, dumping the fork and knife to the mica table

with a clatter. He bunched the napkin up in one hand. Adelle watched his fist open and close around it.

“Oh,” he said at last, and reached into his jacket pocket. “Here’s this.” He slid a Memorex cassette across the table, its yellow label scrawled with illegible ink.

“Thank you.” Adelle reached for the tape, but De pulled it back with a playful grin.

“Not so fast,” he said. “You owe me a story. Why Louis?”

Adelle looked over his dark skin and freckles. There was something ungiven under that grin he wore. Shit. He was serious. The glittery blue beach house flashed through her mind. It sat on the outskirts of City, smudged like a child’s finger painting. Tunes by Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller and others drifted from the open windows where the curtains suspended in a frozen billow. Nothing moved in City, not even the curtains. It was as if a wind had swept them up and they crystalized there in the dead air of dreams.

De was leaning forward, his eyes eager. Adelle felt warmth fan out inside of her. She couldn’t tell him she didn’t know why she loved Louis, that she had forgotten it somewhere in an imaginary beach house. Not after he’d gone to the trouble, poor man, in his too-small clothes.

“Well, you know, Shoshana—I mean, Susan Gordon. Shoshana is her given name. Shoshana is my mother.”

De’s jaw fell open. His star-struck expression made her smile.

“She did all kinds of stuff,” Adelle continued. “*The Twilight Zone*, *Donna Reid*, all those 1950’s shows with everyone cleaner than life itself. But her favorite was *Pennies from Heaven*. It’s the only one she ever sang in.”

By now, De was nodding along as she spoke. Adelle looked down at her thick hands to keep from chuckling. Guilt needled at her stomach. “Being up here in school, away from her, I just thought it would be nice to hear her voice now and then.”

“Your mama sang with Louis Armstrong?” De asked, his mouth still agape.

Adelle held out her left hand and he placed the cassette in her palm. She smiled and flipped the tape over to see if she could read the other side. It was equally blurred. She tucked it in her purse.

“No,” she said. “My mother is a Connecticut housewife.”

De’s face fell dark.

Adelle worked up an apologetic smile. “The truth isn’t that interesting, I’m afraid. I just like jazz.”

De hesitated. “I guess sometimes a good story works as well as a true one.”

“What about you?” she asked. “Do you play?”

“Not much money in music. But my mama says when my daddy played, you’d forget you were hungry.”

“He doesn’t play anymore?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

De stared into her eyes without blinking. His hands twisted the napkin into a wrung-out snake. When it would go no tighter, he dropped it on the table and began drumming his fingers.

Adelle listened to the hollow sound. “When did he leave?” she asked.

“I was six.”

The neon-haired waitress returned with a tray of food. She slid three full plates in front of De, who tucked in to his black and bleu burger before shoveling a bite of mac and cheese. Adelle

looked down at her anemic tomatoes and iceberg lettuce. Diner salad. Her stomach closed up on itself. She shouldn't have come. "Look, De—"

"Mama used to call me the black hole. I could eat anything. Seemed like I sucked down everything in the fridge soon as she filled it."

Adelle opened her mouth to try again, but De rushed on, his hands slicing the air for emphasis.

"She would say, boy, God help you if you choose yourself a skinny woman. Skinny girl won't know what to do with a black hole like you."

Adelle managed a tight smile.

De let his hands rest. "Did you have a nickname growing up? Miss Connecticut housewife?"

She looked away from his teasing eyes out the window over their booth. People in black coats were walked past, some alone, some by twos. That warmth was rising up in her again. This wasn't supposed to be a date.

"My mother called me Addie," she said.

"Addie." De shrugged his shoulders, rolled the word around in his mouth like he was trying it on to see if it fit. "That's got a nice sound," he said at last. His neutral voice could have been doling out a consolation prize, careful not to make the second-place winner for most creative nickname feel bad about losing.

"Yours is better," she said.

De smiled his salesman smile.

Adelle stabbed at her salad. As she lifted her right hand toward her mouth, the tight sleeve of her turtleneck pulled down below her wrist.

De reached across the table and touched the red serif of Simonides' *m*.

Adelle pulled her hand back and returned the fork and lettuce to the plate.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Adelle cut him off.

"This has been great, but I've got to go. I have a test tomorrow."

"Oh. Yeah." De stared down at the half a burger still uneaten in front of him. He hadn't even started on the bowl of chili. "Seems like all we ever do is study, right?"

"You're in school?"

"You thought Jay Jay's was a permanent gig? Nah. Just the bread and butter while I'm getting my degree."

De tossed a couple dollars onto the table for the waitress and cast a last glance at his uneaten food before sweeping a hand through the air to indicate Adelle should go first. He followed close enough to reach out and get the door for her. She watched the curl of his fingers around the push bar, his jacket cuff too high up on his wrist.

The New York night numbed their faces. On every corner, pockets of warm humidity and putrid smells wafted from the storm drains. Then they would pass into the crosswalks, the cold hitting them again, so that their cheeks went raw from the alternating temperatures as they walked along the blur of lights.

"What's your test in?" De asked as they turned onto Adelle's street.

"Phenomenology of ancient structures."

"Phenoma-what? I didn't know I just had dinner with a genius. How about you translate for us lowly humans here on earth?"

Adelle laughed. "It's about how buildings in ancient civilizations affected the way people thought. The way the architects designed spaces for imagination, rationale, and memory."

“And here I thought I had my hands full chasing a BS in business.”

“Business?” Adelle turned her head up at him, focused on the proud angle of his jaw.

“Yes, ma’am, business. You’re looking at the first, best future millionaire of the Jones family tree.” De gave bow.

Adelle smiled. She looked past him and realized they were already standing in front of her building. De’s freckles faded into his cinnamon skin. His face was so much darker when he wasn’t smiling.

“So you have a lot of studying to do?”

Adelle didn’t answer.

De reached for her gloved hand. His skin was so cold she could feel it through the felt. His fingers tapped gently at the shrouded brand on her wrist.

“De—”

“I know,” he said. He bent toward her, his celestial freckles mere inches away. “It wasn’t a date.”

She felt herself flush against the autumn air before he released her hand and stood up straight, leaving her unkissed.

“You kind of look like him,” Adelle said.

“Who?”

“A young Louis Armstrong. With freckles.”

De flashed her one last smile. “Well, you look nothing like Susan Gordon.”

#

Adelle stares one last time at her pancake ceiling, softened to gray in the dimness of night. It is never quite dark here. Even after Maude switches off the fluorescents so Adelle can

sleep, rectangles of light stretch across the floor, let in by the narrow windows in the double doors to the broad beige hallway. A soft yellow glow gentles up the walls from sconces hidden behind the mounted racks of medical instruments—scopes for examining ears and throats, blood pressure cuffs and gauges, and others that Adelle cannot identify, all standing at attention within arm’s reach of the attending staff in their scrubs and lab coats. Dark, coiled wires twist beneath the army of tools, a mire of spiral intestines that connect them to the building.

Tomorrow it will be time to start over in her Rhodia. She will draw new floor plans, name new nurses, perhaps describe a roommate. The graft sites have sealed into hairless planes of silver-white, and her leg looks like an ancient map, shredded by time and pieced together in the wrong order by well-intentioned archaeologists.

Jeff would start her on the walker tomorrow. He said it would be only a few minutes at a time at first, but enough to make her an outpatient.

We needed to make sure you were ready, her dad had said. Would they take her off the sedative in her new room? Maude promised to visit, but Adelle suspected she wouldn’t see the nurse again. The gifts had an air of finality.

This was a test she had to pass, this new room. She had to remember. What if she didn’t?

Ben deserves better. What do you want me to do, Addie?

#

The new room smells different. The same astringent burn of hospital smell runs underneath everything, but above that hovers a sick-sweet scent of skin and aging flowers. There are two beds. A track for a faded green curtain runs down the ceiling between them. The dull drape hangs limp against the wall. Military-press sheets gleam across the gurneys untouched,

their crisp corners sharp and precise. Again Adelle has a room to herself. She stares up at the eternal pancake ceiling.

“Underbooked?” she jokes to Karen, the nurse who wheeled her down. Karen’s bland blue eyes widen. She opens her thin lips but does not speak. “It’s okay,” Adelle says. “I know it’s for my own good.”

Karen’s mouth bends to a tentative half smile. She locks the wheels and leans down to offer Adelle an arm. A curtain of white-blond hair hides the nurse’s translucent face.

Adelle sighs and starts with her good leg. She kicks up the footrest with her left heel and feels out the cool smoothness of the hospital floor with her toes. Then she tucks both hands under her right knee. She still thinks it’s crazy that her leg weighs so much when there’s so little of it left. Most of the muscle in her calf is gone, and if it weren’t for the patchwork skin, it would look like a charity advertisement for malnourished third-world children. It’s the brace that makes it so heavy. The metal boning inside the Velcro cast holds her lower leg unbendable. She’ll need it until she builds up enough muscle to insulate the fragile tibia bone.

Adelle hoists her right leg. She feels the pull and strain down in her ankle. It rings all the way up through her thigh. She resists the tightening burn, moves slowly, the way Jeff taught her, so she doesn’t bang her bisque ware body against the chair or floor. She watches as her toes touch down, purple with the effort, then accepts Karen’s outstretched hand.

Adelle tries not to lean too heavily on the frail nurse. She takes small, shuffling steps with her left foot so she can keep her balance while concentrating on pulling in the anchor that is her right leg. Adelle forces herself into an even pace and fluid movement, resisting the creaks and splits crackling through her as though she were brittle wood. Halfway to the bed she stops, already needing a break.

“I’m sorry,” she says. Karen keeps looking forward. Adelle wonders if the nurse is looking away for Adelle’s sake or her own. “So what would you forget if you could?”

Karen blinks a series of quick little blinks. Her eyelashes are white and remind Adelle of a frightened moth, skirting the edges of the fire. The fragile nurse stutters.

“It’s ok,” Adelle says. “I was joking.”

Karen finally turns her head. Adelle watches the water colored eyes take her in. The poor girl can’t be twenty-five yet.

“Relax. I know the rules. I’m not allowed to know anything. I won’t try to trick you into telling me.” Adelle realizes it’s true as she says it. It surprises her. Karen would be an easy target. But Celesse and Dr. Wyndham would probably find out. How long would they make her wait to see Ben if they knew she’d shoplifted the memories from her frightened new nurse?

Karen nods. Her face relaxes. “Ready?” she asks, and the pair skulk forward, dragging Adelle’s leg along behind them.

#

At nine o’clock, an orderly comes in holding a small plastic cup and a serving-size carton of milk with a bendy straw. Adelle knows the routine. She accepts the little cup and pinches out the first pill with her thumb and forefinger. Her stomach tightens.

“I think you forgot one.”

The orderly raises his thick eyebrows. They make creases in his forehead. “Let me check.” He puts the milk down on a metal tray table like the one in the Burn Center and flips through papers on a clipboard. “Nope,” he says. “All present and accounted for.” He puts the chart back into the plastic file catcher hanging on the door and hands Adelle the milk.

“What are all these for?”

Mel Genovese runs his finger down the clipboard. “Pain, infection, vitamins, kidneys.”

“Kidneys?” Adelle asks.

“Sometimes people have trouble with them after a burn.”

The tightness has risen to her chest. “Anything for sleep?”

“Sorry, honey. You’re going to have to sleep on your own tonight. They usually try to wean people off the sedatives before sending them home.”

Adelle’s face goes cold, as if all the blood from her head has just flooded into her stomach. The milk carton shakes in her hand.

“You all right?” the orderly asks. He bends over her, steadying the milk with one hand and touching her forehead with the other. His badge dangles from the green scrubs, filling Adelle’s field of vision. Mel Genovese.

“Do you know Maude? She’s a nurse in the Burn Center,” Adelle’s voice sounds small in her ears.

“I can find out if she’s working tonight.”

Adelle nods.

Mel backs off and lets her take her antibiotics and pain meds. Each one feels like she’s swallowing a bullet.

#

When Ben was two, Adelle forgot him. She doesn’t know why. She woke up and he was gone. De, too. He lay beside her, a cinnamon-colored stranger, under the eaves of a house she’d have sworn she’d never seen before. Adelle watched his back rise and fall. Her stomach tightened into itself. She’d been in the habit of one-night-stands back in grad school at Columbia, not willing to risk anything more permanent than that. But, as far as she could recall, it had been

a long time since she'd gone trawling at clubs, looking for someone just drunk enough to come and play. The string of men, half-sober, and, if she could gauge it right, just a little mean, were never important enough to forget. They clung to her mind with Simonides, the words of Alberti's architectural treatise *De Pictura*, and the number of light years between the earth and moon. Trivia. Eventually, the nameless lovers filled more of her head than she was willing to share. But when she stopped seeking them out, they stayed with her, permanent fixtures where her childhood ought to be.

The man beside her was still sleeping. She lifted the duvet to assess her own body: naked but for scars and City. Blood pulsed under her skull. It must have been brutal, for her to forget sex with a complete stranger. What had he done to her?

She slipped out of bed and gathered her favorite yellow sundress from the floor. It was so hard to find XL clothes in muted colors, like designers somehow didn't get it that if you were already four times the size of anything strutting down a runway, you didn't need neon and flashy patterns to draw attention to yourself. Adelle held the tencel frock against her body, blocking herself as much from view as she could in case the man woke up. She scurried through the open bathroom door, and closed it behind her.

When she turned to find herself in the mirror, her stomach unfurled. Skylights diffused a glow over her. She was surrounded by butter-colored travertine. The dark cherry countertop floated low, at her thigh instead of her waist, to accommodate a pair of vessel sinks that looked like mosaics of Murano glass in shimmering aqua, brown, and ochre. Their oiled bronze faucets curved like swans above them. *Someday*, Adelle thought, *I will design myself a bathroom like this*. She stood in the sunlight and began the examination.

Adelle searched her naked skin, fingertips picking over scarred rooftops, windows, bridges, and trees. She smoothed out folds of fat, lifted breasts to see beneath them. She held her arms overhead, turned to see the sway of her behind in the wood-framed mirror. There wasn't a single bruise, cut, or burn besides the ones she knew she'd come with, the ones that opened ancient secrets. If he'd done her any harm, it hadn't been on her body. Her eyes traced over the Bakery, Mother Stairs, and a branded Block Fort just inside her hip bone. There were the ancient burn marks, too. Circles the size of fingertips or raindrops in the sand. Whatever had happened with the man last night, it hadn't made marks she could see. All of these lines and scars had been with her when she came in.

She slipped into her dress, sat on the toilet, focused on Simonides as she relieved herself. In, out, Adelle breathed above the trickle, thinking her way through City. In, out, over cobbled Bridge, past Bascule House, jump where it narrows, through the blue arches, past the sparkling beach house. In, out, beyond Stadium, past the daisy field where Cathedral used to be.

There is a fortress here. St. Luke's. Its spiky spires rise above her. Its stones look old as bones, and still less solid than the rest of City. It dominates the center. The only thing taller is Moonflower Tower, where the Baron lives.

The dull click of the doorknob startled Adelle out of City. Her stomach seized up again. She'd finished some time ago, but hadn't gotten off the toilet. She pulled the front of her dress over her knees just as the stranger came in, tall and lanky in his checked boxers and dark skin.

He wiped sleep from droopy eyes and glanced her way. "Morning sunshine." He said it like a habit, like putting on shoes, then moved to the sink closest to her and loaded a squirt of white onto a toothbrush.

He studied his reflection, poking at the skin beneath his left eye every so often. His sinewy arms flexed and rippled with his movements. He had a little paunch at his waistband, not enough to hang over, just enough to be comfortable. He didn't suck it in. He touched his cheek again. Under the dark of his skin, she noticed a smattering of darker flecks. The creases around his eyes and forehead couldn't overshadow the youthful freckles, and Adelle found herself tracing imaginary constellations across his face, until he brought his free hand once again to his cheek and she remembered where she was. Adelle turned the roll of tissue slowly and slipped a wad under her dress, between her legs, keeping her eyes on his face to be sure he didn't glance her way.

"I need to get going," she said when he'd finished rinsing his mouth and she'd stood up from her compromising perch. "Thanks for... thanks."

The man tilted his head and looked at her. She gave a tight smile and moved past him, careful not to brush her arm against his naked skin. He followed her to the doorway and leaned against it, watching her look around for her panties and the long-sleeved white shrug she always wore with the dress to hide her scarred arms. She'd plucked it up off a gold brocade chair and was wriggling into it under his gaze when the bedroom door burst open. A latte-colored toddler hurtled through shouting "Mommy!"

Oh, God, Adelle thought. He's married.

The child careened toward the bed and stopped short at the tousled duvet. He looked around, his eyes a wide, butterscotch question. Adelle froze, mentally shrinking her thick body into wisps of air, but his round and perfect eyes halted when they reached her. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“Mommy!” the boy shrieked again, running at her on stumpy legs and throwing himself around her calves. Adelle wobbled but didn’t fall. She looked over her shoulder at the man. He hadn’t moved from the doorway. The lines of his forehead knit together in a pattern of deep creases. He was studying her. Under the scrutiny she felt how stiff her body had become.

“Mommy’s not feeling so good today, Benny Boy. Why don’t you go turn on cartoons. I’ll make you breakfast in a minute.”

Benny Boy loosened his grip on Adelle’s legs and she stared down at him.

“Sick?”

“Yes,” the man said. “Mommy is sick.”

Benny Boy stroked Adelle’s left hand with his pudgy fingers. “Feel good, Mommy.” He gave her palm a wet kiss and waddled away. Adelle held her hand in front of her and noticed a thin band of skin, even paler than the rest, around the base of her ring finger.

The man walked over to the cherry nightstand on the side where she’d slept. He opened the top drawer, pulled out her notebook and a bridal set, and put them in the hand Benny Boy had kissed. He walked away without a word.

#

Adelle remembers sitting in the brocade chair with her notebook. She had known it was hers before she opened it.

She pulls her current Rhodia out from under her pillow, where she stashed it out of habit after Karen left her in the new room with her small collection of possessions in the clothing bag from Maude. She lays it beside her on the bed and places her left hand flat on top of the smooth cover, watching the diamonds of her wedding set sparkle in the low glow of hidden wall sconces.

The lights are tucked behind a row of medical tools identical to the one in the Burn Center, black guts and all.

She remembers how stiff the brocade chair had been. The carved cherry armrests were beautiful but left no smooth, soft place to rest her elbows. The back was insistently straight, did not meet Adelle's spine at the small for support. It had been a gift from De's mother, though she'd had no idea in that moment when she stared down at the two diamond-studded circles glistening against the black cover of her notebook. She'd looked again at the pale band encircling her finger. She had known they would fit, no matter how impossible it seemed. How had she forgotten a whole husband? A whole child?

Now, in the new hospital bed, identical to the old one, her heart quickens. Tonight she might begin to find Ben, or find out why they're keeping her from him. With her dreams back, she can finally journey through City, see what edifice the Baron has built around him to keep her out. She can sketch it into the Rhodia in the morning, find a way to get to Sam or, if that won't work, figure out how to get her hands on a razor blade. This could be her last night without him.

Or, she could lose him completely. Without the sedative, what will keep the Baron from erasing everything she knows, everything she already remembers, to protect her from the pain of that separation? He'd stolen a whole child before, and now the goddamn doctor had sliced away the tattoo that brought Ben back. She didn't know her memories could be stolen a second time. She wonders if there's a way to rebuild St. Luke's.

Adelle finds a button on the side of the gurney and eases herself to a sitting position. She smiles in spite of the wringing in her stomach: there is no more pain screaming down her side or beneath her, just a tensing pull and creak from her leg. She leans forward and tears away the first Velcro strap. The ripping sound echoes in the empty room. Adelle stares at the door, but no one

comes through. She pulls away the other straps and braces against the sharp ache that runs through her when she bends her knee to better reach the gauze. It's there for comfort now, cushion between her new skin and the unbreathing vinyl inside the brace. She unswaddles her calf to examine the patchwork tattoo. The fresh skin closing up the punctured pattern of the grafts hasn't scarred the same way as her ancient cuts and brands. It fills in the holes with bright pink flesh that still isn't quite level with the rest of the skin, making pock-marked stripes of the relocated bands. The tattooed bits look like comics on silly putty, stretched and dimpled at the whim of a sadistic child. The empty skin, grafted from Adelle's backside, is a pattern of concave dots. Will the ravaged turrets be standing in City when she dreams, waiting for her to etch them onto her torso once more?

Maude said she had to wait at least a year before getting tattoos over the grafts, but what about the graft site? When could she ink over the scarring? Would Sam be able to make any use of a dead and gnarled canvas?

Adelle flips through her notebook. Normally, she likes to start a new one if she moves house. Her favorite volume is the one from when they built 1930 Laurel Lane, the home that she'd designed for them, the one she'd forgotten that morning when she'd woken up with De. She knew De wanted her to stay home with Ben, but he'd never be the First Best Millionaire if he had to go to work for real instead of finishing his business degree. Jay Jay's Music was enough for grocery money, but Adelle paid the rest of the bills, and, the February before Ben's second birthday and De's graduation, she'd been able to save enough to hire contractors to start on a 1930 Laurel for them, back in Connecticut.

Her job of drafting prison concepts, even prisons meant for rehabilitation, didn't give Adelle much opportunity to explore the quaint brick-and-shingle combinations of the

architecture from her favorite tradition: Queen Anne. She'd visited Illinois back in undergrad, when she was choosing which MArch programs to apply to, and toured University of Chicago's campus, even though they weren't in the running. They didn't offer a Master's of Architecture. But the buildings! Adelle had considered going to IIT, a few miles away, just so she could visit the neo-Gothic spires of the Queen Anne halls of University of Chicago. She visited the Robie House, the Rookery, Sears Tower. They each did their jobs sufficiently, compelling her to look up when she was supposed to look up, pushing her forward into the next room with the induced claustrophobia of a cleverly low ceiling, manipulating the exact entry points of sunlight. But the university buildings did something more.

Gothic architecture began when most people couldn't read. Their own holy texts closed the doors of heaven on them, illiteracy making them unworthy and unable to enter. Their buildings—stone fingers pointing to the clouds, buttresses swooping out like angel wings, stained glass freezing stories of Divinity for anyone to view—these were the open gates, the pathways to God in a gray and empty world. The Queen Anne style took all the elements of a meeting place for heaven and earth and translated them for a world of scholars. The buttresses were scaled back, but the lofty, upward towers remained. Rough-hewn stones, wood and slate shingles, and arched windows glimmering with colored glass encased UC's sanctuaries for learning.

But you will forget, her mother had said when Adelle told her the plan in her weekly, obligatory phone call.

And Mother was right. New York had been a risk, but one close enough to Fairfield that if the Baron ransacked her college routine, she could trust that she'd find her way home with little enough trouble. But Chicago. That was different.

Adelle had accepted the fellowship and stayed on at Columbia for three more years. Whenever she had a little free time, she worked on the design for her Sanctuary. She didn't want to call it a dream house; the term meant something different to her than to the insipid young homebuyers who used it. But she didn't like to share her name for the neo-Gothic house she drafted. She imagined people would think her overly dramatic, if she'd had people to tell.

It was one of the reasons she loved De. She'd shown him the first night they were married, pulled the tube from under her bed, where it had hidden beneath their love-making these months, and unrolled the renderings. She didn't try to hide her block letters, measured out in guidelines at the bottom of each velum sheet: *The Sanctuary*.

"That's a gorgeous house, Mrs. Jones," De had said.

Adelle felt sweet heat in her cheeks; she liked his new name for her. "Would you live there with me, Mr. Jones?"

His shoulders straightened. His freckles glowed. And when he finished his B.S. after seven years of part-time school and full-time work, they both pretended it was his graduation present, moving their little family into Adelle's Sanctuary.

A different kind of ache opens up inside her as she considers for a moment how small her world has become. At the first empty page, Adelle stops. She dates the top, September 19, 2010, and begins to scrawl out the standard information. But after writing her name and Karen's, she can't concentrate on sketching the floorplan of the infernally small, skin-smelling room.

On July 18, 64 C.E., and for five days after that, Tacitus survived the Great Fire of Rome. Seneca, the stoic philosopher and advisor to the emperor, wrote a letter to the apostle Paul claiming only ten percent of Rome had burned. The letter was a forgery. In fact, the fire consumed seventy-two percent of the city.

The faint blue lines of the graph paper blur before her. *Benjamin DeAngelo Jones is your son*, she writes. When the pen goes still, Adelle tries to think of what else to say. Nothing comes, so she repeats the line, *Benjamin DeAngelo Jones is your son* over and over until the page is full. Splotches of wet follow the words, pulling the ink into spider webs where her tears fall. She sets the open Rhodia beside her on the bed, wraps her leg back into the brace, and lays the gurney down.

Part II

Chapter 5

The stairs make a straight, dim mountain to the apartment above the bakery. Thick 1920's linoleum covers the steps, black with white striations to mimic marble. The steps are too narrow for Adelle's walker. She folds in its sides and hands it to Celesse, who rests it against her hip and waits.

"Go on," Celesse says.

Adelle obeys, gripping the handrails on either side. The air is cloying. It forms a sticky film over her skin. She doesn't know how she's going to live in this air. It smells like old man and confectioner's sugar.

She lifts her good leg first. Splintering sensations rip through her right shin, a protest against supporting her weight on its own. She resists the urge to move faster to get past the pain.

#

It had been about building up the muscle first, what was left of it. Before she was allowed to stand, Jeff had her lying on a table doing excruciating leg lifts. Over and over, slow and slower.

"A good chunk of meat got cooked off," Jeff had told her.

"Is that the medical term for it?" She'd asked through gritted teeth, flexing at the knee.

He smiled and went on. "Use what you've got, that's what I always say. Work it, baby."

She'd thought she couldn't wait to stand on her own. Then, a couple weeks in, Jeff made her do it.

She had to get off the bad leg fast, before it cracked beneath her. She'd thought this every time she'd raised her left foot the slightest bit off the ground.

But Jeff had said no. “You’ve got to take it slow even if it feels like you’re going to break.”

It was the first time he’d made her stand. She’d gritted her teeth and clenched the armrests of the wheelchair with her hands, hoisting herself up and then collapsing back down the moment she let go.

He’d caught her under her shoulders, thumbs digging into her armpits, and lowered her down into the chair. “You can’t just fall like that. You can’t just react. You have to think it through, every movement, or you’ll break yourself again.”

He pointed at his bicep. Sky blue ink peeked out from beneath the short sleeve of his scrubs. “Do it right for me, and I’ll show you the one I got when my buddy Mike joined the Air Force.”

#

Jeff had been there today, when they released Adelle into Celesse’s care.

“Push her, but don’t rush her,” he’d told the baker. “That would be too easy.” Adelle shot him a mock scowl, but Jeff missed it. He was staring at Celesse.

Adelle had hardly spoken. The orderly last night had been wrong. It wasn’t about weaning her off. This morning, Karen had come back with her watery looking eyes and opened her mouth five different ways before managing a question: “How did you sleep?”

Adelle glared at Karen. The girl stared at the floor.

“Who took my notebook?”

The nurse’s thumbs fidgeted at her stethoscope.

“I want to talk to Maude.”

Karen's blond head snapped back up, her eyes wide. Then, she bandied out the door without speaking, and Adelle understood. It had been a test. They knew she would dream. They were waiting to see if she would remember.

#

Celesse stands watching, her face glazed with neutrality, as Adelle's left foot comes to rest on the bottom step. Adelle leans her weight forward, inching off the right foot so slowly that the relief burns almost as badly as the pain. When it's in the air, she holds it still until it becomes too heavy for her, which isn't long since the brace acts like an anchor dragging at the ocean floor. Adelle straightens her knee deliberately, smoothly, so that if Jeff were watching he'd make one of his jokes about ballet.

She'd earned it, the story about Air Force Mike.

"We were supposed to join together," Jeff said. "Went out, got wasted the night before. Stumbled into a tattoo shop and said we were signing up. Told the guy we wanted matching ink. Woke up the next morning, and this is what he'd done." Jeff lifted the hem of the sleeve halfway up. A black-rimmed circle with an eagle in the middle was inked on a field of blue. Gold letters spelled out *United States Army* around the border of the seal.

"I thought you said you guys joined the Air Force," Adelle said.

"We did. Or, he did. The idiot inked the wrong damn seal. Anyway, we went to get our physicals. Turned out I had a heart murmur no one had caught before. Mike joined up without me. He took flack for that ink. So when he came back after his first tour in Iraq, we got the rest done before we went out drinking." Jeff lifted his sleeve the rest of the way. The blue went all the way up except for some uninked skin in the shape of clouds. Across the top, in deep red letters, it said, *M.G. - Best Pilot in the Goddam*—.

Adelle laughs.

“Yeah. And a damn good friend. He didn’t make it through his next deployment.” Jeff shakes his head. “At the funeral, they did the full-on color guard, but at the end, that’s how they saluted him. Mike Gentry. Best Pilot in the Goddam Army.”

It was nice to listen to the way Jeff inked monuments to his friends. The only friend she’d had was Sam.

#

The Thursday after Tammy’s prom party, Adelle had closed her locker and turned to go. Sam blocked her path, his blue eyes rimmed with kohl. He’d been waiting behind the metal door.

“Busy week?”

“Something like that.” Adelle walked the other way. It would take her twice as long to get to class in this direction.

“You didn’t call me back.” Sam loped along, just behind her.

Adelle’s stomach tightened. She picked up her pace, felt like a duck trying to run, navigating the sea of Oxford shirts.

“Adelle.”

Her first name sounded foreign, like a question mark, when he said it.

“I can’t talk to you,” she said.

“Late for class?”

She shook her head and kept walking.

“Jealous boyfriend you forgot to tell me about?”

She smiled but didn’t stop.

“Is it me?”

Adelle moved into a recess between the columns of lockers. “It’s my mother. She doesn’t want me to see you.” She glanced around.

“Planning to wear a blindfold in fifth period?”

Adelle pictured Sam’s seat two stations away from hers in the biology lab, then dropped her gaze to the floor.

“Do you always do what your mother tells you?”

She started to smile, but then Tammy Craven passed beside them through the hall. Adelle bent over and shuffled through her backpack, hoping Tammy wouldn’t see them.

Sam left her alone after that, until about a month later, the day they were doing the pigs. Adelle stood in the formaldehyde air of the bio lab.

“Better take your blindfold off,” Sam said behind her, too close to her ear. Gooseflesh rose across Adelle’s arms. He came and whispered it to her as he passed her station. “Better take your blindfold off. Or you might miss something.”

Adelle had studied her thick hands until he moved away. Then, she watched the back of him rise and fall with his long stride, his dyed black hair a comma with a tiny pointed curve at the divot where skull met neck.

The piglet looked like a kid’s plastic toy left outside until sun and rain had drained its color. Except for one blue gash. Adelle stared at the dye-soaked slice along its neck and the tiny eye bumps, the shape of rosebuds that would never open. She expected its bleached flesh to be smooth, but when she stole a secret, ungloved touch, it felt wet and pimply. She drew her hand back, rubbed her finger in a circle against the pad of her thumb, spreading the cool chemical moisture. She brought it to her nose, acrid and earthy at once, when her lab partner, Gavin King, snickered.

“Adelle just figured out where her perfume comes from,” Chase Goodall whispered from his station behind them. Gavin laughed louder. Adelle glanced to the far left of the room where Sam stood straight-backed over his own doomed piglet and a tray of sheers, pins, and probes.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Laroux said, “begin by examining your specimen for age and gender. Work with your partner. One of you can hold the mouth open while the other probes with a finger. You’re looking for teeth and texture. Remember to mark your notes on your diagrams.”

“I’m not sticking my finger in a pig’s mouth,” Gavin said. He reached down and pried the snout from the chin. Adelle’s finger had roved deep inside the cavity, pressing and probing for oral development, when Gavin smashed the mouth shut over it. He opened and closed the gummy lips twice before Adelle could snatch her hand away.

“Mr. King,” Mr. Laroux said. “What’s funny?”

Gavin’s face went grave. “Nothing, sir.”

“Let’s keep it that way. Now, class, separate your pig’s hind legs and identify either a scrotal sac or genital tubercle.”

Adelle looked away while Gavin’s latexed finger poked along the puckered circumference of their pig’s genitalia. A glance was enough: it was a female. When it was time to tie back the limbs, she snatched the twine from him and hovered protectively, pulling clean, precise knots below the unfinished hooves. She straightened from the task to see Sam staring back at her. He dipped his head and tipped an imaginary hat before turning to his own captive specimen and lifting a scalpel.

That afternoon, when Adelle opened her locker, a folded paper slipped out. It was one of the dissection diagrams, the outline of a splayed pig, naked to its entrails, with labeling blanks

spiking out from it like flying buttresses, tearing apart the structure instead of holding it together. Someone had colored the heart red and drawn dark black lines around the eyes. *Not all men are pigs* was scrawled across the bottom.

Adelle's stomach went soft. He was right. She didn't want to miss anything.

#

"Thanks," Adelle said as Jeff had wheeled her through to meet Maude outside the rehab room.

"For what?"

"Sharing Airforce Mike with me."

"You do that good tomorrow, and I'll show you the dagger and chalice on my leg."

"I bet that's what you say to all the girls," Adelle answered as Maude wrapped the blanket around her for the trip back up to the burn center.

"And it always works." Jeff winked.

Maude pushed the wheelchair back to Adelle's standard room. Now that she had remembered, without sedative or notebook, her favorite nurse was allowed back. Adelle tried to concentrate on the delicious Connecticut air for the five minutes between the PT center and the main hospital, but now that Sam's voice had risen in her mind, she couldn't shut him off. Usually she could trick herself out of it, shift subjects to Tammy and her mom, how Mr. Craven had kicked them out, and how Adelle's own mother mysteriously knew to expect it. Mother had Adelle make up the guest bed for Mrs. Craven, and for two horrible days, all Adelle could hear was Tammy's infinite monologue of complaints on the other side of Adelle's bedroom wall. With her knack for hanging onto useless information, Adelle had regretfully retained every whiny word. Reciting Tammy's comments on the size of the room, low quality of the food, and

the horror of sharing a bed with her mom, almost always made enough noise in Adelle's brain to push the few important things she still remembered to the outer rim of her thoughts. She had always suspected that hanging on too hard was one reason the Baron came, as if her clinging alerted him that something was worth taking. She'd figured if she pushed away the good memories while she was awake, maybe the Baron wouldn't steal them. So far it had worked.

But Jeff's tattoos and the bright sun had dredged Sam up from the deeps, and she could not drown him out.

#

"How many others are there? Buildings in your dreams?" Sam had asked. It was two days after the pig. He'd caught up to her on her way to the parking lot after the final bell.

Adelle glanced around at the white shirts flooding the hall. They moved together, one gleaming blur, toward the exits. She knew they weren't listening, weren't looking, but lowered her voice anyway and stared ahead, away from Sam. "It's a whole city."

They were almost to the doors when he spoke again. "So your mother hates me."

"My mother hates everything."

"And me." The back of his hand brushed against her knuckles. Adelle's stomach whirled.

"It's because of Mrs. Craven. She's always trying to impress Tammy's mom. Mrs. Craven told her about your eyeliner."

"Does it bother you?"

"What?"

Sam's mouth went crooked when he smiled. He pointed at his eyes.

Adelle stared at them, rimmed in black, for maybe a moment too long.

Sam smiled even wider. “Hey,” he said, tilting his head to one side, “you want to open up another one?”

Her hand moved intuitively to her thigh, touching the scar through her khaki skirt. Cathedral had split open one memory palace, but the next two weeks of her life disappeared. Would she have to give up something this time, if she cut in another building? She didn’t know the system, if it were a trade with the Baron or coincidence. She’d only done it once. She looked at Sam.

He winked at her.

If she tried again, at least she’d know. And this time, she wasn’t alone. She gave him a small smile.

They left the school separately. Fifteen minutes later, Adelle pulled into Westfield Mall and called her mother from a payphone. A couple girls from her calculus class giggled past.

“You’re late,” her mother said.

“I’m at the mall. I just felt like going shopping.” Adelle waited. She’d always groaned when her mother had dragged her to the mall.

“Well,” her mother said after a long pause, “stay away from those little kiosks with the dirty college kids and cheap knock-offs.”

Permission obtained, Adelle walked to the nearest jewelry counter and bought a gold bracelet for evidence, then stood outside Sears until Sam drove past in his battered silver Prelude. Adelle followed the car with her eyes and walked out to it when it came to a stop three spaces from her own.

Sam leaned over the stick shift and kissed her, first carefully, experimentally, then harder with his hand tangled in her hair. He drove them through the pick-up window at Burger King.

“You’re supposed to eat before stuff like this,” he said and ordered them both Whoppers and fries before continuing on to a vacant apartment building beside the park. He wound the Prelude around to the back corner of the lot, pulling in to a spot hidden on one side by unruly shrubs and on the other by a twisted, leaning hawthorn.

Adelle picked at her fries. The car was silent except for the occasional crinkle of the To Go bag. Sam crushed his Whopper box and pulled a pack of Marlboros out of the center console.

“Right back,” he said. He stepped out of the car.

Adelle watched him unbutton his shirt cuffs and roll up the sleeves. His arms were almost as pale as hers. His ass made two khaki circles pressed up against the driver’s side window. Her chest tightened. She stared at her untouched burger and wondered if this was such a good idea.

Finally, he stamped out the cigarette butt and poked his head back in the car. “Ready?”

Adelle didn’t answer. His eyes looked darker, hungry even though he’d just eaten. The smell of nicotine hung around him and clogged the air.

Sam emptied out his Marlboros and tore the box at the seams to make a flat, eight-inch panel. He pulled out the Xacto knife and a handful of alcohol wipes he’d lifted from the art room, and passed Adelle his eyeliner pencil. Her heart pounded in her ears. She tried not to cough.

“I don’t know how to choose.”

“Draw them all.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if I want to wake up to that much of myself.”

“I’ll stay with you tonight.”

“Right. My mother won’t have any problem with that.”

“It’s your call. I’ll stay with you if you let me. I’ll wake you up if you have a bad dream.”

So Adelle drew the bakery, hoping it would hold memories she wouldn't mind getting back. The Willy Wonka style building had shown up in her dreams when Adelle was about twelve, rereading Roald Dahl. She closed her eyes and conjured the black and white peppermint candies, like buttons down a giant baker's hat, with a swirling door at the bottom. She pictured the brass cupcake-shaped doorknobs, the round window frames with wood carved like circles of oatmeal cookies. It was always night over the bakery, so that the lights inside would glow brighter. Adelle drew it all, even the white picket fence with post caps made of Hershey's kisses.

She handed him the cigarette box drawing. "It has to go where she'll never see it."

Sam studied the eyeliner sketch, then said, "Lift your skirt."

Adelle stared at him.

When she didn't move, he glanced up at her, eyebrows raised, but then his face softened. He took off his Oxford and held it out to her. "You can cover up with this."

In just his T-shirt, he looked more fragile. He was so thin. Adelle tried not to let him see the tremor spreading through her. Without a word, she wriggled the hem of her skirt up over her stomach, the Oxford a makeshift sheet across her thighs.

Sam told her to recline her seat so he could reach better. "Just breathe," he said. His voice shook, and, Adelle noticed, so did his hands as they lifted the corner of his school shirt and her panties away from her hip, careful not to uncover too much.

The first cut was the worst. Sam dug the razor in just below her hip bone, copying from her drawing. A bead of blood followed the blade down the side of the hat-shaped building and across Adelle's white skin. She clamped her jaw to keep from whimpering. Sam cleaned the razor with the alcohol wipe.

"It's going to burn," he warned and dabbed the wipe over the cut.

Adelle sucked in a breath.

“Ready?”

She nodded, and he went in for the second cut, the bubbly top of the hat. He didn't use the alcohol after that, just his own spit on one of the leftover Burger King napkins, and that felt better. And then as he cut and carved, it stopped getting worse. Everything on her hip throbbed and she couldn't feel new pain anymore, only the pulsing burn that would save her from forgetting whatever it was she'd forgotten.

Sam was an artist. He didn't just copy the child-scrrawl of Adelle's drawing. He improved it. He asked her questions: How tall was the building when she stood in front of it? How far did the poufy roof of the hat extend over the edges of the cylindrical tower? Was the fence close to the building, or was there a little yard? How many windows were there? He talked as he cut and she answered while the tears, which she couldn't hold back any more, glided down her cheeks. By the end of it all, when he was slicing little hash marks to make the shadows under the poof and accentuate the curve of the walls, he abandoned the napkin altogether and sucked away the blood as it came, and went under the Oxford and kissed away everything else, and Adelle hung onto the emergency break and clamped down her jaw to keep from screaming how it felt so good.

#

“Adelle!” Sam's fierce whisper entered her dreams. Then he was in her throat and pulling her arm, shaking her and shouting her name.

Adelle woke choking, moved to push him away, and discovered it was her own hand, down her own throat, that he'd been trying to pull out. She woke to the burn of fingers deep beyond gagging, the wheeze of lungs nearly empty. She trembled with her own trapped screams.

But she woke to Sam. He was the first to teach her to breathe in and breathe out, to keep herself when her world was falling apart. He managed to dislodge her arm, fighting her off while she writhed against him. “Breathe with me,” he said, probably mostly to calm himself down, but it worked and together they inhaled, and together they exhaled.

Adelle began to shiver and they moved into the back seat to keep each other warm. Sam stroked her hair but didn't kiss her.

“You want to talk about it?”

She shook her head.

They stayed until the sky turned gray, preparing to give way to the sunrise.

#

In fifteen minutes, Adelle has gotten halfway to the top. She pauses on the claustrophobic stairs and twists her head around to see Celesse, standing silent as a mountain at the bottom. If Adelle were alone, she would sit down and bump the rest of her way up on her freshly scarred backside. She wants to hate the baker. She very nearly had hated her, an hour and a half ago, when Celesse was there instead of De and Ben.

#

After the nurse Karen left, Adelle stared at Simonides' scarred red name, but could not focus. Blood pulsed in her head, and her eyes kept flicking to the door.

She hadn't forgotten. She remembered the entire hospital stay, from Day sixty-eight till this morning. Her dreams hadn't swallowed it. Heat rose from her chest. Somewhere in City was the building that held the first sixty-seven days. If she could get her hands on her Rhodia, maybe she could start figuring out where. Adelle would saw it into her skin with one of the plastic hospital forks if she had to, if it meant she'd be allowed to see Ben.

She'd spent the night in City, in the levitating apartment that floated alone, no building around it, no elevator up. The apartment had been there before; she remembered it from sketches in her Rhodia before the hospital, before the day she took Ben to Build-A-Bear. It was a mutilated version of her little place on 105th Street, when she was a student at Columbia. The one hallway turned into seven that twisted and intersected. If she could focus, she might be able to remember her way to a window, look out and see the other buildings, compare them to old drawings to see if anything in City was new. But even if she could, without the Rhodia to keep track, she'd never have a reliable start date for when anything she'd dreamed last night came into being.

She looked again at the door. Faint footsteps padded past the other side, but no one opened it.

It was four in the afternoon before anyone besides the orderly remembered she existed. Mel Genovese, and her lunch tray, had come and gone, one fork less on its way out than it had on its way in. Otherwise, Adelle lay alone in her room with the smell of skin and flowers. The frustration exhausted her.

When the wooden door finally swung open, Dr. Wyndham strolled through with a clipboard and a small entourage: Karen, Jeff, and Celesse St. Armand.

“Where the hell has everyone been all day? And who took my notebook?”

“Ms. Corey, I've brought your release papers. Karen and Jeff are here to brief you and Ms. St. Armand on outpatient instructions—”

“Ms. St. Armand? What does she have to do with this? Where's De?”

“You'll be staying with me a while, my sister, until things get figured out.”

Adelle stared at her cornered eyes. “Things.”

“Mm. Yes. Things.”

Dr. Wyndham started talking about forms and prescriptions while Karen cowered, translucent, in the doorway behind him. Jeff stood with his arms crossed, a peculiar look on his face, as if he were as confused as she was about why the baker was taking her home. Adelle felt him studying her, when he wasn't studying Celeste St. Armand.

Adelle twisted her torso as far left as it would go and reached out for the phone on the wall. Dr. Wyndham continued to read off the clipboard, but little Karen's eyes got big as Adelle began to dial. The beeps got the doctor's attention. He paused and stared at her from under his Sam Eagle eyebrows. Adelle ignored him and listened to the phone ring on the other end of the line. Dr. Wyndham shrugged and kept going. He finished his speech, signed the top page, and handed Karen the clipboard.

“Any questions, Ms. Corey?” Adelle became conscious of the doctor's words for a moment between rings, but then De's voicemail message began and she waited for the beep before demanding that he get his ass to the hospital right this instant if he wanted any semblance of a marriage from this point forward.

Dr. Wyndham had shrugged then and left the room.

#

Adelle stands at the top of the stairs, trying to curb her panting. There is a door at either end of the landing. She watches Celeste's fluid ascension. The baker rises from step to step without pause, not even holding the handrail, probably not even thinking about what she's doing.

Celeste unfolds the walker and passes it to Adelle, then unlocks the door to the right. Adelle follows her into the great room, made great only by the Art Deco trick of high walls with molding two feet down instead of at the crown. The scuffed pine floor needs refinishing. All the

public living space seems to happen in this fifteen by fifteen foot quad. The whitewashed wainscoting tells its story through cracks and chips. But, above it, the walls are butter yellow against white trim, and in spite of herself, Adelle feels warm. Badly faked Tiffany lamps clutter the room: one on each of the end tables flanking the threadbare couch, their dragonflies mere cartoons of the originals. A slightly more impressive take on his wisteria design drips from a small chandelier over the round kitchen table. Across from the couch stand three pressboard bookcases, mostly cluttered with cookbooks, and to Adelle's left a recessed niche holds the only genuine antique in sight: a 1924 Wedgwood double-oven stove, restored to perfection in mint milkshake green and creamy white. About two feet of countertop separate it from a farm-style sink and tiny apartment refrigerator.

“Your room is through there,” Celesse gestures toward a door on the opposite wall.

Adelle feels the pinched eyes appraising her and straightens herself off the aluminum walker as much as she can.

“Do you need help?”

Adelle shakes her head and squeaks forward on the metal frame, but Celesse follows close behind her anyway. Damn her. Adelle doesn't need a hovering, spoon-feeding, nanny. She needs to be home, in her home, every brick, tile, and beam her own design. She needs to hold Ben and smell his sweaty head after he runs inside from the swings, cheeks blazing, and flings his arms around her. But it's winter now. The cold air rushes at her from the squalid guest room when she opens the door, a reminder that summer passed without her. She takes in the worn bedspread, embroidered with gaudy yellow hibiscus. Her red suitcase rests in the corner. De must have brought it over. Beside it stands a tiny bookcase, another fake Tiffany lamp on top. This one has yellow calla lilies. Adelle's eyes scroll down. Her pulse quickens when she sees

that on the shelf below, instead of the predictable dime store novels, sits her Rhodia and the Berol pencils. She can see the checkered “O” from here.

“You took it.”

“Mm. And now I’m giving it back.” Celesse turns, a perfect, natural movement, and walks back toward the great room. “Good night, my sister,” she says, and closes the door behind her.

#

Adelle runs her palms over the surface of the bed in slow circles. Knobby crewel work dots the quilt, a pointillist swirl of yellow roses. It feels the way she’d imagine a turret on a sandcastle would feel, the kind Ben builds by dribbling watery handfuls through his fingers to pile up in bumpy spires. This bedspread is how they should feel. But they don’t. When you touch them, they turn to dust.

A few feet in front of her, a group of framed postcards clutters the wall. They look Caribbean, perfect turquoise against lines of white. Adelle imagines a tiny Ben in red trunks, running across the sand, jumping from one framed beach to the next, always behind the glass. She glances at her doorknob—the blessed lock guards her tiny block of space. No nurses, physical therapists, or useless doctors, no stranger named Celesse St. Armand, will come through without her permission. She looks back at the motionless waves. The shoreline blurs. She can’t quite see her imaginary Ben anymore.

Chapter 6

Adelle sits in the yellow room. Morning sun makes stripes through the mini blinds. Her Rhodia splays across her lap. She is staring at the last filled page. She always reads it backwards, beginning with the most recent notes. The floor plan of a meager apartment—this one, apparently—boxes itself around the graph paper grid. She had labeled it *Home of Celesse St. Armand*. If these are yesterday's notes, then today is September twentieth. She flips back a page, hunting clues.

In that halfway state between dreams and waking, Adelle had expected to open her eyes to the hospital room. It was cold enough to be that room, the last room she remembered. But, as she continued toward consciousness, something in the smell was wrong. No skin, no sickly sweet rotting flowers. It was bread baking, and cakes, maybe, too. It brought her all the way awake, and here she was, in a clean but threadbare room with yellow flowers on every surface.

Someone taps on the door.

Adelle tenses and closes her notebook. "Come in."

The doorknob rattles.

"You have to unlock it," says a thick voice from the other side.

Adelle reaches for the walker beside the bed and hoists herself up slowly, sliding her braced leg across the bed behind her, concentrating on moving it smoothly off the edge. She inches over to the door, grateful for the compactness of the room, and turns the lock.

The door opens slowly, revealing a tall, angular woman with lovely cheekbones. Celesse St. Armand. She looks just like Adelle's notes said she would.

"Hungry?" the woman asks. She gestures into the great room toward a small pine table with a bowl of fruit on it.

Adelle heaves her way to one of the chairs and focuses on lowering herself into it. The shabby couch, the awful lamps, and the bookcases clutter the space—all just as her notes described.

Celesse stands at an enameled antique stove and opens one of the ovens. Steam curls out into the room and the bread smell stretches down into Adelle's empty stomach. She can't help it: her muscles give up all their tension to the homey scent, in spite of her having to play the day by her notebook. The almond-skinned woman carries wheat bread and a tub of butter substitute over to the table and sits down. She cuts a painfully thin slice of the tempting loaf and slides it over to Adelle.

“Eat up, my sister.”

Adelle spreads a layer of fake butter over the hot, perfect crust. She devours the meager slice in three bites and reaches for the bread knife to cut herself some more, but Celesse pulls it away.

“No time for that. We have much to do today.” She offers Adelle an apple from the bowl.

Adelle frowns. She studies the apple in the woman's dark hand. She needs to put on weight. There are tattoos to be done, and not enough room for them after months of hospital diet. Her skin sags about her body in little puckers.

“What are we doing?” Adelle asks.

“We're going to find me in that crazy head of yours.”

“You're Celesse St. Armand.” Adelle speaks slowly, almost certain that she is right.

“And so I am,” the woman says.

Adelle rests her knife on her plate and her hands in her lap. Under the table, her fingers rove her Simonides wrist, around and around, up and over the bulbous letters, down into the valleys between them. “How did you know,” she asks, “that I had forgotten you?”

“How could I not know? One day you were my sister, my best friend, and the next,” she meets Adelle’s eyes and stops herself. “Oh,” she says. “Good God. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten again? It’s a wonder you keep your own name straight. Well, eat up. It’s time you know who I am.”

#

At first, Adelle watches the brick town go by from the passenger seat of Celesse’s Volt. She tries to ignore the itch and weight of her braced leg. Adelle wonders what Celesse has in mind, if the baker understands the tattoos, or if they’re headed to some psychiatrist. She wants to ask, but doesn’t want the answer. She thinks of when Sam did the Block Fort, how she almost lost the baby. He hadn’t known she was pregnant. Would anyone be willing to ink her up while she’s still recovering from burns, grafts, and broken bones?

She doesn’t want to think about it anymore, so Adelle reads through the rest of her Rhodia, taking note of every mention it makes of Celesse St. Armand, who sits beside her, driving them northward on I-95. It seems to Adelle that she isn’t supposed to like Celesse. Her notes say the baker lurked around the hospital almost every day, making decisions that De should have made, directing the doctor when to start and stop Adelle’s care, stealing her Rhodia. Cold fingers spread out in Adelle’s stomach when she reads that her mother hired Celesse. She looks up from the pages. The baker’s profile is like an almond-skinned Nefertiti, but with wider, more beautiful eyes that crinkle at the corners like they’re ready to laugh. It reminds Adelle of Ben, of his laughing eyes, and an ache stabs through her chest.

Dark, barren branches scrape the sky, blurring outside Adelle's window as they zoom past. She decides she cannot hate a woman who has Ben's eyes.

Hating De, however, is another matter. Adelle stares at the snowy landscape, letting her notes from the day before sink in. De hadn't come. She remembers everything up to that point: moving out of the blue room with the pancake ceiling, the physical therapy sessions with Jeff, even watching her parents and De read her Rhodia. The only things she's lost are Celesse St. Armand and the moment her husband gave her to the baker. She'd never thought him a coward until today, on this ride, when she flipped one more page back and read how he hadn't had the balls to face her. What had happened to the man who'd marched on her in Uris Deli?

"Why don't you date, Addie Corey?" De had said.

Her pulse quickened, but she'd answered without looking up. "Too much to remember." She was reading over a research paper she'd just gotten back, an analysis of I. M. Pei's use of geometric architecture to control people's movements.

"You mean too much you don't want to remember."

Adelle looked at him then. De tapped the paper in her hands. "Another perfect score, I'm guessing," he said.

Adelle folded her hands over the paper.

"You remember everything," De continued. "What do you have? A photographic memory or something?"

"It's not like that."

"They say only liars have to have a good memory."

Adelle's shoulders tensed.

He went on. "So. The truth. Why don't you date?"

She glared at De and said nothing.

“I stopped by your apartment yesterday.”

“You did?” Adelle’s stomach sank. Thoughts crashed through her brain too fast to cohere into any lucid strain.

“I was going to ask you to come to the Greenmarket with me, but when I turned down your hall, I saw something funny. Something I wouldn’t have seen if you didn’t date.”

Adelle looked down.

“Who was he?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice small.

“Right.”

“It was nothing. A one-night stand.” She hazarded a glance.

De’s face had grown so dark she couldn’t make out his freckles. “A one night stand,” he said through his teeth. “And do you have those often?”

Her chest felt like it was caving in. She stared at her hands.

“All right, then. I see how it is.” He pushed away from the table, his chair scraping across the industrial linoleum floor. “I’d have stood a better chance if I never introduced myself, wouldn’t I? If I didn’t give you compliments or pick up your dinner tab.” His dark figure towered over her. “You only ever want the people you can afford to forget.”

Adelle shifted under his stare. She waited for him to continue or walk away, but he just stood there, waiting.

“Fine,” she said, her voice firm but quiet.

De crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine?”

“You want to be a one-night stand? Fine.” She was going to lose him anyway. It should at least be worth it. And this way, maybe she’d forget him. Then it wouldn’t matter that he’d gone. She gathered her papers into her bag, stood, and pushed in her chair. After taking a few steps, she turned back to see De still standing, arms down, palms out, face a muddle of expressions all at once.

She raised an eyebrow. “Coming?”

He shook his head and started to follow.

Adelle glided through Uris Deli out into the bright autumn sun. De walked a few feet behind, saying nothing. Adelle felt his rage reaching toward her, over the concrete, boring into the flat of her back right between her shoulder blades. She imagined he must be glaring at her right there, all the way to her building, staying back like an angry dog instead of coming up alongside her where she could see him. He scuffled through the revolving door, jumping in and out to avoid getting stuck in the cramped, moving quadrant he’d squeezed into with her. In the elevator, he stared straight ahead.

The narrow, fourth-floor hallway constricted around them. The walls felt closer, the ceiling lower, and the musty smell of old building mingled with the scent of De’s skin and fury. Adelle absorbed it all, herself an empty slate, resigned to the moment, ignoring the inevitable loss that would greet her in the morning.

Adelle dug her key out of her messenger bag. De loomed behind her. The lock clicked and turned. She walked through, leaving the door open, and dropped her things on the rosewood console table. De’s rubber soles squeaked on the hexagonal tiles.

“I don’t want to be a one-night stand,” he said to her back.

“No talking,” she said. Her muscles seemed to turn to water inside her, her bones now bound together by blood and weeping. But her eyes were dry. She peeled out of her gypsy sweater and began unbuttoning the silk, paisley blouse underneath. Halfway down, she turned to face him. De watched, unsmiling, his limbs a collection of still, sharp angles.

“Changed your mind?” she asked. God, let him say no.

And he was upon her.

#

De lay behind her, on his side, one long arm wrapped around her so he could trace the faint, raised lines of the Bakery just inside her left hip. His earthy scent drifted above Adelle like a cloud of cigarette smoke, but more human and more selfish.

She caught his fingers with her own. For a moment he held her hand before going back to the tracks of the scar.

“Stop,” she said.

“What is it?” he asked, not stopping.

Adelle pulled his hand away from her skin and moved it to her waist. “No talking.”

“I want more than this.” De slid his other arm beneath her and pulled her toward him, hugging her in around her belly, but stopped when she struggled against him, moving to keep the inches of air a fence between them. She wouldn’t remember him tomorrow, if the Baron did his job. Anything beyond a goodbye fuck would only make it harder on De.

“There isn’t more,” she said.

“There could be a lot more. There could be tonight and tomorrow and as many days after as we want.”

“I’m going to forget you tomorrow.”

De pulled his arms away. She felt him roll onto his back, listened to his heavy, angry breaths.

“It was that good, huh?” He bit out each word, no ring of playfulness in his sarcasm.

Adelle smiled, staring at the yellow wall. It *was* that good. Maybe she could make him angry enough to be that good again before sleep took over and cemented him into oblivion. The real one-night stands, the ones she picked up at clubs when they were drunk enough not to ask questions, those she remembered down to the exact rasp of stubble against her neck and the most uninteresting birthmark. She remembered who could hit the hardest, go the longest, be the most creative with the pain.

De wasn't the type to mix in that sort of play. She could tell from the first night they'd gone out, when he wanted to kiss her, but didn't. He loved too much even when he wasn't in love, was too gentle, too afraid of his own power. It made her want to kiss him, too. Made her want the *more* that he offered, that everybody else could have. It hadn't been worth risking losing him until he was ready to walk away on his own. This afternoon would have been the end. He would have walked away from her and never looked back. Better to forget him. Better to give him what she could and let him go.

She lay beside him listening to the anger mount in his breath and wondered what shape his building would take.

“So that's it?” he asked. “You don't even talk? You just fuck guys and forget us?”

Adelle's stomach churned. “You knew when you came. What this was.”

“And you knew me.”

She turned to watch his long, dark body spring up from the white sheets. She inched a furtive hand to the pressed shape he left behind. It was warm.

De stood and faced her. She took in his Olympian body for the first time. The afternoon sun came golden through her window, danced with the tawny cinnamons of his skin, glinting off the tight dark curls that ran across his chest and down the center of his stomach, dividing his lean body with a line pointing to where he hung, half-spent and purple-brown. She wondered if it were anger or arousal that kept him from going completely limp.

“You don’t have to go yet,” she said.

De pulled on his green boxers and jeans. He grabbed his wallet off the cherry nightstand and unfolded it to grab a couple bills, which he put down in its place on the smooth, polished wood. Adelle stared at the flaps of money, her throat tight. She felt De’s glare. She could barely muster the strength to meet his eyes. His gaze was flat, guarded, trapping light. His pale, dead eyes dared her to speak.

“This isn’t what I do,” her words scratched against the insides of her throat.

De flung his button-down shirt over his shoulder and walked out of the apartment.

#

Celesse exits onto Colonel Henry Mucci Highway.

“Where are we going,” Adelle says, newly alert to their route.

“Trumbull.”

There’s only one tattoo parlor in Trumbull. How many psychiatrists are there?

“Your husband tells me it’s the only place you will let them do it.”

Tension peels away from Adelle like a husk curling down her skin. God bless De. Just a little. He’s still got Ben to answer for, but he’s sending her to Sam. He hates it, she knows, but he’s sending her anyway. Sometimes Adelle thinks De would rather have her forget than let her go to Sam. But she’d never given him a choice. Maybe things aren’t as bad as she’s imagined, if

De's wants her to remember. She'd never have gone to Sam to begin with, if it weren't for that first night with De.

For two weeks after their one-night stand, Adelle had dreamt herself in the same part of City every night. Mother Stairs were a white, spiral staircase with marble steps and rails that dripped like melted cheese. They stood alone on the northern border, reaching toward the empty sky. Long, dark stick figures with clumpy skin stood frozen, mid-stride up and down the steps. And every morning, after climbing and climbing all night long until her legs ached and tears of frustration streamed down her face, she woke up and remembered De.

This was not De's building. She'd known Mother Stairs nearly her whole life, recorded them in her earliest Rhodia, back in undergrad. They were almost as old as City itself, and though she searched each stony step for the slightest change, there was nothing new.

The first gray morning, when her eyes flew open, Adelle felt like her chest was going to collapse. She hadn't lost him.

It made no sense. She sifted out her life from the facts, carving away all the repugnant trivia that clung to her brain like a sailor would scrape barnacles from the hull of a ship to check the condition of the ancient wood. Here was her apartment, painted like butter, with the same furniture arranged in the same way as her childhood bedroom. Except the bed. Here she had a queen instead of the daybed that, she imagined, still waited for her in her parents' house. It had taken weeks of hunting to scope out a place she could afford with the window in just the right position, letting in just the right light at just the right time of day so that, if she did forget herself, she would not be startled into a foreign place upon waking. Here was her work, her studies, the buildings of the waking world, concrete and I-beams, stucco and tile, theory and practice. She'd learned years ago that structures were the only friends she could trust to remain: they changed

with the weather, with the eyes through which she saw them, but never on their own, never in ways that would take her past the realm of safely neutral ground. A building could not put her in raptures, nor could it defeat her. It could do nothing to stand out enough that she'd have reason to forget it. She had no pets, no friends, only Simonides wreathed around her wrist. She did not remember her mother past Cathedral and the Bakery, past the incidentals. She did not remember her father past routine. They were actors on a screen. She recognized them from the movie of the day before, or the notes she'd made in her Rhodia, and nothing more. No birthdays, vacations, or heart-to-heart talks. No punishments, no celebrations. No moments of their disappointment. No expressions of their pride. The hull of her ship was rotten, holes everywhere, not seaworthy by any standard.

And yet, there was De, solid as the day she met him. Adelle let herself wonder for a moment what this might mean for Sam, but her heart thumped and her blood pulsed and she pushed the thought aside before it had a chance to consume her.

She rolled over in bed, resting in the spot where he had lain those brief moments after they'd made love. Out the corner of her eye, she could see the bills still curled on her nightstand.

#

It has been nearly twenty minutes. Celesse St. Armand pulls into the gravel parking lot at the corner of Main Street and Edison. It looks different during the day, snow gentling the unkempt field that surrounds it, than it did that first time Adelle had driven there, stopping beside a lone black pickup.

#

It had been cold then, too, but a brisk autumn cold instead of the wet, white cold of winter. She'd sat in her car and let gusts of rubbery heat blow at her cheeks while she listened to

Louis Armstrong's *When You're Smiling* play out. The CD shuffled to *All of Me* before she pulled the key toward herself and silenced the Honda.

It looked nothing like a cathedral. The gray shack of a house drooped over flat ground, its windows painted black. Rotting lattice panels shielded the scant yard. Adelle half expected them to reach toward her with a tin cup, begging for alms. A neon OPEN sign flashed in the congested light.

Adelle slung the transport tube's strap over her shoulder and climbed out. The thunk of the car door reverberated through her. She leaned against its predictable metal and stared at the Old English letters above the fresh paint of the red front door. *Cathedral Tattoo and Piercing*. She felt her nerve run out like ghosts across the icy brown grass.

She'd thought about getting it done in New York. After four years of excuses, coming home for Thanksgiving set her on edge.

You don't have a project due? her mother had asked over the phone. *I thought MARCH was supposed to be harder than your undergrad classes. Well, I guess we can order a turkey.*

Don't trouble yourself, Adelle said. *I can't stay that long. Just one night.*

I can order it online from Fanny's now. One night in four years. What would people say if I didn't do a proper turkey?

Adelle hung up, imagining the buzz and click of a dial-up connection bouncing through her childhood kitchen. She wondered what else had changed. She considered again the stack of psychedelic business cards enumerating the dozens of tattoo parlors within a subway stop of her apartment. They sat on her desk, a Monopoly colored tower, next to her Rhodia, open to the page where she'd scrawled the address of Sam's place in Trumbull, an hour north of where they grew up.

It had been in the computer lab. That's where the thought seized her. *If anyone can do it right, it's Sam.* Adelle blinked at the monitor. Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth century Panopticon elevation and floor plan strobed back at her, a series of spokes attached to an omnipotent tower. It reminded her of Moonflower Tower, a looming spiral of vines in the precise center of City. It had got her thinking: what if she could corner her memories like that, stand in the middle, move her gaze from chamber to chamber and see all that had happened in her life in three hundred sixty degrees of clarity?

And then, there he was, asking. *You want to open up a new one?* Sam, in the middle of her mind, out from the chamber where she had kept him all this time.

#

"Ready?" asks Celesse.

Adelle isn't. The first time she came here floods her mind. The feeling of déjà vu makes her queasy. It happens every time she visits Sam. But she's not going to share this with the baker. She opens her door, and Celesse comes around the car with her walker. It's cold, like it was the first time.

#

The first time she'd come, Adelle stood alone by her car, staring at the Old English letters above the door: *Cathedral Tattoo & Piercing*, until the chill had penetrated her sweater. She shivered and walked across the cold pebbles of the driveway. Her feet made crunching noises as the tiny rocks skittered beneath her. The sky was darkening. The OPEN sign glowed brighter now, its neon voice the lone compass in the coming night.

#

Today the gravel shifts beneath the rubber stops on her walker. It makes it hard to balance, and she has to go even slower. Disabled. Handicapped. Crippled. These are the words for what she is now. She tries them on, but they don't feel right. She's never liked relying on others. And now Sam will see her like this. She leans on the walker as little as possible, placing her feet straight down with each step so that the rocks press into the earth instead of slipping out from under her. Celesse opens the door. The bell jangles.

#

The same bell had jangled above Adelle when she'd crossed the threshold alone seven years ago. She'd blinked several times to adjust to the light inside, creating the illusion that the burgundy reception area was fluttering before her. Dime store icons decorated the plaster walls, along with a poster of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* in a heavy wooden frame. Adelle stared at the young saint, draped in sumptuous folds of marble, mouth open in a rapturous sigh. The sculpted angel stood over her with his arrogant stone smile, poised to plunge his arrow through her flesh.

"Are you okay?"

Adelle swiveled toward the voice. The transport tube bounced against her side, and small drum beats echoed from it. A young woman stood behind a glass credenza covered in binders, a few of which lay open to display tattoo designs. She was skinny.

"I'm fine," Adelle said. "Why?"

"Didn't mean to startle you." Her voice sounded raspy. It was that sexy kind of raspy that Adelle knew guys loved, like the girl had been up partying too late, like her voice was

an invitation to party some more. Adelle didn't ever have that voice except once when she was getting over bronchitis. "I just asked a couple times if I could help you. Guess you didn't hear me."

"Oh."

Adelle didn't move. She looked at the girl's brown eyes, but she saw everything: the straight blond hair, the perfect boobs. The only thing between the girl and a fashion runway was the black ink dragon tattoo that spread its delicate wings across her exposed collarbones and twisted up her neck, breathing its smoky gray fire onto a smooth, apricot cheek.

"So, can I help you?"

"Is Sam here?"

The girl's lips straightened into a line that wasn't quite a smile. "Do you have an appointment?"

Adelle shook her head, feeling the sway of her limp hair and the stiffness from the drive. It suddenly seemed as if her clothes didn't fit right. She tugged at the bottom of her yellow sweater. It was too bright. It made her look fat.

"Sam's a busy guy."

Adelle stilled her hands. "The parking lot was empty. Almost." She remembered the truck she'd parked beside. Maybe Sam wasn't here. Or else, how would the girl have gotten here?

"Right, but the book isn't." The girl held up a black-bound date book and tapped the page. "See?" Adelle moved closer. Under the girl's iridescent blue fingernail, three names scrawled consecutively across the entire evening, starting at 5:30 and stretching into the early morning hours. Adelle's watch said 5:09.

“So he has some time. Is he here?”

“He can’t just ink you up in fifteen minutes. Unless you want a piercing?” Adelle shook her head again. “Well, then, you have to have an appointment.”

“Look, I just need to see Sam.”

The girl crossed her slender arms under her breasts. “So you don’t want a tattoo. Or a piercing.”

A door creaked the back of the converted house. “Hey, is that Marlo?” a man called.

Adelle tensed. She heard his footsteps approach, sure and heavy on the hardwood floor.

“I’ve got a—” Sam stopped under the low arch that divided the reception from a seating area. He was so tall his dusky brown hair nearly scruffed against the peak of the arch. He tilted his head to one side. Adelle felt loose and uncoordinated under his stare. “Well, fuck me. How the hell are you, Corey?” he said at last.

Adelle smiled.

“Who’s your friend, Sammy?” The reception girl had uncrossed her arms and stood with one of her slight hips out to the side. She was leaning over the credenza, hands splayed across the glass, giving Adelle and Sam full view of the beast snaking down her body.

“Rose, meet Adelle Corey. From high school, over in Fairfield.”

Rose made a breathy little sound that floated above them and extended her sleek arm to Adelle. Her long fingers wrapped around Adelle’s pudgy ones in a dainty handshake. “Fairfield? I thought you hated everyone there.”

Adelle pulled back her hand.

“Not everyone. What brings you here, Corey?”

“I know you’re busy.” Adelle’s voice felt small in her throat.

“Booked solid,” Rose said.

Adelle looked down at her lambskin boots. “Can you do a staircase? I know it sounds crazy, but it has weird railings. Soft and drippy.” She raised her eyes for a peek at him. He still stood with his head cocked to the side, half a smile on his thick lips. He stroked his stubbly chin. Long, slinky cat tattoos danced around his arm.

“Like Dali?” he said.

Adelle smiled. “Can you do that?”

Sam nodded one slow nod. “Where do you want it?”

Adelle twisted and gestured up her right side. She watched Sam’s eyes track over her body as her hand rose and fell.

“Rose, give Marlo a call. Tell him something’s come up. Who else have we got tonight?” Sam stepped to the credenza and glanced at the book.

Rose opened her mouth, but Sam spoke first.

“Cancel them all,” he said.

“Marlo made his appointment three months ago. He’s coming in from Bridgeport,” Rose said.

“It’s not that far.”

Rose put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“He’ll be fine,” Sam said.

Rose arched an eyebrow, but Sam didn’t seem to notice. He’d turned back to Adelle. “Ready?” He motioned down the hall.

As Adelle passed, Rose flicked the appointment book closed and spun around to grab the phone behind her on the wall.

#

Celesse holds the red door open and Adelle hobbles through on her walker. Rose is not behind the credenza. Sam's been through three shop girls since Rose and married the one he has now: Janice. Janice is polite when Adelle makes her sporadic, unannounced visits. She clears Sam's schedule without protest, and always disappears to some unknown place by the time Adelle emerges, newly inked. The first time, Sam said he guessed she'd gone to the grocery store. After the third time, Adelle made a point of not coming except for an emergency.

Today, Janice is already gone. Adelle stares at St. Teresa and listens for Sam's heavy footsteps. Soon she'll take her Rhodia out of the satchel Celesse lent her and they'll thumb through it on his drafting table, choosing the building that feels right. Adelle has no idea where in City Celesse might be, and she doesn't plan to waste time figuring it out. She has a fire to recover, and a son. Something in City somewhere has to be different. Sam has seen the drawings over the years. Maybe he'll find something Adelle has missed in the absence of her earlier notebooks.

It was different every time she came to Sam. And the same. The first time he'd taken her back to the drafting table, she'd known exactly what she wanted him to do. Sam had gestured to one of the leather stools in the corner, the only other furniture in the room besides the vinyl medical couch under the blacked out window. Adelle pulled out one of the stools. It scratched across the wood floor and squeaked when she sat down. She popped the plastic cap off the end of her transport tube, a hollow sound in the middle of silence. The room seemed very small. It smelled of incense—sandalwood—and astringent. Not ammonia. Rubbing alcohol. Her fingers coaxed the rolled mylar sheet from the tube. She handed it to Sam. He spread it across the

drafting table and stood looming over her rendering of the spiral staircase, rails melting, and long bumpy stick figures creeping on the steps.

“She’s pretty,” Adelle said.

“Yes.” Sam continued to study the drawing.

“Is that her truck out in the parking lot?”

“No.”

“You drive to work together?”

“Did you come here to talk about Rose?” Adelle felt him shift above her. She looked up and met his stone blue eyes. “Because after four and a half fucking years, I can think of some more relevant topics.”

“No,” she whispered. He turned back to the drawing.

“I only do black and white. Does that work for you?”

Adelle nodded.

“You’ll need to take off your bra. I’ll be back.”

The door closed behind him. Adelle stared at her hands. She could leave now. She could call her mother and say she couldn’t make it after all, that the balsa model she was building for Theory and Practice in Public Spaces needed last minute revisions. She could drive home to her dorm and go to any number of anonymous tattoo artists mere blocks away.

But none of them would understand.

She stood up and began peeling herself out of her autumn layers. Her pale, heavy body was the milky unformed color of a light bulb when the glow was gone. When she popped the bra clasp, her breasts sank with their own weight. She pulled her pale blue T-shirt back over her naked torso and left the sweater folded on the stool. Everything about her seemed to droop.

Two quick knocks called Adelle's eyes to the door. Rose walked in, pushing a cart of tools: inks, swabs, a tattoo gun. Her black velveteen top clung to her tiny waist.

"You can lay down over there. Sam'll be just a minute."

"Did he do your dragon?"

Rose smiled. She pulled her shirt up to where Adelle could just see the lower curves of a lace bra. Rose's perfect belly was a full fantasy scene: the dragon's tale swooped down the center and twisted toward a stippled stone castle, turrets creeping up to her breasts and disappearing under the folds of fabric. A drawbridge opened down so low that it didn't take much imagination to know where it ended. "Sam did all of me." Rose smoothed the soft black cloth back down over her body. "Make yourself comfortable."

When Sam came back, he did not knock. He didn't look at Adelle waiting on the raised vinyl couch in her baggy top. He locked the door behind him and went straight to the drafting table and sat down, shifted some papers around, and began tracing over Adelle's drawing of the twisted staircase. She watched him, only clothes and air between them. At last he rose, lifting the tissue pattern he'd created, and crossed the distance, boots on wood.

"Lay down," he said, and Adelle stretched on her left side so he could work her right. His fingers shifted the T-shirt, exposing her from armpit to waist, keeping the greater curve of her breast hidden. The gentleness surprised her. When he told her to take her pants down, Adelle unzipped her jeans and began to wriggle them lower. After a moment, Sam's hands joined hers, pulling the heavy denim past her hip. Only once, his fingers grazed the bubbly scar. He shifted the jeans back over it then and said nothing. It could have been an accident.

Sam opened a bottle and the acrid scent of rubbing alcohol crept through the room as he wiped down her skin. "Have you had any others, since ours?"

Adelle raised her Simonides wrist. Sam took her arm in his hands, turned it over to examine the brand. She watched his eyes rove the swirls and wondered if he thought the work was any good. He placed her hand back on the vinyl and began smoothing shaving cream down the length of her side.

“Any ink?” His voice was flat.

“No.”

Sam pulled the razor slowly down her ribs to the cushion of her hip.

“You know this is going to take eight or nine hours. Last time you spent the night with me it didn’t work out so good.” He didn’t speak for the next few swipes. Then, he leaned toward her ear. “It’s going to hurt.”

Like the biting and the bakery back in high school. Adelle couldn’t quite stop the grin that tugged at the corners of her lips.

“I know,” she said. She glanced toward him without turning her head. He was close enough that she could see only his chin and mouth, and that he was smiling, too.

#

At last, heavy thuds sound on the hardwood floor. Sam emerges from a door into the waiting room, behind the red couch. Adelle had been back there once. The kitchen was small but bright, with black granite countertops and a subway tile backsplash. There was another red couch, identical to the one out front, and a king-sized bed.

“Adelle.” It is almost a question.

She wonders why he’s using her first name. “Sam,” she says, deepening her voice to mock him.

Sam smiles, but something is different, a stiffness to his face. Adelle tenses. His eyes twitch over her, rest a moment on her walker and mutilated leg, before he extends a hand to Celesse. “Sam Crossing.”

They all move down the hallway, Adelle’s walker clinking as she goes. Why is the baker coming back with them? Adelle thought she understood that Sam had done this before.

Sam pulls out a stool and lets Celesse help Adelle lower herself into it.

“You sure you’re up to this?” he asks. He keeps his blue eyes trained on hers, and Adelle senses that he’s avoiding looking down at her leg again.

“This girl has got to find me in her head.” Celesse says. “I understand you are the mapmaker.”

Bridge Master, Adelle thinks, but says nothing. She looks at the black vinyl couch where she’d spent so many nights under Sam’s expert hands. That first night, after he’d done Mother Stairs, she had lay still as long as he let her, not wanting to break the spell. Her skin pulled in delicate snail tracks where tears had rolled over her cheeks and then crystalized to salty stripes. She’d dried up and still he’d brought more, and she’d heard him breathing above her, watched as his mouth turn up, hungry, and his teeth grit in concentration, and as finally, after hours of eternity, his face went slack, full of satisfaction. He’d brought her a mirror, but she was too spent to raise her hand and take it from him. So Sam ran it the length of her torso and she saw the steps and figures and railings swirling up her side in such fine detail it could have been a grainy photograph.

“So, why’d you ditch me, Corey?”

Adelle pressed her fingers gingerly to the tender red skin radiating from the winding tattoo. She wondered what this one would reveal, if she'd wake choking on another body part, or strangling herself.

"I mean, you never looked at me again. It was like I was breath. Poof. Invisible."

"It was the dream," she said. "It was about my mother."

"That figures," Sam said. "What did she do to you?"

"She taught me a secret." Adelle could hear her mother's always voice as clear as she had when she first woke up to it, that morning in Sam's Prelude.

#

Adelle blinks and Celesse comes into focus. She leans over the drafting table, rifling through the pages of Adelle's Rhodia. Sam stands with his fists clenched, watching her treating Adelle's notebook like a cookbook with a hard-to-find recipe.

Adelle reaches out. Celesse makes a humph sound and places the Rhodia in her hand.

"Your buildings are all gray." It is an accusation.

"I'll find it," Adelle says. She should have known better than to trust a woman that her mother hired.

#

It's time you learned to take care of yourself. Mother had towered in the doorway. Adelle slumped past her into the powder room, keeping her eyes down and maneuvering her body so she wouldn't accidentally brush against Mother's willow frame. A thick cigarette scent crept under the spicy flowers of Mother's *Eau de Parfum*.

Do you know you're the fattest girl in your class?

She remembered the way Mother had watched through narrow eyes when Adelle had processed onto stage with the rest of the sixth graders at Ellsworth Prep for their annual Autumn Sing. She had felt stiff and cold the entire performance. She'd moved her mouth without making a sound for fear her throat would fist itself up and make her squeak above the haunting unison of her classmates' *Agnus Dei*. Afterward, they'd had a vegetable tray and oatmeal cookies that smelled like cinnamon and earth. Adelle stacked a pillar of the cookies onto her yellow party plate and found a wooden cafeteria chair in the corner. She was halfway through the third one when she felt her mother's gaze cut through the gaggle of kids and yapping parents. Adelle lifted her head. Mother stood across the room, beside Olivia Craven. Mrs. Craven's lips and hands moved around some story that Adelle couldn't hear, and Mother would give a measured nod every so often, but her eyes passed over the crowd and leveled on Adelle's mouth and the half-eaten cookie in her hand. Adelle stopped chewing. Mother raised an eyebrow. Adelle placed the half cookie back on the stack. This time, when Mother nodded, it was in Adelle's direction, not Mrs. Craven's. The meaty oatmeal turned to cardboard on her tongue. Adelle put her napkin to her mouth and spit out the bite. Her mother's eyes softened, almost seemed to smile, and then, finally, left Adelle's face to concentrate on the demands of mingling. Adelle stared down at the lumpy beige circles for a moment before carrying her plate to the trash can. As she dropped it in, she'd heard her mother's tinkling laugh spreading out under the tongue-and-groove cafeteria ceiling.

Mother closed the powder room door and put a hand on Adelle's back, guided her to the sink. *Look at yourself, sweetheart.* Adelle obeyed, lifted her eyes to their dull brown reflection in the mirror. She examined her flushed round face, her thick shoulders. She was too short to see lower than her waist, where the Formica counter sliced across her middle. Adelle had always

been stocky. She never thought of herself as fat, just solid. Her memories could flit and flee, leaving her mind twisted into a different shape on any given morning. But her body was always the same. Or, it changed slowly, at the right pace.

Mother closed her twiggy hands on Adelle's shoulders. *You know you'll always be beautiful to me. But we have to do something about this baby fat if anyone else is going to want to take care of you. It's best if you watch what you eat. No more cookies.* Her reflection arched an eyebrow at Adelle, like in the cafeteria. Adelle tasted the cardboard mush in her mouth again and swallowed to get rid of it. *But if you can't help yourself, here's a little secret we girls use to make up for our mistakes.* Keeping one hand on Adelle, Mother leaned over and opened the toilet with the other. *Now, open your mouth.*

#

"After a dream like that one," Adelle had said to Sam's patient silence, "I was afraid to do anything to make her mad."

He'd slipped his hand under the waistband of her jeans, still lowered almost to her thigh to let the tattooed staircase rest. "Is it okay?" He'd asked.

Adelle nodded, and Sam pulled them down further, leaning in to study his old work. He ran a thumb over the bubbly surface of Cathedral before moving higher, closer, and tracing the smooth, perfect lines of the bakery.

"Where are you sleeping tonight?" he asked.

"Home."

"Your parents' house?"

Adelle nodded.

"Like hell."

“Well, I’m not driving back to New York.”

“You’re not driving anywhere. You’re sleeping here.”

“What about Rose?”

Sam picked up his tattoo gun and released the needle. He tested the caps on the ink bottles and wiped down the top of the cart.

“Sam?”

“I’ll sit over here,” he said, dragging his stool across the room. “I’ll just watch, you know, in case you try to eat your hand again or something.” He gave her a strained smile and sat down.

Leaning against the wall like that, he reminded Adelle of his high school self, a spindly kid with ink-black hair. When she’d woken up in the car beside him, gagging on her arm, wrestling away as he tried to save her from herself, Adelle knew exactly who he was. He’d cut into her twice, first with his teeth in Tammy’s bathroom, and then with the Xacto that had delivered her mother’s secret best advice. Adelle breathed with him there in the back seat, and she knew herself in him. He’d never leave her. She could spend her life remembering. She would be his canvas. He would carve her life back into her skin, and when all the buildings were down, he could carve himself there, too. They were eighteen, and everyone would have told them they were too young, naïve. But that wasn’t why she did it. She couldn’t give a shit about what people thought.

Her skin had stuck to the vinyl seat. He spooned behind Adelle, his dick a hard lump against her. She felt the edges of herself begin to blur, and when he inhaled, it was Adelle inhaling, and when Adelle exhaled, it was Sam exhaling. Their skin, where it touched, became

one skin, holding in the both of them, and she couldn't tell how much of herself she owned.
Facts smeared into each other, ink in rain.

His whole being absorbed her.

She couldn't stay with Sam.

If she woke up in ten years forgetting him, she'd have forgotten her whole self.

"I'll go with you," he'd said, when he drove her back to her car in the graying dawn.

"You don't have to do this alone."

Adelle imagined him beside her on Mother's Nouveau settee, his dyed black hair making a ghost of his pale face. She wondered what it would be like, to have his hand in hers, to be as calm as Mother was when she meted out her wrath. Something came together solid in Adelle, in her core. It would work, she knew it. If Sam were there, she could pass through Mother's rage uncharred. But then she'd always need him there. She'd never make the pass alone, never learn how. That solid core would not be Adelle's alone, which made it not hers at all. If she brought him along and forgot him the next day, she'd have even less against defense Mother's onslaughts. She'd know where Adelle's strength had started. She'd know how to make it stop.

And, aside from all that, Adelle didn't want to lead him on. She didn't know, couldn't know, but had always suspected that anything she tried too hard to hold onto would eventually disappear, the Baron's marked prey. Some buildings in City, when she entered them, felt like the friend she'd once imagined. It was as much confirmation as she could hope for, unless she got Sam to cut her again.

No. It was unfair to him. If she were right, the more he meant to her, the more likely she'd be to lose him. She couldn't keep him. It would be a mercy. She would let Sam forget her.

Adelle wilted inside, thinking of this. She had never been forgotten. She stared into his waiting eyes and shook her head no. He could not come. She would face Mother on her own.

He looked like he wanted to argue, but all he said was, “Your call.”

She’d see him again, but not like this. Tomorrow, when they’d pass at school, he had to believe she’d lost him.

“You okay, Corey?”

Adelle shook her head again. He caught her chin, stroked it with his thumb, moved up to her mouth. And Adelle took it in, and his tongue, too, and felt down with her hands to how stiff he was under his khakis. They clamored to the back seat and devoured each other, there in the empty parking lot, inch by delicious inch. He came fast, apologized, and watched her below him. While he did the rest with his hand, until she shook. And shook. And broke.

Adelle had grown to hate herself those last awful months of their senior year. She’d watched him slowly give up on her while she ignored him. At first, he thought she didn’t hear him. She could tell because when she turned away, he grabbed her hand and she had to fight the tingling in her fingers and keep her face blank. She focused on the middle distance, staring in his direction without meeting his gaze. She held her mouth still as realization swept over his face. *Adelle, it’s me, Sam*, he’d said, and she knew that it was working. *Adelle, try to remember.*

She’d done enough to Sam already. And, anyway, he had Rose now. And, depending on how the dreams would go that night, with Mother Stairs winding up her side, there was the chance, if she could convince him, that Adelle might have De. She grabbed the waist of her jeans and began pulling them up over her thighs.

Sam didn’t move, but his eyes flicked to the silvery lines of the bakery one more time. “You know, you were my first,” he said, almost too quietly for her to hear him.

Adelle stopped. She studied his pale, strong face.

“Have you still got that ridiculous Oxford shirt?” she asked at last. “I’m going to need something to cover up with.”

#

Celesse St. Armand has her hands on her hips. “Well?”

Adelle begins turning pages slowly, wondering how she can get Sam to help her figure out what she needs.

“Enough of that,” Celesse says. “Do the beach house.” She’s talking directly to Sam, over Adelle’s head.

Sam crosses his arms, and Adelle knows she’s still got him as an ally, however weird he was acting when they first arrived. He isn’t going to let this glorified nanny decide what goes on her skin.

Adelle turns to Celesse. “Is there anything De didn’t tell you?”

“He did not tell me about the beach house. You don’t believe me? Ask me the first day you dreamed it. Ask me what your sad husband wouldn’t know.”

Adelle’s voice is slow and wobbly. She feels dizzy, insubstantial. She has the sensation of being outside herself, watching an actress play her. “What music sings inside it?”

Celesse smiles and closes her eyes, as if she’s listening to the sultry notes. “That would have to be Manman’s jazz. It was always on at our house.” She hums a strain of Louis Armstrong’s *Good Night, Sleep Tight*. “Sound familiar?”

Chapter 7

Celesse snores with every third breath. Cocooned beside her on Sam's bed, Adelle listens with her eyes closed, counting. Sam had fallen asleep first, on the couch across the room, left toes peeking out from under an afghan. He never let her sleep alone after a tattoo. At first it had been the stool against the wall for him. After the Block Fort incident, he'd dragged a flip-and-fold chair into the studio whenever she came. She'd never slept in his bed before. She wasn't supposed to be in this part of the house. She wonders where Janice is, but pushes the thought away. That's between the two of them, she tells herself, opening her eyes to peer over the pillows at him. His exposed foot jerks and slips off the side of the couch.

There's something about being the only one awake in a room of sleepers. The proximity of other peoples' dreams, so close she can almost lift the skin off their secrets, as though she's pressing against the edge of an invisible universe. If she could, would she reach in, pull out their treasures and unspoken fears? What kind of collection would she make, if she were a Baron?

Adelle used to think everyone dreamt in Cities and Barons. After cutting in Cathedral, and losing the next two weeks of her life, she became obsessed with what normal sleep might mean. How did her classmates dream? Why could they remember the last sixteen days when she could not? She began with the obvious: subject listings for dreams, nightmares, memory, but found the card catalogue at Ellsworth Prep's Primary Student Library severely lacking. The best information came from *Encyclopedia Britannica: Dream-state depends the pontine tegmentum in the brain stem. The brain goes from high-frequency, short waves while a person is awake to low-frequency Delta waves before entering REM. Artemadoris, a soothsayer in the third century, recorded the wide-held superstition that dreams were messages from the divine.*

Adelle imagined herself a mystic from Ancient Rome. She looked with pity at her classmates, poor souls whose dreams meant nothing more than neurons fulfilling a mathematical obligation, responding to the change in frequency like when she changed the dial on her radio. They were slaves to the Dream Gods. She was their chosen one, a conduit for pulling the physical into the realm of the unseen. If this was her fate, to live a life with holes punched through in order that the Gods could work their magic, so be it. She determined to make herself worthy of the task. Mohammed, Ezekiel, and blind Tiresias were her brothers. Cassandra, the Sphinx, the Oracle at Delphi were her sisters. So what if the other kids didn't believe her? No one believed Cassandra.

Being a Messenger of the Gods helped for about a week before the gymnastics it took to draw the parallels wore thin. Even at ten, it was clear to Adelle that a gap separated her from the school of prophets. A prophet channeled heaven's truth into the world of bone and blood. Adelle's condition worked in reverse: through her, the Gods, if there were any such creatures, siphoned the crude reality of the world away to their insubstantial realms. A prophet's words became manifest, and history exonerated him. Adelle's history was being sucked through her dreams like a straw while everyone else moved forward in time. If she were meant to be their conduit, then something was off in the wiring. She feared she was nothing more than faulty equipment.

Adelle broadened her search to "barons," tromping through illustrated books about the Middle Ages. She added "buildings," which first introduced her to the word "architecture." By the end of fourth grade, Adelle had flipped through every library holding from *Aachen* (a city in Germany with an impressive cathedral but otherwise irrelevant to her dreams) to *The Wolves in the Walls*, an illustrated hardback about wolves taking over a family's house. The skinny drawers

of index cards, longer than her arms, had offered no explanation and little comfort for her condition. In an elementary school collection, Karl Jung was no more than an “important psychologist,” and whole cultures, the Senoi, for example, were reduced to caricatures for entertaining the primitive superstition that dreams could in any way influence the waking world.

Celesse shifts in the bed beside her. Adelle watches her eyes roll under thin, brown lids, orbs rotating around their sun, a solar system Adelle will never see. Gray light blankets their small world, a bridge between sleep and consciousness. Adelle’s memories cross over, out from where the Beach House once kept them captive, mingling with Celesse’s sour breath. They rise in her mind, a mess of sweaty summer afternoons in rambling vegetable gardens, a blue school blazer with a gold embroidered crest, Bobby Kinney’s face smashed like a half-eaten blood orange. The images pick up speed, strobe through her brain faster than she can read them. Dirt under fingernails, three seed pods and a cracked stone *Erzulie Dantor*, a green high heeled shoe, stairs and the feeling of flying, weightlessness, a cast, a cookbook. She feels her soul might crack. She stares at Celesse St. Armand but sees a bandy-legged child, bowl-wide eyes brimming with the wise fear of a five-year-old who recognizes the mark of the supernatural when all the adults in the room go hunting for psychiatrists and pharmaceuticals. *Bawon Sanmdi*, Celesse mouths with her child-lips. She refuses to say his name above a whisper.

He hadn’t always been the Baron. What had she called him, before the two of them sat, grubby-handed, hidden between Manman’s rows of peas, where Celesse listened to her nightmare stories and gave him that name?

What would it have been like, Adelle wonders, going through life with someone who believed her? It wasn’t the first time she’d thought this, but when she was little, it was all speculation: what if there was someone out there just like her? Or just for her, who knew

everything was real, who didn't think she was a freak for remembering there were over ten million bricks in the Empire State building, and that a dentist invented the electric chair? Someone who knew she wasn't crazy? Someone who she couldn't forget?

By high school, she'd given it up, locked the questions and the hope they contained into the dark closets of her mind. Years later, as a mother, watching Ben play with his friends made a bitter soup of Adelle's insides. She wanted him growing up with companions, wanted all the intimacy for him that she'd missed. She invited children over on weekends. She had Ben's nanny, Ginny, take him on play dates with his best friend, Payton. Adelle provided snacks and games and movies and birthday parties, did everything right and necessary to make sure Ben's friendships grew. And then she hid in her office or went on errands and let Ginny take over so she wouldn't have to watch in shame, jealous of her own son.

God, she'd been foolish. Wasting all that time she could have been with him. She'd quit her job today and set up play dates until eternity if it meant that he was okay, if Celesse and De would let her see him again.

When they let her see him, she corrects herself, heart quickening. She remembers Celesse. She's that much closer to her son.

And now she has no reason to envy him. She has her own friend, if Celesse will still have her. Why else would she have agreed to take over, to put up with Adelle's rage and crippled memory?

Under the blankets, Adelle lifts her T-shirt, careful not to rub against the new tattoo, still covered in plastic. She holds her right breast off to the side and dips her head to look at the Beach House and motionless waves newly inked under her ribs. The tattoo is muted in the early light, but the lines are crisp enough to define the shape, even with the slight swelling. Adelle

mentally colors in the golden beams of sunlight glimmering out of the windows and onto the sparkling water. She shakes her head in wonder. Sam's black and white work has more life to it than any of the bright and garish tattoos that dominate the inking world. He got colorless waves to sparkle. She almost laughs, remembering Celesse's frustration. Of course all her drawings are gray; she's translating them for Sam.

And then her chest aches for all she owes Celesse St. Armand.

Adelle never forgot the memories that her Cathedral scar had returned to her. But she'd always wondered why she'd forgotten her birthday party the next day. The closest she could ever get to it was Mother waking her up, telling her to get ready for her guests. After that, the day had been gone, and the next event Adelle recalled was waking up, but later, on another day. She'd never been sure how much later.

At first, she thought maybe it was a trade: one memory for another. The birthday party came the day after she'd opened up Cathedral. Maybe City took it in exchange. But then Sam cut in the bakery, and she hadn't had to trade him for it. Years after, she could still feel his fingers clutching her bicep, pulling her hand out of her throat, and, later, stroking her hair in the back seat of his Prelude while dawn made a silhouette of the hawthorn leaning over the car. And then there were the stairs, and the blocks, and the rest, and still there was Sam while the birthday party had remained stubbornly hidden.

#

"It is not the same kind of birthday present," Celesse whispered. When Celesse said words, they sounded prettier. Mother said it was the Creole, and that Celesse was nice, but that no one could understand her. Adelle could understand her. She handed Adelle a dress box

wrapped in shiny silver paper. It was very light. “The cookbook was from Manman. This is from me.”

When Adelle was little, when she was six, and Manman first started taking her home, Adelle asked once, “*Eske ou ta kwit manje m*?”

Manman held her soft stomach and laughed to the sky. “Of course I will not cook you, Adelle.”

Adelle’s face got prickly. Her Creole wasn’t so good then. Manman was laughing at her. She tried in English. “No, Manman, will you teach me to cook?”

“I’ll teach you more Creole first. Girls today should not learn to cook before they complete their studies. When college is done, and you have a good job, there will be time enough for cooking.”

The cookbook was the only thing in the heap of packages that had anything to do with Adelle. Her new classmates gave her silver bracelets, embroidered handkerchiefs, a makeover kit. Their glossy gifts were still on display on the veranda downstairs. Celesse and Adelle had snuck up to Adelle’s room so Celesse could present her gift in secret. Outside, the kids from Adelle’s class at Ellsworth bounced in the pink castle moonwalk. She didn’t know them yet, only their names, except for Tammy Craven. Her mom had brought her over to play once a month as long as Adelle could remember. When Mother decided it was time for Adelle to move up to a school better suited to her talents, Adelle had to wear a black dress and blazer and answer Mrs. Craven’s questions in an office first. She didn’t understand why Tammy’s mother hadn’t just asked her when they came over for their monthly visit. When it was done, Mrs. Craven opened the office door and gave Mother a smug nod, and the next week, Adelle had a new school.

She'd written Celesse letters every day, but this was the first time she'd seen her friend since the transfer.

Adelle ran her fingers over the beautiful package, then pulled up the edges of the shimmering paper. She did not want to rip it. She and Celesse lifted the top off the box. Inside was one of Celesse's Famous Artworks. That's what their teacher in third grade had called them. Celesse's Famous Artworks were always full of magic purple marker and glitter. This one also had blue and green and sand. She'd glued the sand across the bottom and painted over the markers with water so the colors swished and ran together. It was a sparkly house on the beach.

"Why's the sun inside the house?" Adelle could see it shining through the window.

"Because that's me. It's my house. I don't want you to forget me. If you ever build me a house in City, make it look like this so you know where to find me."

Adelle jumped at Celesse and threw her arms tight around her.

When the squeezing was done, they weren't ready to let go, so the girls held each other at the elbows. Adelle looked in Celesse's face and knew she could tell her.

"Celesse, *mwen sonje*." *I remember*. Adelle lifted the hem of her poufy pink party dress and showed the scar-and-scab building on her thigh. The scabbing was thin and weepy. It had swollen so Cathedral's walls looked round.

Celesse's eyes got big enough that Adelle could see the whole circles of her dark irises with the whites all the way around them. She tried to organize it in her head, how to say it. She would tell Celesse first that she remembered the blaring cars, the way mother had reached out to grab her, pulled her so close Adelle that could smell her hair and her sweat and her fear. Adelle remembered how tight mother's fingers gripped her tiny hand when they went to cross together. It was as easy as remembering a spoon is to eat with.

Before Adelle could figure out the words, Mother knocked twice, sharply, and opened the door without waiting for *Come in*.

She raised an eyebrow as Adelle's hectic right hand smoothed down her dress. The left, Adelle realized, still held Celesse at the elbow, as Celesse still held her.

"Adelle, some of your guests are leaving. They're looking for you to say goodbye."

"I'm sorry."

"Celesse, we are glad you could come, but you may not keep Adelle all to yourself. She needs time to make new friends."

"I am sorry, Mrs. Corey."

Their hands slipped away from each other they followed Adelle's mother down the stairs, into the sounds of screeching children.

Everyone from Adelle's fourth grade class at Ellsworth Prep was at her birthday party. She said the goodbyes that Mom required. Poppy Robinson had a tea date with her grandmother and Madison James and her mom were going to get manicures together before Mrs. James left on an overseas business trip. They both put on innocent faces and shook Adelle's hand and smiled. Then they left, chattering to their mothers about the fun they'd had with everyone but Adelle.

Mother guided Adelle by the shoulders to the moonwalk to join her remaining guests. Celesse followed a few feet behind, watching Adelle work to keep her dress down and not press her thigh to the inflated vinyl as she dutifully climbed in. Adelle could smell the sweat of a thousand children congealed in the seams where the air came through in intermittent puffs, pushed out by the bouncing throng.

Her classmates went up and down like smiling carousel horses, teeth bared. Their skin reflected garish pinks, oranges, greens. They reminded Adelle of distorted mirrors in a carnival house, blurred and ballooning in weird places from the air caught in their clothes.

None of them spoke to her.

Adelle shuffled her sock-feet along the edges trying not to fall. The waves of air beneath her came on unpredictable tides. She'd catch her balance one way, then, be toppled the other when another bouncer bounced. A breathless swimmer, Adelle anchored herself in the corner and pretended to jump, bending her knees and straightening without ever lifting off. The flexing of her thigh tore at the new scabs. She clenched her jaw and made herself smile.

Bobby Kinney flew off the top of a mountain of air and landed beside Adelle. He grabbed her arm and twisted her about so her back was to the rest of the class.

“Birthday spankings!” he shouted.

A roar of glee sounded through the castle. The ground undulated beneath Adelle as they bounded over to get their licks. The slaps came from all directions. Most of them landed below her waste, but Adelle felt bruises coming up on her arms and sides, too. One hand slammed into her left cheek. She tasted blood.

Adelle wriggled to protect her thigh. Bobby Kinney yanked her closer and held both her arms. Stinging hands whacked Adelle's back and legs. Someone lifted her dress. Their sweaty palms slashed against her bare skin and underpants.

“Ew!” Tammy Craven shrieked. “Blood!”

The slapping stopped. Adelle's skin burned. Her thigh felt like it had split open. Bobby Kinney shifted his grip, maybe to get a look at the blood. Then, he screamed and let go.

Adelle opened her eyes to see little Celesse in a white fury of party dress kneeling on Bobby Kinney's chest, pummeling his face with her fists. Bobby kept screaming. Celesse kept punching. Adelle could hear the thuds of her fists meeting his cheeks, forehead, ears. The two rose and fell on the waves of the moonwalk,.

The other kids were not bouncing any more. They shifted sullenly, watching Celesse. Nobody liked Adelle. But nobody liked Bobby Kinney, either.

"Celesse St. Armand! What do you think you're doing?" Adelle's mother climbed into the moonwalk without removing her shoes.

Celesse looked up from the fight. Bobby moaned. Mother wobbled her way over the sea of air and yanked Celesse off of him. "Wait till your mother hears about this!"

Bobby Kinney's mom was right behind Adelle's. If he could have gotten up on his own, he didn't. In a great act of flustering effort, Mrs. Kinney pulled her groaning son from the bounce house, glaring a warning at the rest of the children. She struggled from the moonwalk and supported his exaggerated limp up to the veranda.

Nobody pointed out that Adelle was bleeding, least of all Adelle.

They all left pretty quickly after that, except Tammy Craven and Joan Devereaux. They crouched by the bounce house whispering while Tammy's mom put her fists on her hips and stood with her shoulders back while Mother made bird-like movements with her hands. Adelle watched from the bathroom window. She'd snuck in there to clean what blood she could off her thigh and dress. The petticoat was ruined, but she could hide that for the moment.

When she at last made her painful way up the stairs, thigh throbbing with each rise, Adelle found her mother already in her room. Behind her, the pile of birthday gifts was arranged like a shop display on Adelle's dresser. All except one. Mother held the cookbook in her hand.

“You are the smartest little girl in your class, Adelle. Did you know that?”

Adelle stood very still.

“Ellsworth Prep only gives out two scholarship each year, and only one to a girl.”

She took a long breath. This was how she kept her voice so quiet, the breathing. She walked across the room in long, calm strides. Her face came close to Adelle, inches away. Adelle could see nothing else. Not even the cookbook.

“Now you must stay the smartest. Do you understand?”

Adelle didn't, but she nodded anyway.

“What do you understand?”

“I have to stay the smartest.”

“Do you know why?”

Adelle considered nodding again, but her stomach curled in on itself, afraid she might get caught in the lie. She shook her head. Manman's cookbook blurred to her left.

“Who is your mother's best friend?”

Adelle's heart pounded. It was never good when Mother talked about herself like she wasn't in the room. “Mrs. Craven.”

Mother's eyebrows came together in a jagged line. “Ah. Mrs. Craven *was* your mother's best friend. Now, she doesn't want her daughter sharing a water fountain with you.”

Adelle didn't have a water fountain, and neither did Tammy, as far as she knew, but she kept quiet.

Mother's face became a silent film, shadows of every feeling dancing on the screen. There was rage and joy and emptiness, and feelings Adelle didn't yet have the words for. Nostalgia. Regret. But when she spoke with the always voice, it broke the spell.

“You will forget this,” Mother said.

Something moved to Adelle’s left. She felt the crack against her head. And then, Mother’s face disappeared. Adelle could see nothing but the dark, with a million tiny points of light.

#

Back when Adelle used to think everybody had a city inside them, she didn’t know that other people remember their lives like she remembered a spoon is to eat with. Celesse believed her about City after the others grew up enough to separate real and make believe. Celesse knew Adelle could be the best at memorizing multiplication and still forget who her own mother was. She used to leave Adelle notes and pictures: a wobbly drawing of a woman with dark hair and the word “Mom,” a sparkly Famous Artwork of their best hiding spot between the trunks of two trees that grew and twisted around each other, a description of their adventures spying on Manman working in the garden. And now she’d brought Adelle a house, her house, just in case.

That night, after her birthday party, Adelle lifted all Celesse’s drawings from her nightstand drawer and put the beach house on the bottom of the stack. She was afraid that if she looked at that one too long the Baron would see and build it. What if planning her friend’s house in City was enough to lock Celesse away in it?

Adelle didn’t know why she hadn’t forgotten Celesse or Manman before that day.

When she went to Celesse’s school – the one with the blue uniforms and the little gold crowns embroidered on the jackets – Celesse’s mother, Manman, would bring Adelle home with her. Manman worked in the Emergency room, a doctor at night. She slept while Celesse and Adelle were in school, and returned Adelle to Mother in the evening, when Celesse’s babysitter came and Mother’s job at Reception was done.

Manman's house was a brick face with window eyes. Across the bottom and around the sides a white porch ran like a whiskery smile. Adelle's house didn't have a porch. It had a verandah that didn't wrap around. It was a small, pinched up mouth like an old lady telling Adelle to stop screeching when she was only humming quietly to herself. Adelle's house wears snippy bushes shaped like biscuits and spikes. She couldn't pick the flowers in her yard because they were roses and they bit. She couldn't bite the berries on the biscuits because they were holly and poison. The birds could bite them, but Adelle couldn't.

Manman's house wore flowy, raggy skirts with yellow Susans Adelle and Celesse could pick. Manman said they could see Adelle, but they had only one eye, so Adelle could to sneak up on them from behind and then make sure to get them in a jar of water fast so that they didn't get all sad and wilted. There were also mints. There were tall spearmint and minty vines and then the one that wasn't mint, but looked like mint, and if Adelle and Celesse chewed it by accident, they got a mouth full of spicy. But it wasn't poison, and the birds didn't eat it.

Adelle's favorite part of Manman's garden was the moonflower vine tangled up in the porchy whiskers, making it look like parts of the smile were missing, like an old man who ate lots of candy. He was happy even though he doesn't have all his teeth because everybody liked candy. Adelle would trade two of her teeth for candy, the ones in the way back. But not more than two, and not the ones in the front because then her smile would look black and rotten. But if she had beautiful white moonflowers in her smile, maybe that would be ok.

When Adelle sat on the porch and played Hi-Ho-Cherry-O with Celesse, the wind sometimes blew the smell of the moonflowers at them, only in the morning when the blooms were still awake. It smelled thick and sweet like Manman's kitchen, and then the spearmints that they chewed like gum smelled like cold water, and it mixed with the sweetness. Adelle wanted

breathe like that all day. But she couldn't because the moonflowers always closed up by the time they ate lunch. Manman said they were nocturnal like raccoons, but they didn't steal your garbage. They were in love with the silver moon because they had him all to themselves. Roses and Susans loved the sun and had to share him with hundreds of other flowers all dressed up, but the moonflower put on her ball gown only for the one who loved her best, and, in exchange for her loyalty, the shy moon doted on her. He loved their gentle glow and that they were the color of cream like he is. He knew they saved their sweetness only for him, and he kissed them with his shining and did not envy the sun his admiring reds and purples and pinks. Too many lovers, the moon would say, made it impossible to notice the miracle of each golden leaf.

Adelle loved Manman's stories.

In the linoleum kitchen, Manman would serve them cassava bread and Adelle would say *mesi*, just like she was one of Manman's daughters.

Mesi pou pen an. Thank you for the bread.

Mesi pou akolad la. Thank you for the hug.

Mesi pou rad yo. Thank you for the clothes.

Celesse was skinnier than Adelle, but much taller. When Celesse outgrew her uniforms, Manman would spend a weekend letting them out and then gave them to Adelle. Mother did not like this. Adelle could tell because little lines came around her lips and she said *Thank You, Aniyah* in English, even though she had taken French in high school and would sometimes talk to Manman to practice.

Adelle lay in bed, under her fluffy pink canopy, and tried to stay awake. *You will forget this*, her mother had told her, but when she opened her eyes after the darkness and the tiny lights that danced to the song of pain like frightened stars, she hadn't had a dream. Only a headache.

The Baron hadn't come to Adelle while she recovered on her bedroom floor. Without dreams, he had no doorway to her mind. But now it was night, and Adelle's eyes drooped, and she thought for a moment that her mother might be the Baron, if she knew what Adelle would forget, and she tried to concentrate on Celesse's kitchen, climbing trees in Manman's rambling back yard, the softness of the hand-me-down navy skirts.

But Mother's angry mouth took over. First it was angry at Manman, but then it was angry at Adelle. Again, they were crossing the street in Adelle's new memory. Adelle ran ahead, out toward the blaring traffic. Mother grabbed for her, pulled her close. Adelle remembered the smell of Mother's perfume and her fear. She looked through her mind's five-year-old eyes – that's how old she was when it happened – and saw that Mother's mouth wasn't angry, but worried. And a worried mother couldn't be a Baron, could she?

#

Adelle didn't sleep long enough to dream. She woke up with wet sheets everywhere, and her body was shaking. Her thigh where Cathedral was felt like it was on fire, up and down the whole muscle, not just under the cut. Everywhere throbbing and flames. She called for her dad, but her voice was weak and her father, she remembered, was away. Another business trip.

Sitting up felt like the air was pushing her back down, and she half-slithered, half-fell out of bed and crawled across the hall to where Mother slept in the middle of her king-sized mattress. Adelle couldn't make her voice loud enough, so she pulled her dad's slipper from under the bed and slapped it against the footboard over and over until Mother woke up and said, "Who is that? What the hell are you doing?" before reaching down to grab the slipper. She missed, her fingers grazing Adelle's forehead, and then she stopped. Adelle felt Mother's cool hand on her face, and then Mother was out of bed and pulling khakis on under her nightgown.

Mother's arms encircled her, and Adelle felt herself being lifted off the floor as gently as she ever had been touched in her life.

#

"This child needs a doctor." Mother's always voice was like the music from Adelle's Walkman. It sounded close and sharp in one ear, the one that Adelle rested against Mother's neck, and swam somewhere far away in her other ear. Like when the drums were on the left and the singing was on the right. Adelle opened her eyes to the fluorescent lights and pockmarked ceiling tiles. It had that stinky clean smell like the stuff in her doctor's bathroom where she always had to pee in a cup. Why couldn't she forget peeing in a cup? That would be something she wouldn't care if she forgot. An old man with a scabby bald head sat moaning in a blue chair a few feet away. A new wave of trembles shook through Adelle and she closed her eyes.

#

Adelle lay in the hospital bed trying to keep Celesse at the front of her thoughts. They were opposites. Celesse had skin the color of raw almonds, and thick braids sprouted from her head. Adelle's hair was long and straight and, back then, blond. Only their eyes matched.

"*L ap pase byen*, little noble." It will be all right. Manman's beautiful dark face floated above Adelle, blocking out part of the ugly grid of the ceiling tiles. She was too blurry to count the gray hairs, what Adelle and Celesse liked to do when Manman napped on the couch back when Adelle would stay with them for the days.

Manman's hair was blurry, but her eyes still had their kind lines. Adelle had traced them with her fingertip once when Celesse was on the front porch and Manman lay like a heavy sack on the couch. She didn't mean to wake Manman, but a glinty eye came open and Adelle pulled

her hand back fast. It was the first time she'd touched her, and Adelle knew mothers didn't like to be touched.

But Manman had smiled and said, "It's okay, little noble. Those are my kind lines. If you smile a lot, you'll get them one day, too. And Adelle had smiled as big as she could then, and Manman chuckled before sending her out to play with Celesse.

Adelle missed going to Manman's house. She wished she didn't have to go to the more suitable school of Ellsworth Prep. She didn't understand what wasn't suitable about her blue blazer school before. It had gold crowns. What was higher than a crown?

But at least Manman was here now. If Adelle's leg had to feel like a swarm of fire ants and if her head had to swim and sweat, and if she couldn't stop the shaking, she was happy anyway to be with Manman. And it was a hospital, and Manman was a doctor. Maybe Manman could fix what was wrong with her and make her remember. Maybe Manman could change her sleep.

#

Adelle aches with memories. Sam and Celesse are still asleep, though the room is getting lighter, and she's glad they can't see her crying. She pushes back the blankets. It's bright enough to see small orange flowers on the sheets. They have to be Janice's choice; Sam would never pick these out. Her toes find the wood floor, and she pads over to the bathroom. One-inch octagonal tiles pattern the small space, sending cold shocks through her feet. The door squeaks when she moves it, so she pushes it through as fast as she can, stopping just before it would slam, and looks through the crack to make sure she hasn't woken them before gentling it the last inch closed.

Her red-rimmed eyes stare back at her from the mirror.

How many times has she tried to change her sleep?

Adelle turns the porcelain *Cold* knob and jumps when the walls shake with a deep hum. They quiet down as the water begins to flow. She holds her stringy hair back and splashes her cheeks with the other hand.

Her sleep changed after Ben was born. That was in a hospital, too. Until then, she'd kept waiting to forget De. They could fight, make love, scar each other's souls, and still he remained. In that first year with him, she hadn't lost a single moment. City had stayed the same. He'd begun to tease her when she pulled out her Rhodia in the mornings to draw the same buildings over and over, and then again at night, when she refused to go to bed until she'd listed the minute details of her day. They shared her small apartment for two more lease terms after she graduated, and she worked long hours at Axes Architectural Solutions, taking only a month of maternity leave so De could finish out his semester and switch to night classes.

From the first night in the hospital, Adelle sensed the change. He was outside her now, this tiny, warm human, with nothing but loose skin and dark space where he'd been. She tickled his thumb-sized chin, the way the nurse had taught her, to get him to open up and take her nipple in his mouth. His miniature purple lips gaped in an O that took up half his scrunched face. His fingers squeezed to fists like cat paws and rested on either side of her double D breast, a great white planet that dwarfed his Mercury head. Her milk came in that day, fast and ready, and he choked under the force of the flow. Adelle cupped his skull in one hand and moved the blue towel to catch the fountain hosing out of her, sprinkling his cheeks while he blinked and rolled his tongue. She waited till it slowed, patted down her son, and tickled his cheek again.

Ben opened his mouth back up, but only halfway this time. His lashless eyelids unfolded and he stared at her, soft irises the same slate gray as her mother's garden path.

His gaze was too steady, full of the first betrayal: *I trusted you once and you nearly drowned me*, his eyes seemed to say. Adelle wanted to apologize, to convince him it hadn't been on purpose, but she knew this was ridiculous.

She brought him up to her lips, kissed his slick forehead, so she could not see his eyes. They would change over the next two months, a daily continuum from gray to butterscotch, the exact color of his daddy's, letting light in when De's rarely had. But no amount of sun could bleach out the doubt she'd seen in that instant. It was as if, now that he was on the outside, he knew what she knew: that his mother was flawed, that her flaws would cost him.

She wouldn't let them take him to the nursery. The orderly turned to De, but he agreed: the baby would sleep in Adelle's room with them. No, they didn't need any down time. No, they didn't need to be alone as a couple. Yes, they'd call immediately if anything happened.

The orderly shrugged and left, and De crawled into the hospital bed beside her.

"Don't let me dream," Adelle whispered.

He smoothed her hair back from her eyes, and they stared across the darkening room at Ben, sleeping in his plastic-sided bassinet. His eyes rolled under membrane-thin lids, and she wondered for the first time if it were hereditary. What if Ben forgot her?

Adelle turns off the water. She reaches for a checkered pink towel—also Janice's choice, no doubt—and pats her face dry. Her cheeks are cold and numb, but the water washed out the red from her eyes. She can hear someone moving on the other side of the door. If she knew it were Sam, she'd tiptoe out and sit with him in the lobby. She needed to get her head together before facing Celeste St. Armand, and he was the only person besides De who'd ever cared about her memory. But the bakery opened at six each morning. If one of them was going to wake up first, it probably wasn't Sam.

She looks around for an excuse to stay locked in the bathroom. If it weren't for the fresh tattoo, she'd take a shower. Adelle pulls her shirt off and twists to see the Beach House in the mirror. She stares at the undulating stippled waves and knows why her mother did it, made her switch schools. She shakes her head, realizing that Manman knew, too. Or else why would she have sent the cookbook after insisting Adelle get through college first?

#

Mother woke her when the sky was still purple with stars. Adelle's body felt heavy, like slow oceans were sloshing around inside. She pulled herself up to sitting under the pink and white canopy of her bed. Dad didn't like it, Mother said because of the *frou-frou*, what was French for the ruffiness and the lace. Mother wasn't French but Manman was, Creole French from Haiti. She said Adelle had milk skin like the moonflower. Manman and Celesse were warm and brown. Together, the three of them could be hot cocoa, or a Boston cream pie.

Adelle pulled her sloshy body up into the gray morning and put on her Snoopy backpack and her Rebox. She hung on careful down the stairs. Adelle loved it down the stairs, when Mother put her on like she was the Snoopy backpack, but in the front of her so it was like a hug while she carried Adelle all the way down. Adelle could smell her Avon-sweet-sense skin cream from the pink plastic jar with the golden cap. Mother was like a queen with royal pretty things. Her hair was lighter than Adelle's, and softer, and in curls. Adelle wove her fingers through the bottoms of it and pretended it was tumbling down off her own head instead of the stringy blond. But not tight. She kept the weaving loose and gentle and hoped her mother doesn't notice it at all. Mother got sharp with Adelle if she pulled her hair that she worked so hard on.

Manman kept Adelle on Mother's workdays, but not Saturdays anymore since Corporate, the bosses at Dad's work, stopped making him go far away. Adelle liked him home but

sometimes not since he didn't want to play Jax or Hi-Ho-Cherry-O, or anything. Not even throw the football, which was ok because Adelle didn't like that game, but it was better than no games and being quiet all day.

Mother was the Receptionist – the Receiving the Calls person, and people, too, when they came in with emergencies. And Manman was the doctor, but only at night when Celesse was asleep and her nanny came over. Manman was Adelle's nanny. Adelle was the payment because Celesse needed someone to play with after school and homework every day, so, really Mother was doing Manman the favor.

Sometimes they liked playing with each other and sometimes they didn't, but they had to use nice words no matter what. That was the Rules at Manman's. It was the only Rules. At Adelle's house, there were lots: be quiet upstairs, say Magic Words, but they didn't do anything magic like cast spells, they just meant she was good manners and maybe she got what she wanted and maybe she didn't. Don't touch Mother's tiara collection. Don't go in Mother and Dad's room, especially not the Her Closet what had Mother's pedal Singer, where Mother hid whenever the Who Are You Game went badly. Be quiet downstairs. There were more, but that's enough.

Adelle was thinking about the Rules and twisting the curls and by accident she break the one what said Don't pull Mother's hair. There was a sound in Mother's throat, near Adelle's ear, like a pig sound, an oinky squeal, and then Adelle was flying, and for just a second it was like magic powers, but she didn't know she had them, and then it wasn't magic because she was falling. The air, like silk, rushed past her arm skin, and her Snoopy backpack was pulling on her, down, down, and she didn't know why she hadn't hit yet. She could hear her mouth screaming, and then a giant Thud made it stop. Adelle Thudded again, and Thudded one more time. First she

Thudded on her butt, but Snoopy pulled her down and she summersaulted backwards like she was always practicing but still couldn't do it right. But this time she did it right, and the second Thud was when the top of her head hit a wooden lip of stair. And then everything looked black with twinkles and she Thudded on her butt one more time. And that was it. She stopped. It was the Downstairs and even though her mouth stopped screaming, it felt like all the rest of her: her back, her butt, and her head, were screaming now instead. And her wrist. It was tight and twisty and when the dark twinkles went away, Adelle looked at it, and it was bent the wrong way. Adelle rolled over like Stop Drop and Roll to get off her wrong-way wrist, and it pounded and it pounded and it pounded on the inside like the bones wanted to get out.

Adelle was crying. She could feel the stupid tears. Mother hated stupid tears.

Mother stood, still on the stair where Adelle was when she flew. She was staring at Adelle with her mouth open. Her lake-blue eyes were big. Adelle heard stomping on the ceiling, what was the floor in the upstairs.

"Mommy," she held her right hand and her wrong hand up. She wanted to try Down the Stairs again so she could feel Mother hug her, so she could do it right.

Mother's lips came together like curtains closing. Her eyes got smaller, but still pretty. She came down the stairs with slow feet, and Adelle knew they wouldn't try again. She closed her eyes to make the stupid tears stop crying.

And then, soft fingers like an angel touched her cheek. Stupid tears. They fell more and more and Adelle thought she'd get a Spanking, but Mother's hands went under Snoopy's straps and slipped him off Adelle's shoulders. She kept her eyes closed, Mother picked Adelle up and set her in her lap on the bottom step. She held Adelle's head on her neck, and Adelle could smell

the Avon-sweet-sense again. It was sweet but not like moonflowers. Adelle snuggled into her creamy skin, and Mother hummed her Little Bird song let her cry.

Dad's door whooshed open. He stood at the top. "What happened?"

Mother pulled away from Adelle. She watched her with lake-blue eyes.

"I fell." Adelle said.

Later, when Mother tried to drop Adelle off at Celesse's, Manman told her no.

"You have to take her in with you." Manman sat beside Adelle on the flowery brown couch. Her words were thick and Creole. She touched Adelle's wrong-way wrist, but doesn't turn it.

"It didn't swell until right before we got here."

"It's broken, Missy."

"Can't you take care of it?" Manman looked at Mother with her eyebrows up. Mother's voice got softer. "You're a doctor, right?"

"I don't keep plaster of Paris around the house."

"Please," Mother said. Her always voice crackled like it might break. "I can't keep track of the doctors' names. How will I keep track of the child?"

After a long minute, Manman nodded. She took away her arm what was around Adelle's shoulders and put her wrist down gentle on her knee. Manman's soft, heavy body lifted off the couch, moved like a turtle to the little table-bench with the phone, where she wrote something down. She passed the paper to Mother.

"Thank you." Mother's eyes looked wet, but she was a grown up and didn't do stupid tears.

Manman ignored her and put her pillowy butt on the coffee table so she could look in Adelle's face. Her kind lines were back around her eyes and lips.

“Don't come back here till you have a good strong cast on that arm, you hear me? What's the use of a broken arm if Celesse can't sign it? If you're a good girl, Dr. Miles might give you a yellow one. The latest style.”

Adelle gave Manman a hug with her right-way arm.

“Manman,” Adelle whispered, “I flew. I had magic powers. But they don't work right backwards.” Manman stiffened, but Adelle could only feel it, not see it. By the time she let Adelle go, Manman had the same smiley face as always.

#

In the hospital after the birthday party, while Adelle shook and burned and sweat and swam, Manman touched Adelle's left cheek with her leathery hand. “And what did you do to your face, little noble?”

But Adelle's mother answered for her. “She fell in the bounce house.” And she did fall in the bounce house, but it is still a lie.

#

Manman knew. She knew it was a lie about the bounce house, and she knew it was a lie about falling down the stairs. She had to. It was the week after Adelle flew that Mother made her dress in black and talk to Anita Craven, and then she started at Ellsworth Prep, and she hadn't seen Celesse since. Not until the birthday party. Manman knew what Mother was up to, and Mother knew she knew, so she took Adelle away.

Adelle blinks her reflection. She touches her face where Manman's fingers had moved with such love. *She got locked up for it in fourth grade, in an insane asylum. She was, like,*

committed. Tammy Craven's tenth grade voice whines through Adelle's head. For the first time, she knows for certain that Tammy was right. Manman had pumped antibiotics through Adelle's veins so that the tremors stopped in time. They hadn't had to cut away the infected leg. Adelle had slept and slept and when she woke up to the blue and white room the next day, the gray-haired woman with leather skin was a stranger, and so as was the skinny girl who hung in doorway like a shadow.

She'd wait until all the doctors were gone. Then she'd stand beside the gurney, eye to eye with Adelle. "Go to the beach house," the shadow girl would whisper. "Go and find me."

And Adelle would wonder who she was, ask her how she knew about Baron's buildings. Celesse would explain each day, and each day Adelle was amazed. She thought the little girl was magic, to know what happened in someone else's dreams.

Every day the shadow girl was new. Adelle had forgotten her each time she dreamed. Beach House swallowed her nightly, along with Manman and two weeks of living in the temporary residence for disturbed children.

Adelle feels sick. It is enough. She does not want to think of the rest.

It is no wonder Celesse wants to protect Ben.

Chapter 8

Adelle and Celesse sit at the granite counter that doubles as a breakfast bar. Sam stands over a pan of popping bacon. The sweet, smoky smell drifts around them. His back is turned. Adelle stares at Celesse. She studies the high, regal forehead and beautiful eyes pinched like Ben's, but wider than his, and deeper. Like a doll's eyes. Her face has thinned and strengthened, but Adelle can match it to the ghost image of the nine-year-old hero who rescued her in the bounce house in a cloud of crinoline and blood.

Celesse takes a sip of her coffee. The cup makes a satisfying clack when she places it back down on the counter. "Well?" she asks.

"Forgive me," Adelle says, the sickness creeping in. She looks down at her own mug and lets herself steep in the wrong she's done. She touches the raised scar of Simonides' O, but it doesn't help. She'd left this woman, this child, with the most complete abandonment. She'd erased her. *No wonder they won't let me see Ben.* Adelle shakes her head, tries to escape the little girl voice ringing through her mind. *Find me in the beach house.* And then, her mother's face rises, nose like a statue, hair dark and glossy. It looks over Adelle, back in her bed at home, and Adelle is asking, *Did I miss them? My birthday guests?* And Mother's twiggy fingers crook tightly toward each other, turning white, before she backs toward the door and says, *Nobody came.*

Adelle's hand shakes as she lifts her coffee. She spills some on the counter, but Celesse turns at just that moment to ask Sam how much longer on the bacon, giving Adelle time to mop it with a napkin before anyone notices.

"Another minute," he says over his shoulder.

"Adelle will need only the white of her egg. Do you have wheat bread for her toast?"

“Sure. Wheat bread. If that’s what you want, Corey.” He steals a glance at Adelle. She sticks her tongue out and makes a face. Sam gives her a wink before going back to the cooking.

“How is Manman?” Adelle asks Celesse, but she thinks she knows. Manman had been an emergency doctor at Bridgeport Hospital. If Celesse knew Adelle was there, Manman would have known, too. Manman would have come to see her, memory or no.

Celesse takes another sip of coffee. But Adelle is holding out hope.

“Did she move back to Haiti?”

“She is half in Haiti, yes,” Celesse says. “Haiti gave her birth and it made her want to die, it gave her every joy and every sorrow. Since she could only half live there, she said she’d be only half dead there. Celesse Antonia and I flew her ashes down five years ago, the half of them. The rest are in her garden.”

“I didn’t want to lose you. I hung on as tight as I could.” Adelle says quietly

“Perhaps,” Celesse says.

The air is heavy with ghosts and breakfast grease. Sam slides plates of bacon and eggs over medium in front of them. Adelle’s eggs have their yolks. Her toast is as white as her skin, and he’s given her five pieces of bacon. Celesse St. Armand presses her lips together but says nothing. Sam grabs his coffee and leaves through the door to the tattoo parlor, his bare feet slapping on the wood floor.

“The doctor says you must lose weight,” Celesse says.

“So does my mother.”

“Well? You can’t eat like this.”

“I’ll eat how I want.” Adelle feels bad the instant she says it. “I know you want to help me, but food and I haven’t always done well together. It’s important.”

Celesse chews and swallows a bite of her own breakfast before speaking again. “So tell me, how much of me did you get back? What do you remember?”

“You beat the snot out of Bobby Kinney.” Adelle feels the corners of her mouth twitching. She looks at Celesse and sees her old friend is having the same trouble. In a moment, they both are laughing and Adelle remembers how they had looked like violent lovers: Celesse straddling the bewildered boy, the two of them rising and falling, a passion of fists on waves of air. Adelle dunks a bite of the bacon into the gooey egg yolk. They talk and laugh and eat until all the food is gone and their joint childhood lives again in the air between them.

And Celesse says, “Is that all?”

And Adelle says, “Is there more? Besides all that and the cakes? I can’t believe De wouldn’t let me hire you for our wedding. But he knows now, right? Or else he wouldn’t have let me come with you after the hospital. He must have felt like a fool when he found out who you are.”

Celesse smiles but her eyes do not. “More coffee?” she offers.

Adelle wonders at the incongruity, but then it is gone, and she’s not sure she saw it to begin with.

Adelle watches Celesse’s long, strong arms as they pour the coffee. She replays the day when those same arms had shuffled trays of cake samples to and from Adelle’s and De’s table. She remembers anew how the baker had remained silent, reserved, and watchful.

Celesse replaces the coffee pot on the burner. The two friends drink the dark, musky liquid and keep their thoughts to themselves.

After a while, there’s a knock on the door, and Sam peeks his head around. “How about it, ladies? Beach house do its job?”

Adelle smiles and says, “You’re a genius.” But, in her peripheral vision, she can see Celesse is still contemplating her coffee. She keeps her voice bright and lifts her shirt to just under her breast, bending down to see the new ink. “And it’s gorgeous. Black and white waves. Who else?” Adelle shakes her head slowly as if in awe.

Sam tilts his head up and sniffs. “All right, Corey. I can smell bullshit when there’s a smaller heap than that. Why the flattery? What do you want?”

Adelle looks at him from under her eyelashes. “Ink me another one?”

“Now?”

“We’re already here. You wouldn’t even have to close shop.”

Sam snorts. Celesse starts to say something about physical therapy, but Adelle misses most of it because Sam is talking at the same time. “After the Block Fort?” He gestures at the red-tinged beach house on her stomach. “You’re lucky I didn’t make you wait till you could stand up on your own for this one.”

“I have to find Ben. Or whatever’s making me forget him. The fire.”

But Sam has crossed his arms over his chest. “Your body’s still recovering from last night.” He walks over and examines his work on her skin. “The red hasn’t even gone down yet. It’s too much at once. I’ll be damned if I have to watch you go into shock again.”

Adelle remembers. It was the only brand he’d done for her. She had shuddered on the table as he seared in the last three lines, cauterizing the fort into her flesh. *Hold still*, he’d said, and, *Almost*. And his voice had sounded tinny like he was speaking through a can-and-string telephone from the other room. And somewhere in the wracking cold and throbbing air, he came above her in a cloud and his blue eyes were there and then they were not, and his voice became more urgent but the air around them sucked away all the sound. And she moved her cottony lips,

but she didn't know if she said it or only thought it very loudly in her head: *Don't let me lose the baby*. And then it was okay because, somewhere, past all the silence, she heard his voice in the can again. *Baby?* he'd said. And that was all.

"We have to go," Celesse finds her way into the conversation, pulling Adelle back into the little kitchen. "You have a physical therapy appointment at two."

But Adelle is still glaring at Sam. "I want my son." Her own voice surprises her: she sounds like Mother.

Sam has crossed his arms again. "Come back and get him in three weeks."

"Tonight."

"When you can walk, so you can haul your own ass to the emergency room."

"Fine," Adelle yanks her shirt down, scraping against her tender skin and savoring the burn. "Three weeks." She looks at Celesse. "Let's go?"

#

No amount of ammonia can drown out the smell of sweat and plastic that fills the rehab room. Adelle holds the ends of a rubber strap that wraps around her feet in a loop. She's supposed to pull her feet apart as far as she can, against the resistance. She tries to keep her expression neutral. She's bent forward, and each movement rubs the skin of the new tattoo against itself.

"What's the baker doing to you?" Jeff jokes. "Two nights out of the slammer, and you're acting like it's your first time."

"Celesse is great," Adelle says through gritted teeth. She brings her feet together.

Jeff eyes her sideways. "You sleeping all right?"

Adelle forgets the PT for a moment and looks up at him. She's never told Jeff about the dreams, but that doesn't mean he doesn't know. After a lifetime of gritting her teeth against a secret, this damned fire that she can't remember has split her wide open. She can wear all the long sleeves she wants and it doesn't matter. They all know, Dr. Muppet, Maude, even Mel Genovese the orderly. She wonders which is worse: this staff of near-strangers knowing, or her parents reading her Rhodia, finding out everything while De just stood there. And Celesse, too, she remembers. But Adelle can forgive Celesse; if she'd grown up forgotten by her one sister-friend, Adelle would want to know what happened, too.

But De? With all that he knows? Adelle doesn't understand how he could just stand there, leaning over her mother's shoulder cow-eyed to get a better view. Adelle would have shared it with him anyway, was dying to share it with him. She needed him to help her comb through it, figure out which buildings had been there all along, help her get the details right in those days when she wasn't dreaming. She'd been calling him from her hospital phone almost every day, asking him to come, telling him what she remembered, pleading with him to let her see Ben. She wonders for the hundredth time what's really going on. If De is letting Mother take care of Ben, if anything happens to her son... Adelle's fingers curl into fists. If Mother has hurt Ben, De had better find a place to hide.

"I mean, you look worn out."

Jeff's defensive voice reminds Adelle that she's not alone in the rehab room. She relaxes her face in case he thinks it's him, his question about her sleep, that's made her mad. Jeff can't help it if her chart tells him things about her. It's not his fault she's walking around with her secrets hanging out in all directions, like the emperor in his new clothes.

"Maybe Dr. Wyndham can give you something to help you get some rest."

“I’m fine.” She goes back to straining to separate her feet.

“Enough of that,” Jeff says. “Tell you what. There’s a snake with one blue eye and one yellow eye on my back. You do three laps around the room for me, and I’ll tell you about the blue eye.” He drags her walker over as he speaks.

Adelle swivels slowly to come down from the table. She starts to ask him what about the yellow eye, but then Jeff puts his hands on her sides to steady her as she descends. Adelle yelps and jerks from his touch. Her beach house is burning, and the new muscles in her bad leg go into spasms.

Jeff jumps back. “Shit. What happened?” Trenches run wavy lines across his forehead.

Adelle stares at him. Finally, she lifts her shirt, like she had that first day, when he showed her his sister tattoo.

Jeff gapes at the beach house and its red glow. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Adelle yanks her shirt back down and looks away.

“Okay.” Jeff hoists himself up next to her on the PT table. “No more working out today. You’re going to be buffer than me soon, anyway. But I need you to tell me why this was so important. You’ve had enough ink to know better, that you’ve got to wait until your body is done healing from one injury before putting it through another.”

She doesn’t answer.

“Come on, Adelle. I’ve told you about all—well, most—of mine.”

Adelle stares at the wall.

“Fine,” Jeff says. “You remember what’ll happen if you don’t work out?”

Adelle remembers. Her leg will stiffen permanently. She won’t be able to walk or drive again.

“You don’t have to tell me. But until you do, you’re on your own.” He hops off the table and stands in front of her, holding an arm out in a gesture of dismissal. “Don’t come back until you’re ready to talk.”

“It’s none of your damn business.”

“When something interferes with my patient’s recovery, it’s my business. I’m not going to fight for your body if you’re just going home and sabotaging it. Does the baker know about this?”

Adelle says nothing.

“I thought she had more sense than that. I should contact Social Services.”

Her chest tightens. She can almost feel Celesse’s nine-year-old hand gripping her elbow, eyes go huge, waiting to hear what it is that Adelle remembers. Adelle runs her fingers over Simonides. Jeff looks down at her dancing hands. What the hell? He probably knows at least half the story already. She holds out her wrist to him.

“What do you know about mnemonic devices in Ancient Greece?”

#

Once Adelle starts talking, she’s like a faucet. Words pour out: her amnesiac childhood and the day she cut in Cathedral. The bakery and inheritance of purging. The way she’d lost everyone and then tried not to hold onto anyone, and then met De. She told Jeff about how De was supposed to be a one-night-stand, how remembering him every morning after that was like an unexpected Christmas, her present under the tree, so that she went to Sam and got Mother Stairs because that was all that she could dream.

It was a test. The Baron had never done anything like that before, corralled her in one building, an infinite nightly climb. She didn’t know what it meant: if he kept her there to hide

some other memory, some new development in City that he'd stolen from under her while she concentrated on De, or if, for some inexplicable reason, he was trying to tell her something. Either way, Adelle had been trapped, and the only way out was through her skin. She went to Sam knowing the risk; she'd woken up half-killing herself before. But if the Baron had constructed some new edifice around a memory while she was looking the other way, she'd only ever know about it if she could escape Mother Stairs and go exploring. And if he was trying to tell her something, about De or sex or her one-night-stands, or any of the things she'd been doing right up to the Mother Stairs confinement, she needed to know what it was. She allowed herself to hope. She'd decided, on the drive to Sam's, that if the memory was good, she'd take it as a sign. She'd let herself be with De, if he'd have her back, and do her best to trust in something more than the nameless line of addicts and sadists at her bedroom door.

She told Jeff about her dad and the pizza parlor, the Museum of Modern Art, all unlocked by Sam's tattoo, and how she went to Uris Deli every day after that, De's money waiting, tucked in her messenger bag. The first day, she felt disappointment sink and settle into her stomach as she sat alone and stared at her untouched box of sushi. By the third day, she wasn't expecting him anymore, and by the seventh, she stopped hoping. It was just before Winter Break when she finally looked up and saw him in line waiting to pay for his roast beef sandwich. As he dug out his wallet, Adelle stood and began moving toward the cashier, timing her steps so she would arrive just when he did.

"It's on me," she said, passing De the bills he'd left behind.

He stared at her for a moment, then glanced down at the slips of green in her hand. "It's not enough," he said.

Adelle looked at the money. All this time she'd been carrying it, it had never occurred to her to count it. "It was worth less to you than a roast beef sandwich?"

De shrugged and pulled a card out of his wallet. He handed it to the curly-haired girl behind the register who was watching them from under her lashes.

"Didn't you plan on forgetting me?" he asked as the girl swiped and returned his card.

"Plans don't always work out."

De slid her a sideways glance before gathering his food and turning toward the dining area. Adelle watched him survey the nearly empty café and then turn toward the door.

"It's okay," she said. "Sit down. I'll go."

De pulled out the nearest chair and plopped into it.

"It's a memory," she told him. "The scar on my hip is a memory."

"Five minutes," he said.

"What?"

"You have five minutes, Addie Corey, to convince me it's worth remembering you." De gestured at the blue plastic chair across from him.

But Adelle had sat and stared at him, too excited and terrified about the possibilities to speak.

"Well?" he'd asked.

Adelle pauses. Jeff is still holding her Simonides hand. He's staring at her, mouth open.

When she doesn't go on, he asks her the same question. "Well? What did you say?"

She lifts her shirt again, careful not to rub against the beach house, and runs her hand down the nine-year-old tattoo of Mother Stairs, gyrating up her side with drippy rails and stick figures. Jeff leans in and climbs the steps with his eyes.

“I showed him. He asked what it meant, said he didn’t understand, but that he couldn’t give up on a girl who told such a good story.”

“He didn’t believe you.”

Adelle shrugs. “I lied to him on our first date.”

She watches him think it over.

“They told me you had memory trouble, but this is out of the park.” He holds out his arms, surveying his own inked history. “I got nothing on you. So what about the new one? Why’s it so important? Did you figure out what’s going on with your kid?”

Adelle’s senses sharpen. “What do you know about Ben?”

“Nothing.”

He answers too fast. He’s a goddamn liar.

“They wouldn’t tell me anything. The less I know, the better, they said.”

Adelle looks at the plastic wall clock across the room. “Time.”

Jeff steps back from her and nods. He places a hand at the small of her back and steadies the walker so she can lean on it as she climbs down from the table.

“I guess the baker knows what she’s doing. Tomorrow. Four o’clock,” Jeff says. “I want to hear the rest.”

“Only if you can do three laps around the room.”

Jeff laughs, but Adelle does not smile.

#

A rumble shakes Adelle’s stomach. The vegetable stir fry and half cup of brown rice that Celesse fed her for lunch wouldn’t have filled Ben’s six-year-old stomach. Seven-year-old. It is October third, his birthday. Celesse is downstairs at the bakery register. Adelle has hobbled out

to the great room, over to the house phone that hangs on the wall beside the niche that is Celesse's kitchen.

"I have to see him," she pleads with De through the phone. "At least let me talk to him. Let me tell him I didn't forget his birthday."

"Can't do it, Addie." De's voice cracks in the middle. "Ms. St. Armand says you have to remember on your own."

The rumbling in her stomach wraps itself into a fist. "Who is she to decide? She doesn't even have children. Come on, De. How is this better for Ben than me forgetting him? I might as well have, as far as he's concerned, if I don't even talk to him on his birthday."

"I'll tell him you said happy birthday."

"De—"

"I've got to go."

The dial tone sings its constant note in her ear. Adelle holds the phone in front of her. It's pale blue; a spiral of wire sways between it and the cradle mounted upright on the wall. Her grip tightens, her fingers curling around it like claws. She does not throw it across the room and through the glass window into the bright Fairfield street below. She does not yank it out of the wall and hobble over to each of Celesse's hideous imitation Tiffany lamps and smash them one by one. She does not crush it to its electronic innards against the molding that frames out the kitchen niche. She places it back on the cradle and holds onto her walker with both hands.

I should have let Jeff call Social Services on her. Aching splits through her leg and Adelle is suddenly exhausted. She tries to go slowly like Jeff told her, but she can't concentrate on the movements. She half-shuffles, half falls to the orange couch. At least the small space means she's never far from a place to rest.

She uses both hands to lift her leg onto the couch so she can lie back against the threadbare cushions. She closes her eyes and spreads her palms over her stomach, remembering the two blue lines that told her what she already knew. She knew like any woman would know when they missed a month at the worst possible time. She had to defend her MArch thesis in six weeks. But more than that, she knew because of the dreams: because of the white stone dragons that appeared inside of Block Fort, snarling at her stomach.

She also knew he'd be a boy. That bit she couldn't explain. But he would be.

Early on, De wanted to believe her. "Little Mr. Jones," he'd said. And then he'd got down on his knee right there in the bathroom doorway.

The dreams were repeating themselves again, like when she'd first made love with him. Over and over, the Block Fort. She would fall into sleep, cross the cobbled Bridge into City, and, like blinking, she would find herself in the fort. She would be lying flat on her back and there were dragon sculptures with fangs like gargoyles growing down from the block roof that levitated above her. They seemed always to be craning their scaly necks toward her stomach, even though they didn't move. Even though they were still as breath at a funeral.

#

The baby was always with her. She could feel him clinging to her insides. He made it impossible to enter Big Nick's. Ever since Mother Stairs, she'd been going there more or less regularly, in the afternoons when the pizza parlor was nearly empty and De was working at Jay Jay's. She would sit in the booth where she and her father had sat every month, order the pizza she'd eaten with him, and smell the salt and the cheese. And the garlic. That was always the first smell to hit: the garlic that thickened the air against the snow falling outside. And she would remember. Other women pampered themselves with a manicure or new pair of shoes. Adelle

treated herself to a memory: her teeth sinking through the yielding mozzarella and meatballs seasoned with parsley and sage, down deep through the crust. She'd let the cheese string between her mouth and the slice. She'd slouch down in her seat and see things taller than they were: the rough brick wall, the dropped pine ceiling as high above her as they were back then. If she slouched and bit and squinted her eyes to blur the empty green seat across from her, she could imagine a young version of her dad, smiling ironic smile, tanned even in winter. She could almost call up the ghost of his voice. *There's my little trooper. Another clean plate club championship for Adelle!* Dad would cheer a silent cheer, his arms bent in a Ra-Ra motion above his head.

But the first time she walked into Bick Nick's with the baby in her gut, she turned and walked right back out before the door closed behind her. The garlic made her gag. She couldn't even stand on the street next to it. Every time a customer walked in or out, the smell drifted at her, and her belly wretched all over again. She held her stomach and slumped to the corner, crossed the street, and stood on the other side, staring at the green awning and the warm, yellow windows. Cars sped between Adelle and Big Nick's. People passed in their coats. Her stomach rumbled, but that night she went home hungry: a punishment for her selfish son who'd stolen what she'd worked so hard to recover.

The baby stole more than pizza. He and his father ganged up on her. It began in the waiting room, before her first prenatal visit.

She was sitting in the cream-colored reception area writing in footnotes for her thesis, tuning out the loop of crisp voices on the TV that advertised birth control and cervical cancer screenings. De walked in carrying a pale blue gift bag and a book. He sat down next to her and passed her the bag, then opened the book and started reading. Adelle could see the cover from

the corner of her eye. It was one of those *What to Expect* ones. She stared at the bag. It had white polka dots and tissue vomiting out the top.

Adelle pulled the tissue from the gift bag. Inside was a copy of the *Expecting* book for her. On the front, a watercolor woman in a rocking chair stared into space with a wistful, not-altogether-reassuring, expression on her face. Along with the book was a magazine article, its glossy paper rolled like a scroll and secured with a blue satin ribbon.

The ribbon surprised her. Adelle stole another glance at De. He flipped a page and kept reading.

She uncurled the article first. “Foods to Avoid When You’re Pregnant.” Sushi was number three.

Adelle hadn’t told De about the appointment.. She figured he’d let himself into her apartment at some point and noticed one of her calendars. She had them everywhere: a Wright one in her bedroom over the desk to remind her that space should say something about man’s relationship with the world, one in the living room with a different Queen Anne style home for each month, and a Gaudy calendar magnetted to her refrigerator for fun. If he’d visited her place at all this week, he wouldn’t have been able to escape the fact that her appointment was today.

It wasn’t just the appointment. They hadn’t said much of anything to each other since his bathroom door proposal. She’d found reasons to skip their regular lunches at Uris Deli. He wasn’t studying in his usual place on her couch, waiting for her to get home Thursday night. It seemed natural to Adelle that De needed space right now. There was so much to think about. Adelle needed time to get used to it, too, the thought of becoming a mother and a wife. Until three months ago, she hadn’t ever thought she’d even date someone. Who would think she was worth the gamble, with all they stood to lose? And she’d lost enough already. But, every day,

there was De, sticking around in her waking mind, finding his spot among exam questions and encyclopedic minutia. Her brain felt crowded. The dating bit was working: he liked her stories and she liked his freckles, and if they didn't talk much about where they were headed as a couple, well, the reasons for caution were obvious.

Adelle had only just begun to become comfortable with the romantic ambivalence when the two of them became three. She took it as a good sign that De never suggested an alternative to keeping the baby. The Baron let her have De. Keeping him meant negotiating TV remotes, who paid for dates, and the balance between his fascination with her upbringing and her inability to remember so much of it. But it also meant she didn't have to be alone. She could make love to the same man every night, learn the exact distance of the space between his shoulder blades, the difference between his breath when she scratched and his moan when she bit, how long to let her mouth linger, and on which square inches of skin, before he couldn't stand it anymore and pulled her up on top of him to come inside. And he could measure her. They had the time. She stopped worrying about asking questions and the power that gave away. He already knew she forgot things and didn't seem bothered. He could believe her or not about her dreams, she didn't care. The dreams left him alone, and that was enough for her.

But romances could end. Even if the Baron never took him, who was to say things wouldn't sour on their own? They were so different. Adelle lived in the world of edifices, buildings her only friends. De streaked through parties like a comet, introducing her to this music major or that engineer student. She smiled and nodded, learned to ask a different kind of question, the kind that got people talking about themselves. In sales, De had told her many times, the person asking the questions has the power. Adelle learned to wield the power and then tune

out. One friend was enough for her. Many were overwhelming. De called it networking, so she attended with him whenever she could, but always came home exhausted.

Romances could end, but she would always be her baby's mother. The creature grappling around inside of her, he was forever. If De had suggested anything but keeping him, Adelle would have broken it off, even though mothering terrified her. She didn't have much of an example. And what if she forgot her son? Even if she didn't, where would she find space in her life for a baby? If a single lesson from her parents' marriage had survived the Baron all these years, it was that she would never, ever repeat her mother's mistakes. She would not rely on De, or any man, for her keeping.

Mother had been a beauty queen. Kitchen skills were secondary to good posture, and grades merely entry requirements that could be met with extra credit or the occasional cheat if necessary. Adelle didn't know her grandparents, whether they'd counted on Mother's looks and raised her to be incapable of taking care of herself, or if Mother had recognized her physical assets independently and tailored her expectations to that discovery. Mother's Modigliani face floated above a willow tree neck, which dipped down into deep valleys carved out by the perfect bend of her clavicles. The valleys were where Adelle's dad had gotten lost. He ran the pads of his thumbs through them, then out to the sharp mountains of Mother's shoulders. When Adelle was little, the traveling thumbs made Mother smile. But by the time Adelle started high school, she could feel the air crackle with resistance whenever her dad's hands began their journey. Mother's spine would straighten, and her lips made the line that wasn't a smile, and Adelle wondered how her father didn't notice that the woman following him up the stairs of their lower-middle class house had turned herself into a statue.

Adelle would not be a statue. Child or husband, it didn't matter. She would earn her own living.

#

De came to every appointment. Adelle started emailing him the dates and times. His replies were simple *Thank you's*. They still hadn't slipped back into their old conversations when they bumped into each other at Uris, but they would sit together and eat quietly. Sometimes De had an article for her, sometimes a whole magazine. And he was always reading about it, too. One Monday, about four weeks in, he slid a two-page spread across the table. It had what looked like photographs of the play-by-play development of a fetus. The one for one months' gestation was circled in black Sharpie.

That Thursday, when she opened the apartment door after her final thesis advisory meeting, De was in his spot again, on her couch, thumbing through an accounting book. Legal pads, a calculator, and parenting magazines littered the cherry coffee table in front of him. Adelle felt the smile in her stomach before it reached her face. It was warm and full of light and traveled up her throat with a tingling that made everything in her body relax. She'd been waking up to vomit almost every night, and had begun keeping a bucket next to the bed for those times when she couldn't scramble to the toilet fast enough. Her throat was raw and swollen all the time. That smile was like a lozenge, rising up from the best part of her, soothing her insides.

#

As the baby grew, the dream grew, until Adelle wasn't even getting halfway across Bridge anymore before she was vortexed into Block Fort. The dragons never moved, but they were bigger and closer each time. When only inches remained between her stomach and the alabaster fangs, Adelle woke up, threw on a pair of jeans, and drove to Sam's.

She pounded on the red door. Morning light hung quiet in the naked trees. A late snow had fallen the night before, and the dawn had crusted the top of it, spreading crystal fractals out across the dead field surrounding Cathedral Tattoo and Piercing. It was wrong that the world was so peaceful against the panic inside her.

Adelle heard the click of the lock and lowered her fist. A girl opened the door a chain's width and peered out at her. This one wore a silk robe and had kinky black hair that the night had worked into a fuzz around her head. Her skin was too pink, raw, maybe from the cold. Adelle could make out the geometry of a tribal tattoo creeping from under the woman's sleeve onto the hand that held open the door.

"What do you want?" A drift of mucky sleep breath curled toward Adelle's nose.

"Is Sam here?"

"Are you Rachel? The appointment's for eight at night, not A.M." She closed the door.

Adelle knocked again.

The red-faced girl opened back up. "What?"

"I'm not Rachel. I'm Sam's friend from high school." Adelle heard her voice linger over the word *friend* and cursed herself.

The girl's eyes traveled down the full length of Adelle's body and back up. She gave a smug nod and took the chain off the door.

"Have a seat," she said. She didn't look back to see if Adelle had followed her in. Adelle moved past St. Teresa and her Angel. She sat on the red couch. Sam's girl disappeared into the house side of the building.

Through the wall, Adelle could hear loud voices, but couldn't make out what they were saying. Something slammed against something else. Not as big as a person. Maybe a book. Or a hand. The voices quieted down.

A minute later, Sam came out, rubbing a palm over his eyes, and closed the door behind him.

"You know, normal people make appointments." He threw his arms in the air and arched his body into a full stretch. His fingers pressed against the ceiling. Adelle's eyes followed the tattooed cats pawing up his wrist to his elbow. She imagined their claws digging in deep and wondered if Sam liked the pain as much as he liked doling it out.

"I wouldn't want to stand you up," she said.

He smiled his crooked smile. "Sorry about Lola."

Lola. A perfect stripper name.

"What do you need?" he asked.

Adelle pushed past her nervousness. This one was going to hurt. "Have you ever done a brand?"

Sam stood up straighter, his smile now a fiendish grin.

#

The sun gleams off the thin blanket of snow over everything outside Celesse's apartment. Adelle blinks in the white light piercing through the window. Soon the baker will come up the stairs to take her to PT. She doesn't want to see Jeff. She doesn't want to see Celesse. The thought of inching her way vulnerably down the stairs under the eyes of the woman who's keeping her from Ben sickens her. Her fingers itch with rage. She clenches the walker and pulls herself up. Damn her body. Damn the grafts and her slow, slow leg. She inches her way across

the scuffed pine floor while her brain gallops ahead. An image flashes across her mind: Celesse's smooth dark neck, the pulse throbbing rhythmically as she sleeps, and Adelle's own hands reaching down like white branches, wreathing the warm, dark skin until it pulses no more.

Adelle blinks. Celesse's cheap Tiffany knock-offs replace her violent hands. She continues across the miles of the five feet between herself and her bedroom, trying to forget the terrible thought. That's something she'd give the Baron for free. Not for free. A trade. He could have Celesse back if he'd give her Ben. The baker deserved it. However much pain Adelle had caused her, she'd taken this too far. It wasn't Adelle's fault that the Baron stole her days. All this time away from his mother couldn't be less damaging to Ben than a couple missing months. If the Baron took Celesse back, Adelle would never think of hurting her again. That, Adelle decided, was generous, more than the baker deserved.

She needs a distraction and forces herself to think about what she'll say to Jeff today. If she offers him the right story, will he be willing to tell her what he knows in exchange? Maybe about coming to, after the Block Fort brand.

As Sam had finished the last scorching lines on her belly, Adelle's body had seized in cold spasms and Sam's face disappeared into white. And then, she drifted. There were people in white and a wailing noise, bumps and wires and tools and an IV. But she doesn't know what order they came, and she sometimes wonders if she dreamed it all. But it is not City, and it is not a trip through City, and too many things moved. She learned later that it was the ambulance. Sam didn't want to take her in his truck. There was no way for her to lie flat with her feet up unless he put her in the bed of the F250, and that would have been ridiculous. The whole journey was a tunnel of white with the odd sensation or image coming through at random.

It wasn't until she lay still on a cot in the wide hall of Bridgeport Hospital's ER that Adelle knew for sure she was awake and alive. Her body had stopped trembling, but all the sound still felt like it was coming to her through walls of cotton. Something small and hard scratched her inner arm when she moved. She opened her eyes and tilted her head to look at it. The IV. It was real, too.

"Baby. You're okay. The rooms are full, but the nurse said it's just shock and you're going to be fine." De's words came in a jumble and she turned her head through the cotton to see his face tense with worry. She lifted her free hand, wanting to touch his cheek, but not making it quite that far. De grabbed onto it with his long, perfect fingers. They were cold and gentle.

Beyond their clasped hands, she caught sight of a figure standing not far behind De. Sam leaned against the opposite wall, arms crossed over his chest. Another tremor vibrated through her. She steadied herself, pulling the pulpy feeling of her limbs toward solidity. The shaking stopped.

Sam stepped forward. Exhaustion or rage had wrought shadows under his eyes, dark enough to look like someone punched him twice. "Does he know?"

De's face got darker. His freckles faded into his deepening skin, and his grip tightened on Adelle's. "Don't you talk to her."

Sam ignored him. "Does he know you're pregnant?"

De glared at him.

Sam continued. "Because I sure as hell didn't." He bent toward Adelle, his chest close enough that she imagined she felt his heart beating above her hand holding De's. His face came between them, blocking De from her vision. His skin was paler than she'd ever seen it. "What the fuck were you thinking, Corey?"

De let go of her hand, and then the two of them were across. De had Sam pinned to the wall. His face was up against Sam's cheek. Adelle's hearing must have come back, because she caught every violent word.

"You don't talk to her like that," De said. His voice was frighteningly calm, like the glassy top of an ocean with death currents circling underneath. "You might have killed a baby today. It's time for you to leave."

Sam met Adelle's eyes. She couldn't read them. They looked full and empty at once. Her body was hollowed out, caving in on itself. And then, she felt him. Just inside, under her belly skin, under the muscles, halfway in. It was like a little marble rolling around inside her. She felt her Baby swimming through her, and that same sunshine smile that from the night when De was on her couch, that smile rose up in her from the deeps where Ben was, and she could feel the glow they say that pregnant women have, and all she could do was smile.

"De." She extended her hand to him across the hallway. "He's moving."

De turned toward her, and the stars of his freckles came out of their sky. She felt his hand in hers again and placed it on her belly, the side where their boy had swum, just above the newly seared Block Fort. De's fingers spread out like a starfish. She willed their son to move again, but everything was still.

"She'll forget you." Sam's voice was clear and calm. She couldn't see him. De filled her entire view. But she heard his boots pound and squeak on the hospital linoleum as he walked away.

Later, when they got her back to a room and gave her the stress test and squeezed the cold gel onto her abdomen for the ultrasound, the technician would say no, it couldn't have been

the Baby. Adelle wasn't far enough along for that yet. You never felt them before the fifteenth week.

But De said, "This one's different," and his smile was proud, and it crept through her and stayed, lining her insides, while their baby grew.

Part III

Chapter 9

For the next three weeks, Adelle eats what Celesse puts in front of her and returns to her room until the baker goes downstairs for the day. Then, she does laps around the claustrophobic apartment, keeping her eyes on the antique stove, and imagining shoving the baker in the way the witch did to Hansel and Gretel as she remembers that drive to physical therapy.

“It’s Ben’s birthday,” she had told Celesse on the way.

“Mm,” the baker had said.

“I’d like to talk to him.”

Celesse shook her head.

“Do you really think this is better?”

Adelle waited until the minutes on the dash clock changed twice, then reached over and grabbed the steering wheel. “Answer me! What makes this better?”

Celesse cursed her in Creole and fought for the wheel.

Adelle gave it a sharp jerk. The car swerved to the shoulder. “How is this good for Ben?”

The car came to a stop. Celesse yanked the keys from the ignition. “That’s right,” she said, her *r* bending around her accent. “How is this good for Ben? You want to kill us? To have a dead mother, that solves nothing.”

Adelle glares at her, but Celesse glares right back. She feels it in her fingers, how easy it would be: the baker’s neck is thin and brittle. She digs her nails into her palms, closing her fists on themselves to fight the temptation, and pounds the glove box in frustration.

“I know this is hard,” Celesse says, her voice full of unwelcome pity. “But you will find him. You found me. You can find anything.”

“Wherever he is, he needs me. Whether I can remember or not. It’s better if I’m there.”

“Why?”

“I don’t forget with happiness. I may have lost him in the fire, you can coach me, or De can. Prep me with the details each day. I’ve lived whole months like that, with nothing but what’s written in my notebook while I built new memories and acted out the old ones that I lost. If Ben got hurt, like I did, he needs his mother.”

“I understand. You love him.”

“But you still won’t let me see him.”

Celesse shook her head one more time. “But Manman would be proud, if she could see what a parent you are.”

The hypothetical pride of a dead woman did not make Adelle feel better.

Celesse reinserted the key and started the car. Adelle looked at the dash clock. They were going to be late.

“Now, will you let me drive?”

Jeff had given her a cane. It was one of those old lady acrylic ones, covered with hideous flowers, but far less clunky than the walker, which she is outgrowing in short bursts of determination. She alternates between the two when she does her laps around the apartment. The cane would work better for forcing the baker’s stubborn limbs into the belly of the oven. The base of the walker is almost as broad as the oven door, and would likely get caught and be no help at all.

She rests on Celesse’s rust-colored couch and picks at its bald spots. When she hears Celesse on the steps, she leans on her walker, still more reliable than the cane, and shuffles back to her room. She doesn’t do it on purpose; she’s slow. But she likes it that she never has quite enough time to get there before the baker’s footsteps reach the landing and the apartment door

swings open. She likes that Celesse has to see her pass through the bedroom door, and close it between them, every time she comes home.

On the twenty-first day, Adelle finishes her egg whites and makes a point of standing and hobbling over to the sink with her own dirty dishes. She's been practicing balancing them in one hand and leaning on the cane with the other. She knows she can make it, and if she pauses to rest against the counter for a few minutes, she can make it back to the table, too.

She looks straight ahead, cursing her leg but keeping her pace slow. It's more important to get there than to get there quickly. She lowers her plate with care, resting it in the perfect center of the sink and maneuvers herself around so she's facing Celesse. Celesse sips coffee and ignores her.

"I thought I'd take a cab today."

Celesse swallows again before answering. "It's no trouble for me. The bakery closes at three anyway."

"I'm supposed to develop independence."

"You don't have to worry. I remember. It's time to see Sam."

Adelle tightens her grip on the cane. Sam is only part of the plan.

Celesse finally looks at her, one quick flick of the eyes, and then turns away again.

"You're not ready to see Ben."

Adelle pushes back the burning in her throat. She straightens every muscle, pulling herself up the way her mother does when she's getting ready to use the always voice. Adelle knows what she wants to say. She repeats it in her head at the end of each lap around the infuriating great room, sharpening the blade on each syllable, preparing for this moment. But now her mouth dries out. Her tongue clings to the roof, and her burning throat shrinks into itself

so that she couldn't swallow even if she had the spit. If she were her mother, she could say it. *Ben is dead.* Mother could say anything. But she is not her mother. Even if they are the only weapon she has against the cruel separation, she cannot say the words out loud.

Celesse doesn't say anything, just watches. Adelle's muscles quiver. The palsy spreads down through the cane, which wobbles and clatters to the floor. Celesse doesn't help. Shaking, Adelle grips the counter behind her.

The baker's face softens, but still she does not move. "You have to learn independence," she says.

Adelle ribs stab against her breathing, resisting her expanding lungs, but she inhales again, and again, until the shaking stops. She turns to face the counter, holds on for balance, and lifts her wretched leg so she can stoop down with the strong one to retrieve the cane.

She fingers its rubber grip, but is too spent to stand back up. She stares at the white cabinet door in front of her with its cheap, nickel handle.

"I hate you," she says.

"Yes." Celesse says.

Adelle gets her cane up under herself and rises. She doesn't move out of the way when Celesse brings her coffee cup to the sink. Celesse reaches around Adelle, rinses the cup, and exits the apartment. Halfway out the door, though, the baker turns around.

"But I do not hate you."

#

Sam holds the door open for her. She wishes she were good enough with the cane, but the gravel driveway kept slipping out from under it. Adelle follows her walker under the jangling bell, clasping her Rhodia up against the metal bar, trying not to drop it. She turns to watch

Celesse drive off. The baker had helped her out of the car and then got back into the drivers' seat.

“You're not coming?”

“I'll be back for you tomorrow.”

Adelle's pulse had quickened. For a moment, she tried to decide if it made more sense to call a cab before the tattoo or after.

“Sam will watch you until then.”

“Welcome back,” Sam says with odd formality as Adelle inches past him into Cathedral.

“You remember Janice?”

Sam's wife sits behind the glass credenza. Great. So Sam and his wife are babysitting.

Janice bows her head. Her curtain of shiny, burgundy hair sways. “Hello, Adelle.”

Adelle manages a smile.

She follows Sam to the back room. She likes that he doesn't slow down for her, or stand in the doorway waiting. She moves at her own best pace, the walker squeaking as she goes.

“Have you found anything?”

Adelle lowers herself onto the black stool and shakes her head. “I've looked been combing through my notebook. I think they took one from me, at the hospital.”

“What do you mean?”

“The the first day I remember, I woke up and there was no notebook. But I'd been there two months. I wouldn't go that long without a Rhodia.”

As she talks, Sam busies himself with the cart of ink and needles. He doesn't look at her when he asks, “So what do you want to do?”

“I think the apartment is getting bigger.”

Sam nods, sits beside her, and pulls paper from a roll across the drafting table. He hands her a pencil, and she begins to draw. She's never done a furnished interior before. But she is only ever in the apartment. She can't see it from the outside. It floats four stories up, above the concrete ground of City, invisible until she finds herself inside it. It's her place on 105th, from back in grad school. It's been there for years, but she doesn't know how many. Even with her meticulous notes, she missed the day it appeared. It looked too much like the real one, and she thought it was just a trivial memory until she realized she couldn't rely on its logic. The dream apartment had seven hallways, too many for any real one-bedroom place. Its walls angled in at the top, making it feel like the rooms were looking down at her. The colors were off, and the layout had changed, but, she'd still never had such a faithful replica of a real place before, even if this one did make her feel queasy. City twists its buildings to look the way they mean. It makes it hard to distinguish what to draw. Was the drum set really there, or did City build it as an icon? Didn't she still have her old thrift store table then? The walnut table from her parents' kitchen seems to be in its place, but they gave that to her and De when they moved into their house.

Adelle's been over this. She's spent almost a month sketching and erasing, trying to get every image right.

Sam is quiet while he works. She doesn't have much room left. He suggests her back, but she wants to be able to see this one, in case this is the right one, without a mirror. She shouldn't have to look backwards and crane her neck for it. If Ben is here, she wants to see it front and center every day. So he inks across her right breast, avoiding the scarred graft site on her left. De would have it in for her, but she didn't care. If he didn't want Sam touching her, he could tell her what was going on with Ben. Besides, Sam's hands are different today, mechanical.

Adelle looks at his face. He wears an expression of blank concentration, an artist doing his work. There's nothing sensual about this. Her breast squishes around like a stress ball in his hand as he adjusts the gun to start a new line. She feels only pain.

#

When she dreams, she's sure she'll find him.

The apartment is exploding. This is fire. Adelle surveys the destruction. The drums swell, their hollow bellies expanding to fill the little living room. She presses herself against the wall and shields her eyes as they burst, showering her with shrapnel. Syrupy fingerprints cover the table, splinter away with it as it self-destructs, ripping into jagged, sticky toothpicks. Sparks shoot from every corner, and in the doorway to the bathroom, a plaster Madonna and Child explodes.

Adelle runs toward the bedroom. Furniture hurtles through the air, smashing into walls, combusting in unpredictable flames. Something is wrong. Nothing ever moves in City. The apartment itself begins to crack. Fissures web patterns into the plaster walls. The butter yellow paint peels away in giant flakes, turns green, then a chalky, musty black. And now the floor is rumbling, too. Adelle shifts against the earthquake beneath her, grateful that in dreams her body is whole and fast and able.

Then she is falling.

#

Adelle is awake, but she does not move. Her organs rush like lava. She concentrates on holding them in, not trusting herself to open her eyes, not trusting the morning. Or De. Or Sam.

#

When Adelle was five, she and Celesse got married. They tore down Manman's vines for dresses, moonflowers for Adelle and morning glories for her sister-friend. They held each other at the elbows and pledged their best friendships before the stone statue of *Erzulie Dantor*, the Haitian Mary, Goddess of Women, in the middle of Manman's garden.

#

De proposed on the bathroom floor. When Adelle met Mama Jones for the first time, she was surprised to realize she couldn't remember the rest of the story. De filled it in for her: he'd bought a ring a week after they'd met, before they even dated, and had been waiting for the right time.

#

"There's a woman there," De had said, "an old family friend."

"Your family or mine?"

"You'll like her. Listen to Celesse."

#

Adelle's red suitcase rested in the corner. De must have brought it over.

#

The apartment keeps splintering even though she's awake, tearing through her brain like seams ripping against a load. It hurts more than the pulpy graft site had, more than her burnt and broken leg. Everywhere she thought she knew anything about her life with De, fissures fjord into what had been solid ground.

#

"Marry me, Addie."

But he didn't have a ring, not there with him, and not hidden anywhere else waiting for the right moment. It was an impulse, a reaction, the right thing to do.

"It's too fast," Adelle had said, looking down at De's set face. She was still learning its constellations; they'd only been together a few months. "I think so. Probably, yes. I need some time."

The muscles tensed in his neck. He got to his feet, unfolding to his full height in front of her. He towered over her. "That's my boy in there?"

Adelle smiled. She reached a hand to the sharp line of his jaw, traced her fingers tenderly up to the Big Dipper freckles. "Yes."

De closed his eyes and leaned into her touch for a moment. Then, he reached up and took her hand between his palms, held it below his chin. "You don't have to marry me, Addie Corey," he said. His eyes had shrunk to two dull lumps of coal. "But my son's going to have a proper upbringing."

She stared at him, not sure what he meant.

"A woman like you, with your condition, raising a child alone. Well, I don't want my son waking up one day with a mother can't remember who he is."

Adelle felt his words like a punch in her gut.

"So you go ahead and take your time," he went on, voice hard, face like stone, "but either way, I'm his daddy." He let go of her hand and it fell limp to her side.

"You'd take him away from me?"

"Wouldn't have to. Someone would find it out, if you tried to keep him alone. Lock you up so they can figure out what's wrong with you. Cure you."

Adelle's body stiffened. The heat rattled on and a smell like burnt hair filled her apartment. She glared at her lover. "This is how you propose?"

De shrugged. "Best relationships are founded on honesty." He turned toward the window looking out over the street. Adelle followed his gaze. The glass fogged against the cold. She wondered for the hundredth time why she couldn't forget him. She wondered how long he'd hated her.

She knew she wouldn't wake up the next day and forget she was pregnant. It had been weeks since she could get near Big Nick's. But the little parasite was growing. Soon he'd be too big to stay inside, and, as much as she resented him for stealing her one-sided pizza dates with Dad, and for tying her inexorably to De, Adelle needed to have this child. Mother ought to see it, what a parent was supposed to be. It wasn't a rule book. It was sinew to sinew, Adelle's own blood and muscle weaving a human being, stretching around him and into him so that he was her and was not her, and she was and was not him. Neither of them could move without the other counterbalancing. Adelle knew it best in the mornings, after hours of bracing her will against the dragons all night, pressing her will between their stony fangs and the inside place where Ben hid. Adelle became the fortress. She became the shield.

She couldn't forget Ben within her, but how would she keep him when he emerged? She and the baby needed De.

"Got to head to class," he said. His voice was almost normal again. He slipped on his jacket with the too-short sleeves. He slid the pin into the pull, and zipped the teeth together one by one, a chest-length snarl, and opened the door.

He looked at her over his shoulder. "I'd be a good husband."

Then he closed it behind him, and she was alone with the burnt hair and the fog. They didn't see each other again until the obstetrician's office.

#

Adelle had forgotten Ben when he was two. She didn't know why. After De woke up and realized what had happened, he handed Adelle her Rhodia and rings, two weighty circles in her palm. She didn't remember picking out the bands together, or the day when she'd finally forgotten enough to agree to marry him.

She sat in the stiff chair, confused, and he walked away.

Adelle read through the Rhodia that the man had handed her. She fiddled with the rings, not ready yet to put them on. It had been about half an hour when the bedroom door opened and he came back through. She put a finger in the notebook to hold her place and flopped the black cover closed over top of it.

"Find any new buildings yet?"

"What?"

"In City. Did you figure out where he hid us?"

Adelle shifted in the uncomfortable chair. "Who?"

"God, Adelle. The Baron. You don't have to pretend with me."

"I don't know you."

"The hell you don't. I'm your husband. De." The man walked to a cherry dresser and yanked open the top drawer. "Find the new building and start drawing. Ginny's on her way." He tossed a blue shirt on the bed and opened another drawer.

"Who's Ginny?"

"The sitter. We're going to get your memories back, Mrs. Jones."

“Jones.” Adelle tried the plain name out on her tongue. The man shook his head and began to strip. Adelle stared down at the Rhodia in her lap.

There had been nothing familiar in the crunch of the gravel beneath her feet. De had brought her to a shack in Trumbull with blackened windows, like its eyes had been spooned out. The name had to be the reason. If she were going to choose a tattoo parlor, she probably would have picked this one for the sake of the name. But it made her feel naked, approaching the weathered red door with the stranger who was her husband. She’d like to think he picked it because there were only so many tattoo shops around Fairfield. She’d like to think it was a coincidence. But Adelle knew it wasn’t. This man would know. He would know everything without her permission. Yesterday’s Adelle had given it to him, but her self today had not.

The open sign was not lit up, but the door was unlocked. A bell jangled above. Adelle slid a glance at the man as he ushered her through. His brown skin stretched taut over his jaw. If she had just met him today, would she marry him? It was hard to say.

“Rough morning, Corey?” A man stood up from a plush red couch beyond the archway that separated a sitting room from the icon-laden reception area. His wet brown hair looked like he’d just toweled it down. The dark scent of coffee steamed up from a mug on the gilt end table. The husband, De, stiffened beside her.

“Pleased to meet you,” Adelle held out a hand. The man raised an eyebrow at De before moving through the archway, just clearing its peak, and taking her hand in both of his.

“It’s Sam. I’m Sam.” His voice caught in his throat, sounding like an unfortunate teenager going through vocal changes. “Sam Crossing. It’s a pleasure to meet you, too.”

“Can we just get started?” De said. “Addie, show him the notebook.”

Sam gestured down the hall, placing a hand at the small of Adelle's back as she moved past him. De followed. The rubber soles of their shoes made bump-and-suck thuds on the raised wooden floor. At the end of the red hallway, Sam pointed Adelle toward a drafting table with two stools. She sat down and placed her Rhodia on its slanted white surface. Sam took the other stool. De hovered above them.

"So, Ms. Corey," Sam began, "I understand you're looking for some custom work?"

"It's Jones. Mrs. Jones. Right?" Adelle looked at De.

Sam twisted around slowly, following her gaze.

"No," De said, his jaw tense. "You didn't take my name."

"You called me—"

"It's a joke, Addie. It used to make you smile."

Adelle studied his sad face. His freckles looked like weeping stars. This man had given her years. She wasn't sure how many, but years enough to have a son together, to have a permanent white line on her finger where the rings were supposed to go. She searched his butterscotch eyes and the nubs of black hair dotting his scalp, wishing she could feel the smallest flare of recognition.

"I forget things, Mr. Crossing," Adelle worked to keep her voice even. She sat still as stone but for her left thumb and forefinger, which worried the knee-high hem of her dress.

"Tattoos help you remember."

"Yes."

De gave another huff.

"Do you know what you're trying to recover? What kinds of things you've forgotten?"

"It's just me and Ben. Our son," De said. Adelle's fingers pulled at her dress.

“Maybe it would be better if you waited up front,” Sam said.

“Maybe it would be better if you just got to work.”

“De,” his name felt metallic on her tongue, “I think he’s right. I’m sorry.”

De opened his mouth, but then closed it again. He turned and marched back down the hall. Sam called out an offer of coffee, but De shot back that he was fine, and Sam closed the door.

“Mr. Crossing--”

“Call me Sam.”

“Sam. Who are you?”

Sam’s stubbly face went soft. “Cathedral. Mother Stairs. The Block Fort.”

A tingling spread through Adelle’s veins. “You didn’t do Cathedral.”

“No. You did. When you were nine. When you fell off your bike.”

“Ten.”

“Yeah. Ten. When you finished the job with your dad’s razor.”

Adelle searched and found nothing. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember you.”

“Don’t be. It’s about damn time I mattered enough for that.”

They stared into each other and for a moment it didn’t matter, what she had lost. She leaned in, trying to find them both in Sam’s eyes.

“You married De three years ago.”

Adelle blinked. She straightened herself. “And the boy? Ben?”

“You were pregnant. But the two of you moved fast enough that no one knew. You weren’t showing yet, at the wedding. Everyone thought he was a premie.”

“Everyone but you.”

Sam nodded.

“When did I forget you?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen you in a while. Not since the wedding. But we’re not exactly friends, you know.” Sam looked down at his hands and Adelle followed his gaze. A thick, silver band encircled his left ring finger.

“You’re my tattoo artist.”

“Exactly.”

“My tattoo artist who knows what I looked like in my wedding dress.”

“That’s me.”

He touched the open page of her open Rhodia, his finger landing on Moonflower Tower.

“Let’s get to work,” he said.

Adelle sketched the buildings from the last night’s dreams, and she and Sam sat, side-by-side, strangers and not quite friends, and compared the drawings to the earlier versions of City she’d recorded in the Rhodia. Two were new. One was obvious: a fortress with a drawbridge that rose up from the center. The other was harder to find. It wasn’t a freestanding structure, but an obscure addition to Bridge, which had always been there.

“It’s a bascule house,” Sam said when he spotted the extra turret halfway across.

“Yes,” Adelle answered.

“On a cobblestone bridge?”

Sam was right. Only a drawbridge needed a bridge master.

“Has it always been there?”

They flipped back through the pages, but couldn’t find another bridge keeper’s hut.

#

St. Luke's had taken hours, the bascule house only thirty minutes. She'd endured the spires of St. Luke's as the needle stippled up her side. The spaces between ribs and the curve of her waist were pockets of relief. The gun bit into her, but the sting was bearable.

But Sam inked the modest hut right over her sternum, in the valley between her breasts, where almost nothing separated skin from bone. The pain vibrated through her. She gripped the edges of the tattoo table, trying not to thrash beneath him. Her back arched involuntarily. Everything in the world was one screech of fire needling over her heart.

They stayed at the tattoo studio that night. Sam had insisted. "She doesn't leave until she's dreamed." He blocked the door, eye to eye with De.

"It's not up to you," De had said. "She's my wife."

"A fact she obviously cherishes."

"What's that mean?"

"She doesn't forget with happiness. You should know that by now. So what did you do to her?"

Sam's arms were crossed. De's fists balled at his sides. Their noses were inches apart.

"She forgot you, too."

Sam's face relaxed into half a smile. "Yeah. But I wasn't the one around to fuck things up. Whatever you did must have pissed her off so much she tried to hide the way back from herself."

"What way back?"

"I'm the way back."

De looked at Adelle, his face an angry question mark.

"I think we should stay," she said. She turned to Sam. "Where do I usually sleep?"

#

“I don’t forget with happiness,” she’d told Celesse.

Something had to be wrong with Ben. She’d studied her Rhodia into the night over the past three weeks, trying to find where he was hiding. The same buildings loomed in the first page as on the last. By Ben’s birthday, she was desperate. She hadn’t found a thing. But then, that evening, after a dinner of plantains and tomatoes, she remembered the bascule, the sly way it grew out of the bridge. She decided to try measuring instead of counting buildings. That’s when she discovered it.

The apartment had been growing. She wasn’t sure how long. Sam inked it into her breast, blending its edges with the bascule. When she dreamed, her mind exploded into drum bits and splintered table. This was where it was hiding, everything she didn’t want to know about De. And herself.

#

“You slept with Ginny? When?”

“For the hundredth time, yes. Four years ago. Ben was two. I slept with the fucking nanny. And don’t you tell me I’m a goddamn cliché.”

“Well, it is, De. You’re a parody of a man. A satire. You only want to be something because you think that’s what people are supposed to be. There’s nothing real about you. You’re a car salesman.”

De’s arm yanked back at the elbow, his hand a grapefruit-sized fist. It hurtled toward her. Adelle squeezed her eyes closed. A rush of air blew past her ear, ruffled the loose strands of her hair, just before the splintering thud. A great animal howl roared out in front of her. Adelle opened her eyes to see De doubled over, cradling his fist against his stomach. She turned to

examine the wall. Small dents scuffed the surface, but there was no hole. With her eyes, she scaled the distance between where he'd punched and the closet door jam. She divided by two. She tried not to smile. He'd hit a stud.

"Put your pants on," she told him. "I'll drive."

"The hell you will. We're not going anywhere together." His face twisted, and his voice came out like a taut rubber band. He was still rubbing his wounded knuckles.

"You need to see a doctor."

"I'm going to Mama's to pick up Ben."

"Good luck driving one-handed on those curves."

"When we get back, you'll be gone."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm divorcing you Adelle. I've been telling you for two weeks, but you're too fucking crazy to remember."

Adelle's insides ebbed and crashed, waves sloshing around, held in by skin.

De composed his face. His freckles settled into place. "It's not working, Addie. You keep telling me give you a few days so you can make arrangements, but then you forget again. You have to leave now, while you still remember. I can't keep doing this every day. And Ben can't keep watching it."

He struggled into his pants and buttoned down his shirt with his one good hand. She thought about how in college none of the sleeves ever made it to his wrist. It had been a long time since he'd had to wear clothes that didn't fit. She wondered what that must have been like for him, walking around with wrists and pride naked to the world. Her saliva dried to a sticky goo that she tried to swallow, but couldn't quite. De walked out of their room, leaving the door

open behind him. She listened to the rumbling of ice cubes and imagined him filling a plastic bag for his hand. The car started. The garage door hummed open, then closed, a series of hollow, metallic creaks.

The brocade chair from Mama Jones waited a few feet from her. She made her way to it and tried to smile, but her face wouldn't cooperate. It was as uncomfortable as ever. The morning that she'd lost them flashed through her mind: De standing in the doorway, watching as Ben stared up at her, a stranger's child stroking her hand.

The affair. That had to be the reason she'd forgotten them. She could still hear De saying, *Mommy's sick*. She could feel the weight of those unfamiliar rings in her hand.

For the hundredth time, he'd said. Four years ago.

How many nights had they had this argument? How many mornings had she woken up believing she was married to a perfect, faithful husband?

The garage door echoed once more. Adelle hadn't moved. She was still in Mama Jones' cheap, beautiful chair. She could tell by the careful voice De used to send Ben to his room that he wasn't happy to see Adelle's Mercedes still here. The refrigerator opened. The beer bottles clanked against each other. He was half through his Blue Moon when he came in and closed the bedroom door behind him. He was carrying her red suitcase and duffle.

He didn't look at her.

He put the suitcase on the bed, unzipped it, and started opening drawers.

"There are no new buildings in City," she told him.

He continued piling her things into the suitcase. "I know."

"I don't know how I've forgotten this."

“Yup.” Now he was in her closet, the one she’d measured studs by an hour earlier, gathering up her shoes. “How many feet do you have, woman?”

Any other time, Adelle would have smiled.

“Have we done this before, too?” she asked.

De peered around the closet door jam, a jumble of heels in his arms. “No. Not this part.”

“Can I save it?” Adelle’s throat closed on the words as they came out. She shut her eyes, holding in the tears collecting there. The light in the room shone red from the other side of her lids. There was the sound of a small avalanche as De dumped her shoes into the suitcase, and then the slow puff of air that the mattress exhaled when he sat on the edge of the bed. Adelle swallowed, willing the tears back into their ducts, and opened her eyes.

He looked at her the way he’d look at Ben, when the bigger kids wouldn’t let him play soccer with them at the park. “There’s nothing to save, Addie. There never was anything. Just Ben.”

“It’s late. Let me leave tomorrow.”

“No, not that.” De stood up. “That bit we have done.” He opened the cabinet door on her nightstand, pulled out all her notebooks, and poured them into the duffle.

“This is my house. I built this house.”

“It’s Ben’s house.”

“I’m his mother. He can stay here with me.”

De let out a mirthless laugh.

“You can’t make me leave.”

He flung the lid of the suitcase closed, zipped it in one angry gesture. “Benny Boy!” He called. A moment later, Ben’s feet came smacking against the hardwood floor, then slowing down as he approached their room. He wasn’t allowed to run in the house.

“Yeah, Dad?” he panted. He tilted his cloudless face up at De. Adelle drank up his perfect skin, the color of sandstone in the shade, his so-round eyes that tweaked at the corners. Someday he’d be one of those old men who always looked like they were smiling. She could predict the exact trajectory of the laugh lines to come. His arms dangled at his sides, too low. He was in a growth spurt, and his spine hadn’t caught up with his limbs yet. They swayed unconsciously as he stared at his father.

“Get your coat back on. Mommy’s going to stay with Missy Nana tonight. We’re giving her a ride.”

Ben snuck a glance at Adelle. His orange-brown eyebrows scrunched together for an instant, but then he ran off to do what his dad had told him, his scampering footsteps stopping halfway, at the spot where he always remembered he wasn’t allowed to run inside.

“I’m not going anywhere. This is my house.”

De went back into the closet and emerged with one last pair of shoes. He dropped them into her lap. “Put these on.”

Adelle glared at him. He shrugged and yanked the suitcase off the bed.

“I’ll meet you in the car.”

“Fuck you.”

Ben peeked into the room as she spoke. Damn it. She hadn’t heard him coming. This was when he remembered to walk.

“Come on, Ben.” De said, putting a hand on our son’s back and shuffling him away.

“What about Mommy?”

“Mommy’s a smart woman. She loves you, and wants to be able to see you on a regular basis.”

If her son weren’t standing there, she’d tear De’s tongue right out of his mouth for saying something like that to him.

“Huh?” Ben tilted his head in confusion.

“She’ll be along in just a minute.”

#

De flipped down the ceiling-mounted DVD player and put an episode of *Jane and the Dragon* for Ben. They drove without talking.

“Did you call them first?” Adelle asked when they pulled up to the curb beside her parents’ house. She stared at the tiny porch that her mother always called a verandah. The light was off.

“Benny, you stay here, okay, buddy?” De said. In the rearview mirror, Ben’s head nodded, but his eyes remained trained on the screen behind and above Adelle’s head. It was the one where Jane and Dragon get caught in a tunnel they’d been exploring.

De’s door slammed, and Adelle jumped. She watched his reflection in the rearview mirror as he opened the hatch and hoisted out her bags. Then she looked back at Ben’s entranced face. Behind her head, Jane’s Dad had just told Smithy to load up a horse so he could go after his daughter.

“I love you, Benjamin.”

“Love you, too, Mom.” He spoke automatically, like people do when they know what they’re supposed to say, without looking away from the cartoon.

De opened Adelle's door.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she said to Ben.

This time he blinked and focused on her. "Can I stay, too?"

"Not this time, Benny Boy," De answered. He reached over, unbuckled Adelle's seatbelt, and put an arm around her like he was helping.

Ben's lips went into a pout, but then he remembered he was six and six-year-olds don't pout. "Hey, Mommy. I will no longer sweep for you." He smiled a broad gash of a smile, showing off the gap where his left front tooth had been just yesterday.

Adelle worked to keep her voice steady while she sung the next line: "For I am not your broom." She tried to smile back at him, but the gap in his mouth was too much for her, and he'd turned back to Jane and Dragon already.

De rang her parents' doorbell. Adelle's mother's high heels clipped toward them from the other side of the door, and then there she was, her head in a red polka-dot kerchief, a white linen Banana Republic blouse hanging at just the right angle over her slight figure. Anyone else would have thought she'd been dressed and waiting for them all this time. For years, she'd kept that particular blouse buttoned up to the third buttonhole so she could throw it on over her head and secure the last two on her way down the stairs. She always left the top one open.

Mother ran her eyes down De and stopped at the red suitcase in his hand. She pressed her lips together in a line.

De shifted it toward her, nudging its bulk into the gap between the door and its frame. "Addie needs a little mother daughter time," he said.

Mother's gaze lifted, moved past them to the Suburban where Ben sat watching Jane. Slowly, deliberately, she met De's eyes. "You're not keeping Ben."

“Missy,” De began.

“It’s Mrs. Corey to you.”

Adelle blinked. She hadn’t heard that voice from her mother in years, not since before the wedding. It was her voice that could spread smooth as oil over cracked, scaly skin. She could say anything in this voice, and it sounded like she’d won already, and weren’t you the fool for thinking anything at all in her presence? Calm as the knowledge that a spoon is to eat with, and packing words full of venom like De had never known.

De went on, unfazed. “Mrs. Corey, then. Adelle needs—”

“Not without Ben.”

“But, Melissa—”

“You said you knew what you were getting.” Adelle’s mother seemed taller when she spoke like this, and even though De dwarfed her by over a foot, Adelle watched him tilt his head back some to meet her eyes, floating, somehow, above him in perfect serenity.

“Good night, DeAngelo.”

Adelle’s mother closed the door. Her footsteps clacked away behind it.

Adelle crossed her arms and stared at her husband.

“You’re not coming home with me.”

“The hell I’m not.”

“You can’t.”

Adelle pressed her lips together like her mother had and smiled as much like her mother’s smile as she could manage. She grabbed her duffle from where he’d dumped it on the porch and marched toward Ben and the Suburban.

“I filed an injunction,” De said.

Adelle stopped. He did what? She didn't trust myself to look at him. She didn't want Ben watching her choke the life out of his father.

"You're disturbed, Adelle. A hazard to our son."

Rage twined through her, braiding muscle and sinew into coarse, tight rope. Her fingers crackled into fists. Calf twisted up into thigh, stomach raveled through her chest, her neck, her head. It rose and it rose and it rose until she was too brittle to move. She stared at the TV colors bouncing off Ben's face, a point of light tethering her to the world.

De's feet crunched the grass behind her. He lifted the duffle strap from her shoulder. She let it fall for him to catch. He turned back to the house. Her arms, her legs wound tight as a wet towel waiting for someone to snap. And then they did. She unraveled. Her limbs, her stomach, everything, all of her went running wild at the Suburban, at Ben. She tore at the handle, threw back the door, clawed away his seatbelt. In her head, she could see herself, hands flying, frantic, like they belonged to someone else. Ben went rigid beneath their frenetic dance, his so-round eyes even wider. Adelle could see the dark rims edging his butterscotch irises, the whole circumference, and the whites beyond them.

She was gathering up his tight little body when De's arm came between them, pressing Ben back into the car seat, while he pulled her away with his other hand. Her shrill voice came into focus, and Adelle wondered how long she'd been screaming *You can't take him!* over and over. De's back became a shield against her while he buckled her son back up. He stayed like that, leant over Ben. Adelle lunged into the street, going for the other side of the car. The locks jogged down against her, De's finger too fast on the lock button for her to outrun. Before she could think about what she was doing, she threw herself at him, pounding her fists at De's back, beating her knuckles into his shoulders, the spaces between his ribs, the divot under his skull.

You can't take him! Her arms wound like a pitcher's for every blow. De's body stiffened against the attack. His shoulder quivered once, and Adelle caught sight of Ben's brown eyes, pools of fear, blurred by the raging whip of her fists. De shifted back between them, blocking Ben's view, but there was no need. Adelle was done. Her arms loosened at the hinges, and the last couple blows were nothing but pathetic aftershocks. The screaming had stopped. Her throat was hoarse, and the sudden silence felt anticlimactic.

De faced her, pausing as he turned, stretching and adjusting his shoulder, his side. His eyes were flat, dead as the day she told him she'd forget him. Ben had seen those eyes. He'd seen De's face and heard Adelle's screams, and even then, De did what he could to protect their from seeing her. It was only in that one awful moment, after her fist had wedged under his shoulder blade, that De had faltered enough for Ben to see her, to know what she was. Shame washed through her. She couldn't look at either of them.

"Are you done?" De said. His voice was dead, too.

Adelle nodded.

He stepped toward her and reached for her wrists. She flinched, but didn't fight him. He gathered both her hands into one of his, clasping them behind her back. From where Ben sat, De could have had his arm around her, holding her in a cuddle.

"Kiss your son goodnight," he said.

Adelle's eyes filled up once more, but she held the tears and looked through them. They made a fuzz of Ben's tense face. She brought her lips to his hot forehead, took in the smell of playground sweat and Mama Jones' musky perfume, still clinging to his hair.

"No longer must I sweep for you," she sang, but her voice was hoarse after all the screaming.

Ben clasped and unclasped his little boy hands. His eyes puddled, and he pulled them down, away from her, to stare into his lap.

De walked Adelle back to her parents' porch, sat her on the swing. It swayed beneath her as he drove her son away. Behind her, inside the house, her parents' landline rang. Nobody picked up.

#

An hour and a half later, Sam's black truck pulled up and stopped where the Suburban had been. He sauntered over in his boots.

"Janice is going to kill us both."

"How did you know?" Adelle asked.

He lifted her red suitcase. "De called."

She followed a few steps behind him, lugging her duffle of Rhodias.

#

The splintering peaks. Adelle can't take any more. She opens her eyes to stop the flood of memories. She stares at the tattoo studio ceiling. She traces the swirling plaster with her eyes, concentrates on the texture of the vinyl table beneath her wherever it touches her skin, listens to the sleeping breath from Sam's corner of the room. This is here. This is now. The room is the same size that it always was, gives her no reason to fear that it might burst. She puts her faith in the solidity.

At least Ben's all right. If this is it, the exploding apartment, if this is what she had to find, Ben is fine and De is just being an asshole. But then, why would Celesse play along? And how does the fire fit in?

Adelle turns her head to look where Sam always sleeps, against the far wall on his flip-and-fold chair, when she comes to him. Janice is curled against him, her long dyed hair splayed out across the pillow they share. Under the worn blanket, it's impossible to separate the outlines of their bodies from each other.

Adelle doesn't want to be there. Her walker waits beside the drafting table, a good eight feet away. She begins to sit up, but her breast shifts as she moves, pulling against the plastic Sam had laid over it when he was done. The whole thing feels like he's still going, like he has a hundred tattoo guns instead of the one, all trained on the white skin around her nipple.

Was that the first sign, she wonders, when De got mad that she wouldn't keep breastfeeding? She was going back to work. There wasn't time to pump, and it disgusted her to think of Ginny handling her breast milk while she was away. So after three weeks, she'd weaned Ben onto formula. It wasn't natural, De had said. As if her rock-hard glands weren't painful enough. As if she wanted to lose the warmth of her son's tiny hands clinging to her body, taking life from her.

Adelle prepares herself for the stinging. She sits all the way up. Her breast is a swaying bag of needles, and her bad leg aches. She lowers herself onto her good leg and inches along the edge of the tattoo table to the wall. The drafting table is harder. Its slick slope works against her balance. She lunges for the stool. It teeters beneath her, but doesn't fall. She checks the fold-out chair to see if they've heard. Janice's side of the conjoined lump wriggles, but it's Sam who opens his eyes.

"Morning Corey," his face and voice are guarded, their easy friendship gone.

"Sam." Adelle says it through gritted teeth, and continues toward her walker.

"Where you headed?"

“What are you, my fucking babysitter?” She’s almost there. Another two feet.

“Yeah. That’s exactly what I am. Your babysitter, your tattoo artist,” he glances down at Janice before finishing with, “your leftovers.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Fuck you.” She grabs for the walker, but misses.

Sam sits up. Janice stretches out beside him but doesn’t open her eyes. “Right,” he says. “Fuck me. Fuck me then forget, but don’t really forget, just pretend to. Fuck me and disappear. Fuck me and go into shock with some other poor bastard’s baby. Fuck me when he doesn’t want you anymore, when I’ve got something worth keeping. Someone who deserves more from me than this.” His hand jerks through the air above the fold-out chair and Janice, who is blinking back at them now.

Janice raises a weighty hand, strokes Sam’s angry face. Adelle had always thought of her as skinny, but now she sees that Sam’s wife is almost as heavy as herself. How did she miss that before? Sam catches Janice’s fingers and pulls them up against his cheek. Janice mumbles something up at him, and he smiles a smile so tender that Adelle wants to vomit. This time she makes it. Her fingers wrap around the bars of the walker, and she makes her way toward the door.

She’s halfway down the narrow hall. Sam comes up behind her. When it opens out into the reception area, he overtakes her, blocking the path to the phone. It’s not fair. He’s taller and stronger anyway, and now with her having to lean on the goddamn walker, he’s unquestionably faster. Adelle stands on one foot, defeated. Janice pads toward them, wrapped in a blanket. She looks at Sam, not Adelle. Her face is peaceful.

The night De left her on the porch plays through her mind, the rest of it, after Sam picked her up and brought her home with him.

He kicked me out, she'd said when the black pick-up came to rest on Sam's pebbly driveway.

Sam had turned to her, run two fingers down her cheek. *He's an idiot*, he'd said.

Adelle leaned her face into his palm. He pulled her across the bench seat, hugging her against him. She put her arms around him, too, held on while he let her cry. It was a strong, short bout of wracking sobs, and when they were done, she dried her eyes and lifted her face to his. She was already kissing him, roving his body with her hands, before she understood his movements were not drawing her closer. He pulled his head back, wedged his hands between them, and thrust her away.

What's wrong? She'd asked.

God, Adelle. He shook his head. *Just because your marriage is over... Janice is inside, making dinner.*

The next morning he'd contacted her parents.

"Well she can't stay here either," Adelle overheard Sam's half of the conversation through the wall between the reception area and his and Janice's living space. "There's got to be someone."

That afternoon, he parked the pickup in front of Stuff of Heaven. The owner, Celesse St. Armand, came out to meet them.

"Hello my sister," she said to Adelle, wiping the flour from her hands onto her apron. "I understand you need a room."

Sam set her suitcase and duffel next to her on the sidewalk and got back into his truck.

#

Janice pulls the blanket tighter, stands on tiptoes, and gives Sam a light kiss before going to the residential side of the house and closing the door. Adelle can still taste the rosemary Janice had used to season the chicken that night. Shame melts inside her.

“I’m sorry,” she says to Sam.

He leans back against the credenza. “Yeah, well. I know it’s been rough.” He gestures to the couch.

Adelle hobbles across the hardwood floor and eases herself onto the red cushions. Pans clang on the other side of the wall. After a few minutes, a faint smell of breakfast sausage wafts through the house.

“Tell me about your dream.”

“Is it okay if we just don’t talk for a little while?”

Sam holds his chin in his hand. “Fine. It’s fine.”

Glass shatters on the other side of the wall. They hear Janice’s muffled curses. Sam watches the door.

“You can go help her,” Adelle says. “I promise I won’t try to escape.”

#

Janice comes back out wearing jeans and carrying a tray of steaming food. Sam follows with a handful of coffee mugs. She begins to shift the load to free one hand, but Sam sweeps over gathers the tattoo magazines out of her way. She smiles up at him. Adelle wonders if they’re always like this. They’ve been married five years. That’s long enough to have some good arguments, isn’t it?

Until this morning, she’d thought she and De never argued.

Janice places the tray on the coffee table and fills one of the plates with sausage, eggs, and orange slices. Adelle leans forward to fill one for herself, but as she reaches out, Janice places the loaded plate into her hand.

Adelle lowers her eyes, thanks Sam's wife in mumbles. She deserves to be thrown out, she knows this, and here is Janice cooking for her. Her stomach shrinks with remorse, but she swallows every bite, determined not to insult Janice further.

Sam and Janice pull up leather stools and fix plates for themselves. They don't speak, but they seem to be having a conversation in their silence. Sam looks at Janice, raises an eyebrow. Janice grins and stabs a round of sausage from his dish. They lean toward each other, dowsing rods to water. Adelle tries not to look. She can't quite get her knees situated, but if she moves them too much, she'll knock her breakfast over. What's left of it, anyway, which is the smooth, soupy yolk from her eggs. It smears over her plate, a sheet of gooey, yellow stained glass, obscuring the design: hand-painted orange flowers—clearly a husband's concession to the tastes of his wife.

"I wasn't good to him," she says, thinking about De.

Janice and Sam concentrate on their food.

"There are three left."

It takes a moment, but then Janice lifts her head to meet Adelle's eyes.

"Three what?" Janice says with a guarded voice.

"Buildings. Three buildings left in City."

Janice fidgets with her fork.

"You know about City?"

Janice places her dish on the coffee table. "I know about it."

“I just need these last three.”

“You’ll make more, right? Isn’t that how it works with you?”

Adelle shakes her head. “I have to remember Ben. After that, it doesn’t matter. The dreams can take whatever they want.” She concentrates on Janice. Looking at Sam might break her. “I won’t ask for another one, ever.”

Chapter 10

Janice drives her to physical therapy. They listen to the radio. At the last light before the hospital, Janice turns the volume down.

“Can I ask you something?”

Adelle doesn't like this. “Okay.”

“Why did you marry De,” Janice's voice wavers, “if you were in love with Sam?”

Adelle would love to lie, but they are past that. “I was afraid.”

“Of what?”

“Of loving someone too much.”

Janice stops in front of the PT building. She leaves the car running. “Only three?”

“Yes.”

Janice gets out and helps Adelle unload her walker. She waits until Adelle is inside before driving away.

“What happened to your cane?” Jeff's tone is restrained, as it has been since the day he lied about what he knew.

“Gravel,” says Adelle.

“So I never told you about the yellow eye. On my snake.”

“Let's just get to work.”

Jeff makes her walk, really walk, without the walker or a loaner cane. She has to go from table to table. She can hold on when she's next to one, but they're too far apart to hold on in between. She slides her feet across the floor most of the way, a snowless skier dodging weight sets and vinyl tables, moving in circles, just like the laps she does in Celesse's living room.

She should have let Jeff tell her the snake story. It's too quiet, and her footsteps are depressing. Janice's question fills the gaps. Along with her answer. Afraid. She'd been afraid of everything, all her life, and afraid to admit it. Even Ben's friends. She wanted him to have them, but after engineering the circumstances, she'd left the rest to Ginny.

Ben was a toddler when Adelle had decided he would not grow up alone the way she had. She found him a play group online. She gave Ginny that Friday off and buckled his squirmy body into the green, plaid Peg Perego car seat. On the drive, they practiced their words together, Ben parroting as best he could without any *l*'s or *r*'s. Adelle would say, "Hello. How are you?" and Ben would answer, "Hewow. How awe me?"

In the First Church, Fairfield parking lot, mothers in capri pants and pastel eye shadow unloaded their well-groomed offspring and strolled toward the entrance in shiny huddles. Adelle eyed Ben's untucked Transformers T-shirt and 2T sweat pants. The website had said Fridays were Gymboree days, that children and parents should come ready to exercise. She sighed and grabbed the diaper bag. Ben curled his hand around her pointer finger, and she lumbered toward the door with him, loose strands of her ponytail lifting in the breeze.

After having them flap a parachute around for half an hour their knee-high charges screeched beneath it, Sheila, the Gymboree Coach, excused Adelle and the other moms to the sidelines so the children could have free play. Ben stood under a wooden slide and surveyed the sanctuary-turned-playground. Most of the children didn't seem to play with each other so much as near each other. They gathered in clumps, these ones near the giant foam blocks, those ones beside a ball. The mothers would say, "Annabel, it's your turn. Climb over block mountain!" and "Jackson, toss Emma the ball," and "Isn't this fun?"

Adelle gave Ben no such coaching. She knew what it was like, being the stranger walking into a room full of kids who'd known each other their whole short lives. She figured he'd come out from under the slide when he was ready. If he was ready. And if he wasn't, well, that was okay, too. There were plenty of play groups out there. Maybe these just weren't the right kids.

"Is that your little guy under there?" a tall brunette with hair cropped in a bob held her hand out.

Adelle shook it.

"What a cutie. I'm Joan." She nodded at a dark-haired girl in pink gingham. "That's my Payton. You're Adelle, right? Adelle Corey?" Joan pointed to her wedding band. "Well, I guess it's not Corey anymore." She smiled, but Adelle sensed a hesitation, something in the way the skin pulled around her eyes.

"No, it's still Corey." She returned the smile as honestly as she could. Joan had been Tammy Craven's best friend. Adelle recognized a few of the women as former Ellsworth classmates, but hadn't picked Joan Devereaux out from the blur of manicured mothers, parachutes, and screaming children. She'd been so focused on getting it right: listening to Sheila's commands on lifting and lowering, shaking and popping the chute, making sure to cheer Ben on like all the other moms were cheering for their kids, and trying to keep the cuff of her sleeve from inching up to reveal her Simonides brand. Joan must have been near her in the circle, to her left or right, instead of across where Adelle would have noticed.

"Do you mind?" Joan gestured to a metal folding chair beside Adelle and sat down. "So what's your little fellow's name?"

"Ben."

"Ben. Nice. He takes after you."

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I mean, he’s just, he seems shy. Not that there’s anything wrong with—not shy. Quiet.”

Adelle stared at her.

“So you kept your name. I would have kept mine, but Gavin is so old-fashioned.”

“Gavin King?” Adelle asked, not because she was interested, but to distract her. Ben had his finger in his nose, and she didn’t want Joan to see. He wasn’t digging, just had it up there while he watched the others, like he was going for a contemplative, stroking-the-chin look, but missed. Adelle hoped Joan didn’t notice.

“Yes. You knew each other?”

“We had biology together.”

“Oh. Great. Well, then you know, right? How old fashioned he is.”

She knew he had too many teeth and liked to molest dead piglets. Adelle thought of the accounts of Puritan boys prosecuted for copulating with farm animals—definitely old-fashioned—and tried not to smile. She had to give some kind of answer. She nodded.

Joan’s fingers twitched at the pocket of her salmon capris. “Here,” Joan said, withdrawing a business card. “If you and Ben ever want to have a play date.”

Adelle stared at the lime green rectangle. Pink tulips danced around the border. White script letters spelled out *Queen Joan King and Princess Payton*, followed by a phone number, email address, and a Picassa website where Adelle could *View the young royal’s journey through life*. Adelle didn’t know what to say. She’d never seen anything like it except maybe the calling cards people left behind in Victorian era movies. An invitation from Joan Devereaux, now King, and a Mom Card.

“Thank you,” she managed.

Joan smiled. She finally looked like her skin fit right. “Do you have a card?”

Adelle fished through the diaper bag for her wallet. She slipped out one of the concrete gray Axes Architects cards and passed it to Joan.

“Oh. An architect.” Joan ran her finger over the raised block type. “We always thought you’d do something with yourself. I mean, you had such a memory for... you always had the top grade in everything. We didn’t get it, how you could walk around not knowing... I mean, forgetting, and...”

Adelle looked away. Ben had finally taken his finger out of his nose.

“How do you even find time for things like this?” Joan talked faster the more she said. She was like a fish flopping around on the dry surface of a dock, as if the struggle wouldn’t kill it faster. “Do you always have Fridays off, or is this week special? I always thought of mothering as a full-time job.”

Just like De, Adelle had thought. She pulled the diaper bag strap over her shoulder and stood. She took a step toward Ben, but at just that moment he emerged from his cave under the slide and toddled over to Princess Payton, who lay on a foam wedge a few feet from two other children she was “playing with” and moved her arms like she was making a snow angel. Ben stood over her, cracked open his sparse-toothed smile, and said, “Hewow. How awe me?” to which Princess Payton giggled and said, “Me, me, me.” Of course, this was the child Ben would pick.

“So,” Joan said, “a play date.”

“Right,” Adelle said. “I’ve got to go. Work, you know?”

Joan was back to her ill-fitting smile. “Don’t forget.”

Adelle tried to keep the irritation from her face.

“I mean, you know, it’s just an expression.”

“I’ll have Ben’s nanny give you a call. Ginny.”

#

Adelle limps to the last table on this side of the rehab room. She leans against it. Her leg feels like someone’s cleaving it down the center for kindling. But the nausea from her own excuses is worse. Joan was trying to be nice. Adelle knows this now. She probably knew it then, if she’d just taken a moment to be honest with herself. Instead, she’d used the woman’s nervous mistakes as proof that Joan had never outgrown the Tammy days. Any friendship with her would be impossible, manipulative. For Ben’s sake, she’d welcomed Payton. But in less than fifteen minutes, she’d written Joan off as one more self-involved Connecticut housewife instead of risking getting to know her.

“Keep moving,” Jeff interrupts her thoughts. He’s still using only half his voice. The humor and authority are missing. Adelle’s had enough. She’s lied to herself about people for worse reasons than his. Whatever they’re keeping from her, she’s beginning to think they may be right.

“How many laps before you tell me about that damn snake of yours?”

A smile opens across his blond face. “See that?” He says. He’s pointing at the treadmill.

“That’s your next challenge.”

#

Memories blur her next few days. She writes in her Rhodia like always, but it doesn’t help. Time bends around her. The past seeps into cracks in the present like mortar in the masonry. At night she flips back pages to determine how to date her notes. In the mornings, her

scrawl confuses her. She can't tell which facts happened when, and movies of her misplaced life crowd her head while she tries to read. She tries to follow protocol, to begin with last night's dreams. But her dreams are changing. The Baron won't let her in.

Every night since the apartment, she mounts the waking end of Bridge, but gets no farther. Across the motionless roil of the ocean, where the last three buildings stand, a gash tears through the sky, a hole with jagged edges. She's never seen the apartment from the outside, but she guesses that must be where it had hovered before Sam tore it out of her dreams. She tries to cross over, to gather details of Stadium, Tree House, and Moonflower Tower, but as soon as she sees the tear in the sky, everything reverses. Her soles grow into the cobbles. Her muscles freeze in place. The darkness that the gash lets in begins to grow and grow and grow, until it shrouds City in ghostly black smoke. The waves crash beneath her, cresting and thrashing out decades of inert violence. Across the ocean, she's able to make out low movement on the shore. The meadows where buildings once stood, their grass sways in the storm.

City comes to life while Adelle stands paralyzed, the silent stone of Bridge infecting her from the feet up. And it is angry. The black smoke thickens, advances consumes the dreamside shore. Now Adelle sees only Bridge and water. She struggles to separate herself from the stones as the darkness dissolves the distance, crossing over toward her, gliding in awful grace.

It is the Baron, this smoke that fills her lungs. It is his fury, too vast for anything smaller than everything. It clogs her eyes and stops her ears and becomes substance inside her, around her. The vapors gather, liquefy. Adelle gags and tries to move her arms, tries to swim out. He drowns her and still isn't satisfied. The liquid thickens, slows. It is solid. He is in her. He takes up all the room. She has no place inside her skin.

Adelle wakes up gasping three times a night if she's lucky. Four or five if she's not. And each time she opens her eyes, they fill with more unwanted moments: a minute here, an hour there, the ugliness that crept beneath every good thing with De, and also some with Ben.

#

"Do I still have a job?"

Celesse looks up from the book she's reading. She and Adelle have hardly spoken since Sam did the apartment, but her face shows no surprise. It impresses Adelle, this unruffled face, the more so since she's broken habit and come out of her room while Celesse is home and while it is not time to eat. Celesse probably thinks she's still angry. The last conversation they'd had was when she'd dropped Adelle off at Sam's. But Adelle has no room anymore for anger. Her brain teems with moments, shuffled out of sequence like a deck of cards.

"You have medical leave," Celesse says.

Adelle feels both relief and dread. She becomes aware of the cane in her hand. She's given up the walker now, even on the gravel, but isn't sure she'll ever be off the cane. "How long?"

"They must like you very much," Celesse says. "They said as long as it takes."

"Thank you for all you've done." Adelle didn't know she was going to say it, but she's glad she did. These shapeless days, blending at the seams, have gutted her pride. She now remembers her stay with Celesse, before the hospital, after De and Sam both kicked her out. Sam had left Adelle and her two bags there on the sidewalk, and the baker had taken her in without question or explanation. Celesse never tried to remind Adelle of their childhood friendship, not once in those nineteen days.

I have a room, was all she'd said. And why would she say more? The next day, and the next, and next, Adelle had woken with no memory of her host, except when the smells from the bake shop below wafted in like ghosts of wedding cake. When that happened, twice in those weeks, Adelle wondered why she was living with the rejected baker. The other days, she'd merely opened her eyes to a meager room with an ugly lamp she didn't recognize. She listened to Celesse's explanation each day, and refused to write it in her notebook each night. She would not tell herself about the divorce. It could not be real.

So every morning, when she reached for her Rhodia, resting on top of her duffle, she was newly mystified by the scarce facts it contained: Celesse St. Armand, recommended by Mother, a room for rent, a rough sketch of the floor plan. She'd unzip the duffle and discovered it contained all the notebooks she'd ever kept. Why would she bring them all? She couldn't be planning to stay long, if she'd packed only one suitcase.

Now she sees them, days stacked up, several takes on the same scene. How could anyone have such patience? Celesse had waited, steadfast, while Adelle forgot and cursed her, and kept going back to the 1930 Laurel at night to tuck in Ben.

She'd go over after work most days. The first time, she took a cab and demanded De give her back her car. Celesse had explained that morning about the divorce. He was already keeping her son and her house. She at least would take her car. De met her at the garage and handed Adelle her keys.

She thumbed through them. "Where's my house key?"

De shrugged.

Adelle controlled the anger in her voice. "Can I say goodnight to Ben?"

Some mornings Adelle saw Celesse before going in to the city to work, others she didn't learn about the divorce until she was pounding on the door of her own house.

After a few days, De stopped answering. When that didn't keep her away, he started taking Ben out after he was done with work, or having him stay with Mama Jones at night.

Adelle hadn't written a single note about the fight, not a word about the divorce. She remembers now, how she'd sat on the bed staring into the graph squares in her lap, sifting through facts that could contain what had happened. *I beat my husband in front of Ben.* That wouldn't do. How could she bear to wake up to that? *My parents wouldn't take me.* No. *De slept with the nanny. Sam sent me away. Ben would not sing back.* She couldn't bear to write any of it. And so she didn't. She put down her pen, put down her notebook, and stared into the darkness until the Baron came for them, condemning Celesse to a daily ritual of explanation: *You live here now. You are getting divorced. Not today, but you may see Ben this weekend.* Every day the same. Of course Celesse never tried to get her to remember twenty years ago. She wouldn't even help herself remember a single yesterday.

But there is the puppy. Adelle had remembered the Build-A-Bear trip with Ben, even in the hospital.

It had been a morning she'd seen Celesse before work, the nineteenth time her sister-friend had endured Adelle's scorn while explaining about the marriage. She didn't know what De was telling Ben about her, and needed to see him for herself. She took the train to New York like always, but didn't go to the office. Instead, she went down East 2nd Street and withdrew Ben early from the summer program at his school. He was quiet on the train ride back, staring at his Optimus Prime lunchbox and moving his lips along with the voices of the Transformers

characters in his head like he did when he wanted to be alone. But he brightened by the time they pulled into the Trumbull Mall.

Adelle remembers Ben's nimble hands, pushing tufts of cotton into the hide of an empty dog. He picked out fluorescent green sunglasses and a camouflaged pop-up tent for accessories, and named the nappy puppy Bumblebee.

And that's the end. That's where the awful magic of the Baron's exploding apartment stops.

After that, Adelle has nothing. The next day in her mind is day sixty eight, the first hospital day that the Baron didn't erase. Where is he hiding the time in between?

Celesse has gone back to her reading. Adelle realizes she's been standing there looming.

"I have a request."

This time Celesse closes the book and sets it on an end table. "About Ben?" The baker's voice is weary.

Adelle shakes her head. "I'm not ready for him yet." She hates the words, but knows they're true. She can't put him through another daily loss.

Curiosity breaks through the smooth façade of Celesse's expression, and then it's gone. "Go on," she says.

"My notebooks. When Sam brought me here, he brought a duffle full of them."

"You remember this?"

Adelle nods.

"And what else?"

"I remember De wants a divorce, and I remember why. And that you're more patient than I deserve."

Celesse hesitates, then smiles. Adelle realizes it's the first time she's seen her friend smile as an adult. She has kind lines like Manman. She disappears into her bedroom and, after some loud rummaging, returns with Adelle's bag over her shoulder. "Welcome back, my sister," she says, and passes it to Adelle.

#

Celesse starts letting Adelle take a taxi to PT. She's going only twice a week now, and it gives Celesse more time to close at the bakery. She still comes to get Adelle at the end of the hour. Lately, Celesse brings cupcakes for the three of them at the end of each session.

"I thought you wanted me to lose weight," Adelle said the first time, holding in her smile.

"And I thought you wanted to keep it," Celesse retorted. Adelle had never heard her voice so flustered.

Celesse's strict food rules have been largely inconsequential. She spends the day downstairs while Adelle has full access to the refrigerator. For a baker's kitchen, it's oddly stocked: mostly vegetables and rice. Adelle has lost a pound here and there, and could probably stand to go clothes shopping if she wants. But she's careful not to lose too much before getting the rest of City onto the map of her skin. The old tattoos already sag. She can't afford to give up more space.

Celesse knows it, and they both pretended it isn't happening. If Celesse notices she had two fewer bananas and a pound less rice than she had cooked that day, the only note she makes of it is on her grocery list. But Adelle knows the charade could go only so far. She'd never be gifted with the weighty richness of a red velvet cupcake if it weren't the best excuse for Celesse to stay and talk to Jeff a few extra minutes.

"These are amazing," Jeff says. "What's in the frosting?"

Nutmeg and coffee grounds. Like we do in Haiti.” Celesse’s face does not change except to become somehow fuller. If Adelle hadn’t been searching her friend’s face for hints of expression all this time, she would have missed it. “

“You grew up there?” Jeff leans toward her.

“My mother did. She never wanted me to cook until I finished college. So I went to pastry school.”

Jeff laughs a little louder than necessary. Celesse smiles with Manman’s kind lines, and Adelle decides to take another lap around the rehab room. She carries her cane until she needs its help, circling from table to table and thinking how strange it is that remembering the moments she’d hated Celesse makes her love her friend even more now.

#

The old Rhodias are proving less helpful than Adelle had hoped. She’s been working her way through them for about a week, looking for the sixty-eight days. Sometimes she studies her renderings of City, others she reads her notes, but as her next appointment with Sam approaches, she’s no closer to an answer than she’d been without them. They’d always held clues for her before, but now that City has nearly fallen, none of the notes surprise her. She remembers without them. The pages hold nostalgia instead of intrigue. She remembers De moving into the apartment, an inch at a time, back when she was pregnant, remembers writing about it, remembers waking up astonished that she remembered. Keeping him had been like waking up to Christmas every day, but now she knows it hadn’t been so bright all the time. The notes she had written don’t surprise her. It’s what she’d left out that makes Adelle shake her head with sickened awe.

She’d left out the time he’d told her not to go to Sam.

It happened the night of the smile, the one that rose from Ben in her belly when she saw De on her couch. Adelle dumped her messenger bag on the console table and pulled a Blue Moon out of the fridge.

“You can’t—” De said as she popped the top, but he stopped himself when she passed him the bottle. “Thanks,” he said.

Adelle poured water into a tumbler and sat down across from him. He took a hesitant pull of his beer.

“I keep having a dream.”

He swallowed. “Is this anything like those stairs?”

She nodded. “Something wants me to remember it.”

De gulped some more Blue Moon. Adelle watched his Adam’s apple rise and fall in his long, lean neck. It looked painful.

“Can’t you just draw it?” he asked. “I mean, maybe you could try drawing it on your skin somewhere instead of in that notebook.”

Adelle told him about Moonflower Tower.

When she was ten, Adelle woke up under her flowered canopy with her Cathedral cut healed over to fresh, pink scar tissue. Her mother told her she’d forgotten her party.

Then she went to school and no one would talk to her. Not that they’d given her much time before. Adelle was the new girl, the scholarship nerd, the easy target. In fourth grade, she could recite poems by Coleridge and never had to study for a math test. After the first day, she’d stopped raising her hand, but the damage was done. *Smarty Snorty Corey*, they were calling her by the time the bell rang. The words had stung. But they weren’t as bad as this new silence. When she pushed open the classroom door, they all stopped talking and, for a moment, all Adelle

could see was plate-round eyes. Then, collectively, they shifted their gaze down. Some picked at the pencil grooves across the tops of their desks. Others stared at their shoes.

“We missed you, Adelle,” Mrs. Latham had said. She had a million skinny braids that probably reached her ankles when she unwound them, but she always wore them twisted around her head like a turban growing out of her scalp. Sometimes she wove beautiful scarves between them. She looked like an exotic queen.

Adelle wanted to make her happy, so she said, “I missed you, too,” even though she’d just been away for the weekend like everyone else. She shuffled to her seat, feeling like Grimace from the McDonald’s commercials, bumbling and bumping into things. It seemed like everyone was still watching her, even though no one looked.

Nobody ever told Adelle that she’d been out of school for over two weeks. She’d figured it out when Mrs. Latham chalked the date on the board for the class to copy into their morning journals. Adelle’s hand shot up, all on its own, before she could stop it, but it was okay because everyone around her was busy copying words into their composition books. Adelle surveyed the bent heads of her classmates as they scribed the vocabulary words they’d have to use in each journal entry this week. *Carousel, Enigmatic, Unintentional, Surreptitious*. None of them seemed to notice that Mrs. Latham had skipped sixteen days.

Mrs. Latham turned around before Adelle had completely lowered her hand. “Yes, Adelle?”

All the pencils in the room stopped.

Caught. She couldn’t point out the date if no one else noticed it. What if the Baron had come? “I like your hair,” Adelle said.

Tammy Craven snickered from the back of the room, but everyone else just waited, staring at their comp books, pencils still as death.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Latham said and gave Adelle one of her beach-warm smiles. She went back to writing on the board.

That night, Mother read the story about the firebird before tucking me in. Her reading was Adelle’s favorite. Mother didn’t hug. Adelle had to put on her own Band-Aids, and Mother didn’t like noise. Mother cooked and cleaned since we didn’t have a maid. She got her nails done and went to Garden Club and Bridge Club even though she didn’t garden except for the roses between their yard and Mercer’s, and Mother and hated playing cards. But stories, she was good at. *Children need routines*, she’d said once to a lady in the grocery store whose baby fussed in the shopping cart. The lady told the cashier that the baby missed his nap. Mother had tapped her foot the whole time. It sounded like the new dot matrix printer Dad had bought.

Children need routines. Adelle knew this was why she read them. She wasn’t even reading to Adelle, not really. She was reading next to her. Mother’s eyes roved the page or stared out Adelle’s window into the black night, but never at her face. Adelle used to think she was reading to someone out there in the darkness, but by fourth grade, she knew no one that far away could hear. It was different from Mother’s always voice, the one that stayed even all the time. Mother’s story voice worked like Penelope’s loom. She could let the music of her words rise and fall, drawing Adelle in until she thought I knew what would happen, and then, strand by strand, she’d unravel it until Adelle was lost again, deciphering hints of a tapestry that could grow into anything, a royal hunt or flotsam from a shipwreck. Even if she’d heard the story before, even if she remembered it, Mother’s voice made it new every time. It didn’t matter that she wouldn’t look at Adelle, or show her the pictures.

Even that night, as Adelle tried to lay still and not let Mother see her plotting her next building, the song of her mother's words made her forget to focus on the Beach House that Baron had built. Her mouth rolled out the words while Adelle squinted in concentration, envisioning the sparkling blue rocks and the sun on the inside while. The new building grew recently. Adelle was sure it hadn't been there the last time she'd been in school, or the last time she remembered being there.

But as Mother spoke, Beach House wavered in Adelle's mind, overtaken by Russian peasants and a bird with flaming tail feathers.

At last, Mother closed the book and her spell over Adelle broke. The stories were magic, but the tucking in scared her every night. Mother stood, and the bedside lamp cast shadows upward so Adelle thought she could see her bones. Mother reached brittle arms over Adelle, white and naked as a birch in winter, and clawed the rosy pink comforter up till it reached her chin. The twig fingers crackled above Adelle's face. Instinctively, she'd press my head back deep into her pillow, distancing herself from the cold, white branches. She never outgrew this, even though she knew there was no danger: Mother never touched her.

The door clicked closed. Mother was gone.

Adelle waited till her footsteps quieted down the stairs and clipped across the living room floor. Then, she eased the drawer from the cherry nightstand. She took out her Smurfette flashlight and three Sharpie markers she'd stolen from the kitchen. She ducked under her ugly pink sheets and shone the light on Cathedral, running her index finger over the bubbly surface of the new scar. All her muscles softened as the memories rose: her mother, Mom. Mom held Adelle close and Adelle could smell the sweet skin of her neck. From the look of her hands, in this memory Adelle was three. Mom dangled her fingers above Adelle's head and Adelle

reached up and together they twirled. Then, Mom lifted her onto the couch with her shoes on. They ran around around the living room while Liesl and Rolf ran around the conservatory in *Sound of Music*. Adelle scampered across the couch to the settee, singing *I am sixteen going on seventeen*. Mom lifted her over the gaps of floor between pieces of furniture.

Mom looked like Mother. Their noses were the same statue perfect slopes, making their twin faces regal and long. But Mom had a real smile instead of that awful line Mother makes with her lips.

Adelle smashed away tears with her fist. She stuck the flashlight between her teeth, straining her jaw to keep it steady, and lifted her nightgown from her left thigh. The cap didn't want to come off the black Sharpie. Adelle yanked until it gave a great pop, throwing her hands away from each other and marking up the stupid girly sheets. Adelle's heart got jumpy because eventually Mother would see it, but she made herself stop and remember that right now she had work to do. She adjusted her bite on the flashlight and began drawing. Beach House grew in thick, wobbly lines, stretching from her knee up her inner thigh. It smeared at the top where her skin got soft and she pushed in too deep. Adelle tried to wipe away the smudge, but it had already set, and she only got more black marks on her sheet and comforter from holding the Sharpie out of the way and not paying attention to what it touched.

"I don't remember the punishment." Adelle had told De. "I'm sure there was one, and that it's locked in a building somewhere in City. But I haven't found it yet, and I have no intention of going looking for it. All I remember is that the experiment didn't work. I slept that night like any other." City rose around her as she spoke, transposing itself over reality, like layers of watercolor paint on a rendering. Beach House sparkled in her mind, and through it she watched De's face. "I didn't get to go inside Beach House. I woke up the next morning without a

shred more of myself than I'd had before the drawing. I still had to go to school and face my classmates without those sixteen days. They got to keep their minutes like normal people, and they were beginning to figure out how very much I was not one of them."

De nodded like he was listening some rhythm in his brain, not paying attention to Adelle. He'd clearly made up his mind about it long before she'd finished the story, while she'd been too caught up to see.

"You'll just have to wait till after he's born then." He was facing Adelle, but his eyes focused somewhere in the middle space between them.

The alabaster dragons roared, something they could not do while she was dreaming. They were taking over her mind awake. They wanted to take her baby. Who the hell was De to tell her when she could and could not remember? Adelle smiled her vaguest smile.

He slept among his papers that night. When she came out of my room the next morning, he was already gone, but he'd left his textbook and three pens on her cherry bookcase, in the empty space beside my stack of Rhodias.

Adelle started the coffee maker, carried the black and orange notebooks to her room, and stashed them under her bed. He could have the damn shelf. She was going to Sam.

#

Adelle stares at her Rhodia entry for March 8, 2004. *De came over to study. He'll be a good father.* She remembers thinking it and writing it. She doesn't remember if she hid the rest from herself on purpose, or if she was just so happy to see him that night, when she first walked in, that by the time she went to bed she didn't think the rest was important. Whatever the reason, the entry is among many incomplete accounts. She flips the notebook closed. It doesn't matter.

There are only three buildings left. Notes or no notes, one of them has to hold the memory that will make her whole again. Then she will fight for her son.

Chapter 11

The three remaining buildings have been there since her childhood. Adelle heals faster now that the grafts have settled with new muscle underneath. Sam does the next two a week apart. She has him start with the newest, the Stadium, because it's the closest in time to Ben.

Stadium is her father angry, but Adelle doesn't know why.

From the time she could stand, Dad would take Adelle out in the back yard and toss her the football after he came home from work each day. Adelle would put on her green jacket and her favorite clover patterned galoshes. She wasn't allowed to wear pink today. Mother had turned her room to Bismal, Dad said, and that was plenty pink enough. The football was hard and heavy and Adelle was scared of the leather projectile, but she knew better than to run from it. The one time she tried, the corner of it clocked her in the back of the head and knocked her over, onto the garden path Mother had installed. There was just enough time for the slate's quick edge to slash into the side of her palm, below her pinky, deep enough to make a mouth of skin that opened and closed when she flexed her hand. Too stunned to cry, Adelle tested the lips, now a garish smile, now a bloody frown, before Dad grabbed her by the biceps and scooped her into the air, arms pinned to her side, blood staining the thigh of her stiff 2X jeans, and walked her back over to the receiving spot. He planted her firmly back on the ground and glared into Adelle's eyes, now filling with hot tears.

"It's not something to escape, Addie. Catch it and hold onto it."

Adelle stared back at him, mute.

"I'm going to throw it again. Ready?"

She nodded. He was so big, she couldn't see anything else in the world but his giant, furrowed face. Dad stomped back to his spot and raised the football. "Ready?"

Adelle nodded again. The leather bullet came hurtling toward her. Her heart pumped, her head hurt, her hand bled. She closed her eyes and put her arms out in front of her, pretending her feet were Sticky Bob, the gummy toy that she had got out of a candy machine and threw at her bedroom ceiling, where it stayed all day and Adelle cried because she wanted it to come back down. But it never did until Mother cleaned her room and threw Sticky Bob away. Adelle didn't move her feet like Sticky Bob didn't move.

A great thunk knocked her in the face. Points of light danced behind her closed eyelids and the ache in her head pounded out like when someone jumps in the pool and there are all those circles: circle after circle after circle, they keep coming. Adelle fell on her butt and as she landed the football did too, bouncing off her face and into her outstretched hands, which she'd been too afraid to withdraw.

“Great job, Addie! There's my little trooper.”

#

A week later, Sam does Tree House. She asks him to put it on her back, just beyond the curve where Mother Stairs winds up her side. Adelle had always hated Tree house. She doesn't want to see it every morning when she surveys herself in the mirror. Its gray and brittle wood spindled out like hands to catch her. It had been there almost as long as City, since before it was a city, just a tower and a tree. Almost thirty years, now, it had loomed crooked over her dreams, and she'd never gone inside.

She didn't see the black smoke creeping through the gash in Sky when she fell asleep that night. It was already there, waiting for her. All night long, after the Tree House tattoo, Adelle dreamt she stood in darkness, alone with the sound of woman's weeping.

#

Sam and Janice didn't ask. They didn't have to. If she'd found Ben, or anything to fill the gap between his days and hers, Adelle wouldn't have lain around waiting for the two of them to wake up. But she was there both times when they stirred. Stadium and Tree House were her parents, not her son. She accepted breakfast and coffee with quiet thanks.

#

"You're going to make me eat them alone?" Jeff raises the box of cupcakes.

"Adelle has an appointment," Celesse answers.

Adelle shifts her cane so she can wriggle into her coat. "Hey Jeff, you still want to know who does my tattoos?"

They pick up two rotisserie chickens and steamed vegetables on the way. Adelle offers to ride in the back, but Jeff won't have it. He leans forward between the seats and asks Celesse questions about cooking and Haiti the whole ride.

When they get to Sam's, Jeff is impressed at how Adelle handles her cane on the gravel.

"Yeah," she says, "I'm training for a three-legged race."

He holds the door for her and Celesse. Sam and Janice get out a bottle of wine, and the five of them sit around the coffee table in the reception area. Adelle has water. She's still on prescriptions for the pain and, anyway, she doesn't need to drink right before a tattoo. She leans back on the red couch beside her sister-friend and listens to the company. Jeff asks Sam about his work, shows him the one of his sister with the piano keys. Celesse tells Janice about her plans to expand the bakery next year.

"Business is good," she says.

Janice nods, halfway through a chocolate bowtie cupcake. "It's no wonder," she says. "These are delicious." She gets up to see what's keeping Sam; he'd gone into the back to brew

coffee. Adelle stacks empty paper plates, and Celesse and Jeff stand to help Janice bring things back to the kitchen. The three of them bottleneck at the door just as Sam comes out, stopping so fast that coffee sloshes out of the pot.

“Looks like you guys could use a bigger place, too,” Jeff says. “With work like Sam’s, you’ve got to be stepping all over each other around here during business hours.”

Sam and Janice lock eyes, and the two of them are suddenly in their own space with their own light. They remind Adelle of river stones, round and smooth and polished like Easter eggs. She wants to be a river stone.

Sam speaks first. “We’ve been thinking the same thing. Actually, we’re moving up to Bridgeport next month.”

“Bridgeport?” Adelle says. Jeff and Celesse are nodding with approval.

“We found a bigger house there. We’re having a baby.”

Adelle forces a smile onto her face. Celesse and Jeff sound far away as they congratulate her tattoo artist and his wife. She’s full of chicken, zucchini, and cupcake, but lower than that, where Ben had swum inside her, she’s as hollow as she’s ever been.

#

They’d waited until a month after the wedding to announce the pregnancy. Adelle still wasn’t showing.

Everything in her parents’ kitchen stopped, like someone had vacuumed all the air out of the room. Mother’s cucumber slice perched between her thumb and forefinger, inches from her parted lips. Dad’s tanned face went taut and pale. They were cardboard cutouts of themselves. Adelle blinked, and the room reanimated, like pressing play on a DVD. Mother crunched away.

“Fast work,” her father said.

De nodded proudly. "It's too soon to tell, but Addie thinks it's a boy."

"Have you thought of names?"

"We're naming him after De," Adelle said. Her parents nodded, made approving noises in their throats. She watched De's face fill with light. He'd asked for this, but she hadn't yet told him she agreed.

The Big Dipper twinkled as he spoke. "Benjamin DeAngelo Jones."

After dinner, Mother got out Adelle's baby photos, because that's what people do when their daughters are pregnant, and called De over to the settee. Adelle hadn't even known she had a photo album. It made sense. She was Mother, and this was what mothers did. But Adelle had never seen it before.

De raised his eyebrows and pointed, acting interested in Adelle's early life and history as Mother flipped pages, one by one, across his lap. Adelle wanted to stand behind them so she could see, too. How much more would she remember with photographs to help?

But just as she was about to join them, her father asked for her help with the dishes. She followed him to the sink, leaving Mother and De cooing in the living room.

"Have you thought this through?"

"What do you mean?"

There was a lull in the living room, and Dad looked past her to make sure no one was listening. The laughing and chatter started back up. Dad turned on the water.

"What if he inherits your condition?" He keeps his voice just above a whisper.

"I've thought of that."

"Have you? Do you know what it's like, raising a child who doesn't know who you are half the time, and the other half she hates you?"

Adelle touched her dad's shoulder. "I don't hate you, Dad."

"I'm not talking about me."

Adelle looked out at her Mother, smiling over the album. She moves a hand to her abdomen, where the newly-healed brand of Block Fort bubbles on the skin above her ovary. "I have reasons."

"You're not the only one."

"What do you mean?"

"Those pictures are from before. You weren't always like this. You were happy."

Electricity snapped through her. "What happened?"

"Don't know. You went to bed our Addie, and you woke up a stranger. You want that for yourself?"

"Something had to happen. You and Mother don't have memory problems."

Her dad fidgeted with the faucet, not meeting her eyes. "Nothing happened. Sometimes diseases take a few years to set in."

"Diseases?"

"Take some time to think. Not too much. I'm guessing you didn't get pregnant yesterday."

"I don't understand."

"You've only got so much time, if you decide to get rid of it." He gestured at her mother, who looked up and met his eyes with that line that wasn't a smile. "Is that what you want to become?"

#

Adelle thinks again of the football and the tree.

#

“He won’t be here,” Adelle says. She and Sam bend over her drawing of Moonflower Tower. She can hear the others, still talking and laughing out in the front part of the house. She wants to hope, but there’s nothing in her for it. She feels as thin as she’s ever felt. This is the last one.

“You can’t know that. What about the apartment?”

Sam was right; the apartment had gathered its contents slowly, feeding off the ugliest moments of her marriage, turning itself into a belly full of spite so that she could live in happy ignorance. It wasn’t one single, awful event, but a series of moments. It had protected her, but left De holding the short straw on every drawing: how could he work through an argument if she forgot it before it was over? How could she forgive him when she couldn’t even remember what he’d done? How could he forgive her when dreams swallowed every selfish thing she did, leaving her with no apologies, no way of changing, of growing, or of even knowing that she should?

Of course he was divorcing her. Of course he wanted to keep Ben. Celesse said she could see Ben when she could remember him, but Adelle wondered now if De would ever agree to it. It had to be more for him. It had to be more for Ben. She had to stop forgetting. She couldn’t raise a son like this.

All this time, from the morning she had woken up in the hospital and begun to hold on to her days, no new buildings had sprouted in City. These last weeks, as Sam pulled what few were left down from dreams onto her skin, she’d begun to think of it as something else, as Not City or Old City, or, most simply, Absence. She hadn’t been allowed inside. The Baron and his darkness now controlled Bridge. But before he’d taken it over, she’d crossed to fields of silent grass,

unwhispering because no wind blew through the blades to sway them against each other. She tried to remember, in her sleep, what buildings had once stood there, but it was as futile as trying to find their secrets had once been when she was awake. Her dreams lay fallow. Even ghosts could not breathe here. There was something beautiful about land asleep. But after that night, the darkness came, edged her out of City's borders, until she couldn't even cross Bridge. And now, Bridge was lost, too.

Adelle hadn't seen Moonflower Tower in weeks, but she remembers it.

Sam scrutinizes the drawing, stroking his chin.

"Everything okay?" Adelle asks. He's been standing like this a while.

"I'm not sure I can do it," he says.

Adelle's pulse quickens.

"The detail. Skin's not like paper, Corey." He gestures at the tiny vines and petals woven into an obilesque. "All those tiny flowers. It's going to look like a cartoon version if I try that."

This can't happen. It's the last building. Ben's probably not here. She knows this. Moonflower Tower is as old as sleep to her. She doesn't remember a dream without it. It's her last chance, and however hopeless it may be, she has to get into that tower.

"What about white ink?" she asks.

"Do you know how much that hurts?"

"You could do it in layers."

Sam looks doubtful.

"Sam. Please." Adelle wraps her fingers around his wrist. His muscles flex. She realizes what she's done, pulls her hand away. But Sam catches it in the air, places it back on his arm, and his tattooed cats creep around between them. She is herself, and he is himself. Their skin

does not meld; the cats see to that. He has carved himself across her chest. She'd been afraid of that once, that if she lost him, she'd lose herself. He'll never be inside her again. But now he'll never leave her.

"I'll do what I can," he says.

"You and Janice," she says, "you're going to be great parents."

Sam's face softens. He pats her hand, and she lets go, and climbs on his table one last time.

#

Adelle finally stops whimpering. Her body sings with pain.

Sam throws out the needle and wipes down the cart. His eyes cloud when he looks at her.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Why?" she whispers. "Did something go wrong?"

He wipes his forehead and hands her a mirror. She takes it and rests it beside her, too exhausted to hold it up. "No. The tower's good. Maybe the best I've done."

She smiles weakly at the pride in his voice.

"I feel like I've been beating you up all night." He puts a hand on his hip, sweeps the other one above her. "I mean, look at you. You can barely move."

"I'll be all right. As long as I find Ben." She closes her eyes. "What will I do, if I don't find him, Sam?"

"Hey, Corey," Sam says.

"What?"

"Look at me."

Pig intestines, Burger King, his arms across his chest as he watched her fall asleep after Mother Stairs, these are in his eyes.

“If he’s not in there,” Sam touches her temple with his index finger, “I’ll take you to him myself.”

She closes her eyes, trying to believe that De and Celesse would let him. Her eyes rove beneath her lids. She feels their soft insides. Black smoke clouds around her doubts, and she is in the tower.

#

The dream lingers past the night. It hangs around her even as Adelle opens her eyes. It does not feel like her body, this body she is in. City is empty. There are new things to hold. She can eat all she wants, but it won’t matter. Spreading skin into canvas won’t save her. It will never be large enough to contain all she knows.

#

Janice wakes before Sam. Adelle hears the squish of the foam cushions she rises, careful not to disturb him. She watches Janice tuck the blanket back around Sam with tender fingers, then pad to the door. She envies the easy flex of her legs, tries to remember what it was like to move with such fluidity. When her body had been whole, she’d never noticed it. Only now, when creaking along on an ugly cane comprises her best accomplishment, does she understand the pure ecstasy of free movement.

Janice pauses. Her hand clutches the doorknob in a half turn, but she stops and looks at Adelle, her usual stolid expression crackles, burnt sugar over crème brulee. She is all compassion.

She comes over to the tattoo table, dodging squeaky floorboards.

“May I see?” she whispers.

Adelle is still lying on her side. She’d slept this way because the only space left had been between her shoulders, and she couldn’t breathe sleeping on her stomach.

Adelle shifts her body flatter. Janice peels back the sheet. Adelle imagines her skin from Janice’s point of view: the swollen red background and ghostly tower, overlapping itself in layers of stippled dots. Sam had overlain white and black, building up the vines to follow the line of her spine. Each layer grew out from the one below it so that the final, rendering stretched from her neck to the small of her back, and hundreds of delicate white flowers bloomed out from it. He’d gone right over top of the roofs of other buildings, inked years ago above her sacrum. This new one, transparent, hazy, didn’t blot out the older buildings, but merely shrouded them in a fog.

It had taken all night. When he’d done the bits in the center, Adelle hadn’t been able to help herself. She’d cried out under the pain, ashamed of her wounded, wordless voice. At the end, when she tried not to let Sam see hot tremors shaking her, too weak to hold a mirror, he’d held up two of them, one at her back and one for her to look into so she wouldn’t have to turn her head. He’d moved the first one over her body, and she stared at the reflection in awe.

Janice hadn’t been in the room for that. She gave them their tattoos alone. It was only afterward that she came in and slept alongside her husband. Adelle wondered how much of her wailing Sam’s wife had heard.

“Did you find him?” Janice whispers.

Adelle nods. She doesn’t trust herself to speak.

It wasn’t Ben in Moonflower Tower. But she found him just the same.

Janice wraps her warm fingers around Adelle’s Simonides hand.

Adelle grips back, and they stay like that, hands entwined, for Adelle doesn't know how long.

She wants to say thank you, but her mouth tastes like glue. Janice leaves, and Adelle and Sam are alone. Adelle stares at the wall until it takes on a glow. She blinks, the moisture of her lids burning against her dry retinæ, and sits up to pull a T-shirt delicately over her torso.

The sun fights through tiny scratches in the black paint coating the window. By the time Sam wakes up, the light is bright and high. He reaches his arms over his head, arches his back in a stretch, and sits up, taking in the empty space beside him on the flip-and-fold chair. Then, he turns to Adelle.

“Morning, Corey.” His voice is somber. Neither one of them says anything else for a while. Their silent communion makes a cocoon of the room, until Sam's stomach rips out a long growl.

Adelle manages a weak smile.

“Hungry?” Sam asks.

She shakes her head.

“Yeah, me neither,” he says, patting his stomach. “Food's overrated.”

Adelle tried, but she couldn't force the smile any wider. “Will you still take me there?”

“To Ben?”

She nods.

Sam wipes a hand across his face, stares at his wiry toes. “Yeah. Okay. Just let me brush my teeth.”

He helps Adelle down, and she canes her way out ahead of him. Janice is gone.

#

Sam's truck rumbles toward Fairfield, blurring the leaves of roadside trees into one long streak of green. Adelle leans forward to keep Moonflower Tower from rubbing against the seat when they go over bumps.

"Turn here," she says at Black Rock Road.

"That's not the way to De's."

"I have to see my mother."

Sam looks at her, then back at the road. "I don't think she wants to see you." But he takes the exit anyway.

#

No one is home.

"Are you sure you can stay?" Adelle asks for maybe the eighth time.

"You sound like you want me to leave."

She doesn't, but she promised his wife. Sam had done the final tattoo, and now here they are, alone together on the bench seat of his F250. When she'd asked him to drive her, it hadn't occurred to her that Mother might be out.

"This isn't going to be easy for her," Adelle says.

"What about you? I don't know what was in that tower, but you're not exactly in the habit of dreaming buildings around the happy shit."

"St. Luke's was happy."

"Yeah." Sam stares out the windshield. "And look how that turned out."

The meanness distorts Sam's voice. He'd been mad at her before, but never mean.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

He keeps staring at her parents' gray garage door, lips pressed in a hard line.

He finally looks at her. “Your mother, the way she fucked things up. You should have had better.”

She remembers him the night De left her on her parents’ porch. He was furious but he was here, hoisting her red suitcase into the bed of this truck, pushing her off him when they get to his house, tattooing her anyway. And before that, when he was one of three people on her side of the aisle, smiling as his fingers dug into pew in front of him. And before that, poised over her with an ink-filled needle to mark her with the stars that would, unbeknownst to him, confirm to her that De was safe. And before that, and before that, and before that. All the way back to his eighteen-year-old self, pleading with her to remember. *Adelle, it’s me. Sam.*

He thinks she deserves better.

“My mother deserves better,” she says. “And so do you. Go home to Janice. I’ll call Celesse when I’m ready to go.”

#

When her mother pulls the old Mercedes into the curve of the driveway, Adelle meets her eyes through the glass of the passenger window. It’s a long way for eyes, through the verandah screen, across the manicured lawn, past the cast iron mailbox. But there’s no question. She sees her mother, and her mother sees her. So when the garage door echoes its way up and down its tracks, and a dull thud within signals that her mother has entered the house, Adelle doesn’t pull herself up from the porch swing to ring the front door bell. She waits.

Across the street, the sun glows gold over the neighbor’s cottage-shingle roof. Adelle imagines the sky above her purpling into an inky bruise. She stares at the mailbox, now a silhouette. She examines the faces of the houses lining the road, watching as they turn into

shadows. But they are not shadows. They are not memories or nightmares or dreams. They are only buildings.

The deadbolt clicks. The door makes a sucking sound as Mother pulls it open. She has her hair in a kerchief, and Adelle can't help but think of Lucille Ball. She fights back the swelling in her throat, reaches for her cane.

"I told you, you can't stay here." Mother's voice isn't as perfect as it is when Adelle hears it in her mind. The real voice, the spoken one, is thin and worn, she realizes, like Celesse's couch. It still works, but there's nothing pretty about it.

Adelle stands. She moves slowly, anchoring herself with the cane. She brings herself eye to eye with Mother. "I'm sorry I forgot you."

Mother is still as City. She doesn't even breathe. She is all the statues Adelle ever dreamed. Mother Worried, the stick figures on Mother Stairs, the alabaster dragons. Adelle wants to weep for her, to cradle her and rock her, to make all the bad things go away.

The Baron rises in her mind the way he'd done last night. She'd stood, only inches high, in the center of a prison of moonflowers, and he, arms spread, cloak wide, filled the tower to its infinite ceiling.

You need this, he said, but it was a dream, so his voice came from inside of her, intimate as her own thoughts. *I won't let you tear it down.*

The voice was every voice she'd heard, her father's, husband's, Manman's. Celesse's and Jeff's. Sam's. Her mother's. Ben's. The voice was all their voices. And none of theirs. It was too familiar, too much inside, as if she were going over conversations with each of them in her mind, sifting through what they'd said, sifting through what she could and could not bear to hear, sifting through what she would keep. The Baron's voice was not his voice at all. It was her own.

It had always been her own.

In the stillness, centuries pass: the history, the wars, the victories and starvations.

Mother raises a frail branch of a hand.

Mother extends her thin, white finger through the shadows between them, pressing the tip gently into Adelle's stomach, the exact spot of one of the dimple scars, the size of a raindrop in the sand. There's a rumble behind Adelle, her Dad, home from work. The garage door echoes and swallows her father's car. Adelle watches her mother's blue eyes fill and swim, but by the time Dad's car door slams shut, Mother has pulled the puddles back without letting a single tear fall.

Adelle cups her hand over Mother's cold fingers. Dad's footsteps get louder on the slate path behind her, and then he's beside them, his face a maze of strained lines and smile.

"Both my ladies in one spot," he says. He kisses Mother's cheek, which she leans toward him like a habit. "How you doing, trooper?" he asks Adelle.

Her chest is burning, ripping apart between the ribs. She reaches her arm around his neck, sweeping the cane through the air and accidentally scratching it against the stucco wall as she moves, because she has only two hands and isn't ready to let go of Mother.

#

"Have you seen him yet?" Mother asks.

Adelle knows who she means. She shakes her head. She'd called De on Sam's cell phone while they waited in her parents' driveway, and let him know she knew. "I needed to come her first."

Her mother's eyes fill again, and again the water recedes. It's been like this all through dinner. Her dad had invited her in, and Mother heated up a lasagna from the grocery's freezer aisle. Adelle had smiled.

"What?" Mother asked, her voice alert.

"Practice dinners."

Dad smiled, too, but Mother looked like she'd just been caught adding an extra shot to her martini. "How long have you remembered those?"

Adelle lifted her shirt and pulled the waistband of her skirt just low enough for Mother to see the top of the Willy Wonka bakery scars. "Sam's first cut."

They ate and talked and filled in each other's blanks, the gaps in each of their memories where they had to work together to create a composite sketch of what their life had been. Adelle decided that it wasn't always selfish, leaving out the ugly parts.

Eventually, Dad looked at Mother's pregnant face and pretended to yawn. "It's getting late," he said, and excused himself upstairs.

"How much do you remember?"

Adelle looks at her mother with tenderness, but Mother won't meet her eyes.

"Everything," she says. "I remember everything."

Mother nods, still staring at the table. Below her, drops of water begin to spot its surface, the size of raindrops in the sand. "I wasn't always like that," she says.

Adelle reaches out and lifts her mother's chin. The statue face is wrecked and blotchy, eyes glowing garish blue against the red that rims them. But the bones are there, still beautiful, and when this moment has passed, Adelle knows, the skin and eyes will settle back and maybe find peace in their perfect symmetry.

“I know,” she says. “That’s why I need your help.”

#

Her mother parks the Mercedes outside a ranch style house with green shutters. They haven’t spoken much on the way, not wanting to break the morning’s spell. Adelle had slept in her old room, waking to the smell of coffee and runny scrambled eggs. Mother handed her a plate, an apology on her face, and Adelle had smiled, thinking it was the best undercooked breakfast she’d ever had.

Outside De’s house, the sun is higher, glaring down on them. Her muscles tightened as they got closer, and now they feel like rocks. The images are flooding back, and she’s afraid to try to stop them, afraid she might lose Ben again. She doesn’t want to see this. But she makes herself look at the memory anyway.

#

Adelle had silenced her cell phone. De had been calling all afternoon. She handed Ben another tuft of cotton for his dog.

Mommy, she hears him in her mind, buckled into the passenger seat with the airbag off just in case, *Sing the broom song*.

It meant something for him that it didn’t mean for her. She didn’t know it was the first time in nineteen days that he’d sung it with her. She didn’t know he was forgiving her. They divided it into parts. *Now, Broom, you must now sweep for me, the dust it fills my room*, Adelle sang, and Ben did the broom part all the way home.

A police car was parked in the driveway. Adelle pulled in past it, running through arguments in her head. She flipped down her visor and saw that De had forgotten to take the garage door opener when he’d removed her key. She wondered if she’d tried it already in the two

and a half weeks they'd been separated. If she had, he'd probably already changed the code. He might have changed it anyway. She pressed the button and the door began to climb. She parked the car and came around to Ben's side, slung his backpack over her shoulder, and carried him and his dog to the kitchen door.

De opened it. His body shook with rage, like the apartment had in her dream, just before it exploded. The shouting began, echoing through the granite kitchen, and Ben clung to Adelle, and hid his face under her chin.

Adelle didn't notice the officers until they approached. They'd been standing back by the sink, but now they were both coming toward her. Her pulse quickened. She tightened her grip on Ben. The bigger one put a hand on De's bicep. He used an endless parade of quiet words and questions—*Now, that's not how you want your son to see you, is it? Why don't we come this way for a minute, talk it out over here*—to ease her husband away.

"I'm Officer Nickles," the shorter one said when they were gone. "That's a fine dog you have there, sir."

Ben kept his face hidden.

"You're the boy's mother?"

Adelle nodded.

"You had us worried."

"My cell phone died."

"Mr. Jones says he's got custody."

"We're not divorced."

"No paperwork at all?" Officer Nickles tilted his head.

Adelle wished she'd taken better notes since the fight. "None about custody." She has no idea if she was right.

De and the other officer came back into the kitchen. De had composed his face, but she knew he was still mad. She couldn't see his freckles.

"Mr. Jones," Officer Nickles said, "I understand there is no custody agreement."

"I filed an injunction."

"Really? On what grounds?"

"She's crazy. She forgets things."

Officer Nickles looked at Adelle, then at his partner. "I forget things all the time. That doesn't make me a bad father. Did a judge sign this injunction?"

De glared at him.

"Looks like no. Mr. Jones, you can't keep the boy's mother away from him without some kind of court order."

Ben relaxed his grip on Adelle. His puppy slipped to the floor.

"Bumblebee!"

Officer Nickles picked up the dog and handed it to him. "I wish I had a dog that nice."

Ben smiled.

"Mrs. Jones—"

"Corey," Adelle said. "I kept my name."

Officer Nickles' eyes smiled like he wanted to make a joke, but his voice was serious.

"Ms. Corey. Do you feel safe sleeping here tonight?"

Adelle nodded, smiling. She'd wake up to Ben.

"She can't sleep here," De said.

“Well, then, the boy should pack a bag. You need to calm down before we can leave him alone with you.”

De opened his mouth, but stopped himself.

“Charge that phone, Ms. Corey, and call us if you need us.”

The officers let themselves out through the garage.

“I’ll take the guest room next to Ben’s,” Adelle said with as much authority as she could. She walked toward the bedrooms, her skin prickling as she passed him. She tensed, preparing for a blow, but it never came. The fire came instead.

They were sleeping when it started. She woke up to the smoke alarm and De calling her name. “Addie! Get Ben out of here.” City dissolved into heat and smoke. Adelle covered her nose with her sleeve and crawled next door to Ben’s room. He was sitting in the middle of his bed holding Bumblebee. Flames crawled up the opposite wall, beneath the window, mesmerizing in their orange and purple dance, leaving everything black in their wake.

“It’s all right, Ben. Hold onto me. We’re going for a ride.”

He climbed onto her back.

“Cover your nose.”

She felt him shift above her. His puppy’s limbs flopped against her neck. He had only one arm around her now.

“You ready?”

“Ready,” he said, voice muffled.

They made it through the door. The hall was full of smoke. Ben began to cough. Adelle crawled faster. They were halfway through the living room. The ceiling was on fire, but the floor

and walls were fine. Smoke thickened above them, hiding the flickering light. If they stayed low, they would make it.

“Ben!”

He’d let go and slipped from her back. She saw a Ben-shaped shadow through the pluming smoke.

“I dropped Bumblebee!”

“Come on, Ben, I’ll get you another dog.”

A great popping sounded above, crescendoed to a deafening crash. A flaming, eight-by-eight cedar beam landed on her leg. The weight cracked open her bone, and the fire licked at the rest. A scream of pain ripped out of her, but she closed her mouth around it, strangling it in her throat. She drew a breath to still the pain, but the air was full of smoke.

“Ben,” she called.

“Mommy?”

“Crawl to the front door.” She had to pause between each word to gather up her voice against the fire searing through her skin.

“Mommy? The fire’s in the way.”

She tried to see past the beam, but the flame formed a wall between them. Her entire body was screaming. Adelle closed her eyes, her chest full of grief and poison. The fire could have her, if only it spared Ben.

“Mommy?”

“I am not your broom,” she sang. She waited.

“I will no longer sweep—” he coughed, “for you.”

“For I am not your broom.”

Chapter 12

Adelle turns away from De's green-shuttered house.

"Has it been very hard for him?" she asks.

Mother nods. "There's nothing familiar," she says. "The furniture, his toys, the fire took everything. With you, at least, it was always the same house. You could remember little things like the table or your bedroom. Ben's got nothing."

Adelle stares at the unfamiliar block structure. "I don't know if I can do this."

Mother clasps her hands in her lap and fiddles with the keys. "Some days you can."

DeAngelo answers the door before Adelle has pulled her hand back from the bell. They follow him inside. It's small and dark under the low ceiling.

"I've got him notebooks," De says. "I make sure they're all the same, just like you always made me." He looks down at his hands. "He draws in them, mostly."

"Buildings?" Adelle asks.

De nods. "Cars. And a dog. Keeps drawing the same damn dog. Calls it Bumblebee, but hell if I know what that means."

The three of them stand awkwardly, looking away from each other. Finally, De says, "His room's here," and leads them down a narrow hallway. He raps on the door and calls out, "Benny Boy?" before opening it with a hesitant turn of the knob.

Adelle's cane wobbles beneath her. She can't quite still the trembling as she steps through the open door.

Ben's face is striped in three skin tones on one side. The grafts run down his neck, and, Adelle knows, across his chest under the store-fresh Transformers T-shirt. Mother told her it would be like this. And she remembers. She remembers the first three weeks, together in the

burn center, the poor child one bed over who'd been in a fire, too. She remembers how she asked Maude each day what happened to her little roommate, and where was his mother. He reminded her of Ben, they were the same age, same size. But the little boy beside her had no face. His chest was black with charred skin, and even in the coma the doctor had induced, he sometimes moaned, sounding like the wreckage of a small creature on the shoulder of the road. And then each day, De would come in, but he wouldn't come to her. He'd come in and she'd smile, for a second forget her own pain, burning through her body. But the fire licked her limbs again each time when he turned away from her, toward the the little boy. He'd stand over the pathetic body, all pus and burn and bandage, and hold his head and weep. And then she'd look over her own body, pus and burn and bandage, and she would understand. And every night she would go to sleep, and every morning the boy was a stranger once more.

Looking at him now, sitting on his bed playing with three shiny Matchbox cars, she can hear the echoes of her own grief, rolling out of her in screaming wails every time she figured it out: this poor broken boy was her son. She takes in his mosaic skin and tries to keep her face composed.

“Benny Boy, this is your—”

But Adelle raises a hand to quiet him.

“Ben,” she says, her voice hoarse, “My name is Adelle.” She holds her hand out to him.

Ben looks up from his cars. His eyes are full of knowledge, and also, somehow, empty. He takes her hand hesitantly, his scarred fingers curling around it lightly, then draws his arm back to grab the yellow car. But he doesn't look away.

“We have something in common,” she says.

Ben tilts his head to the side. Mottled lines of ink on his neck peek out above his collar.

She canes her way over to his bed to sit beside him and heaves her leg onto the mattress.

“Can I show you something?”

Ben nods.

Adelle lifts her ankle-length skirt and takes off her shearling boot. Ben’s mouth opens into an O. He snaps his head up to meet her eyes.

“It’s okay,” she says. “You can touch it.”

He runs his fingers over her bumpy, tattoo-striped calf. Adelle closes her eyes and concentrates on the muted pressure of his soft hands. She wills herself still to keep from snatching him into her arms and scaring him out of trusting her. She is a stranger to him. She has to earn space in his heart, one minute at a time. Today they meet each other for the first time. If she’s lucky, if she’s worthy, she’ll have a hug by dinner. And then they’ll do it again tomorrow. She catches Mother’s eye. She wishes she could pull them back in, each of those horrible mornings. She will learn from her mistakes. If Ben needs a lifetime of first times, she will do her best to give him that.

Ben lets go of her leg and yanks his T-shirt over his head. Adelle stares at the quilt of skin that patterns over his torso. He points to the graft at his right shoulder, the one his collar had exposed. Watery black lines stretch across it, outlining what could be a window, all run through with diamond-shaped dots of uninked skin.

“We match,” he says.

“We match,” she agrees. Adelle takes both his hands in hers. She closes her eyes to keep the tears from sliding out. And there, in the wet darkness of her eyes, she sees the wooden priest again, holding baby Ben’s sputtering, drowning body under the baptismal waters. And as her son fights for air, the hands of the saint become flesh, the robes become white cloth, and the priest

lifts her perfect child, angry but unharmed, and hands him to De, who wraps him in a blanket Adelle embroidered the night before, determined that she would play some motherly role in this moment in Ben's life.

The blanket is gone now, ash like everything else in their house. But Adelle remembers it.

#

Adelle scoops the cupcake icing with her spoon and lets it dissolve on her tongue. Nutmeg and coffee grounds. That was the combination, faint at the back of each of the wedding cake samples that day, the flavor that reminded her of Manman, even when she could not remember Manman.

De sips his espresso and drums a rhythm onto his knee under the table. "How are you sleeping?" he asks. He doesn't look at her.

"Better."

He switches from fingertips to palm. The drumming becomes rhythmic slapping.

"Did they figure it out? How the fire started?" Adelle asks.

"Who?"

"Chief Roker. He said he'd oversee the investigation."

"Bad wiring," De says, and takes another sip.

Adelle smiles. What strangers they are, tentative and careful over every word. Now that she knows everything, remembers both of them completely, she feels as if she doesn't know either of them at all, herself or De. The people she'd thought they were, and the people she now knows they were, do not seem to be the people that they are, sitting there, like any normal

couple, having an afternoon coffee date while her mother watches their son. She isn't used to this sadness. Or this freedom. There's too much room to make mistakes.

"You remember everything?" De asks, his voice careful.

"Yes."

"So, there's hope for Ben."

"He has to want to remember."

De finally looks at her. "What made you want to stop?"

"My mother."

"Figures."

"Not that way. She wasn't always like that." Adelle can almost feel her mother's hand in her own, guiding her as she runs the perimeter of the living room, toddling on her two-year-old legs across the furniture, leaping over the spaces in between, shouting *I am sixteen going on seventeen*, while Mother laughs. Adelle takes a bite of cake. She presses its dense body between her tongue and the roof of her mouth. She's agreed to stick to Celesse's diet regimen, starting tomorrow. The Baron hasn't coming back. She doesn't need the extra skin.

"What did she do?"

"She forgot me."

De stops his drumming.

Adelle smiles because it's as good a way as any to arrange her face, and she looks right at him and says, "You've been a rotten husband."

He stares at her, mouth open.

"And I've been a rotten wife."

"Things change," De says. "Ben needs both of us, Addie."

“I’ve always hated that nickname.”

“Adelle. Ben needs you. I don’t know how to do this alone.”

Adelle stares at her half-eaten cupcake. “You’ve had a lot of practice.” Every fight she’d forgotten plays out like a long, violent movie in her brain. Hell, the whole thing started with a fight. The pile of dollars on her nightstand, worth less than a roast beef sandwich. She’d been so happy to remember something good, something she’d wanted to remember, that she’d ignored how bad they were together. More images reel through. Block Fort, her going back to work so soon, the dent in the wall, the nanny. De had wanted a housewife, someone to take care of his son and cook his meals, a Donna Reid to make up for his crazy childhood. And she hadn’t even taken his name.

“I only ever wanted to see the good parts,” she says.

“I know,” he says. “I guess that’s what we all want.”

“Ben can have us both. It doesn’t mean we have to settle for each other.”

De’s fingers start to drum again. He finishes his coffee while Adelle looks out the window. The snow is melting.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you,” he says. He stands up and extends a hand to her. They shake. It feels good to touch him. And to watch him leave.

#

“Are you sure I cannot come with you?” Celesse clears away the last round of plates and mugs from the day while Adelle wipes down tables. Her cane rests against the counter in case she needs it.

“Afraid I’ll wreck your car?” Adelle teases her friend.

“I merely offer support.” Celesse is trying to keep her face from twitching, Adelle can tell. All week, Adelle has been practicing going around the block at about five miles an hour while, in the passenger seat, Celesse’s face goes blank as raw bread dough, but her fingernails dig into her thighs.

Jeff sits in the back coaching Adelle along. “Easy on the brake. Remember, slow and smooth, just like walking. Hey, did I ever tell you ladies about the chalice and dagger on my left leg?”

“I know about your leg,” Celesse says.

Jeff reaches a hand through the gap between the seat and headrest to rub Celesse’s long, tense neck. “You know them all,” he says. And then, “Brake! Adelle, you can brake a little faster than that.”

Adelle wipes down the last table. She carries the cloth to the kitchen in the back where Celesse runs hot water over the dishes she’s collected. She stands behind her friend and rests her head on Celesse’s shoulder.

“You don’t have to worry. I’ll be all right.”

Celesse dries her hands and reaches up to pat Adelle’s cheek.

#

The drive is harder than Adelle expected, although 1930 Laurel Lane is only ten minutes away. At first it’s like practicing around the block, but halfway there her leg quivers with overuse. The strength it takes to press the gas pedal, and then hold it at a constant speed, requires all her concentration. For the last two miles, perspiration breaks over her at every stop sign. But she’s glad she came alone.

She rolls onto Willow, barely meeting the twenty-five-mile speed limit. Three more blocks, then a left, and its gables rise at the end of the drive. Her beautiful Queen Anne house. She can see it in her mind as clearly as anything the Baron built, even though she knows. It isn't there. But she can't stop herself expecting to see it. Her eyes, hungry, fix just beyond the windshield, level with the rise at the end of the drive. She makes the turn.

Thick snow blunts the landscape. It looks like a woman's breast, the hill where her house once stood. Lines of charred brick sketch a black rectangle through the snow, but the white blanket is so thick around them that they look like a knee-high garden wall, running the perimeter of the lost kitchen. A green post juts out from the bank at the edge of the driveway, reaching over to dangle a sign with letters that say *For Sale*.

The song runs through her head again, *I need someone older and wiser*. Mother's clear voice answers, singing Rolf's part. *I'll take care of you*.

The next day, the Who Are You Game began. Adelle had run into her parents' room, shaken her mother awake. It was time to go to Manman's and play with Sister-Friend so Mommy could work. She had to do the Reception at the hospital.

But when Mother opened her lake-blue eyes, Adelle could not see herself in them. There was no smile, just a line where Mother's mouth was.

"Who are you?" Mother said.

A game! Adelle thought. "Addie. Who you?"

"Melissa. I'm Melissa Corey."

Mother wasn't playing right. "Not Messa. Mommy. I Addie, you Mommy."

Mother's head lolled side to side. "No," she'd said. "Melissa."

Mother remembered her house, but not her job. Her husband, but not her daughter.

Dad had been away on business.

“James, there’s a child here.” Mother said into the phone. She stared at Adelle while the Dad talked on the other side. Adelle couldn’t hear what he said. Mother’s statue face went ancient and crumbly, like the ones that were missing a nose. Her voice wavered when she spoke again. “That’s not possible. How could I forget a whole child?”

For three days, the snow kept her father from flying home while Adelle and Mother’s memory waged war.

“See!” Adelle would scream, pointing at the refrigerator where her scribble of Mother and herself feeding ducks hung by a Snoopy magnet. “You Mommy!”

Or she’d climb onto the back of the couch where her mother was sitting and run stubby fingers through the matted hair. It used to be silky, but Adelle didn’t care. It was still Mommy’s hair, and her mother had to see that. “See,” she’d whisper, “I do your hair like this. You Mommy.”

Adelle pursued her everywhere. If Mother went upstairs, Adelle showed her she was Mommy by the way they had to hold the rail. If she went into the bathroom, Adelle followed or slammed herself into the door until she came out, then pointed at her training seat and demanded that Mother admit she was Mommy. By the end of the second day, Melissa Corey had locked herself in her bedroom to get away.

Adelle started with her fists, but when the pounding didn’t work, she laid down on her back and kicked as though she were trying to run up the door. “See! See! See!” she screamed. Until she wore thin with toddler grief and exhaustion. She slid on her back until her head was beside the door, the putrid mush of her unchanged diaper streaking the carpet. She rocked her

head back and forth, banging the door, until she fell asleep. And she dreamed of Manman's garden, and the moonflowers climbed, twining into a tower.

Adelle plays through the days after that, trying to pick out which ones her mother had remembered her for a stretch, and which ones she had forgotten. She thinks it got better as she got older. Or maybe mother just had more practice hiding it. Not with Ben, though. Mother had always remembered Ben.

The bones of the charred kitchen draw a square grave in the snow. Adelle canes her way to it, making sure to let the rubber stop sink all the way through to the ground before she takes each step. The cold numbs her calf, erases the pain from driving. She stops in the center of the remains of her kitchen. Mother was not made for this. She'd been in nursing school part time while she'd worked the hospital reception desk. Adelle hadn't known this. Her dad had told her that first night around the kitchen table.

"She couldn't do either one anymore," he'd put a hand on Mother's shoulder, "school or the job. Every time a trauma patient came through, or if one didn't survive, she'd misplaced it by the next day."

"Do you remember them now?" Adelle asked.

Mother stared at the table and shook her head.

"What do you dream in?" she asked. "Buildings?"

"Dresses," she said. "I dream in dresses."

Adelle surveys the snowy plot from the ghost space of the kitchen. She imagines the rich wood floors, the plaster walls and cedar beams. They rise around her, as in sleep, and invite her to stay here where it's safe. She closes her eyes and hears Ben singing through the smoke. When she opens them again, the walls are snow, the beams a lake-blue sky.

Adelle does not need a tattoo. There is no building for this. The Baron had never made one. It wasn't worth the risk: if he had, he knew she would find it.

Adelle pulls out her new cell phone. She's going to need someone to come and drive her home.

Celesse picks up and asks, "Did you crash the car?"

#

The divorce happens quietly. Adelle and De sit across from each other in a small room. A laminate table runs between them. De offers Adelle two thirds of the insurance money from the house. She isn't going to be designing prisons anymore. She gave notice at Axes, so she could build her own firm closer to Ben. She's been spending her days with him while De is at work, and helping Celesse draw out the expansion for Stuff of Heaven in the evenings. De had offered her the entire sum. He's been working all this time, and, besides, she designed the house. But she'd said no, that wouldn't be fair. She tells him to take his half. He agrees on the condition that she accept half of that back, an investment in her new firm. They're done in fifteen minutes. Their attorneys seem disappointed by the lack of excitement.

De goes back to work.

Mother waits in the parking lot to take Adelle to De's. She holds out arms, stiff as branches, and Adelle maneuvers her cane so it won't scratch the car while they hug. It's a short and bony embrace. They are still practicing.

"Are you sure about tonight?" Adelle asks after they get in the car.

Mother's mouth is getting better at smiling, but that still needs practice, too. "I don't know," she says. "Does it hurt?"

Last week, at Sam and Janice's baby shower, Janice had pulled Adelle aside. "Sam could help your mother."

Adelle looked across the room at her tattoo artist, standing next to Jeff and a handful of other guys, seeing who could drink beer out of a baby bottle the fastest. What would Mother think of getting a tattoo from the eyeliner boy? Would it even work?

"I'll ask her," Adelle had said to Janice.

Adelle adjusts her seatbelt and tries to keep her voice casual when she answers her mother. "It hurts. And it might not work."

Her mother's smile settles back into its old, straight line. She nods and concentrates on the road. They pull up to a red light.

"You know everything," Mother says in her always voice. "Is my life something I'd want to remember?"

"Everyone has something they want to forget," Adelle says.

They park in front of De's.

"If you're not ready, Celesse can pick me up tonight."

"No," Mother says. "I'll come."

#

Adelle lets herself in. The back of Ben's nubby head rises like a foreign planet above the couch cushions. He's sitting next to Shannon, the new babysitter, watching Transformers. Adelle puts her purse on a battered oak side table she recognizes from Mama Jones' house, and crouches in front of her son to look into his butterscotch eyes, framed in mosaic skin.

"Ben, my name is Adelle. Your dad talked to you this morning, remember? He told you I'd be coming."

“Hi,” he says. “Nice to meet you.”

Adelle smiles. “It’s lovely to meet you, too.”

Book List

Fiction

1. *The Lovely Bones*, Alice Sebold: movement beyond an initial character goal to a greater one
2. *Neverwhere*, Neil Gaimen: blurring lines between the real world and a dreamlike one
3. *Fragile Things*, Neil Gaimen: esp. “Forbidden Brides...” for interplay of imagined and physical worlds
4. *The SandMan: Preludes & Nocturnes*, Neil Gaimen: interweaving real and imagined worlds
5. *The Wolves in the Walls*, Neil Gaimen, Dave McKean: overcoming internal monsters
6. *The Boy Who Drew Cats*, Arthur A. Levine: magical realism, using an internal world to cope with physical challenges
7. *Lost & Found*, Shaun Tan: building new archetypes and worlds in the tradition of the Jungian fairytale
8. *The Tattooed Map*, Barbara Hodgson: use of places on skin to chart personal journeys, magical realism
9. *The Rings of Saturn*, W. G. Sebald: descriptions interwoven with obscure facts
10. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Edwidge Danticat: understanding of Haitian-American culture
11. *Daughter of Fortune*, Isabel Allende: dialogue among characters who are secret-keeping, nonexample of plot
12. *Room*, Emma Donoghue: fear of losing a child, constructed reality as a coping mechanism
13. *Life of Pi*, Yann Martel: constructed reality as a coping mechanism, use of limited setting, descriptions
14. *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini: intergenerational relationships, loss of a child, class tensions
15. *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver: female generational relationships, loss of a child, interweaving of first/third world cultures

16. *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, John Irving: characterization, gifts of injury among friends
17. *The World According to Garp*, John Irving: unconventional sexual relationships, mother/child relationships
18. *A Widow for One Year*, John Irving: unconventional sexual relationships, coping with the loss of a child
19. *Hotel New Hampshire*, John Irving: unconventional sexual relationships, unhealthy family relationships
20. *Franny & Zooey*, J. D. Salinger: coming to grips with truth
21. *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters & Other Stories*, J. D. Salinger: mental illness, family relationships
22. *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger: mental illness
23. *Drowning Ruth*, Christina Schwartz: female generational relationships/means of death
24. *Memoirs of a Geisha*, Arthur Golden: collision of a constructed world with the world at large
25. *Empress*, Shan Sa: characterization, architecture/monuments as symbols of power, controlling collective memory and history, tone/style
26. *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Amy Tan: magical realism, use of physical structures (cairns) for mystical/personal meaning
27. *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy: light touches of magical realism, family and class relationships, unconventional sexual relationships, tone/style
28. *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie: use of archetypes/collective narrative to make sense of reality
29. *East/West*, Salman Rushdie: interweaving of dissonant cultures
30. *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri: esp. "A Temporary Matter," loss of a child, overcoming cultural tensions
31. *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys: examination of evolution of female madness
32. *The Human Country*, Harry Mathews: building truth via symbols in a way that works metaphysically and in the concrete world

33. *The Physik Book of Deliverance Dane*, Katherine Howe: integration of magic into the concrete world via challenging generational relationships
34. *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje: waking up in hospital with no memory
35. *Remainder*, Tom McCarthy: moving around memory loss, use of architecture to gain a grip on reality, need to control environment to regain something of oneself
36. *Labyrinths*, Jorge Luis Borges: weaving in facts and architecture
37. *Love and Other Demons*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez: gain a sense of the tradition of magical realism
38. *Beloved*, Toni Morrison: magical realism, female generational relationships, mother's coping with loss of a child
39. *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald: the goal – to create a piece of art that is appealing enough to a mass audience that it works for a popular readership as well as an esoteric one, that people would experience art without realizing their experiencing it
40. *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison: ways to write child abuse, generational relationships, loss of a living child, racial relationships
41. *Up from the Blue*, Susan Henderson: mother/daughter relationships, growing up in a family with mental instability
42. *The Lathe of Heaven*, Ursula K. Le Guin: exploration of dreams and alternate timelines
43. *Memory and Dream (Newford)*, Charles de Lint
44. *Alva & Irva*, Edward Carey: use of architecture to tell a story
45. Short Stories:
 - “Beware of the Dog,” Roald Dahl
 - “Harvest,” Amy Hempel: how to tell a story, characterization
 - “A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” J. D. Salinger: dialogue, mental instability
 - “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman: interplay of physical world with mental instability
 - “The Lottery,” Shirley Jackson: gradual release of information
 - “Drive,” Aaron Gwyn: unconventional sexual relationships
 - “The Management of Grief,” Bharati Mukherjee
 - “Swell,” Caitlin Jackson (working title): pregnancy from a new perspective in fiction
 - “A Complete History of New Mexico, Parts I, II, II,” Kevin McIlvoy: interspersal of facts to help set tone of story

Memoir

46. *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*, Edwidge Danticat, ed.: examination of the experience of contemporary Haitian immigrants in the U.S.
47. *Some Girls: My Life in a Harem*, Jillian Lauren: using tattoos as a coping mechanism, unconventional sexual relationships
48. *The Color of Water*, James McBride: racial relationships in the eras when Adelle and De are growing up
49. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers: mixing personal fictions with reality as a coping mechanism
50. *The Memory Palace*, Mira Bartok: intentional construction of imagined architecture to store memories, female generational relationships, female madness

Nonfiction/Criticism

51. *A Beautiful Mind*, Silvia Nasar: mixing a constructed mental world with the physical world, biography
52. *Reality Hunger*, David Shields: helped solidify thoughts on aesthetics
53. *Walking On Water*, Madeline Le'Engel: explorations of faith and writing
54. *The Writer's Notebook*, Tin House: essays on craft
55. *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott: to keep me sane
56. "Once Upon a Time, Someone Said 'Once Upon a Time,'" Steve Almond: finding meaning in spite of the contemporary narrator
57. *A Year In Architecture*, Prestel
58. *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, John D. Spence
59. *Third-World Folk Beliefs and Practices: Haitian Medical Anthropology*, Bryant C. Freeman
60. *The Mystique of Dreams: A Search for Utopia Through Senoi Dream Theory*, G. William Domhoff
61. *The Mind at Night: The New Science of How and Why We Dream*, Andrea Rock

62. *The Secret History of Dreaming*, Robert Moss
63. *Memory and Dreams: The Creative Human Mind*, George Christos
64. *Dreams*, C. G. Jung: essays on the function of dreams
65. *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard: phenomenological exploration of domestic architecture
66. *A Dictionary of Superstitions*, Iona Opie and Moira Tatem†
67. *The Encyclopedia of Monsters*, Daniel Cohen†
68. *The PDR Family Guide to Prescription Drugs, 6th Edition*, Three Rivers Press
69. *Memory's Daughters*, Susan Stabile: an examination of the material culture of early republic women, including connections between architecture and the female anatomy and societal status

Websites and Articles

www.travelinghaiti.com: “Common Creole Words and Phrases”
The 2009 Connecticut Health Disparities Report, Connecticut Department of Public Health
www.burn-recovery.org
www.palace.net: “Living with Self-Injury”
 “Ethanol Potentiates the Acute Fatty Infiltration of Liver Caused by Burn Injury: Prevention by Insulin Treatment,” National Health Institute
www.quickcare.org: “Minor Burns”
www.home.wanadoo.nl: “Children with Nightmares,”* “Learn from the Senoi...”
www.maclester.edu: “Nightmare Disorder Treatments,”* “Sleep Terror Disorder,”
www.ncptsd.va.gov: “Nightmares”
www.emedicine.medscape.com: “Skin Grafts”
<http://www.biography.com/people/louis-armstrong-9188912?page=1> Louis Armstrong bio
<http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/brooklyn/summer-gun-dangerous-brownsville-brooklyn-neighborhood-shooting-victims-place-city-article-1.1136405> Brownsville, NY

Interview

Dr. Arun Phophalia, MD, Monday, October 17, 2011, 10:30 AM

Movies

The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind: a chase through memories in order to avoid having them erased by people hired to remove them

Memento: structured from the end of the story backward to its beginning: a man uses tattoos and clues to understand why he's on a revenge quest after losing his memory