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This is Not Your Life

Ella M. Carroll-Smith
University of Southern Maine

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This Is Not Your Life

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

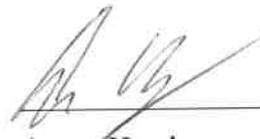
Ella Carroll-Smith

2016

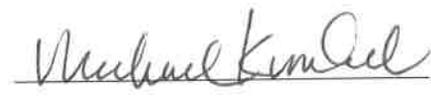
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 15, 2016

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Ella Carroll-Smith entitled *This Is Not Your Life* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



Advisor
Aaron Hamburger



Reader
Michael Kimball



Director
Justin Tussing

Accepted



Interim Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
Adam-Max Tuchinsky

ABSTRACT

My novel, *This Is Not Your Life* examines themes of identity, class, and fate. Identical twin sisters, Annie and Quinn Graves, shared a troubled childhood, which led each of them down very different life paths. Annie is now climbing the corporate ladder at work, while Quinn leads the perfect family life in Richmond's elite suburbs. And yet, they're both unhappy, yearning for something different than the lives that seem to have chosen them. The two women decide to switch places for a while, hoping for a change of scenery and lifestyle. However, that decision has potentially disastrous consequences for them both.

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Preface

I wish I could say that writing was something that always came naturally to me or that I've always known I wanted to be a writer, but that's not true. In fact, I often still feel like I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing.

What I do know is that writing is what I keep coming back to. I've skipped down other career paths before, but they never led me anywhere. I tried insurance for a while, thought about being a doctor, signed up to take the LSATs and then chickened out on the day of the test. I've never regretted any of those experiences, but I've never felt the urge to return to those professions either. Even though writing hasn't always been a constant in my life, it's always been close by. There have been times when I wouldn't write anything new for a year, but there are also times when I have so many new ideas that I feel as if I can't write them down fast enough.

I never imagined that writing could be a viable option for me, career-wise. Instead, I thought that it could only ever be a hobby, and maybe that's why I never took it too seriously or tried to force it when the words didn't come naturally. For some reason I believed that, if I was meant to be a writer, it was something that would just happen. But that's not the way life works. Things don't happen unless you *make* them happen and writing is no different.

For a long time, I didn't know what kind of writer I was, or even what kind of writer I wanted to be. I simply liked to write, which was fine for a while, but something

happens when you begin your MFA in Creative Writing. Suddenly you think a lot longer and a lot harder about things that you never paid attention to before.

I used to always start, but never finish stories. Writing a book seemed impossible to me, and while I didn't let that deter me from starting, I started a lot of stories. A myriad of unfinished novels have taken up residence on my hard drive.

When I quit my job working in insurance back in 2013, I moved home to “reboot” (in other words, have a bit of a nervous breakdown since I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life). While I was working a number of part-time jobs and living at home, my mom asked me if I would sign up to run the Marine Corps Marathon with her in Washington D.C. I'd been a runner since high school, but never competitively. It was something I just did for myself. I'd always wanted to try to run a marathon, but it was never something I thought I'd actually do – just something I thought I'd talk about, something that would forever remain on my bucket list.

The only reason I said yes was because I had no good reason *not* to run a marathon.

Training for a marathon, especially your first one, is pretty grueling. It involves long hours spent pounding the pavement week after week as your mileage increases. There are days when you never want to run again, when the very thought of running makes you want to kill whoever invented running. But I'd committed. I'd told too many people I was doing this, and my dignity was now at stake. So, day after day, I got back out there.

I've always gotten my best thinking done when I'm running. Story ideas, witty comebacks to comments people made to me three weeks ago, grocery lists – you name it,

and I've thought about it while on a run. During marathon training, I got a *lot* of thinking done. Much of it was pointless, but there were some seeds in there. Ultimately, I decided that I would try to write a book. Really try, not make some half-assed attempt like I'd done before. I decided that if I could run a marathon, I could write a book.

Writing is a lot like running. Some days you have good runs and can't wait to get back out there. Other days, you get a cramp in your side during the first mile. When you get a cramp, there's no magic solution to make it go away. You can try massaging it, you can try stopping and stretching, but more than likely, you're just going to have to run through the pain. It's hard, but if it were easy, everyone would run a marathon.

There are days when I feel like a sham as a writer, days when I honestly forget how to write. On those depressing days, I question every decision I've ever made to get me to this point where I'm parading around, calling myself a "writer." But those days pass and inevitably lead to good days – days when the words flow and I don't even know where they're coming from. All I know is that I have to get them down before they disappear, before I forget. With writing, like with running, you just have to put the miles in. It's the only way to get anywhere. If you put the miles in, then the results will come. Maybe not at first, but over time, your endurance starts to increase.

It was during my marathon training that I started plotting my first real novel and dedicated myself to writing it. I would schedule my writing sessions just like I scheduled my practice runs. In my mind, they were official chunks of time blocked off on my calendar. Slowly, over the course of many months, my novel started to take shape. My word count increased with my mile count. By the time my marathon rolled around, on the

last weekend of October, I was more than half way finished, which, up until that point, was as far as I'd ever gotten with a piece of writing.

Running the actual marathon was fun until mile eighteen. At mile eighteen, I hit my wall. I wanted to stop. I couldn't feel my legs, my lungs burned, and every muscle in my body felt sore and limp at the same time. But I refused to walk. I hadn't trained that hard and that long just to give up. So I pushed past mile eighteen, past the wall, and crossed the finish line in four hours and eight minutes. I'd aimed for around four hours and couldn't believe I'd actually accomplished such a feat. After nearly a decade of telling people I wanted to run a marathon someday, I actually did it. I put in the miles and made it happen.

Finishing a marathon changed the way I viewed my goals. Before then, I tended to view some of my goals as so much larger than myself – as these insurmountable things that loomed in front of me. But that's not true. No goal is bigger than you unless you make it so. What's most important to understand, however, is that achieving a lifelong goal is not something that happens overnight. Whether your goal is running a marathon or writing a novel, it's a step-by-step process. One of my favorite quotes is: "To begin, begin." Stop making a to-do list and just start already.

I finished my first novel a few months after I crossed the finish line at the Marine Corps Marathon. In retrospect, it's a pretty awful novel. I didn't really know what I was doing, but that's not what mattered at the time. All that mattered was that I kept doing it. When I finally finished, I had a lot of momentum, but hit the dreaded "what's next?" impasse. I knew it wasn't very good and I knew that I still had a lot to learn before I could ever put out something even remotely publishable. That's when I finally decided,

after about two years of telling people that I would by no means consider graduate school because it was a waste of money, that I would go back to graduate school to get my MFA in Creative Writing.

My goals were two-fold: first, I wanted to become a better writer, second, and almost more importantly, I wanted to develop my writing community. I didn't have any writer friends that I could lean on or complain to or seek out for advice. Writing is a very lonely endeavor. For the most part, you're just sitting alone in a room talking to yourself, so it's essential to have a community that can relate to what you're going through, and to find people with whom you can commiserate. At Stonecoast, I have found my community.

When I first applied to Stonecoast, I knew I wanted to write a better novel. I had a few ideas swimming around, and had a few false starts before finally settling on the idea that would go on to be my thesis. I also knew that I wanted to try my hand at a few other genres. At Stonecoast, just because you're a fiction student, that doesn't mean that you're strictly relegated to fiction for your entire career. On a whim, I decided to take a screenwriting workshop with Mike Kimball. I'd always known I wanted to try screenwriting, more as a writing and dialogue exercise than anything else. I never expected to love it as much as I did. After taking Michael Kimball's Dialogue Intensive workshop, I knew that screenwriting was something I wanted to dedicate more time and effort to. With his encouragement as my mentor, I spent my second semester working on an original TV pilot script as well as a spec script for the hit FOX show *New Girl*. Mike suggested I focus on TV writing for my third semester project, which I ended up titling "So You Think You Want to Write a Pilot?: The Ins and Outs of Developing an Original

TV Series.” Elizabeth Searle mentored the project and helped me develop another original pilot script.

Between my second and third semesters at Stonecoast, I decided that TV writing was something I wanted to pursue professionally. In August of 2016, I packed up my car and moved across the country from Pennsylvania to Los Angeles. It’s by far the craziest thing I’ve ever done – even crazier than deciding to run a marathon. It was scary and there are still days when I wonder if I’ve made a huge mistake, but there comes a time in life when you have to bet on yourself.

What appeals to me most about writing for TV is that it’s a communal process. The act of writing, in and of itself, is very solitary. Writing for TV, however, involves multiple writers sitting in a room together, brainstorming and bouncing ideas off of each other. I tend to get my best ideas when I have a sounding board, or someone to build momentum with. Additionally, being in the writer’s room allows you to get instant feedback, which is both appealing and somewhat intimidating. If you pitch a joke and it’s not very funny, you’re going to know right away. TV writers are on a strict deadline and there’s no time to waste on bad or dead-end ideas. I can see myself growing the most in a writer’s room, working for a TV comedy. Eventually, I’d even like to be a showrunner.

I haven’t completely strayed from fiction, however. After spending two semesters mainly focused on teleplays, I knew I had to get back to my novel. Screenwriting is fun, but I think of it as the skeleton of a project. When you’re writing fiction, you get to play around with the details that don’t even make it into a script. Writing a novel is about fleshing everything out – the nitty-gritty details are what make a story great and I missed being able to explore those.

One of my first workshops at Stonecoast was with Aaron Hamburger, and afterward, I knew that I wanted to work with him at some point in my Stonecoast career. His advice on building characters and creating a sense of place resonated with me – he’s the first person I ever heard use the phrase “unknown unknowns” and that’s something I think about constantly in my writing now. Sometimes, I’m even a little paranoid about it.

What are the things I don’t even know that I don’t know? Those are the little details that make all the difference – the fleshy parts of a story that readers latch on to and remember: What’s in your character’s pockets? If all of their wishes came true, what would their life look like? Aaron has encouraged me to ask questions I never would have thought of before, in an effort to delve deeper into my characters and give my worlds more texture.

During one of his seminars, Aaron said something that really stood out to me: One of the most neglected, yet most important aspect of any story, is the setting. Before coming to Stonecoast, I hadn’t given too much thought to developing a sense of place. I simply thought that I could describe what places looked like and get by on that alone. I quickly learned that the process of developing a fictional world is much more involved than I’d originally believed. In Aaron’s workshops, he’s helped me see that plot, character, and place aren’t three separate entities. They all bleed into each other. Sense of character helps develop a sense of place and vice versa. Furthermore, characters are what move the story forward. Under Aaron’s tutelage, my approach to writing and reading has changed for the better.

A funny thing happens when you’re studying creative writing. You don’t read books the same way you used to. You can’t help but be more analytical; you read

between the lines and appreciate nuances that you otherwise wouldn't notice. It's almost like watching a sport; it's more exciting once you've played the game yourself. Studying creative writing has changed the way I read books, watch movies, and listen to other people. I'm constantly trying to find those savory details – the ones that really make a story.

I think that my way of discovering those savory bits is by pushing myself. Pushing myself to run a marathon, pushing myself to go to grad school, and, most recently, pushing myself to move across the country, to a city I'd never even been to, where I didn't know a soul. I have an obsession with clean slates: new places, new people, new opportunities. With a clean slate, you have the most room to grow. It's just like how a blank page can be scary, but it's also exciting. With a blank page, the opportunities are endless. I tend to think of different stages of my life as blank pages in and of themselves.

I've now turned to the chapter in my life where I will attempt to become a professional writer. Right now, I don't have many words written yet. My dream would be to write for a show like *The Office* while continuing to write novels and even adapting them for the screen. Right now, however, I'm still just trying to get my feet under me in this brand new, overwhelming city. I like to fantasize about the future. Sometimes, it's the only thing that gets me by. I see it going something like this:

INT. NETFLIX WRITER'S ROOM – DAY – A FEW MONTHS FROM NOW
THREE WRITERS sit around an oblong table.

WRITER #1

They didn't even want to see a script. Ella pitched the idea and BAM - straight-to-series order.

WRITER #2

I know, she's incredible. I'm so honored to even be working on her show. She's so nice, too. So humble and giving.

WRITER #3

Like a modern day Mother Theresa.

WRITER #1

No wonder she climbed the ranks so fast.

ELLA enters, followed by her ASSISTANT.

ASSISTANT

HBO called again. They want to know if you're interested in developing an original series for them.

ELLA

Again? Don't they know I'm showrunning for this hit Netflix series now?

ASSISTANT

I told them, but they're very persistent. They sent you a wine gift basket. I put it in your office. Also, you've got more fan mail from Tom Perrotta. He said he loved your latest novel and wants to know if you'd co-write something with him.

ELLA

Oh, that Tom. He's such a character. Tell him I'll think about it.

WRITER #1

Good morning, Ella!

ELLA

Morning, gang. You guys ready to get down to business?

WRITER #2

Where do you think we should start?

ELLA

The beginning would probably be a good place.

All three writers laugh.

WRITER #1

You're hilarious!

WRITER #2

Where does she come up with this stuff?

WRITER #3

How about if we start when the main character moves back home with her parents?

ELLA

I think that beginning is ripe with possibilities.

END OF SCENE.

This Is Not Your Life

Chapter 1

Annie

“You can’t get the Caesar salad. I’m getting the Caesar salad,” Quinn said, leaning across the table to indicate the gravity of the situation.

“We can both order the same thing,” Annie said

Shaking her head, Quinn pulled back to her side of the booth. “People always look at us funny when we do that.” Quinn was always far more conscious of the fact that they were identical twins. After twenty-eight years of living with a carbon copy, Annie tended to forget that it wasn’t the norm.

“Fine,” Annie relented. “You get the salad. I’ll get the Caesar wrap.”

“Oh.” Quinn paused. “A wrap sounds good.”

“Quinn!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Quinn said, shaking her head. “I’m getting the salad. It’s decided.”

Annie and Quinn folded the oversized, faux leather-bound menus in unison and laid them on the edge of the wooden table. They sat in a window booth. On the other side of the glass, Carytown's streets were bustling with pedestrians.

Annie didn't think she'd ever been to this particular establishment before. But maybe she had. When in Carytown – Richmond's trendiest district – it was difficult to keep track of all the restaurants that specialized in organic, local, farm-to-table cuisine.

“So how are the munchkins?” Annie asked after a bored, nose-ringed waitress took their order after listing off the day's wheatgrass-infused soup specials.

“Oh they're fine,” Quinn said. “Isaac has his first sleepover this weekend. It's Ben C's birthday party.”

“Ben C, huh? From soccer?”

Quinn nodded as she sipped ice water from a mason jar.

“Do we like Ben C?”

“Ben C. is fine. Ben C's mother is a twat.”

“Isn't his mom the head of the PTA?” Annie asked. It was difficult for Annie to keep up with all of the mothers at Jefferson Academy whom Quinn disliked.

“Yes. Trudy I've-had-more-nose-jobs-than-Michael-Jackson Cromwell.”

“I thought she was the one who helped you get Zoe into that ballet class?”

“That wasn't her helping. That was her getting leverage so she could guilt me into *joining* the goddamn PTA.”

“Ah.” Annie sat back in the wooden booth and toyed with her straw. “Tricky Trudy.”

“More like manipulative, psychotic bitch Trudy.”

“But how do you *really* feel, Quinn?” Annie asked.

Quinn ignored her and ran freshly painted, rose-colored nails through her hair.

Annie glanced down at her own naked, chipped fingernails. The differences between Annie and Quinn were there, if you looked closely enough, but at a distance, with just a glance, they were identical. They didn’t intentionally keep their hair styled the same way or choose the similar clothing, it simply happened.

When Annie had chopped off twelve inches of her hair sophomore year and came home sporting a bob, Quinn was furious.

“How did you know I was planning to cut my hair tomorrow?” Quinn had demanded. “Did Stephanie tell you? I knew I shouldn’t have said anything to her. She can never keep a secret.” Their hapless childhood friend, Stephanie, often found herself on the receiving end of unwarranted anger.

“I just felt like getting it cut!” Annie shouted back. “This might come as a shock, but not everything is about *you*, Quinn!”

Even now, their stick-straight blonde hair fell just past their shoulders, framing their angular faces. Quinn had even worn black today, though most of the other stay-at-home moms at Jefferson Academy preferred the bright patterns of Lilly Pulitzer.

The biggest difference that Annie could spot were the large diamonds that encircled Quinn’s left ring finger, which managed to sparkle even now, in the dim lighting of the restaurant as night fell outside.

The waitress returned with two plates, paused, and bit her lip. “I’m sorry, which one of you got the salad?”

“That wrap looks good,” Quinn observed.

The waitress moved to place the wrap in front of Quinn, but Annie stopped her.
“Actually, I ordered the wrap.”

Pausing, the young girl glanced back and forth between them uncomfortably.

“And it comes with fries.” Quinn looked to the waitress apologetically. “I didn’t realize it came with fries.”

Annie sighed. “Quinn. Do you want the wrap?”

“That’s okay.” Quinn waved her off. “You ordered it.”

The helpless waitress quickly placed the salad in front of Quinn and dumped the wrap in front of Annie so hastily, it almost rolled off the plate. She scurried away before she could be a part of any more confusion, ponytail bobbing all the way back to the kitchen.

Quinn eyed her salad with regret. Neither twin made a move to eat.

“Just take the wrap, Quinn.”

“Are you sure?”

“It really doesn’t matter to me.” She’d wanted the salad all along anyway.

They swapped plates and Quinn popped a fry into her mouth, crunching away with satisfaction. “It’s been forever since I had waffle fries. Remember the ones they used to serve in the cafeteria back at UVA?”

“They were the best. You’d eat an entire plateful for dinner.” Annie speared a chunk of romaine with her fork and fished for a crouton.

“Sometimes two,” Quinn whispered, as though it were a crime.

They sat in silence for a moment, Annie’s fork squeaking against the ceramic bowl. Quinn dressed her fries with ketchup and an extra helping of salt and pepper.

“I’m going to Charlottesville next week,” Annie said.

“What’s in Charlottesville?” Quinn asked. She hadn’t been out that way since last fall on a PTA excursion so that the new members could “bond.” Apparently, bonding among PTA moms really meant hiring a mini-bus to cart them from vineyard to vineyard while they all got progressively plastered in sundresses and wide-brimmed hats, as though they were headed to the Kentucky Derby afterward. Through the foggy wine-haze of her memory, Quinn swore that Crystal Moyer tried to make out with her after lunch, somewhere between her fifth and sixth glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

“This new winery,” Annie replied. “Two-Fold Vineyards.”

“New client?”

“Hopefully. I’m supposed to try and win over the owners.”

“But you don’t even drink,” Quinn pointed out.

“Well, they don’t have to know that.”

Quinn shook her head. “What a waste. Sure you don’t want *me* to go with you?”

“Ha.” Annie moved lettuce around her bowl. “Eric’s supposed to go with me. I’m sure he can drink enough wine for the both of us.”

“Eric? That waste of space you call a co-worker?”

Annie nodded, her mouth in a grim line of displeasure – as usual whenever Eric Findley was involved.

“If you change your mind, I’m just a phone call away,” Quinn sang.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She glanced out the window at the pastel sky. The sun had begun to set. A line queued in front of the historic Byrd Theatre up the street. She

craned her neck to try and make out what was playing tonight. *Casablanca* again?
Weren't the good people of Richmond sick of that one yet?

Quinn wiped grease off her hands and sat back in the booth. "So Brooks is going out of town at the end of the month."

"I thought he went out of town last week?"

"He did, but his dad's giving him more responsibility at the company," Quinn said. "Apparently, getting more responsibility just means travelling more because it seems like that's all he does now."

The Frederickson family business – aptly named *Frederickson's* – was always referred to simply as "the company." Annie thought this sounded ominous, like Brooks was part of a crime family. In reality, Frederickson's manufactured pest control supplies. In a way, they were murderers, but their victims were vermin rather than people.

"I'm sorry," Annie said. "That must be hard on the kiddos."

"They're kind of used to it actually," Quinn replied with a shrug. "They get so busy with all of their activities. Carol wants Zoe to start playing the cello."

"Isn't she a little young for that?"

"Apparently Yo-Yo Ma was performing for audiences at five," Quinn said, striving and failing for nonchalance. "Or so Carol tells me. Who cares what *I* think? It's like they say: grandmother knows best."

Annie wiped dressing off her fingers as she shook her head. "Doesn't she have anything better to do?"

"No," Quinn replied simply. "She doesn't."

Carol Frederickson wasn't quite on the level of monster-in-law yet, but she was getting close. Annie felt bad for her sometimes. Carol didn't work; she didn't need to. However, charity fundraisers and renovating the kitchen only ate up so much of the day. Now that her grandchildren were at the age where they could do more than simply sit around with alphabet blocks and coloring books, it was only a matter of time until she and Quinn came to a head over her involvement.

Quinn scraped away stray shreds of romaine lettuce and settled her gaze onto Annie. "Remember when we were little and used to switch places so we could take each others' tests?"

"Yes," Annie said, pushing her bowl away. "You were terrible at fractions."

"And you couldn't spell 'parallel' if your life depended on it."

"I still always mess that one up," Annie admitted. "Is it three ls or four?"

Quinn waggled three fingers in the air. "How have you gotten this far in life without knowing that?"

Annie shrugged. "It's been tough."

"Well if it ever gets too tough and you want to switch places again, just let me know."

Annie laughed. "I'd take shuttling kids back and forth over putting up with Eric any day. Sometimes I do feel like his mother though, so maybe the difference between us isn't really all that drastic."

Quinn's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously?"

"He's just so needy."

“No.” Quinn shook her head and leaned forward. “I mean you’d really rather be a say-at-home mom than work in a fancy office?” She motioned to Annie’s suit.

Annie flinched and looked away, back out the window. It was dark now. “It’s not like I ever kept that a secret, Quinn. This isn’t... it’s not the sort of future I envisioned for myself. You know that.”

Quinn nodded slowly. “I know. Sorry.”

“You think we could really fool Brooks?” Annie asked because she didn’t want to dwell on the subject of envisioned futures for a moment longer.

“I could shave my head and Brooks wouldn’t notice.”

Annie tried to flag down their waitress, but she seemed intent on ignoring them. “I think you’re being a little dramatic.”

“Even when he is around, all he does is stare down at his stupid cell phone.”

“Isn’t he watching the kids tonight?”

“Yes,” Quinn said with a shrug. “I’m taking a big risk with it, too. They’re probably drowning in the pool as we speak.”

“Hilarious.” Annie tried to wave toward their waitress again. “Is she ignoring us on purpose?”

“Mom could never tell us apart either,” Quinn continued.

Annie couldn’t argue there. June Graves had always struggled to tell the difference between her twin girls. Though, to be fair, June struggled with a lot of things: money, a fierce addiction to Marlboro Reds, and steering clear of Jack Daniels until at least five o’clock. Except some days five turned into two, then two to eleven. And some days she woke up with the bottle right beside her, ready to pick up where she left off.

“What are you trying to say?” Annie asked.

A slow smile crept across Quinn’s face. She leaned in closer, lowering her voice like a conspirator. “I propose a switch.”

“Last I checked, I don’t have any spelling tests coming up.”

“I’m serious.”

“Quinn, come on. That might have worked when we were kids, but it wouldn’t work now. You honestly think we could fool Brooks?” Annie tried to picture herself in Quinn’s bedroom, in her bed. Brooks’s tanned, naked back as he dressed. He’d been a serious athlete back at UVA and those trained, lacrosse muscles still had to be there under the Oxford shirts and tailored suits.

The table shook as Quinn sat forward. “Yes, I do,” she said. “Besides, Brooks wouldn’t really be a factor if we switched places while he was out of town.”

“Are we really still talking about this?”

“Isaac and Zoe would never notice. They’ve even confused us before when we were all in the same room together. Zoe calls you Mommy all the time.”

Annie rubbed a hand across her forehead and toed off one of her shoes to relieve a blister that was nagging at her left heel. Quinn had a point. The kids often failed to pick up on nuances like clothing or hairstyle, but still. It seemed like a stretch, especially for Isaac. He was seven now and growing more critical of the world with each passing day. Sometimes Quinn didn’t give him enough credit for that.

Quinn took her sister’s silence as motivation to continue. “You’re always talking about how stressful your job is.”

“What about our friends?”

“What friends?” Quinn asked.

Annie bristled. “Hey, I have friends.”

“You have Melody,” Quinn corrected. She wasn’t exactly wrong. Outside of the receptionist at The Findley Group, Annie’s social life was severely lacking in action, but Annie couldn’t help but feel mildly offended at the implication that she was some sort of pariah. “And the PTA moms are not my friends. Even if you did have to see some of them, I doubt they’d be able to tell the difference. Remember our birthday party last year, when Crystal Moyer called you Quinn even after I introduced you to her?”

“It probably didn’t help that we *both* decided to wear purple,” Annie said. “We’ll have to coordinate better this year. No matching.”

“You see my point though.”

“Not really,” Annie said, ignoring Quinn’s frown. “How would this even work, Quinn? I have a job. A real job.”

Quinn sat up straighter. “I’m not an idiot, you know. I’ve listened to you talk about Findley for the past three years.”

“So that makes you qualified to work there?”

“No, but with a little assistance, I’m sure I could get by for a few days. A lot of what you do is just busy work for Mark, right?”

Annie rubbed a hand over her forehead and looked out the window while she considered how difficult it might be to fool her boss. “Sometimes. It varies.”

They were six the first time they’d fooled June. Annie’s heart had raced the whole time, sure that their mother would sniff them out in a second flat, but the seconds rolled

by, then minutes as they sat at their small dinner table, munching on boiled hot dogs and baked beans from a can.

Annie had expected to be thrilled that they could pull one over on their own mother. They'd been counting on it, after all. But as they sat there at that table, and she counted how many times June called her by another name – six – her heart sank lower, till it settled somewhere near her stomach. She shoved her paper plate away. Her half-eaten hot dog rolled off and fell to the carpet.

“Hey!” June called after her as she marched to her room. “Get your butt back here, Quinn. Clean this up.”

Quinn called it a magic trick: they were miniature magicians: invincible. Swapping places for tests whenever it suited them, fooling Stephanie, tricking boys – whatever their juvenile hearts desired. Annie tried to see it that way, but the fact that their own mother couldn't even tell them apart was always unsettling.

“Annie?” Quinn said, waving a hand in front of her sister's face. “Can you say something?”

Annie blinked and faced her sister again, returning June to the back of her mind, where she belonged. She watched Quinn twist her wedding band around her finger, flawless diamond after flawless diamond.

“I guess,” Annie said at last. “I guess I just don't understand why.”

Quinn's strong, squared shoulders folded slightly. “It could be fun,” she said, but it came out more like a question than a statement.

“Quinn, come on,” Annie pressed. “Seriously, why do you want to do this?”

Exhaling, Quinn slumped over the table, staring down and tracing the grains of wood with her index finger. Then she stopped, looking up at her sister through wisps of blonde.

“Is it terrible that sometimes I wish I could disappear?” Quinn asked. She looked out the window at a passing group of giggling teenage girls hurrying across the street toward an ice cream parlor. “Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and I just want to grab my keys and jump in the car, slippers and all. Leave my purse and drive until I run out of road.” She pushed her plate away roughly, so that the silverware fell off and clattered to the table. “Does that make me a bad person?”

Their waitress appeared out of nowhere. She removed their plates and balanced them on her arm with practiced skill, then eyed Annie and Quinn in turn.

“Can I get you two anything else?”

Quinn

Quinn was doing her best to remain patient, but when Annie said she needed “time to think it over” how much time did that mean, exactly? Probably longer than it took Quinn to drive back to Henrico.

She pulled into her circular driveway and killed the engine, but didn’t have the energy to get out yet. Tapping a pink nail on the black steering wheel, Quinn studied the large, sturdy house, which she didn’t pay for. Her name was on the deed, sure, but none of her own money went toward the mortgage because Quinn didn’t have any money of her own. She hadn’t earned a cent since her sophomore year at UVA, when she re-

stocked books in the library. That was before she'd gotten pregnant with Isaac and dropped out of college.

Brooks was the one who worked because that's what Frederickson men did. They got up at six o'clock every morning, drank half a pot of coffee and three quarters of a sesame seed bagel with cream cheese, put on their suits, and left. On weekends, their focus shifted to making a birdie on the nine hole at the Richmond Country Club. Rinse and repeat.

Manufacturing pest control supplies may not have been the most romantic way to make a fortune, but it had been good enough for Brooks's grandfather back in the thirties. Frederickson's didn't really come into its own until they expanded into electric mousetraps in 1995, which were their best-selling product to date. The idea that electrocuted mouse carcasses paid for Isaac's prep school – Jefferson Academy, most prestigious in the county – did cross Quinn's mind and make her squirm from time to time, but whenever she hopped up into her Escalade and admired the glint of her four carat wedding band against the crisp, black interior, she got over it pretty quickly. At least, she used to.

Quinn glanced at her watch. Eight-seventeen. She'd hoped that her evening with Annie would have kept her out until at least nine-thirty. Even later would have been ideal, but Annie had been tired and gotten all weird and quiet after Quinn's proposal. She'd claimed that she wanted to go to bed early, but 'going to bed early' for Annie typically entailed sitting around in her pajamas watching reruns of *History's Mysteries* until she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer and fell asleep with the television on. Quinn had learned a long time ago never to ask her sister about television unless she

wanted an in-depth lecture about Egyptian mummification methods or the Tower of London's most infamous prisoners. What a waste of a perfectly good evening.

When Quinn wasn't feeling sorry for herself, she felt sorry for her sister. Annie was beautiful. After all, she looked exactly like Quinn. She had a good job, a steady income, and a semi-nice apartment. Studios were too cramped for Quinn's liking – she preferred rooms to be separated based on purpose – but Annie insisted it was cozy.

Most importantly, Annie had freedom. She didn't have to drive her kids to school every morning. She didn't have to be home by a certain time. She didn't need to worry about a babysitter if she wanted a night to herself. She didn't need to have stale sex once a month with a husband she'd tired of.

If Annie wanted, she could stay out until dawn, hit up local bars, go home with random men whose names she would never learn. The very idea sent a thrill down Quinn's spine. Oh, to have careless days like those back again.

But Annie had never wanted those things. She'd always been the one who yearned for the stable family structure that she and Quinn lacked growing up. While Quinn was busy counting down the days until she could get the hell out of their tiny hometown of Louisa and start living life at a faster pace, Annie had fantasized about two parents who doted on their children and never missed a spelling bee. That was the future she and her boyfriend, Tucker Wills, were headed for until the accident that left Tucker dead in the driver's seat and Annie with so much internal bleeding and trauma that they'd had to perform an emergency hysterectomy. She'd never be able to have children, but she lived.

In some cruel twist of fate, Quinn found out she was pregnant with Isaac two months later and Annie had had to pretend to be happy for her while she was stuck in a wheelchair learning how to walk again.

It just seemed that God had gotten it all backwards. This was not the way things were supposed to be. That's why Quinn didn't believe in God, at least not in a God who could have gotten everything so wrong.

As soon as Carol Frederickson found out that her son had knocked up some college girl, she'd done as she did best: she got involved. Prior to being pregnant with her grandchild, Quinn had never met the Frederickson matriarch. Carol was a slim, no-nonsense woman with a severe ebony bob and a penchant for pantsuits. Her favorite color was plum, and that's what she'd worn when she strode into the hospital waiting room, where Brooks sat with Quinn, ready to go in for an ultrasound.

Carol's first words were, "Have you gotten a paternity test yet?" She stared past Quinn, her piercing blue eyes searching her son's matching set.

Brooks ran a hand through his then-floppy black waves. "Ma, don't do this now."

"Don't you think it's a valid concern?" Carol tightened her fingers around the shoulder strap of her black leather purse, as though ready to wield it in an act of self-defense at any moment.

Quinn decided to speak up then. "It's his," she tried to assure Carol. "And I'm Quinn, by the way."

Carol turned to Quinn slowly, robotically, taking in her flip-flops, cherry-painted toenails, and faded blue jeans. "Excuse me." Her voice was nearly breathless. "I was speaking to my son."

Carol refused to offer any financial support without a paternity test. Having grown up in a trailer park, Quinn didn't have any money of her own. If it weren't for massive amounts of financial aid and student loans, she wouldn't even have been able to attend UVA. Brooks might have come from the opposite side of the tracks, but his trust fund didn't kick in until he was twenty-six.

Brooks was the president of Sigma Chi. Quinn was an attractive blonde sophomore who enjoyed spending blurry evenings at the Frat house. But that version of Quinn Graves died right there on the sterile linoleum floor of the Charlottesville Hospital waiting room, next to a pile of year-old *People* magazines.

Brooks graduated from UVA that spring, immediately married Quinn, and got a job working for his father. At first, Quinn balked at the idea of marriage, but Carol had offered to pay off all of her student loans if she agreed to it. That was the Christian way and Carol couldn't exactly show up at St. Anthony's church every Sunday with a bastard grandchild.

To Quinn, it seemed like the easiest solution. She wasn't sure if she loved Brooks, but she liked him enough. He was attractive and he had this way of poking her side whenever he knew she was uncomfortable – which was often the case around Carol – like it was all a big joke. It made her heart go soft.

The prospect of raising a child alone had petrified Quinn. She had nightmares about a baby shrieking in the cramped, moldy-carpeted quarters of her mother's doublewide. She refused to let history repeat itself that way.

When Carol brought up taking her to court over custody, Quinn caved. Carol's threat still rang in her ears: "My grandfather was on the Virginia Supreme Court. If you

don't think I have clout in this state's justice system, you've got another thing coming, young lady. I can make your life a living hell so easily."

In the end, Isaac's welfare won out over any other argument Quinn could make. Growing up as a Frederickson would present him with opportunities Quinn didn't even know existed when she was growing up. So she married Brooks in St. Anthony's and popped out Isaac three months later. To her surprise, they were actually happy.

It felt like a game at first – like she was playing dress-up. They were so young, she and Brooks. There was no way that she was responsible enough or mature enough to have a newborn baby. Everything changed so swiftly to the point where her life didn't seem like her own. After seven years, however, the reality of the path that she'd chosen was now all too real.

Quinn heaved the car door open and hopped down from her monstrosity of an SUV, which always made her feel like she should be transporting the president instead of chauffeuring kids back and forth to soccer practice with a cooler packed full of orange slices. But Crystal Moyer had gotten new a suburban last year – a move that needed to be one-upped.

She locked the car even though she didn't need to – this was a gated community, after all – and trudged up the steps to the large oak and glass door. It was quiet inside. Zoe was hopefully asleep already. Isaac was supposed to be asleep, but typically rebelled playing his handheld Nintendo until at least nine o'clock.

Quinn was surprised to find Brooks in the kitchen reading the newspaper. He must have relieved the babysitter. He looked so normal sitting there in his untucked

oxford shirt, grey slacks, and argyle socks. Hand fisted around his usual tumbler of scotch – neat.

His cool blue eyes crinkled as his face broadened into a smile. Brooks was an attractive man. Tall, square jawed, thick black hair. He'd been the captain of the lacrosse team at UVA, but golf was his sport of choice nowadays. Quinn still questioned whether golf actually counted as a sport. A sport should make you sweat. Golf just made Brooks string together ever-inventive combinations of curse words when he inevitably landed it in a sand trap. Perhaps he was better now, but Quinn had only been able to endure two lessons with him and the golf pro before calling it quits and heading back to the clubhouse for mimosas.

“Hey,” Brooks said, folding the newspaper, but ignoring the creases so that it sat lopsided on the counter. “How’s Annie?”

Quinn placed her purse and keys on the counter. “She’s fine.”

“Where’d you guys go for dinner?”

Quinn squinted as if she was having a hard time remembering, even though she knew exactly where they’d eaten. It had been the most exciting part of her week. “Some new place in Carytown. Oh – The River Grill. It was okay.”

Brooks nodded slowly, as though this was information he had to process and mull over. After seven years in the family business, he’d learned that the best way to make it seem like you were really listening was to nod slowly while staring directly in front of you with a furrowed brow.

“Are the kids asleep?” Quinn asked.

“Zoe is,” he said. “Isaac’s faking. I’m pretty sure he’s playing that stupid Nintendo thing. There was a lot of beeping coming from his room a few minutes ago.”

“Maybe he’s being abducted by aliens,” Quinn said.

“We should be so lucky.” There was a moment of silence and Quinn could hear the old grandfather clock that Carol had given them as a wedding gift ticking away in the hallway. “Maybe you should go check on him next. He never listens to me anyway.”

Quinn wasn’t sure when the rift in her marriage had started. She couldn’t pin it down to a specific moment or an exact conversation, but somewhere in the space of the last few years, everything had changed. Brooks’s jokes were no longer funny. Nowadays, she couldn’t even tell when he was making one. He didn’t make her laugh anymore, he just made her tired. When two people marry so young, it seems inevitable that they’ll change, but what happens when they don’t change together? Or maybe Brooks wasn’t changing at all. Maybe it was her. Lately, she’d been feeling antsy, like she was waiting for something to happen. Only, Quinn wasn’t even sure what she was waiting for.

Brooks eased himself off the barstool and took a measured sip of his scotch. From the sour face he made, Quinn always wondered if he drank it because he actually liked it or because that’s what his father drank.

Quinn leaned against the counter and glanced at the shoddily folded newspaper. It was the sports section and she could just make out a headline about the NFL draft:

“Washington Redskins poach Heisman Winner!”

“Oh, I can’t go to Zoe’s thing next week,” Brooks said. “Quinn? Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” she said, mildly annoyed. Brooks always needed confirmation that people had *heard* him, as though there were going to be a quiz later.

He set down his glass so that he could talk with his hands. Brooks was a big gesticulator – he got a double dose of it from his parents. Robert and Carol employed emphatic hand motions often, like some sort of Frederickson dance. Quinn had never quite learned the choreography.

“The Chinese manufacturers are visiting so I can’t go to that ballet... thing. On Tuesday,” he said. “We’re taking them out to dinner.”

“Tuesday,” Quinn repeated. Then it sank in. “Tuesday is Zoe’s *recital*.”

“Recital,” Brooks said quickly, one hand shooting up into the air. “*That’s* the word I was looking for. Right, I can’t go to the recital.”

“You’ve known about this recital for weeks, Brooks.” Quinn shoved the newspaper farther away and watched it skid across the sleek marble countertop, then flop open to the ‘Dear Abby’ column. “Weeks. And you tell me this *now*?”

“What does it even matter if I’m not there?” He picked up his glass again and grimaced around another sip. “She’s four. Christ, it’s not like I’m missing *Swan Lake* at Lincoln Center.”

“Four-year-olds can have recitals,” she snapped, even though she knew what he meant. Zoe likely wouldn’t even notice.

Brooks sighed as though Quinn was asking him to donate blood instead of simply show up for his daughter. “I’d have to move a bunch of stuff around. We’ve got this meeting with a new design team and –”

“Great.” Quinn stood and marched toward the door. “It starts at five.” She flicked off the lights as she left, leaving Brooks alone in the dark.

When she made it up to her bedroom, Quinn turned on the single bedside lamp. Its light was only strong enough to illuminate a small portion of the room, leaving the corners shrouded in shadow.

The room’s reflection greeted her in the wall of glass to her left, which normally looked out on a spacious backyard. Tonight, however, the darkness outside created a giant mirror that looked inward.

Quinn stared at her image in the glass and watched, transfixed, as she yanked the silk blouse over her head and pushed her pants to the floor. Kicking the clothes aside, Quinn looked back into the glass. It was a game she played sometimes. Staring into the wall of glass allowed her to become a voyeur on her own life. She liked to imagine that the woman in the glass was a stranger and pitied her, alone in her expensive bedroom, modern and sterile; she looked so small.

Quinn knew that she should be grateful for the life she. Most people would be. Walls of thick brick with six and a half bathrooms, trust fund babies set for life. But this wasn’t a life she’d chosen; it was one that had been thrust upon her. Sometimes it still bewildered her how one action, one decision, one mistake could change the course of someone’s life so completely.

Quinn loved her children, but if she had the choice to make again, if she were back in that Charlottesville waiting room, if she knew what life with Brooks would really be like, after the dust settled. Sometimes she wondered.

When Brooks's footsteps sounded on the stairs, Quinn hurried into her pajamas, scooping her discarded clothes off the floor and tossing them into the hamper. As he entered the bedroom, she hustled into the ensuite, busied herself with her nighttime routine, hoping he wouldn't bring up the recital again. Just the thought of it made her bones feel heavy. But Brooks always had to have the last word.

"I still don't understand what the big deal is," he said, coming to stand beside Quinn at their double vanity, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

Quinn spat into the sink and stood up straight, dropping her toothbrush into the holder. "The big deal," she said, wiping her mouth, "is that you've known about this for weeks and you don't care. You don't care, Brooks. All you care about is yourself."

A vein in his neck popped up as he flexed his jaw. Brooks took a step forward, gripping the marble countertop and leveling her with a hard stare. "I don't care? Really? I work my ass off for you, for this family, and all I care about is myself. Is that it?"

Quinn hated when he did this, backed her into a corner this way, forcing her to feel ungrateful and guilty. "And what do you think I do all day?" she asked. "Sit around twiddling my thumbs?" Let Brooks play babysitter and chauffeur for a day. See how long he'd last.

"Well, we've got a maid to clean the house." There was always more in what Brooks didn't say than in what he did. The not saying was where the hurt was. Quinn slipped past him, through the bedroom, down the hall, and into the guest room, where she slammed the door and locked it. Leaning back against the door, she closed her eyes, trying to let the serene darkness of the room seep in. It was cold in here – almost

too cold – but Quinn didn't mind. Nothing could be worse than the chill of her own bedroom.

Chapter 2

Annie

It was not yet dawn, and Annie Graves was in motion. Her legs were a blur and her breath came in foggy, shallow puffs, cheeks red from exertion. Tall glass windows of city buildings flew by as she sprinted the last half-mile. Racing past the Daily Grind Café, which sat adjacent to her apartment building, she finally slowed, then stopped, placing her hands on her hips as she bent over and attempted to catch her breath.

For Annie, life was about distraction. When she wasn't moving, her mind was too free to wander and, given the opportunity, Annie's mind found itself in dark places. She gasped for air now, as her body thrummed like blood pulsing behind an old bruise.

It was always five miles. Every morning. She'd missed a couple of runs over the winter due to slick, ice-riddled pavement, but now that spring was creeping in, she was back to her usual, Monday through Friday schedule. The chilled morning air felt good against her slick, hot skin.

Annie paced back and forth in front of the Daily Grind, focusing on her heart, trying to slow its pounding. She sucked in a deep breath and held it for a moment before letting it escape in a quick whoosh. She whisked her hand across her slick brow.

It was warm inside Daily Grind, its plump couches and wooden cane chairs vacant of any other early birds. That would change in an hour – Annie knew from experience and much preferred the pre-dawn atmosphere.

“Vanilla latte with an extra shot of espresso!” The familiar barista called over her shoulder before turning to Annie with a smile, her strawberry blonde ponytail bobbing with more pep than you would expect in the pre-dawn hours of a weekday morning. She punched a few keys on the register as Annie handed over her credit card. “You have a good run?”

“It was great,” Annie said with a smile. “I’m finally starting to hit my stride again.”

Annie wasn’t a religious person. Never had been. Her mother was a strict cafeteria catholic – Christmas and Easter only – putting in the minimal amount of work, but even that only lasted for a few years. The last time Annie could remember being inside a church was at Quinn’s, wedding. Seven years ago.

Though she didn’t worship any particular god, she did bow at the altar of routine. If routine was her religion, then caffeine was her blood of Christ.

It took Annie four minutes to walk from the Daily Grind to her third floor studio in the apartment building across the street. Forty minutes to shower and get dressed. And three minutes to stuff a stale chocolate chip granola bar down her throat, chasing it with the dregs of her latte.

She scooted out of her cramped kitchen and into the living room, its pale yellow walls lined with pictures. Every picture she had ever taken of Tucker Wills was framed and placed delicately around her apartment.

Quinn thought it was creepy. “He’s been dead for eight years, Annie,” she’d say. “How is this supposed to help you move on?”

Annie glanced at her favorite picture: Tucker, wide-eyed and grinning, splayed out in a pile of fallen leaves on the quad back at the University of Virginia. Right in front of Chambers Hall, where they'd met Freshman Year on the first day of Economics 101.

The pictures made it feel as though Tucker were still close. Some days she could pretend he'd walk through the door at any moment, bags of Chinese food in hand, laden with Kung Pao chicken. It had been their brain food back in college during all-nighters spent writing papers, cramming for finals, or simply just being, wrapped up in wrinkled sheets until early light crept in through dormitory windows.

Annie still dreamed about him – the same dream she used to have every night after the accident. It didn't come so often anymore. Maybe once a week. Maybe not. Sometimes she could barely remember what he looked like, but the pictures helped.

The clock on the wall caught her eye. Annie stuffed her feet into her black flats and flew to the door, scooping her bag off the couch as she went. It took exactly twenty-two minutes to get to work on a good day, but the morning traffic in Richmond was known to be temperamental.

The Findley Group's offices sat on East Main Street, sandwiched between the James River and the Capitol Building. Annie skittered across the parking lot, gripped her coat tighter, and braced herself against the brisk wind.

Once she'd made it through the tall glass doors and onto the elevator, she released the tight breath she'd been holding. The lapels of her tan wool coat fell limply to her sides, as though sighing along with her. She punched the button for the twelfth floor and stared at the mirrored wall before her. Every wall in this elevator was a mirror, making the small space feel like some sort of optical illusion, like she was in a fun house. Mirrors

were usually implemented to help spaces feel bigger, but it had the opposite effect in this elevator. If anything, Annie felt claustrophobic - sometimes nauseous, overwhelmed by the infinite reflections on all sides. So she'd learned to keep her eyes forward, focused on the reflection right in front of her. Her own hazel irises stared back intently, and Annie thought of her sister.

Quinn's proposition had been nagging at her ever since they left the restaurant last night. She'd tried to distract herself with a *History's Mysteries* marathon when she got home, but conspiracy theories about Hitler evading death and fleeing to Argentina weren't enough to keep her mind from wondering what it might be like in Quinn's home.

Stephanie used to call Annie and Quinn carbon copies: like they were some sort of science experiment. Calling Quinn her carbon copy was a tad dramatic. But a small part of Annie felt like there could be some merit to Quinn's idea. People had confused them enough throughout their lives – even people who should have known better.

She'd never told her sister this, but once, Brooks did mistake her for Quinn. It was two years after the wedding, during Thanksgiving dinner at Carol's.

"You want another glass of wine, sweetie?" he'd asked, upon seeing her empty hands.

Annie thought he was joking at first and could only laugh. She couldn't think of any other explanation. Met with only a vacant stare and raised eyebrows, Annie felt the need to elaborate. "No, thank you."

"You sure?"

"Brooks, you know I don't drink."

In that moment, Annie could see in his eyes that he realized his mistake – that flash of panic, gone in a second, replaced by the smooth Frederickson grin.

“I’m just messing with you, Annie,” he said, forcing a laugh before leaving, his pace just a touch too quick, like he couldn’t wait to get out of there.

Annie had stared after him, dumbfounded, and replayed the entire exchange over in her head. Sure, she and Quinn both had their hair up that day, but their dresses weren’t even the same color. Could Brooks truly be that unobservant?

Brooks ignored her for the rest of the evening. There was a tightness in his voice whenever he said ‘Quinn’ during the meal, as though he had something to prove. “Could you pass the roles, *Quinn*?”

Annie couldn’t bring herself to tell Quinn about the mishap. She considered it, but in the end, what was the point?

When the elevator doors opened on the twelfth floor, Annie stepped out quickly, anxious to put the mirrors behind her.

The Findley Group liked to tout themselves as “Richmond’s most innovative PR agency” but Annie always thought that their offices were far too bland for a company whose livelihood rested solely on the appearance of its clients. Didn’t they have some sort of precedent to set? If so, she was quite certain they weren’t setting it properly, with bare gray walls, dull blue carpet, and endless fluorescence.

Because The Findley Group wasn’t a very large company – they only had about twenty employees, most of whom were underlings like Annie – they used terms like ‘innovative’ and ‘new age’ to make themselves seem more important. Annie’s co-

associate, Eric, was fond of saying “We ain’t your grandma’s PR agency!” as though the phrase would catch on. So far, it had not.

The Findley Group’s specialty was businesses that were struggling to click with the modern world, whether it be their social media accounts, websites, or simply attracting younger clientele altogether. Advertising was in a new era now, and if businesses couldn’t keep up, it wouldn’t take long for them to fail.

George Findley had started the company back in 1995, riding the coattails of the Internet boom. “I saw where advertising was headed and chased it like a dog after the mailman!” he always said. Annie had heard him tell the story three times – always at the company Christmas party, right near the shrimp buffet, while he piled his plate high with an extra helping of cocktail sauce.

Annie started down the hallway, lit only by weak daylight, and headed toward her division’s suite. Her direct boss was Mark Todd, one of the account managers. Typically, Annie arrived at least half an hour before he did, but today, the light in his office was already on.

“Hello?” Annie called out as she stood in the entryway. “Mark?”

Mark popped his head around the doorway, his too-white teeth gleaming.

“Annie!” he said, coming out of his office to greet her. “You’re here early.” Mark Todd was attractive in that fading eighties, teen heartthrob sort of way. He looked as though he could have starred on *Beverly Hills: 90210* back in his prime, but now the gray and wrinkles were creeping in.

“I always get here at eight.”

“Early bird gets the first worm, huh?” Mark ran a hand through his short, peppered hair.

“Something like that.” Annie set her purse down on their receptionist, Melody’s, desk and flicked the light on. “What are *you* doing here so early?”

He rubbed his hands together and began to pace. “I got an e-mail late last night from Owen Decker. He and his brother run that new winery in Charlottesville. Well, new by Charlottesville standards – they opened up a few years back.”

“Two-Fold?” Annie asked and Mark nodded. “Yeah, I know. We’ve been working on securing that account for weeks.”

“Right!” Mark said. “Well, hard work pays off because we got it, baby!”

Annie forced a smile. She knew she should be excited – Mark Todd had been yearning to expand into wineries since she’d started working there three years ago. Charlottesville was only an hour away and the epicenter of Virginia wine country. Annie had a hard time mustering enthusiasm for new accounts anymore. Like everything else in her life at this point, work was a routine and after three years working for Mark, there wasn’t much that surprised her.

“Anyway,” Mark continued, “Owen sent me about fifteen e-mails last night talking about their vision for a re-brand. I’m going to forward them over to you, okay?” Mark started back toward his office. “You’ll sort through them for me? Give me the highlights?”

Mark Todd always phrased his demands as requests, perhaps in an attempt to come across as friendlier, but it wasn’t as though Annie could refuse.

“Sure thing,” she said, giving him a half-hearted thumbs up.

“Thatta girl!”

Three years ago, when Annie first interviewed for the job of Mark Todd’s Accounts Associate, he’d accidentally spilled a full glass of water while nervously shuffling a handful of papers, causing a stream of liquid to cascade across the glossy conference table and completely drench her navy pencil skirt.

“Oh!” She’d jumped up, startled, and stared down at her dipping skirt and soggy tan flats. They were a new pair, too – a gift to herself for graduating from business school with top honors.

“Ah, fuck,” Mark grumbled. He dashed from the conference room and returned a moment later with a handful of paper towels. “Shit, I’m so sorry.”

Annie still felt like she’d only gotten the job because Mark felt guilty about the incident. He joked about it to this day, whenever Annie poured herself a glass of water during meetings: “Careful there, Annie, we don’t want any repeat of the first time we met.” He seemed to have forgotten that *he* was the one who had done the spilling, but Annie didn’t have the heart to remind him.

The businessman swagger came naturally to Mark, fake smiles materializing at a moment’s notice during meetings. Mark Todd had a knack for knowing what people wanted to hear which was why, at the Christmas party a year and a half ago, when George Findley was lamenting about what to do with his son, Mark Todd suggested joining his team. “I’m sure Eric would be a wonderful fit. He’s a Findley man! I’d be lucky to have him!”

Annie would never forgive him for the transgression, but at least having another associate around meant that they were awarded their own receptionist.

Melody's desk sat out in the atrium of their three-roomed suite while Annie shared her claustrophobic office with Eric, the thirty-eight-year-old man-child Findley son.

Annie sat at her desk now, sorting through Owen Decker's e-mails, while Eric's desk remained vacant. The fluorescent bulb above her flickered and she cast a precarious glance upward. The light continued to wink, adding a feeling of decay to the cramped space.

This morning, Eric was later than usual. Melody had poked her flaming head of red hair in around eight-thirty, but it was past ten now and Eric's squeaky chair was still vacant. Annie always found Eric's gall striking. But when you were Eric Findley, what was the worst that could happen?

Annie clicked around Two-Fold Vineyard's sad excuse for a website. The broken link for the 'Shop Online' section led her to an error page. She backtracked to the 'About Us' section and found a picture of Owen under the Owner/Manager section. He was bigger than she'd imagined – burlier. Annie sipped on her second mug of coffee as she scrolled down further, then stopped. Just below Owen's bio, under the title of Owner/Winemaker was another picture.

Sam Decker was unkempt in a way that seemed purposeful. As though he'd rolled out of bed with plenty of time to look presentable, but had decided to walk out the door without glancing at a mirror anyway. His choppy brown hair stuck up at the sides, almost childlike. Behind him, Annie could make out fields of grapevines. The professional photo had clearly been taken at a vineyard, but nothing about Sam Decker appeared professional.

Annie felt like she knew him, even though she'd never seen him before. Maybe it was the softness in his eyes – there was something comforting about those muddy brown irises, something that made you want to stare into them for far longer than necessary.

Eric strode in then, at two minutes past ten, breaking her focus. Annie quickly minimized the webpage, feeling like a stalker. She set her coffee down and didn't flinch when Eric sagged into his chair and spun around three times, the hinges squealing in protest beneath his weight. He hadn't even bothered to tuck his shirt in. The pale blue tails hung limply at the sides of his baggy khakis, which were in desperate need of ironing. And he'd worn sneakers to the office. Sneakers.

Eric hummed the Star Wars death march while his computer booted up. Annie curled her toes inside her black leather flats.

“So what's on the docket for today, Annie?” He scratched a hand over the top of his balding head.

“Why don't you go ask Mark?” Annie opened up her e-mail, drafting a quick message to Eric. Subject line: Two-Fold Vineyards. His computer dinged a moment after she pressed send, and Eric let out a low hum as he looked it over. Annie always preferred to e-mail Eric, as though their five-foot gap between their desks were actually a gorge, making any physical contact impossible.

“Wine,” he said. “Cool. Did I ever tell you about the wine and cheese party my frat threw back in college? We had boxed wine and string cheese.”

Annie still had a hard time believing that Eric had ever belonged to a fraternity, but perhaps they were different back when he was at UVA. He seemed too soft – not in

the good way either. He could have been attractive, if his face were put together slightly differently – if it were less round. His aquiline nose didn't seem to fit right.

“You and I are going their next Monday to meet with the winemaker,” she said.

“So don't forget that you need to be here early. Eight o'clock, okay?”

“Field trip.” He grinned and leaned back in his chair, spinning around again.

“Awesome.”

“Eric?”

“Yup, I got it,” he said, turning back to his computer. “Oh-eight-hundred.”

Eric had a penchant for using military time. Annie had absolutely no clue why, but had gone so long without ever asking him, that now she felt like she couldn't. She knew he'd never been in the military. Maybe it just made him feel more official.

She felt bad for him sometimes. What must it be like to be pushing forty and working as a bottom-rung employee at your father's company? Sometimes, Annie had nightmares about still being an Associate at thirty-eight. She always woke up in a cold sweat.

Annie sent him another e-mail. Subject line: EIGHT O'CLOCK MONDAY.

Message: Don't forget.” Annie hit send and heard the telltale ding of receipt from Eric's computer, but he didn't say anything.

They'd been through this before. Last month, when they were supposed to drive out to Williamsburg together to visit a silversmith, Annie had ended up going alone when Eric didn't show. Not that she minded. She'd preferred it actually, but Eric was *supposed* to be there.

The light overhead flickered again, blinked a final time, then went out completely, shrouding Annie in shadow. Eric's chair squeaked as he swiveled around to face her. He squinted up at the broken light.

"You should probably get that fixed."

Quinn

"Mommy!" Zoe screeched. "Hungry!"

"I'll get dinner started as soon as we get home, baby, I promise." Quinn halted her Escalade at the stoplight and eyed her children in the rear-view mirror. Zoe squirmed in her car seat. Isaac bounced his soccer against the back of the passenger seat headrest, staining the leather with smears of dirt.

"Isaac, how many times do I have to tell you to cut that out?"

He dropped the ball to the floor, then bent over to remove his sweaty shin guards.

The kids were always surly after Isaac's soccer practice, which ended at five-thirty and left them both on the precarious edge when tiredness meets hunger. Zoe rubbed her eyes and kicked her legs against the back of Quinn's seat.

"Mommy, hungry *now*!" she wailed.

"I have an idea," Quinn said as the light turned green. "Why don't we play the quiet game?" Zoe and Isaac were never particularly keen on the quiet game, but that wouldn't stop Quinn from trying.

Though Quinn loved her children, there were times when they felt like an anchor keeping her deep at sea while everyone else enjoyed life ashore. If you'd told a nineteen-year-old Quinn Graves that in the weeks leading up to her twenty-eighth birthday, she'd

be chauffeuring her two kids back and forth between soccer and ballet, she would have laughed in your face. Granted, she probably would have had to look up from vomiting into the sink of the Sigma Chi house bathroom to do it and she definitely wouldn't remember the conversation the next day, but she would have laughed.

Yet here she sat, turning up the volume knob on a classic rock station while her kids ignored every rule of the quiet game in the backseat. Isaac continued to bounce his soccer ball while Zoe kicked at Quinn's headrest, and all Quinn could do was try to drown it out with CCR's "Fortunate Son."

Quinn pulled into her empty circular driveway. She gripped the steering wheel tighter. Apparently, Brooks was working late again. Ever since he'd been promoted to Senior Vice President at his father's company, cooking dinner for the kids – alone – had become the new routine. Sometimes, Brooks didn't get home until nine o'clock. There were days when the kids didn't see their father at all.

Isaac bolted from the backseat before Quinn had even shifted into park. He'd left his soccer bag, smelly socks, and dirty cleats behind and was sprinting toward the door of their large, brick colonial. He jiggled the locked handle while Quinn attempted to unstrap a squirming and kicking Zoe from her car seat.

"Mom, the door!" Isaac called out.

"Zoe, you've gotta stop that. I can't get you out if you keep kicking."

Zoe momentarily acquiesced. "Pizza!" she cried the moment she was free.

Ordering pizza for dinner was a sure-fire way to skyrocket your popularity among children, but Quinn had already gone that route twice this week and was beginning to worry that she was a terrible mother. Trudy Cromwell didn't let her kids eat any refined

sugar. Crystal Moyer shopped exclusively at Whole Foods. And Quinn had Papa John's on speed dial.

"Not tonight, honey," Quinn said, struggling to unlock the door with Isaac's soccer bag on one shoulder and Zoe clamped to her other hip. "We had pizza yesterday, remember?"

Isaac raced past her, into the foyer and up the spiraling staircase. Quinn kicked the door closed and dropped his soccer bag at the foot of the stairs. "Isaac, take your bag up to your room, please!" she called up before repositioning Zoe on her other hip and heading into the kitchen.

On nights like this, Quinn always thought about how Zoe and Isaac's childhood was very different from the one she'd had. Quinn still kept the key to her mother's trailer on her key ring. She had no intention of going back there; she and Annie weren't even on speaking terms with June anymore, but its worn, brassy familiarity was comforting. It brought her back to school bus days when her world was smaller, but easier somehow. Less complicated. She'd carried the key in the left side pocket of her yellow Jansport all throughout middle school. Once, she'd forgotten it and she and Annie had to break into their trailer after the bus dropped them off, which turned out to be an unnervingly simple task.

June Graves had worked a lot, often pulling doubles at the Seven-Eleven. Before Annie and Quinn were old enough to stay home alone, they'd tag along. As a kid, Quinn couldn't fathom why her mother would dislike working there. Seven-Eleven had everything you could ever want and more. The shelves were lined with an endless supply

of Yoo-Hoo and Cooler Ranch Doritos. They even had June's personal favorite: Slim Jims.

"They're like crack," she'd explain to customers who eyed her wearily as she gnawed on one of the sausage ropes while ringing them up. It turned out that crack was also a lot like crack for June. Quinn used to think that was a good thing that her mother hadn't gotten arrested for possession until she and Annie were off at college. At least they'd gotten through grade school without the drama. In retrospect, however, would a foster home really have been so much worse than the trailer park?

"Mommy!" Zoe stomped her sneaker-clad foot on the kitchen floor, illuminating the flashing red light in the shoe's heel. Usually this feature delighted Zoe, but she was currently unfazed. "Where pizza?"

Quinn rummaged through her well-stocked pantry. She'd made a Whole Foods run just yesterday, after talking with Crystal Moyer about the new brand of Mediterranean hummus they were stocking.

"How about some quinoa?" Quinn asked, picking up a box that boasted "an organic and stone ground ancient grain" and scanning the back for cooking instructions.

"Where's Daddy? I want Daddy!" Zoe broke into a fresh round of sobs, her face reddening to match her *Thomas the Tank Engine* T-shirt.

"Daddy's working, sweetie," Quinn said, tucking the box of quinoa under her arm. She escorted Zoe over to the counter and set a container of applesauce in front of her. That should tide her over for a little while.

Why Zoe would want her father at a time like this was beyond Quinn – she couldn't remember the last time Brooks had cooked anything, let alone been present for a family dinner. Her kids tended to take a “the grass is always greener” view of parenting.

Isaac stood in the doorway, donning a fresh set of pajamas. Zoe lapped up her applesauce like a dog, ignoring the pink plastic spoon beside her.

“I want a pudding cup,” Isaac announced. He plopped down next to his sister at the island.

Quinn poured the quinoa into a medium pot, as instructed, and carefully measured out two cups of water. “Dinner will be ready soon,” she assured him.

“That's not fair! She gets to eat before dinner!” Isaac pointed an accusatory finger at his sister, who polished off the applesauce at record speed, jamming her tongue into the grooves at the bottom of the small plastic container. Runny applesauce spittle ran down the sides, pooling on the white marble countertop.

“You're a big boy. You can wait twenty minutes.”

Isaac's face settled into a grim line. He jumped off the barstool and stomped toward the fridge. Ripping it open, he grabbed a pudding cup off the shelf and ran out of the kitchen, leaving the refrigerator door ajar in his wake.

“Hey!” Quinn hurried to the doorway, but he was already thumping up the steps in his socks, then down the hall. The slam of his bedroom door resonated throughout the two-story atrium.

Quinn knew she should follow him. She should take the pudding cup away and tell him he'd have to go to bed with no dinner. Or was that too cruel? It was difficult to tell these days. Tough love was getting rarer. Just the other day, Crystal Moyer was

talking about an article she'd read, which condemned raising your voice to your children at all. "It's all about positive reinforcement," Crystal instructed.

By middle school, Annie and Quinn were cooking dinner for themselves on a nightly basis. Well, "cooking" was a loose term. It didn't take a lot of expertise to make boxed macaroni and cheese, but they were relatively self-sufficient. Isaac couldn't even make himself a peanut butter sandwich. It was just easier if Quinn did it for him. Faster. That way, peanut butter didn't end up smeared onto every kitchen surface.

Quinn stared at the open refrigerator door, scanning the juice boxes, snack packs, and sticks of Go-Gurt that took up the bulk of the shelf space. Tucked away on a shelf toward the bottom was a half-empty bottle of Chardonnay. Quinn's mouth salivated.

"Mommy!" Zoe cried.

"Hmm?" Quinn's focus was still on the wine.

"Mommy! Still hungry!"

Chapter 3

Annie

Most people longed for Saturday. Slogged through the entire workweek in search of a blessed reprieve. But for Annie, weekends were more space that needed filling.

Today was the first clear Saturday she could remember when it was warm and dry enough to actually enjoy spending time outdoors. Maymont Park was a bit of a hike from her apartment, but it was a good day for a long walk. As a girl, she'd sought solace in the outdoors. Annie would have preferred the deserted woodland of middle-of-nowhere Louisa to these crowded downtown streets – that had been the one perk of growing up in the boondocks – but Maymont would be close enough.

She adjusted the neck strap of her camera and uncapped the lens, lifting the camera to take a peek through the viewfinder. The world always looked different through a camera lens – simpler. There was something to be said for capturing moments, yet remaining completely removed from them. Annie felt safe behind a camera. She focused in on the distant trees of Maymont and snapped her first picture of the day.

Maymont Park was a hundred-acre Victorian estate in the middle of downtown Richmond. It had been converted to a public park a while back, and now boasted ample trails, gardens, koi ponds, and even a small zoo. It was Annie's favorite spot in the entire city. Magnolias and ancient, arching oaks covered the sprawling acreage. At Maymont, it was easy to forget that you were in a city at all. The air there even smelled green.

Nathan liked the petting zoo best. Melody always brought a bag full of quarters to stuff into the grain-dispensing machines. Melody's son reminded Annie of Isaac. They were about the same age and they both had endless energy. Annie met Melody in front of the Maymont Mansion, a sweeping stone structure that looked like something out of a Gothic novel. Nathan climbed a nearby Magnolia tree, swinging from its gangling branches with his long, monkey arms.

They strolled deeper into the grounds, Nathan bustling along a few yards ahead. Annie squatted to stare into the eyes of a large, whiskered koi, its orange gills flapping slowly as he gazed up at her. Annie lifted her camera and twisted the lens slowly, focusing on the fish's wide eyes. There was something about captive animals that always made Annie sad. She felt a kinship with them – moving around in circles all day. How did they make the time pass?

“Any big weekend plans?” Melody asked. She settled onto a nearby bench. Isaac raced off toward the stepping-stones. “Other than Maymont-ing with us, which I *know* is the highlight.”

“I'm watching Zoe for Quinn tonight.” Annie dropped onto the bench beside her. Her fingers remained on her camera, at the ready.

“Again?” Melody squinted and held a hand up over her eyes, shielding them from the bright sun. “Didn't you just watch Quinn's kids last weekend?”

“That was two weeks ago.”

“You know what I mean. Can't she hire some neighborhood kid to watch them? Don't you ever just want some time for yourself?”

Nathan waved to them from the middle of the pond, stretching his arms far into the air.

“I don’t mind,” Annie said. If she wanted, she could have her weekends to herself. But weekends to herself were typically quiet – too quiet – and they always ended the same way. Lying in the darkness of her apartment – alone – listening to that old Whiskeytown song on repeat until tears seeped out from the soft space between her eyelids. The same song Tucker used to play for her on his guitar. Her favorite.

Quinn and Tucker did not get along. She called him a fuddy-duddy. “Eighteen going on forty,” she’d mutter whenever he held doors open or carried Annie’s books. The fact that her sister disapproved only made Annie love Tucker more. For once, she had something that was all hers.

Until she’d met Tucker, Annie didn’t believe in soul mates. She didn’t believe in magic or wonder. How could there be anything wonderful about a world with June Graves? Coming home to a dirty trailer with carpets that smelled of piss no matter how many times you scrubbed them. Waiting at Louisa Elementary until dark, when even the after-school program was over, for June to finally come for them. How could the world be a truly good place when she was stuck here? Tucker changed all that. With him, Annie finally knew what home felt like.

And then, as quickly as he’d come into her life, he was gone in a flash of headlights, a crunch of metal, and the rusty tang of blood. The life that Annie wanted was one she was supposed to have with a soft-spoken boy from Mississippi, but he was gone in an instant. So no, Annie didn’t want her weekends to herself. She had to keep moving, and like a caged animal, it didn’t matter which direction she was going in.

Melody patted Annie's knee and stood as Nathan hustled off to check out the red-tailed hawks.

"Ready to keep moving?" she asked.

Annie nodded and stood to join her. "Always."

Quinn

Once a month, Carol had Quinn and Brooks over for dinner. She invited them more often than that, but once a month, Quinn ran out of excuses not to attend. The children were never invited and Quinn envied Zoe and Annie as she climbed into Brooks's Mercedes. She would give anything to trade places for an evening spent baking brownies and watching Disney movies. Instead she'd be subjected to an eight-course smorgasbord of pretension with her in-laws. And the food wasn't even the worst part.

Isaac was spending the night at Trudy Cromwell's house, for her son's birthday party. It was a toss-up whose company Quinn enjoyed less – Trudy's or Carol's.

"I don't understand why you're always so difficult about this," Brooks said as he pulled out of their development and headed toward the city. His parents lived closer to downtown, in one of the old, ivy-shrouded mansions that lined the pristine streets of Richmond's West End.

Quinn rested her head against the cool window as suburbia fell away into the darkness behind them.

"It's dinner with my parents, not an evening with Stalin," Brooks muttered. "It'll be fine."

"I'd rather dine with him," Quinn muttered.

“I heard that.” There was laughter in his voice, and from the corner of her eye, Quinn could see that he was smirking.

She used to feel like Brooks was always on her side, like they were a united front in the face of his mother or anyone else who disapproved. Lately, however, a certain sort of complacency had been creeping into him, like this was simply the way things were going to be, and it was easier to accept it than try to fight back. Where they used to fight back together, Brooks now yielded. He was tired of resisting, Quinn could tell that much. She wasn't ready to give in though; didn't know if she ever would be.

They sped through the night in silence as passing streetlights cast the black interior in alternating shades of light and dark. The mumblings of talk radio wafted through the speakers, but Brooks had it turned down too low to make out any words. Quinn reached across the console and fiddled with the knobs until smooth jazz filled the car.

Jazz always made her feel classy. Maybe the rambling saxophone would seep into her pores so that for once, she could feel that way around Carol Frederickson. Nothing else seemed to work. Not the sleek burgundy dress that hugged her hips and swept across her chest in a sweetheart neckline. Not the silver pumps that numbed her toes and pinched her heels. And not the diamond accessories that Brooks bought her year after year. Quinn had racked up quite the collection now, but Carol would simply cast a lazy glance at her daughter-in-law's chandelier earrings, as unimpressed with them as she was with Zoe's finger paintings. At least with Zoe, Carol pretended to care.

The wrought-iron gate opened slowly to a wide, cobblestone drive. Brooks's childhood home sat a good hundred feet back from the road, blocked almost entirely from

street view by a row of tall evergreens. Dark ivy tendrils stretched across much of the stone tudor's exterior and steep, gable roofs. The house always made Quinn feel like she was on a rural southern plantation instead five minutes from downtown. It had belonged to Carol's great-great grandfather and had been in her family for over a hundred years. While the Fredericksons might have only made their rodent-fueled money in the last few decades, Carol's family money was rooted in tobacco – colonial Virginia's most successful cash crop. Carol wasn't quiet about the fact that she thought that made her better, like older money was somehow more valuable.

Quinn stepped out onto the cobblestones with care, not bothering to wait for Brooks to come around and help her. Crickets sang into the chilled night air as they made their way toward the front door. Brooks didn't knock, instead sweeping into the two-story foyer with familiarity, not even glancing at the excessive crystal chandelier that hung above their heads.

“Mother?” he called out as Quinn shook off her fur coat.

“In the sitting room!” Carol's voice cut sharp and clear through the house, straight to Quinn's ears. A maid rushed to greet them, nearly ripping Quinn's coat from her arms in her haste to hang it up.

These dinners usually followed the same, worn out routine. Brooks and his father Robert spent a good portion of the evening discussing the company, as though they hadn't been at work together all week doing just that. Carol would inquire about the children, her interest beyond mere curiosity. “Do they take a multi-vitamin? What time does Isaac go to bed? Did you try that almond milk I suggested?” Quinn half expected her to inquire about their bowel movements.

Quinn accepted a glass of Merlot from Robert, who hugged her with gentle arms. His ashy hair was swept neatly to the side of his kind face, eyes warm as he welcomed her. Robert's tall, firm stature was similar to that of his son's, but that was where the resemblance ended. Brooks was his mother's child. He'd inherited her crystal blue eyes and slate black hair. Quinn suspected that Carol dyed it now, a fact that gave her a small sense of satisfaction, though she'd never dare ask.

"Let me know how you like the wine," Robert said with a nod in Quinn's direction. "I've been working my way through a sample case from a new winery out in Charlottesville."

Quinn lifted the glass to her nose and inhaled cherry and spiced cedar. She swirled her glass gently, admiring the long legs that formed along the inside, and took a large sip, pursing her lips around the rich, dry finish.

"I love it."

Brooks touched her arm. "It matches your dress."

"So when you spill some on yourself, no one will even notice," Carol added, her hard eyes gleaming.

Quinn said nothing as she took her seat beside Brooks on the Georgian sofa.

"I'll send a case over for you two," Robert said. Robert's wine cellar was the stuff of dreams. It was bigger than the layperson's living room, temperature controlled to a perfect fifty-two degrees, and stocked with rows upon rows of bottles from all around the world, ranging in age nearly as much as they ranged in price.

"Which winery?" Quinn asked as she took another smooth, velvety sip.

"Two-Fold Vineyards. Just opened up a couple of years ago."

Quinn perked up; she knew that name. “Annie’s working with them. She’s going to meet with the winemaker on Monday. I forget his name.” She couldn’t remember if Annie had even mentioned it. She’d had more important matters on her mind during their dinner last week.

“Sam Decker,” Robert supplied, nodding slowly. “He’s a talented young man.” He raised his glass. “Makes a damn good bottle of wine.”

“How *is* Annie?” Carol asked.

Quinn should have known it was a mistake to mention Annie’s name. She would never understand Carol’s fascination with her sister. In Carol’s eyes, Annie was out in the real world making a name for herself, building a life from scratch. Never mind that Quinn had borne the woman two grandchildren. Evidently that wasn’t enough of an accomplishment.

“Is she still working at the Findley Group?” Carol prodded, edging forward in her wingback chair, interest piqued.

Quinn cast a quick glance at Brooks, hoping he might change the topic, but he was busy staring down into his wine glass like it held the secret to eternal life.

“Yes,” Quinn hedged. “She is.”

“And this vineyard,” Carol said. “It’s a new project of hers? That sounds exciting. Doesn’t that sound exciting, Brooks?”

Brooks glanced up, eyes wide, as though he’d just been called on to answer a question in Calculus class when he hadn’t been listening. Quinn saved him from having to say anything.

“Yes,” Quinn hedged. “It does.”

“After all, not everyone gets lucky and simply has everything handed to them.”

Carol’s eyes remained on Quinn as she took a small sip of wine, barely tasting it.

The maid entered, small and unobtrusive in the large doorway. She gave a gentle nod, not meeting anyone’s eye. “Dinner’s ready.”

Robert and Brooks rose at once, anxious now. Brooks never knew which side to take when Carol and Quinn got into it, which bothered Quinn more than anything else. She could deal with Carol, but Brooks’s refusal to stand up to his mother grated her nerves. He used to at least roll his eyes, or chuckle secretly into Quinn’s ear whenever Carol made a pretentious comment. He felt so far away now.

Carol waited, patiently finishing her wine before moving while Quinn remained on the sofa, debating how annoyed Brooks would be if she stole his keys and left right that second.

At the dinner table, Quinn stared down at the grilled sea bass on her plate with trepidation. It still had its eyes, for God’s sake. Was she really supposed to douse its body in fresh lemon juice and just dig in, as though her dinner wasn’t watching her? She glanced around the dining room table at the rest of the Frederickson clan as they stabbed away with their silver forks, unfazed. Yes, that’s exactly what she was supposed to do.

Quinn poked at a sprig of asparagus instead. She’d deal with the fish later. Or maybe not at all.

“So Quinn,” Carol began, clearing her throat.

Quinn picked up her wine glass and took a swig in preparation. Whenever Carol gave her that hard-eyed business look, she knew condescension was about to spew from her pursed lips in some way, shape, or form.

“Yes, Carol?” she asked, hoping her tone didn’t sound quite as tired as she felt.

“I got an interesting call from Jefferson Academy the other day,” Carol said.

“Oh?” Quinn went to work on another piece of asparagus, needing a distraction.

“They were returning my call about Zoe starting kindergarten there in the fall.”

The fork slipped from Quinn’s fingers and clattered onto the rose-patterned china, the clang echoing in the large room. The corner of her mother-in-law’s lips quaked, hinting at glee. Oh, she was enjoying this, the witch.

“What were you doing calling about Zoe in the first place?” Quinn could feel her temperature rising as Brooks and Robert abandoned their own forks and stared back and forth between the two women, as though they were watching a championship match at Wimbledon.

“She’s my granddaughter. I have a right to know what’s going on in her life.”

“Yes, and you can ask *me*. You don’t have any right to go above my head and call her school like that.”

“That school’s science building is named after my father,” Carol said, her voice raising just a decibel, but that was more than enough. “I’ll call them anytime I see fit. And it’s a good thing I did call, seeing as *Zoe failed* her entrance exam.”

“What’s this now?” Brooks finally spoke up, icy eyes on Quinn. He removed the cloth napkin from his lap and tossed it onto the table, which was the Frederickson equivalent of the gloves coming off.

“Yes,” Carol barked. “I’m curious as well. When *exactly* did you plan to inform the rest of us that your daughter failed to pass a simple entrance examination?”

Quinn didn't miss the fact that Zoe had suddenly morphed into *her* daughter. She could finally see this dinner for what it was: a set-up. Carol never did anything out of the goodness of her heart. There was always an agenda for these dinners, whether it was convincing Brooks to buy a table at her next charity auction or berating Quinn about not outfitting Isaac in the latest edition of Jefferson's uniform, because God forbid he wear *last year's* polo vest. This, however, was the worst form of guerilla warfare yet.

Robert stood. "I know Dean Nichols has been antsy to break ground on a new arts center ever since Exeter renovated theirs last year. It's about time I make another donation anyway. Let me get my calendar. I'll figure out a day he can meet for drinks."

Carol's cold eyes never left Quinn, who squirmed in her banister-backed dining chair, digging clammy fingers into the burgundy fabric of her dress, no longer caring if it wrinkled.

"Quinn," Brooks said. "Is that true? Zoe really didn't get in?"

Quinn pushed her plate away and sat back. "Oh, you know she'll still get in."

"That's not the point," Carol said. "Fredericksons don't fail. Some people actually have to get by on merit in life, Quinn. How's Zoe ever going to learn that if you refuse to instill that in her at such a malleable age?"

Quinn stared down into the eyes of her dinner. In that moment, the idea of switching places with the fish didn't seem all that bad. Hell, she *was* the fish.

"Well," Carol said as Robert returned. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"What do I have to *say* for myself?" Quinn looked around for support, but all she found were bowed heads until she came back to Carol's taut face. "How, exactly, is this my fault?"

“You’re the one who’s home with her every day, are you not?” The calm in Carol’s tone combined with the ferocity of her slit eyes was disconcerting. Quinn did her best not to break the stare. Now was as good a time as any to prove that she could go blow-for-blow. “*You’re* the one that she emulates, the one who’s supposed to be teaching her about the world. Did you even *call* that tutor I recommended last year? Have you even *started* her French lessons?”

“She was four years old!” Quinn threw her hands up. “She’s supposed to be playing with Barbies and Tonka trucks. Why the hell should a four-year-old need a tutor?”

“You know why *now*, don’t you?” Carol crossed her arms over her chest and sat back, satisfied.

“Can we all just agree that having to take a test to get into Kindergarten is ridiculous?” Robert busied himself scanning through his calendar. Brooks tore a dinner roll to shreds over in his corner.

“No one else in this family has ever had any trouble passing that test,” Carol said. “Yet the child that most takes after you seems incapable of it. To me, that’s not a coincidence.”

If Quinn hadn’t been on the verge of boiling over, she actually would have laughed. She’d always known about Carol’s prejudices, despite Brooks’s adamant denial of their existence. Now she had proof, right here in front of him, but he still couldn’t see it. She could tell from the despondent look in her husband’s eyes that he agreed with his mother. So there she sat, ganged up on and out of arguments.

Then, like a gift from God, Quinn's cell phone rang, piercing through the tense silence. Quinn jumped at the familiar tune and bolted out of the room.

"Is that... Dolly Parton?" she heard Robert ask.

Brooks mumbled something in response.

"It's her *ringtone*?" Carol hissed.

The only similarity Quinn would admit to sharing with her mother was a penchant for Dolly Parton, simply because there was no denying it. She and Annie used to fall asleep to the sound of Dolly's voice crooning them from the old record player June kept in the kitchen. Quinn adored the buxom blonde, and used to sing right along with June. And even though Annie would never admit it, she knew every word to Dolly's greatest hits album, too.

Quinn yanked her cell phone from her purse, where she'd discarded it in the living room, and held it up like a carnival prize. Salvation.

"Hello?" Quinn rasped into the receiver, breathless. She'd never been so happy to hear Dolly Parton before in her entire life. That is, until the person on the other line opened her mouth.

"Quinn? Hi, it's Trudy. Trudy Cromwell." *As though I know another Trudy.*

"Hi, Trudy." Quinn walked deeper into the sitting room, intent on getting as far away from the Fredericksons as possible. She wasn't keen on them overhearing any conversation she had with Trudy Cromwell. "How's the sleepover going?"

"Not well," Trudy replied, her voice steeped in sympathy. "I'm afraid you're going to have to come get Isaac."

The more Quinn thought about it, the more she believed that there was really no other way the most hellish night on earth could end, other than with Isaac wetting the bed at his first slumber party. Well, not wetting the *bed* per se, since all the boys were sleeping en masse on the floor, but wetting the sleeping bag and, in effect, wetting Trudy's plush carpet.

At the very least, it gave Quinn an excuse to get the hell out of her in-laws' house. Robert had met her at the door as she hustled into her jacket.

"I don't want you to worry about this, Quinn," he'd urged, holding out the sleeve of her coat still so she could wriggle into it. "I'll call Dean Nichols first thing Monday morning and we'll get it all straightened out." Then he lowered his voice and stepped closer. "Don't mind Carol. You know she just gets protective over family matters."

Quinn wanted to scoff in his face, but she had a soft spot for Brooks's father. Why couldn't the *rest* of his family be this kind? Quinn could only imagine what Carol had said to Brooks during her absence from the dining room. Her best guess was something along the lines of, "I told you so."

Whatever it had been, it wasn't good. Brooks's stony demeanor on the drive to Trudy's told her all she needed to know: despite the fact that Robert had vowed to fix everything, this conversation was not over. Quinn was actually glad for that, because she had a few more things to say on the subject, away from the prying eyes and bionic ears of Carol Frederickson.

Brooks had turned the radio off completely. No distractions. Quinn refused to look at him, her brow set in determination as they waited, seeing who could outlast the other in this adult version of the quiet game.

Brooks broke first.

“What the hell was *that*, Quinn?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, the next time something monumental happens in one of our kids’ lives, I’d prefer not to hear about it from my mother.”

“Please. I’d hardly call Zoe failing a *kindergarten* entrance exam “monumental.” You know, maybe this is a sign. Maybe we shouldn’t send her to Jefferson. She could always go to public school.”

He laughed, as though she’d meant it as a joke. “You must really not know my mother at all if you think she’d ever let one of her grandkids go to public school.”

“I went to public school.”

Brooks suddenly became very focused on winding his car through the dark streets.

“And I’m the one you’re married to, remember?” Quinn said. “Last I checked, I was supposed to get a say in this.”

Brooks shook his head. “My father will get everything squared away with Dean Nichols next week.”

Quinn actually *had* made the public school jab in semi-jest, to gauge a reaction. Now, however, she wanted it more than anything. Zoe was different than Isaac. Less cautious, less calculated. Brooks didn’t see it because Brooks wasn’t around enough, but Quinn knew her daughter. Zoe didn’t need the extra pampering, the uniforms, the eighteen PTA committees. If she fell down and scuffed her knee, she got back up and ran.

“I don’t want Robert to buy off Nichols like some corrupt politician,” Quinn said, fervent now. Brooks wouldn’t look at her. “I’m serious about this, Brooks. I think Zoe might actually do better in public school. Maybe this is for the best. It’s fate.”

“Fate,” he chuckled, an odd sound in the small, tense space there in the shadows of the car. “That’s a cop-out if I ever heard one.” The faint blue light of the dash illuminated his furrowed brow, tight lips. At times like these, it was hard for Quinn to remember a time when she had loved him.

They pulled into Trudy’s circular driveway. On any other night, Quinn would have found this amusing. Trudy’s first words to her, two years ago at Jefferson Academy’s Accepted Students Day, were: “Nothing screams money like a circular driveway.”

Now, as she stepped out onto the beacon of wealth as Brooks rushed ahead, straight toward the front door, she felt sick.

Annie

Annie’s sleepy eyes creaked open and, for a moment, she believed. It was still dark outside, the full moon hung low in the sky, big and bright. Annie snuggled further under the fleece throw blanket, only to discover a small set of warm, soft limbs. Zoe yawned beside her on the couch, her blonde curls splayed out on the throw pillow beside Annie’s own locks, where they mixed and tangled together, nearly impossible to tell apart. Annie closed her eyes again, not wanting to wake up yet. She’d had this dream before.

The night rushed back to her all at once: baking double chocolate chip brownies, Zoe spilling flour all over the kitchen floor, watching *Frozen* for the umpteenth time. Zoe

had settled in beside her, and as Annie pulled the little thing into her arms, they'd both drifted off soundly.

Now, in the quiet solace of the night, Annie could pretend that things had turned out the way they were supposed to. There was never any accident, there were no tears except those of joy, and she was whole in every way a person can be. If life were fair, this would all be real.

Annie pulled Zoe close once again, allowing herself to keep the dream alive for a little while longer.

Then, a car door slammed outside, keys jiggled in the lock, and the clack clacking of high heels on marble floors pierced the night air. Zoe's eyelids began to flutter.

"Annie?" came a soft, low voice.

Annie opened one eye and could just make out Brooks's outline in the darkness of the living room.

"Hmm?"

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," he said lightly. She wasn't sure if he was speaking to her or Zoe.

"I'm awake," Annie rasped, her throat creaking with sleep.

Brooks pulled Zoe from her arms before she was ready, and the chill of night air hit her chest with surprising force. "I'll take her up to bed," he said.

Annie wanted to protest, but what could she say? Brooks was out of the room with Zoe before she could even respond, leaving her alone in the dark living room. She rubbed her tired eyes, and although she still wasn't completely awake, the dream was gone.

Seventy miles of Virginia stretched between Richmond and Charlottesville, and Annie was well acquainted with each and every one. She'd seen them through tear-blurred eyes, sung to them along with Bob Dylan, and sometimes she'd not seen them at all, instead spending the entire drive with her mind adrift.

This small stretch of road held the summation of Annie's past, present, and future. Seventy miles. There are one hundred and sixty-four thousand miles of highway in the United States, but these seventy hold everything that was or has ever been important to her. It always seemed sad to her that an entire life could span such a small distance.

She'd been other places, sure. There were school field trips to New York City and college spring break getaways to Key West, but none of those miles held a modicum of importance compared to a single one of these seventy.

Annie knew which rest stops had cleanest bathrooms, where the accidents were likeliest to occur on slick roads, and exactly how many trees stood in the cluster that always hid the Louisa exit sign until you were right on top of it. She hadn't taken that exit in nearly five years, but she used to know it well, back when June Graves was still a part of her life. The trees were barren now, stripped of life by winter storms and waiting for buds. She passed them without a second thought. Annie had become so accustomed to ignoring the Louisa sign that sometimes she could pretend it did not exist at all.

It was easy to pretend today, her mind otherwise occupied as she glanced over at the pile of manila folders in her passenger seat, filled with information on Two-Fold Vineyards. The Decker brothers hoped to change the reputation of Two-Fold from a backyard, mom-and-pop place to a real competitor in the Charlottesville wine world.

Annie was usually grateful for any reprieve from numbing, day-to-day doldrums back at the office. Today, however, she couldn't shake the biting agitation that was building in her gut. On top of twenty wasted minutes spent waiting for Eric, the rush hour traffic back in Richmond had her running unforgivably late. Not the best way to begin a client relationship. She could only pray that Sam Decker was forgiving. It wasn't her fault that Eric Findley didn't believe the word 'mandatory' applied to him.

When Melody's name appeared on the screen of Annie's phone, she answered immediately.

"That little shit hasn't shown his face yet, has he?"

"Not yet," Melody said, "and I doubt he will. He's not answering his cell phone either." The usual secretarial politeness in Melody's voice was glaringly absent this morning.

"It's like he thinks that just because we don't have to be in the office today, he doesn't have to come into work."

"No," Melody said. "Nepotism at its finest."

"You know," Annie said. "This is why monarchies never worked out."

"No, monarchies didn't work because inbreeding causes twelve-fingered babies with humps in their backs, who can't speak and think glue is a food group."

"You know what I mean. Will you tell Mark? And remind him that having one associate do the work of two is basically slave labor."

"I'll tell him."

"It'll make me feel better."

Melody chuckled. “That’s about all the good it will do. Oh, see if you can score some free wine today.”

“Aye aye, Captain.” Even though Melody couldn’t see her, Annie still saluted.

“And drive safe,” Melody said. “They’re calling for a bad storm this afternoon.”

Annie eyed the purple clouds in the distance. “April showers and all that, I suppose.”

“Don’t forget the wine.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Annie chugged along just past Charlottesville, to its richer western side, under an ever-darkening sky. She’d always preferred this side of Charlottesville, where the mountains began to grow, taking on a different life, more severe in their nature. Back in college at the University of Virginia, whose campus sat just west of Charlottesville’s downtown, she used to drive out here to clear her head, for a breath of mountain air. Following Tucker’s death, after she was released from the hospital, she would sometimes spend entire days out here, pretending that when she got back to UVA, everything would be as it once was.

The entrance for Two-Fold Vineyards came into view as she crested another hill. Two old wine barrels sat on either side of the driveway and a small wooden sign stated: Welcome to Two-Fold Vineyards. The words were faded though, and Annie had to squint to make them out. That sign would be the first thing to go. Unless the look the Decker boys were going for was “Keep on driving. There’s nothing to see here.”

The vineyard’s driveway had been paved once upon a time, but it was now littered with potholes, the pavement chipping away at all sides. Annie wondered how

they got any business at all with this type of welcome. The climb up to the winery felt like an obstacle course as she wove her car back and forth, narrowly avoiding a flat tire.

Her knuckles grew firmer on the wheel the higher she climbed, every bounce and jiggle from the road sending a jolt of irritation through her body. This driveway reminded her of something Eric would do, if he ever had the gumption to start his own business, which was unlikely. She hit the brakes as her car rumbled over another pothole.

When Annie reached the parking lot, she shook out her stiff fingers. Rain began to fall in fat drops as she raced across the cobblestone lot. Her hair was dripping by the time she reached main building, her suit blazer damp and clinging to her body at odd places.

The main building at Two-Fold was a large cedar and stone structure, reminiscent of a log cabin. The back half, which looked out over acres of grapevines along the valley, was made almost entirely of glass, offering a one hundred and eighty degree view of the budding vineyard. The smell of wood smoke permeated the air.

“Miss Graves?”

Sam Decker stood just inside the entryway, peering at her from beneath the brim of a worn Virginia Tech baseball hat. His jeans were tucked into hunter green wellington boots, which came up to his knees. While practical for the day’s weather, the boots weren’t something Annie would ever advise someone to wear to a business meeting. Most clients she dealt with were very concerned with appearing put-together, but Sam’s white, wine-stain riddled T-shirt and the tattered flannel he’d thrown over it did not radiate thoughtfulness.

“Mr. Decker,” Annie said, after a moment too long. She stuck out her hand and walked toward him, crossing the wooden floorboards in three, purposeful strides. Sam’s

hands were clammy and calloused, but the warmth was comforting to her chilled fingers. Frazzled, she pushed her damp, frizzing hair back behind her ears and shifted from one foot to the other.

Something about Sam's careless appearance made her increasingly uncomfortable, as though he were making a silent statement. Annie just wasn't sure what, exactly, that statement was. Maybe he'd forgotten about their meeting. From the stiff look on his face, it was quite possible that Sam Decker felt more uncomfortable than she did.

Two employees – a man and a woman, both in their mid-sixties – watched the exchange from behind the tasting bar as they restocked the shelves with bottles of Petit Verdot. Acutely aware eyes on her, Annie smoothed her black pencil skirt and took a step back. She gazed around the high-ceilinged room again, dotted with exposed beams and iron chandeliers. The chic, rustic modernity here did not fit with the ramshackle signage and driveway she'd just endured. Clearly, Two-Fold was still in somewhat of a renovation stage.

Annie followed Sam over to a small table for two by the window, which overlooked the rolling vine-streaked hills.

“Nice place you've got here,” Annie said. “I think I narrowly avoided a flat tire on the drive up though.” She knew she was supposed to be pleasant, but she couldn't help herself.

Sam leaned back in his chair as though he were at the beach. Annie half expected him to pop open a cold one. “Owen and I like to think of it more as a safeguard for

guests,” Sam explained. “Am I sober enough to drive? Guess I’ll see if I can make it down the driveway.”

Annie went about methodically unpacking manila folders from her briefcase. Sam sat up straighter. She paused and eyed him carefully before pulling out a legal pad. Why did she suddenly feel like a court-appointed lawyer for a man on trial?

“That was a joke,” he said. “We don’t really over-serve people. It’s not a nightclub.”

“I should hope not.” Annie flipped to a blank page on her legal pad and penned the date into the top, right-hand corner. Was it really only Monday? “I was looking around your website and I think what might be really helpful is an “About Us” section where we could talk about the winery’s history. Why don’t you tell me a bit about how you and your brother came to own this place?”

Sam took off his hat and scratched the top of his messy head before replacing it. “I am sorry about the driveway,” he said. “We’ve been meaning to fix it but when you buy a run-down winery that hasn’t been open for business in three decades, it comes with a lot of baggage. The driveway didn’t even made the first to-do list. Or the second. We’ll get to it.”

“They ran some nice articles about you guys in the *Charlottesville Enquirer* a few months back,” Annie said. “Said you and your brother really turned this place around. It was in pretty rough shape when you first bought it, huh?”

“Oh this place was a crap heap,” Sam admitted readily. “I like to think it’s a bit more impressive now though.” He stared out at the vines as rain poured down, pelting the glass mercilessly. Annie followed his gaze.

No matter how many times Annie visited the Blue Ridge Mountains, the surrounding beauty still never ceased to amaze her. Through the blur of rain, she could just make out the peaks that rose and fell in the distance, every inch of them laced with grapevines and dotted with naked, arching trees. Even prior to full bloom, the landscape blended together so seamlessly it almost seemed that, from the moment of creation, this had been the plan all along.

“We’re growing Petit Verdot over there.” Sam pointed to the right, toward a particular stretch of vines that, to Annie, looked indistinguishable from the rest. “And Cabernet Franc – that’s a grape that grows real nice around here. Beyond that is Traminette. You ever heard of Traminette?”

Annie shook her head as she stared at Sam. He traced the vines on the glass, making lines through the fog of the window like Isaac always did when it rained. She watched his pale fingers, transfixed. One thing was becoming increasingly clear: the man before her was unlike anyone she’d ever met before.

She blinked once. Twice. Then tried to focus on the list of questions before her. A gust of wind rattled the windows and she tensed. “So what makes two guys want to buy a run-down old winery? I heard that Owen quit his job at a hedge fund in D.C. to do this. I can only assume he took a bit of a pay cut.”

Sam drummed a faint staccato beat on the tabletop. “Owen was doing well for himself in D.C., but he hated working for a hedge fund. What’s the point of doing something if you hate it?”

Annie tapped her pen against the legal pad, matching Sam’s rhythm. “Well, some might argue that money is a pretty big motivator. Bills don’t pay themselves.”

Sam nodded. “That’s fair. My brother and I just saw a chance to get out of the rat race and we jumped at it.”

“Lucky you.”

He smiled then and finally looked at her, clasping his hands and leaning forward over the table, the brim of his cap only inches from her face. She should have leaned back, put more distance between them, but his eyes held her still.

“And what about you, Miss Graves? What would you jump at if you had the chance?”

Tucker’s face burned somewhere in the back of her mind. That was something he would have said, dreamer that he was. Then, a wave of guilt came over her like nausea, and Annie gripped the table until her fingers turned white. It happened whenever she felt the stir of attraction toward someone else, or any sort of compulsion to move on. She knew it wasn’t healthy to live in the past, but sometimes it seemed like the only thing she knew how to do.

“I don’t know,” Annie said after a beat, trying to compose herself. “A million dollars?”

Sam laughed. “Fair enough.” He glanced at her empty legal pad. “Aren’t you supposed to be taking notes?”

Clearing her throat, Annie fidgeted. “That was the original plan, yes.” Annie rubbed her temples in an attempt to clear her head. She needed to get this meeting back on track. The table creaked as Sam sat forward again, leaning onto his elbows.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Annie's eyes flashed to his. She could have lied. She could have said she was completely fine, not a care in the world. Probably should have, but Annie felt like he'd know she was lying somehow. She didn't want to lie.

"It's been a rough morning," she admitted.

Sam's brow creased, eyebrows knitting together. "There were supposed to be two of you coming today, right?"

Annie tried not to groan. "That would be Eric. He had a, uh, a family emergency."

"What's that code for?" Sam asked, amused. "Is he hung over or something?"

Annie considered this for a moment. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility. She knew Eric had a penchant for beer pong. Or was it beer bong? She was fuzzy on the specifics. Typically, when Eric chose to wax poetic about his glory days as a frat superstar, she did her best to tune him out.

Sam took her silence as an affirmation and continued, intrigued. "Is he going to get fired?"

"That'll be the day." Annie kicked her feet out and leaned back in her chair, taking in the view on the other side of the glass. Rain continued to pour, but in the distance, over the mountains, rays of light began to fight through the dense cloud cover.

Annie shuffled her papers back in order and readied her legal pad. She offered him one small, apologetic smile before uncapping her pen. "How about we try this again?"

She peppered him with questions about his position as the vineyard's winemaker. The wind howled outside all the while. Sam's awkward, stumbling answers and jolting

shifts in trails of thought suggested that he'd rather be boiled alive in hot oil than go into detail about his work, but his effort didn't go unappreciated.

A young couple was splitting a bottle of Rose two tables away, their hair damp from the rain. Annie wondered what could have brought them there at eleven in the morning on a Monday. Didn't either of them work?

"Is that everything?" Sam asked.

Annie tore her gaze away from the man and woman, who were now giggling as they whispered into each other's ear.

"Hm?" She turned back to Sam only to find that he was also staring at the couple.

"Are those all of your questions?"

"Oh." Annie fumbled with her folders, as though there might be an answer somewhere within them. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess so."

"Great. Owen should be here any minute. He had a meeting at the bank earlier this morning. Let me shoot him a message." Sam leaned back in his chair as he pulled out his cell phone. Then his face fell. His next words came out in a pinched voice: "He's running late. There's an accident on sixty-four."

"Oh." Annie paused. "That's okay."

"Hey, have you ever tried some of our wine?" Sam asked.

Annie hesitated, unsure how to go about answering. She knew she should be delicate. He was a prospective client after all. And yet, she felt an overwhelming compulsion to remain honest. His eyes were too deep, too brown. Certainly, he'd know if she were fibbing.

"Actually, I sort of... hate wine," she admitted.

Sam surprised her by looking thoroughly amused, his dark eyebrows shooting towards the ceiling. “*Hate*,” he repeated. “That’s a strong emotion.”

“Well, not just wine,” she continued, talking too fast now. She always turned into a machine of sputtering verbiage when uncomfortable, hoping the flood of words would mask it, distract people. Sam didn’t seem easily distracted. “All alcohol, really. I’ve just never had a taste for it. Probably something to do with my mother.” Or everything to do with her mother, but that was another conversation entirely and Sam probably had other places to be today. “Caffeine is my drug of choice.”

He leaned back casually in his chair. “You must find all of *this* pretty unimpressive then,” he said, motioning to the room around them.

“On the contrary, I actually find it fascinating. Just because I don’t like wine doesn’t mean I don’t admire the process. I think what you and your brother have built here is pretty amazing. I have a lot of respect for people who make their own way in life.”

It seemed that the less they talked about wine, the more relaxed Sam grew. “Are you someone like that?”

Annie shrugged. “I guess so.”

“You guess?”

Pausing, Annie shifted in her seat as his question soaked in. What kind of person was she, really? That was something she was still trying to figure out. She used to know, at least she thought she did, but now? Annie wasn’t so sure anymore.

Sam opened his mouth to say more, but a booming voice interrupted them.

“Hey, party people! Sorry I’m late.”

Sam and Owen Decker did not look related. Where Sam was lean, Owen was bulky. Not overweight, per se, just thicker. He was the offensive lineman to Sam's quarterback: still an athlete, but his purpose was brute strength over precision.

Owen's pale blue suit was crisp, his pink shirt bright on this dreary day. The sleek, brown loafers on his feet were a stark contrast to his brother's choice of footwear, though Owen didn't bat an eye at Sam's sloppy get-up as he made his way over to Annie, as though he expected nothing less.

"Miss Graves, it's nice to meet you," Owen said, grasping her hand and giving it a firm shake. "Please forgive my tardiness. Sixty-four was a parking lot."

Annie waved him off. "Don't worry about it. In the spirit of full disclosure, I was actually late, too."

Sam held up his hands. "I wasn't going to say anything."

"We're even then." Owen buttoned the front of his blazer, signaling his readiness to get down to business. Annie picked up her briefcase in a silent reply and he motioned her in the direction that Sam had pointed in during the interview while simply stating 'offices.' "Shall we?"

Owen's booming laugh filled any room he was in and his round face reminded Annie of an old teddy bear she'd dragged around with her for an entire year when she was six. Sam did not follow them into Owen's office, but Annie barely had time to register his absence as Owen chattered on and on about how excited they were to be starting a new chapter and expanding Two-Fold's brand. She felt at ease around him at once. Where his brother was awkward and fumbling, Owen was smooth and confident. She could see why they

fell into their particular roles, with Owen as the face of Two-Fold and Sam working behind the scenes, giving the winery legs to stand on.

After a successful hour with Owen, Annie said her goodbyes and headed back to her car under blessedly clearer skies. The crunch of approaching footsteps sounded over her shoulder as she tossed her briefcase into the backseat of her car.

Sam shielded his eyes from the glaring sunlight as Annie turned to face him.

“We didn’t get to say goodbye,” he explained.

“It was nice to meet you.” Annie stuck out her hand.

Sam shook it slowly, keeping his eyes on hers. He rocked back on his heels, stones grinding under his feet. “Hey, do you want to get lunch?”

From what Annie knew about Sam Decker thus far – though she didn’t know much – it was clear that he did not have a business lunch in mind. He’d had a hard enough time talking shop with Annie prodding him along, slinging questions at him. She doubted he’d choose to talk about business of his own volition and despite the fact that she actually found that appealing, there was a strict no fraternizing with clients rule at The Findley Group.

Somehow, the story managed to come up at every happy hour. There was this accounts manager – no one remembered his name or how long ago he’d gotten sacked – who slept with one of the attorneys at a law firm he was working with and got into a brawl with her husband in the middle of an *Applebee’s*. Regardless of how the rule came to be, it was still a rule, and one that Mark Todd did not take lightly.

Annie knew it was excuse, but she latched onto it like a life raft. Anything was preferable to admitting the truth: that the very idea of firmly cementing Tucker in her past

made her feel like the worst person in the world. Moving on meant opening herself up to hurt. Annie didn't know if she could survive pain like that again. Sometimes, even the pain from Tucker's death eight years ago felt fresh – like she hadn't even begun to mend.

“I don't think that's a good idea,” Annie said, sweat forming on her brow under the glare of the sun. She shaded her eyes as she looked up at Sam, who bit his bottom lip and nodded.

“Yeah, you're probably right,” Sam agreed slowly, though he didn't seem repentant. He stared past her, into the messy interior of her car. Stale paper coffee cups littered the floor. The passenger seat was barely visible under the mountains of manila folders. “When's the last time you cleaned your car?”

Annie stepped to the side, blocking his view of the interior, but Sam's smirk was already growing back, fueled by this intimate detail.

“Do you want some coffee for the road?” he asked. “All those cups look empty.”

Trying not to laugh, she stuck out her hand in an attempt to regain some semblance of professionalism. Sam grasped it gently as they shook, never taking his eyes off hers. “Goodbye, Mr. Decker.”

“It's been a pleasure.”

Annie wanted to look back at him as she drove away, but forced her eyes forward, telling herself she needed to concentrate on neatly weaving her car between the potholes. She saw him in the rearview mirror, standing there with his hands in his pockets, watching her drive away, until she disappeared around a bend in the lane.

Quinn

Quinn eased her Escalade into the parent pick-up line at Jefferson Academy amidst a swarm of buses and crossing guards in reflective vests, waving handheld stop signs in her face.

Sometimes she fantasized about mowing them all down with her car. She'd never do it, of course, but the vision of those stop signs crunching under her wheels was satisfying.

She always felt out of place here at pick-up time, where the hum-drum buzz of suburbia was at its highest. Parents were all smiles as they greeted one another, happily discussing the upcoming end-of-school picnic or the bake sale to raise money for the eighth grade field trip to Washington, D.C. The entire bake sale was a sham – Quinn knew that much. The fee could be raised in ten seconds flat, with one Jefferson parent whipping out a checkbook. But kids were supposed to have bake sales at school, so on went the charade.

When the nurses had handed her Isaac's tiny, wet newborn body, everyone else saw beauty, wonder. All Quinn saw when she stared down at his shriveled skin, mewling screams piercing the sterile hospital air, was her entire future slipping away. Try as she might, and as unfair as it was, that vision never changed.

Quinn hadn't even gotten to name him. Carol was probably afraid that a no-good, trailer park hussy like her would name him Billy-Bob or Rusty. Instead, he was destined to be Brooks Isaac Frederickson IV from the moment of conception. He'd go on to take over the family business someday.

She pulled up behind a mini-van at the end of a line of cars in the designated parent pick-up zone. Zoe belted out a Disney tune from her car seat in the back, refusing

to quiet down even as Quinn retrieved her and locked the car behind them. Zoe trotted along beside mother, only quieting to a hum at Quinn's request for silence.

A gaggle of other moms waited outside the locked school doors, many of whom Quinn recognized from Isaac's soccer games. Trudy's son – Ben – played on Isaac's team, which was the whole reason he'd been invited the birthday extravaganza in the first place. The very thought of that disastrous slumber party made Quinn groan. When they'd gone to pick Isaac up, Brooks had insisted on laying down newspaper in the backseat of his Mercedes, worrying that a single drop of urine might somehow damage his leather interior. Quinn had just wanted to get the hell out of there as fast as possible, but instead they'd had to wait ten extra minutes while Trudy dug Saturday's *Richmond Dispatch* out of the recycling bin. The newspaper crinkled and crackled the entire drive home while Isaac fidgeted in the back, tired, cranky, and embarrassed.

Quinn had somehow managed to avoid Trudy so far this week, but her winning streak was now over. She glanced at her watch: five past three. Five minutes of mindless small talk to endure before school officially let out.

"Quinnie!" Trudy Cromwell crowed. "*You're* here early." Trudy Cromwell was the only person on the planet who called her Quinnie, no matter how many times Quinn had tried to subtly remind her that it was actually just "Quinn." She'd given up at this point, but that didn't stop the name from grating her nerves just a little bit more every time she heard it.

Zoe pulled away, anxious to play with another group of tag-a-long toddlers. Quinn waved to Crystal Moyer as Zoe ran over began engaging her daughter in a game of patty-cake. As always, Crystal winked at her, as though there were some kind of secret

understanding between them. Quinn never knew how to respond and offered up a half-hearted wave.

“Get your skinny butt over here, lady!” Trudy called again. Quinn tried not to wince at the high-pitched, nasal voice, a perfect mimicry of Zoe’s earlier screeching. She attributed the nasal tone to Trudy’s four-plus rhinoplasties. The woman was giving Michael Jackson a run for his money.

Zac Posen handbag tucked firmly under her arm like an affirmation of worth, Quinn offered a tight smile and twisted her wedding band around her finger. “Hey there, Trudy.”

“Hiya, darlin’!” Trudy’s eyes widened in forced excitement, as though delighted by Quinn’s very presence. The blue eye shadow caked onto her lids always made Quinn think of a cheap, circus fortune-teller. “So what brings you here so early? Usually you’re just pulling in when we’re all leaving.”

“Actually, Zoe has her recital today.” Quinn pointed toward the small patch of grass where Zoe was playing. “So we’re on a tight schedule.”

Karen Bristow and Charlotte Jones murmured soft awws as Trudy clapped her hands together, solid gold bangles clattering about her wrists. “How precious! But where’s Brooks?” Trudy craned her neck, searching around as though Brooks might suddenly appear from behind a nearby trashcan, surprising them all. “He’ll be there, of course?”

“Yes,” Quinn clipped. “*Of course.*”

Trudy always inquired about Brooks as if Quinn’s entire marriage might burst apart at the seams at any minute. Sometimes, Quinn wondered if she only stayed married

to Brooks out of spite, to prove people wrong. She could just picture the pleasant curl of Trudy's lips if she ever found out about the arguments that went on behind closed doors in the Frederickson household and added a curt, "He wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Isn't that nice," Trudy said, running a hand through her short, highlighted brown hair. She was on her third husband now, but Ben was her first child – a miracle baby after decades of trying. "By the way," she added, "How's Isaac doing? It can be so traumatic for boys his age to wet the bed outside their own home. He was just hysterical about it on Saturday night, locking himself in the bedroom like that. We tried to scrub the stain out of Ben's carpet ourselves, but we couldn't get rid of the smell. Good thing Stanley Steamer is only a phone call away, right?"

Quinn forced a smile just before the school bell sounded. The front doors burst open and children swarmed around. Suddenly she was amid an ocean of forest green and navy blue as girls in plaid jumpers and boys in slacks and polo shirts searched for their parents.

Isaac came to a stop before here, dragging his royal blue backpack behind him – the fancy L.L. Bean kind with his monogrammed initials.

"You're here early," he said, eyeing her cautiously, waiting for the catch.

A few feet away, Trudy scooped Ben into her arms as though they'd been separated for months.

Quinn fought the urge to roll her eyes. She grabbed Isaac's hand, turned on her heel, and called out to Zoe as they trudged back to the Escalade.

It was too stuffy in this auditorium. Quinn shifted in her folding chair to glance back toward the doors. Isaac sank down further in the seat beside to her, busily attempting to beat level four on his handheld Nintendo game. The recital would start in a few minutes and Brooks was still nowhere to be found. Her texts and calls had gone unanswered.

The small stage was decorated with bright orange and red flowers, purple butterflies, and puffy-bodied, yellow bumble bees. The banner hanging above read, “Welcome, Spring!” Zoe would be dressed as a bumblebee during the recital, which, if you asked her, was unforgivable. She should have been a butterfly. Many tears had been shed over this travesty.

Quinn hoped Zoe wouldn’t spend the entire recital sulking. She’d seemed fine when they first arrived, but four-year-olds weren’t exactly known for their emotional stability, and Quinn knew the petulance could return at a moment’s notice. Her leg jittered with nerves, worried about the possibility of an on-stage meltdown.

Someone slipped into the chair next to Quinn and she whipped around, expecting Brooks.

“Annie?” Quinn paused. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?” Annie asked. “It’s Zoe’s recital! I couldn’t miss it.”

“Don’t get your hopes up – she’s a bumblebee.”

Annie frowned. “Is she still hung up on that? I thought she was over it. She actually seemed kind of excited about it on Saturday night. We even practiced her dance.”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Quinn pointed to the stage. “You think she’ll be okay?”

Annie grabbed Quinn's hand and gave it a squeeze. "She'll be just fine." Annie glanced around the auditorium. "Where's Brooks?"

Quinn tried to keep her voice even. "I don't think he's coming."

"Shocking," Annie deadpanned. "Are you going to record it for him?"

"Should I?" Quinn had never even considered it. He'd never asked her to record anything before, not soccer games or class plays or talent shows. "Do you think he'd want to watch it?"

"Couldn't hurt." Annie shrugged. "Even if he doesn't, it would still be nice to have. Zoe might like to watch it when she gets older. I bet she'd get a kick out of it. You probably will, too."

Quinn pulled out her smart phone and held it at the ready for when the curtain rose. She and Annie had very little to remember their childhood by. There were the items they'd saved – school tests, newspaper announcements about their academic achievements, but their mother had never been a picture-taker; June Graves did not specialize in the sentimental. Annie and Quinn had their memories of spelling bee wins and Halloween nights with buckets full of candy, but those were beginning to slip away, too. They'd had to shake June awake from an alcohol-induced slumber far too many times for good memories to have any lasting effects. The best memory Quinn had of Louisa was leaving it for good.

Annie perused the paper recital program while Quinn fiddled with the video setting on her phone.

"Did you still end up going to Charlottesville yesterday?" Quinn asked.

“Huh?” The program fell from Annie’s hands, drifting slowly to the floor, and she reached down to retrieve it from under her chair. “Oh, yeah, I still had to go.”

Quinn waited for her sister to elaborate and when she didn’t, quickly lost interest in her phone. Annie wasn’t usually the elusive type. “How’d the meeting with Sam go?” Quinn thought Annie flinched when she said his name.

“Sam?”

“The winemaker?”

“Yeah, I know. I just forgot I told you his name.”

“Robert knows him, too.”

“Robert?”

“Brooks’s dad,” Quinn said slowly, like Annie had a learning disability.

Annie shook her head back and forth, flustered. She closed her eyes for a moment. “I know. How does Robert know Sam?”

“Robert knows everyone,” Quinn said. “I tried some of the wine, too – it’s really good.”

Annie paused. “You tried some of Two-Fold’s wine?” She almost sounded angry, like when they were kids and Quinn borrowed one of her CDs without asking.

Quinn laughed. “Well *someone* has to drink it.”

The lights flickered and dimmed. Quinn pressed record on her phone and tapped Isaac on the shoulder, but he wouldn’t look up. “It’s starting!” In her periphery, she saw Annie staring up at the stage with wide eyes, spooked.

When it was over – without any breakdowns or tears from Zoe – Annie clapped and clapped, like it was her own daughter on stage and not just a niece. She joined in the standing ovation, but Quinn remained seated, the paper program crumpled in her hands.

Chapter 4

Annie

Annie thought that, after the accident, she wouldn't be able to stand the sight of children ever again. She thought it would be too painful to see something she could never have flaunted in front of her like that.

When Quinn told her that she was pregnant, Annie took it as a personal affront, like it was something Quinn had done just to spite her. Annie didn't speak to her for an entire week until Quinn finally confronted her on the quad, while she was limping to civics class, still on crutches, fully ensconced in the familiar numbness she'd learned to inhabit. Back then, it was the only way she could get through the day.

"I need you," Quinn had said through sticky tears. "Please, Annie. I need you."

Annie couldn't say no to her. She'd wanted to, but with Tucker gone, Quinn was all she had. They were barely on speaking terms with June anymore. Annie couldn't feel much during those days, but Quinn was still her sister.

Quinn knew better than to complain too bitterly about her position in front of Annie, but sometimes she couldn't help herself. Annie didn't say much when she did. After all, the situation was far from ideal, but bitterness still stung in her throat like bile whenever Quinn whined about the trials of pregnancy, or debated over cake flavors for her reception. Annie would have done anything to switch places with her then. To have Tucker back. She and Tucker were the ones who were supposed to get married. He was

going to ask her to marry him on graduation day. They used to stay up late at night, tangled in his dorm room sheets, planning their life together.

Quinn would have been sad if Brooks died, sure, but not devastated. She would have gotten over it, moved on. It wasn't like that for Annie. She would always be stuck.

Then Isaac came. Annie had never seen anything so beautiful in her entire life. He was so small. His fingers so pink and soft. She used to touch her nose to his. Gentle Eskimo kisses. When she held him, she used to pretend that he was hers. It was easy enough to do. He looked like her. He had her hazel eyes. Quinn's hazel eyes.

Even now, there were times when Annie allowed herself to pretend. Usually late at night, curled up on her couch with *Ancient Aliens* droning softly in the background. While an 'expert' explained how the pyramids had really been constructed on Saturn, Annie let her mind drift.

But on this particular night, it wasn't working. She could remember what Tucker looked like, sure. His pictures dominated the walls of her studio. But she couldn't remember the sound of his voice. No matter how hard she tried, or how much she wished for it to come back, she couldn't remember.

The loneliness hit her all at once, like slamming on the brakes. Her heartbeat quickened and Annie sat up, muting the television and looking around her dark apartment. It was so quiet.

She was stuffing her feet into her slippers before she even really knew what she was doing or where she was going. She was in her car, driving out of the city when she finally let herself think the words: *I don't want to be alone anymore.*

When Quinn had first suggested changing places, Annie hadn't allowed herself to consider it much. It was too silly, too childish. They were adults. Adults didn't do things like this.

Now that her mind had already strayed for the evening, she decided to let it go a little farther.

It was childish – they hadn't changed places since middle school. But *crazy*? Annie didn't know about that, because right then, Quinn's plan started to feel like exactly what she needed.

Quinn

Quinn had had it. It was one thing for Brooks to miss Zoe's recital. But now it felt like he was hiding from her, like he could smell her anger in the air like prey animals sniff out their predators. She'd seen a documentary about that once – when Annie had control the remote – which explained how lionesses hunted downwind from a herd of gazelle, to remain undetected.

She felt like a lioness now, but Brooks was better when it came to stealth. He'd come home late last night and left this morning – an hour earlier than usual. And now, he wasn't home for dinner. No texts, no calls.

Quinn had texted him once. A short, "Where are you?" It had gone unanswered. That was two hours ago and she refused to text him again. Maybe he felt the anger in her silence. She hoped so. Maybe he was having an affair. The fact that the idea of it didn't really bother her that much should have meant something, but it didn't. She almost found it amusing.

“Mom, is the pizza here yet?” Isaac whined.

Yes, it was only Wednesday night, and she had already yielded to Papa John’s. Sue her.

“Have you heard the doorbell ring?” Quinn snapped back. She hadn’t meant to sound so harsh, but she was hungry, too. And tired. Soccer practice had gone long today and she’d been sucked into a seemingly never-ending conversation with Trudy Cromwell about the end-of-school picnic. Quinn didn’t really believe it counted as a “picnic” if the event was catered. Last year, they’d served Cornish game hens and Quinn had to stop at the McDonald’s drive-thru on the way home because Isaac and Zoe refused to eat them.

But it was always held outside, at Trudy’s father’s ranch in Manekin Sabot, horse country just west of Richmond. Carol kept her dressage horses stabled out there, just up the road from the Cromwell compound. Trudy had spent the entirety of soccer practice telling Quinn it was about time she enrolled Zoe in horseback riding lessons. Quinn wasn’t quite sold on the idea; it seemed like too much – dance, cello, *and* horseback riding? Zoe was only five, after all.

“But how’s she going to get into a good college without extra-curriculars?” Trudy had asked, completely straight-faced.

Quinn couldn’t be certain, but she would bet money that Trudy knew Zoe hadn’t passed her Jefferson entrance exam. She kept baiting Quinn: Have you ordered Zoe’s uniforms for next year yet? Do you know who her teacher’s going to be? Is she excited about going to school with her big brother? They were the sorts of questions a normal person might ask just to be nice, to make conversation. But Trudy was not a normal person.

The fact that this was something Quinn had to worry about was maddening. In what twisted world did five-year-olds take exams? She needed to speak with Brooks, which was difficult to do when he was never home. He'd completely abandoned his family for the Chinese manufacturers all week, as if it were a royal visit. And on Friday, he'd be flying to Dallas for a buyer's conference.

"Mom!" Zoe shouted from the living room. "Isaac took my pillow!"

"Did not!" Isaac protested.

They'd built a pillow fort in front of the TV, utilizing every pillow in the house. All the rooms had been raided and Quinn was already dreading putting everything back in its place later. She could barely see her children beneath the pile.

"Isaac, leave your sister alone," Quinn called out. She opened the refrigerator and peered inside, scouring the shelves for the bottle of Pinot Grigio she knew was hiding out somewhere.

She was halfway through her first glass when the doorbell finally rang. Quinn darted across the ice-cold marble floor in her bare feet, digging through her purse to find her wallet and hoping she had enough money for a tip.

Quinn swung the door open. "Hi, thanks for – Annie?"

Annie stood on the porch with her arms crossed, wearing an oversized T-shirt and sweatpants. She bit her lip and stared down at her slippers.

"What's wrong?" Quinn asked, eyebrows creasing together with worry.

"Can I come in?"

Quinn nodded and stood aside.

While her sister paced back and forth across the foyer, Quinn dug her nails into her palms and waited, patience waning. Annie wasn't one to show up unannounced like this.

Annie came to a stop just as the doorbell rang again and stood by while Quinn paid the deliveryman.

"I've got to feed the kids," Quinn said as she kicked the door closed behind her. "Otherwise we're in for a mutiny."

Annie followed Quinn to the kitchen in silence.

Zoe screeched when her aunt appeared and darted over. "Annie, Annie!"

"Hey, munchkin," Annie cooed, brightening as Zoe jumped into her arms.

"Did you see me yesterday? Did you see?"

"You were the best bumble bee I ever saw." Annie pressed a kiss to Zoe's temple and hugged her tight.

Quinn doled out pizza slices onto paper plates. Annie's lower lip trembled, ever so slightly, the tighter Zoe clung to her.

Isaac grabbed two extra slices of Hawaiian pizza and sauntered off into the living room, taking up residence amidst the jumble of pillows on the floor. Quinn didn't have it in her to insist that he sit at the dinner table. Instead, she grabbed a slice for herself and watched as Annie cut Zoe's slice into bite-size pieces, listening intently as Zoe walked her through the intricacies of the bumblebee dance.

"Then we runned around in six circles, fast as we could!"

Annie nodded thoughtfully and tucked a paper towel into the collar of Zoe's T-shirt as a makeshift bib. "You were very fast," Annie agreed. She placed the paper plate before Zoe, then turned to her sister. "Paper plates?"

"I took a page from the June Graves parenting book," Quinn said, shrugging.

"Let's hope that's the only page you took."

Later, they all sat amidst the sea of pillows. Zoe curled up on Annie's chest, her breath coming out in low little puffs, droopy eyes finally closed. A documentary on the feeding patterns of orca whales droned on in the background. Isaac snored softly by Quinn's side. The TV flickered in the darkness – blue, then green – as a pod of orcas raced through Arctic waters onscreen.

"Remember when we used to make forts out of our bed sheets?" Annie asked, her voice soft as she ran her hand through Zoe's fluffy curls, slow and mesmerized.

"Yeah." Quinn laughed. "And June used to get so mad because we'd lock the door." Quinn remembered feeling protected in those forts. It was easy to pretend that things were different when they were locked away like that, hiding from the world.

"She used to bang on the door like the big bad wolf," Annie said.

Quinn sucked in a breath, preparing her best hearty, Southern accent. "If those sheets aren't back on your beds in five minutes, your rears'll be raw tomorrow!"

Annie shook her head back and forth, chuckling. Zoe murmured against her chest, sticking her thumb in her mouth, her eyes still closed. Quinn had been trying to break her of the habit for months. The dentist said it was bad for her teeth. She'd develop problems with her teeth sticking too far out if she continued. Quinn thought about asking Annie to make her stop, but decided against it. Instead, she said, "Thanks for your help tonight."

“Of course.” Annie’s voice was so low, Quinn could barely hear her.

“Is everything okay?”

Annie was quiet for a long time. Her eyes were trained on the television, the documentary reflected in them. But she looked absent, her expression vacant, like she wasn’t really watching. “I don’t know,” Annie said after a while. “I’ve been thinking about Tucker a lot lately.”

Quinn nodded. Though Annie rarely spoke about him, Quinn knew that Tucker Wills was never far from her mind. She could tell whenever that far-away look came into Annie’s eyes, like tonight, that her thoughts were with the smiling boy from their past, his memory frozen at eighteen years old. Sometimes it seemed Annie was frozen like that, too. Like she was happiest living in the past. It struck Quinn that that was no way to live.

“I want to take you up on your offer.” The harshness of Annie’s voice caught Quinn off guard, so much so that the words didn’t make sense to her at first. She didn’t sound like someone agreeing to something. She almost sounded angry.

“What?”

“Switching places,” Annie said. “Like we used to do when we were kids. I’m in.” She looked determined, like she were preparing for battle.

The thrill of the idea zipped through Quinn’s veins like a spark. Her fingertips tingled. “Are you serious?”

Annie nodded. “I just...I need something to look forward to. With the kids – with Isaac and Zoe – I think it might be just what I need. I know I can never... I can never have that, but to pretend, even if it’s just for a few days, I think that might be enough.”

Isaac was hot against Quinn's side and she began to sweat, pushing him off gently and kicking away the plush throw blanket so that she could cool down. Isaac shifted and mumbled in his sleep, turning away from her. "Annie, this is going to be great." Quinn's words came out in a rushed whisper, cutting through the still air of the living room with a hiss.

"Yeah?" Annie seemed tepid, not thoroughly convinced. "You think so?"

"I do." Quinn gave a firm nod. "This is exactly what I need." Isaac began to stir beside her, but Quinn didn't even notice. "Exactly what *you* need. I know how hard it can be for you sometimes. How much you wish... things were different. I wish that, too. For both of us. Now they can be. For a little while anyway. Brooks is going out of town on Friday. He'll be gone for almost a week. We can do it then."

Annie held Zoe tighter to her chest and kissed the top of her blonde head, resting her lips there for a long moment before she glanced back at the TV, where a pod of whales now circled a lone seal.

"The orca whale is what's known as an apex predator," the narrator said. "At the top of the food chain, they have no natural threats. No other animal hunts orcas except, of course, human beings."

Annie stood, cradling a sleeping Zoe in her arms, fleece blanket draped over her shoulders. "I'm going to put this one to bed." She padded out of the room. Quinn couldn't hear her walk up the steps over the sound of the TV, but she wasn't paying much attention now. Anticipation stirred inside her and she shivered, but she wasn't even close to feeling cold.

Chapter 5

Annie

“Melody, I had two shoes on when I walked in here this morning, right?” Annie called out.

“How would I know? You got here before me.”

Annie felt around blindly under her desk with her bare foot, then pushed her chair back and sank to her knees. She stuffed her arm into the dark underbelly of the desk where dust bunnies and, hopefully, one lone ballet flat lay in wait.

“You know,” Melody’s voice drifted in from the doorway, “You wouldn’t have this problem if you kept your shoes on while you were working.”

“I think better with my shoes off,” Annie grunted, straining further under the thick, cherry-stained desk, to where she could feel the teasing point of her shoe, just out of grasp. She wedged her shoulder further under the desk, ignoring the pain in her arm.

“Whatever you say, boss.” Annie smiled at Melody’s jeering tone. Melody only called her ‘boss’ ironically. Technically, as one of Mark Todd’s associates, Annie was her boss. However, Mark Todd was *their* boss and he was the only one who gave orders. Melody might have been just a receptionist to Mark, but to Annie, she was a solace. Melody helped keep everything in perspective. This job was not her life.

It was quiet in the office now. Mark Todd and Eric always left for lunch, preferring to patronize nearby food trucks in lieu of sticking around the office. It was Annie’s favorite part of the day.

Melody dug into her brown bag lunch. “So here’s a question.” She tossed a package of peanut butter crackers to Annie before pulling out a bag of carrot sticks for herself. “Sam Decker called for you this morning and you had me tell him you were on a conference call.”

Annie ripped into the plastic packaging and stuffed a cracker into her mouth. “I thought you had a *question*.”

Melody pointed a carrot stick at Annie, accusatory. “I was wondering *why* you had me lie to Sam Decker.”

“He could have left a message,” Annie said, staring at the floor. “And maybe I *was* on a conference call.”

Melody shot her a dubious look. She nibbled on the end of her carrot stick like a rabbit. “*I* schedule your conference calls.”

Melody had her there. Annie glanced around the room for a distraction. She considered asking Melody if Nathan was getting excited for his summer away at science camp, but thought better of it. The girl was unshakable.

“He sort of, um, asked me out,” Annie mumbled around a cracker.

Eric’s chair protested with a crunching squeak as Melody jolted upright, spinning to face Annie, shocked. “Shut the front door! When are you going out?”

“I told him no.”

“Aw, come on,” Melody said. “I googled him, he’s cute. Call him back already. What’s the big deal?”

Annie tossed the rest of her crackers into the trash and snatched a ballpoint pen off her desk, clicking it incessantly. “The big deal,” she said. “Is that client relationships

are a no-no. I could jeopardize the entire account. Mark's wanted to branch out into wineries for ages. He'd murder me if we lost this account."

Melody considered this. "You'd be his PR representative, not his doctor. Or his lawyer. I don't see what the big deal is."

"Rules are rules," Annie said, looking out the window. The overcast sky reminded her of Monday at Two-Fold. Only now, she looked out over cramped city buildings instead of rolling acreage laced with grapevines. She preferred the view in the mountains.

Melody squinted at her. "Is this really about that?"

"What do you mean?"

"This doesn't have..." Melody sighed, which was surprising. Annie turned to her. Melody usually didn't have a problem being blunt. Seeing her struggle for words was a rarity. "This doesn't have anything to do with Tucker, does it?" She said his name in a whisper, like it would hurt less that way.

Melody was one of the only people other than Quinn who knew about Tucker. She'd encouraged Annie to get help before, to see a therapist. Said it wasn't healthy for someone to still be so broken over something that had happened so many years ago. Annie couldn't though. She didn't want to talk to anyone, especially not about Tucker. Just thinking his name was painful enough. Saying it aloud to a complete stranger, over and over again? That would be torture.

"This is about my *job*, Melody." Annie didn't mean for the words to come out so strained, so sharp. She couldn't help it. "I kind of like having one and I'd like to *keep* having one for the foreseeable future."

Melody sat back. Crossed her arms. "I don't buy that."

“There’s nothing to buy.”

“Annie, look. I love you like a sister. And I know you’ve been through hell, I do. I’m so sorry about what happened to you. No one deserves to feel pain like that. No one.” She paused and sucked in a deep breath before continuing. “But that was eight years ago. There comes a time when you need to move forward and I think you’re past it. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life like this? Just waiting around? What are you even waiting for? For someone to swoop in and save you? Life doesn’t work that way. If you want to move on, if you want to heal, that starts with *you*.”

The hair on the back of Annie’s neck stood up, like a spooked cat. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. You didn’t know him.”

“Who?” Melody prodded, leaning forward, smelling blood in the water. “*Who* didn’t I know?” She waited, but Annie said nothing. “You can’t even say his *name*, Annie. That’s not right.” She shook her head. “That’s just not right.”

Annie didn’t know if she was angry or terrified. To have his name so close, there in the room with them, it was like another presence entirely. The air felt heavier, thicker. She hugged her sweater tighter around her, like armor. She shook her head. Swallowed dryly.

“It’s not about Tucker,” Annie whispered. Melody was wrong. She could say his name, but not without effort. Whenever she did, she pretended she was speaking about another person entirely. She pictured a stock photo from a magazine in her head, or the lead from the latest blockbuster – any face other than the real Tucker’s would do, anything to provide some distance.

A different tactic occurred to Annie then. Something she hadn't considered before, but that might make her plan with Quinn more plausible. And, most appealing of all, it would yield just enough distraction to get Melody off topic. "Actually, Mel, I need to talk to you about something else. Something important."

Melody leaned back in Eric's chair and swiveled from side to side, intrigued. "Oh?"

Annie paused for a moment at first, unsure exactly how to go about this. Melody typically opted for bluntness, so that was probably the best tactic here. "I've been talking to Quinn," she began.

"Yeah?" Melody snapped off a hunk of carrot, crunching away loudly. "How is your evil twin doing these days?"

Annie never completely understood Melody's distaste for her sister. She thought Quinn took advantage, relied on Annie for too much help with the kids. Annie didn't mind the extra responsibilities – quite the opposite, actually. Still, Melody balked whenever Annie told her about last minute babysitting, or when she had to leave the office early to pick up Zoe from day-care because Quinn had scheduled an "emergency pedicure."

"That girl needs a serious reality check," she'd say, shaking her head.

Annie could only hope that Melody would be amenable to what she was about to ask, despite her prejudices. She was her best friend, after all. You were supposed to support your best friends, even if you didn't always approve of their choices.

“Quinn’s fine,” Annie said. She stood and paced in front of the window, the gloomy city of Richmond looming behind her. Finally, she stopped and turned to face Melody, who sat up straight, almost nervous.

“Annie, what is it? You’re acting like you murdered someone and need me to help you bury the body.”

Close, Annie thought. She did need Melody’s sworn secrecy. “Quinn and I are planning something, and we need your help.”

To say that Melody was being difficult was putting it lightly. First, she’d outright refused: “Absolutely not. I’m not helping. This is crazy.”

Next, she’d tried to convince Annie that the entire plan was asinine. “Are you insane, Annie? Have you lost your mind? I mean, this isn’t the goddamn *Parent Trap*. This is real life. Who does something like this? Why would you even want to?”

Annie couldn’t exactly argue with her. She knew the plan had its flaws. She knew failure was possible, and yet, a part of her didn’t care. There was something she’d never be able to explain to Melody, no matter how hard she tried: Annie *needed* this. She’d never be able to have what Quinn had. That option had been dashed for her long ago when Tucker’s car collided with an eighteen-wheeler. Now Tucker was gone, she’d never be able to have children, and the idea of even opening herself up to the possibility of loving someone the way that she’d loved Tucker was too terrifying. To hurt like that again? Annie didn’t know if she’d survive it. She’d barely survived the first time.

For Annie’s entire childhood, June had tried to convince her that there was no good that could come from dreaming. Dreams only led to disappointment. When she met

Tucker, Annie finally realized that wasn't true, but there was a catch. Because when dreams come to fruition, there's the possibility that they can disappear. And to have a taste of your dream life, only to have it taken away from you in a split second, is even more painful than never having it to begin with.

So yes, Annie knew that Melody was right. This plan was crazy, but the idea that for a few days, Annie could pretend life had worked out the way she imagined, was enough motivation to try and get Melody on her side.

"You don't have to like the idea, okay?" Annie had said. "And you don't have to approve. But it's just for a few days, Mel, so please. Will you please help me? We can't do it without you."

Melody might have agreed, but that didn't mean she was going to be pleasant about it.

"Well *hello*, Mr. Decker!" Melody said, practically shouting from her desk, so that Annie could hear her loud and clear from her office. "It's wonderful to hear from you!"

Annie ignored her, assuming Owen was calling for the fourth time that afternoon to speak with Mark about website design ideas. She blew away scraps of eraser marring the page of her sketchbook and held it up to Eric. "What do you think?"

Eric paused from spinning around in his chair and tossing a toy basketball into the air. "What's that?"

"Logo options."

"Logo options?"

“Remember when you got back from lunch and Mark said, ‘Why don’t you two start brainstorming new logo options?’ Does any of that ring a bell?”

Eric scratched the red, stubbly skin on his chin as he thought about this. Annie stared at the cactus plant on the desk behind him. It was the only living organism Eric could be trusted to keep alive. He’d already killed two ferns during his time there. “Oh yeah. I like it”

Melody appeared in the doorway, her grin suspiciously wide. “Hey,” she said, breathless, as though she’d sprinted over. Her next words came out in a singsong: “Sam Decker’s on line one for you.”

Annie sat up so fast, she almost fell out of her chair. “He is?”

Melody nodded, her grin wicked. “And he knows you’re not on a conference call. I already told him you were free.”

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“Nope. He just asked to speak with *Miss Graves*. Better not keep him waiting.” She patted the wall twice with the palm of her hand before returning to her desk. Annie turned and stared at her phone like it might bite her. “While he’s still young!” Melody called out.

“Want me to answer?” Eric asked.”

It wasn’t often that Eric volunteered to make himself useful. In fact, in the year that she’d known him, Annie could probably count the number times on one finger.

“No, I’ve got it,” she replied absently, taking a deep breath before she picked up the phone. “Annie Graves here.”

“Hello there, Miss Graves,” Sam said, a smile in his voice. The sound brought her back to Monday morning. She could almost smell the rain again, feel the dampness of that day on her skin. Edgy with energy now, Annie rocked her chair from side-to-side.

“Hello, Mr. Decker.”

She wondered where he was. Maybe in his office. Or outside. Yes, that was it. He was probably outside right now, lost somewhere in the acres of grapevines. Her office felt stale then, claustrophobic. Acutely aware of Eric behind her, not ten feet away, Annie could feel his eyes on her back, probably wondering why she was twirling the phone cord around her finger like a teenage girl. She dropped the cord. Curled her hand into a fist.

“So.” Sam drew out the word, like he wasn’t quite sure how to begin. “I’m going to be in Richmond on Sunday.”

“Oh.” The idea of him here, in her city, made her heart beat kick up a notch.

“I thought maybe I could buy you a cup of coffee.”

Annie bit her tongue so hard it hurt. Her palms sweat and she readjusted her grip on the phone. Despite herself, and despite everything she’d said to Melody only a few hours before, Annie wanted to say yes. She already had one crazy plan in the works. Why not just throw caution to the wind completely?

But this weekend, she wouldn’t be Annie Graves. She’d be Quinn Frederickson.

Sam took her silence as hesitation and when he spoke, the words were rushed.

“Annie, can I be honest with you?”

“Um, sure.”

“Look, I’ve never been very good at beating around the bush. I like you.”

“Oh.” Annie paused. She hadn’t expected him to be quite so blunt. It seemed like nowadays, people rarely asked for exactly what they wanted. Maybe because they didn’t know. His honesty was refreshing, but she wasn’t sure how to respond, so she said the first thing that came to her mind: “I like you, too.”

“Really?”

Annie didn’t know who was more surprised, her or Sam. “Yes,” she said again, more confident this time. She had every reason to lie. Probably should have, but then she thought about last night. About the yearning she felt with Zoe curled up on her chest. Annie had spent a long time wanting things she could never have, letting that bitterness seep into too many other aspects of her life. Something about the lull of Sam’s voice made one thing clear to Annie: she didn’t want to be alone anymore.

“Can I be honest again?” he asked.

“Go for it.”

“I really didn’t expect you to say yes. I was fully prepared to launch into a speech about why you should change your mind. I wrote it down and everything.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“I’d hardly call it a disappointment,” he said.

“There is one caveat though.”

“Do tell.”

“I actually can’t this weekend.” Annie shut her eyes hard, thinking. “I’m watching my sister’s kids.”

“Oh.” Sam’s voice was a mixture of surprise and disappointment. “So you have a sister.”

“A twin, actually.”

“*Twins*. Nice. I always wanted a twin.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. So we could trade places – did you two ever do that? As kids?”

Annie’s blood ran cold. She almost dropped the phone.

“Annie?” There was a sudden commotion in the background and Annie heard a muffled noise, followed by a low curse from Sam. “Hey, I’ve got to go. My manure guy is here.”

She cleared her throat. Forced a laugh. Too loud. “If I had a nickel for every time a guy used that line on me.”

“Can I call you later? We’ll set something else up then.”

“Sure,” Annie said.

“Okay. Okay, great.”

Melody was there as soon as Annie hung up the phone. “I was really tempted to listen in,” she said in a rush, nearly dancing with excitement. “But you’ll be happy to know I restrained myself.”

“Well, thank you for that,” Annie said, picking her pencil back up and flipping through her sketchbook. She took a deep breath.

“What happened?”

Annie nodded in Eric’s direction and shook her head slightly. “I’ll tell you later.”

Her hands shook, hovering over her sketchbook, and her heart thrummed. How was it that Sam Decker managed to weasel his way in so close, so fast, without her even

realizing it? Almost as though he knew she was beginning to yield, beginning to consider the possibility that he presented.

It unnerved her, but at the same time, for a fleeting moment, she wished that she hadn't agreed to this whole thing with Quinn. She wanted to see him. He'd be here. In Richmond. The idea that he'd be so close, yet she couldn't see him, was almost painful. She considered backing out, but Quinn was too excited – she'd already texted Annie nine times this morning about the swap. Making arrangements, coming up with different ways to go about it. Annie couldn't do that to her.

She continued to sketch, Sam planted firmly in her mind, unshakeable. She wished there was a way to fit it all in somehow. But for now, as much as she loathed to admit it, Sam Decker would have to wait.

Chapter 6

Quinn

Brooks and Quinn were not speaking. It was Friday, he'd come home from work early, only to start packing. Well, *she* wasn't speaking. He could do whatever the hell he wanted, as far as she was concerned.

"My flight's at seven," he said, though she hadn't asked.

Fridays were a blessed reprieve from extracurriculars. No dance rehearsal. No soccer practice. Quinn got back from Jefferson Academy at three-thirty and usually started counting down until five o'clock when she could pour herself a glass of cold white wine. Today, she'd popped the cork as soon as she got home. She was celebrating. Annie would be over in a few hours.

"A little early, don't you think?" Brooks had asked when he breezed in at four o'clock. "And *thanks* for picking up my dry cleaning. Didn't you get my text this morning?"

She had gotten it. And promptly ignored it. If Brooks wasn't going to respond to her texts, why did she have to respond to his?

Quinn took a healthy gulp of wine and sat down on the end of their bed. "Why didn't you come home for dinner last night?"

Brooks sighed as he threw a mess of shirts into his suitcase on the floor. They landed in a hodgepodge. "It was a late night at the office. My father didn't even leave until eight o'clock."

Children's laughter bubbled up from downstairs. Isaac and Zoe had set up Candyland on the kitchen table and were engrossed in the game.

"Well, you could have told me that *last night*."

"Quinn," he said, his voice tight and short. "It's been a hectic week, I've got this conference coming up. I just don't have time for this. I don't."

Quinn imagined him bending his cute little brunette secretary over his desk. Tearing at each other's clothes. She was young – fresh out of college. Not too much older than Quinn was when they first met. Maybe Brooks had a type.

"I didn't realize your family was such an inconvenience," Quinn said casually, as though she were commenting on the weather. She took another sip of wine.

Brooks pinched the bridge of his nose and turned to face her. When he was like this, Quinn almost didn't recognize him. Gone was the lacrosse-playing goofball she'd married. He felt like a stranger now.

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," he said slowly.

Quinn headed downstairs for another glass of wine.

When Brooks came to kiss the kids goodbye, he didn't even look at her. Didn't speak to her. He left with little fanfare. Quinn popped a frozen pizza into the oven and waited.

At six o'clock, the doorbell rang, and Quinn sprinted to the door, giddy. The wine buzzed in her system and she threw her arms around Annie as soon as she crossed the threshold.

"Whoa," Annie said, giving Quinn a once-over. "You okay?"

“I’m just...” Quinn ran a hand through her hair and paused, trying to find the right words. “I can’t remember the last time I was this excited.

That was hours ago. Now, the wine buzz had morphed into a full-on drunken splendor, and Quinn didn’t know where she was. She didn’t even care.

The club was hot and loud. Shrouded in darkness, but intermittently lit by flashing, multi-colored lights. Quinn stumbled across the crowded dance floor, pushing toward the bar. Heavy drums and wailing guitars thrummed over the speakers as the band played. The entire room seemed to pulse.

Quinn couldn’t remember the last time she’d been to a place like this. To her, excitement meant a few too many glasses of wine over at Crystal Moyer’s home, under the guise of a PTA meeting.

Now, she craved whiskey. Wine was for housewives.

“I’ll take a Jack and Coke!” she yelled to the handsome young bartender. “Easy on the coke!”

He grinned. “You got it, sweetie.” The small, blond bun on the back of his head bobbed in time with the drumbeat while he worked. His body moved to the music.

When he set her drink on the bar, she tossed her credit card at him. “Open a tab. I’ll be back for more soon.”

He winked and slipped her card into his jeans pocket. “You know where to find me.”

Annie

Pancakes were one of the key differences between Annie and Quinn. Quinn would slap the batter down on that hot griddle without a care in the world, symmetry be damned. Annie, on the other hand, was incapable of pouring batter without fearing that the fate of every person she held dear depended upon her forming a perfect circle each time. If a splatter occurred, she scraped it away immediately, cast it aside, and pretended as though it had never happened.

To further the distinction, Annie actually used a recipe, whereas Quinn followed the same path as their Bisquik-wielding mother. Annie didn't believe in shortcuts. She'd dutifully printed out *The Barefoot Contessa's* Cloud Nine Banana Nut Pancakes recipe yesterday at work and had even stopped at the grocery store on the way over just to get toasted walnuts. Apparently, the toasting factor was what brought the pancakes to cloud nine and Annie wasn't about to argue with the Barefoot Contessa.

The difference between their finished products was jarring. Quinn's amorphous blobs paled in comparison to Annie's pristine discs, but Annie wouldn't exactly say it was something she was proud of. It was a pancake, for crying out loud. It really didn't matter.

Annie was beginning to think that perhaps pancakes had been the wrong course to take this morning. Isaac and Zoe eyed her skeptically as they sat at the breakfast bar drinking orange juice. Zoe managed to spill half her glass onto the marble countertop with each sip.

They'd been down the pancake route with their mother before, with less than spectacular results.

"We can just eat cereal," Isaac suggested over the rim of his glass.

“Relax,” Annie said. “I’ve got a new recipe this time.”

Zoe fiddled with the jug of organic maple syrup, twisting and untwisting the brown cap. “Last time you made pancakes, Daddy got sick.”

It was the first time either of the kids had brought up their father since Annie’s arrival last night, and it caught her off guard.

“Well, these ones won’t make anyone sick, I promise.” Annie scooped another perfect cake off the griddle before turning off the burner.

“When’s Dad coming home?” Isaac asked?

Annie glanced at Quinn’s gaudy wedding bands. They felt out-of-place and clunky on her finger, and kept catching on her sweater.

“Later today,” Annie said, stacking the pancakes evenly. Topped them with powdered sugar.

When she placed the plates in front of Isaac and Zoe, they stared at her with wide eyes. Annie took the maple syrup jug from Zoe and poured for her, lest half its contents wind up on the floor. Zoe stabbed an entire pancake with her fork and raised it to her lips, nibbling at its syrup-soaked edges.

Isaac poured his own maple syrup. “*You* made these?” he asked again.

Annie shook her head and wiped flour off the countertop. “You watched me the entire time.” Like a hawk, as though she might try to poison them.

He took a hesitant bite, then another, barely chewing before going back for a third. “Wow,” he said, his mouth full. “Thanks, Mom!”

They were silent after that, eating with gusto, then demanding seconds. Annie fired the griddle back up, happy to oblige. It was the perfect morning.

So perfect, that at first it didn't strike her as odd that the front door opened. She wasn't paying enough attention.

But then Brooks called out, "Hello?"

Isaac's eyes lit up and he bolted off his stool so fast, it nearly fell over. Brooks appeared in the doorway, and Annie's blood went cold.

Quinn

Quinn woke with three problems: a bone-dry mouth, a throbbing head, and a ringing cell phone. Then, she glanced down and spotted a hairy arm around her waist – too tan to belong to Brooks. Also, Brooks didn't wear hemp bracelets. Four problems.

"Shit," she muttered, easing herself up gently. The ringing stopped, and then started right back up again, the cheery tune reverberating throughout the room.

"Are you gonna get that?" came a groggy voice from beside her.

The room spun, and that's when Quinn realized that she wasn't in her own bedroom. Annie's cramped studio sat in front of her, the familiar, gauzy mesh of the silk screen was right there, serving as a makeshift divider between the living room and bedroom.

A warm hand met her naked back and Quinn jumped, pulling the sheet higher over her chest. Then there was a raspy chuckle. "Good morning to you, too. Well, more like good afternoon."

Oh. Pieces of last night began to flutter back into her mind. Quinn turned to face the bartender. His hair had loosed from the bun somewhere in the night and now pattered

wildly around his face. Quinn had just slept with a real-life Tarzan. Her gaze fell past him, to the digital clock on the windowsill.

Two o'clock. How could it be two o'clock?

The cell phone blared for a third time, the sound piercing right into the deepest depths of Quinn's throbbing skull. She scrubbed a hand across her forehead and groaned.

Tarzan glanced around, halfheartedly searching for the phone, before his gaze fell back to Quinn. "Someone *really* wants to talk to you."

Quinn had exactly one guess who that someone might be. "It's probably my sister," she mumbled as her feet met the cold, hardwood floor. Although Quinn couldn't imagine what she was calling about. It was Saturday – she didn't even have anything planned. How could Annie already have a pressing question?

"Oh," he sounded relieved, then laughed. "Better than your *boyfriend*, I suppose."

Quinn would have laughed along with him if her head didn't feel like it was about to spontaneously combust. She only managed a small, hidden smile, her back still to him as she dressed, her movements clumsy. *If only you knew.*

"No," Quinn said. "No boyfriend." It wasn't exactly a lie.

He nodded and jumped up beside her. They dressed wordlessly, the only sound between them was the intimate clinking of his belt buckle as he fastened it. Quinn stumbled as she stepped into Annie's jeans and he caught her before she fell, his hands lingering on her elbow.

"Thanks, uh...*you.*" Quinn yanked Annie's blue blouse over her head to hide her red face. She could barely remember getting home last night, much less his name.

"Eli." He offered her a small, knowing smirk.

Quinn debated for a moment, then hoped that, even in her drunken state, she'd been wily enough to keep the lie alive. "Annie," she finally decided, sticking out her hand.

He accepted it readily. "I know. You told me last night. A lot. 'I'm Annie! I love being Annie!' It was cute."

"Oh God," Quinn moaned, striding into the living room in search of some shoes. Although she couldn't remember all of it, *cute* was the last word she'd use to describe her performance last night.

Eli followed her. "Hey, don't be embarrassed. I'm a bartender, remember? Believe me, I've seen people a lot worse off than you were last night." Then, as though he could read her mind: "It *was* cute. Trust me."

Quinn plopped down on Annie's worn leather couch and thrust her feet into a pair of ankle boots. They'd do. "So what exactly *did* happen last night?"

Eli settled in beside her, tossing an arm around her shoulder and easing his bare feet onto Annie's coffee table. Quinn eyed his too-long toenails. *Go ahead, make yourself at home.*

"I got off at midnight," he said. "Then we headed to the Tap Room with your friends so I could catch up with y'all. Last call there was at two. Then we came back here."

Quinn frowned. "My friends?"

Eli eyed her with speculation. "Y'all seemed pretty close last night."

Then it was there, in flashes. The memory of her arms thrown around a random girl on the dance floor under flashing, staccato lights as they became immediate best

friends under the sway of the whiskey. Quinn jabbed her fingers into her eyelids and moaned as she rubbed them. The cell phone blared again. Its ringing beginning to sound more and more like a dirge. “Dammit, Annie,” she mumbled.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Eli soothed, misinterpreting her words. “We all have crazy nights. Don’t beat yourself up over it.” He rubbed her shoulders gently.

Giving up, Quinn let her head fall into the crook of his neck. She just needed a minute. Eli surprised her by kissing the crown of her head. She couldn’t remember the last time Brooks had done that. Had Brooks *ever* done that? Eli’s warm hand rubbed the gooseflesh of her arm, calming her. Then the phone rang again and Quinn was on her feet.

After a brief search, she found the phone under the coffee table. How it had ended up there, she didn’t particularly want to know. At first, the caller ID startled her: how could her own name be flashing on the screen? It took realization a moment to dawn. *Of course*. This was Annie’s phone.

Quinn answered tentatively. “Hello?”

“Quinn!” Annie’s voice was low and panicked.

“What?” Quinn asked, stepping over Eli’s feet. She moved into the bedroom.

“What’s wrong?”

“Brooks is here,” Annie rasped.

The words didn’t make sense. “Brooks is in Dallas,” Quinn said.

“Correction,” Annie said. “Brooks *was* in Dallas. He flew back early this morning. And now he’s *here*.”

Heart, meet throat. “What?” Quinn hissed.

“Did you guys get into a fight last night before he left?”

“Oh my God.” Quinn turned in a full circle, unsure what to do, where to go. She raked her fingers through her tangled hair.

“I sent him out for milk,” Annie said.

Quinn could tell there was more, but there was no time to get into it. “I’m on my way.” She raced back into the living room and stopped at Eli’s feet. “I have to go. Now.”

“Oh.” Disappointment creased into his forehead, eyes downcast as he stood. “I was hoping I could take you out for breakfast.”

If Quinn’s heart hadn’t been beating so fast, it might have been softened by the offer, but there was too much adrenaline coursing through her veins. Still, she somehow couldn’t help herself. “Maybe next time, but I *really* have to go.”

He brightened at that. “Next time,” he agreed, collecting his converse sneakers as Quinn escorted him to the door. Then, he surprised her one final time by pulling her in for a kiss. Quinn didn’t have it in her to resist, and melted into him easily. “I’ll hold you to it.”

Annie

Annie sat on the bottom step like a sentry as she waited. Laughter echoed out from the living room, where the kids sat watching TV and munching on grapes.

She looked to the large grandfather clock. Two forty-five. Annie turned Quinn’s cell phone over in her cold hands. Brooks would be back from the store any minute.

The morning played back in her mind for what felt like the thousandth time. Brooks walking into the kitchen, the kids shrieking in delight while she tried to ease the

panic. She'd told herself it was okay, it was all okay. She could pull it off, she could get through this. Quinn had told her, just before she'd left, that if Brooks texted, to ignore it. Annie didn't think anything of it at the time – nowadays, it was an odd day when they *weren't* fighting.

Annie thought she could ignore him, but Brooks wasn't having it. He pulled her aside as soon as the kids returned to their pancakes.

"I need to talk to you," he whispered into her hear, his breath hot.

Annie shook as she followed him across the foyer, into his office. He closed the door behind them.

What would Quinn do? She kept asking herself. Probably say something rude, but her mind was racing too fast to come up with anything.

"Quinn, I'm sorry," he said.

She jumped at the name, then calmed. This was a good sign.

Annie cleared her throat. "Oh?"

For the first time since he'd walked in, Annie got a good look at him. He looked awful. Suit ruffled like he'd slept in it. Hair sticking up in every direction. There were bags under his eyes, and lines under the bags. When was the last time he'd slept?

He took a step toward her and found her hand. Annie couldn't move.

"I know things have been hard lately," he said, voice low. "But I want you to know that, no matter what, I love you. That hasn't changed, Quinn. I've always loved you."

Annie opened her mouth to speak, but there was no time to react. His lips were on hers before she could move.

She tried to remember what little she'd learned from a self-defense class back in college. *Hell of the palm to the nose, thrust up.* She couldn't work up the nerve though. How could she talk her way out of punching her "husband" in the face? There was no walking that back.

Her initial reaction should have been repulsion, but there was none. Gone was the ire at Quinn for putting her in this situation, replaced by the desire for strong hands, for heat, and for the simple, intimate connection of skin on skin that she'd been deprived of for eight, long years.

As Brooks's long fingers wove into her hair, Annie's lids grew heavy and closed, the muscles in her neck weakening. His hands slid down her sides, tracing the curves, and rested gently on her hips, turning her skin to gooseflesh. How long had it been? God, she couldn't even remember.

His voice was wet in her ear: "Quinn."

And like that, as if the ground had dropped out from beneath her, it was gone. Quaking, Annie pushed him away.

"I have to go," Annie rasped, searching his wood-paneled office for anything familiar, anything she could use as an excuse, but coming up empty. This was not her place.

"What?" Brooks almost sounded amused. "Go where?"

"Milk!" Annie shouted, like she had Tourettes.

Brooks laughed and dropped his chin, smiling. "Milk?"

"Zoe!" Annie gasped, turned, and pulled the door open. "I need to go get her some milk."

Brooks grabbed her elbow as he followed her into the foyer. “Hey. I’ll get it. It’s the least I can do.”

That was thirty minutes ago. Now, Annie sat on the step at the bottom of the grand, spiral staircase, her leg jiggling incessantly.

Quinn didn’t bother with a knock. She hustled through the door and scurried past Annie, who failed to land a punch on her sister’s arm as she twisted and followed her sister up the steps, half crawling.

“What the hell, Quinn?” Annie demanded once they were safely in the master bedroom with the door locked behind them. Quinn was already stripping her clothes off. Annie followed suit.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Quinn muttered, sounding more annoyed than apologetic as she struggled to get Annie’s blouse over her head.

They exchanged clothing in silence for a moment.

“Just so you know, you went out last night.”

“What?” Annie asked as she stepped out of Quinn’s jeans and threw them at her sister.

“You went out last night and you went home with the bartender from the Tobacco Company.”

“Quinn!” Annie landed a solid whack on her sister’s shoulder. “You said you were just going to go back to my place and relax!”

Quinn shrugged into her sweater. “I lied.”

“You’re unbelievable. Is there anything *else* I should know?”

“His name’s Eli.”

Annie smacked her again.

“Ow!” Quinn kicked out at her sister, narrowly missing her shin. “What the hell?”

“Why would you do that?” Annie dropped down on the bed and pulled her shoes onto her feet.

“What does it matter? It’s not like you have a boyfriend. It was just one night. Calm down.”

Hot, angry tears pricked at Annie’s eyes. She fought them back, pushing her palms into her eyes and taking a deep breath.

Quinn eyed her sister strangely, then reached out a peaceful hand, resting it on Annie’s shoulder. “Hey.” Her voice was soft, soothing. A white flag. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it would bother you so much.” There was silence as Annie nodded. “Why *does* it bother you so much?”

“I just...” Annie stalled, glancing around the room at the wedding photos on the dresser, the black and white portraits of Isaac and Zoe as newborns, the window with a view of the swing set in the backyard. The empty swings rocked back and forth in the breeze, like ghosts of children.

“He wasn’t creepy,” Quinn assured her.

Annie took another deep breath. She needed to get a grip. Quinn would get suspicious if she knew how upset she really was and Annie wasn’t ready to tell her about what had happened with Brooks. How could she? It felt sacrilegious to even think about it right now.

From the corner of her eye, Annie glanced at her downcast sister. “He didn’t steal anything from my apartment, did he?”

“Oh my God!” Quinn groaned, flopping back onto the bed melodramatically.

“That was *one* time and it was like nine years ago. You don’t even use a French press.”

“Not anymore, I don’t.”

“He *didn’t* steal anything,” Quinn said. Annie stood, eyeing her warily. “Scout’s honor.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Annie picked her purse up off the floor and began sorting through its contents. It almost felt like a scavenger hunt, seeing what Quinn might have left behind.

“So is there anything *I* need to know?” Quinn asked.

Annie stopped, purse forgotten, and weighed the possibilities. She should come clean – she knew as much, but she couldn’t even bring herself to say the words. “Um,” no, she said, voice low. “Brooks came home, he apologized. I think he wants to make up. I freaked and told him we needed milk.”

Quinn dropped her chin, awe-struck. “And *he* went out to get it?”

The front door slammed. Annie and Quinn froze, eyes wide.

“Quinn?” his voice echoed throughout the entire house.

Even though it wasn’t uncommon for Annie to visit, she couldn’t help feeling that she’d been caught. That Brooks knew. That the jig was up. She flung the door open and sped down the hall, Quinn at her heels. Rounding the corner, she nearly collided with Brooks.

“Whoa there,” he said, grabbing Annie’s shoulders to steady her. He held her at arms length and when their eyes met, Annie could see a trace of confusion behind those blue irises as they searched, seeking recognition in her own.

“Annie was just leaving.” Quinn’s voice sounded from behind her sister.

“Annie,” Brooks said, still gripping her shoulders. “I didn’t even realize you were here. Must have missed your car in the driveway.”

“I was just returning a pair of shoes,” Annie choked out, thinking better of the words as soon as they were out of her mouth. Like she would *ever* borrow Quinn’s heels.

Brooks pulled her into a hug, his starched lapels flush against her cheek as his arms came around her. Spicy cologne tickled Annie’s throat as she inhaled. He must have touched it up in the car.

Then her stomach dropped. The rings. Quinn’s rings. They were still on her finger.

Annie stepped back and fisted her right hand around her left, praying that he hadn’t noticed. Quinn stepped forward and looped her arm through Annie’s, keeping her own left hand hidden, as though she’d just made the same realization.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” she said. Too loud. Annie winced.

They hustled down the steps. Cold sweat dampened Annie’s forehead.

Outside, she loped down the brick steps, toward the driveway, eager to get away.

“Hey!” Quinn called out, tailing her. “Wait up.”

Annie spun around and ripped the lavish gold rings off, her knuckle smarting, and dropped them into Quinn’s waiting palm. Quinn fisted her hand around the rings, in no rush to return them to her fingers.

“You think he noticed?” Annie asked.

“I doubt it. Brooks doesn’t notice much these days.”

Annie nodded and turned to get into her car, but Quinn stopped her once again. “You don’t actually have to leave, you know. You could stay, hang out.”

“I think that would be tempting fate too much,” she said. “Let’s wait for the dust to settle and see where we stand.”

Quinn fiddled with her rings, still not putting them on. “Did you have fun at least? With the kids?”

Annie smiled for the first time since Brooks had walked through the door, a sense of calm finally returning. “I did, actually. It was really nice. You know, your life’s not as bad as you make it out to be.”

Quinn shifted from foot to foot, failing to meet Annie’s eyes. “It wasn’t even twenty-four hours, Annie. You don’t actually know what it’s like to be me.”

It was times like this that Annie wanted to smack her sister upside the head, like June used to do whenever they asked stupid questions like, “Why are we eating potato chips for dinner?”

“*You* gonna go out and buy us a steak?” June would say, only to be met with silence. “That’s what I thought. Now shut up and eat your Pringles.”

“Quinn,” Annie said, tired now. She leaned back against her car as she spoke. “If you’re really that unhappy, do something about it. Divorce him.”

Quinn pressed her fist to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. “It’s not that simple.”

This wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation. It usually went the same old way: Annie pushing, Quinn digging her heels in. That wouldn’t stop Annie from

trying though. As much as Quinn might frustrate her, she didn't enjoy seeing her sister so unhappy.

"But it is," Annie pressed. "It's not as though you'd be left on the streets. You'd be taken care of, the kids would be taken care of. Or, if you hate playing soccer mom all day, don't. Hire someone."

"So I could do what?" Quinn folded her arms across her chest and took a step back.

"Anything! Find something you're passionate about, find a job you actually enjoy. Just live your life."

"I haven't had a job since college. I don't even have a degree."

"So that's going to stop you from even trying? Go back and finish school."

"Yeah, Carol would love that."

"Who cares what she thinks? Why are you so afraid of change?"

Quinn leveled her sister with a glare. She actually laughed, which surprised Annie. She'd expected ire, but not this. "You're really going to lecture me about change, Annie? That's rich. Hey, when's the last time you went on a date?"

Annie froze, her tenacity dissipating. "That's different."

"How?" Quinn stuffed her rings back onto her fingers. "If you're so much more evolved than me, if you're so willing to embrace *change*, then why are you living in the past?"

"Quinn," Annie warned, her tone biting. "Don't go there."

"Why not?" Quinn was on a roll now, sensing blood in the water. "You think *I'm* the one that needs to move on? Have you looked in a mirror lately? You live like a nun

because you're still in love with a boy that died eight years ago. *Eight years*, Annie. Get over it already."

Get over it. Annie found Quinn's own words resonating within her: *It's not that simple.* Quinn wasn't in the car that night, Quinn hadn't had her bones crushed and spent an entire year in physical therapy. Quinn had probably never even been in love. She didn't know the wrenching, crippling pain that comes when something so precious is stolen from you.

"Fuck you, Quinn." With that, Annie ripped her car door open, slamming it once she was inside. She fumbled twice trying to stick the key into the ignition, her fingers shaking.

Quinn's muffled words made it through the glass before she stalked back to her brick monstrosity: "Right back at you."

Chapter 7

Annie

Annie didn't know why she was heading west on Route Sixty-four. All she knew was that the warmth from this morning was gone, replaced by a bitter ire toward her sister, and the last place she wanted to be was her apartment. Quinn probably hadn't even thought to change the sheets; she'd bet money on it. Richmond in general, held little interest for her in that moment. It was too claustrophobic.

She passed Louisa without lifting her eyes from the road. Sam's face sat in her mind, unmovable, and there was no fooling herself now. For reasons she could not explain, the thought of his crooked smile was the only thing that could make her feel much of anything right now. She wished she'd said yes to coffee the other week. She wished she'd never agreed to this stupid plan and could meet him tomorrow. Quinn had worn down her usual obstinacy and Annie was done trying to stand strong. She didn't want to wait until tomorrow.

The potholes slowed her down more than she would have liked and she swerved slowly from left to right, now only amused by this ridiculous excuse for a driveway. At this pace, she could truly appreciate the textures and colors of the land around her and the buds on the poplars that lined the drive.

She probably should have called first. Sam might not even be here, but as soon as she'd pulled out of Quinn's neighborhood, there'd been no slowing her down.

The lot was packed with cars. Patrons milled around the picnic tables that dotted the front lawn, wine glasses in their hands and smiles on their lips. The joy and freedom of sunny, Saturday afternoons radiated off them like a warm aura.

Annie hustled inside and walked straight up to the tasting bar. She recognized the older woman behind it from her visit last week.

“Hi,” Annie said, managing a hasty smile.

“Welcome to Two-Fold. How may I help you?”

“I’m looking for Sam Decker. Is he around?”

The woman looked taken aback, as though this was a question she’d never gotten before. Evidently, people didn’t come looking for Sam often. “Is Mr. Decker expecting you?”

“Yes,” Annie lied, shifting her eyes to examine the rows of bottles on the wall.

The woman’s eyes searched Annie’s, hesitant. Annie wondered if she recognized her. “Last I saw him, he was out back by the gardening shed.”

“Thanks.” Annie was out the door before she had to lie again. She’d never been very good at it – Quinn was the superior fibber. Always had been.

A group of women in sundresses were cackling collectively just outside the door, one of them bent over and gasping for air between giggles, holding her wine glass high in the air so it wouldn’t spill. Annie squeezed by them and headed around the side of the large, stone and cedar building.

It was quieter back here. The raucous noise from out front faded to a dull hum. A few shabby sheds and a small barn were scattered around the gravel drive. Stones crunched beneath Annie’s boots as she walked down the hill and came to a halt in the

middle of the miniature, oblong cul-de-sac. The door to the barn was open and Annie heard a sharp curse from inside, then a rough clink of metal, as though someone had just chucked a wrench.

Now that she was here, Annie was unsure of herself. What was she even doing? There was still time. She could run back to the parking lot and drive away. He'd be none the wiser. But that woman. What if she said something?

Sam appeared in the barn doorway and stopped, confusion etched into his sweaty brow. The dirty rag in his hands looked like it had been white in a past life. Black stains marred his tan coveralls and he still had on those wretched wellington boots.

“Annie?” He finally asked.

She could think of no other response but to nod once in affirmation.

“What are you doing here?”

Annie looked up to the glass walls of the tasting room above them, then out to the bright, rolling vineyard. A cardinal sat in a bare dogwood and ruffled its feathers.

When she looked back at Sam, there was something new in his dark eyes. Something she hadn't seen there before. It was the same look she'd seen in the eyes of her high school guidance counselor growing up, when he caught wind of the fact that June was spending a majority of her free time at Monty's on Main – the only bar in town. Annie didn't want Sam's concern though. She wasn't sure what she wanted, really, but it wasn't that.

“I'm ready for that coffee now,” she said.

He didn't seem surprised at all, as though he'd been waiting for her to show up, like he knew she'd come around eventually.

“Okay,” he said. “Let me just wash up. I’ll meet you out front in five minutes.”

Annie nodded again and turned, marching back up the hill to wait.

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