

# NOVEMBER



THE PHONE RINGS. The landline. I hate the landline. In the weeks after Michael died, it was constantly ringing—the sympathetic neighbors, the PTA moms, everyone wanting to know how I was doing. *You don't need to know how I'm doing*, I'd think. Michael died eight months ago, so it doesn't ring that much anymore. I guess I'm still not doing well.

"Stacey," the voice sings into the machine, "pick up your goddamn phone . . ." It's my sister, Jenny.

"Hang on," I say as I pick up. I hold the phone away from my mouth and call down into the basement. "Time to brush teeth, boys. Get ready for bed."

"You guys want to come here on Friday? We can stream a movie, make milkshakes?"

We've spent almost every weekend at her house. The boys are probably expecting it, but I'm starting to feel trapped. Michael was so big on routine, and now I feel like I've fallen into another one. Sometimes I just want to wing it. I don't know how to tell her that.

“I don’t know,” I say. “We should let you guys get back to your own lives. I mean, we’ll be fine.”

“No, we love having you!”

I know she means it. She was born to mother—her own kids, me, the boys. This past year, she’s been amazing, and I know in some ways she loves it. Being so necessary.

I wander back into the living room and sit down in front of my laptop. I got it out earlier to look at job postings, but with my background—an advanced degree, two published books of poetry, and no real work experience—it’s discouraging how little I’m qualified for. I could be a barista maybe.

Jenny keeps talking, but I’m not really listening. I’m checking my Facebook, my e-mail. I have a separate account that comes in from my author’s website, but I haven’t been paying attention to it. I haven’t been writing anyway, and besides, it rarely has anything in it. But today, there’s something there. The subject line reads, *Interested in your book*, so I open it. The note is short.

“Listen to this,” I say, interrupting my sister, and I read her the e-mail. *Dear Ms. Lane, I just had the pleasure of reading your novel-in-verse, Monsters in the Afterlife. I’m wondering if you have an agent who represents you. I’d be interested in discussing the film rights.*

“Seriously? That’s so cool! Who’s it from?”

“Alan something-or-other. Probably some nobody,” I say, but I’m already plugging the name into Google. “Is this the same guy? Holy shit.” The list of credits is long. Really long, and I recognize a lot of it. “Oh my god. What do I say? I don’t have an agent.”

“Then answer, ‘Thank you, that sounds amazing, but no, I don’t have an agent because there’s no money in poetry.’”

It’s true. My first book, *The Seduction of Eve*, came out with a tiny

press, but the reviews were good and it sold close to six hundred copies, which for poetry is really not bad at all. It wasn't a novel-in-verse like *Monsters*, but it was thematic, and each section opened and closed with poems titled "The Seduction" that retold this one moment, but the perspectives, the voices, kept changing. Some of them were really beautiful, like love poems, but in others the language turned dangerous, dark. The day the box came with the first copies of the book, I just sat on the floor and read it cover to cover, like it was something new, like it wasn't even mine.

"Wow," Michael had said when he'd come home. "Congratulations." And he picked up a copy and flipped through it, not to read it, just to see if it was real.

"One more chapter?" Stevie begs.

I look at the clock. It's late, past their bedtime by ten minutes, but I say yes anyway. I like reading to them. I feel like I can fall into the book, and then I'm giving them what they want, but I don't have to think. I don't have to find my own words. When the story's over, I kiss Stevie first, leaning into the bottom bunk to tuck him in. "Give me a squeeze," I say, and he does, his little arms tight around my neck. "Who's my favorite monkey?" I say, and he squeaks, "Me!"

I step on the rail and pull myself up to kiss Ben. I smooth his Hulk blanket across him, ruffle his hair. "Thanks for being my kid," I whisper, and he smiles. "Thanks for being my mom." We do this every night. Every touch, every word the same. I love the ritual of it, the few minutes when I feel like I'm my best self. I feel like I'm getting it right. I flip off the lights and stand in the hallway outside their door, leaning against the wall, listening to them talk. Some part of me is always

expecting to overhear something painful or profound, to hear them talk about Michael or me. Most nights, they don't. Tonight Stevie is talking about Spider-Man, imagining new powers he thinks would be better, what if he could fly, what if he could be invisible too?

"Invisible all the time?" Ben asks. "Or just when he wants to be?"

I walk down the hall to my bedroom, and Bear pads along behind me. He curls up on the big fleece mat in the corner of the room. It's funny to think he's as settled as ever. It's the boys and I who are floundering. Just in different ways. They want nothing more to change, and I want everything to.

Last week while the boys were at school, I packed up all of Michael's things. It seemed pointless to keep hanging on to it all, the T-shirts, the electric razor. I went to a grief session once, in the very beginning, but one of the other women was talking about how she couldn't wash her husband's clothes, how she held on to the smell of him. Some days, she said, she spent hours on the floor of their closet, trying to breathe him in, and I thought, *I shouldn't be here, this isn't for me.*

I packed one box for each boy using old pictures. *Here is the tie your father wore for your christening. Here is a T-shirt he was wearing one day at the park. In the photo, he's pushing you on the swing. Here is a wallet, a watch.* I didn't know what to do with his wedding ring, so I just put it in a velvet jewelry box with mine.

The upshot is that now I have all this empty space to fill. I tried spreading my clothes between both dressers, but I couldn't find the right balance. Everything feels disordered. I can never find what I want.

I walk down to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of wine. At first I'd felt weird about drinking alone, but I have a rule about stopping at one glass, so I think it's okay. I do use my biggest glasses and I pour them pretty full, but I always stop after one.

*Monsters: A Love Story*

Michael and I met in Boston, in graduate school. He was studying actuary science. I was studying poetry. He had a job lined up months before graduation, and when he proposed, he said, *Marry me, Stacey. God knows you can't afford not to.* Then he laughed. We both did. We were really young then, and happy.

We moved to Omaha right out of grad school, the year we got married. It's where Michael grew up—flyover, landlocked, just about as far as you can get from either coast, which is where I'd always lived—Boston, and before that San Francisco. First one coast and then the other, and now I'm right in the center. I don't feel very centered. I used to. I don't anymore.

I take the wine out to the living room and sit on the couch. My laptop is still sitting open, but the screen's black, timed out. *You realize your book could end up a movie?* Jenny had said before we hung up. *I wonder what they'll pay you.* In my best year, just last year, I made three thousand dollars. *Look at you,* Michael said. I think he thought it was cute.

He did risk calculation for an asset-management firm. *It's not really risk if you understand math,* he used to say, but I don't understand math, not even a little, so he told me not to even look at the numbers when we bought our first house. It was this sweet little bungalow in Midtown with wood accents and dormers. Michael didn't love it, but he liked the commute, and he liked that I liked the built-in bookshelves next to the fireplace.

"It's close to the university," he said. "Maybe you could teach."

"I don't think we can afford this," I said, running my hand along the dark wood of the shelves. "Maybe we should rent."

"Maybe you should trust me," he said.

There were not any jobs at the university. There never are, but for a while I did part-time development for an arts nonprofit. I wrote

some grants and sat in on a few board meetings, but it didn't pay much and I wasn't very good at it. When Ben was born, Michael said I should just stay home.

I'd walk Ben in the stroller for blocks and blocks through Happy Hollow and Dundee with all the big brick Tudors and overgrown lawns and one-way streets. We'd stop at this cute little corner market and I'd buy Ben grapes most afternoons. Plums when he got a little older. Some nights we'd walk down to this offbeat vegetarian place, though Michael liked to tease me that if I was going to be a Nebraskan, I was going to have to learn to eat steak. I wasn't sure, really, how I felt about Nebraska, but I loved Midtown.

"We need a bigger house," I told Michael after Stevie was born, and what I meant was a big brick Tudor with ivy. But all he saw were the detached garages and the radiators and the retrofit piping for central air-conditioning.

So he bought this house, or rather it just *fell into his lap*, a corporate relocation deal that he couldn't pass up on.

"I don't want to live out west," I said.

"It's closer to my parents."

"I hate your parents." But he convinced me.

So we moved west. All the way west, past the cornfields at Boys Town, away from the narrow streets to the part of town that's all pedestrian malls and golf courses. We have a three-car garage and a lawn service. We have a monitored security system and a stacked slate fountain by the front walk. We don't have any ivy.

Not that any of that matters now. Michael set everything up years ago, *so you won't have to make any decisions*, he'd said. And there had been all these papers for me to sign. I just remember him saying, *Life insurance . . . trust account . . . annuity.*

I know I should be grateful. It's probably for the best. I'm not all that good at decisions, and a job is a long shot. Still, it would be nice to have some direction.

According to the boys, Jenny's husband makes the world's greatest milkshakes. I wouldn't know. I've never tried one, though he's made them a million times. Todd is this big, burly guy who can't go five minutes without offering you a snack or a beer, the ex-football player type you see a lot of in Nebraska, though he is not Nebraskan. Jenny and I have known him since we were kids. They moved here *so our kids could be cousins like the kind we never had*, Jenny said. But I think Todd fell in love with the lawns mostly. We didn't have lawns this big in San Francisco. The kids are close though. Jenny has three, two girls around the same ages as my boys, and then her littlest, a boy still in preschool.

Jenny jostles the pot on her stove, waiting for the popcorn to pop. Todd's in the great room, fixing the surround sound.

"No, the other remote," I hear Todd say for the third time.

Jenny wrinkles her nose. I turn away from her, move to look out the window. It's late enough that the sky is a heavy gray.

"So speaking of movies, this thing with your book sounds insane. I mean good insane. But, you know, crazy."

Behind me the kernels start to pop, dinging loudly against the metal of the pan. There's the sound of the heavy pot dragging across the grate of the stove as she shakes it and shakes it, then the rustle of her pouring the finished popcorn into a bowl. The bowl is the color of butter and it reads *Popcorn* in big white letters. I have a matching bowl, but I don't ever use it.

“Can you imagine what Michael would say? I mean, he would be like, ‘This is insane.’”

“Wow. It’s like you’re channeling him.” I lean closer to the window, peering out. “I think we’re in for more snow.”

“You know, refusing to talk about him is never going to make this any easier,” she says.

“Well, with you around, how will we ever find out?” I turn around and she’s scowling, one hand on her hip. “I’m kidding,” I say, but she doesn’t soften at all. “You’re right,” I say. “He’d be thrilled.”

I’m making dinner late again because I haven’t been paying attention to the clock. Stevie had finally asked for a snack and I said, *You’ve already had one*, and he said, *Yeah, but I’m hungry again*, and when I looked up it was already seven o’clock. Lately, I’ve been doing this a lot. I cradle the phone against my ear while I heat tomato soup. Ben doesn’t really like it, but Stevie does, and it’s the fastest thing I can do. It’s almost their bedtime.

“I don’t really understand all of this, Mom,” I say. “They’re buying a six-month option, whatever that means, but they’re sending me a check for fifteen grand and flying me out to work on the script.” I don’t really need the money, but I like the thought of making it. And more important, they’re flying me somewhere. More important, I get to leave.

“Jenny says this producer seems like a big deal,” she says. “Maybe you’ll get into screenwriting and move out to L.A. and we’ll actually see you once in a while.”

“You’re seeing us for Christmas. We’ll be there in a month.”

“You know what I mean. I don’t know why you don’t just move home.”

*Monsters: A Love Story*

“To San Francisco?” I laugh. “Sure. The boys would love it. If we sell the house we could swing an efficiency apartment over someone’s garage.”

“That’s a little hyperbolic, Stacey.” She’s using her best professor voice.

“Anyway, Jenny would kill me if we left.” They moved out here three years ago when Todd got a job with the railroad. The hours are long, but the benefits are amazing, and the cost of living’s so low, Jenny’s able to mostly stay home. She used to teach French full-time. Now she gives private lessons.

“I’m just saying this could open some new doors.”

“I wouldn’t get carried away,” I say. “From what I understand, these options almost never pan out. Honestly, Jenny shouldn’t have even told you yet.”

# DECEMBER



THERE ARE FOUR SEPARATE FLIGHTS to get to the island, first to Denver, then to Newark overnight. We land in Turks and Caicos early evening, but then there's still a little island-hopper flight. The plane is tiny, with just a handful of people on it. The whole time we're in the air, I sit with my legs crossed, my right foot hooked around the back of my left calf. It makes me feel smaller, more steady. I balance my book on my knee and flip slowly through it. I've been away from this book so long I don't know if I can slip back into its voice, and that's what they're asking me to do. *We love it as a skeleton*, he'd said, *but of course we need some of the scenes you left out. The things you implied, well, now we need you to write them.* They're bringing a screenwriter too.

The landing is less than pleasant. The plane tips heavily to one side, and I throw my hand out to brace myself. "Fuck!" I look around to see if anyone else looks nervous, but no one seems to have noticed me or the plane's sketchy maneuvering. Just then the wheels hit and the seat I'm clutching shudders hard and begins to vibrate as the plane struggles to slow itself. I close my eyes and clench every muscle until the

shaking stops. When it finally does, I pull out my phone and switch it off airplane mode. I text Jenny, *Landed. How are boys?* and then slip it back into my pocket.

On the tarmac, there's a man waiting for me with my name on a sign. He takes my bag, and then we're in this Mercedes, and we're driving through hills and past beaches, and we finally pull up to this huge gate. He types in the code, and the gates open, and we drive up to this massive stucco house with a Spanish roof. The double front doors are wooden and open, and when we walk in, the whole place is full of light. The back of the house is all glass, doors and windows, and they're all open to this enormous terrace overlooking the ocean. It reminds me of a hotel Michael and I stayed at in Kauai. *I love it here*, I said the first night. I wanted to stay out late and drink too much and walk barefoot in the sand and kiss in the moonlight. Michael was tired though. *I'm still on Central time*, he said.

"You must be Stacey." The voice comes from the left, and I turn to see a man walking toward me, hand extended. He looks about fifty. His head is shaved and the top is pink from the sun. He's got a full, round face, thin lips. His graying eyebrows are obscured by the black frames of his glasses. His hand, when he grabs mine, is soft and firm.

"I'm Alan. Welcome. Welcome," he says. "Can I get you a drink?" He turns to the driver behind me and says, "Put those bags in her room." He looks back at me. "Ready to get started?"

"Sure," I say. "Yeah." I'm not ready at all. I need to catch my breath, to look around.

"I'm just kidding. We'll let you settle in first. We'll start tomorrow. Joe got here this morning. He's the screenwriter. Great guy. I've worked with him a ton. He's got a working draft. Just a sketch really.

Needs a lot of work.” I realize he’s leading me slowly into the room as he talks. “So you want that drink?”

I shake my head. “No, thanks. I’m good.”

“And you call yourself a writer?” He pours himself a smallish splash of something—bourbon, maybe—and puts the bottle back. He pats the bar. “Tommy’s got a hell of a bar here, so help yourself. This is his house, by the way, but you probably knew that. He gets in tomorrow.”

I have no idea who Tommy is, so I just nod.

I wake up to the sound of the ocean. I barely slept all night. I just lay there staring at the ceiling, the walls, but then sometime around five, I closed my eyes. Now it’s light out, and I’m not sure where I am for a second.

My hair is curling from the humidity, but it doesn’t look bad. It’s always curly, though not quite this full. I pull my fingers through, half untangling it, half checking for grays. I don’t feel like I’m old enough, but stress can do that. I found one last week, a little wisp of silver against the brown.

I pull on a clingy white tank and a pair of shorts. They’re looser than they were last year, kind of hanging off my hips. I don’t mind this part at all. Grief is terrible, but it looks amazing on me. If Michael were here, he’d grab my ass and try to pull me back into bed. He’s not here though, and I need coffee. It must be nine o’clock, but no one seems to be up. I know there’s staff here. Someone unpacked my bags and cleaned up from dinner last night, but now there’s no one around. There’s a cappuccino machine that I don’t know how to work, but I find a regular coffee-maker too. I brew a full pot and take a mug out to the terrace.

I sit cross-legged on a sofa holding the coffee in my lap, and I close my eyes. I'd forgotten how good the sun can feel. I think, *This is what happy feels like*, and I think about how people say you should just let the good feelings wash over you. But then I think, *No*, and I open my eyes. The coffee tastes kind of stale and bitter, and I wonder why this Tommy doesn't keep better coffee in his house when he has such an amazingly stocked bar.

I hear footsteps behind me.

"Well, don't you look gorgeous, all sun-kissed and fresh?" When I turn to look, it's someone new. He's young, maybe late twenties, skinny, his short black hair swept to one side. He holds his hand out. "I'm Daniel. Tommy's assistant. I do everything. Well not *everything* . . . ooh, coffee." He grabs my mug and takes a sip. "Jesus, who stocked this?" He looks around like there should be someone there to answer him. "I'll get you something else, honey. Don't drink that shit." He sits down in the chair across from me and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "So you're Stacey?"

"I'm Stacey, yeah." I smile.

"Tommy's in the shower. He's a mess as usual. I got him on the plane at four, and other than crashing out on the flight, he hasn't had much sleep." He makes an exaggerated face. "Models. At the hotel last night. It was not a good scene." He shakes his head. "I was like, 'You know we have an early flight,' and he was all, 'Shut the fuck up,' and I was like, 'Whatever, as long as you sign my paychecks.'" He sighs. "Actually, I sign my own paychecks, so it's a good thing I'm honest. I mean, I should give myself a bonus anytime I have to drag his ass out of some strange bed that smells like morning-after pussy."

I laugh, but it's more fucked-up than funny. Daniel raises his eyes above my head. "Well, there you are, sunshine."

The voice behind me is a low grumble. "Fuck off." He moves around the couch and drops next to me, bumping my leg. He's wearing jeans, a gray T-shirt, damp at the collar from his hair, which is dark, very dark, almost black, and it's combed back from his face, which I can't really see because his hands are at his temples like he's trying to hold his head together. Then he drops his left hand to my knee in this apologetic pat, and *Jesus Christ*, I can't even think, but it's fucking Tommy DeMarco. "Sorry," he mumbles without looking at me. He looks like shit. I mean, gorgeous, of course, but like hell.

Daniel leans across and hands him my mug. "Have some coffee."

Tommy stares at it. "It's cold."

"Just drink it." Daniel digs through a bag next to him and pulls out a prescription bottle. He shakes a pill into his palm and hands it to Tommy. He looks at me. "Vitamins."

Tommy takes it and swallows half the coffee. "This is terrible."

"Your life? Yeah, it's a mess. Just drink the coffee. I'll get you an espresso in a minute, but only 'cause I'm making one for her." Daniel nods in my direction as he walks away.

With that, Tommy looks up at me, and he smiles this amazing little smile, and suddenly, he doesn't look like some hungover piece of trash. He looks like a movie star. I mean, he is a movie star, but right now he looks like something out of a movie, and he winks and says, "I don't travel so well." I laugh, and he holds his hand out and takes mine. "Tommy. And you're Stacey." He's still holding my hand, not so much shaking it as just holding it, and I really, really hope I'm not blushing.

"I loved your book, by the way. Obviously, or we wouldn't be here. But really, it's beautiful. Awful, but beautiful. And it really challenges

the whole idea of what monstrous is. What makes a monster? And who or what is responsible? Or are we all? It's just great. I loved it."

"Wow." I hate it when I don't know what to say. I mean, I'm a writer. I should be good with words, and instead I'm like, *Wow*. "I'm flattered. I didn't realize many people had bothered to read it, much less get that much out of it, so that's really generous of you."

"Oh, a lot more people will read it now. Once the publicity machine starts rolling for the movie, people will get interested in the book. Your sales should pick up quite a bit."

Daniel reappears with the espressos and sets one down in front of me. "Here you go, sweetie." He looks at Tommy. "And you, fucking degenerate."

"I should fire you. I swear to god, man." He takes a sip of the espresso. "That is good though. Really good." He closes his eyes, leans his head back, and rubs his jaw. "It's bright out. You have my glasses?" Daniel pulls a leather case out of his bag and hands the dark glasses to Tommy, who puts them on over his closed eyes. "Jesus, I could die. Do we have anything to eat?" He gives my leg the little apology pat again. "Sorry. I'm not usually this bad."

Daniel's already on his way to the kitchen, but he calls back over his shoulder, "It's true. He's usually worse."

The script is much, much worse than not very good. We're sitting on the terrace, and I'm thumbing through the hard copy in my lap. I'm the only one still reading, though I'm not reading so much as stalling. I'm not sure where to start. "I think one problem is that you've sort of taken the poems and turned them into dialogue. I mean, you've plucked out all the good lines and given them to different characters."

Joe nods. “Obviously, we’ll have to add to it.” He looks older than me, which probably means we’re the same age, mid-thirties. I’m always surprised by my own age. Sometimes I feel older, sometimes younger. I never feel right.

I glance at Tommy. He’s stretched back on the couch next to me. He has his head tipped back, his glasses on. I mean, he could be asleep.

Alan is definitely not asleep. He’s watching everyone. I’m not sure how this all works, if he works for Tommy, if Tommy works for him. I do know that I don’t want to piss either of them off, but I don’t want to let them break my book either.

“Right. But it’s more than that. I mean, this basically reads like kind of a typical Frankenstein movie,” I say, holding up the script.

“Your book is Frankenstein,” Joe says. “Kinky Frankenstein with this Frederick psycho building himself a girl.”

Tommy makes this grunting laugh. I guess he is awake.

“Okay, but this isn’t based on the movies. This is based on the book, the whole nature-of-man discussion?”

Joe looks at me blankly.

I feel myself slowing down, pausing between words, waiting for some recognition to show on his face. “So, where Frankenstein’s creature has a fully human soul in a physically corrupted form, my monster has a beautiful exterior, but she’s evil.”

“I thought the monster was always bad?” Joe looks at Alan and shrugs.

“The creature only turns when Frankenstein rejects him. But that book is about the corrupting influence of religion. Mine is about gender ideals and sexual power dynamics.”

“Great”—Joe smiles a deliberately strained smile—“a feminist manifesto. That’ll make a great flick.”

“How’d you get your book in their hands?” Joe asks as everyone’s heading in for lunch.

Alan’s already at the bar. He catches my eye and raises a bottle in my direction with a questioning shrug. It’s barely even one. I shake my head.

“I have no idea, really. I just got an e-mail one day.”

“You’re kidding me.” Joe says this like he might be kind of pissed.

“No. Why?”

“You just ‘got an e-mail?’” He shakes his head. “You are one lucky bitch.”

Tommy opens three bottles of wine over dinner, but I don’t think he finishes more than a glass. Alan has quite a bit. Maybe more. And Joe, Joe has a lot. He seems to be holding on to some anger from the day. Tommy and Alan spent the afternoon holed up somewhere, talking about I don’t know what, which was not so good because Joe and I need a translator. The only language he seems fluent in is asshole, and in the past few hours, we’ve gotten nowhere but pissed off.

“Well,” Joe says, pushing his plate back and refilling his wine yet again, “I think we’re fucked. Or you are, anyway.” He waves his glass toward Alan and Tommy. “It’s not my money on the line.”

Alan leans forward and tries to do this calming motion with his hand, but it hardly seems to work. “Whoa, let’s not get carried away. It’s a rocky start is all.”

Joe looks at me and shakes his head. “She doesn’t get it. Controlling bitch if you ask me.” He sort of sneers drunkenly. “How do you even

keep a husband anyway? Seriously, how does he even put up with you?" Because, of course, it's right there, at the back of the book, my whole life boiled down to a paragraph. It reads, *Omaha . . . husband . . . two sons*, and I don't even know how to start correcting him. I don't even know which parts are still true.

Tommy laughs. "Joe, you're a handful, man." He stands up from the table. "Brandy?" He points to Joe, then Alan, then me.

"Please, yes, I'd love some." I get up and follow him to the bar.

Tommy lines up four snifters and pours two fingers in each.

"Let's talk outside." He hands me a glass and gestures toward the terrace. He points me to the couch and then sits across from me. "Don't worry about Joe," he says. "He's an asshole and a drunk, but he's really, really good. No one would put up with him if he wasn't. I think he hasn't quite figured out your vision yet, but he'll get there. We'll make him get there. Promise." He rests his hand on my knee and smiles. I think it's supposed to be a reassuring gesture, but I just feel hyperaware of his fingers and maybe a little flushed, which is ridiculous because I'm not the sort of woman who gets flushed. "Just don't let him push you around."

"Do I look pushed around?" *God, I hope not.* I take a sip of the brandy and try really hard not to look rattled. Or look at his hand, which is still just resting there on my leg.

Tommy laughs and leans back in his chair, taking his hand with him. "I don't know, honestly. You're hard to read."

In the morning, I walk out to the kitchen and find a full pot of coffee and a tray of sliced fruit. I pop a piece of pineapple in my mouth and

take a cup of coffee out to the terrace. Tommy is already there. He's sitting with his feet propped up on the table. My book is in his lap, and he's writing in the margins. I feel strange standing there, out of place.

He looks up. "Coffee's good today," he says. "Daniel took care of it. There should also be some breakfast in there if you're hungry."

"No," I say. "Just coffee's good."

"So I'm making notes. I think if we look at these poems in terms of scenes, and then work from there. Who else is present for this scene and what will those characters say and do? Your monster is so fleshed out, so real, the rest of them need to come to life, give her some balance."

"Right." I nod my head a little and stare at my coffee. The steam rises in a slow, looping swirl. "You know, I don't know if I can do this," I say finally.

"Sure you can."

I set the coffee on the table and sit on the couch, cross-legged, holding both feet next to my hips, my fingers tight around my ankles. I look out over the water to the point where it merges with the horizon. When I finally turn back, Tommy is looking at me. He must have shaved this morning. They like to picture him with stubble, maybe to scuff up the pretty. That's really the word for it. Aside from the hard line of his jaw, he has the face of a pretty girl—high cheekbones, wide green eyes. He lets the book fall closed in his lap. I just shake my head.

"I know that you can." He puts this emphasis on the word *know*. Like it makes a difference. Like a person can know anything. Like knowing helps.

"I don't have room in my head for the others. Hers is the only voice I hear."

"That's bullshit." He stands up and grabs his cup. "I need a refill. You?"

“No,” I say. “Thanks.”

He turns toward the house and then turns back. “I can hear them in there. Right in the book. There are snippets of them, moments. You just keep them on too tight a leash. You’ve got to let them loose. You’ve got to give in to the chaos.”

I try to laugh. “I don’t like chaos.”

“No shit?” He steps closer and leans down until we’re face-to-face. I feel myself shifting backwards, trying to make space. “Jesus. You are wound so tight you’re gonna break something. But you are not”—he raises his hand to point in the direction of the book where it sits on the table—“you are not gonna break this.” He stands up and walks into the kitchen, and I turn my head back out to face the ocean and close my eyes as tight as I can and hold my breath.

It’s getting later, and the sky is slowly darkening. It doesn’t gray like back in Nebraska, it just turns a deeper blue. It’s been a long day, with not much progress to show for it. *See*, I thought about saying to Tommy at one point, *I can’t do it*.

Alan and Joe took off half an hour ago, headed out for burgers.

“Thanks, no, I’m a vegetarian,” I said when Alan asked, and Joe just looked relieved.

I snap my laptop closed and lean back into the couch.

Tommy comes out to the terrace with a bottle and two short glasses. “Scotch,” he says, setting the bottle on the table. I wrinkle my nose, but he says, “You’ll like it.” He sits down on the couch next to me and pours a little in each glass, hands one to me. “To finding chaos.”

I roll my eyes, but I take a sip. “Jesus. This tastes like lighter fluid.”

He laughs. "That's a four-hundred-dollar bottle of scotch."

"It's awful."

"Keep drinking. It'll grow on you."

It does. By the time the sky's completely dark, I feel like I could melt right into the couch. Tommy's telling me a story about his favorite uncle. He's telling it like there's a lesson in it somewhere, but I'm having trouble concentrating.

"Where'd you grow up?" I ask.

"Texas. Didn't I say that?"

"Maybe." I shrug. "Did you like it?"

"No." He shakes his head and takes a sip of the scotch. "No one likes their childhood. At least, no one likes their childhood and then ends up here."

"Really?" I turn to face him, adjusting my body so I'm sitting sideways. "Why not?"

"Isn't that what drives us? Getting away?"

"Not me," I say. "I loved my childhood."

"Tell me about it," he says.

"It was great." I pull my right leg up and hug it into me, resting my chin on my knee. "My parents both taught at USF."

He makes a face because he's obviously never heard of it.

"University of San Francisco. I did my undergrad there. Free tuition." I shrug. "Anyway, we lived a few blocks away. We didn't really have a yard, so my dad would take us down to the campus on the weekends, and my sister and I would roller-skate. My dad would say, 'Sunny, don't dig up the grass with those skates.'"

"Your dad called you Sonny? Like Sonny and Cher?"

"Sunny, like sunshine."

"Right. Because of your sunny disposition," he says.

“My older sister was Boo. Pale. White-blond hair.”

“Like a ghost?”

“Like Boo Radley,” I say, and Tommy laughs.

I’m smiling now. Just smiling. Then Tommy smiles, and then he leans forward and kisses me. It’s this soft, slow kiss, just his lips on my lips, and he’s got one finger under my chin tugging me closer and then his hands are on either side of my jaw, and he’s pulling me toward him. I scoot my left leg across his lap, and then I’m kneeling over him, and his head’s tipped all the way back. I’ve got his bottom lip in my teeth. He runs his hands up under my shirt and along my back all the way to my neck, and he presses his fingers into my hair and pulls his mouth away from mine, brushing his lips against my chin, and it feels like an electric shock, and I suck in my breath and scramble backwards as fast as I can and walk in the house.

In the kitchen, I brace my hands on the counter, but I can’t keep myself up. I drop down into a squat, curling over my knees, my arms up over my hair. “Oh god. Oh my god. Fuck.”

I can hear his footsteps coming closer. “Look, I get it,” he says. “Some girls are married, and some girls are fucking married. Whatever. Let’s not make a scene.”

I’m rocking from my heels to my toes. I’m trying to breathe.

“Jesus. You’re a disaster. You need to get your shit straight.”

*I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m fine.* I stand up in one fluid motion and push my hair out of my face. “I’m fine,” I say.

“You call this fine?” He’s got a glass of scotch in his hand, and he’s pointing it at me. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I take a really slow breath. I can do this. I can handle it. I’m fine. I press my lips together. It might look like I’m smiling. I try looking him in the eye. “My husband is dead.”

“What?” He shakes his head like I’ve said something impossible. It’s not impossible.

“My husband.” I say it slower this time. “He’s dead.”

“Like . . . recently?”

I nod. I think I look like I’m smiling again. I might be trying to smile. “Mm-hmm.”

“Oh Jesus, honey, I’m sorry.” His jaw relaxes, and he takes two steps toward me and pulls me into him. He’s cradling my head in the crook of his elbow, holding the glass of scotch next to my ear, and he’s making this rocking motion like he’s shushing a baby. He brushes my hair back off of my face with his other hand.

Tommy sits me down in the living room and goes out to retrieve the scotch. “We’re gonna need more of this,” he says, handing me my glass. He sits on the floor in front of me, one leg stretched out. He leans back into the couch and closes his eyes. “All right, let’s hear it.”

“There’s nothing to hear,” I say. “He just died.” I take a drink of the scotch. I’m not so much sipping it anymore as sucking it in. “In March. He was in a car accident. Dead on the scene. Thank god. I mean, that it was fast. Not that it happened, just that it wasn’t some lingering thing. You know?”

“How long were you married?”

“Ten years.”

“And your kids?”

“They’re six and nine.”

He reaches one arm back over his head and squeezes my knee.

Then I’m crying, and I haven’t cried in months. I cried a lot in the beginning, but it made the boys so sad, and now I don’t cry anymore,

and I'm telling him this too, like he'll believe me when I tell him I'm not crying, even though I'm sobbing and my hands are covered in snot. Through it all, he just sits there, shaking his head occasionally and pouring me more scotch.

I remember waking in Michael's room in his apartment in Boston, watching him dress. He was still so young then, his face like a baby's, but he had the body of a man. He stood at the dresser, buttoning his shirt, buckling his belt, fastening his watch around his wrist, and I thought, *This is how a man moves in the world, how he fills the space around him.*

I hadn't intended to go home with him. I'd just been tagging along with a friend. She wanted to go home with him, and he was really more her type. Clean-cut, businessy, athletic. We left the bar in a group. I hadn't been angling to be the one riding back to their place on his lap. I was just the last one in the car, and it was a small car, and then he patted his legs. I was wearing this short skirt, so when he draped his arm around me, his hand was resting on my bare thigh. My flight home for the summer was three days away, so it wasn't like we were starting anything. It was just for fun, just a fling.

I didn't plan to think about him through the summer, but I did. I thought about his hands. He had these big, strong hands and this sweet boyish face. He looked like a Boy Scout. He looked like the kind of guy you'd want with you if you were lost in the woods, worried about bears. I remember feeling lost that summer, and very much alone. Jenny had moved in with Todd by then, and my parents spent most of it traveling.

I had an assistantship, so I was teaching that fall when I got back to Boston. The second week of class, I walked out of the building, and there he was, sitting on the wall by the front steps.

“I would have found you sooner if you’d told me your last name,” he said.

“Would you?” I said.

He jumped off the wall, and I walked toward him, and I dropped my bag at his feet.

“You know my friend tried to set me up with this girl, and I said, ‘I’m seeing someone. Or I will be once I find her again.’”

I probably would have married him right then. Michael always made me feel found.

I feel like someone is hammering nails into my temple. I turn my head to get away from it, and it feels like my skull is cracking open. I have to stay still. Everything is broken. Everything hurts.

“Hey.” There’s a voice in my ear, and someone is touching my head. “You’ve got to get up now. You’re gonna have to move.”

*Hurts*, I try to say, but it doesn’t come out.

“Jesus, Tommy. What did you do to her? Just get out of my way,” I hear another voice say. “Sweetie? It’s Daniel. I’m gonna help you, okay?”

I try to nod.

“Here’s the thing, honey. You’ve been poisoned.”

“She’s not poisoned,” Tommy says.

I just whimper. I have been poisoned. I think I might die.

“I’m gonna need you to drink something for me. Can you do that?”

“Uh-uh.” I can’t open my mouth at all. I think if I do, all my organs will come rushing out.

“We’ve got to sit her up,” Tommy says. He pushes past Daniel and slides onto the couch next to me. “Help me pull her up.”

“No, no, no, no, no,” I mumble as they pull me into a sitting position.

None of my muscles seem to be working, so they just prop me against Tommy, and he grabs me by the chin. “Open your eyes. You have to open your eyes.”

I do, but it hurts. It hurts so much. Daniel is smiling at me though, and he looks happy to see me. “Yay! Baby’s awake!” He claps. “Okay. Now I want you to drink this.” He hands the mug to Tommy. It’s clear I’m not holding anything. “You just take a sip.”

I shake my head. “I’ll throw up,” I say.

“Just try.” Tommy holds the mug to my lips. I try to swallow. I do swallow. But then he tips the mug into my mouth again and it’s too much. My stomach seizes, and I feel everything start to come back out. I slap my hands over my mouth, but it just runs through my fingers, down my shirt, all over Tommy. And then I start to cry. Again.

“Jesus Christ. Ah, god, get some towels,” Tommy says. I wish I were dead.

“Oh, honey.” Daniel pats me on the arm. “It’s okay, sweetie. Girls throw up in his lap all the time. You’ll feel better now.”

“Fucking towels, man!”

Daniel runs down the hall, and Tommy pats me halfheartedly on the back. “Don’t worry about it,” he says, but it doesn’t sound very sincere. When Daniel comes back, he has these fluffy white bath sheets. They look expensive, but he just wipes my face and hands, mops up what he can. Tommy dabs at himself with another towel and stands up. “Get her showered off and put her in the sauna. She needs to sweat some of this shit out.” He walks off down the hall, still wiping at his hands with the ruined towel.

Daniel gets me back to my room and turns the shower on, and I stand under the water for I don’t even know how long. I can’t lift my

arms to wash my hair or anything. I just stand there, hoping I'll come out clean.

When I finally come out, I find a robe hanging by the door and pull it on.

"You decent?" Daniel calls through the crack in the door, but he doesn't really wait for me to answer. "Brush your teeth, sweetie." He fusses over me like a mother, finding my toothpaste, combing my hair. "All right, let's get you out to the pool house. Sweat lodge time."

It's early. The sky is a dusty blue and the sun's just barely over the horizon. In the pool house, the sauna is on but empty. Daniel plants me on the bench and promises he'll be right back. I let my head fall back against the wall and close my eyes, waiting.

I hear the door open, but I don't bother moving.

"How're you doing?" It's Tommy's voice this time. I wish he weren't here. I don't want to look at him. I don't want him to look at me. I keep my eyes closed and just shake my head, and I feel him sit on the bench next to me.

"You'll live," he says, sighing. I finally lift my head and turn to look at him. He's bent over, resting his weight on his knees. He's just got a towel on, fresh from the shower. His hair is wet, falling forward around his face. He glances up at me. He looks tired. He looks wrung-out. "Sometimes I have bad ideas." He shrugs.

Just then, Daniel comes back with two mugs in his hands. "Coffee."

"I don't want coffee," I say.

"You want this coffee," he says. "This is prescription strength." He hands me a mug and passes one to Tommy.

"I'll check on you in twenty," Daniel says. He reaches across and

pats me on the knee. "You're gonna be fine. But drink that. All of it." He ducks out and closes the door.

It's sweet as hell. Full of sugar. I don't really do sugar. "I don't really do sugar," I say, half to Tommy, half to the mug.

"You couldn't drink it without the sugar. It's so full of Oxy, it would taste like shit."

"It's full of what?"

"OxyContin. He crushes the pills and stirs them in. Works faster that way."

"Seriously?"

"Just drink it."

I do. It helps. But the less I hurt, the worse I feel. "I'm so sorry about all of this."

"You're fine." He rests his hand on the back of my neck, gives it a quick squeeze. "I'm the one who fed you all that scotch. I knew where we'd end up."

"You must think I'm such an asshole."

He laughs. "Yesterday, I thought you were an asshole. Today, I like you. Today, you're just as fucked-up as the rest of us."

I turn my head to look at him. He's folded over again, resting his elbows on his knees, holding his coffee in both hands. He has a tattoo on his right shoulder, and this close I can see how some of the edges are blurring, like it wasn't outlined very well.

"You didn't like me yesterday?"

"No." He shakes his head. "But I like you now."