

Into the Dragon's Den



OneHandedTypist

(Contains giantess growth, breast expansion, ass expansion, hair growth, gentle femdom, less gentle femdom, power imbalance, very brief nonconsent, Br*tish people)

Author's Note

This is a love story (psychological horror?) above all else and will reward those who approach it with patience and investment. I hope you'll fall for these characters as hard as I did.

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Enjoy!

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Chapter One

The first thing that gives me away, maybe, is that I show up ten minutes earlier than I'm supposed to. The date's in a cozy cafe-bar, bathed in dim orange with blue moonlight shining through the windows in complement. Murals on the walls depict frontier era Kansas. A barista with curly green hair chats with a sulky coworker, a bulletin board behind them advertising slam poetry on Sunday evenings. There is the smell and heat of people, of rasping espresso machines and margarita makers, the speakers playing "Comfortably Numb."

I expect to hold a table for her, to have time to get used to the place, but there she is, already sitting by the window. Her crossed legs, her hips, her torso, everything about her is long and lithe. A black, long-sleeved shirt with a conservative neckline, clinging to the form of her chest.

She smiles at me as I approach, tilting her head enough for her messy ponytail to hang down. Blonde, wavy hair. She asks if I'm Nathan, her date. Then she chuckles.

"Rather early, aren't you?"

Her accent is gentle and lilting, and makes her sound like she's reading a nursery rhyme. But her joke makes me nervous. I'm suddenly aware of how dressed up I am. I'm wearing slacks, a sports coat, and a button up shirt. I've gotten a barber's appointment and trimmed my beard. By comparison, my date's simple shirt and jeans are a casual outfit, her hair thrown together. I feel overdressed now. A college student, trying to seem older than they are. Then I remember the obvious: my date arrived even earlier than I did. She's poking fun at herself.

I smile. "How desperate of me."

"Nothing wrong with eagerness, dear."

I want to ask if she really is Grace, the girl who agreed to meet me. It's a stupid question. She knows my name, looks the same as the pictures, and has the same accent from over the phone, when our mutual friend Maisie gave me her number. But she's so enchanting; it's easier to think there was some kind of mix-up.

Holding my tongue, I take my seat. My feet bump against hers and she withdraws herself. She's pretty tall — Maisie told me she was five-nine, when I asked. She wears

gray, backless, flat-bottom shoes that make my leather ones seem unbearably stiff. I want to run home and change.

My worries fade as the date progresses. Even though she's less dressed up than I am, she has a poised air to her that makes it feel appropriate for me to have dressed smartly. She sits with a straight posture, her hands in her lap, her thin lips always smiling. She smiles while she talks, and she smiles while she listens. Her eyes are kind. They're a desaturated, light blue, so pale it's hard to believe. They're like frozen ponds on a white winter day.

One of the workers comes by and brings Grace her drink, a margarita she ordered before I got here. I order the same thing for myself, almost out of reflex, and don't ask myself where the compulsion comes from.

The date keeps flowing. She asks me questions, listens to my answers. I mean to ask her questions too, but she always seems to ask something else before I can think of something, and she's just so good at coaxing out more. Musical "aaahs" of understanding. Slightly off-base guesses that compel me to fill in the gaps. I tell her about being an English major, about the stories I want to write, the things that have inspired me. Her slender-fingered hand props up her chin, her elbow resting on the table.

Eventually, I can't stand to keep talking; it's like the entire date is for my benefit, and it makes me feel scummy. I get my opportunity to change the dynamic when I notice a shift in Grace's expression. She's still leaning in, still smiling, still looking at me, but there's something distant about her eyes. Her thoughts have gone somewhere else.

I stop talking for a few seconds, and she doesn't call me out on it.

"Grace? Are you there?"

She blinks a few times, keeps her smile. "Apologies. My mind tends to wander. That's something people notice quickly about me." Her speech is smooth and calm, as if she's been waiting for me to call her out.

"You don't need to be sorry. I've been going on for a while."

"That's sweet of you to say, dear, but I'm quite certain this is my fault. Whenever I go on a date, I often forget that I've remembered to show up for it. I just let people go on and on. A lot of men don't mind, naturally." Her smile grows a little more, her eyes

crinkling. “Though, I suppose you’re a much more considerate sort of fellow, aren’t you?”

I smile, hoping I seem like someone graciously accepting a compliment, and not like someone melting into a puddle.

She continues. “I got distracted, thinking about the art in this place, the art over there.” She points. Behind me, on the wall to the left, is a mural of Kansas plains stretching into the sunset, light blue fading to orange and red. “I think its style is rather distinctive. Do you see all those straight lines on the field? Do you see how neatly they converge to the vanishing point? Perspective was relatively new during the Renaissance, and so they often included conspicuous straight lines in their paintings, just like those. And the texture. That’s fresco — or, an imitation of fresco, at least. Also Renaissance.”

Grace points to the mural as she speaks, but never looks away from me, and in fact leans in closer. At first I observe the painting for the features Grace points out, but as she goes on — as she enthuses over the contrast between the classical art style and the modern day objects depicted, as she shares a fun fact about *The Last Supper* being painted on a convent’s refectory wall — I focus all my attention on my date, listening as attentively as I can, doing my best to show that I care what she has to say. I won’t be a man who likes to listen to himself talk. I’ll be considerate, like she said I was. I want her to call me considerate again.

After quite a few minutes of this, and not long after finishing her margarita, Grace halts her lecture. She lowers her gaze into her empty glass and smiles ruefully. “Apologies for my rambling. I’m worse than you are.”

“No, you’re okay,” I say immediately. “I like to learn about you. Are you an art history major?”

She sighs. “I was hoping to keep that secret.”

“What’s wrong with being an art history major?”

“If you don’t see the problem, you clearly haven’t heard me talk about it for long enough. I can be a real bore.”

“You wouldn’t bore me.”

“There’s no need to protect my feelings.”

“I mean it. I think you’re too considerate to go on about something if it’s boring me. You’re a really sweet person. And passionate, too. I can already tell that.”

Something about the date shifts, just then. Her gaze rises to meet mine. Once again, like earlier, the look she gives is so smooth and calm as to seem rehearsed. She smiles at me. Something about the smile is less kind than before. She's amused.

She studies me like that for several seconds. I shift in my seat, feeling heat under my arms. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing." She turns away her face, but keeps her eyes on mine. She seems to decide upon something. "I was just thinking about how adorable you are."

It's like being punched in the chest. My legs clench in towards each other beneath the table and I have to look away, at once. I tell myself that I hadn't meant to seem obsequious; I just thought she felt embarrassed for talking about herself.

But, no. She's exposed me. She said exactly the words I wanted to hear. Me, adorable.

The lurch of my stomach, the involuntary hitch in my breathing. I don't want her to see my reactions. She must never know that I want her to say that a hundred more times, to work at me until I collapse. You can't give someone that power. You can't let someone know how much you care what they think about you.

She doesn't say another word, won't look away. I turn my face from her and can still feel her scrutinizing me. I make myself laugh. "Thanks. I just didn't want you to be hard on yourself."

I look up, thinking that I've been released, that it's her turn now. Grace doesn't comply. She gives a hum of acknowledgement and then keeps watching me, keeps appraising me. There's an entirely different glint to those icy gray eyes of hers, something coolly self-assured and unflappable.

I hold her gaze, try to remind myself that she's the one being weird. She'll realize it's her turn to speak if I wait long enough.

But she just keeps looking at me. I feel myself smiling, trying to appease her and defuse the tension despite my desire to seem put-together. I'm pushed past my limit when I suddenly realize that none of her self-deprecation was genuine, a minute ago. I break my gaze and finish my drink.

She laughs, not unkindly. She sounds so relaxed that I wonder if I imagined the whole stare-down. "Struggle with compliments, do you? That's alright, dear." She slides out of her chair. "I'm going to get another glass."

I look at my empty drink. Before I can start thinking about whether I want more, it's snatched away from me.

"You're having another, too." Her voice is cold, calm, and pleasant as the breeze.

Chapter Two

Grace's long legs carry her away to the bar with a new energy. It's my first good look at her body. An athletic rear sways and bounces in the skinny jeans she wears, its convexity unmistakable, her profile showing itself as she turns to stand in line. Her chest, which is maybe between a C and a D, looks like two softballs smuggled beneath her shirt, cradled by an arm she's wrapped around her torso to clutch at the other. Said other arm is bent, its hand dangling both our glasses. While she waits in line, she closes her eyes and hardly moves, as if listening to some private message. She's still smiling.

My eyes roam her down and then up, surfing the S-curve of her ass, her lumbar, her upper back. Her shirt shows me her whole form and lets me imagine her flexibility, her strength, her vitality. I wonder if she ever played volleyball.

I chastise myself; it's a mistake to admire her like this, to allow myself to be further intimidated. For my own sake, I need to treat her like she's just a person. It felt good when she teased me — I'm convinced now that's what she was doing — but how long until she gets bored of me if I'm just a simpering idiot? People are unpredictable. Even the ones who seem to like you, who call you adorable, who say they find your weaknesses endearing. Let your guard down too much and you get dropped.

So I keep my composure, even when Grace returns with our drinks, and with a reassuring smile.

"Cheers," she says. She hands over my drink, takes a large sip of hers.

There's an instinct to mirror her, but I fight it off and refrain from drinking. If she's going to order a new margarita every time I finish one, I need to pace myself.

"You must have a pretty high tolerance," I say.

"Mmm. I suppose." She takes another drink. The glass hides her smile and, for a moment, all I see is an intent glare. "I'm given to understand you can handle drinks fairly well yourself."

"What makes you say that?"

"Our dear friend Maisie, of course. She told me quite a lot about you."

"She did?" I frown. "She wasn't nearly as talkative with me."

She titters. “Well, the more I heard about you, the more I wanted to know. I kept poor Maisie on the phone for an hour.”

I think back to the beginning of the date, the way Grace kept me talking, never gave me the chance to ask a question of my own. I can picture Maisie sprawled on her couch, picking at her camisole, wondering why she hasn’t hung up forty minutes ago like she intended to, while Grace says she has “just one more question” for the fifth time.

There’s something else that bothers me, thinking back to earlier. A lot of the questions Grace asked me were pretty basic. What’s my major? What do I want to do after college? Do I write? Questions that, surely, must have come up in an hour of asking Maisie about me. I can’t help but wonder if Grace spent the first fifteen minutes of our date asking me questions she already knew the answers to. There’s something disquieting about that.

“What did Maisie have to say about me?” I ask, trying not to sound too accusatory.

“It’s hard to remember everything she said; there was so much we went into.” Grace takes a sip of her drink, swirls the glass around. “I find it interesting that Maisie wouldn’t tell you about me. Did she say why she wouldn’t?”

It’s more clear each time she does it, the way Grace turns around my questions, how she drags out more about me while keeping herself hidden.

“She did,” I say.

Grace smiles. She’s unhurried, infinitely patient. She knows I’ll say more.

I look away, can’t help but pout a little as the answer escapes. “She said you were exactly my type. She said that if she told me too much about you, I’d be too intimidated to agree to the date.”

She laughs at that. “Maisie seems to know you well. That’s the impression I get of you, too.”

“Hey!”

She smiles innocently, puts a hand up. “Only teasing, only teasing. There’s no judgment here.” She takes another long drink, and I can’t help but feel conspicuous about having left mine alone. Grace doesn’t seem to notice or care, so far. “In all fairness, I had a little help making that assessment. Maisie told me that you were shy in our phone call.”

Of course she did.

“Well, at least you were warned, I guess.”

“Warned? I wasn’t warned, dear. I was tantalized. I like my dates to be a little bit flustered.” She puts a hand to her face and makes an exaggerated, obviously fake expression of guilt. “Do you think that’s horrible?”

“I suppose that depends on exactly how flustered you want them.”

Sighing, leaning onto her elbow and sinking her cheek against her palm, she gives me this look as if we’re both on the same side of the problem. “How much would be too much?”

A woman’s laughter shrieks from the other side of the restaurant. People glance over, resume their evenings.

“You tell me how much you want, and I’ll tell you if it’s too much.”

“You want me to answer first?” She smiles, almost affectionately. “Are you embarrassed by how much you’d be willing to tolerate?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“We’re on a date, you know.”

“Of course. But on a date you’re supposed to answer them, too.”

I watch carefully for a reaction. All I see are a few blinks, but it feels like a victory. I’ve surprised her with my gall.

“Does it make you feel uncomfortable, Nathan, if I know you too well?”

“You’re doing it again.”

She gives me an indulgent look, chuckles in the pitying, guilty way you’d save for a dog that ran into a glass door.

“My, it really does bother you, doesn’t it? You poor thing.” She clasps her hands in her lap, straightens. “Alright. What would you like to know?”

My ears burn. Did I expect her to find me assertive, challenging her? All I’ve done is reveal my discomfort.

“Where are you from?”

“Mississippi.”

“You are not from Mississippi.”

She laughs. “Alright, fine. I grew up in England. A southeast town you’ve never heard of.”

“How long were you there?”

“Just long enough to be stuck with the accent. Kindergarten was in some New England city. I can’t remember if it was Connecticut or Rhode Island.” Grace takes a long sip of her drink. She seems a little uncomfortable, finally having to talk about herself. “Then a suburb outside Kansas City. Not far from here, actually.”

“Oh? Which one?”

She scrunches up her brow. “It was a long time ago. Jackson County? Johnson? Something like that.”

“Johnson County’s where we’re at now.” I feel electrified, a little queasy. The elegant European with a touch of my childhood. “Which school were you at?”

It’s total trivia, but a part of me is hungry for the answer, salivating at the potential to connect her to something familiar. This stubborn, private woman.

“It was called Westwood, I think.”

“That’s where I went.” It’s like being tased; I want to spring up from my chair. I lean forward. “What grade was this?”

She shifts in her seat. “I don’t think about my childhood much.”

It’s a clear signal to drop it, but a part of me is maybe a little angry with her, with the ways she’s chided me tonight. I want to bring her down to Earth, to a place where she can’t suddenly fly away.

There’s something else, too. Like a metal detector going off. Some dreadful excitement that jostles my stomach.

“Was it first grade or second grade?”

“Nathan...”

“Did you have Reichardt? Coleman? Kleinschmidt?”

“I don’t remember a thing. I...” something hitches in her throat. “Coleman. I had Mrs. Coleman. I remember her.”

I see her face as if for the first time. The thin blonde eyebrows. The small nose. The way her voice lightens and soothes me. Those eyes.

I had Mrs. Coleman too.

“Grace...”

“We moved again after second grade.”

“I know.”

“We... I think it was Nebraska, next.”

“Grace, it’s me.”

Her lips move, but she’s unable to say anything. She swallows, refuses to look at me. I can’t help but empathize. Without knowing why, exactly, I feel the same way as her. I feel upset, having remembered.

In second grade, Grace Stillerman was my best friend. She was the best friend I’ve ever had.

Chapter Three

Silence stretches out between us, but I see the recognition bloom in Grace's eyes. There is no delight in seeing me — only a kind of incredulous queasiness.

How the hell did “British blonde girl with pale blue eyes named Grace” *not* ring a bell? It is her. Unmistakably her. The only change is how much she's developed. The Grace I remember was twiggy, skinny, and short. She must have been a late bloomer.

As memories come back, I realize how thoroughly I have forgotten her. I haven't thought about her in several years, not even briefly. When Maisie told me she was setting me up with a woman named Grace, I didn't even think, “oh, I knew a girl with that name once...”

We were friends in second grade, and for exactly the length of it. I met her on the first day and she was gone on the last day, snatched off by her parents without a proper goodbye. In the time I knew her, though, we were almost always together. Wandering through trees, telling stories. Watching her draw something in her sketchbook, in awe of an ability that I thought was godlike. The way she'd explain with great care and posturing the rules of etiquette that her parents had taught her, and then point at something behind me and try to tackle me to the grass.

But something else that comes to mind, the reason I feel off-balanced realizing that she's my date, is how close we were... and how embarrassing I was. When I was young and didn't know any better, I was extremely emotional. I liked to tell people about what I wanted my wedding to be like when I grew up, gave a lot of sincere compliments. I kept explaining to my friends how much they meant to me. It took me several years and many friends abandoning me to understand how uncomfortable people were with this. In fifth grade, everyone started calling me gay, even though they didn't know what that meant, and it would make me cry in class, even though I also didn't know what that meant.

Only Grace was truly okay with it, I think. She listened to me when I gushed about my feelings and would gush back. We could play house together, and when I told her about how I wanted a nice wedding one day, she didn't laugh. She even joined me in fantasizing about the particulars. I think we pretended to get married, once.

As I learned more about how you were supposed to interact with people, and how boys were supposed to be, I became more and more embarrassed about the friendship I had with her. I even began to feel grateful that she had moved away; with her gone, that side of me could be forgotten. And I suppose I succeeded. Like I said, it's been years since I've thought about Grace, even a little bit. Memories of the embarrassing child I used to be have safely faded away.

But now I'm remembering it. Now Grace remembers it.

I come out from my recollections and see that she's been glowering down at her drink. She looks furious. Her neck and head are trembling, her teeth ground together hard enough to spread tension throughout her body. She's squirming in her seat. Her knee bumps against mine under the table and I flinch back, worried the sudden contact will provoke her.

She blinks a few times after my startle, takes a huge swallow of her margarita. "Apologies," she says. "I didn't recognize you."

"To be fair, I didn't recognize you either."

She nods along but clearly isn't listening. She takes another big swallow, emptying her glass.

"I'm getting another," she says. When she stands she bumps her thigh against the table. This visibly annoys her, but not so much as when, upon reaching for my glass, she sees that it's still full.

"For goodness' sake, Nathan, it hasn't been *poisoned*."

She turns away and tries to stride to the bar. She staggers on the first few steps, stumbles, shivers again. She seems to straighten her back, stretching herself, before finally gaining balance.

I'm worried, at once, that I've ruined the whole date. But before I have the chance to think about what I did wrong or how to fix it, my attention is riveted to something else.

It's absurd and piggish to stare at her ass at a time like this, but the sight of it has jolted my system. It's better than before, somehow — expansive enough to threaten the fabric. There are new qualities: a fold of flesh where her butt hangs down the backs of her thighs, squashing and stretching with each step. A sliver of skin between her jeans and the hem of her shirt. I wouldn't think it Grace's style, to show skin like that.

She pauses at the bar to order another margarita and then disappears into the restroom. This gives me a chance to think. Grace is upset. With what? With me? With having remembered? I know why the memories bother me, but why do they bother her? Whatever's just happened, I'm afraid I'm losing her. The need to fix this is overpowering. Have I spoiled the whole date?

I make myself breathe. Things went wrong when I badgered her with all those questions. I can't remember why I felt so compelled to do that. It's not like I wanted to hurt Grace, or anything. But, if my motive wasn't hostility, what was it? The comforting answer would be that my only aim was to set boundaries. But, no. I know the truth. All it amounts to is that she made me feel uncomfortable and exposed, and instead of responding to it maturely, I acted like a little brat. I wanted to get back at her.

While I'm thinking about that, the green-haired lady at the counter sets out Grace's drink, who emerges from the bathroom not long after. The barista calls out for her, pointing to the glass, but she doesn't seem to notice. She calls out again, louder, and only then does Grace blink a few times and turn to look at her. It takes a third gesture for her to realize what's going on. She accepts her drink and returns to our table, almost knocking into someone as she does. She forces a smile.

"Sorry for the wait," she says. She slides into her chair, bumps her feet against mine, and scrapes back her seat.

Forcing a smile of my own, I take a sip of my margarita. It's a nice excuse not to talk for a few more seconds, and I haven't forgotten how she snapped at me earlier for my abstinence. Grace hasn't touched her drink yet. Her smile keeps fading and then returning, as if she lapses on her pleasantries and has to remind herself.

"Sorry," she says again. "I just, I'm..." She trails off. "I'm a little out of sorts. I wasn't expecting something like this." Her mouth works as she struggles to find something else to say. Her fumbling stops, though, when she raises her gaze and sees my expression. Little by little she seems to forget what's on her mind and switch focus. Her eyebrows scrunch together.

"Are you feeling alright, darling?"

I must look as guilty as I feel, because Grace leans across the table to better study me.

"I, uh..."

Before I can find the words, a glint of light catches my eye. Grace is wearing a necklace. A plain, silver rectangle that disappears beneath her shirt. It's the top of a cross. I remember now how disappointing Sundays were as a kid, how Grace could never play in the morning. The sight knocks me off-balance. It's not the memory that does it, but how I know, for a fact, that I hadn't been able to see that crucifix earlier. The neck of her shirt looks stretched. I see ridges of her collar bone that I'm certain I hadn't seen before. There are horizontal creases on the front of her shirt where the fabric is especially taut. Her chest almost seems swollen. It spills around her forearm and comes close to meeting the table.

I blink a few times, averting my gaze. "I need to apologize."

"For what?"

I take a breath. "I shouldn't have pried, like I did. I feel like I've really made you uncomfortable by asking you so many questions. You clearly didn't want to talk about your childhood."

Her brows remain furrowed. There's a strand of blonde hair dangling past her chin. I hadn't noticed that before.

"When you were asking about what school I went to? Please, just forget about that. I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You seemed upset."

"That's... it's sweet of you to be concerned." She grabs at her necklace, rubbing her fingers against the cross through the cotton of her shirt, lost in thought again. When she speaks, it's halting. "Maybe you're right. It may have been a little difficult for me to talk about that."

Another long silence. I feel like there's something weighing on Grace's mind, but I don't know if it would be a good idea to probe into it.

I make myself smile. "You're very good at what you do. You got me so flustered that I, uh, I guess I overreacted."

"Overreacted?" She tilts her head, seeming more present now. "When you were asking me those questions?"

I chuckle. "Yeah. I was so worried you'd think I was a sap that I got all pushy."

Grace stares at me for a long time. Then, slowly, ever so slowly, a smile creeps across her face.

“Are you saying that I made you so nervous that you lashed out at me in panic?”

“Yeah.”

Grace pulls back and sinks into her chair, putting a hand up to cover her mouth. At first, she just seems deep in thought, but as the seconds pass her cheeks crinkle up around her eyes, and she starts giggling.

“That’s...”

She giggles even harder. Her shoulders tense and her knees pull up as she tries her utmost best to remain ladylike amid her snickering. Her face has reddened.

She takes a few deliberate breaths and clears her throat. “Goodness, that’s exciting.” She lowers her legs back down, straightens. “Apologies. You really know how to make a woman flustered. That’s... heavens, you’re adorable.”

I feel my face get just as hot as hers. Grace notices this and starts giggling again.

Finally getting herself under control, she leans across the table. Her eyes dart around and her lips wrestle for a few seconds as she debates with herself. Eventually, she meets my gaze. “I have something to confess.”

“Yes?”

Her eyes crinkle. “I like nervous. I like it quite a lot. Making a man’s heart race like a rabbit’s.” The tip of her tongue darts out and wets her lips. “And I like men like you. I like it when they’re sweet, and affectionate, and *adorable*. I even like it when they’re a little... pettish.”

A bead of sweat trickles down my temple. I want her to keep going, so I resist, give her another objection to smooth over. “Those are some strong words. I could be a real jerk, for all you know.”

She giggles. “Somehow I doubt it. ‘Oh, Grace! Please don’t call yourself boring! It breaks my heart!’”

“I didn’t say it like that.”

“Oh, darling, it was all over your face. You’re just *desperate* to please, aren’t you?”

I feel the corners of my mouth twitching. I look away, try to think of another token resistance I can give. “Well, everyone’s polite on a first date. Who knows what I’m really like, you know?”

I jump as something brushes my ankle. It's one of her toes. She must have slipped off her shoes, at some point.

"Mmm. On any normal date, I suppose that'd be true. But, unfortunately for you, I know exactly what you're like. I'm afraid we have quite the history. You always..."

The words trail off. She pauses and scrunches her face. It's nearly a grimace. Her next words are strained and reluctant. "You always were a sweet boy, when we were children." Another pause, just long enough to be awkward. "You'd go everywhere I told you to, play whatever I wanted to play. I'd tell you what a handsome man you'd grow up to be, and you'd get so flustered. You'd wrap your arms around your face so I wouldn't see how red you were."

Her toe slows, goes still. She stares into space, and little by little I see her expression fade into blankness. The restaurant's music enters my awareness. Each strum of the bass marks another beat of silence, of Grace being somewhere else.

Her eyes close, stay shut, then open. She continues as if nothing happened. "But there's no hiding now." She smiles. "Yes, it's too late for secrets. You're a sweetheart through and through. Sometimes you get a little defiant, is all, but that's just because you're scared."

I smile weakly, wondering whether or not to call out that weird lapse she had. Grace, perhaps interpreting my concern as the shyness she was hoping to provoke, beams at me and takes a long swallow of her drink.

The rest of the date is a blur. She teases me with delight, asks me question after question. She's doing the same thing as before, where she learns every little thing about me and doesn't share anything about herself, but I don't care. I've realized that it's not rude for me to do all the talking. Not with her. Not tonight. She doesn't want to be listened to — she wants to butter me up, to learn how to annihilate me. I want that too.

She's had more margaritas than I have and yet seems far less drunk. Though, there are some signs. Her penchant for zoning out has gotten worse. I catch her staring into space quite a few times, and at one point she closes her eyes for a few seconds, sways slightly, and then blinks them open again. I also feel she's being friendlier than usual. Her smiles seem less calculated and more natural. Her teasing grows bolder. But it's not so bad. My face is already red from the drinks, so what's the harm of blushing?

The conversation drifts to my writing. She asks question after question and is, from what I can tell, genuinely interested. I lean forward, beam at her, gesticulate.

“Sometimes you gotta force it. You wanna write something, but you don’t know what, so you think about it in this analytical way, where you try to, y’know, logic it all out.” I wipe my face, drift a little in the chair, grope for the words. “You force yourself to write those stories because the ones you really care about take time to percolate. You always think about them while you’re bored, or walking to class, or jogging. They don’t need your help. They just need time. You work on the less exciting stories so you won’t rush ahead and kill the good ones.”

She looks so dignified, listening to me. Her eyes glimmer with affectionate amusement. “Your mind must be an interesting place, with all those ideas dancing around. You must hardly ever get bored.”

I know she’s flattering me, but she’s good at it. “It can be distracting. I remember, when I was a kid, I’d just spend hours wandering around my house, daydreaming. The walking helped me think. My parents would ask me why I was pacing around so much and all I’d say was, ‘I’m thinking!’ I was a very pretentious kid. But, God, Grace, you were the best at that. Seriously, you were leagues above me. You were the most imaginative person I knew.”

She chuckles, looks away. “Come now. I’m really quite mundane.”

“No, I’m serious. You always had the best ideas. Like, we’d go into this little copse or something — it couldn’t have been more than two hundred feet across — and you’d narrate this whole story. We’d wander around the trees and you’d describe what was going on. There was one story that spanned two weeks, I think. Like, we’d come back the next day and pick up where we left off. What was it..”

I knock my knuckles against my forehead. Grace fidgets in her seat.

“Right.” I laugh. “You said we were fairies, and we were lost in the woods. We were fending off squirrels and blue jays and all. Do you remember that?”

She smiles sadly. She’s swaying her wrist around, letting the shallow pool of tequila in her glass oscillate. “I do.”

“You were obsessed with fairies. That’s something else. You talked about fairies all the time. Not even Disney fairies but, like, actual folkloric ones. You’d tell me we had to be careful with giving out our names because of ‘the fairy rules.’ You tried to convince

me that you'd met one. You kept saying it put a spell on you. You really tried to make me believe that."

I expect her to laugh, but she doesn't. She keeps smiling at me, blinking, as if waiting for me to say more.

"The more I remember things, the more surprised I am that after, like, fourteen years, you're very much the same as how I remember you. You were always trying to embarrass me."

She hums along. She's stopped moving her wrist around. I think she's zoning out again.

I get nervous. I wonder if I've offended her, by describing her that way.

"Which isn't a bad thing. I mean, it's fun, you know? And obviously... obviously I like it..."

She doesn't respond. She's not even smiling, anymore. I see her open her mouth and suck in a breath.

"Grace?"

She squirms in her seat. I thought she was already sitting straight, but she straightens her posture even more, her head rising higher.

"Sorry," she says. She makes herself smile, tries laughing. "I'm just, um..." She gets a perplexed look and zones out again. Several seconds pass in silence.

"Is everything alright?"

Her face has paled, her expression near frightened. I get seriously concerned.

"Grace, you can talk to me. I mean it."

She takes another breath, seems to arch her back. She repositions her hips, and her knees clash against mine. An odd creaking sound. She closes her eyes and bites down on her lip. She's trembling.

"Grace, talk to me. You can trust me. I know it's been a while, but we're still—"

"Would you *please* be quiet?"

We sit in lengthy silence. I pull my feet from hers, the pressure of her knees having begun to make my legs ache. The jazz music fades as the track ends. After a lull, another begins. One of the bartenders chats with a couple seated across from them, and the other goes through the cabinets.

I'm afraid to say anything else and make her snap at me again, but I do find the courage to look at her. Her eyes are closed, and she's doing some sort of breathing exercise, her lips parting with each exhale. What have I done to upset her this much?

I wait a while longer, and when her face seems calm, I speak.

"I'm sorry."

She releases one last exhale and opens her eyes. "Hm?"

"I said I'm sorry. I'm sorry if I upset you."

"What do you mean?"

I frown. How could she not know?

"Just now. You were really upset."

"I was?" She knits her brow, as if trying to remember. "When?"

"Just now."

Could this be another game of hers? It's possible, but somehow I doubt it. There's no coyness to her tone, no small smirk. I wouldn't put it past her to be acting, but I feel like she's being genuine. It's just my gut.

"Oh," she says. "I'm very sorry." She slides one of her thumbs under her shirt collar, tugging at her bra strap. She doesn't seem aware of doing it. "I've been told I can be passive-aggressive. Do you remember how my parents were?"

Vaguely. I never met them, but I remember how their shadow loomed over our playdates. Grace was always worried about breaking curfew.

"Kind of?"

"Well, they didn't like me to be angry. I suppose I never learned how to deal with that feeling." She seems truly sorry, looking at me. "If I've been rude to you at any point tonight, you have my deepest apologies."

I appreciate her contrition, but still feel uncomfortable. She has no clue when she might've been rude to me, just now? She can't even guess?

"You're okay. I was just worried that I'd been rude. I mean, I'm pretty drunk. Maybe I said something I shouldn't have."

"No, no, Nathan, you've been great. Perhaps I was only sad, thinking back to how things were. I miss those days." She grabs her necklace again. "Isn't it silly to have so much longing for something I had forgotten about?"

"No," I say. "It's not."

She smiles and gives me a long look. “Maybe not. But, still, we shouldn’t brood on that. In fact... I have a proposition for you.”

I grin involuntarily. “Yeah?”

“Yes. I was wondering... would it be untoward if I suggested we continue this night elsewhere?”

“Like where?”

Her eyes twinkle. “Like my apartment.”

A buzzing goes through my body that’s almost painful.

“Are you sure?”

“It sounds lurid, I know.”

“No, no. I’d really love that.”

She beams. “Splendid! I have some reds for us to enjoy when we’re there. We’ll have a lovely time. And, if you’re lucky, I might even let you leave afterwards.” She stands from her chair, ends up stumbling a little.

“Oh!” She giggles. “It seems you never realize how tipsy you are until you stand, doesn’t it? Give me a moment to pay.”

“I could—”

“No, no, I insist. Stay there.”

Grace regains some semblance of her namesake and heads to the bar. I end up eyeing her ass again. *That’s my FRIEND’S ass*, I think. *My best friend has an ASS*. I notice a ridiculous pride to my thoughts — not the pride of snagging a hot date, but the pride you’d have for a friend that accomplished something. The feeling makes me laugh. My thoughts are hilarious. I don’t stare at her butt for long, though. I lean back in my chair, close my eyes, and luxuriate in the buzz, swaying to the music. I realize that they’re playing “Comfortably Numb” again, and that strikes me as the funniest thing ever.

I’m well into a giggly stupor when, suddenly, there’s a hand on my shoulder.

“You’re not asleep on me, are you?”

I blink my eyes open. “Not yet.”

“Good.” She helps me to my feet, with surprising strength. “It would be very rude to fall asleep on a lady.”

It takes me a moment to respond. I wobble around on my feet, staring at Grace. I debate not asking the question, but I'm so confused, and it slips out.

"Grace, how tall are you?"

A bemused smile. "What's that have to do with anything?"

"Uh... just curious."

She chuckles. "Well, if it's so important, I happen to be five-ten." She pats my shoulder. "Now, let's be off before your legs give out, alright dear?"

Grace strides to the exit with me in tow, feeling something like a duckling behind its mother.

I double check her shoes, to see if I misremembered what she was wearing, but they're the same gray flats from earlier, now with heel hanging from the back. Endless legs rise up to long, ovular, jiggling asscheeks, which push out her jeans so much that there's a gap between the waistband and the small of her back. The hint of skin around her waist is on its way to being a proper midriff. Her black shirt is full of folds and creases.

And earlier, when we had both stood up, her eyes had been above mine.

Maisie said she was five-nine, and just now Grace said she was five-ten. In either case, she shouldn't have been able to look down on someone six feet tall.

Chapter Four

The walk to Grace's apartment is, objectively, picturesque. The full moon and streetlights keep the world orange and blue, as if we haven't left the bar at all, and a breeze keeps the warm night from getting hot. Only on occasion does a lone car pass. Best of all, I suppose, is that soon after leaving the restaurant, Grace slips her arm through mine and holds my hand. It reminds me of when we were kids, how she'd drag me around in her excitement. I glance up at her. She's smiling playfully, looking at me from the corner of her eye. The whole walk she bumps against me in a way that I'm sure is meant to seem accidental. The alcohol makes it feel like, instead of walking, we are floating down a lazy river, certain to arrive at a cozy destination through no effort of our own.

My enjoyment of the stroll is tempered, however, as I am near-totally lost in thought, trying to puzzle out the situation that I'm in.

A five-ten person cannot be taller than a six-foot person — not in the flat-bottom shoes Grace is wearing. So unless I've been wrong about my height for the last couple years, Grace is taller than she says, and taller than Maisie said.

The next question, then, is why Grace is taller than I've been told.

It actually makes sense that Maisie would downplay Grace's height. She knows I like tall girls, and she knows I have a shy streak. She probably thought I would have panicked and cancelled the date if I knew that Grace was taller than I was. Five-nine was tall enough to pique my interest while being normal enough to keep me from being overcome.

And Grace? Well, that's even easier: she's fucking with me. Maisie undoubtedly told her about my weakness for tall girls in the hour long conversation of Grace probing her for details, and so Grace decided to be coy about her height. She wants to see if I'll have the nerve to call her bluff. It amuses her to see me lost in thought about this, as I am now.

Why am I thinking so much about this, anyway? Maisie and Grace conspired to lie about Grace's height because they know it's a weakness of mine. That fits both their personalities. Why has it taken me a whole line of reasoning to arrive at this conclusion?

Isn't it the most obvious thing in the world? Yes, it is. The only reason to think so hard about it is if there's some confusion about the situation, but what is there to be confused about?

You're working so hard to reach the obvious answer because you saw her grow. You don't want to believe it, but you did.

I did. The shaking. The grunting. The stretching sounds. The way she kept "sitting up straighter" and bumping her knees against mine. The way her clothing has seemed to get less and less wholesome as the night's progressed. It's been easy enough to dismiss this, to file it under "strange but not important," but I can do it no longer now that we've both stood, and I've seen the way she towers over me. Sure, we hadn't both been standing until that moment when we left the cafe, but God damn it, she was not this big at the start of the night.

Her clothes used to fit far better. I glance down at Grace's undersized shoes. As if she'd wear something so ill-fitting to a date. Her jeans show too much ankle, her shirt shows too much waist. The whole outfit is too tight to be comfortable. Some girls might choose to dress like that, but Grace? Someone so poised? She wouldn't! She'd never! I'm not mistaken! She's grown!

I take a deep, shaky breath. People don't grow like that. It's physically impossible.

But there's something I remember. Grace and I were wandering through the trees, once, and she was going on about fairies again. Then she got very serious, which was rare for her. I can remember now, clear as day, what she kept insisting to me.

"I'm not lying. I met a fairy. The fairy made me taller."

I had joked that she was so short that the fairy must not have done a good job at it. She got more upset than I had ever seen her get before. It was the only time I ever saw her cry. I wanted to ask if she was okay, but she just huddled into a ball and told me that she didn't want me to look at her. I apologized and we made up, but she seemed sad the rest of the day, and even thinking about that incident now makes me feel as confused and guilty as I did then.

I glance at Grace's feet, as if this time she'll be wearing high heels, explaining everything. But, no, still the undersized flat-bottom shoes. I swear they fit better at the start of the night.

Get a fucking grip, man. This is all in your head.

But what about what she said in the forest? She was so upset...

Children lie, Nathan. She was just in a touchy mood that day. You might also do well to remember that fairies don't exist.

I squeeze my eyes shut and raise my gaze from Grace's feet. Before long, I'm looking at her chest, which I swear projects an inch farther than it used to. It's as if her breasts have grown faster than the rest of her.

She's not growing, dumbass.

I don't know sizes well, but she has to be bigger than a C-cup, at this point. When the light is just so it seems that perhaps, through that tightening shirt, I can make out the rim of an overburdened bra.

I look up more and see Grace smiling. Smiling down at me.

"Sorry."

Her laughter purrs, and her thumb strokes my hand. "Oh, it's quite alright dear."

Despite all that's on my mind, she's still able to fluster me.

"Sorry I've been so quiet," I say. "I've barely talked since we left the restaurant."

"Oh, that's quite alright too. I haven't talked much either. I have a habit of getting lost in daydreams — some people I know find it frustrating. It certainly hasn't helped with my classwork. I apologize if I've seemed distant."

We eventually pass state line, into Missouri, and arrive at Grace's apartment building. It's a charming if perfunctory brick structure that reminds me a lot of the place my grandparents lived in. Grace living with a bunch of old people would feel strangely fitting.

"It's no problem," I say. "I've been lost in thought too."

"About what?"

I smile up at her. "Just what a good time I've been having."

She giggles and ruffles my hair as we enter. After the way she's seen through me all night, it's sort of exciting to lie to Grace and get away with it.

The building has no lobby, just a few doors leading to ground apartments and a staircase rising to the next level. The floor and stairs have beige carpeting.

"Although, there's something I've been wondering about," I say.

"Oh?"

Grace leads me up the stairs. Her expression is hidden, and being a step ahead means she towers more than ever.

“Maisie said you were five-nine, but at the restaurant you said you were five-ten. Did Maisie just estimate wrong, or...?”

My question trails off, and we keep climbing. I wonder if Grace will simply ignore me.

“Perhaps,” she says calmly. “Though, in all fairness, I have been going through something of a growth spurt. Just last year, I would’ve told you I was five-nine.”

I can’t help but get excited. It’s like she’s confirming the bizarre growth I may have witnessed. She at least seems on her way towards it.

In fact, perhaps I’m more excited than I should be. I feel myself getting flushed as we keep climbing; the term “growth spurt,” from her lips, excites me in a way that’s hard to describe.

“A growth spurt, huh?” I’m trying to focus. This is a serious matter — I’m figuring out whether or not I’m crazy. But an increasing part of me just wants to listen to her talk about this. “Isn’t that strange, at your age?”

“Oh, I suppose it is. I hit five-nine in my Sophomore year, and I stayed that height for the rest of high school. All evidence suggested that I was done, but then lately all my clothes felt rather tight. I had myself measured and found that I had somehow grown a whole inch.”

We’re still climbing, and she’s still in the lead. I’ve tried my best not to look at her ass, but hearing her talk about her tight clothes and sudden growth breaks my will. Her legs are so long that, being a step or two ahead of me, her ass is near level with my face. The cheeks are heart-shaped, their form outlined clearly. With each step they bounce. Even in the starchy texture of jeans, they can bounce. My mouth dries.

The fairy made me taller.

“How recently?”

“Hm?”

We reach the top floor. As she fishes for her keys, I adjust myself so my arousal won’t be visible.

“When do you think you were growing? When did you learn you were five-ten?”

“Ah. It’s hard to say when I was growing. It’s the sort of thing that sneaks up on you. Besides, I’ve never been great at remembering how long ago things happened. I can be inattentive to particulars like that.”

She unlocks the door and opens it to her apartment.

“As for when I was measured, it was while I was buying clothes for this date.”

When I enter her room, the first thing that strikes me is how terrible it smells. It smells like shit. No, literally, it smells like shit. Grace stiffens.

“Oh!” She turns to me, embarrassed for perhaps the first time tonight. “It would seem that someone hasn’t buried their business. One moment.” She sets off towards a small hallway but then stops and spins around. “You’re not allergic to cats, are you?”

“I’m good.”

“Good. Again, it’ll just be a moment.”

Grace leaves. I’m now alone in a large-ish living room. At the other end of it is a dining table, and a counter partitioning some space for a kitchenette. I can’t help but be shocked by how messy everything is. The floor is strewn with dirty clothes — I even see a bra dangling on a chair — and shards of kitty litter. Dust bunnies hunch in every corner, and many in the open. Dirty dishes fill the sink of her kitchenette beneath a weird stain on the ceiling. The walls of the living room are bare and yet there are paintings resting against them, as if Grace had gotten them out to hang but then didn’t bother to finish the job. I try to remember if she was this sloppy as a kid. I don’t think her room ever used to be so bad.

Grace returns from the hallway, spraying Febreze as she goes. She slipped off her flats while away and is now barefooted. I wonder how she can tolerate stepping on everything that’s on the floor.

“Alright. There we are. Nice and covered up.”

My gaze is on the bra she’s left out. “Do you have a roommate?”

My question seems to confuse her, but then she glances down and, suddenly, she’s smiling. “Of course I do. He’s right there.”

She points near my leg, and when I look down there’s an orange kitten sitting by my foot, staring up at me. He mews angrily upon being noticed.

If there’s no roommate, then all the mess in this apartment is Grace’s doing. I make myself chuckle and say, “cute little guy. What’s his name?”

“His name is Hamlet, because he’s my sweet prince.” She strides over and bends at the hip, her hands on her knees, beaming at him. “Isn’t that right, darling?”

Hamlet shakes all over and stares, the hairs on his back and tail puffing out.

Grace frowns. “What is it, sweetie? It’s just me.”

She reaches to pet him and he sprints away, darting behind the TV stand.

Grace rises back to her full height and puts a hand on her hip. “Strange. He’s very friendly with new people, usually.”

Did Hamlet notice something too? Is his owner different from how he remembers? Is she too big?

Now you’re just interpreting everything as evidence. Cut it out.

“Hey, cats are weird like that sometimes. Especially kittens. How old is he?”

Grace smiles, and seems grateful for my shift to a more pleasant question. She looks so much like the person I remember from childhood.

“He’s... seven months? More of a teenager than a kitten, I suppose.” She surveys her apartment and frowns, as if just noticing how bad it is. “Sorry. This place is a sty, isn’t it? I ought to be more diligent.”

I glance at the unhung paintings again. Such a bizarre detail. “Did you just move in?”

She tracks my gaze. “Ahh... no. I’ve lived here a few years now — since I started college. I just never got around to putting those up. I can be bad with chores.” She’s quick to the kitchenette, long legs striding, and takes down some water-stained wine glasses. “If you want the truth, I almost canceled this date when I realized my clothes didn’t fit. I was convinced that shopping at such late notice would be more effort than I could muster.”

I follow her to the kitchenette, where she’s pouring dark inky wine into the glasses. “Well, I’m glad you managed to follow through. Your outfit’s great.”

She smiles. “Are you sure? It’s a rather simple get-up. I was just trying to put together something nice as quickly as I could.” She hands me my drink. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.” We clink our glasses and take a sip. It’s wonderful stuff — the smell earthy and pungent.

“And I am sure,” I say. “I like what you’re wearing.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Although, I’m afraid they may have measured me wrong.” She glances down at herself. “These are a trifle tight.”

If I want to find out for sure whether I’m imagining things, this is my best opportunity. I proceed slowly, nodding along at her observation.

“They do look a little... undersized. I mean, it’s showing some of your stomach.”

“It is?” Grace sets her wine on the counter. She leans back her torso and cranes her neck. At first, I don’t understand why she’s doing this, but then I realize with some embarrassment that her chest is blocking her view of her stomach.

“Oh, goodness,” she says. “How long have you been waiting to tell me?”

“Sorry,” I say, although I’m surprised she hasn’t felt the air on her skin. Is she really so inattentive to what’s around her?

She pulls the hem to her waistband, stretching the shirt. As soon as she lets go, it scrunches up again. She reclines further against the counter and the kitchen cabinets, trying to see past her own breasts and cover her stomach.

“What’s the matter with this bloody thing?”

“Did it fit at the store?”

“I.. I thought it had. And I swear, it fit just before our night out.” She grabs the fabric around her lower ribs, rather than her hem, and tugs it. “I don’t know what’s happened to it.”

As the seconds pass, and she continues to struggle to stretch her shirt, it becomes harder to understand why she hasn’t given up yet.

“I think it’s too small, Grace.”

“That’s ridiculous. It fit fine earlier. Why would a shirt shrink for no reason? It just needs some adjustment.” She hunches over, pulls harder and harder. She’s starting to sweat from the exertion.

“You don’t need to fix it right now.”

“It’s not a problem, Nathan.” She straightens to her full height, tugging hard as she does. “I just need to—”

Shrrrrripp!

Stitches rip across her left shoulder, the fabric gaping open to reveal her skin, to reveal a taut, pink bra strap. Her hand flies up and clutches at it, her arm pressing

against her chest. Even as this all happens, the hem of her shirt slides back up to her navel.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake!” She strides forward, nudging past me. “I am so, so sorry... so inappropriate. This is what I get for buying cheap. Let me change.”

“What if nothing else fits?”

She stops. “That’s a silly thing to say, Nathan.” Slowly, she turns around, and looks at me for a long moment. “Why wouldn’t my other clothes fit?”

There’s challenge to her tone, and a look in her eyes that chills me. A dead, cold, sharklike fury. The kind I saw when she snapped at me earlier, or when she’d zone out for several moments without registering. This isn’t her being coy, or trying to tease me again. She is commanding me not to continue.

Maybe it would be better to let it slide. Keep her happy. I’m at the apartment of an exciting, eloquent, gorgeous woman. So what if her apartment’s a mess? Or if she’s maybe growing? Or if she keeps zoning out and snapping at me? I want this night. I could have it.

But I’m worried about her. Beyond everything else, she’s my friend. I think she needs help.

I force myself to hold her gaze. “I don’t know how to say this.”

“Then I’m sure it can wait.” She starts turning away.

“Grace.”

Reluctantly, she turns back. “What?”

“Grace, I’m six feet tall.”

“Good for you.”

“Could you come here?”

She presses her lips together and looks away, near pouting. “Why do I have to?”

I take a few steps closer. “Grace, look at us. You’re looking down at me.”

She takes a shaky breath, lowers her eyes to mine.

“You’re five-ten?”

“I’ve already told you so.”

“Then why are you taller than I am? I’m six feet. You’re bare-footed. How are you taller?”

She stares down at me. The silence stretches on, and on. All the while I look into her eyes. They're a blue so pale they're almost gray. We're right in front of each other, but those eyes seem miles off. Leviathans lurk in there, hidden.

Then, in the silence, there's a sound like sand falling through a person's fingers. I know what it might be, but I don't look down to investigate. I don't want it to be what I think it is. So I keep my eyes locked to hers.

But then her eyes move. They move up. They're rising, and I can see it.

Her voice is a whisper, at first. "Why must you imply that there is something wrong with me?"

She's on her toes. She's just a very good actor. She's doing this on purpose.

I look down, and her feet are flat on the floor. Wrinkles in her jeans smooth out and disappear. The cuffs of her pants slide up her calves.

She staggers a step back, sucking in a huge, painful, convulsive breath. There's a sheen of sweat across her forehead.

"Perhaps you think you're taller than you really are. Or perhaps... the floor is slanted."

Her chest heaves. It's expanding right before my eyes, its weight compounding. The hem of her shirt bunches more and more as it slides up her midriff, and finally gets hidden as it gathers up entirely beneath her bust. Her breasts, now heavier, droop down and cover it. The hole at her shoulder rips and yawns bigger, her arm tensing and rising out from the fabric, rising so high that I can see a crack of her armpit, the side flesh of her breast. The shirt that was once so conservative splits apart in the middle into several jagged windows of cleavage. Golden hair grows past her shoulders, her elegant waves becoming tangled and mad as they thicken.

She lurches more steps back. "Or, if not the floor, then... *nnnnngh*... a trick of the light?"

As if punishing her for her guess, Grace's body tremors, tremors, and then bursts out another two inches.

"Nnnnnngh...!"

She loses control of her momentum at the sudden change of distribution and falls backwards against the dining table. Low grumbling of wooden legs against the floor join the tumult of Grace's throaty groans and the hole on her shoulder ripping out across the

sleeve. Her feet stay planted, her arms and legs shaking, as she struggles to lift her upper body. When her arms eventually prove too weak for this, she rests her torso upon the table.

Her breathing is shaky, gasping, calming down only by degrees. Her breasts have swollen so large that I cannot see her face from where I stand. All windows of exposed skin glisten with sweat. I find the nerve to approach. While I do so, she sucks in her breath and pushes against the table, erecting herself back to her legs. I feel dizzy watching her, as she rises up, and up, and up, until I look directly at her throat. I have to crane my neck to see her face, and she's staring off into space. She looks as though she's not aware I'm here.

Her breathing slows more and more, until the silence is overpowering and eternal. At last, in an emotionless voice, she speaks.

"How is it that I'm taller than you?" A deep breath in, a deep breath out, like a meditator. "I suppose it's just one of those things."

She wets her lips, nods to herself.

"I will find something else to wear. And when I do, I will be decent in it. Then we will continue our date. We will have a very nice evening." She smiles blankly. "Everything will be okay."

Chapter Five

By now, I've finished my first glass of wine. I have not found the energy to get up and pour another one. There's a half-empty glass of water on the TV stand, and I'm wondering how long it's been there.

I can hear her in her bedroom. Clothes hangers rattle as they're pushed aside gently at first, and then impatiently. Occasional grunts. Quiet muttering as she tries to convince her apparel to cooperate. She calls out, again, that "it'll just be another moment."

Maybe I should take the opportunity to leave. It might be my last chance to do so without having to face Grace's disappointment. Her disappointment could lead to anger, which could lead to another episode of whatever it was that I've just seen. And that's assuming I'd get the option to leave. Grace wouldn't hold me here against my will, but whatever she's turning into might.

Is that a dramatic way to put it? It might be. My mind goes to intense places quickly. But as surreal as her growth is, what bothers me most is that she seems incapable of acknowledging it. There's something wrong with her. I think she's suffering, and I want to help. But I also worry that if I say the wrong thing she might snap.

"I'll find something soon, I promise!" She calls out. Her voice is cheerful. "I must've gotten a bad laundry load. Sorry for the inconvenience! Treat yourself to as much wine as you want."

She speaks as if her earlier explosion never happened. Maybe she's erased the memory. It wouldn't be the first time that's happened tonight.

She's crazy. Get out of there.

She's not crazy. She's just... unwell. She needs help.

You can't fix her.

I'm not trying to fix her. I just want to support her, so maybe she'll fix herself.

Potato po-tah-to. This isn't your job. Get out.

But she's really hot...

There will be other hot girls, who don't have a thousand-yard stare every ten minutes. Leave.

But it's Grace.

I drag my palm down my face, deeply tired. That's what it comes down to. There are other girls, but none of them are Grace. This isn't some chick I picked up. This is my friend. She doesn't want to hurt me.

It's been fourteen years. You can't cling to what you want her to be. Even bad people have their good moments.

What exactly has Grace done so far that proves she's a bad person? She's played mind games, sure, but those were all in good fun. Even when her behavior was concerning, she wasn't intimidating me on purpose. Nothing she's done tonight has been malicious. She's just struggling with something deep. Maybe I can handle whatever that struggle's about, and maybe I can't, but I'm going to try.

I hear a door open.

"Sorry for the wait, dear. I've had some difficulties."

"That's alright." I glance at Hamlet, who came out of his hiding place while Grace was gone and is rolling on the floor, batting a ball of tinsel. "Did you find something to wear?"

"In a manner of speaking." Her voice carries a quiet glee. "I think you'll like it. But you have to close your eyes. You'll have to keep them shut until I say you can open them."

A quickening ache at the bottom of my stomach. My bones begin to buzz.

I close my eyes.

"Are they shut, dear?"

"Yes."

Footsteps against the carpet. Slow and heavy.

"And you're certain they're shut nice and tight? Not a chance they'll open?"

"Not a chance."

"Good. That's very, very good."

I hear the rapid scampering of paws on carpet; Hamlet has retreated behind the TV stand.

Grace sighs. "I don't know what his problem is. Am I so frightening?"

I don't answer. Her footsteps get nearer, then stop. Her voice is so high above me that I know she's standing close enough to touch.

"It seems I make everyone nervous." I can almost believe there's real melancholy and regret from the way she delivers the line. "There's my cat, and then... the men I date. Some of them look at me like I'm wicked. A monster." The word "monster" puffs against my face, the lips that spoke it now lowered to my level. A thumb brushes my cheek. Her voice is husky, quavering with hunger. "You don't think that of me, do you Nathan? I don't frighten you, do I?"

"No. Of course you don't."

"Not even a little bit?" She sounds hurt. "You're not the least bit nervous?"

I'm only able to breathe through my mouth. It's painfully audible. "I... well... of course I'm a little bit nervous."

"You are?" Her nose touches mine, rubs against it. Our foreheads meet. "And why are you nervous?"

"You... you know why."

"Hmhmhm... well, I suppose I have a few theories." Her lips brush against mine. Her breath is hot and tremulous. "Do you find me attractive, Nathan?"

"Yes..."

She kisses me, at last. It's almost chaste. "Do you want to touch me, Nathan?"

It's driving me mad how she keeps saying my name. She wraps her fingers around my forearm and guides it to her body. My palm meets the side of her torso, feels her smooth skin, caresses and savors on its own. It's all the answer she needs.

"Such an angel. Now, do you want *me* to touch *you*?"

"...Y-yes."

She kisses me again, longer and deeper. A large hand presses against my chest.

"Have you figured out yet what I'm wearing?"

"Nothing?"

She chuckles. "That's a good guess. But, no. Let me give you a hint." She grabs the hand that was on her back and redirects it to her chest. I feel the stiff fabric of a bra, feel my hand curve as it molds around the form of her breast. As I explore, I feel a ridge of flesh that bubbles over the cup. She's too big to be wearing this.

“I couldn’t find anything that fit, and you were having to wait so long. It just wasn’t proper. But now I am at least keeping decent. You don’t mind me compromising, do you? You don’t think it’s too lurid?”

“No. No. Not at all.”

I bring both hands to her face, pull her lips to mine. I hear the low growl of her desire, the woman beyond the ladylike decor who is quite the opposite. I have never kissed before and yet I take her in with abandon. She wants me. That’s all that matters. She wants me.

I thought you were trying to help her.

My hands slide down her neck to her shoulders, down her back to her waist. My fingers brush past her panties, and then I feel the contours of her hips flare out... and out... and out...

Her rear is much wider than it’s supposed to be, so much wider that I think my hands will slide outwards forever. When my arms have stretched as far as they can, my palms have only reached the sides of her ass. If my eyes were open in our current position — Grace in front of me, bent over at the hip — I’d see her ass cheeks protruding laterally, swelled out of proportion to the rest of her, just like her breasts.

“What’s happened to you?”

I know immediately it’s the wrong thing to say, but it comes out before I can think it through. My mind is muddled, and feeling her sheer mass jolted me enough to remember how impossible the situation is.

Grace stops kissing me. “Nothing has happened.”

She doesn’t resume, but doesn’t pull away. I realize I have a choice. She’ll let us keep going if I drop it. If I keep pushing, it’ll be over.

“I’m not judging you, Grace. I really like it.”

“And what is ‘it?’” she says, pulling away.

“Nothing.” It was a mistake to continue this conversation. The best thing would be to wait, until after we’ve taken this night to its conclusion. “Forget it.”

“Nothing’s happened to me,” she says again. “I’m not going to enjoy this evening if you keep saying things like that.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. Let’s enjoy this.”

“Yes, that’s what I want too.”

She says that, but doesn't do anything. She simply waits. I realize she won't be satisfied until I say the words, until I too declare that there is nothing out of the ordinary. But what kind of person would I be if I participated in her delusions, just for praise, and touch, and acceptance?

I make myself smile. "I'm here with my wonderful friend Grace, and I'm more excited than I've ever been. She's gorgeous, and the drinks are buzzing, and I'm so, so lucky to have reunited with her. Let's enjoy that."

"I'd like nothing more, darling, but I won't be able to relax until I know you won't bring it up again."

"I won't bring it up."

"Ever."

Her command hangs in the air. I open my mouth, but no words come out. I can't agree to that.

She scoffs at my hesitation. "What's so bloody important about this that you won't simply drop it?"

There's no more putting it off. I can be a doormat or I can stand up to her, but I have to choose.

"Can I open my eyes?"

"I have not given you permission."

"Can we talk? Could you sit next to me?"

"I thought we were having a lovely conversation just a moment ago." She releases me. I hear fabric shifting as she stands to her full height. "I am not fond of this new one."

"It's important."

"So was that. Far more than you could ever understand."

"I'm sorry. I just—"

"Forget it — you've spoiled my whole mood. I'm going to bed." She sighs. "Join me, or don't join me, or you can even leave, if you like."

I hear the pounding of Grace's footsteps as she storms away. The urge to open my eyes and chase after is so strong I almost do it, but something stops me.

I keep my eyes closed and, slowly, carefully, rise to my feet.

"Grace."

She doesn't respond. I creep after her, trying my best to remember the layout of her apartment.

"Grace, I want to keep this going."

"I want that too, if you're willing to stop with those questions."

I speed up. "Well—"

CLANG!

The very front of my shin, least protected by muscle, slams against the metal edge of her coffee table. I grab at it, still fighting down the instinct to open my eyes, and stagger sideways like a hunchback. Placing all my faith in my memory of the room's layout, I hold out my hand as I lurch and hope that I don't crash into the kitchenette. I'm fortunate; my hand meets the wall, and I use it as a guide to follow her.

When I strain my ears, though, I don't hear anything. She must have stopped and glanced behind her to see what the racket was.

"Grace?"

"You're still keeping your eyes closed?"

"You haven't given me permission."

She scoffs, but I hear a hint of fondness. Then there's a slight shuffling sound. She has likely turned to face me.

"No man I've dated before has behaved so... confusingly."

I don't respond. I'm mostly thinking about how much my leg still hurts.

"You have such an eagerness to please. You're such a loyal, adorable thing." She's approaching me. "And yet you're so stubborn. And about the strangest things."

"This growing thing isn't normal."

I hear Grace, just a few steps away, take a shaky, controlled breath, a deliberate attempt to calm herself. "I've grown about an inch in a year. It's... it's unusual, yes, but—"

My frustration boils over. "You're like six and a half feet tall! You've been growing all night!"

Before I even have time to regret my outburst, a stabbing pain shoots into my shoulders. Grace is gripping me, panting, trembling. Her voice is breathless, its strained calm failing to mask urgency.

"Nathan."

“What?”

“Open your eyes.”

I do as she asks, and regret it at once. All willpower and conviction disintegrates when, first, my eyes catch a glimmer of light. She is still wearing her crucifix, and it's the crucifix I blame for my collapse more than anything. Its austere, dignified purity grounds me, forces me to accept the reality of the glutted, overflowing, swollen masses of tit surrounding it. Her bra is lacy and light pink. It should be girly, as wholesome as her necklace, but it compresses her breasts into such jiggling, voluptuous forms. Flesh muffins from the top, from the sides, and threatens to subvert her underband. A drop of sweat trickles down her upper chest, curving with the slope of her breast, and slips into her cleavage, which even threatens to engulf the cross I've been staring at.

Grace spins me, slams me against the wall. It's all background noise. Her heaving breasts are as big as if you poured an entire fish bowl into a water balloon. Her bra straps are dangerously taut.

And I know that she's going to grow. She's near hyperventilating. I want to apologize, backtrack, say something to calm her. But I can't. She has demolished me.

“Don't you think I have problems too? Don't you think I just want to escape sometimes?”

Her cleavage fills more and more of my view. I watch the flesh of her breasts quiver until, with a *twitch*, they burst forward, and come a few inches higher towards my eyes. Her fingers dig into my shoulders hard enough that I gasp in pain. She presses herself against me, subjecting me to the full pressure of her burgeoning assets.

“Just a little fun! All I want is a little fun! Some control, *for once!*”

Snap!

Her left bra strap flies apart from her shoulder. The bra cup on that side tries to slip off but is pressed too tightly against my chest. Her crucifix slides up, the necklace tightening around her expanding neck.

“Even still! Even still! I paid for drinks! Kept my manners! I would have treated you gently! GENTLY!”

On each utterance of “gently” she pulls me back from the wall and slams me against it. Two harsh thumps on the back of my skull. I hear her other strap snap but can't see it. Her bra finally escapes and hangs down, only held up by the underband

around her torso. Her breasts are inflating before my eyes, approaching the size of literal watermelons, and they've reached the level of my face. They press against my chin, then up against my mouth.

“And yet you pester me with these assertions that I'm growing! People don't GROW, Nathan! That's *ABSURD!*”

Half my face is engulfed. I can only breathe through my nose. Warm, thin air. Her scent is overpowering. It's not a good smell — something akin to cats and tequila — yet in this moment it makes me ache. I try to talk, but I'm muffled by her titflesh.

“Grace... I...”

“What?” Suddenly my back scrapes up the wall and I'm well above her, held up and pinned by her arms. “Don't *mumble* at me.”

Poof!

Her hairband snaps and flies off. Her ponytail explodes outward, turns into a wild mane of blonde tresses past the middle of her back, all the way down to her waist. She looks like a naked cavewoman but for that face — the face that, even in its rage, is that of my childhood friend. She's gorgeous. She's terrifying. She's perfect.

I hear a noise. It's a pathetic, high pitched whimper, full of neediness and submission.

I really hope that wasn't me.

Oh, but it was.

Grace stares at me. I stare at her. She's over seven feet tall.

Her eyes soften into wistful entrancement, her mouth parting just a little. The desire on her face is so acute that I find myself craning down my neck.

She lifts her toes and kisses me. It's long, hungry, and gasping. When she pulls away, a groan, without my will or consent, escapes from my throat.

“You are not going to utter another word about this.” She looks up at me. “I need you to promise that.”

I can't look away from her eyes. There isn't the slightest twitch to them. It is as if nothing exists except for those murky, pale irises. My friend did not have those eyes.

My shoulders slump, my chin drooping to my sternum. “I'm sorry,” I say. “I won't bring this up again. Ever.”

“There is nothing unusual happening.”

“No, there’s not.” I have to swallow. “You’re the same as always. The same height, everything. I was just...” I shake my head. “...trying to get under your skin, I guess.”

As the seconds stretch on, Grace’s breathing slowly, slowly, gets under control. Finally, after one last exhale, she puts her thumb under my chin and raises my gaze. I open my eyes and see her small smile.

She clicks her tongue. “Troublemaker. You’re even worse than my kitten.”

She stretches her neck and kisses me again. When I close my eyes, I can imagine that we’re having a sweet moment. I can imagine that we’re kissing after I’ve gotten back from a two-week trip, or that she’s popping up her foot like a lady in an old movie. A minute or two passes like this. The force pressing me against the wall lessens, and as I slide down I wrap my arms around her shoulders, my legs around her waist, until I’m clinging to her. She’s strong enough to hold me, and it’s frenzied. My kisses grow more desperate. My hunger fuels hers and we begin gasping, panting. At first her palms are rubbing my back, but then she begins to claw into me, and as we devour each other there sprout lines of burning pain.

God help me, it’s good.

My limbs grow weary and I dismount. I reach my arms straight out to embrace her and they’re wrapped around the middle of her back, level with the thinnest part of her waist. I only have to move my hands down slightly to feel the beginnings of her lumbar, the curves which lead to an ass too big for most desk chairs. Her breasts are both bigger than my head, the nipples pink and large and erect. She thrusts me into her cleavage, saws her palm at the back of my neck. Her caresses are rabid and hurried, a manic forgery of tenderness.

“I have desires, Nathan. I have great need of you.”

“Yes.” I’m so stiff, my brain so drained of blood that I worry my legs will give out under me. “Yes... yes, whatever you want... anything at all...”

“Get yourself cozy. I will be right behind you.”

I kiss her chest a few times, to savor the taste. Then I stagger off towards her bedroom door. My bruised shin is protesting but I pay it no mind.

As I enter her bedroom, I also pay no mind to the boxes of vases and framed photographs in the corners, the empty easel, the brushes and small ceramic cherubs knocked to the floor and chewed on, or to the bed that hasn’t had its sheets washed in

months, or to the gaping holes and scratch marks that litter those sheets, or to another, mostly empty glass of forgotten water on the nightstand. I randomly recall the memory of Grace, as a girl, asking me if I wanted to swing dance together in music class, and there's an urge to cry, but I ignore that too. As soon as I reach the end of her bed, I spin around and sit upon it, kicking off my shoes, peeling off my socks.

Grace appears. She is so tall by this point that her eyes are obscured by the doorframe, and she has to hunch to fit through, but she doesn't seem to notice that. Her eyes are locked on me, as blue and unreachable as cataracts. Her breasts hang down heavily and wobble, bumping against her arms. She doesn't seem to notice this, either.

She reaches behind her, trying to unbuckle her bra, but the straps have already snapped open. Unable to acknowledge that, Grace grabs at the underband. She grimaces, still looking at me, and yanks hard. The underband tears open. The bra is tossed aside.

“Blasted thing...”

All that remains is the crucifix necklace, which barely fits her neck, and her panties. They're the same lacy light pink as her bra was, at this point too strained to provide much coverage to her backside. They're so bunched up around her crotch that I can see the wetness around her slit. The area glints mercilessly.

I take off my sports coat and unbutton my shirt, trying not to be frightened as I watch Grace rip apart her panties, too, and dispose of them. Then I remember something.

“Grace, I, uh, I didn't bring a condom.”

Naked now except for her necklace, Grace places her palm on my chest and shoves me, slamming my back against the mattress.

“It won't be needed. I forget so many errands, but these nights are too important. I've prepared myself.”

Grace crawls over me, and I have no choice but to scramble backward towards the pillows. As I do so, I unbutton my dress pants, hook my thumbs under the band of my briefs, and pull it all off.

“Did you know the night would end like this?”

“You were on your way towards this bedroom as soon as you agreed to meet me.”

I can crawl back no further. Grace stalks after me, massive feminine hands indenting the mattress. Her breath hisses and snarls around her teeth, and her eyes never blink. Her gaze is unnaturally steady. Dilating pupils create a yawning blackness.

The tip of her fingers graze my cock, the light touch enough to make me shutter and gasp.

“Good,” she says. “That’s very good.”

She crawls closer, and as she reaches me, her breasts drag against my chest. Her womanhood presses my shaft against my stomach, enveloping the side of it. I almost succumb at once from the feeling of warmth and wetness. She pulls up her torso, her head looming higher, higher, higher above me.

“How many times have you—”

She puts her finger to my lips.

“I’m tired of delaying. We’ve teased each other plenty enough, and all I need of you now is to stay quiet, and to behave.”

I watch, in awe, as her massive hips lift from the mattress. She grabs my member, pulls it straight up, and presses herself against my head. She shoves me into her an inch, raises her hips, shoves me in several more, pulls back, and thrusts down to the hilt. Random colors flash across my vision and now I stare up at the ceiling, listening to Grace’s bellowing.

“Nnnngh..... *NNNNNNNNNNNGHAAAHHH!*”

One of her hands plants onto my shoulder. She uses the leverage to impale herself again and again, fucking me. Her free hand grabs at her necklace, and in her ecstasy she yanks hard enough to snap open the chain. The crucifix falls and bounces beside my head, falling off the mattress.

The weight is crushing, but I feel too ashamed to try to stop it, and far, far too excited. Just hold on and enjoy the thrill. Let her fuck me. Pleasure and shock overwhelm all else.

Grace’s hair jostles about as she keeps thrusting. But of course that pales to the bouncing of her chest. I’m mesmerized by how they move. I trace the imaginary lines of how her nipples move, looping and twisting like a butterfly. Hardly thinking about it, I reach and grab at one.

Grace seizes my forearm and pins it onto the mattress.

“I said *behave*.”

That almost makes me lose control on its own. And yet I feel power. At the beginning of the night, she wouldn't even deign to answer my questions unless I haggled her. Now she's a force of nature, howling, frenzied, and I'm allowed to see all of it. In this moment, she needs me.

Grace releases me and begins fondling her own breasts with both hands, pinching and gripping herself, to the point where I wonder if she's in pain. This steals some leverage from her thrusts, allowing me to last longer, but I know I can't hold forever. I'll be lucky to last another minute, even.

“Grace... Grace, I'm gonna...”

She glances down at me in a daze, as if she's forgotten I'm here. She bends down, lying fully upon me, her back bent just enough to keep me inside her. Her face presses against mine.

“Keep your eyes open. Fight to control your face. I want to see the struggle.”

Her forehead still against mine, her eyes all I can see, she thrusts rapidly and forcefully. The wet slapping sounds cry out as if in warning. I feel her breasts press against me with every lurch. My eyes keep trying to close but I keep them open, keep them on Grace's. Nothing but blue, blue, blue.

When the moment comes, I turn my head by reflex, but Grace clutches my jaw and makes me look at her.

“Cry my name.”

“G-Grace! GRACE!”

The release is almost painful. It's so hot and explosive that my convulsions feel in danger of dislocating something. My eyes roll up, at this point impossible to control, and I groan in agony.

“GRACE.” My lips work on their own. “GRACE. GRACE. GRACE.” I realize I'm sobbing.

A violent pain flares from my shoulder. Grace is biting me. She trembles and roars through teeth closed around my flesh. Her whole body is shaking, and I worry that she's growing again, but she's only reached a climax of her own. Something tells me it's no coincidence that it happened along with my wails.

I fade in and out of consciousness, hear that I'm still muttering her name whenever I come to. I sound baffled and stunned. At one point I wake to see her grinding herself against my bent knee. In my fugue, her eyes seem shallow and reflective like a wolf's. She's working with the same frenzy as before, pushing herself to another climax, but with a glazed, near-frightened expression. Her thrusts are compulsive and desperate.

"This never happened."

I fade out again. Then, some time later, I open my eyes and her full weight is upon me. She's covered in sweat, panting. I run my fingers through her hair. At first it's a comforting gesture, as if I'm some kind of equal, but eventually I give up on the pretense and simply cling to her. Grace is asleep, her arms wrapped around me in a death grip.

Not long after, I fall asleep too. Her weight is a comfort of sorts, and perhaps a few hours pass like this, but then I'm woken by my bladder. I've had many drinks tonight. After much effort, I squeeze myself out from under her and take care of my business.

Her bathroom is tiny, and as messy as the rest of her apartment. The sink is stained with toothpaste, and the bathtub is simply gross. I become conscious of how bad I smell, how bad this whole place smells. I look myself in the mirror as I wash my hands, and what I see is sickly and used up.

Look at you. Look how scared you look. All covered in hickeys...

I glance at my shoulder.

And bite marks...

The bathroom is across the hall from her bedroom, and when I open the door I see Grace, bathed in the bathroom light. She's just as stunning, physically, as she was before. Her ass, in particular, practically demands to be stared at. It's so large that it obscures my view of her all the way until her shoulders. Her legs and feet dangle off the mattress and touch the floor. I want to feel something as I look at her. I want to feel tenderness, or lust, but she just looks so inelegant, lying there.

I walk up to her, beside the bed, and crouch so I can touch her hair. I tell myself how beautiful she is, and then imagine how great it will be to wake up with her tomorrow. She won't be scary anymore, in the sunlight. She'll have forgotten what

happened and I'll be able to forget too. She'll tease me, perhaps tap my nose. She'll look so perfect, with her hair glowing. We'll set breakfast out for her cat and Grace will beam as we watch him eat.

But then she'll have to put on clothes, and she'll find that nothing fits. She'll say that they shrunk in the wash, or something, and then she'll look at me and wait for me to confirm it. Then I'll have to make the same choice again.

Tomorrow you'll make the right choice. You'll get her to see the truth.

I look at her face. It's so peaceful now, but when I imagine it looking down at me with that cold, dead, shark-like gaze, when I imagine her commanding me not to pester her with my lies, I know the truth. I'll do the same thing tomorrow morning as I did tonight. I'm terrified of making her grow any more.

Then what's left? To keep lying? To deny the reality of my own senses, again and again, to myself and to others, just to avoid conflict? At some point the bubble will burst. Do I want to be the person who colluded to let it grow as large as it did beforehand? Would confronting Grace with Maisie by my side as another concerned friend be enough? Would we need a third person to break through? How many would be enough? Does it even matter how many people come together if Grace just keeps growing and growing?

You were on your way towards this bedroom as soon as you agreed to meet me.

This never happened.

The truth annihilates me: this was just a one-night stand. Her teasing was only to make me compliant and ready for her. Now that Grace has gotten what she wants, what's left? A sweaty man and a sweaty woman in a dirty apartment that smells like cat shit. She's spent the whole night forgetting things, and tomorrow morning she'll forget about this, too. She won't even want to see me.

I find my underwear, my pants, my shirt, my sports coat. I slip them on, one by one, there beside Grace as she lies asleep on her unkempt bed. Maybe if she woke right now and asked me to stop, I would, but she doesn't. I turn off the bathroom light and creep through the living room, where the lights are still on. I already feel the aches of a bruised pelvis. The shame is like a physical weight atop my shoulders, and there are tears burning in my eyes.

You little crybaby. This is why Grace was your only friend in the first place.

I'm stopped at the door by the sound of purring. I look down and can make out Hamlet staring at me. After gathering myself and wiping the tears, I crouch, rub his head.

"How many men like me have come through here?"

He doesn't answer.

I stand back up and sigh.

"I hope you take care of her."

I immediately hate myself for saying it. Why am I acting magnanimous? I'm ditching her in the middle of the night.

"Take better care of her than I have, anyway."

Beside her door, at eye level, there's a Post-it note. On it is a strangely well-done illustration of a cat with stripes like Hamlet's, touching a paw to its head and sticking its tongue out. Above the drawing, written in whimsical cursive: "Did you take your pills? Remember your wallet, phone, and keys!"

After patting my pockets to make sure my stuff is there, I exit the apartment, the door unbearably loud as it clacks shut behind me. Then, in the hallway, it's deathly quiet. I stare at the door ahead of me and wonder about the normal, uncomplicated life that exists beyond it.

I squeeze my eyes shut. It's late. I'm drunk, going on hungover, and need to call a ride. I just want to go home.

Chapter Six

It's hard to remember, exactly, but I think Nathan and I had a bit of a row last night.

I wake at about four o'clock in the morning. I don't have the energy to get up, or even move my legs, but I can't fall back asleep, either. Hours and hours pass. Eventually it's nine o'clock and the sun is well into the sky. For the last few hours, Hamlet has periodically shown up beside my bed and yowled at me. It's well past time to feed him, the poor thing, but I still cannot find it within myself to move. I am so very tired. Now and then I try throwing the blanket off myself. Each time I do, however, I fail to seize the momentum and end up under the covers again. It's terrible to make myself cozy when my cat needs me, but there I am, making myself cozy anyway.

Hamlet hops onto bed. I try petting him, but he bites my hand. He always bites me.

It makes me conscious of my nakedness to have him so close. I know he's a kitten and doesn't pay any mind to such things, but I still find it embarrassing. I grab my pillows and cover my head with them so neither Hamlet nor the sunlight will bother me, rolling onto my front as I do. I'm met with strong discomfort. While naturally it's never pleasant to lie on your own bosom, I feel far more squashed than I expected to. And it's painful. My breasts feel sore and tender — a feeling I've had intermittently for the past year. Does my soreness mean I'm still having a growth spurt? If so, I'm a tad concerned. To grow a whole inch after high school was bizarre enough. Hopefully, if I am growing, it's not something ludicrous like that again. Five-ten is plenty tall.

I think about Nathan. He wouldn't stop nosing about my height yesterday.

Actually, where is Nathan?

I try to remember but am interrupted. Hamlet snakes his head through the gaps in my pillow coverage and bites my face. I give him a small shove to get him away, and he flies off the bed with far more force than I expected him to. The thump he makes on the carpet concerns me.

I sit up. "Sorry! I'm sorry! Are you okay, darling?"

He's pacing in circles with a grumpy expression, his back arched. Everyone always gets mad at me.

I should get out of bed and pet him so he knows I didn't mean anything bad. And I should feed him. I should maybe check if Nathan's in the kitchen, too. Instead, I fall back onto the mattress and cover myself in blankets again. I don't know what's wrong with me. It's so hard to move when all my muscles feel so stiff and sore. There's an ache in my belly, and I wonder if I'm having an early period. Then I remember that I probably had sex last night.

More likely than not, Nathan's left. He was cross with me, and I was cross with him. He wouldn't stop talking about the growth spurt I had, which was very impolite.

I get chilly when the air vent turns on. I pull up my blanket to cover the gooseprickles that have broken out across my upper chest, but when I do that it only serves to expose my legs. My blanket must be bunched up underneath me, too, because even my rump is out in the open. What's also awkward is that my feet are touching the floor, which must mean I'm positioned far down the mattress.

Because of the chill — and because of Hamlet biting my ankles — I curl into a ball and try to warm myself. Even still, the blanket barely covers me. This isn't fair. I just want to be warm, and to sleep.

Hamlet leaps onto the mattress again. The audacity of this strikes me as insufferable, and so I shove him again, harder. He launches off, stumbles as he hits the floor, and sprints away to the living room.

I'm breathing more heavily than I should, and my heart's beating so hard that it hurts. I close my eyes, steady my breaths, and get some distance from everything. Something I've learned is that anger isn't so bad if you imagine it being on the other side of an ocean, or happening to someone else. Not that I'm even angry in the first place. I love my cat. Why would I get angry at him? He's an adorable little scoundrel! Who could be mad at such a sweetheart? He doesn't bother me at all, really. We get along blissfully.

That said, I want him to leave me alone. This finally gives me the motivation to get out of bed so I can shut the door. As soon as I rise, however, I'm struck by vertigo. The bedroom looks all wrong.

I hate the headrush from when I get out of bed in the morning. There are days where I have the gumption to lean against a wall and wait for the dizziness to pass, but

today, in my weakness, as soon as I've gotten the door closed, I collapse back into bed and drag the blankets over myself. I curl into a ball and cover my head in pillows, ignoring the chill of cold air sneaking under my sheets.

Hamlet starts yowling again and scratching at the door. I imagine that there's a man down in the street, and he's worrying that Hamlet will damage the paint. Then I imagine him in my room. I imagine that he's the one screaming at my cat to shut up, the one trying to scare him into a few minutes of silence.

When I do find the strength to get out of bed, two more hours have passed. It's eleven o'clock. I've been awake for seven hours.

You silly girl. One of these weeks, you must get up early enough to attend service. It has been far too long.

It has. My psychiatrist encouraged me to get my act together by bringing up church — even if I'm taking things step by step, wouldn't it be motivating to try attending again? I agreed with her, since it's easiest to just agree with whatever she says, but I haven't followed through. It may have something to do with how I keep missing my appointments with her. It's not that I decide to skip them, or anything. I just keep forgetting. She advised me to set alarms to go off an hour before we were to meet, but I always forget to set the alarms, too. Admittedly, I never feel too much regret about missing my appointments. I don't think she particularly cares about me, my psychiatrist.

But I'm good at taking my medication, at least. I bend down to my nightstand and open today's compartment on my monthly pill box. Within is a contraceptive, and the pill that Tajima prescribed me for the morbid thoughts I used to have. It's easy to remember her pills because I take them with my birth control, and the birth control is important to me. My date nights are something special I can look forward to when I feel sad.

The pills feel smaller and more finicky than I'm used to and, butterfingers that I am, I end up dropping them. It's strangely disorienting, once again like vertigo, when I bend to pick them up. It feels like my head is traveling through more space than it should. Perhaps this is due to the drinks I had last night. Normally alcohol doesn't bother me too much the next morning, even with the pills I take, but stuff like this is unpredictable, I suppose.

I reach for the glass of water I had on my nightstand, but Hamlet seems to have knocked it over while I was asleep. You never realize how many things you could depend on until you get a cat, and they spoil them. I don't want to attend to that right now. I build saliva in my mouth to swallow the pills the old-fashioned way and search my room for something to wear. I take the contraceptive. Shortly after, I find my underwear on the floor. I pick it up and find that it's been ripped open. Was that Hamlet, too? I didn't think he could do that.

I take my other pills and then try on one pair of undergarments after another, but not one of them fits comfortably. Have I gained weight? I was rather sporty in high school, but since then I've found it more and more difficult to exercise. My diet has been nothing to brag about, either. I give up on putting anything on. For now, at least. I don't love it when Hamlet looks at me naked, but I can endure it.

He's waiting for me when I open my bedroom door, although I struggle to see him past my bosom. I bend over to pick him up as I pass through the doorframe. Of course, he sprints away again. The back of my head collides with something when I straighten.

You silly girl. Don't walk with such a bounce to your step.

I crack open a can of wet cat food while Hamlet yells at me and set it on the floor where he can feast himself. I remember too late that I was only supposed to give him half a can, but I suppose he's earned a full meal after having to wait so long. I watch him eat for a while. I'm distracted for a moment, thinking about nothing in particular, and then he's gone with over half the food missing.

Glancing around, I faintly note that Nathan's not here either. Perhaps he had been here when I first woke up but left while I was struggling to get out of bed.

Last night was fun. It followed the nice, predictable pattern of all my dates. First, I make sure I'm with the right sort of fellow. I ask them a lot of questions and see if they get shy about it. How do they handle long silences? Sustained eye contact? If I allow myself to zone out, do they notice? If I ramble about something dry, do they force themselves to listen? Do they rush to reassure me if I put myself down? Do they respond well to being called cute, sweet, adorable?

If they're too self-assured, I end the date right away. Those sorts of men are no fun. What I'm looking for is the type of man who will beam and blush when I coo nice things at him, but who is still worried about talking too much, or being scrutinized.

And then there are the ones who *squirm*.

Heat rushes through me just thinking about it. As my hand floats to my breast, I remember how Nathan sucked in that convulsive gasp, how he shuffled in his seat like he had a bad itch. The sweat that traced down his temple. How earnestly he struggled to seem put together. Oh, yes. Those are the best boys of all.

Once I've ensured I'm with the right sort of person, I get to have my fun. All I have to do is relax into a rise and fall. Tease them gently, but maintain decorum. Tease them harder. Say something very kind. Scold them. Flirt. Up and down, up and down. It's a natural flow, like the tides, like sleep. Keep them guessing until they don't bother to guess anymore, until all they want is to fall. I let go of myself more and more, until the hunger is so bad that I'm salivating. I'm bold. I'm direct. I say things that I would never say, and feel things that I would never feel, but it's okay, because I am no longer myself. All these unseemly things are being done and felt by a different person, and I'm lucky enough to sit in the passenger seat while they cruise. I can simply watch, fading into a nice sleep, as they work that sweet darling precious boy up and down, up and down, and then...

Well, if you want the truth, I can never remember what happens once they agree to come home with me.

I catch myself drifting a hand between my legs, and realize that I've been absently teasing my nipple. I pull back my hand, chastising myself. Don't do it standing in your own living room, you silly girl.

I decide to shower since I probably smell terrible. My bed is an absolute sty, and if Nathan and I spent the night then it's soaked with our sweat, too, and I've been lying in it for hours. I should also wash my sheets, but I already know I don't have the energy for it. I'll just shower, for now, and maybe I'll feel better.

As the water heats up, I let my fingers dance around my particulars. It's not like me to be so frisky the morning after a date, but I'm not thinking about that. I'm not even in the bathroom. I'm in last night, on my bed with Nathan. I imagine him underneath me, utterly overwhelmed. I would never actually pin him down and be so forceful, of

course, but it's just a fantasy. Nothing wrong with that. I keep thinking about it as I enter the shower. Whenever I'm concerned about how much soap I have to use, or how the shower feels cramped, or how my breasts are making it so difficult to scrub my legs today, I just think about the way Nathan squirmed in his chair. Long after I'm clean, I'm sitting in the bathtub, pinching and kneading myself. I bring myself to climax and remain sitting until the water gets cold. After I turn off the faucet, I continue sitting. About half an hour passes where I'm unable to get out of the tub. It's probably past noon.

I'm beginning to regret enjoying myself, the way I have. I'm so exhausted again that I can hardly move.

Am I going to get anything done today? Anything at all? There's so much that needs to be done. My apartment needs cleaning — at least a little bit — the litter box needs scooping, I have several assignments overdue, and—

My eyes open.

Groceries. I have to buy groceries.

I'm nearly out of food, and I know what a strain it will be to go shopping on a weekday, when I'm dealing with classes. It needs to be today.

The silly girl in the bathtub puts her face into her hands and whimpers. She's a weak, pathetic little thing.

Chapter Seven

My rump is still wet from the tub. I attempt to tie a towel around my waist, creating a skirt of sorts, but today it doesn't fit around me. It makes me feel soft back there. Softer and wider than I should.

What am I supposed to wear? None of my underwear fits, so a skirt is out of the question. But I doubt my leggings and shorts will fit well, either. I ponder this while I dry off and recall that I have a pair of basketball shorts that were always a bit loose. If anything is going to fit me today, those will. I'm excited to wear something that is merely draped on me, that doesn't make me feel pinched.

I end up disappointed, on that account. I used to worry about these shorts sliding off while I ran warm-up laps, but once I'm in my bedroom, as soon as I put on the first leg, I feel the fabric embrace my thigh more snugly than I'd like. I consider giving up. If even the legs are a tight fit, what hope do I have of getting this past my hips? But there are no other options today, so I force the other leg into the other hole and prepare myself for some struggle.

I do, indeed, struggle.

It's even worse than I expect. I have only pulled the waistband halfway up my backside when it gets blocked by what is, inexplicably, myself. Peering over my shoulder, I grey at the lurid overflow, my own pale skin obscuring the black fabric, each tug causing a ripple of the flesh. I can't help but avert my gaze. What would Mother think?

"Alright now... easy does it..."

I squeeze my eyes shut, and then I tug, and tug, and bounce on my toes, and wiggle my hips like some obscene dance. With each hop-and-tug I do, I feel myself bouncing behind me, and, worse, I hear myself — this flat, smacking sound. I try to brace my lower back against the edge of the mattress, but I end up meeting it with the back of my thighs. I have to scoot myself forward until I'm positioned for proper leverage. More tugs. More indecent grunting that I can't restrain. My chest is unsupported and bouncing as badly as my rear, and it hurts. This is all Nathan's fault. He's made me self-conscious with all those questions about my height, and now every

slight difficulty to fit something onto me seems far more significant than it really is. I stop several times to remind myself that I am not, in fact, very frustrated, and that I am not, in fact, so upset that I want to cry.

I finally squash myself in, albeit tightly. That's the power of positive thinking. I'm going to keep my chin up, stay optimistic, and the rest of the day will be over before I know it.

I remind myself of that again and again, and it keeps me going as I put on the rest of my outfit. I don't brood over how my bra from last night is broken apart on the floor, or how ten others are uncomfortably tight. At last I find a black sports bra with a nice snug underband. It's one of my larger ones, but it doesn't quite fit, either. I scrutinize myself in my full-length mirror — which must have slipped down a little, as I end up having to bend over — and take note of the spillage. There is an undeniable mushroom-cap shape to the exposed portion of my breasts, but my pink buds are covered, and I do feel supported. It hurts, of course, but that's nothing to be bothered about. Pain doesn't have to bother you if you don't want it to.

I hear Hamlet start on his breakfast again in the living room, and it makes me smile. Things are going okay.

Since it's a sunny day out, I'd like to wear something that shows some skin. I want to feel the sunlight all over me. The first thing I try is a stretchy knit crop-top with a zipper on its front for décolletage. I can hardly fit my head through that one, but I don't let it get to me. I eventually decide on a frilly, V-necked, short sleeved black shirt. It shows as much cleavage as if I were only wearing the bra, and it fails to cover any of my stomach, but it fits, more or less.

I bend down once more in front of the mirror. There's certainly a lot to look at, up there. Mother wouldn't approve of this. Not at all.

But imagine if you'd been wearing this last night...

I rise to my full height and pose a little. With my head disappearing off the top of the frame, I can imagine I'm one of those lively out-on-the-town girls. I don't seem to have gained weight, which surprises me. My stomach's still flat, and my legs are still toned. If anything, I look better than I can remember.

Then why doesn't anything fit?

It's just one of those things.

My mind drifts. If I were wearing this, I wouldn't have had to even try last night, would I? Nathan would barely be able to string a sentence together, the poor boy.

The same heat from earlier rushes through me. It's strange. Usually, I'm hardly aware that I have a body, and feel more like a ghost that floats from room to room. But today, there are all these aches and desires. It's not unpleasant, but I'm not sure I like it, either. It makes me feel weird. Despite that, my imagination keeps going. I think about how funny it would be if Nathan were still here — making pancakes, perhaps — and I came out in this get-up. I bet if I acted oblivious he'd never call me out on it. He'd let me plop myself onto the counter, cross my legs, and chat with him as if we were both still children, with not an impure thought between us. And then, as we ate, I'd bump my knee against him. See how long it takes for him to call me out on it. Ask why it's such a big deal to brush against him now and then, if he does.

Just before I can imagine how it would go when Nathan's nerves begin to fray, I get a call. It takes a while to find my phone in my bag.

Oh. It's my mother.

I ignore it, and am surprised by how disappointed I feel. I was hoping for Nathan to be calling, which is silly. I never get back in touch with people once I date them. That ruins the whole point. I go on these dates so I can forget about being boring, lazy, absentminded Grace for a while. If I went on more dates, people would want to know more about me, and I'm just not very proud of my life. Also, on a second date, I'd have to remember what we talked about during the first one, and I don't like to think about these nights after I have them.

It's especially silly to want to reunite with *Nathan*, of all the boys I've done this with. Yes, he was my friend, and I thought he was very sweet and sensitive, but my evening with him was far too turbulent for my taste. He wanted to pick a fight with me all night, and for no good reason. He admitted himself that there was nothing wrong. He did.

An image flashes through my mind of Nathan pinned against a wall, saying there's nothing wrong, and it makes me pause. Is that from last night?

A chill goes through me. I should be happy that I can remember something that happened at my apartment, for once, just like I should be happy that my body can feel so much pleasure today. But once again I just feel anxious. Nothing about this is right. I'm

usually so refreshed after my dates, and I can move on, but this morning I feel worse than I did before. It's like a part of me is stuck in last night.

Feeling claustrophobic, I suck in a deep breath. That does it: now I know, for a fact, that I do not want to see Nathan again. He bothers me. I don't know why, but he does, and it's best to leave him out of my life. I have enough problems.

I get to work tying my hair into a big messy bun, which proves as difficult as everything else has this morning, because even though it hasn't been long since I got my last hair cut, it's dangling down to my waist. When did that happen? Has it been longer than I thought? How am I only now noticing this?

You're sounding like Nathan.

We're not thinking about him.

I put on some sandals. They hardly fit, but so long as I keep my weight on the front of my feet, I should be fine. It's hard to find my necklace, though. I look all over the place for it but can't find it anywhere. It's not on my nightstand, and it's not on my bedroom floor, either. My crucifix is one of the few things I never lose, because I never take it off.

I only find it once I've given up and gone into the living room. It's there on the floor, beside Hamlet.

I giggle. "Ah! There we are. Did Mummy's sweet prince help her find her necklace? Hm?"

Hamlet sprints away and hides behind the TV stand again. I sigh and pick up the crucifix.

"I'm not going to rip your head off, you know..."

My spirits drop further when I see that my necklace has somehow snapped open. I won't be able to wear it until I get it fixed, or until I get a new one. I can't imagine having the energy for that, right now. Why is everything such a chore?

Suddenly my good mood is gone. Going outside feels unbearable, and so I spend twenty minutes sitting on my sofa chair. I stare at the TV but never turn it on. My mother calls again from the bedroom but I don't even get up to ignore it; I just let the ringing die out on its own. She calls again, and I ignore it again. I keep sitting there, letting the day slip away from me, feeling more and more tired, yet I know I'd be unable to nap if I tried to. My mother calls once more

horrid bitch

and I ignore it again. Hamlet comes out of his hiding spot and creeps around the perimeter of my apartment, nearing me bit by bit. I click my tongue so he'll come over and sit on my lap. Finally, warily, he approaches me.

"Good morning, darling," I say, despite it being well past noon. I try scooting over for him, but it seems I'm filling the seat. "Would you like on Mummy's lap?"

He's in his pounce position, trembling all over, staring at my calf. I realize he's about to bite me again.

"Can't we just have a nice moment? Let me show you."

I bend down, wrap my hands under his belly, and pick him up. He's writhing like a snake.

"I'm just trying to pet you, dear. I'm trying to pet you."

He flails his arm and scratches me deeply across the cheek. I drop him reflexively and he scampers behind the TV stand again. I put my fingers to my cheek. They come back with blood stains.

Did you come out here just to attack me!?

I rise to my feet, fighting another strong bout of vertigo, and make way to the kitchen where I can wash the wound.

I have no idea what Hamlet wants from me. I don't know much about cats in general, to be honest, and it's exhausting to sift through the conflicting advice online. I didn't even want a cat, really. I off-handedly mentioned to my parents while visiting them that a small companion would be nice while I'm alone in my apartment, and three weeks later there they were at my door with an orange kitten. I accepted it out of politeness and, only a few hours later, was calling Mother in the middle of the night, the kitten scratching at my door, telling her that I couldn't handle it. She told me that I would get used to him and that he would calm down. Things haven't changed much since then, except now when I call her she says that it's too late: he's formed a bond with me, and it'd be cruel to abandon him. I suppose she's right about that, but I think it's also cruel for Hamlet to have to tolerate me as his owner. There's just no winning. But I can be better. I can be patient and kind. I'll let him scratch me all he wants, and I'll remind myself what a special angel he is, and I'll never get angry at him. It's all about attitude.

I do a basic wash and return to the living room with a damp paper towel against my cheek. After I squeeze into the sofa chair

why is everything so small today?

I try to remember everything that I need to get at the store. I think Nathan and I drank most of the wine, so I should definitely buy more of that. A few glasses would do me well tonight, I think. Besides that, I'd need some bread and butter, some tea bags, some...

some...

My eyes flutter, and I realize I was lost in thought again. When I try to remember the few items I've come up with, I simply can't.

You silly girl. You didn't even grab your phone. Tajima told you to write stuff down so you don't forget. You were supposed to write down your appointments with her, too. Why do you keep forgetting everything?

I nod to myself in the empty, dirty apartment. Yes, I'll get to that right away. But I don't. I feel so disoriented, so awkward and unmaneuverable. Another hour passes of me sitting in my chair, listening to my phone ring in the other room and not having the will to answer it. Hamlet reappears and plays with one of his toys. I watch him, but it feels like I'm watching a movie of him playing, not the actual thing. A car in my building's parking lot goes off and starts blaring its horn, over and over. I keep expecting it to stop, but it doesn't. I try to get myself excited for the grocery trip by reminding myself of how much I love the South Plaza, which I go through on my way to the store. It's my favorite part of the city. Interlocking bricks form the shopping center's sidewalks, red and beige just like all the buildings. The whole area has a united architectural style harkening back to Renaissance Spain, especially the city of Seville, and it's made all the more exotic by the abundance of statues and fountains. The Plaza is of great solace to me. When I was first applying to university, I had my heart set on submitting a request for a foreign exchange program to practice my painting, but my mother told me that she wanted me close to home, and that painters don't make money anyway, and I should at least pursue something that would put me on a track for academia, if I'm going to waste my time with art. So I stayed in the Kansas City area and declared for art history. Mum was right that I don't have the talent to be a painter, anyway — I haven't painted in years — so really this was all the right and responsible course of things. Sometimes, though,

despite my knowing better, I get sad anyway. Whenever I feel down about being stuck here, though, I remind myself of the South Plaza. What do I need Europe for? Spain is just a short walk away, if I pretend. Can anybody stop me from pretending to be somewhere, just because I'm not actually there? No. No, they can't.

By the time I muster the energy to go to my room, grab my phone, and collapse back into the living room, it's three o'clock. All I've accomplished is to put on clothes, feed my cat, and take a shower. I suppose that's not too bad.

I ignore five missed calls from my mother and a text from Maisie asking how the date was. I have no idea how to answer that question. Then I get to work on my shopping list. I keep losing focus and zoning out but it's not so bad; the phone remembers things even if I don't. When I think I've finished, the clock says it's three twenty-six. The car alarm is still going.

For a peculiar few minutes I'm afraid of standing up, although I cannot say why. I only find the courage when I resolve to close my eyes as I'm doing so. My head swims unpleasantly. I find myself disproportionately upset by this, so I focus on the hypnotic sound of the car horn. The distant blaring and rushing blood are the only things I can hear. I can't even hear myself speaking when I tell Hamlet I'll be out, and to take care.

I wander out the front door, but out of the corner of my eye I spot my little reminder. My Post-it Note has, once again, saved me from going all the way to the store just to realize I've forgotten my valuables. When I first drew him, the little cat on there was supposed to be Hamlet. Over time, though, I realized that it wasn't in Hamlet's nature to be helpful, so this cat must be a different one. I haven't decided on his name yet.

I gather my things and leave. A few seconds later, I realize that I can't remember if I locked my door, but I don't bother to check. I go outside and the car is still honking. It's not mine, fortunately.

I don't drive much as of late because I worry that I'll lose focus behind the wheel and cause a ruckus, so I decide to walk. I pace the sidewalk of a scorching and exposed boulevard, the sounds of construction occasionally interrupted by the there-and-gone zoom of passing cars. The people I walk by give me strange looks, which makes me a tad self-conscious about my outfit, but I smile and nod anyway. You never know if someone could use a friendly pep-up.

After ten minutes, I reach an intersection just outside the plaza.

“Wait!” The stoplight has an automated voice, giving me instructions. *“Wait!... Wait!... Wait!...”*

There’s a scrawny boy across the street — a freshman college student at the oldest — and I can’t stop looking at him. He’s holding a sign about how evil the people in Washington are. He keeps turning to face the passersby but they stare straight ahead, doing what they can to avoid being accosted. I will have to pass by him, too, to get where I need to go.

“Wait!... Wait!... Wait!...”

I keep staring at the boy. The longer I wait here, the more sad I feel, and the more I dread to get near him. I wish he weren’t there. Does he have nothing better to do today? Does he think he’s making an impact?

“Wait!... Wait!...”

I squeeze my eyes shut. That’s a mean thought. I shouldn’t think mean things about people. If anything, I’m the problem. I’m doing even less than he is about all that’s going on.

I cross the street when the little robot fellow tells me I can, and then I pass the boy, smiling thinly. He takes my courtesy as a sign that he can talk to me and I have to ignore him. I feel his hopeful gaze. Like a spider on the back of my neck.

Finally, I escape the intersection and enter the South Plaza itself. It’s just as beautiful as I remember, and it’s so bright out today that the red and beige streets seem like a dream. I pass a street performer playing his guitar, pedestrians having stopped their walks to watch him. I love things like that. He sees me smiling at him and he smiles back while playing, and it’s nice. But I don’t feel any happier. I can’t stop thinking about that protester and being sad. I imagine him waking up today, maybe saying goodbye to his parents, and going to that busy crosswalk with his sign. I imagine people ignoring him, all day long, and him trying not to care about it, or perhaps being too caught up in what he’s doing to notice, or perhaps feeling more righteous with every shunning. I wonder if he has a political reading about every movie he watches. I wonder if this is his whole personality, all he talks about and all he thinks about. I wonder if he’s aware that some people just want to buy groceries and get home and drink their wine and pray that

their cat will be asleep when they do. I wonder if he knows that he's spoiling people's walks and that people hate him. It's terrible to think so much about this, but I can't stop.

I try to think about all the lovely fountains I'm passing. This city has the second highest number of fountains in the world, behind Rome. I should be thinking about how lucky I am to live here instead of thinking about that child with the sign. But the spider's still there on my neck. I feel paranoid that he still wants to talk to me, and that he's following me. I can see him clearly in my mind: he's hobbling after me with a limp, and he's still carrying that sign, and he's desperate to make me read what's on it even though it'll just upset me. I almost glance behind me to make sure that he's not actually there, but I stop myself, because that's ridiculous. Still, I speed up my pace.

I keep stopping at all the little roads so the cars can pass by, and people keep staring at me. Sometimes, in the distance, I see them *pointing*. It's an effort to control my breathing. I feel sweaty, shaky, constricted. Eventually, I stop at this one courtyard. It's a good place to rest because there's this fountain of the god Pan that I've always liked. He's glaring down at these nymphs surrounding him, and I used to find that very funny — what's he have to be so cross about? Lately, though, I've found it less amusing. I think I get it.

Sitting on the low stone wall surrounding the courtyard, I look up at the second wonderful thing about this spot. Right there, in front of me, is the Giralda Tower. This accessory to Seville's glorious cathedral was completed over eight hundred years ago! Actually, it was built to replace an ancient mosque constructed in the ninth century. It is a striking, humbling marvel of art. This one is only half the size, of course, and attached to a Forever 21 shop and a Cheesecake Factory instead of a cathedral, and only christened in the late 1960s. But that's okay! If I squint my eyes and pretend I can't see or hear anything else, I can imagine that there's a different tint to the sky, the intangible difference of Spanish air, and that this is the real thing.

But then something terrible happens. At first I can hear the chatter of those eating around me and the bubbling of the fountain, but a low rumbling in the distance grows louder and louder, until I can't hear anything else. It's this gang of bikers that seem to be driving through the plaza every time I come here. They're always drowning you out when you're trying to have a conversation with a friend or enjoy the music of a street performer. I watch them as they go by, noting how a lot of them don't even have

helmets. Then I spot an old man across the street. He's wearing a stained tank top, a baseball cap, and sunglasses. He has a straggly white beard that hangs past his sternum. His whole body is tense and volatile, and in each hand he clutches a shopping bag. As I watch, he carefully crouches down and releases one of the bags. He rises back up, holds out his free hand like a gun, and slowly mimes shooting at the bikers as they pass. I see some of the bikers do the same to him. At first I think that perhaps they're friends, and this is some inside joke of theirs, but then the old man starts screaming.

“GET OFF THE ROOOOOAD!” His whole body's trembling, his face red and blotchy. “GET OFF THE ROAD YOU FUCKIN' QUEERS!” He screams more but it's blocked out by the sound of the bikes rushing past us. Even though they are clearly ignoring him, the man keeps standing there and shouting, transfixed by his rage.

I avert my gaze and look back to the tower, embarrassed to have witnessed any of that, grabbing at my necklace for comfort but finding there's nothing there. I squint my eyes again, hum a little song to myself to distract from the yelling, and try to imagine that I'm in Spain.

But I'm not in Spain. That's clear to me now.

Chapter Eight

I spend maybe twenty minutes sitting on that wall before I'm able to rise. And, when I do, even though the grocery store is only a few blocks away, I'm so tired upon standing that I only manage to cross one street before retreating into a cafe. I just can't stand to take another step outside, with a smile plastered on my face.

Only a few of the tables are occupied, and the general chatter is quiet enough that I can hear the cafe's music. Initially wanting to take a seat and collect myself, I decide against it and choose to wait in line when, upon me seeing the menu, my stomach grumbles; I haven't eaten in perhaps forty-eight hours. Hunger is one of those things that comes and goes for me.

Standing in line is difficult. Once again it feels as though everyone is giving me odd looks; the short fellows ahead of me are especially conspicuous, the way they keep turning to look over their shoulders. I do what I can to keep my breathing under control, to put the discomfort at a distance, but for some reason I'm stuck here in this cafe. Usually, my mind wanders off whether I want it to or not. Why is it that now, when I truly want to escape, I remain so grounded?

I order an unseemly number of this place's sandwiches and, because of how hard this day has been, a few of their cookies as well. The worker I give my orders to, like everyone else, stares at me like I'm some freak. Is it really so absurd for a woman to order a few extra sandwiches for herself? It's been a long while since I've eaten, and in any case I shouldn't be shopping for groceries on an empty stomach. You buy all sorts of silly things that way.

I seat myself in a corner. The chairs and tables in this place are ludicrously undersized. The chair, in particular, is so uncomfortably small that I want to grab a second one, but that would draw more attention to myself. I can't remember the last time I've been this anxious. It's hard to describe, exactly, but I feel like I'm "here" in a way that I'm normally not. The music's too loud, and the other patrons are glancing at me when they think I'm not looking, and this seat is creaking every time I shift my weight, and my knees are pressing against the table. I want to close my eyes and shut it all out, but whenever I do, all I can see in the blackness is that kid with his sign, people

pointing, that old red faced man screaming. It's not like me to brood like this, or to even be angry at all. I don't understand why everything's bothering me today.

Glancing around, I spot a man alone at a table on the other side of the cafe. He's about my age, with black hair, a soul patch, and a short sleeved black shirt showing bulky arms. Across from him is another young man on the phone. While waiting for his friend to finish, the first man drifts his gaze towards me, certainly not for the first time. He scans my body, meets my eyes, and smiles. I smile back and regret it immediately. Despite me looking away, hunching over, and focusing on my food as guardedly as possible, I hear his chair scrape against the floor.

Leave me alone, God damn you. God DAMN you.

I hear my own heart beating, just as I could this morning when Hamlet wouldn't let me sleep in. I take another bite of my sandwich and chew furtively and quickly, my fingers clenching, gouging into the food. I'm making a mess of it and staining myself. There's a blast of exhaust and deafening rumbles as those thrice-damned bikers drive past the shop again. Where are they even going? What in the hells are they even trying to do besides torment me?

My gaze is still locked on the table, but I see the man's shadow, hear him clear his throat.

"Excuse me. I'm Mike. I know it's a long shot — and I promise I don't usually do this — but... tomorrow's gonna be my first time having a Monday off in months, and I think you're so gorgeous, and..." he chuckles. "God, what am I doing? I've only just—"

"Shut the fuck up."

I don't know which of us is more shocked. After a long silence, the man finds his words.

"I... I am so sorry, I just... I didn't mean to..."

He's not even being rude. Say you're sorry.

I face him, to apologize, but I freeze when I realize that, although he's standing and I'm sitting, I can see the top of his head.

Don't be distracted. It's just one of those things. Please tell him how very sorry you are.

"All I wanted was to be left alone. Couldn't you see that?"

What are you doing?

“I... no, yes, I was just... I was so caught up rehearsing what I’d say that I didn’t—”
STRRRRTCH!

All at once my bra is biting into my flesh with such force that I gasp in pain and, instinctively, clasp an arm across my chest. There’s a sense of momentum, a lurch; my breasts have burst from the bottom of my sports bra.

“Are you okay?”

You’re fine. Say you’re fine.

I am fed up with telling people that I’m fine.

I need to leave. My knees bang against the table when I stand up. The man is far, far below me, so far down that it doesn’t make sense. He must only be three feet tall.

A part of me feels compassion. The poor fellow just wanted a date — and, from the sound of it, had to work up courage to ask me. Look how concerned he is whether I’m okay. In fact, he seems like just the sort of fellow I like: fidgety, smitten, straining to hold on to dignity. And yet I see him take a few steps back from me, and see his eyes widen with the beginnings of fear, and heaven save me but it’s such a *rush*. To see him cowering before my massive form

what are you on about ‘massive form’ you’re only five-ten he’s just very short that’s all

and to push back, to see someone realize that they have no power over me. I wish that Nathan were right. I wish I were growing. I wish I were taller than a skyscraper. I wish I could bring this world to heel. I wish I could terrorize this bloke with the soul patch and the old man and my mother and my psychiatrist and my hellspawn cat and that worthless protester, and if they don’t find that frightening enough then I’ll rip out that pathetic counterfeit Giralda from its foundations and hurl it at all those bikers and watch as the stone splatters them like *insects* and—

Suddenly feeling like I might vomit, I shove past the man and stumble towards the bathroom. Each step I take carries more distance than it should. My breasts are jostling against their confines, slipping looser and looser. Mercifully, the bathroom is vacant, a simple unisex room with a toilet, a sink, and a mirror.

Bump!

My head has hit the ceiling.

Absurd... that’s just absurd...

I spin around, lock the door, and stare at it for an agonizing length, waiting for the man to start knocking. But it doesn't happen. For once, I have peace.

Finally allowing myself to relax, I press my back against a corner and take in the absurd bathroom that the cafe owners found it quaint to install. Everything about it is unremarkable and standard issue, but... small. The mirror is so low that I'll have to bend down at the hip to get a good look at myself. I suppose the architects found it terribly funny to make people feel like giants while they're trying to use the loo.

I bend over, brush hair from my face, and am startled by what I see: the gaze of the girl staring back at me is wild and unrecognizable. My pupils are dilated, the whites of my eyes blazing. What's strange is that my face doesn't feel intense; if I didn't have a mirror I'd think that my expression was the same as always. I make myself smile, but my eyes don't change. How often have I been looking at people like this? Is this why Hamlet doesn't let me pet him? Is this why so many of my dates end up scared of me?

And where's my scar? Didn't Hamlet scratch me this morning?

Blonde hair falls into my face again, and I realize the bun I tied this morning is loose. Scoffing, I undo my work and am met by my second surprise. Somehow my hair has gotten so long that it travels past my hips, nearly as long as my knees.

Was it this long earlier...?

At first I want to tie it back up, but then I consider something.

Reaching back, I poke at my rump and note that, yes, my bum is sticking out the bottom of my shorts. Anyone who saw me from behind would suppose me to be wearing the type of shorts designed to show off, wouldn't they? Best keep the hair down, for cover.

That's one side of me covered. And the other?

When I look into the mirror, my cleavage is unchanged from this morning. Sliding my hands up to my chest, however, I realize that the undersides of my breasts are completely exposed. Heat rises in my cheeks; that short fellow from earlier was getting quite the view.

Taking off my shirt proves frustrating, as each time I attempt to pull it off my elbows bump into the ceiling. I'm in a bloody Hobbit hole.

When I finally get it off, though, I see that my breasts have almost escaped my bra, enough so that my nipples stick out past the bottom of the fabric. I struggle for a

long while to pull the garment back down but, inexplicably, it just won't fit. My purse is not big enough to carry my bra if I gave up on wearing it, and walking around with it in my hand is out of the question. After another long while of tugging at my clothes in this cramped room, I give up and just resolve to keep my arms crossed so that I won't have to be exposed from below.

Exhausted beyond words by this point, I sit on the undersized loo and press my face into my hands. I can feel anger simmering inside of me but I want nothing to do with it. Today anger seems to infuse everything I think and everything I see. The whole world, it feels, is made of anger. It doesn't make sense. For years I've managed to avoid feeling angry about anything that's happened to me — or, when I did feel angry, I could keep it so distanced that it might as well have been happening to someone else. In fact, I've avoided being angry for as long as I can remember.

But that's not quite right, dear. There was another time. When Nathan was your friend, when he was there for you, anger wasn't a problem at all.

My hands fall to my lap as soon as the thought occurs to me. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to think of any other point in my life where feeling angry didn't seem like something to be frightened about, but all that comes up are memories with Nathan. When Nathan and I were kids, he'd listen to me complain for ages, it seemed. It was okay because somehow rage was different with him. It wasn't distanced, or suppressed, or fought against, but it also wasn't given the power to take control of me. It was shared. The feeling of anger was small compared to the feeling of having a friend who listened.

And when I moved away and lost him, I lost that freedom as well. All I could do was forget that I had ever known him.

I want to talk to him. Right now he is the one person who I want to talk to.

My phone is as unwieldy as everything else has been today, but at this point that's hardly worth noting. My clumsy fingers stumble around with the icons until I've finally opened my contact list. I select Nathan's number, hesitate, and press call.

The wait is unbearably long. Each pause between rings gives me hope and then crushes it. I can feel myself breathing shallowly through my mouth. I'm tensed and tight. He was so concerned about me last night; surely he'll pick up. Smiling, I suddenly recall him stumbling after me with his eyes closed, clanging his leg against my table. As cross as I was, I couldn't help but find it so adorable that, even then, he was following

my instructions. Yes, he's good. He's a sweet boy, under all his petulance. He'll pick up for me.

But he doesn't. The ringing cuts out, and the default recorded voice is telling me to leave a message. I hang up and let out a gasping sound dangerously similar to a sob.

Breathe, you silly girl. You're going to pass out if you keep gasping like this.

I was with Nathan the first time it felt safe to tell someone that I hated my parents. I was afraid talking about that would make me angry, but he hugged me and kept asking what he could do to make me feel better, and I felt so supported. Thinking about that hurts so bad. I will never, ever be able to feel that way again, and that brings a rage which I could never dare to feel.

My phone rings.

I answer at once. "Yes! Yes, hello! I'm so—"

"About *time* you answered. What could you have possibly been mucking about with all day to miss *six* calls?"

Numbness, all at once. Absolutely nothing.

"Oh. Good afternoon."

"You've missed service again. Your daddy and I had told our friends to expect your coming, and you made us look like fools. I want you to know you made your parents look like fools."

"Oh. Sorry."

"You *promised us* you would come."

"I did?"

"Yesterday morning. You told us that for once you wouldn't loaf about all day. I suppose you were too busy rotting in your sheets to think about anything besides yourself."

I blink a few times. I cannot remember that conversation. I'm willing to believe that I just forgot about it, though.

"Oh. Yes. Right. Sorry."

"If you keep doing things like that, everyone will think you have toys in the attic. I go off to get more tea during bridge and my friends are whispering when I come back. Do you think I don't know what they're talking about? They're gabbering about what a sorry state my daughter is in. Do you think that doesn't hurt me?"

“Sorry.”

“You’re at least feeding the kitten, right?”

It takes me a moment. At last I remember the can of food I left out. “Yes.”

“How are you getting along?”

Lips curl into a smile. Honey infuses a voice’s tone. “Oh, we’re getting along splendidly.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes! You were ever so right about him; he’s a darling little angel, and such a cute thing. I simply needed time to adjust, is all.”

“Your daddy and I have been hoping for pictures.”

“Oh! Well, I’ll get right on that. Hamlet has quite the spirit for adventure! I’m sure I won’t have to wait long for him to do something worthy of a picture.”

She chortles. Her voice has a warmth that I’ve only ever heard her have towards Hamlet. She has allergies that keep her from owning one herself, but she loves them quite a lot. “That’s marvelous. Now, pet, before you get to that, there’s something I need of you. In thirty minutes, your daddy and I are having dinner with the Harrises, and I think, to make up for your absence at church, you could at least make an effort to show up for it.”

I glance down at myself. I’m not quite dressed for that.

“If you want the truth, Mum, I’ve felt under the weather today. That’s why I missed church in the first place.”

“Is that so? We’ll schedule a check-up for you.”

I take a breath. “That... won’t be necessary. This is just a mild bug. I’ll be better in a few days.”

“Yes, well, in any case, it’s been quite a long time since we’ve had you in for an appointment.”

“I’d rather not. I don’t need anyone to examine me or... or to *measure* me, or—”

“Don’t talk back to me. We all need check-ups, you silly girl. And now that you bring it up, a measurement wouldn’t be out of place either, what with that growth spurt you’ve been—”

I hang up and turn off the phone. I have to restrain myself from throwing it into the toilet bowl. I feel the panic pressing upon the floor and walls and ceiling of this

room, trying to break in and set everything ablaze. There's a knocking at the door and I don't flinch, although on the inside there's a bloom of heat and itchiness and gooseprickles. With nothing else to do in here I exit the bathroom. The man who tried to talk to me and his friend are there, asking if I'm alright, and I hear a distant voice tell them that, yes, I absolutely am, and I'm sorry if I caused them any worry. I leave the cafe and amble through the plaza, patiently waiting for each street to be clear before I pass, smiling at all who walk by, distracting myself when, once more, the bikers deafen all around them. Nathan and I are in Spain and he's listening to me explain the history behind every piece of art we discover, and he's listening so, so earnestly, because he knows I'll give him a nice little compliment for it, and I'll get to watch him squirm. I make it to the store and keep smiling as I apologize half a thousand times to all the other shoppers who I collide with in the aisles, even when they don't stop staring at me. I have no desire to turn my phone back on even though I've written my shopping list on there, so I just make guesses at what I need. I put four bottles of wine in my cart and then I wander around grabbing bread, catfood, whatever it is I might need. I've certainly forgotten something but that hardly matters when you're never hungry, and when you can just imagine hunger being off in the distance like everything else. I wait in line for ten minutes next to a woman who stares off into the distance while her toddler keeps screaming and I *do not* bend down to tell the child how sincerely I would like for it to burn in Hell, and I smile patiently while the cashier makes unwanted commentary about my purchases and exclaims over my height as if being a five-foot-ten woman is something so freakish. I walk home with bags that are surprisingly light and don't complain at all when I have to wait for more cars to pass and listen to those bikers continue driving up and down the streets again and again. I hum a tune as I walk, to distract from it. A homeless man has perched himself on my return path and he tries to make me feel guilty like everyone else but I avoid telling him that I want him to kill himself and then I go on and pass through the scorching boulevard and isn't it so lovely out with the clouds and the beaming sun and isn't it so beautiful today?

I make it home, and by now it's around five thirty or so. The car in front of my apartment isn't honking anymore. I smile at that.

I did it. I bought my groceries. I'm home. I'll get right in bed, curl up, and sleep for as long as I can.

I enter the building as the elderly woman who lives across the hall is leaving it, and I'm so happy to see her even though I've barely ever talked to her.

"Good evening!" I say.

She nods mutely, eyes boggling. Old people are adorable.

I ascend the steps all the way up to my floor and reach my apartment. I try to open it and find that it's locked. Would you look at that! I actually remembered to—

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

I start giggling, and then it turns into laughter, and then I'm shrieking into my hand. The car's going off again! And why not! Why not!

I shove my hand into my pocket but as soon as I take out my keys they've fallen to the floor. I look at my hand. It's shaking, the fingers twitching, clenching, throttling. Is that really my hand? It's moving so much; surely I'd be able to feel it moving if it truly were my own, but I don't feel it. I don't feel it moving at all. Whose hand is this?

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

I crouch, but when it's still difficult to reach my keys, I get on my knees, and once I've gotten them I stand back up. One hand grips the other to stabilize it best it can. My lungs are screaming for air as I slip the key into the lock. I'll be okay. I just need to get through this door and I'll be right as rain.

I enter my apartment. And it is then, just at that moment, that I cannot bear it any longer.

From the kitchenette, and all the way to the door, paper towels have been shredded and strewn on the floor. I remember now that that was my last roll; I was supposed to buy more today. A glass of water I had forgotten about has also been knocked off the TV stand and broken, and has soaked the carpet. There are shards of glass that I can see and undoubtedly countless smaller, invisible shards waiting to cut my feet as soon as I let my guard down. My eyes are stinging from an unbearable acrid stench. Glancing to my right, I see that Hamlet has defecated on my couch. Several other turds have been batted around the apartment. His little toys.

The bags drop from my hands and the wine bottles clatter, threatening to break. Silently, I reach behind myself and close the door.

I do my very best to breathe. I tell myself that I'm not feeling anything. This is all just a very bad dream.

The feeling will go away with time. With a little patience. Stand here until it's gone. This too shall pass.

I glance at the TV stand.

This too shall—

He's there he's there he's HIDING THERE he's HIDING THERE he KNOWS WHAT HE DID he HATES ME he DID IT ON PURPOSE

An impossibly large woman rushes towards the TV stand

Your little fucking rat's nest let's see how well you hide when

grabs it, and effortlessly flings it aside. The television's screen explodes apart when it smashes against the floor, the wooden stand screaming. For once, my darling precious adorable angel isn't back there and so she wails her outrage and kicks at the spot of the wall where he should be like a child throwing a fit. The dry wall breaks in on the first go, but she keeps kicking the hole larger and larger, ignoring the tiny sandals that fly off her feet, the blood she's splattered from her own toes.

"HAMLET!" she screams. "*HAMLET!!*"

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

She charges at the large table I have for when Mother and Father come by to visit and we all drink tea together and throws it aside, but Hamlet's not under there either, so she grabs all the chairs where I keep various junk and hurls them around the apartment, trying to make enough noise to scare him out of wherever he's hiding.

"YOU WRETCHED SHIT WHERE ARE YOU!?"

In my kitchenette she punches a hole through the screen of my microwave and sweeps the salt and pepper and oil off the counter and lets it shatter. She rips out the toaster from its wall socket and launches it into the rubble of the dining table. I want to call the authorities because someone has clearly stolen all this woman's marbles, but all I can seem to do is watch.

She stalks back into the living room, turns and looks down the hall. There, at the end, she can see Hamlet peeking at her from behind the door frame. Not far away, she can see that one of my paintbrushes has been taken from my room and is lying on the floor, with half its hairs ripped out.

“You.... YOOOOUUU—”

CRASH!

An awful, awful pain goes through my head. There’s a sound like falling debris. I look up, and there’s a hole in the ceiling; my head is *in* the ceiling. I instinctively grab the back of my scalp and feel the warmth of blood. I look down and there’s debris on the floor, and it’s so very far below me.

“It’s *miles* down there...” I say. “*Miles... and miles...*”

Dizziness graying over the world, my legs give out, and I’m falling sideways.

CRASH!

I’ve fallen onto my coffee table, and have destroyed it with my weight. The pain is everywhere. My toes and head are bleeding. My feet are cut up. It hurts so much.

Hamlet has gotten closer, but is still far out of reach. He’s watching me with huge black eyes.

Oh, the poor darling. He’s so scared.

“Mummy’s alright,” I say, although it’s getting harder and harder to speak. I can’t seem to get any air in. “You were just playing... you... you were just...”

I try to breathe but my throat has closed. I’m suffocating. My heart’s beating so badly and so quickly.

Mummy I’m sorry I’m sorry I’ll behave please I won’t make a fuss please don’t hate me I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m

I grab my throat but I still can’t breathe. Constricted, I tear open my shirt, and then my bra tears open, and my shorts are ripping down the middle, and my legs are extending out and out. It’s all too absurd to be real, and I try to say so, but I can’t find the words.

“N... *Nathaan...*”

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH.

I was propped up by the table but now I've slid down and am lying fully on my back. Staring up at the ceiling, at the hole I've made up there, I feel my heart beating faster than any human heart should.

The room's getting darker and darker, and I realize that I'm having a heart attack, and asphyxiating, and that I'm going to die. I can't help but feel relieved.

...

I woke this morning with my head throbbing, my pelvis screaming, and "Comfortably Numb" stuck in my head. I knew right away that I wouldn't be going anywhere.

All in all, I feel about as spry as an eighty year old. Going to the bathroom to pee was a thirty minute adventure. I cancelled my volunteer hours at my school's writing center and decided that, if I wasn't going to move, I might as well work on my story. I'm still in bed, pinned down by the slightly elevated breakfast-in-bed tray I have my laptop on. I haven't written a damn thing, of course.

Part of it is the physical pain, part of it is the hangover, but above all else it's the impossibility of writing the sweet, tender scene that my novel's gotten to when everything feels like such total bullshit. Everything I've written, everything I've stood for. Bullshit. What the hell do I know about anything? Who am I to say something about love, or friendship? I thought I was someone who would never let lust or fear stop him from doing what was right, and I was wrong. I thought I could tell a woman who had fondness for me from a woman who just wanted to fuck me to death, and I was wrong. So much talk. Such a big game. All I did was humiliate myself and bail.

When are you going to get it through your head that Grace's problems have nothing to do with you? By the time she was seven feet tall and pinning you against the wall, the only thing you could've hoped for was to keep her from growing any more. And you did. You helped Grace get her demons out. That's probably the best thing anyone could've done for her. And if it helps you sleep at night to feel like you've made a sacrifice, just remember how much your pelvis hurts.

That's all sound logic. And for a while it worked: I was determined to grit my teeth and keep living my life until the guilt faded. But then, a few hours ago, my phone

started ringing. It was just out of reach, and by the time I finished squirming around like a turtle on its back, escaped from under the tray, and grabbed it, the call had timed out. It was Grace.

That threw everything out the window. She still wanted something to do with me. She hadn't forgotten last night. Well, not totally, anyway. Maybe there was something I could still do to help her. I agonized over it for a while and finally decided to call her back. It went straight to voice mail, though, as if her phone had died.

So now I'm lying here, with my story no longer than it was when I opened my laptop, idly wagging my phone around. I get a text.

Maisie: heyyyyyyyyyy

Maisie: howd your hot date go ;)

Maisie: grace wont tell me :(

I have no idea how to answer that question.

Then my phone rings again, and when I look, it's her. It's Grace.

I answer immediately. I open my mouth but am too afraid to speak. Ambient buzzing stretches out on the other end. Slowly, I prop myself up in bed, trying not to grunt too loudly as I do.

"Nathan?" Her voice sounds scratchy and strained, as if she's been yelling. "Are you there?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm here."

She laughs, sounding so relieved that it breaks my heart. She takes several breaths, still chucking a little. But, besides that, she doesn't respond.

"Are you alright?"

A long silence.

"Grace?"

"You're really there."

"Yes. I am. Are you okay? Where are you?"

"I'm in my apartment. What's left of it."

"What does that mean?"

She doesn't respond at first, though I somehow feel certain that she did hear me. I wonder if she's gone blank in the middle of our call. I wonder if she wants to answer but is too afraid. The silence stretches on until, at last, I hear her voice.

“You asked me earlier if I was okay.”

“I did.”

“It’s kind of you to ask.” She takes a deep breath, as if preparing to recite a speech. “And I’m not. I’m really not.”

“What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

“I was just an hour ago, but everything seems to have healed.” She sounds flat and preoccupied. “No cuts or bruises or anything.”

“Cuts? What happened?”

“I don’t know how to explain it, dear. I just need to see you. It’s an inconvenient ask, I know, but could you come by? I really need you here. I want to see you very badly.”

Alarm bells are going off for so many reasons. So many fears, all urging me to do different things. She was in such an unstable place last night and the listless way she’s speaking makes it sound like something bad could happen if I don’t go. But there’s another fear. The fear of being manipulated. I worry that she’s being cryptic on purpose, making me as worried as possible deliberately. She’s my friend, but can I trust her? Is she still the same person she used to be, beneath what’s happening to her? What if she’s just trying to do something like last night, again? Would I help her or make it worse, if I went? Should I be making calls of my own? Should I call Maisie? Should I get *Grace* to call someone?

But then she says something that cuts through all of that. It makes me feel that there’s a chance for a happy ending in this, a way out that doesn’t need to get the world involved in *Grace*’s suffering, or to get anyone hurt.

“I want to talk to you about how I’ve been growing.”

Chapter Nine

One wet morning, on the perimeter of Dún a Rí Forest Park, a young girl sat alone in the back seat of her parents' car. Her legs were bent to her chest, supporting a sketchpad with a half-finished drawing of a castle, settled on the back of a massive smiling dragon, though she had abandoned it to watch rain trickle down the window. The day was cloudy, but bright. Dead wet leaves lay splattered across the asphalt. The girl had limbs like sticks and an almost sickly cast to her face; even for her age, she was small. She wore a white dress with mud stains on the hem. Her legs were stained as well.

She saw movement out the corner of her eye. When she looked, she could hardly contain her wonder: there was a small figure there on the tiny ridge outside the car's window, smaller even than one of her dolls, waving merrily at her.

Laughing, the girl rolled down the window at once. The visitor sprouted little wings like a dragonfly and buzzed through the gap, landing upon her cupped hands.

"It's ripe and WET out there! Thank ya for yer hospitality!"

"Are you a fairy?"

"Might be I am! And what be you?"

"I'm... um... I'm a girl! It's very nice to meet you. My name is—"

"Woah there, lass!" The fairy plugged fingers in its ears. "Be careful with names! If ya gave me yers I'd have t' give ya mine in turn, and that's a dangerous thing!"

"Oh! I'm sorry!"

"Don't worry yer pretty head about it." The fairy gave a big, close-mouthed smile. Then, it glanced around the car. "Are you all alone, lass?"

The girl nodded. "My parents are cross with me. I played in the grass and got my dress dirty, and now they won't let me go with them." She pouted. "I want to see the castle. This whole trip was to see the castle."

"Oh... that's too bad, lass." The fairy put its chin in its hand, as if in thought. Then, once more beaming that closed-mouth smile, it snapped its fingers. "Maybe I could help!"

The girl shook her head. "My parents don't change their minds about anything."

“You sure o’ that? You never tell ’em off?”

“Well...” the girl bit her lip, stewing in her anxiety. “When I get mad and say something, it just makes them more cross with me. It’s better if I just don’t get mad.”

“We all need t’ get mad sometimes, lass. Look at me!” The fairy did a pose. “Do ya think a wee fellow like meself would last long if I couldn’t yell at a squirrel tryin’ t’ get in me house?”

The girl giggled. “I’d like to see that.”

“Perchance one day you might. But for now, let me try t’ help ya.”

“What can you do to help me?”

“Oh, I can do quite a bit.” The fairy grinned. Its smile was made from hundreds of thin, pointy, red-stained teeth. “It may be that small critters are at the mercy o’ big critters. But I can fix that. I’ll make it so they’ll never want t’ make ya mad again.”

...

With gritted teeth, I ascend the stairs of Grace’s apartment. I’m rushing at first, leaping two steps at a time, but with each floor my legs feel heavier and heavier. My pelvis is screaming. My head is screaming. My body’s yelling at me to retreat. But Grace had the courage and strength to acknowledge her growth, and to ask for help. I can be courageous too. I can also be strong.

What if she only pretended to accept the truth, to lure you here? What if she’s cunning enough to pretend that she isn’t deluded?

I reach Grace’s room, on the building’s top floor. How bizarre that it can look so ordinary and calm, with the door still closed.

You have a breaking point. You’re terrified. Don’t try denying it.

I know.

Three sharp knocks on her door.

But it’s Grace.

“You can come in.”

I’m only able to open the door a fraction before something blocks it. It’s the remains of a smashed wooden chair. Barely managing to squeeze through, shutting the door behind me, I take in “what’s left” of Grace’s apartment, as she put it. All the

furniture has been destroyed, except for the couch that Grace seduced me on last night, which has stinking cat shit on it. There's dust and glass all over the floor, ripped apart clothing and paper towels, a hole in the ceiling, another hole at the base of the wall where the TV stand used to be. The TV itself is laying face-down, shattered. The chairs from around her dining room table are demolished, and scattered everywhere.

"Grace, what..."

My question trails off when I see her. She has knocked over the sofa chair and is sitting on the carpet where it used to be.

Oh, she's grown. She's grown quite a bit.

Even seated, she's taller than me. Her legs are longer than ever, longer even for her new size, and bent to her bosom, creating an arch that I could crouch through. Her hair has been parted so that she won't have to sit on it; several feet of locks lay flat on the ground to her sides. Her ass would have destroyed the sofa chair if she had tried to sit on it, and her breasts have grown so much that they dough around the arms wrapped across her knees. I raise my gaze and she's watching me. Her face is perfectly sculpted, more beautiful than I can remember, but her gaze is colder than I've ever seen it.

"You're here."

She closes her eyes and exhales, her shoulders relaxing just a bit. The seconds tick by slowly.

"Where's Hamlet?"

"He's shut in my bedroom, no doubt shredding my sheets and knocking my things to the floor. Not that that matters." She looks to the ceiling. "There's glass all over the carpet. Couldn't have him cutting his precious paws, could I?" The contempt in her voice is obvious. "Now, I realized not long after returning that I forgot to buy tea bags on my trip today. Silly me. So, I'm afraid I can't offer you a cup, but right there near your feet there's a bag with some wine in it. Feel free to take a swig. If you leave it with me, I'll drink it all in an evening. I might be able to drink it in one gulp, now."

"Grace, what happened here?"

She sighs. "I don't think there's any way I could explain it that would make you understand. A boy had a protest sign. Some bikers were roaming about, and an old man yelled at them. There was a toddler, a homeless man, a car alarm. Then I get home and Hamlet's made quite the mess."

A low rumbling fills the room, as if a neighbor were moving a heavy piece of furniture, but it's coming from where Grace is sitting.

"What's happened here is that I've had it. I just can't deny the truth anymore. I am... furious."

At the sound of shifting rubble I look and see that Grace's feet are extending further, pushing the shattered remains of her coffee table.

She closes her eyes, shutters, trembles, *stretches*. A few more inches as a soft moan escapes her throat. "I think I've felt it on some level my entire life. It was always lurking in those parts of my mind I kept shut tight. A monster. The evidence has always been there. That's why my parents never trusted me, or liked me, even. They must have known what I was. They must have known."

"You're not a monster." I take a step closer. "Maybe you lost your temper, but—"

"I was trying to kill my cat." She lolls her head toward me, her expression apathetic. "That's why the furniture's destroyed. I was trying to find him and I was trying to kill him, just for doing what kittens do. He's only alive because my head crashed through the ceiling. I've been telling myself that I only wanted to scare him, or smack his bum a few times, but I know the truth. I was going to rip him apart." She turns her head away, grimaces. "And, yes, I'm disgusted with myself." Her breathing grows more labored. "I'm the monster I always feared I was. I'm worse, even. And I'm trying to feel guilt and compassion and pity but all I can feel is rage. And it feels good to feel it. It feels good to say it. I'm *enraged*, Nathan. I'm irate. I am... *nnnngh!*... I'm *apoplectic*."

Scrrrrrrrtch!

As she says the words, her back slides up against the wall behind her, friction voicing its complaints. From Grace's throat emerges a guttural sound between a moan and a scream. Her arms fall from her legs, and as her back arches her breasts thrust out, perky and firm despite their size. New blonde locks spring from the thickest parts of her hair as they thicken even more, as the ends on the floor slide out further. I estimate her to be over twelve feet tall.

Should've gotten back in your car, Nathan.

"Grace, nothing's over yet, okay? Don't do anything you'll regret. Y-you..." it's hard to think. My heart's beating so fast. "You can still have a normal life."

She laughs at that, not even bothering to hide her scorn. As she does, she puts her face in her hand and I see her expression contort; it's laughter, then the face of someone about to cry, then a smile again.

"I suppose I should have expected you to say something like that," she says. "Your desire to make me feel good is endearing, but this time I don't think it's enough."

Grace readjusts herself: she rotates onto her front, her knees crashing into the unhung paintings leaning against the wall before she extends her legs into the hallway behind her. She's propped on her elbows, her breasts squashed atop her broken furniture.

"Let me put this in perspective for you. I need you to have the full picture."

She hunches her back and slides forward her right knee. Then, her left leg lurches forward, bent into a lunge. She pushes herself to her feet. Her right foot plants itself with such force that the windows rattle. Before long, she is bent at the hip with her upper body pressed against the ceiling, cushioned by the thick blanket of hair behind her. Much of it hangs down to the floor in massive strands.

Step by lurching step, Grace approaches, until she has backed me against the door and blocked out the lights above me so that I am bathed in her shadow. Her legs are each the size of my entire body. My top of my head doesn't even reach her glistening, yellow-haired crotch. Gigantic breasts, like yoga balls filled with sand, swing heavily side to side; I feel that if I were in the wrong place at the wrong time one of them would slam my head so hard that I'd be knocked out. Her blue eyes glimmer in the darkness above.

"Shall I wake up tomorrow and go about my daily business? Do you think people will leave me be?"

"Grace... please... I—"

"All I want is for people to leave me alone, but they never have, and now they never will. It is *OVER*."

Grace's tailbone slams against the ceiling as she bursts another foot in height. She falls to one knee, grimacing, her whole body shaking.

Instinctively, I glance behind myself and evaluate how long it would take to open the door and escape through it. But, as if she's reading my thoughts, a massive hand thrusts forward and plants its weight against it.

“You’re not going anywhere. Although I might struggle to get through that door, I don’t think you’d get very far before I snatched you up. You might recall from second grade that you never did well at tag, and you were even worse at hide-and-seek. And even if I simply cannot get through — that door does seem rather small, the more I look at it — you do not think this building would contain me for long if I willed otherwise, do you? I will rip through the bricks like a plastic bag and grab your car in one hand if I must. Do you feel powerless now? Do you see how it feels to be crushed by the world?”

I’m dangerously close to passing out. When I look up to Grace the whites of her eyes shine like crescent moons. Feeling dizzy by the second, I fall back against the door and slowly sink down, so she’ll have no impression I wish to defy her.

A small, triumphant smile breaks out on her expression, though her eyes remain cold and intent. She looks uncannily similar to how she did during our date when she’d catch me in one of her traps, and somehow it’s more unbearable than anything else to be reminded of last night, when the worst I feared was to be teased for my outfit a little.

“Have you begun to see things from my perspective?”

I nod along frantically.

“Very good. I’m sorry to frighten you.” A large hand comes forward and, with surprising gentleness, cups my chin. Her thumb strokes against my beard. “I needed you to accept the gravity of the situation so that you wouldn’t reject my proposition off-hand, but you must understand: I have no desire to harm you.” Her smile is disorientingly sweet. “You’ve been nothing but kind to me my whole life. So loyal and good. I intend to take excellent care of you.”

“I... proposition? What proposition?”

She tilts her head, squints her eyes affectionately, but I can still hear the anger in the intense way she breathes. “Darling, there’s no shrinking. There’s just no chance at a normal life. The only direction left is up. Up and up and up. Larger and larger until there is nothing left to bother us. Just me, the rubble, and my dear friend Nathan.”

Chapter Ten

There is no adequate response to a situation like this, and for a long time neither of us say anything. Somehow, in all my worrying, I never imagined something as terrible as what I've been confronted with.

"Grace... this is..."

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

We both go quiet, and Grace slowly raises her gaze to the door. Her face is predatorily calm. There's another string of knocks, followed by the voice of an old man.

"What's going on in there? What's been slamming the floor so much? What's with the screaming?"

Grace's eyes flicker down to me, with the clear message to keep silent, before she looks back to the door. She speaks softly, but her sheer size makes her voice to carry as normal.

"Apologies. A friend and I have been trying to move furniture, and we had something of a row about it. We'll take care not to disturb you further."

I spot a small movement, and when I look I see a new strand of hair, curved and pointy, sprouting from Grace's mane. Above me her breathing shakes with quiet fury.

"What the hell are you making that much noise all night for?"

Grace trembles and sucks in a breath. Her head, which had gained some distance from the ceiling when she knelt, ascends towards it once more.

"It was a row over something silly. We'll keep quiet."

A very long silence passes. The heat from Grace's body is suffocating.

"You keep quiet or I'm calling the landlord," the man says at last, before the sound comes through of his footsteps fading away. He pauses on the stairs to talk to someone — an old lady, it sounds like — and then disappears. The door across the hall opens and shuts.

From above me, I hear a soft thump. The back of Grace's head has met the ceiling.

"My neighbor's back," she whispers. "Let's have this conversation farther from the door."

Taking enormous care not to slam the floor too hard, Grace twists herself so she can crawl away from me. When her hair parts I'm met with the sight of hips and ass so wide that I doubt they could fit into her apartment's hallway. Massive thighs taper out from them, and then her calves are almost normal, compared to the rest of her. Even while on her knees her legs stick out over four feet behind her. With each of her movements I hear glass crunching. She's seething breaths through her nose, the sound intensifying until it suddenly bursts out as a furious, involuntary growl.

She pounds a fist, crushing a chunk of the coffee table. "No right to *talk* to me that way!"

Her body seizes bent, stiffens, twitches, *stretches*. Her feet slide out behind her until they press against the wall and Grace has to compress herself — her arms shake and lengthen and they push her up and up.

"Mmm... nnggh..."

Ploof! Her ass touches the ceiling.

She lowers herself to her elbows so that her head doesn't do the same. I squeeze my eyes shut and brace for the worst, convinced that her weight is about to collapse the floor, but it's just then that she finally stops. When I open my eyes, my friend is at least twenty feet tall, barely fitting between the floor and the ceiling. She takes a few moments to catch her breath.

"Come on now," she says, under her breath. "Easy does it."

She reaches forward with both hands — her breasts now gargantuan enough to keep her torso lifted — picks up the sofa chair, and places it several feet down the hall. Then she carefully rolls over so that her back is against the wall opposite me, the one adjacent to the entrance. Her head is blocking the hallway, and her legs are bunched up in the corner beside the couch.

"Let me just..."

She places her feet against the couch's armrest and slowly stretches out, pushing the couch across the room until her ten foot long legs are fully extended, and the couch is blocking the door. No chance of escape now.

I stare at this titan, whose upper body covers an entire wall, and whose legs cover another. She stares back at me with wide eyes.

“Goodness, you’re so *small*.” One of her arms, longer than my entire body, bends enough for her to stroke fingers across her breast. Her nipples come alive in seconds. “I thought you were adorable before, but now...” she laughs breathlessly, smiling. “Just looking at you is so... I haven’t felt this good all day.”

Despite my terror, a part of me is enraptured. This is an impossibility as real as the broken glass on the floor — the kind of dream a rational person never kids themselves into hoping for. And her voice. It’s been mesmerizing from the start, but now with her massive size, and the whispering she’s forced to do, her tone is huskier and hungrier than ever. Every word seems to vibrate in my bones. I wander toward her knees and put my hands on one; each kneecap is the size of my face. Her tittering fills the room.

“Do you like this too? Do you like that there’s so much of me to keep you company? So much of me to adore you? This could be our life, darling. You could wake up in the valley of my chest every morning — or next to the point of my nose, if that makes you too flustered. You could be kissed by lips larger than your entire body, again and again and again, every day. If there are places in the world smart enough to leave us alone, we could find a way for you to keep up your writing; you could tell them all about what a treasured experience you’re having.”

“Grace, I...” I turn and look at her over my shoulder. “We can’t. We can’t do that.”

“And why not, dear?”

“People will get hurt. Your cat, the people in this building, everyone whose job it is to try and stop you...”

“So what?”

“What do you mean, ‘so what!?’” I step towards her, but all Grace does is put a finger to her lips. Right. I need to keep quiet. Taking a measured breath, I start again.

“You’re a better person than this. I know you don’t want to hurt people.”

“Don’t I? Nobody knows what I want, Nathan. Not you, not my parents, and certainly not me. Don’t you get it? I’ve never wanted anything. I’ve never *let* myself. If you let yourself *want* things, then you’ll...” She trails off, spends a long time grappling for the words.

“It takes absolutely everything that you have.” She wraps her arms around herself and tucks her head, filling the room but looking small. “You don’t know how scary it was

when it first happened. My parents wouldn't let me see the castle and... I... by the time they came back, I was taller. They were already so cross with me, and if they saw that I was wearing a dress that didn't cover my ankles, they'd..." she chuckles. "Goodness, that sounds like nothing to be worked up over, when I say it, but I was so frightened. I curled up in bed that night and told myself that it would all be back to normal the next morning, but..."

She shakes her head as if trying to snap out of a trance. "Was I supposed to embrace it? Was I supposed to grow and yell until my parents let me have my way? Is it my fault that I didn't *want* to grow? Was I supposed to be *thankful*?"

Grace stops herself when she sees that I don't understand what she's saying. "I'm getting off-track. My point is that I can't do this anymore. I need you to understand that. Do you know what it does to you if you spend your whole life trying not to feel things? It makes you so tired that you can hardly get out of bed. You can't get your hopes up about anything. You agree to every little request, because if you said no and they got upset you wouldn't be able to control yourself. You spend every minute daydreaming or imagining that you're somewhere else so that you won't have to remember how angry you are. There are conversations, errands, weeks of my life that I simply can't remember because I wasn't there for them. Is that what I have to look forward to, if I don't hurt anyone? *Do you expect me to live the rest of my life like I'm already dead?*"

Grace leans toward me in her fervor, her massive legs bending so quickly that I have to leap to the side to avoid them. She's shaking and expanding once again, and it creates a dull roar in the apartment as her sweating skin grinds against the walls. Her eyes widen. Her expression turns apologetic.

"Wait, no! I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Her head is wedged awkwardly against the wall, and she tries to adjust it. "Please don't be afraid. I don't want to hurt you. I promise. It's just... being around you can be painful. But you have to believe me that it's not anything you've done. Please don't think that." Slowly, she bends forward and reaches out her seven-foot arm. Her hand rests on its side, fingers curled, awaiting a body to close around. "Let me show you. Could you come closer?"

I look at her giant hand, which could lift me like a doll. I take a few slow steps towards it, then stop. "This all started as soon as you remembered us being friends."

She pulls back, spurned. “It was painful to remember you, Nathan. I can only think of one time in my life when I was properly alive — when I was authentic about who I was and what I felt. That time was when I was with you. You were so special.” She smiles, her big teeth shining. “Such an adorable, loyal boy. You never made me feel bullied, like everyone else. And if I was upset, it was always, ‘oh, Grace! How can I help?’ And then...” her smile fades. “And then you were gone. And I had no choice but to pretend it had never happened.”

I know what she’s talking about. I know what she means, about needing to forget.

“It was painful for me to remember you, too,” I say. “Remembering how much I missed you.”

I start moving again, and eventually I’m there by her palm. Her fingers wrap around me. My feet lose touch with the floor and Grace’s other palm hovers underneath in case I fall. She’s concentrated fully on being as delicate as possible, as if I were a baby chicken.

“I had to forget so many things to survive. At some point I forgot that I was even growing in the first place; there was only the knowledge that I should never get angry. And yet now you’re here.” She smiles sadly. “And I can’t help but remember things, with you around. But don’t feel guilty, dear. Maybe this would have happened eventually. If I were perfect, I wouldn’t have been five-nine by the time I moved out, and I wouldn’t have been five-ten by the time we reunited. Maybe I was always going to end up like this. And when I consider that, that this was inevitable...”

She pulls me closer, pressing me against her forehead.

“It just makes me so grateful that you’re here, and that I got to see you again.”

The world starts groaning. Her fingers gently relent against my body, her grip on me loosening as her hands enlarge, before it tightens again just a bit more. The couch grumbles as Grace’s feet push it another several inches.

“And I’m sorry that I was so cross with you last night. I just couldn’t accept what you were trying to tell me. If I were growing, then that would mean I’d have no choice but to remember everything. To remember what’s been happening, and why I’m cursed like this, and how... and how...” Her eyes glisten, tears congealing in their corners. “They stole my life. *They stole my life!*”

Grace's legs cover the door and screech the couch into the corner. She holds me closer to her, to where I can hear the great hammering of her heart. All the while, her shoulders press into the wall opposite the entrance, forcing her to shift her torso at an angle.

"But now you're here. Such improbable odds that we would find each other again, *but we have*. This is providence. This is the reward for all my suffering. I have spent every day concerned about what might anger other people, devoted to never being a bother, and I simply cannot do it anymore. I am not going to curl up inside this shrinking room and wait to die. We are together again, and I am going to live. I will breathe the air in great gulps and I will scream and I will destroy and I will love you."

Her growth is accelerating. The couch thumps against the wall opposite us; Grace's right leg starts to bend while her left stretches over the top of it. Her hips are over halfway to the ceiling. She curls up more as her torso covers the entire length of the room and her upper back presses against the wall to the kitchenette. Her hands are each the size of my body. They shelter me and hold me closer.

"I love you, Nathan."

She's stopped delaying. She really means it this time. She's going to grow until she destroys the building. Her hands will protect me from the worst of it, but there will be nothing I can do to persuade her once the damage has been done, and once the blood has been spilled.

And I can't allow for that to happen. Not when I love her too.

There is still an opening in her hands, a crack large enough for Grace to peek in and look at me. I lurch forward. Instinctively, Grace moves her hands to keep me from falling.

"What are you—"

Steadying myself by planting my hands astride her philtrum, I bend and kiss her upper lip. It is, by itself, about three inches wide — too large for me to kiss both lips at once. She closes her mouth by reflex and I kiss even more, my eyes squeezed shut in desperation, hoping that this will do something.

My hair gets tousled by sharp puffs of breath from her nose. I wait for the sound of the floor collapsing and glass breaking, or for Grace to engulf me in her hands and

clutch me against her chest. But eventually I realize that I don't hear anything at all. The growing has stopped.

Opening my eyes, I look up to see Grace staring at me, her pupils dilating. There's a faint blush on each giant cheek.

"Nathan..." She giggles. "I was in the middle of something. Are you trying to distract me?"

That's exactly what I'm trying to do. But judging by her smile, she doesn't mind the ruse too much. Not that she has many reasons to be upset; she knows there's nothing I can do to stop her, in the end.

This is no different, I realize, than what I was trying to do last night — it's just a matter of scale. I could distract her with submission and affection, delaying the moment of disaster but doing nothing to change the ultimate course of things. I could try to resist her, but that would only make her upset, and hasten the destruction. I already tried everything I could think of to help her, last night. None of it worked then and none of it will work now. Not for long.

Maybe I should just give up. In truth it's rather appealing, to have a goddess to wake up to every day. I wouldn't have to worry about student loans, politics, anything ordinary. Her gorgeous voice. Giant, gentle fingers to pet my head. I could be the little Jiminy Cricket on her shoulder keeping her from killing everyone. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

Why the fuck are you even considering that? There have to be at least a hundred people living in this building — not to mention all the animals — and do you really think people will leave her alone after that? What do you think Grace will do when people keep going after her, huh? Do you really think you'll be able to keep her peaceful? You won't. Submit to her, or challenge her.

Those both end the same way.

Then enjoy it.

That's impossible.

Then run like hell.

I can't.

You have to do something that will fix all this.

There's no such thing.

That final thought echoes in my head, again and again, and there is nothing that comes to contradict it. But with the defeat is a kind of clarity. There's nothing I can do, but there is something that I would *like* to do.

I squeeze her thumb. "Grace, can you put me down?"

She frowns. "Darling, you won't be safe without my hands around you. I can't allow it."

"You can pick me up later. Can you just put me down, for now?"

Pale eyes watch me for a while and then, at last, she gently lowers me. I slide off her palm. I crunch broken wood and glass beneath my shoes.

I wander around the room for a bit, taking in all the debris, all the holes. The cat shit on the couch.

I squat and rip off a piece of the paper towel roll that's been torn and strewn across the floor. I head to the couch, ignoring the giant foot resting atop it, and use the paper towel to pick up the turds.

"There's a trash can in your kitchen, right?"

I glance at Grace, who only looks at me.

Shrugging, I enter the kitchenette and look for her bin. At first I don't find anything, but finally I realize she has a set-up where it's disguised as one of the lower cabinets. I dump the poop in there and then, as I'm returning, I almost step on another one out on its own. I throw that one away, too.

"Nathan, what are you doing?"

"It's a terrible smell."

I gather a great clump of the paper towels on the floor, bring them to the sink, wet them, dabble on some soap, and set them on the stain Hamlet's left on the couch, scrubbing it best I can. The whole time I can feel Grace's gaze on my back. Once I've done the best I could, there, I get to work moving the furniture. I slide the empty TV stand to a part of the wall a good distance away from Grace's body. Then I heave up the broken television and put it in its proper spot. Next, I turn the couch in its corner so it's parallel with the wall opposite Grace and push it to be beside the TV stand. Grace has enough room now that her right leg can unbend. The dining room table is a complete mess, but after throwing out the torn remains of Grace's clothes, I clean that up, too. I extract a toaster from the rubble, set it back on the counter, rest the table top against the

wall, and arrange the broken legs in neat rows. I do the same for the coffee table — although it has been smashed into significantly more pieces — and then whatever remains of the chairs are lined up in a distant corner. Then, carefully, I pinch the tiny shreds of paper towels that Hamlet's left on the floor, throwing them away as well.

"I don't see what you're accomplishing. What does it matter if the place is a mess, by now?"

"You make a pretty good point." With all the clutter cleared out from the middle of the room, I can see just how many glass shards and splinters there are. "Do you have a vacuum?"

"You're being absurd."

"Do you at least have a broom?"

She sighs. "In the hallway. The second door on the left. After the bathroom. But I don't see why—"

I stride towards the hallway and only stop when Grace's head is blocking my path. I raise my eyebrows at her.

"You want me to *move*?"

I nod.

"I... this is..." Grace trails off and thinks for a while. Then, after a heavy sigh, she shifts a massive palm underneath herself and pushes up.

"Won't you just—"

Crack!

Grace's head slams the ceiling, the pain interrupting her. As she rubs at where she whacked it I walk under the upper part of her torso, parting her hair like a curtain, squeezing past the sofa chair, and find the closet. I return to the living room with her broom and vacuum and sweep the largest pieces of debris into one pile.

"I don't know what sort of game you're trying to play—"

"There's no game, really."

"*Nathan*. This whole place is going to be *rubble*."

"Yeah."

"Then why are you bothering?"

Finally turning to face her, I just shrug, allowing the exhaustion I've felt all day to show.

“There’s just nothing else to say. I think you’re right. There’s probably no way for you to have a normal life. Your situation seems doomed and your life has been filled with pain and right now I can’t think of any solution or words of comfort. Faced with everything you’ve told me and everything you’ve shown me, I am just about as pessimistic as you are. I could claim otherwise, but you’d know I was lying, and I’m sick of these fucking mind games.

“I can’t consent to the idea of you causing so much destruction, and doing something that I still believe you would hate yourself for. But if you’re determined to grow anyway, there is absolutely nothing I can do to stop you. I have never felt more powerless. There is nothing, *nothing* significant I can do.

“But the only thing that sort of makes sense to me, right now, is that your apartment is messy, and it’s making you stressed.”

“I just told you that it doesn’t matter.”

“I know. But it was still a part of why you destroyed everything. You said so.”

“There were a lot of reasons.”

“Yes, but the mess is the only one I can do anything about. It’s stupid, I know, but I just don’t like you being in a trashed apartment, even if you are about to destroy it. I don’t like you suffering. So I have to believe that, *somehow*, that this is... that I can...”

I trail off, unable to find the right words, and Grace gives no response; she only looks at me with an unreadable expression. After a few moments of this, I heave a massive sigh and go back to cleaning. Once all the major shards are gathered, I scoop them onto the pan and throw them away. Then I spend about ten minutes vacuuming.

Grace speaks up, almost shyly. “I think there were some by the door. Hold on.”

Her legs lift enough to show some splinters, which I vacuum as quickly as I can so she can lower them again. As the adrenaline fades, my head and my pelvis start to ache again, but I grit my teeth and keep cleaning. The vacuuming job is a lot easier than normal thanks to all the furniture having been moved out of the way. After the floor’s clean, Grace reminds me that a lot of things have been knocked over in the kitchen, and she’s punched a hole in the microwave, so I tidy that up too.

“Hey, Grace,” I eventually say, “The carpet should be safe now. Could we let Hamlet out?”

“I suppose that would be good.”

I travel under her and through her hair again, but just when I'm about to open the door, Grace asks me something.

"Would you... never mind."

"What is it?"

"I forgot to scoop the kitty litter. Would you be willing to...?"

"Of course."

So I scoop the litter box, and let Hamlet out. He paws at Grace's hair as I bring him through the curtain. Then I go to the bedroom and clean the things that the kitten's knocked around. Grace has a few more requests, and I set about them as best I can, although truthfully I'm getting worn out. At one point, while I'm cleaning out the toothpaste in the sink, I hear Grace giggle from the living room.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, nothing. Hamlet is very curious about how the couch has been moved, is all."

At last, Grace's apartment is about as tidy as we can manage (at least considering all the holes that are still around). Succumbing to the complaints of my body, I lie in the middle of the living room, idly rubbing my hand against the nice rows the vacuum left in the carpet. My head shoots another throb of pain, making me wince.

"Nathan? What is it?"

"Oh. Nothing. I've just had a bad headache from how much I drank, and I guess the stress of all this has kept it from going away. Not to mention my pelvis."

"Your... pelvis?"

"From last night."

"You mean... oh. Oh! I'm so sorry! I... how large was I?"

"A bit over seven feet."

"Oh, good heavens... I'm so sorry. I wasn't quite myself."

"I understand."

"But still, you look so exhausted down there..."

I hear loud shifting, but don't bother to look at it. Giant hands scoop me delicately and lift me to where Grace lies. She cradles me against her sternum, stroking my hair with her thumb.

"There we are. I hope this makes up for it, somewhat."

“It feels nice. Like a heated bathroom floor, or something. But softer.”

She giggles. “That makes me happy.”

We lie together for a long time. I’m so tired at this point that if Grace broke out of the building I’d hardly react.

“Is there anything else you wanted to do?” Grace says.

“I can’t think of anything.”

“Alright.” A pause. “My apartment does look very nice now. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Several moments pass. I can feel Grace’s breaths get longer and longer. Hamlet has lain down on his side and fallen asleep.

“I suppose now’s the time to do it,” she says.

I sigh. There’s nothing for it, I guess.

Several moments pass. Confused, I look up at Grace. “Are you... are you gonna?”

“Oh. Sure. Yes.” She’s looking at Hamlet, a crease forming between her brows. “I’m just thinking about my neighbor across the hall, is all. She’s this very old lady. I don’t know her, really, but she’s cute in that way old people are.”

“Especially now that she’s the size of your calf.”

“Yes. Especially now.”

The evening cicada song buzzes outside. The apartment’s air conditioning turns on, hums for a while, and then turns off.

“I don’t really want to hurt her,” she says. “I think I’d feel bad. I don’t want to hurt Hamlet either. But I am still angry. And... it’s still the only choice I have, isn’t it?”

I don’t respond. I’m so tired I can barely think.

Grace doesn’t continue. Her breathing keeps slowing until I realize that she’s as close to falling asleep as I am. She nestles me closer; despite her size and weight, I’m surrounded by so much softness that I can’t imagine being in danger.

“Maybe not yet, though,” she says, yawning. “Maybe I’m not quite ready.”

Soon after, Grace is asleep. There is, I’d like to think, some sort of peace there. Although nothing’s been solved, really. Tomorrow we’ll have to wake up and face the reality of this. There won’t be much I’ll be able to do besides ease her pain as much as I can, until the end.

Now would be the time to escape or call someone, while she’s asleep.

I suppose. But I'm not sure what anyone else would be able to do at this point. I don't think I have the energy to even attempt an escape, either.

And she's happy, with me in her arms. I don't want to take that away from her.

Exhausted, sad, and anxious, I fall asleep.

In my dreams I am eight years old. I am back to when Grace and I went to a cliff that dropped twenty feet into the lake. I was afraid to jump, but Grace sprinted off and leaped without any hesitation, and then she cheered for me when I jumped after her. She hugged me, told me I was brave, and then laughed when I tried to hide my face under the water. It's so fun that I decide to climb back up and do it again. I'm falling, falling, and—

Boof!

Somehow, I've slipped out of Grace's hands and plopped onto the floor. Hamlet is staring at me. I think I woke him up.

Grace's arm falls away and splays across the carpet. I take in just how huge her hand has gotten. Her longest finger is nearly a foot long. I could easily curl up in that palm.

Well, maybe not "easily," now that I look at it...

I experiment with lying on her hand, while it's still conveniently open on the floor. But each time I attempt it, it just feels off. I don't quite fit right.

Could it be...?

Suddenly energized, I scramble to my feet and back off as much as I can from Grace, taking her in.

Her head's still against the wall, and her shoulders are still wide enough to block the hallway. Her hips dwarf my whole body as she lies on her side, and her legs...

There's a large gap between Grace's foot and the wall opposite her. In fact, her toe is only sticking out a little past the door frame.

I do a double take, then a triple take. I look over Grace's body again. I compare her to my memory, and to everything that surrounds her.

She's smaller.

I start chuckling under my breath, and soon it turns into something like hyperventilating. My legs give out and I collapse to the floor, covering my mouth so that

I don't wake Grace. As the tears leak from my eyes, Hamlet trots over to where Grace is sleeping licks one of her fingers.

In her sleep, Grace smiles.

Epilogue

Hamlet is slowly learning to tolerate my kisses. This is fortunate because, now that my face is above the top of the cabinets, where he likes to watch me from, I'm giving him a peck about once every thirty seconds.

I am attempting to make a french omelet. Cooking is new for me, as I never had the gumption to learn how before, and when people tried to teach me I'd end up forgetting. No doubt I've ruined the taste with how much pepper I've added, but I love the way the smell crackles when I take a sniff. Judging by how Hamlet has his nose sticking out, he enjoys it too.

Smiling, I lean forward and kiss him on the forehead again. He retracts his head like a turtle and swats at me, but doesn't move from where he's at.

I bend down — a new necessity that I'm still getting used to — and pick up my phone, where I have instructions open. It says the mushrooms need to be sautéed. I imagine that will take a bit. I really should have read through all this before I started...

I'm just about to search the fridge for the mushrooms I bought when my phone rings. I'm not surprised at all to see that it's my mother. She's been trying to call me every day for about five weeks now.

I sigh. There has to be a day where I finally answer her. No reason for it not to be now, I suppose.

“Good morning.”

“She deigns to answer.”

“Mhm.”

I pull out a smaller pan for the sautéing. Mum doesn't say a word while I do this. I realize that she's waiting for me to apologize.

“To what do I owe this call?”

“What sort of message are you trying to send?”

“Message?”

“This way you've been avoiding us! The way some... some *suspicious* man turned us away like trespassers whenever we tried to see you. You're acting like a child, Grace. My mistake for assuming you were more mature by now than to—”

“Oh, that was Nathan.”

“Who?”

“Nathan! You remember Nathan, right? My friend from the first time we lived here?”

The oil is spread out on the pan. I press the phone against my ear with my shoulder and start chopping up the mushrooms.

“Was Nathan that boy who cried at everything?”

“Yes, him. We ran into each other again. Can you believe that? He’s been helping me adjust.”

“Adjust to *what?*”

Being giant, mostly. It took me two weeks until I was able to shrink to my current size, at which point I plateaued. I needed Nathan’s help to get food, take care of Hamlet, cut and dispose of the absurd amount of hair I had grown, write my correspondence, bathe myself (a task in which I may have gotten some pleasure from his embarrassment), and, of course, to send away my parents whenever they tried to drop in on me.

But I’m not sure my mother is ready to hear about that, yet. “Oh, you know. Finding a better psychiatrist. Catching up on school. Remodeling the apartment for Hamlet. I’ve put up these adorable shelves for him to run around on. He seems happy having his own space. Let me show you.”

“You’ve stopped seeing Ms. Tajima!? Do you know how much money we spent to find someone with as many credentials as—”

Ignoring my mother, I leave the kitchenette and take pictures of the wall-mounted shelves that Nathan and I set up for Hamlet. It didn’t take long for me to realize that I probably intimidated him by being so large, and that he might feel more comfortable with perches to watch me from, so we’ve put them all around the apartment. He’s been much more agreeable ever since, and it’s fun that he can follow me from room to room without me tripping on him. Tripping over things is a very real problem, with this new chest of mine. I return to the stove and take a picture of Hamlet atop the cabinets for good measure.

“—and to make such a decision without any of our input is—”

“I’ve sent some pictures.”

“*Listen* to your mother when she talks to you.”

“I thought you said you wanted pictures of Hamlet.”

“Grace, this isn’t funny. If you think your father and I are fools enough to condone such recklessness, you are sorely mistaken.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it. Who do you think is *paying* for that apartment of yours, and for your appointments, and for your schooling, and for—”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that. I can support myself.”

“They’re paying people to be slobs now?”

“They’re paying me for research purposes. I’ve had a bit of a growth spurt lately, and the people at the university were... rather curious about it. They asked if they could study me, and I declined, and then they offered money, but I still wasn’t up for it, and... well, this went on for a while, but they eventually offered me quite a bit. And I even get to keep anonymous — they only use my initials when they write about it.”

“How much?”

“Quite a bit.”

“For a *growth spurt*?”

“I’m seven foot ten, now.”

“If you keep being smart with me I’m going to hang up.”

“I’m not being smart — I really am seven foot ten. I worry about father’s heart, if he saw me.” I’m being sincere with that. Maisie almost died when she saw me, and her heart’s fine, as far as I’m aware. “That’s part of the reason why I’ve had Nathan keeping you away.”

I use my knife to wipe all the mushroom bits off my cutting board and onto the sauté pan. Hopefully I’m not too late.

I realize that Mother hasn’t replied. I check my phone and see that she has, indeed, hung up. That’s unfortunate. I was looking forward to telling her about what happened to my bosom.

I scrape the mushrooms off the pan and onto the omelet. I take another long sniff, smiling at the new, savory smell. If my mother’s hung up like that, I suppose that means she’s on her way to my apartment to demand to see me. I think I’ll be nice and let her in. I doubt she’ll be very frightening this time.

I lean forward to sniff the omelet again, and my chest knocks over a pepper grinder. I can't help but giggle. I wonder if I'll even be able to *see* my mother, under there.

. . .

Today marks the beginning of Nathan and I's celebration. We trundle our bags down the boarding bridge, and he's trying very hard not to sneak peaks at the way I have to duck my head to fit. I did some research before we arrived and learned that the ceilings of these tunnels were a mere seven-foot-seven. Despite that, I have to fight my smile the whole way at how flustered Nathan is getting about this. Especially because, clumsy woman that I am, my hips keep brushing against him. My mistake.

The cabin's ceiling is nearly a foot shorter than the bridge's was, and I have no choice but to loom over everyone else, with my back against the ceiling. I have an excellent view of the luggage carriers. I suppose by all rights I should be frustrated by this, but there's a little girl we pass who looks up with me with wonder, and it makes me so glad to think that she sees me as someone magical.

This is our second flight of the day, taking us from Chicago to Seville. Conservatively, it is going to be a fourteen hour flight across the Atlantic. I've spent years afraid of flying — when I was a girl, I became so frustrated by the conditions of my family's moving flight to the States that I grew three inches and worried I'd destroy the plane — and I never thought I'd be able to take this risk again.

I am technically still cursed. If I were to get very, very upset, I would grow again. But it's funny. Ever since I've told myself that it's okay to be upset by things, I've been finding that I'm happy with most of what's happened around me. There are annoyances, of course, and things that trouble me, but I feel like I can handle it. And, even if I can't, even if I do grow, I have Nathan. I'll probably be quite a few inches taller by the end of my life, even with the shrinking that happens when I have him there to comfort me, but that can't be worth spoiling my whole life over, can it?

When it comes to this flight, the only person who I *really* feel bad for is Nathan himself, who's going to have to listen to fourteen hours of fun facts about Spanish architecture. Another reason I feel sorry for him is that I was very careful to ensure that

he boarded the plane before I did, so that he'd be ahead of me and therefore forced to take the window seat, where I could keep him nice and trapped.

Just after I've gotten my sketchpad from my purse, and just as Nathan's adjusting himself, I make a concerned face.

"Oh, dear. I'm going to regret being all the way over here. I'm missing out on the window view."

"Oh! Uh, do you wanna switch?"

"No, no, that'd disrupt everyone trying to get seated. Here, let me just..."

Leaning across Nathan, I open the window cover and take a nice, long view of the airport runways. And while doing this I, perhaps, purely by accident, press my bosom rather close to his face. How silly of me. A woman with Gs should really know better.

"It's so exciting to be on a plane again!" I shift my weight to the side, feel a pleasant squish. "Look at all that open space. It's a marvel, I think, just how massive airports are. It makes you appreciate how big the world really is, don't you think?"

His voice is muffled. "Y-yeah, I..."

"Oh, look! Another plane's started moving!" I press my face closer to the glass, wrap an arm around the back of Nathan's neck. "Isn't it impressive how they manage to coordinate all this?"

"Grace..." he sounds like he can hardly breathe. Maybe I should show at least a little pity.

"Hm? Oh! Sorry." I pull back, smiling innocently. "I'm still getting used to all this flying business. I hadn't noticed how..." I scoot a few inches closer. My hips are too large for one seat, pressing into Nathan's territory. "...how *close* we are, here."

Nathan sputters something unintelligible and looks out the window. You would think that, after standing up to a giant bent on destroying the city, he'd have better composure than this.

I've spent my whole life terrified of growing. So, when I realized that I wouldn't shrink anymore past seven foot ten, I was gloomy about my prospects. But seeing Nathan squirming there in his seat, trying not to consider all the ways he'll be tormented over the next fourteen hours, I find myself thinking that my height won't be too terrible to live with. In fact, I think I'll rather enjoy it.

THE END.

...

At the end of spring, 2025, I was torn between focusing on my writing and assisting on a project that would have meant a lot to a dear friend of mine. This special friend did not hesitate in granting me permission to focus on the story that you have now finished, even though it meant sacrificing something they were excited for. If you have read this, dear friend, thank you, and consider this the story's dedication. I'll clean your apartment a thousand more times, if I have to. Even if you're thirty feet tall.