

THE
SEA IS
SALT AND
SO AM I



CASSANDRA HARTT

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For Mom, Dad, and Marisa



PLEASE BE AWARE THIS BOOK CONTAINS
INSTANCES OF SUICIDAL IDEATION AND
ATTEMPTED SUICIDE, AS WELL AS DETAILED
DEPICTIONS OF DEPRESSION.



. . . a lapse of waves, balsamic, salty, unexpected:

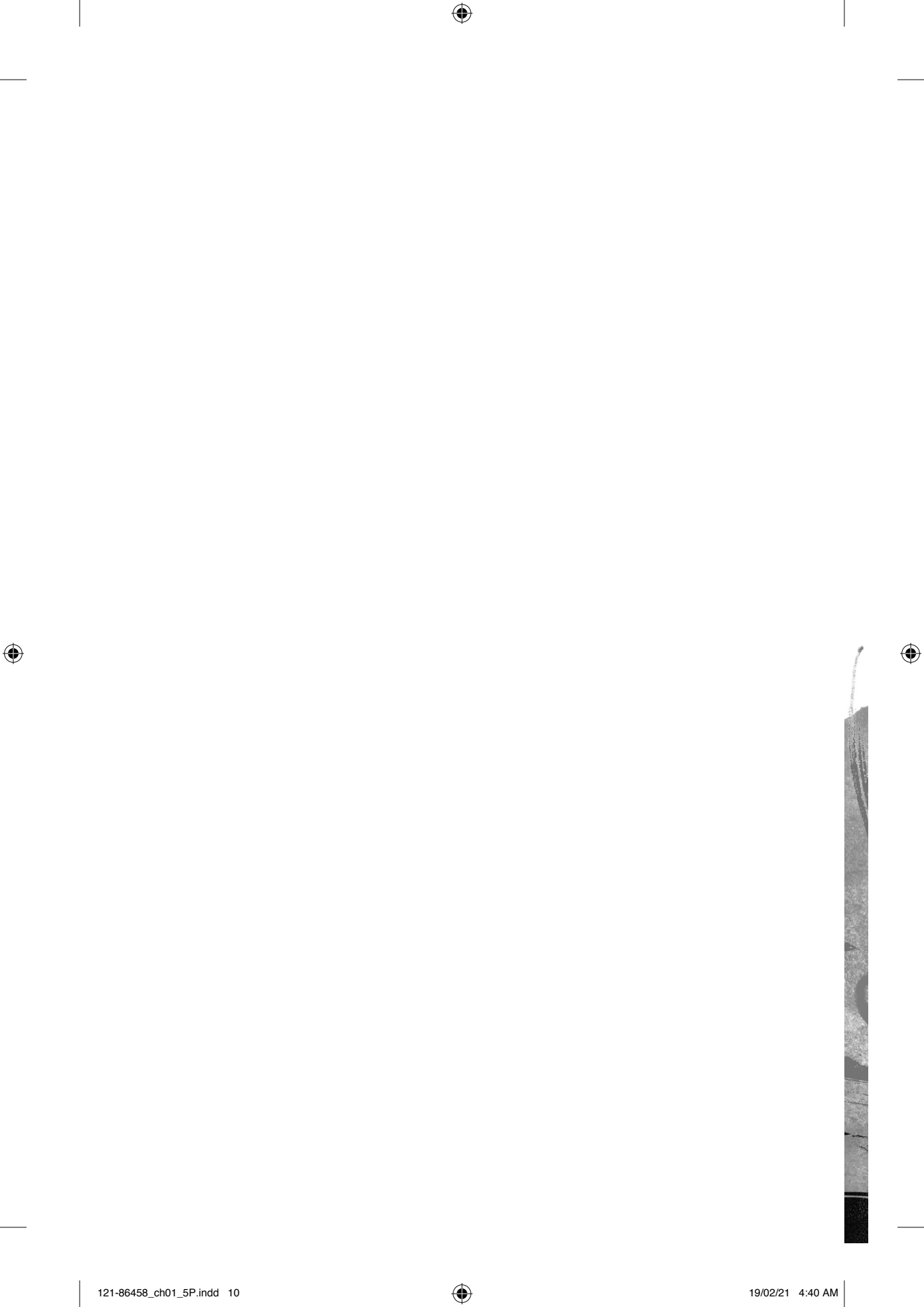
Hours after swimming, sitting thinking biting at a hangnail

*And the taste of the—to your eyes—invisible crystals irradiates
the world*

“The sea is salt”

“And so am I”

—James Schuyler, “The Crystal Lithium”





March



March 22

Any other town, it'd be all they could talk about: how much longer until the house on Ocean Drive hurls itself into the sea. But considering it's the second storm this year (and only March), the people of West Finch shrug and say that's just what happens here.

There are more interesting topics for them to discuss. And they do. Over squat mugs of diner coffee and eggs dropped on toast:

Who was spotted trying to return an empty box of condoms to the General Store.

Which Black Bear Elementary second grader stuck both index fingers up another kid's nose during recess.

The high school boy who placed fifth in the mile yesterday. Remember when he used to come in last every race? They always knew he had it in him.

The boy's pale shadow: a girl with wild hair and a habit of fixing one thing only to break another.

The boy's twin (identical, if you can believe it): finally up for air after a year underwater. Crisscrossing town with bags of donations, scruffy dog at his heels. Pressing old artwork between cardboard and tying it off with string.

The trio of college students with Something to Say about wildlife conservation. Eight days they've been sitting on that rocky outcrop, blue-haired and pierced to high heavens, shivering in puffy jackets.

With so much going on, the fate of that house on Ocean Drive is barely

worth a mention. The people of West Finch don't need to walk by the place to know its shingles hang like teeth in rotting gums. Its collapse a matter of when, not if. Anyone who thinks different is a few fish short of an aquarium.

They'd consider the girl with the wild hair one such fool. There she is again, huddled by the diner's largest window. Sneakers gritty with sand. Palms cool against her own closed eyelids. She pictures clean cedar planks. Stormproof windows, the factory stickers still intact. A woman at a nearby table touches the girl's arm and asks if she's feeling sick. She's never quiet like this.

Rain starts that night and doesn't let up until late Saturday morning. Power's out in half the town by then, and West Finch is ready with card games and candles. Lobster traps hauled, trash cans stowed, flowerpots snug on indoor welcome mats.

The girl waits out the last whispers of the storm at home. But this Ocean Drive house, it's the only thing on her mind. All week her steps twisted toward its trembling frame. In the morning before school, when the tide was teasingly low. Before dinner, when its eaves glistened with foam. She whispered affirmations:

You are strong and solid.

You have the structural integrity of a fallout bunker.

She convinced him to come with her, once. The boy who runs. With him at her back and the house dead ahead, she had silently promised no one at all that if the house weathered this weekend's storm, she and the boy would come back to step through the naked door frame, climb the stairs, and shine a flashlight through the attic window. Their wishful lighthouse.

But that was then. At home now, on the other side of the storm, the girl pulls on whale-print rain boots and a yellow coat. Perched on the stairs, phone in lap, she's waiting for a bone-like crack of wood. Chewing a hang-nail. Hoping for a miracle. And though it's been days since she last visited Ocean Drive, her finger still tastes like it's been pickled.

One

HARLOW

Saturday, March 25

Ellis texts me, asking (1) Did I hear it? The house collapsing just now? And (2) When does he get his ten dollars?

You're going straight to hell, I write back. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200.

Ellis: after you :)

Yesterday he waved an Alexander Hamilton under my nose and said the Ocean Drive house wouldn't last the weekend. I just about slapped it from his hand. In no universe is it okay to bet on catastrophes, for or against. No matter that no one lives in that house. No matter that I pretty much always want to do whatever Ellis wants.

Me: Wait, pretend I said DMV. I feel like that's worse.

Him: to late! we're going to hell!!! get in the car!!!

I blink at that "to" like my phone might locate a second "o" if I wait long enough.

Ellis MacQueen, folks. The boy who beat me on the SATs.

Him: see you in 10?

My whale-print boots and I wade through brown water and wave at neighbors retrieving soggy newspapers. I'm smiling, but I'm picturing the worst. The two-story Cape Codder cracked open like a hinged dollhouse. Ellis saying "Oh wow," trying to sound sad. But the truth is he likes how something as big and sturdy as a house will collapse if you kick it hard enough.

Ellis is already there when I hit the beach. He stands apart from the other onlookers, his navy L.L. Bean windbreaker zipped to his chin. It's too cold for shorts but he's wearing them, so his prosthetic leg is visible below his right knee. Damp, dark hair hangs in his eyes. Without saying anything, I step up next to him and bump the side of my body into his. He bumps me back.

The only surprise: a leash knotted around his fist, and Goose herself at the other end. She's as ugly as ever. If I had to guess her breed, I'd say black Lab–Australian shepherd mix meets hyena. Plus there's her mouthful of snaggleteeth, matted fur no matter how recently she's been groomed, and today the addition of four little booties, one on each paw.

Ellis sees the question on my face and explains, "Tommy asked me to watch her."

Before I can figure out what that means, there's a crash that makes both Goose and me jump. The Ocean Drive house shivers and settles into its most dangerous slant yet.

"Oh wow," Ellis says.

As its foundation buckles, everything the rental's landlord didn't bother putting in storage spills from its open mouth. Soggy seashell-print curtains, red pot holders shaped like lobster claws, all too brightly colored against the gray sea, the taupe sand.

"Is the diner okay?" I say it like *who cares, not me*, but of course I do. His parents' restaurant has one of our town's many unplanned oceanfront views. With the house in front of us becoming driftwood as we speak, MacQueen's Diner is next-closest to shore, and last I checked, his family doesn't have plans to rebuild. They don't have any plans at all.

Ellis's eyes go wide. "Um. I think you should see for yourself."

At once I'm back in a childhood nightmare: standing on the diner's countertop as water surges through the front door, seaweed coiled in the coffeepot, barnacles scarring every surface, stubborn as cement. All this in the two seconds it takes Ellis's face to fall into a lazy, teasing grin.

"You shouldn't joke about that!" I gasp.

He looks down at my hand, which has accidentally grabbed his wrist. I let go. Scowl. His smile stretches across his whole face.

I let him get away with it only because of how pitiful this whole situation is. Figure A: waves swallowing a house and only nine people bored enough to come see it. Figure B: Goose up to her doggie elbows in floodwater, trying to sniff her own butt.

If you've never seen a jetty, walk to the end of Main Street and look for the man-made pile of rocks sticking out into the water, a straight shot for a whole quarter mile.

If you only want to know the important part, it's this: The jetty makes it so the waves don't just break against our shores—they pummel the coastline until it's unrecognizable. Add rising sea levels and we lose several feet of beach each year.

Last month, Maine's governor finally approved funds to tear the jetty down. But it's like the fourth law of physics that every time one problem gets solved, another takes its place.

For West Finch, that looked like the three college kids from California who parked themselves on the rocks last week. After reading about West Finch in environmental studies class, they felt they had a civic duty to save our precious coastal wildlife. Specifically, a bird called the piping plover.

The piping plover's thing is that it lays its eggs right in the sand where anyone can step on them. So of course they're under all these protections and somehow still halfway extinct. West Finch hasn't had plovers in years, but—just in case!—our mayor put the jetty demolition on hold. Dynamite is not ideal egg-laying mood music, apparently. Meanwhile the protestors say they're not leaving until the project's canceled altogether.

I scan the faces of the other Ocean Drive spectators. No sign of the ring-leader's vibrant blue hair, or the dreads or Birkenstocks or hemp-whatever her two co-members are probably sporting. I haven't seen them up close (pretending they don't exist is my protest of their protest), but I'm sure I'd recognize them. I snap a few pictures of the wrecked house with my phone. Maybe if they saw this place, they'd understand their crusade is more complicated than they think.

I follow Ellis to where the house's back door used to be. Water gushes from a rectangular basement window, and with it, a stream of items that point to a richer life than summer holidays. I collect a topless Barbie doll with seaweed threaded through her hair, a bloated paperback with yellowed edges, and a teacup patterned with pink peonies, broken cleanly in two. Ellis comes back with a WORLD'S BEST GRANDPA medal around his neck.

I raise an eyebrow.

"It's because I give out a lot of sweets," he says.

Face full of mischief, he reaches into his jacket pockets and pulls out a whoopie pie in each hand, nestled in plastic sandwich baggies. He offers what looks like the bigger one to me. It doesn't feel entirely appropriate to snack while we wade through thousands of dollars in property damage, but whoopie pies are so much work that Ellis's mom bakes only a couple dozen each day. The sandwich cakes are a dark, sticky chocolate filled with whipped marshmallow fluff.

"So," I say through a glob of frosting. "Are we going to talk about Goose's footwear?"

Because the dog, she is still wearing those booties.

Ellis pushes his hair out of his face with the back of his arm and rolls his eyes. "He wouldn't let us leave without them."

It's no secret Tommy is obsessed with his dog. Nicer to her than he is to most humans (and me especially, his least favorite member of our species). I'm no fan of his, either, but I'm being 100 percent objective when I say the dog looks ridiculous.

I abandon my treasures in the sand and scramble up the boulders stacked along the western side of the yard. I find a dry, flat rock and sit with my knees under my chin. The half-naked Barbie gets yanked out to sea on the next wave, but the heavier teacup and book are dragged along for several minutes before they disappear. I squint at the horizon and don't blink until my eyes water.

It gives me a rash to think we're in any way alike, but besides me, Tommy would appreciate this more than anybody. He thinks he's some kind of artist. Or he used to. Before he got depressed, before he left school for two weeks in January to "get back on track" (doctor's orders), he'd draw whatever you put in front of him. A mountainside prickly with pine trees, Goose making a face only a dog-parent could love, and once a house split down the middle, staring down a wave as tall as itself. It gave me a behind-the-eyes feeling that made me need to hit him. Instead I sent the drawing through a paper shredder and left the skinny strips scattered around his bedroom. I hoped his lungs would freeze in his chest when he saw. I hoped he'd know it was me.

It felt like an appropriate response at the time.

Ellis is running figure eights in the flooded street. His stride's a little awkward without his running blade, but he's still pretty fast. Mud splatters clear up the back of his jacket. Goose chases him unleashed, first in big circles with her different-colored eyes bulging, then zigzags, until she's panting. Ellis will make varsity any day now, so he could keep going if he wanted. But he slows when Goose quits chasing. It's no fun if someone isn't telling him to stop.

We wade north toward the center of town. The ocean pulses to our right some fifty feet away, and Ellis and Goose shield me from most of the spray. In my head I make this week's to-do list: order a better SAT prep book; draft a plan to save West Finch from climate change; etc.

"Listen," Ellis singsongs when I'm quiet for too long. "You can be upset that I'm smarter than you and always have been, or you can be upset about that worthless house. Not both."

“You are *not* smarter than me.”

He spreads his arms in a grand shrug. “Who are we to argue with the College Board?”

“Not in this universe.” My steps, now stomps, soak my leggings. “Not in any of your pretend universes, either.”

“String theory isn’t pretend. It’s physics.”

“Well, whatever it is, enjoy it while you can. I’m doing a retake in May,” I say, making a mental note to register.

Ellis and I are both near the top of our class, but my grades are always a little better. It’ll be a nonissue soon enough. When he gets recruited for track, the whole well-rounded-student-athlete thing will make our on-paper selves look pretty much identical to elite East Coast deans of admissions. That’s The Plan.

My radioactive SAT score is not part of The Plan. But then, neither is Ellis’s skipping homework whenever he feels like it and not making varsity yet, so.

I continue. “Saving the diner comes first, though. Plus the rest of West Finch.”

“Right. Priorities.”

“And you’re going to help.”

He halts. We’re in the middle of the street, no cars, but still. I want to drag him to the safety of the road’s shoulder. He shrugs helplessly and points to Goose, who’s off-leash and lagging several feet behind. My hands find my hips.

“Ellis.”

“Harlow.”

“Hurricane season is only three months away. I need your full participation. Put that brilliant mind to work.”

He takes his time clipping Goose onto her leash, incorrectly assuming I’d miss him rolling his eyes. But his jaw clenches as he stands. Something behind me catches his eye.

A figure in a black wet suit rocks on his heels at the water's edge. Close enough to hear us if we yelled. Far enough I'd rather not. He even looks around once, but he must not see us from there.

I know Tommy by the bumpy white curve of his shaved head and familiar slope of his shoulders. He quit therapy last month, and according to Ellis, his prescription now consists of antidepressants, exercise, and sunshine. He could swim at the YMCA, like a normal person, but their mom is just happy he's cultivating an interest in something besides sleeping.

The first wave touches his ankles. Next, his knees. The ocean is maybe thirty-six degrees, so how's that wet suit warm enough? Not to mention the current's always strongest after a storm.

"Guess that explains dog duty," I say.

Ellis squints. "Let him freeze his balls off if he wants to. It's a free country."

As far as Ellis is concerned, looking alike is the only thing they have in common. I have to agree. They're identical twins, so mix-ups happen—to other people. To me, the MacQueen boys are different in a million ways, all starting and ending with the fact that Tommy and I are not friends. His hatred of me could fuel several bonfires, and I've fantasized about accidentally closing his fingers in a car window once or twice.

The diner shimmers through the mist at the end of the road. Ellis turns toward it, away from his brother, and tugs on Goose's leash. He's told me Tommy isn't trying that hard to feel better. But if happiness is a switch he can turn on and off, wouldn't he have flipped it already?

When Tommy dives, his form is infuriatingly perfect. Hands stacked. Chin tucked like he's holding a fifty-cent piece against his collarbone, the way they taught us in swim class when we were kids. Me, I scattered at least fifteen dollars in the deep end before our instructor conceded diving might not be my thing.

A wave explodes above the spot where he disappeared. Goose barks once.

I can hold my breath longer than he can. I'm sure of it, even as my eyes fill and my lungs crumple against my spine. The ocean roars like I'm

pressing shells to my ears. I count to almost sixty before my breath rips through me. Moments later, his white scalp bobs to the surface, impossibly far out. I knew he could swim but not like this.

A fishhook in my chest tells me to stay, though past experience says later we'll find him curled under a blanket on the couch, and there he'll sleep until dinner, snoring so loudly I sometimes think he's faking.

Ellis and Goose are miniatures halfway down the street. I could squish them between two fingers, or put them in my pocket.

Have fun, I think, sparing one last glance toward the ocean. Then my jacket flares out behind me as I hurry after them.

Two

HARLOW

Goose's tail whacks the backs of our legs as we stomp our boots on the diner's doormats. She shouldn't be in here, but the spot in the grass where Tommy usually ties her up is too wet. Floodwater covers the picnic table seats, and in the surging waves, even the jetty out back looks small.

Ellis's mom pokes her head around the corner. "Is Tommy with you?"

The boys are tall and lean like their dad, but their faces are all their mom, which is why it's so unsettling to watch the thin lips that live in a near-constant smirk on Ellis's face press together in a grimace on Helen Bell's. Low-level annoyance is pretty much her constant state. Owning a restaurant with your ex-husband will do that to you, I guess—especially when that restaurant still goes by your married name.

Ellis and I shake our heads, silently agreeing not to mention we saw Tommy ten minutes ago. Going out in the storm was his bad decision, not ours. And it's like Ellis said: his balls, his business.

Helen's wearing an apron over a heathered-gray MacQueen's T-shirt and jeans, purple-red hair in its signature messy bun. Her pale skin is covered in a fine dusting of flour.

Two lines appear between her eyebrows. "It's rude to stare."

"I'm not," I say automatically.

But I am. Her hair's the same purple-red of the diner's menu sleeves.

Perfect match. Which came first, and does she bring a menu to the salon as a reference for her colorist? I've never been brave enough to find out.

She wrinkles her nose at the eau de wet dog and says, "Your parents are here."

My parents. Coastal oceanographers who know everything about erosion—except how to fix it. A pretty huge knowledge gap, if you ask me. Still, they could draw a timeline of how and when our tiny town will disappear. My parents could probably say down to the day.

Not that I've asked. It's a day that'll never come, if I can help it.

I find them at a table under a section of wall strung with red-and-blue buoys. Mom's mostly gray hair is in a low bun, and the little bald spot on the back of Dad's head winks under the fluorescents. I give them each a one-armed hug and ask how the supply drop went. They report that everyone has power back now, and Dad almost knocks over his iced tea showing me a picture he snapped of a black, oily bird with a hooked bill. I'm just glad it's not a piping plover.

"Where'd you go, sweet pea?" Mom asks.

"We checked out that house on Ocean Drive."

They exchange a look, and Dad takes a long time cleaning his glasses on his shirt. Lately we've had several family discussions about whether my obsession (Dad's word) with the destruction of West Finch is reaching an unhealthy level.

"Chloe said it's halfway gone already." He nods toward Mrs. Samuels, sitting at the counter that runs the length of the room. Ellis has already grabbed us drinks and landed beside her. Now he's chatting with her husband as the old man stares down a mountain of iceberg lettuce, the diner's only low-sodium, heart-healthy anything. Ellis says something that makes Clifford Samuels sweep the grubby red knit cap off his own head and dab his eyes. Then his laugh turns into the kind of cough that makes you want to pull your shirt over your face.

I shrug. "I wouldn't say halfway."

Ellis meets me at our favorite table by the big window, although right now, plywood covers the glass. Goose whines for a few minutes before sighing and sprawling on the floor at Ellis's feet—only to leap up again when his mom brings over a veggie burger cut down the middle and a basket of steaming fries. I give everything a healthy squirt of ketchup.

I'm ready to dig in, but she's still standing there, skewering Ellis with just her eyes.

"Want to tell me what's really going on? Let's start with why you have the dog if your brother's not here."

Ellis takes his time eating a fry in three bites, a move so bold that if I'd done it, I'd be afraid for my life. "He went for a swim."

Her nose twitches, but the rest of her remains eerily still. A few flour motes drift down to join their friends on her shirt. "Did you think, *huh, maybe I should tell him not to swim in the ocean after a nor'easter?*"

His eyes narrow. "Did *you?*"

They glare with the same furious thought: *I shouldn't have to.*

"He didn't pick up when I called home. Go check on him." Big pause. "Please."

"Why me?!" he cries, hands flipping an imaginary table. I picture our burger, fries, everything on the floor, best day of Goose's life.

Helen's face says, *because I said so.*

"It'll take us half an hour to walk there and back. I'm already tired." He props his wet sneakers on the chair next to us for dramatic effect, fidgeting just enough to make his right leg glint.

"I'll go," Mrs. Samuels says behind Helen. Her lavender raincoat threatens to swallow her tiny frame as she slides off the counter stool. "I can drop off Goose while I'm there."

Mrs. Samuels is one of those people who has to be involved in everything. She and Clifford are always butting into stuff, acting like they're the boys' grandparents, and Ellis's parents let them because they've all known each other for decades.

I only like Mrs. Samuels because when we were in her fourth-grade class, she let Ellis and me sit next to each other for two whole months before she moved our seats for talking. Our other teachers gave us one week max.

Mrs. Samuels gets the car keys from her husband and leaves with Goose. I frown at Ellis.

“I’m not in charge of him, okay?” He sucks loudly on his straw.

Like he *wants* me to say something about it.

“Plastic straws never biodegrade. They get caught in sea turtles’ noses. Just so you know.”

“And just so *you* know, lots of people rely on plastic straws.” His damp hair hides one dark eyebrow, but the other shoots up. “So that’s a pretty ableist thing to say.”

My face burns. “I know that.”

When I tear open my own straw and stick it in my pink lemonade (solidarity and all that), he leans back in his seat and cackles.

“Which hippie told you that thing about the sea turtles?” he asks once he’s calmed down. “The one with the hair or the pretty one?”

I’m doing the math (three college kids total, so he’s left out one; which does he think is pretty?), but that’s not the point. “Read it somewhere,” I say.

“I’ll bet.” He’s laughing at me again. With me? “Hey, Harlow. Hey.”

I take a large bite of dill pickle to show I’m listening. He leans toward me over the table, and despite myself, I do the same.

“On your tenth birthday, what’d you ask for instead of presents?” he asks, brown eyes bright and all too eager.

I drop the pickle in disgust and slump back in my chair.

“No, seriously. I can’t remember. Was that the year you said the best gift of all would be a donation to the piping plover foundation? Or was it the year after?”

“It was both years,” I snap. I’m sorry I went there about the turtle noses.

“I was extremely empathic for my age.”

I grab the ketchup bottle, shake hard. I *do* care about those useless birds.

They should be able to build a nest and have consensual bird sex and incubate their eggs in peace. They just need to do so three to five miles away. When I squeeze, the ketchup's top explodes off and disappears into our basket under roughly half the bottle's contents.

Ellis pretends not to notice, though he does carefully use a spoon to scrape some ketchup off a couple fries before he shoves them in his mouth. "Maybe we have to start our own group to fight back."

"Like Correct the Coast?"

He makes a sound that says no, nothing like that. "Correct the Coast is for retired people who like picking up beach trash. Our group will make sure they still have a beach to keep clean."

I must be making a face because he says, "What? Bad idea?"

I shake my head.

"Good idea?"

I kick his chair leg.

"Is that a yes?"

It is.

Half a bottle of ketchup later, the bell above the door rings.

In my experience, there are two types of bad situations: the kind you feel coming—prickly neck, oil-slick gut—and the kind that hits you like a tractor trailer coming down a mountain pass, and you weren't checking your rearview mirror.

Mrs. Samuels returns, minus Goose, plus a wake of muddy footprints. The doormat's right there and she hasn't wiped her boots. That's the first clue.

"He wasn't home," she reports. That's the second.

Depending on how you're counting. There's also the determined way Tommy dived, and the fact that it's been, what, half an hour? Thirty minutes is nothing, unless you're in the Atlantic Ocean at the end of March, and then any time is probably too much.

But I knew that already.

He could've gone for a walk after his swim. He could've stopped by the General Store. It's premature to panic, agrees everyone who didn't watch him disappear into thirty-six-degree water.

Jim MacQueen finally emerges from the diner's kitchen. He has the look of a man wild with purpose, though maybe that's just his scruffy winter beard. He goes straight outside and calls Tommy's name for several minutes, circling the diner. Whatever he left on the stove smells like it's burning.

Helen, Clifford, Mrs. Samuels, and now my parents are suggesting other places to check, people to call. They say *just in case* until it means nothing.

When Jim comes back alone, Clifford squats down next to our table, red knit cap in leathery hands.

"Now, no one's going to get in trouble," he says.

His head looks small without his hat. If I didn't know better, I'd assume he was a cute, harmless grandpa.

I glance across the table. Ellis knows how I feel about Clifford Samuels, but he just grips the back of the chair beside him and studies the boarded-up window.

"Where'd he go in?" Clifford looks at each of us in turn. When we don't respond, he tries again. "Can you remember what streets were nearby?"

I watch his hat slowly rotate as he worries the edge with his fingers. A familiar leaky-pipe feeling starts in my chest. Like something is deeply wrong and there's no way to stop it.

"Birch and Ocean." It takes me a second to realize those words, they came from me. I resist the urge to clap a hand over my mouth, and add, "North-east corner."

I answer the rest of his questions too, telling as much as I dare without saying plainly that we watched Tommy dive into the Atlantic, and no, I guess it didn't look like he'd be back anytime soon. After each answer I leave Ellis an opening to back me up.

His grip on the chairback tightens.

His mouth stays shut.

Clifford Samuels stands up straight and smooths his hat onto his head. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Mira, you stay with Helen in case he comes here. Chlo, you’ll want to go back and check the house again.”

“Jim and I can take the beach,” Dad offers.

“Good. And I’ll go out and take a little ride around,” Clifford says. He means on his lobstering boat.

Great. A plan. I like plans. Ellis likes plans too, but across from me, he looks plain bored.

“Why are you being like this?” I don’t give a shit about his brother, but my lungs are still doing this whole taking-on-water thing. It makes me want to knock over my chair or shake him, hard, just to make his face move.

“Like what?” He drags his finger through the ketchup and puts it in his mouth, his eyes fixed on the basket. “Don’t you think I’d know if something happened to him? He’s *fine*. Probably floating on his back and laughing about how worried you all must be.”

I want him to be right, but this leaky-pipe feeling, it’s telling me otherwise. He didn’t know anything was wrong the month before last, when Tommy spent half his weekends asleep. Got skinny like Ellis except he wasn’t running eight miles a day. That’s when they found out he was failing most of his classes and wasn’t on track to pass junior year.

“Is he still not taking his meds?” I ask, my voice low.

His stony gaze lands on me. “Not since you told him they were making him fat.”

I didn’t say fat. But they were.

“He’s a strong swimmer,” he says.

For the next twenty minutes I make myself believe him. I take the menu out from where we tucked it behind the napkin holder and read it all, though it hasn’t changed since my family moved to West Finch seven years ago. I squint at Jim MacQueen’s untidy scrawl on the specials board. Memorize it. Clam chowder with two rolls. Chicken parm. I grab some napkins,

wipe away the sweat from our drinks, and finish the pickle spear in our burger basket.

Ellis is on his phone. He scrolls through an endless stream of our classmates enjoying their Saturdays. Doesn't even blink when the diner's landline bleats. Helen grabs it before the second ring.

Her hand covers her mouth.

My mom sits between us in the chair still wet from Ellis's sneakers. She looks at me. Him. I wish for noise-cancelling headphones, earmuffs, a wrench.

"They found him," she says.

I give Ellis time to ask the obvious question.

Any question.

"Who did?" I ask when he won't.

"Cliff."

Ellis and I both have our hands on the table and Mom grabs one of each like we're having a séance, which is how I know Tommy's dead. I yank my hand back. Ellis stands, but Mom won't let him get away that easy.

"He's okay," she says. "Tired but okay. They're on their way back now."

Without a word, he breaks her grip and crosses to the front door. The little bell sings. I don't know what to feel yet except worried for Ellis, and I can't see him through the boarded-up windows. I grab our jackets and follow him outside.

He's sitting on top of the picnic table with his back to me. Still on his phone. He drags his finger and scrolls. Again. I wade through the floodwater, climb up next to him, and sit cross-legged. I loop my arm through his and lean my head on his shoulder, and he lets me stay that way for three whole minutes.

At last Clifford Samuels's lobstering boat drops anchor near the marina a couple streets down. Then a smaller dinghy with two silhouettes against the purple waves, one rowing toward shore. As soon as Tommy's foot hits that dock, Ellis launches himself off the table and lands hard, water splashing.

“Where are you going?” I call. He’s already halfway across the parking lot.

“Home. I have shit to do.”

Clifford Samuels walks first and Tommy follows, looking tiny wrapped in an oversize towel, head bowed. The pressure in my chest climbs to my throat. At least he won’t see Ellis is gone.

They reach the diner’s door. The sun hasn’t set but the light has changed, and everything is orange and pink except for the ocean, which is the same steel gray as before. Clifford Samuels goes inside. Tommy trails him, almost safe, until just when I think he won’t, he looks back at me.

Three

ELLIS

Eject me from this universe and put me back where everything is as it should be.

Give me that quantum theory, multiverse shit from physics class. For every choice or possibility in this world, there's another universe where things went a different way. Your parents didn't get divorced. You never learned to ride a bike. You're aching and covered in salt because the twin connection thing is real, not made-up bullshit to get you to be nice to your brother.

Whatever it takes, I'll do it: Turn and wait with Harlow like she wants me to. Reach my house, then keep walking. Or go inside to check if Goose is still where Mrs. Samuels left her. Just one thing staying where it's supposed to. One damn thing. And she is. She's pacing the kitchen, or staring blankly at her water dish, or getting her hopes up it's not me at the front door.

I go straight upstairs so if there's a note on the counter or stuck to the fridge I don't have to see it. But at the same time, I'm checking everywhere: the calendar on the basement door, every receipt in the junk drawer, the block of sticky notes by the phone. If it's a scrap of paper he may have looked at once, I'm searching it for some instructions on what I'm supposed to do next.

I'm checking my phone. I'm not checking my phone. Definitely not reading my texts.

Harlow: They went inside. Should I follow them?

Harlow: Oh no I did and everyone's crying.

Harlow: Where are you?

I'm face-to-face with his bedroom door, hand testing the knob like I'm inside a burning house. Too dangerous to enter.

All at once I'm messaging anyone not from West Finch, thinking I'll hook up with whoever responds first. Ian says he's free in a few hours. Paige doesn't answer.

I find the hurricane bag Harlow made us last year and eat a protein bar because this feels like an emergency.

Harlow: They're taking him to the hospital.

Harlow: Going home first, though. I said you'll see them there.

Instead of waiting around, maybe I change my clothes and swap out my leg. Running right after a big storm, the sky's pressed in closer than it could ever be in real life. A world of churning clouds and pavement black with rain. A puddle covers most of the road ahead and I charge straight through, soaking the sneaker on my left foot, but somehow it's the curved carbon fiber that feels more, a cold crash of needles below my right knee, on skin that isn't even there.

When we saw Tommy on the beach, I had no clue it was anything but a normal swim. Harlow watched him, though. By the time she caught up with me she was panting. Smiling. That alone should've told me everything I needed to know. If she's smiling it never works out well for him.

Then there are the little things that meant nothing before, everything now. How clean his room got in the last few days. Harlow digging through the garbage while I ate peanut butter from the jar: childhood drawings stacked in crushed shoeboxes, letters from grandparents who died before we knew them. Harlow held up a C-minus from a recent geometry quiz and joked maybe if I tutored him, I could get credit for community service hours.

If I'd told him to stop on the beach today, would he have listened?

In some parallel universe, the car to my left barrels through the stop sign as I cross the intersection. It could happen. Instead I flinch hard at an impact that never comes and land sprawled on the ground, palms full of road. I get up and the driver meets my gaze, a startled but safe ten feet away.

Hot pink shame washes down my spine. I scramble up and surge forward at a self-shattering pace that justifies my heartbeat. In this universe, I put as many miles between me and the ocean as possible. I run until I can't.

Four

HARLOW

Monday, March 27

When Ellis doesn't reply to my messages Saturday night, doesn't show up for pancakes at the diner Sunday, I know I can't mention Tommy unless he does first. That if I try, he'll shut me out completely.

In solidarity, I do a good job not thinking about Tommy the rest of the weekend. Like, I don't think about watching him dive into choppy waves, or when Helen asked me where Ellis went (Right in front of Tommy! Still shivering!). I do think about the boxes I found a couple weeks ago, but only long enough to decide anyone can gather their possessions in containers labeled with their family members' names, and it doesn't necessarily mean they're planning anything bad. It's allowed.

By the time Ellis drives us to school Monday, we're so good at not thinking about it that neither of us glances at the back seat where Tommy would usually sit.

It got cold overnight. The collar of Ellis's winter coat hits halfway up his cheek, and his beanie practically covers his eyebrows, but otherwise he's the same. He cranks up the radio as we fly beyond the West Finch town limits. Doesn't care it's not even music. I suffer through the loudest car commercial in history before my hand darts toward the volume knob.

"Driver's rights!" he yells, swerving but staying in his lane as he knocks my hand away.

"But it's my car!" I shout over the music.

The irony isn't lost on me that I hate cars and yet, of the two of us, I'm the one who has one. It's all part of my parents' campaign to Change Harlow's Mind About Driving. I only got my license because they wouldn't take me to Ellis's track meets anymore. So after I took driver's ed (twice) and passed my driving test (third try), they gifted me their ancient Volvo.

He brakes hard at a yellow light. "And if you ever drive, you can choose the volume."

I'd give it a try, maybe, if school wasn't so far. But West Finch's Black Bear Elementary only covers K-through-5. After that, the district buses us to Seaborough's enormous, consolidated schools twenty minutes inland so we can join Model UN or play football if we want to. Which we don't. I'd be perfectly content riding the bus, but Ellis thinks it's a crime against humanity to have a car and not use it. So every morning I carefully drive the half mile from my house to his, then switch to the passenger seat so he can drive us the rest of the way. I'd rather not let my parents find out he's the primary driver of my car, and in West Finch, nothing stays secret for long.

The light turns green and he guns it, a smile dancing at the edges of his lips. I'm slammed back in my seat, the terrible music humming through my bones, but somehow a laugh bubbles out of me. If I can keep him happy like this it will all be okay.

My parents said I needed to give the MacQueens space after the Tommy incident, and reluctantly I agreed. So I spent yesterday strategizing with Coop. If we're on schedule, by now he's managed to tell most of the school (1) Tommy's gone again, and (2) don't say anything to Ellis.

Coop's leaning against the brick wall near the school's back entrance, grin fixed in place. He's one of only a few people of color at school, and the lone Black kid, so he's not exactly hard to spot. Especially when he starts waving at us, arms wiggling like he's one of those inflatable balloon men

you see at car dealerships. It almost gives me a headache to watch. But Coop knows how silly he looks, just like he knows that the watery, skim-milk smile it gets from Ellis is a big deal. If I weren't around, he'd probably be Ellis's closest friend. He knows that too.

"Missed you at Ben's Saturday," Coop says as he thumps Ellis's back.

Mentioning the weekend (or any topic that could lead back to Tommy) is the exact opposite of what we agreed. I glare at Coop. He smiles wider.

"Aw, don't be jealous, Harlow. You know I missed you too," he says with a wink.

Gross. Also, not the point.

I pretend Coop's transparent, like one of those sea pigs, and look through him to the table where student council's selling prom tickets. I'd rather spend an evening picking ticks off Goose than one surrounded by Seaborough High's duller and drunker. Thank god Ellis and I already agreed prom is too cringey to consider.

A couple juniors turn away from the table and, prom tickets in hand, sneak glances at Ellis on their way inside. He looks like he wants his winter jacket to swallow him.

Coop barrels onward and says, "Olivia asked about you."

Olivia is a pole vaulter on the track team and, to put it nicely, she's a bit clueless. Like, didn't know the first name of the president when that came up in US History. Olivia is not part of our plan.

Yet Ellis's face changes like I guess Coop knew it would. He loves when people pay attention to him, so he's already hooked up with quite a few girls in our year and a couple boys too. But who's counting?

Nothing distracts him like a fling. I should've thought of this myself.

"She asked me first!" I cut in because, well, let's get this timeline straight. "Last week, she asked if you're dating anyone."

Coop rolls his eyes hard as Ellis focuses on me. "What'd you say?"

"I told her to ask you herself." She also asked twice if I would be okay with it, but I don't mention that.

Operation Let Ellis Make Believe Tommy Didn't Almost Hypothermia Himself to Death goes surprisingly well. All day I intercept condolences for him, gathering our classmates' and teachers' worry so he doesn't have to. But although Coop has spread the basic facts of what happened, that doesn't stop the question I dread from bubbling up. It comes in whispers with weighty looks, puzzled head tilts.

Why?

If I knew, I wouldn't be half as worried about what might happen when Tommy comes home.

When I say everyone does their part, I mean everyone. Sometime between first and last period Olivia finds Ellis. Latches on like a pretty leech. Apparently, they spent most of lunch making out in the math wing until Ms. Wheelock caught them and sent them back to the cafeteria. I was in the computer lab working on my West Finch climate change manifesto (tentative title, *Preparing for the Worst: Coastal Erosion and You*), so I didn't notice.

When I get to US History, Olivia's sitting next to him. In my seat.

"Do you mind, Harlow?" she says.

The desks are pushed together in pairs, arranged in rows. She's leaning so far in his direction she's in danger of falling out of her chair. Meanwhile Ellis doesn't look at me, has no idea how many times I've told the story of his weekend for him today.

I drop into her usual seat behind him.

For the next thirty minutes I re-memorize the whorls and cowlicks in his hair. This whole thing is classic Ellis after catastrophe: Grab the closest person who shows interest and casually date them until the catastrophe resolves itself. He did the same thing in ninth grade, after finishing last in his first-ever cross-country race (Lila Baxter, five days); when Coop got an email from a college recruiter sophomore spring, the first of any track boys in our grade (Paige Michaud, seven days); when Tommy was out of school for two weeks this past January (Ian Taylor, thirteen days).

It gets worse. Mr. Delmonico gives back our quizzes from Friday, and he

hands me the wrong one because this has a huge B circled in red pen, except it's my name at the top. I can see the A on Ellis's quiz from here.

Olivia keeps touching his arm.

I fold my quiz into an accorded paper fan. Mr. Delmonico asks me to pay attention.

If Tommy had half the game Ellis does, he'd be too busy making out to go swimming when he shouldn't, and this wouldn't even be happening.

I refold my quiz into a fortune-teller, leaving all eight inside flaps blank so each time I land on one, I can make up whatever I need to hear.

7—Ask for extra credit and you shall receive.

3—Pole vaulting is the most dangerous of all track-and-field events.

8—Concussions. Impaling.

Mr. Delmonico takes my fortune-teller/quiz away.

I should be nice. One thing Olivia has going for her is her legs seem to go all the way from the floor to her chin.

Still, supposing I put up with her, I don't see her helping measure sand loss or make anti-plover posters. She likely won't last long—and then Ellis will replace her with whoever looks at him next. Which means he's pretty much on a crash course to ruining our summer plans.

It's because of Tommy that Ellis is acting this way. But if Ellis can cheer up just by kissing someone, maybe it can be that easy for Tommy too.

There's only one person I know who's come close to trying.

Ruby Lee and Tommy were pretty friendly fall semester, at least by Tommy's loner standards (they had a couple painting classes together and ate lunch with the other artsy weirdos). But they had a big falling-out in October. Ruby hasn't talked to him since, and her crew followed her lead. The only art kid who's spoken to me today was Ethan. Asked *How'd Tommy do it?* during second-period band and I honked my clarinet at him (B♭, staccato) until he retreated.

Ruby finds me by my locker at the end of the day. Comes right up to me with her shiny black hair, her clear skin. She's wearing purple lipstick and no other makeup, and the white parts of her Vans are graffitied with Sharpie spirals and stars. She leans her head against my open locker door.

"How is he?"

I can tell she's not just asking to be polite, or worse, to get juicy details she can share with her friends later. There's literally nothing to dislike about her, which is why I've been successfully avoiding her for months.

I slowly load up my backpack and describe Saturday in broad strokes. Tommy looked tired. His parents have already visited the hospital twice. We don't know how long he'll be there.

"I'm glad he's getting help," Ruby says when I'm done. "I feel like I should text him or something. Would that be weird?" My mouth gaping open. That thing that happens to pet fish sometimes where they can't close their mouths and they starve. And then the kicker: "This must be really strange for you."

I transform, betta fish to hummingbird. Pulse vibrating. "What do you mean?"

She scrapes the toe of one doodled sneaker against the other. "Ethan told us you were being really intense, but I think it's cool you're not letting people talk shit about him," she says. "I wouldn't wish this on anyone. Even him."

She pats my shoulder, which must mean my face is doing something weird.

It's not like me wrecking the one nice thing Tommy had is what made him depressed.

But it sure didn't help.

Ellis asks to eat dinner at my house even though our fridge is a wasteland of oceanwater samples and cold cut turkey. He says he's tired of diner food.

Translation: He doesn't want to spend time anywhere Tommy's absence feels too big.

We take turns telling my parents about school. Ellis ran good times during practice, so hopefully he can set another personal record at his meet next week and bump Coop off the varsity roster. My parents recount their day cataloging West Finch's beach post-storm. All their measurements and sand loss projections have to be updated and shared back with the National Ocean Service. They talk like it's business as usual—as if there aren't three intruders sitting on the jetty even now, tagging their selfies #SavingTheEnvironment and screwing up our plans.

"Don't you feel like if someone promises to blow something up, there shouldn't be any take-backs?" I ask as I twirl spaghetti around my fork.

"Those kids might be right, you know." Dad points at me with the veggie meatball speared on the end of his fork.

Mom nods. "Even we don't know what will happen if the jetty's torn down. It could make things worse."

Ellis catches my eye across the table. "A house just fell into the ocean. Seems like peak bad to me."

I beam down at my plate.

Then there's a long conversation about college. I move my pasta around while the three of them debate the merits of dining-hall pizza versus ramen, and if you have to have a roommate, whether it's better to have one or two. Ellis has a lot of inherited opinions about these things because of all the college visits Coop's done, but I don't have much to contribute. It's hard to picture living more than a half mile away from Ellis, let alone sharing a room with a stranger.

"We should visit a couple schools in August," Mom says, more to Dad than to me.

"Is there anywhere you're interested in, sweet pea?"

They all look at me. I stab my garlic bread into my pasta sauce until it

turns pink and soggy. “We’re waiting to see which schools want Ellis to run for them,” I say.

Ellis gives me a little half smile and then concentrates on his plate while my parents have an intense, wordless conversation across the table. I haven’t told them about The Plan in detail, but they know enough to be worried. Mom wins the staring contest. They drop it, for now.

Dad shovels more salad onto my plate. Clears his throat. “So, how’s Tommy doing?” he says in the same tone he’d use to ask about the weather.

Ellis had been gamely inhaling a second round of spaghetti. Now he’s forgotten how to chew. Not Heimlich worthy, but it gets close.

“Not sure,” he chokes out at last.

“He only gets to call home once a day,” I explain, trying to scold Dad with just a look.

Our nonverbal communication is not as good as his and Mom’s. “What does he do the rest of the time?”

Ellis jumps up from his chair. He holds his plate so we can all see it, empty but for a single strand of pasta.

“This is the best garlic bread of my entire life,” he announces.

We all watch the lonely spaghetti slide down his plate and drop soundlessly onto his chair. He turns on his heel and disappears into the kitchen.

I round on my dad. “Tommy talks to a shrink. Does arts and crafts. Who knows?”

He nudges his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “It seemed reasonable to think his brother might.”

We don’t stay for dessert.

Little critters like bunnies darting into the road. Outdoor cats. Ellis impatiently drums his fingers against his door, but if everyone drove like I do, there wouldn’t be accidents.

“Don’t forget we have Goose’s vet appointment Wednesday,” I remind

him as we pull into his driveway. It takes at least two people to get Goose in and out of the vet's office without her asphyxiating herself on her leash or nervous-peeing.

In front of us his house is dark. I put the car in park but he doesn't get out, just stares at his phone in his lap without waking it.

"He left a note after all," he says, voice flat. "Mom and Dad got them too. I guess he scheduled them to send later so we wouldn't go looking."

He unlocks his phone and hands it to me. It's open to an email from Tommy, delivered around lunchtime today:

I hope you get everything you want. I know you will.

-T

Below that, a detailed guide to caring for Goose.

So that answers whether Tommy was planning to swim back and whether he wanted someone to find him.

No and no.

"What does that even mean?" He rubs the back of his neck in a very Tommy way.

"Writing notes is nice," I try. "I mean, at least you were thought of. I'd want a note, if it were me."

I hand his phone back and casually, so casually, pull my own phone out of my pocket and check my email. Nothing. Not even a "Screw you, Harlow." If this was somehow my fault, he would've written to me. He'd have wanted to make sure I felt guilty for his death for the rest of my life. I know because I would've done the same to him.

"Whatever. I'm done trying to figure him out."

I nod supportively as I refresh my inbox again. Just to be sure.

He peeks at me out of the corner of his eye. "So, Coop is going to that cross-country camp in Vermont again."

"Camp Hood?" Inbox empty. The relief is instant.

He tells the windshield: "I kind of want to go."

I blink. Pluck at my still-buckled seat-belt strap. "What for?"

"It's perfect. Distance runs every day, hill workouts." His voice gets loud, like he's trying to scare something off. "Coop got varsity when he came back last year and he met tons of new people."

He met girls, mainly.

"There are hills here," I point out. "I'll find you a hill. You can run it until you puke."

He presses his hands together and makes a single fist. "I already put down the deposit."

This isn't strictly part of our get-into-the-same-college Plan, but if it gets him on varsity, it's certainly Plan-adjacent. I should be proud of him for showing initiative, probably. Instead I feel myself plunge to the bottom of the Y's pool: pressure on my eardrums, the sharp pinch of chlorine up my nose. I'm meant to be retrieving something, but if I open my eyes, I'll make the ten feet of water above me real. It will crush me. I squeeze the steering wheel until I run out of air and the feeling passes, then a bit longer.

"How would you even pay for it?"

"I'll mow lawns or something. It's not that much."

I sink into the car seat. All I really know about this camp is, it's four weeks right in the middle of summer. I'll spend June dreading it and August trying to catch up on all the parts of his life I've missed. Even now I can't see him. In the dark he's just a smooth ridge of nose, a gently rounded forehead.

"Harlow?" He waves a hand in front of my face and laughs a little. I'm too busy merging with my seat's easy-clean upholstery to join him. "What's going on in there?"

The darkness shifts as he lets his hand come to rest on the crown of my head, heavy and warm.

"I'll help you with erosion stuff before I go." He pets my hair gently. "I just want to do my own thing this one time, okay?"

If he can leave for a month this easily, what's to stop him from wanting that again after we graduate? This useless running camp, Olivia—they're little Band-Aids over an infected wound that needs stitches. He isn't used to feeling like he messed up something important. He doesn't know how to deal. Not like I do.

If Tommy hadn't asked Ellis to watch his dog, if he hadn't picked that exact spot on the beach to start swimming, if he didn't make it so hard to be nice to him, then Ellis would be getting ready to save our town, not run away from it.

"You didn't have to do your own thing last week. Suddenly now you do." I can hear how whiny I sound. So I freeze the fear in me, and when I speak next, my voice is ice. "I wonder what changed."

For a few seconds, he doesn't move, just lets himself go under too. The deep end. Ten feet. Then he takes his hand off my head.

"Nice, Harlow." He fumbles with his seat belt. I want him to yell at me, but we don't get into those kinds of fights, no matter how much I sometimes deserve it. Like now.

"Is there a universe where you stay?"

A queasy hush falls over the car. Ellis is sitting still for once instead of tapping his fingers, jiggling a foot, forever throwing his hair out of his eyes.

"I'm a little tired of West Finch right now," he says.

"Tired of West Finch" meaning his family, the diner, the erosion? Or me?

Yes, there's a universe where he spends the summer with me. No, that's not the one he wants.

"What am I supposed to do without you?"

I can only ask because we're in the dark of his driveway and I have the steering wheel to hold on to. My fingers wrap all the way around and then some, my nails sharp half-moons in my palms. He looks at me and I look at him, but neither of us can see each other.

"You'll figure something out." He hits the button to unlock the doors and touches my elbow. A tiny pinch. "You always do."

Five

HARLOW

Thursday, March 30

Goose's appointment Wednesday goes about as badly as it can. Bad like, instead of *You're all set!* they say *Let's run a few more tests.* Then, feeling her stomach: *How long has this lump been here?* The annual checkup turns into blood drawn from a fat pinch of her thigh, an MRI, and a pamphlet about letting your dog die with dignity.

The vet glances at me three times as she delivers the news. She must know what I do: that Goose's cancer came from eating a hefty portion of the chocolate chips I spilled on the MacQueen + Bell kitchen floor three months ago. I mean, I cleaned up most of them but she's fast for an old dog, and I'm not allowed to touch Goose because I make bad luck like other people make white blood cells.

Supposedly.

Tommy's rule.

It's not that there's no hope. It's just that hope is a seven-thousand-dollar course of chemo and surgery, and the MacQueens are not a pet-insurance-type family.

No matter how many alternate universes Ellis imagines, we can't make our past selves yell Tommy's name on that beach. Can't take back the shitty things we've—okay, *I've*—said behind his back and to his face. We can only fix things from here on out.

My plan takes no time to come together, like it's been ready a long time, waiting for me to get brave enough to notice it.

The morning after the vet, Ellis finds me sitting cross-legged and picking brown, velvety scabs off the old picnic table under me.

I don't tell him to hurry up and shower or we'll be late to school. I don't scold him for the extra miles he's just run, the ones his track coach doesn't know about. I don't put my finger to his lips to make him keep his bad news to himself. This new plan of mine requires patience.

He's still panting when he says, "They're letting him out of the hospital. Tonight."

My panic: three thousand bats. Me: the bridge's underbelly where they sleep.

It hasn't even been a week. Plus no one's told Tommy that Goose is sick, and that should definitely be a consideration.

"Can they hold his room for twenty-four hours in case he needs it? Can they do late checkout?"

"It's not a hotel," Ellis says.

A flurry of wings. I know that.

"Mom said he's 'feeling better.'" He does the air quotes. "I'm pretty sure they can't make him stay."

He climbs up beside me, face shiny from his run, and together we look out at the ragged blue seawall behind the diner. Walls like it extend down the coastline, a border between sea and shore: rock and cement, wood and metal. An ever-expanding patchwork as sea levels rise. The diner's waist-high wall has been built and rebuilt probably ten times. After the fifth, Clifford Samuels and Jim MacQueen quit using concrete to bind the rocks together. The pile's only wall-shaped right now because of gravity and hope.

Beyond it, the stone jetty stretches a quarter mile into the sea like an evil

black tongue. A couple of the protestors from California are squatting about halfway down its length, silhouetted against the waves.

“Let’s decide how to tell him,” I say.

“Let’s not.”

“He’s going to find out.”

Ellis rolls his eyes. “We can’t say ‘your dog’s dying’ as soon as he walks in the door.”

There’s an epidemic of people in this town incapable of looking their problems in the face. Half of West Finch won’t believe in global warming until their houses get flooded and there’s a starfish stuck to the refrigerator.

“Let’s give him a week. He needs to readjust to the stressors of home”—rudely, Ellis gestures at me—“and we need to find seven thousand dollars. You can plan a quick fundraiser, right? This is totally your thing.”

That smile: one dimpled corner slightly higher than the other and eye contact so direct it makes me squirm. A look like he believes I can do anything.

I want to hug him. Say yes. But I’m not doing a bottle drive for this dog, or anything else that takes attention away from tearing down the jetty and saving the diner. Not if there’s another way.

“The vet said she shouldn’t suffer,” I try. “Maybe Tommy will agree.”

“Sure. And maybe he’ll thank us for letting her get sick on our watch.”

“Your watch,” I mutter before I can stop myself.

“Excuse me?”

I examine my violet fingernails. “Goose is your responsibility, not mine. For the record.”

He hops off the picnic table and lands hard in the grass. “If you want to tell him his beloved dog is dying, fine. He already hates you. Just don’t say anything awful.”

Sea spray mists my cheeks and I wipe it away. Picture Tommy diving into a steel-gray wall of water again. Ruby Lee’s eyes going wide. I’ve done enough damage already. He’s right about that.

Then I think that's not quite fair. Tommy decided he didn't like me before we'd even met, but out of the goodness of my heart, I still make efforts. When I see dog grooming coupons in the newspaper, do I not clip them out and slip them under his bedroom door? Don't I look at the scribbly drawings he leaves around the MacQueen + Bell house with the misguided hope that Ellis will notice anything past his own belly button? Was it not me telling him said art looked like trash that pushed him to get better, until now, when he's so good his stuff knocks the words out of my mouth?

Okay, yes. Maybe I said some things I shouldn't have in the days before his latest meltdown. How was I supposed to know? Like always, he wrinkled his nose when he found himself in the same room as me. Rolled his eyes whenever I spoke. One day I scolded him for leaving a Lucky Charms box in the pantry, empty except for a few lonely frosted Xs. *You really should throw those things out instead of letting other people get their hopes up.* Without breaking eye contact, he ripped the package from my hand and threw it in the trash, cardboard box and all. And he knows how I feel about recycling.

I'm not saying all this makes up for my behavior. Only that I wouldn't tell somebody "just die already" unprovoked.

Six

TOMMY

"The no-art thing. That for safety reasons?"

The nurse, a redhead, stops halfway through my hospital room's door. No, not door. Archway that leaks light from the nurses' station all night. I point at the blank wall directly across from my bed because he looks confused.

"I get you can't frame stuff. But what about a poster and tape?"

The nurse peers at the blank wall. Me. An *is this kid in danger of hurting himself and others?* look. This would've for sure ended up on my chart if I'd said it yesterday. But I'm almost not this guy's problem anymore.

He watches my flawless performance of Boy Swallows Pills and drops off a "dinner" tray before leaving. Half a peeled orange split into frosted-glass wedges the only edible thing on it. I choose one segment and lean back against my pillow.

When I close my eyes, I can see the washed-out shitty abstract that should go on that wall. Feel the oil paint's body as I work it with my palette knife. Here's a thing Ruby and I used to do: sit beside each other with our elbows knocking, her right-handedness hitting my left, pick a thing, and go. But this time my fingers don't move with that old twitch of wanting to make shit. My hands are about as alive as two loaves of bread. Thank fucking god.

There's not much to pack. Balled-up clothes. The history textbook I haven't opened since December. Mom grabbed it at random from the tower on my desk at home. Maybe she hoped reading about the Great Depression

would put things in perspective. I flip it open and there, right there, on the inside front cover. This isn't even mine. I touch my brother's name with my thumb.

He's not coming. I know it. But I remind myself so I won't forget: Ellis will not be out there when you walk through that archway.

My duffel bag zipper catches. Hands still doughy, useless. I rub them on my jeans. Think of how the waves tossed Cliff's boat like it weighed nothing. No, don't. Yank the zipper again. Piece of shit. But god, how small we were. How hard Cliff must've searched, as if there was a damn thing special about me. Just one more creature treading water. The linoleum under my feet now cold under my hand. The coffee I forced down this morning in my mouth. Antidepressants don't do much for seasickness. Fun fact.

Why now? the doctors wanted to know when I got here.

Why *not* now? Would I be any less a burden on my parents when I was eighteen? Twenty? Would there be something worth giving a shit about? Because from what I've seen, things get small or they get empty. If you think your best days are behind you then they probably are.

Why now? Some things have stories behind them and some things don't.

"Ready?" It's the redheaded nurse again. I abandon my half-zipped bag and follow him before the tide comes back for me.

Just Mom. That's my final answer. It's close to dinnertime (see: suspicious-looking tray) so Dad will want to stay behind and keep at least his half of their restaurant slash bakery open.

Some parents can be two places at once. I've seen it. They're on the sidelines at Ellis's meets, talking on phones out of one side of their mouth and cheering for their kids out of the other. Dad's not one of them, but he's managed to hit visiting hours a few times. Once with Mom. It was weird seeing them sit in the same room without arguing. Clinical Depression: Bringing Families Together.

I scan the common area. Beige couch, tan armchair, plastic fern, no Ellis. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

Mom pulls me into a hug, then holds me at arm's length. "How are you?"

My face a mask. I don't want Mom thinking I'm disappointed to see her. I expected this. But part of me still hoped he'd show. I shrug one shoulder. *Good* won't cut it anymore. Even if I were good who'd believe me? "Fine."

Getting discharged takes a long time. I have my new prescription. A typed list of therapist referrals. I don't have to see the names to know I won't feel comfortable spilling my guts to any of them. While Mom finishes up I go back to my room to grab my bag. If they put up something on that wall across from the bed, I hope I'm never back here to see it.

"Still packing?"

Nurse back for the third time, Mom asking me to hustle, the next sad kid who needs this bed for a few days. Wrong guesses all.

My brother's leaning in the doorway. Hair washed and quite possibly blow-dried, white stripes running down the sides of his track pants.

I want to shove him back into the common room with its fake plants and lifeless couches. Away from these rooms with no doors, bathrooms without locks. Why did I want him to see me here?

"When'd you get here?" I twist my plastic hospital bracelet back and forth on my wrist. He wasn't out there just now. Sure of it.

"I was making sure Goose is comfortable. She's in the car." He cracks his knuckles and considers my duffel bag. "Need help?" I say nothing as he brute-forces the zipper closed. He's glad to have a job. I get that. He throws the strap over his shoulder and looks around again. Nods. "Cheery."

When we were little, we'd trade places for no reason except to prove we could. Like when we wore matching polos on picture day because he was better at smiling even then. Now I couldn't pay him to swap with me.

Tell him they're not allowed to have even the worst of paintings, I think. Tell him Cliff tried to send Mom with a whole jar of sea glass for decoration and it wasn't allowed. But I shouldn't have to tell him anything. Shame is a wet blanket across my shoulders so heavy he must feel it too. Why can't he feel it? I suck in a quick gasp of air through my teeth. I've twisted my

bracelet too tight. Fingers turning pink. I shove my hands in my pockets. "How's Goose?"

"Great!" Voice loud, smile gobbling up the rest of his face. He should see someone about that. "She's in the car. Like I said. With the windows cracked, don't worry."

When I was at my lowest, Goose curled up in bed beside me and it was like, as long as you're breathing, I'm breathing. I need to get out there. Now. She's got half a crayon box in her coat alone and I want to remember colors other than beiges and grays.

Mom makes the nurses talk her through all my discharge paperwork one last time. Then we wave goodbye and walk outside. The sky showing off. Brilliant, embarrassing blue.

Mom uses the walk to the car to catch me up on all the requirements for my return to society. I must sleep normal hours. I must take my medication. I agree because I want those things too. Also because what else can I do? She hands me my phone and I immediately stash it in my back pocket without checking it. The most important part of being healthy is for other people to think I'm healthy. As long as I'm managing my depression, and managing other people's opinions of my depression, they can't put me back here.

"We have an appointment with your guidance counselor next week," Mom says. "No one expects you to go back this semester, but summer school is an option."

Then the conversation stops because Goose sees me through Mom's car window. She's barking in this way that makes my bones ache: a half-howl, half-crying sound because even though I abandoned her, somehow she still loves me. I throw open the back door and lower my forehead to meet hers. Hold her against me as long as she'll stand it.

Ellis takes shotgun and Mom turns the key in the ignition. I climb into the back seat next to Goose and buckle up. Reach over to do the same for her. But she's just wearing her basic harness, not the one that hooks into the seat belt.

“We couldn’t find it,” Mom says when I point this out. Then she backs out of the parking spot anyway. I throw a protective arm around Goose’s body.

“It was on my desk.” I’m looking at the front seat as if through binoculars, the wrong end. Fingers lost in fur. “It was in the emails.”

Mom glances at Ellis. He stares determinedly out the window.

I spent weeks getting rid of junk. Divvying up old artwork. Writing and rewriting those damn emails. I’d already been checked into the hospital and had my phone taken away before I remembered, and I stayed up all that first night thinking of a fix. I could try getting permission to use the nurses’ station computer. Beg Mom to never read her email again. But when she called the next morning I said I was feeling better and that was too big a lie to add on to.

“Did you read them?” I ask now. I want the emails to be sitting in a spam folder somewhere. But I also want my family to have memorized every word.

Mom glances at Ellis again. A look I can’t decipher. About me, not to me.

“We read them, honey,” she says.

“Sorry,” Ellis adds, voice raw. Maybe he’s been taking this harder than it looks. Maybe they both have.

Or they just don’t give a shit about Goose. At least now I know. And then I hate myself for thinking that because isn’t Mom taking time from work to come get me? I shouldn’t have put any of them through this in the first place.

Mom’s eyes appear briefly in the rearview mirror but I don’t have anything else to say. Goose sniffs my armpit. Stretches to lick my cheek, stumbles, lands with her head in my lap. I use the bottom of my shirt to wipe the brown stains under her eyes (also in the note). She doesn’t squirm like normal. Just sighs happily and, too fast, falls asleep.

“Is something wrong with her?” Not letting my voice go sharp. Touching my finger to her ear as I say it and she doesn’t paw my hand away or move or blink.

Ellis’s nose almost touches the window. Must be something good out

there. Ten-car pileup at least. “I took her to the vet Wednesday. Like your email said. They sent us home with some pills.”

“For what?” I demand.

“She wasn’t really eating,” he admits.

I press my hand to the coarse fur on her side. The shallow swell-fall of her breath. But she was fine when I left. I wouldn’t have gone if she wasn’t. Whatever junk he’s giving her, I’m throwing it out as soon as we get home.

Mom looks at Ellis a third time with raised eyebrows.

He sighs. “So, listen. There’s a party waiting for you at the diner. Real low-key. But, um, like, be prepared. It’s possible Harlow went overboard with the decorations.”

“You don’t have to go,” Mom adds quickly.

No time ago I would’ve taken her up on that. Spent the night at the Samuelses’ and pretended trading in your family is a thing you can do. But I can’t make myself give a shit. Harlow’s been dead to me for months, anyway. Since whatever day I landed beside Ruby at lunch, flipped open my sketchbook, and she said, “Don’t.” Looked at me like I’d killed her cat. I remember the trees had already flamed out, leaves sweetly rotting, brown as dirt. Must’ve been October.

But the leaves weren’t all that was rotten.

During my shift at the diner that afternoon, I felt everyone’s eyes on me. Not everyone’s. Harlow’s. She bolted and I tore after her. I caught her in the entryway, my hands flat against the wall on either side of her head. “What did you say to her?” Jaw clenched so hard I had to talk through my teeth. Careful not to let my fingertips brush even her hair. Everything she touches combusts. Brothers lose legs, pet fish find their way to the toilet, girls who once dragged their easels next to yours at the start of every class stop.

Harlow’s earlobe dangled dangerously close to my thumb. “So sorry.” She smiled a smile stolen from my brother. “Can’t remember.”

I wanted to squish her skull between my bare hands. Would have without Cliff’s hand on my shoulder yanking me away.

In the painting studio after school the next day: “It was Harlow, wasn’t it? That bitch. What did she say to you?”

Ruby: “It really doesn’t matter. I don’t want any part of . . . this.” She gestured at me.

Copy of a copy of a *Where are you in this work, Tommy?* brainfogged colordrained me.

So what if a dead girl throws me a party. So what if West Finch wants to gawk. I’m fine. I’ll get good at saying that. Maybe I’ll even feel it.

Sand hisses under the tires as we pull into the too-full MacQueen’s parking lot. I ignore the rising tide of dread that comes with walking Goose to the signpost out front and attaching her harness to the chain coiled in the grass. She whines. “I know,” I say. We both can’t believe I’m leaving her so soon. Or it’s just me. Only a dozen steps toward the diner and she’s already curled into a comma blinking back sleep. I wind her leash around my fist. Promise I’ll be back.

The dining room’s half-assedly decorated for a child’s birthday. Confetti and balloons. Homemade WELCOME HOME sign along the back wall. To be fair, I don’t think they make “You survived!” party sets. Harlow’s corpse smiles and says something nice, which means it’s fake, and anyway, I can’t see or hear dead girls. Dad, all eight feet of him and none of it tears, comes out of his kitchen. He says, “Feeling better?” or something like it. Good that he didn’t come to the hospital. Bullet dodged.

But then his arms wrap around me once and again. Three times total. Realizing how hard I was working to hold myself upright when I let myself lean into him. The kind of tree they make state parks for.

He doesn’t always show up but when he does here’s how it looks. All the times he insisted I bring Goose to his place even though he’s allergic to dogs. Vacuum roaring to life as soon as Mom collected us Sunday mornings. Why should I get to ask him to say the right thing when I’ve spent the last year glad he didn’t try? No *You okay, son?* or even *What’s really going on?* when I

picked up another shift at the diner because it was a clock-in, clock-out, bury my feelings by helping someone else bury theirs in a basket of fried clams type gig, better than therapy. I wanted him to leave me alone and he did.

Now—palm hot on my scalp, eyes squinting like he’s really trying to see me—he says, “Hang in there. Can you do that for me?” Not sure I can, not sure I want to, but I nod. The least I can do.

He lets me go and Harlow’s right behind him. All clouds of brown, frizzy hair. Dark eyelashes and darker brows. All white face with freckles, palms smooth, knees unscraped, unscarred, both feet present and accounted for.

She hugs me too.

Sweat and orange blossom. Cold hands and conviction. It ends before I think of a nice way to say back the hell off. My parents are close enough to hear and I don’t want them thinking I have rage issues or something. Though when it comes to Harlow maybe I do.

Even after she retreats to the other side of the room it’s like I’m in an orange grove. My nose must be more sensitive after the hospital, where the only smells were cleaning products and whatever body fluid they were mopping up. But I’m fine. I’m hanging in here.

There’s bad music. There’s pie. More people. Pat and Jeanie Albertson. They manage the bed-and-breakfast where Ellis and I used to spend every other weekend with Dad. The Caskills, who run the nearby marina. Yes, I’m happy I’m home too. I’m doing just fine. The Turners with their five kids. Chuck Halstead. Fine, fine. Harlow by the counter watching me. I remember the semester Ms. Rousseau took away the black and white paint. There’s purple in the crook of her arm. Auburn in the curl by her right ear. The hospital’s beiges and grays weren’t so bad after all.

Fine.

Bea and Yvette. Wendy Michaels.

The Samuelses. They got one of my goodbye emails too. Theirs was

longer than any of my family's. There was more I had to thank them for. Kindnesses they didn't owe me and I didn't really earn. I didn't think I'd have to see them so soon.

Mrs. Samuels kisses my cheek. Cliff squeezes my shoulder.

"I found this yesterday." He drops a tiny, perfect shell into my palm. No bigger than my smallest fingernail. "Thought of you."

A wave swells. I'm ten years old balancing a warm slip of water in a mussel's shell asking does he know we only get the sparkle of shells on our beaches because the mollusks inside have died.

Only this time I can't speak. Softly Cliff says the same thing he did back then: "Ain't that something to look at? Something good from something bad."

I can never do this to him again.

The seasick feeling washes through me. I clench my fist around the shell. Five seconds. Ten. I'm about to go overboard, but inside my nose it's like a goddamn orange juice commercial. Fuck Harlow and her party. I drop to one knee and yank my sneaker untied so I can re-knot it. Make an exit plan. When the feeling passes, I manage a thanks and talk loudly about getting some water.

I escape through the restaurant kitchen—Dad's half of MacQueen's diner and bakery—then out the back door. It opens onto a patch of dead grass with a dumpster and the old seawall past that.

I unlock my phone. Dismiss all the messages, missed calls, and voice mails. Then the sent folder in my email. A note to Mom. To Dad. Ellis. Cliff and Mrs. Samuels. I delete all four without reading them. Empty my trash.

Once that's done I throw Cliff's seashell as hard as I can over the wall, into the waves, knowing they'll take care of it like they take care of everything but me. They roar back hungrily but I don't have anything else I'm willing to give them. Not right now.

From behind me I hear, "You're littering? *Seriously?*"

Salt sweat orange blossom cold fingers hot tar.

“Never mind,” she says. “I don’t want to know.”

I don’t want a lot of things. To live. To die. To swim or stay dry. To know
her by just her voice. But I do.

Harlow Prout.