

A few years ago

In the dim of the truck's dashboard lights, Bix's hand reached toward the steering wheel. "Hold on a second," he said.

"At ease, soldier." I swatted him away and kept my eyes on the road. We'd already had this argument back in the parking lot of the bar where we'd met the guy from his old unit and his wife. Out of earshot, of course, closing ranks. He usually drove—he couldn't stand to be a passenger—but he'd had one too many at dinner. Three too many. Even so, I'd had to go low to get the keys from him. *You get a DUI, I'd said. I'll have to drive you everywhere for a year.* I didn't know if that's how it went or not, but neither did he, and also he was drunk.

"Take a nap or something," I said.

"Eden, pull over."

"You getting sick?" I let off on the gas, pulled to the edge of the road, and unlocked the doors. Bix stayed buckled. "What?"

"Just . . ." He squinted out the windshield. "I don't know. Is that weird?"

Our headlights picked up a pair of bright eyes in the brush. Beyond that, an empty field. We were stopped in the home-

bound lanes of the divided highway, still more than an hour away from our front door. A black sky wrapped around us. A car approached, but it was distant.

“What? Is what weird?” I said.

When he didn’t answer, I looked over at him again. He was shadow. “You going to puke or what?”

“Just . . . hang back,” he said.

I put the truck in park with a sigh. Drunks. I wanted my bed, the fresh sheets I’d put on. We should have left the bar hours ago, as far as we’d had to travel. Of course there were a lot of stories to get through, a lot of inside jokes until the guys were all red-faced and drawing attention. The wife I’d known from base housing in Fayette Nam, as we called it. Me in North Carolina back when Bix was on the ground in Fallujah. She had as much patience as anyone could expect for dinner and nostalgia, but even she had started yawning into the back of her hand. Rounds got poured. Things got late. And now—well, Bix could take the guest room, if he was going to be sick all night.

He blinked, squinted past me. I was admiring him, my handsome husband, when I realized how bright the night had become.

Out the windshield, the headlights of the approaching car had grown intense—far too bright and too quickly. In the moment I realized what was happening—

“What the—”

—the car rushed past us at speed, on our side of the highway instead of its own, almost in our lane.

We shook, and dust and debris lashed against the truck.

Bix whipped around, pulling against his seat belt to watch the car’s red taillights disappear.

“—hell,” I said.

“Dude’s having a wild night, that’s what the hell.”

It was Army to both respect the rules and scorn them. But I was not Army, and neither was Bix, anymore. “He’s going to kill someone,” I said. I put the truck in gear and pulled onto the road. Bix tucked his arms across his chest and let his neck cradle into the sling of the seat belt. He mumbled something.

“What?”

“If he was going to kill someone . . .” He swallowed the rest of it, his head lolling back.

“What?” I said again.

He had begun to snore. I turned on talk radio to keep me company, but it was still a long way home. I kept myself alert trying to figure it out. *If he was going to kill someone . . .* what?

When we got home, I shook him awake, gently, to go inside. His eyes opened, red and bleary, and I wondered what kind of night we would have. Scale of one to ten. But then he unbuckled the seat belt and opened the door on his own, walked a straight line to the door, and patted his pockets for the keys before he remembered he didn’t have them. He waited for me, sheepish. An OK night, then, at least.

“What did you say about that car?” I said, yawning. “About if he was going to kill someone . . .”

“What are you talking about?”

“The car,” I said. “On the highway. You know.”

“Weren’t there a lot of cars on the highway?”

He didn’t remember. He didn’t remember the car, the near miss, or what he’d said that I couldn’t hear. I let it go. I needed an OK night. I just wanted the sleep.

Chapter One

June

The first sign that things would not go as planned was the tableau that awaited me at the bottom of the open staircase: a pair of boxer briefs hanging from the newel post, as out of place as if they'd been dropped from the sky. Still life with underwear. After a moment, the boxers resolved into a pair of swimming trunks, which was a relief but not a full pardon. A mistake, easily. The last week's renters must have forgotten them. But I wasn't satisfied, because I had already noticed the other car parked outside, an expensive model with Ohio plates. I stood at the bottom of the stairs with my suitcase and camera bag at my feet, waiting for the swimming trunks to make sense. It was one thing for the owner to forget them here. It was another thing altogether to think the cleaning service hadn't bothered with them, or with the pool of water forming on the hardwood floor below.

The pool of water couldn't be a mistake, could it? How could the system that turned the guest house over from one

week to the next—every week of the year—break down so completely?

The rest of the place seemed tidy and reassuring: a big airy front room with wide windows filled with sunlight and a kitchen stocked with silver appliances reflecting the shine. In all this aggressive daylight, I felt safe and entirely at odds with why I had come.

I'm not sure how long I stared at the mess, unable to decide what to do about it.

A footstep sounded above and then a man, young, bare-chested, stood at the top of the stairs, speaking back over his shoulder. "I said we'd figure it out later," he said. "I thought I heard Malloy—"

He'd seen me now and was eyeing my suitcase in the same way I'd calculated the puddle on the floor.

"Hello," he said. He was gorgeously brown, South Asian, maybe, with smooth, hairless arms and eyes so dark I couldn't quite look into them. His black hair was wet and swept back from his forehead in a sheet. The owner of the swim trunks, no doubt. He came down the stairs almost regally on bare feet.

"Are you late getting started on your way?" I said.

"Are you from the cleaning service?" he said at the same time.

"No, I'm . . ." For some reason I didn't want to say that I was here to stay the week. I had a bad feeling that who I thought I was and who he thought he was would clash, unrecoverable. I had enjoyed a certain kind of avoidance of conflict since my husband had died. Dodging disagreement was a symptom, though, not the disease. The truth was that I was a decorated soldier in the fight against decision-making, and since Bix had died, I had given up all patience for the

clockworks of life and the world around me. The casualty had been friendships, then family. Strangers, of course, had been the first to go. I didn't like talking to them, or having them talk to me. In most situations—and I hadn't known this until I'd had the chance to practice it—I could end any conversation I didn't want to have and walk away. Midsentence, if necessary.

Of course I had lived a bit of a rarified life, no children, not having to work, not having to settle any disputes or answer to any demands. Not after the funeral and the first rush of mourners had stopped fussing at me. Not after that. All the systems of my life had been set up well beforehand, and they continued to *tick-tick* toward infinity. Or, actually, not infinity at all, as it turned out.

"I'm the renter this week," I said finally, no way around it.

"Paris," the man called loudly.

"What?" The voice came first, then the woman, lithe, showing off long brown legs in tiny shorts and a substantial décolletage in a strappy bikini top. Her black hair bobbed in thin, tight braids, some of them decorated with beads, gold to match the delicate gold ring in her left nostril. She provided another royal descent down the stairs, an African queen. The frown on her face projected that she wasn't going to accept whatever there was to find out. She had made up her mind. She looked me up and down. "What's going on? Where's Malloy?"

"This is our week, right?" he said. "In the house. You're absolutely sure."

"Of course it's our week. We already checked in, remember?" She turned to me, shapely arms folded across her chest. "We've had it booked for weeks."

“My reservation was made almost a year ago,” I said.

They exchanged a glance, in which it was confirmed that anyone who would make plans so far in advance was clearly disturbed and probably the one at fault. The one most likely to get the date wrong, anyway.

For a moment, I let myself wonder if I *had* mixed up the date. I hadn’t been sleeping well. Plans, thoughts, promises, memories—at times it all went a little fuzzy at the edges. My mind would wander from the moment and deep into another place I couldn’t pinpoint or explain, and then I would come back to reality with a click. A click, almost audible, like the click of a camera shutter. Not my camera, the one I had been carrying around since I’d started the lessons Bix had signed me up for. On my camera, the shutter noise was a setting I could turn off, and so I had. But that was the sound I heard when I came back from wherever I had gone, and maybe the person I’d been talking to would have shifted or even moved away. *Click*. Sometimes the problem in front of me took care of itself.

But I knew I hadn’t messed up this date.

“My husband,” I said. “He booked it for our wedding anniversary—”

The man’s eyes flicked behind me to the door, empty. I hadn’t gotten used to that little glance over my shoulder. It still hurt. He should have been there, backing me up. Though backing me up had not been his best quality.

“Before he died,” I said. It was hard to explain, the loss. Nearly nine months later, I was still trying to figure out which words people needed to hear first. Or at all. People wanted the story. They often felt the details were part of something owed to them. For these two strangers standing in my way,

simplicity was best. “He made the plans, but he didn’t live to keep them.”

“We’re so sorry,” the man mumbled, but the woman wasn’t having it.

“It’s an anniversary for us, too,” she said.

“Pare,” he scolded. “Don’t.”

“Well, it is,” she said, though she looked slightly abashed. “And besides—it’s *also* the anniversary of when we graduated,” she said. A toddler pout crept onto her face. She was used to getting her own way. “Almost. It’s been forever.”

Forever. People liked to throw around words like that, the meaning stripped away. The younger they were, the more easily they pitched the phrase. What did *forever* mean to someone for whom the word *anniversary* was tied to leaving a school?

“High school?” I said.

“College,” he said. It came out apologetic. “Five years.”

“Oh.” I had only a handful of years on them, six or seven. An age difference that didn’t matter from my side but might from theirs. They seemed even younger, actually. But that was probably the grief talking. Grief had its way with you, time-wise.

I was already tired of having to talk with them. They shouldn’t be here. I had fought my despair and inertia and doubts to drive up here and face up to a few things, and these people had no role in it. For a moment, I felt the tug of home. This was the permission I needed. I could get back in the car and, if I drove quickly and made no stops, be home before dark. I could see our tenth anniversary through as I had all the days since he’d gone, locked up tight inside a house with all the lights blazing out into the darkness.

Except it couldn't continue this way. A set of house keys had been placed in the hands of a keen real estate agent who had encouraged me to vacate so that he could inventory all the ways in which our history could be stripped out of the place. At the end of the week, I would decide. Did I give him the go-ahead to stage the place as a showroom, or did I return and figure out how to live there on my own? He had tried to call me three times during my drive north to the park, but I hadn't answered. There were no emergencies left in my life. Except—

I imagined sunset stretching shadows into my path on the long ride home. Except that one.

"Let's find the park director," I said, throwing my camera bag strap across my chest. "We need to settle this before it starts to get dark."

"Why?" the woman said, trading in her pout for a sneer. "I thought we came here to be in the dark."

"But when it gets dark here, it's going to be *really* dark," the guy said, turning to me. He was trying to be nice, but I felt his hope radiating toward me that when we worked this out, I would be the one to get back in my car. He wanted things to go well but he wanted things to go better for this woman and himself. "She wouldn't want to start for home in that kind of dark," he said, and he had no idea how right he was.

"WELCOME TO THE Straits Point International Dark Sky Park—oh." The young woman at the main office recognized me right away. When I'd checked in less than a half hour prior, we'd had a little trouble with the process. Something in the paperwork, and the reservation being under Bix's name—

anyway, we had worked it out at last. Wallace, party of one, not two. Now the woman waited to see what more trouble I could cause, her smile as pinned on as her name tag.

The couple came in behind me, arguing in close tones and letting the screen door bang. I had learned on the way over that the man's name was Dev. "It means divine," the woman, Paris, had said, as though it anointed them both.

Neither of them stepped forward, so I did. "We're hoping you can clear something up for us," I said, leaning in close to read the woman's name tag, "Erica Ruth Neubauer."

"I can try," she said. She was young, too. Maybe the whole world would seem that way to me now.

"The guest house seems to be a little, uh, crowded," I said. "This nice couple believes they have it for the week, and I'm pretty sure I do."

Erica Ruth looked among us. "That's right."

I suddenly saw the third option, the one I hadn't wanted to consider. On the wall over Erica Ruth's shoulder, there was a head-and-torso photo of a man with a thoughtful expression. He was handsome, with the sharp collar of his shirt framing a clean-cut, masculine jaw. He had something of the accountant about him. All business. A metal plate on the bottom of the frame read *Warren Hoyt, Director*.

"Is the director around?" I asked. "We need to get to the bottom of things pretty quickly here."

Erica Ruth turned her back on us to put a page through on a walkie-talkie, then we all waited in awkward silence. I felt the rays of sun diminishing as we stood there shuffling our feet. I was always keenly aware of what time it was these days.

"How many bedrooms are in the guest house?" I said, fidgeting with my camera bag. It was heavy on my neck.

“Three upstairs plus the suite,” she said.

“Which suite?” Paris demanded. “What does that come with?”

Erica ran through a few details without enthusiasm. “They all come with access to the lake,” she said, shooting for cheerfulness.

At the sound of tires crunching outside, we gave up on talking and waited. The man from the wall’s portrait, his face just as thoughtful in real life, appeared in the doorway and entered with a sigh. “Let me guess,” he said. “Both parties thought they had the entire house for the week.”

He was a tall guy, muscular in his adult version of Boy Scout khaki gear, a green polo shirt buttoned to the collar. Warren. There was no easy nickname for Warren that I knew of, and people without a path to a nickname put me on notice. The faux-military aspect of his uniform also got my back up. Bix had been career Army, master sergeant, decorated, twenty years and retirement by age thirty-nine, with stints guarding the DMZ in Korea and active deployments in both Iraq and Afghanistan. As someone who had dated, then married into the strain and fall-out of the actual military, I didn’t expect much from this proto-scout. Either sell me some cookies or get off my porch.

Plus, I had heard the guy’s transference of the problem back on us. A management move. “So we’re meant to share it,” I said. “Is that what I’m hearing?”

“Share it,” Paris moaned. “Dev, do something.”

“If this misunderstanding occurs often,” I continued to Warren, “perhaps the language you use to talk about the arrangements isn’t clear.”

“The contract is clear,” he said. All business, indeed. “Do you make it a habit to sign documents you don’t read in full?”

“She didn’t make the arrangements,” Dev said, kindly.

“Did you make your own?” the director said, giving him the full weight of his attention now. “You also seem to have misunderstood.”

“We have six people coming,” Dev said. “I thought—”

“Six? *Six*?” For a moment my mind couldn’t move past the concept. I could feel my mouth opening and closing. “*Six*?” I had meant to spend the week alone, not in a frat house. Not in a barracks, for God’s sake.

“Our good friends from school, Malloy, Sam, and Martha,” Paris said. “Malloy’s girlfriend. And us. Six. Which is why we wanted the whole house.”

“You wanted three bedrooms,” Hoyt said, sliding behind the desk. He pulled out a clipboard and flicked through a couple of pages. “I can check your request in the system, but save me the time. Three bedrooms?” Dev nodded. Hoyt put down the clipboard. “Three bedrooms were available, and I’m sure someone would have told you the suite was *unavailable*.”

“Oh,” Dev said. “I didn’t—I didn’t realize that’s what that meant. I guess I thought the suite was another building.” Paris sucked at her teeth.

“But surely my husband would have asked for the whole house,” I said. I didn’t get to use that phrase—*my husband*—much anymore, and it felt like a soft blanket around my shoulders. I had always liked saying it. All the Army wives used it, every time, because you never knew when your last chance would come. Plus, my husband outranked a lot of

theirs. “My husband would have asked for the whole house,” I said. “It was our—”

It would have been a romantic getaway, a tenth wedding anniversary. Dev, reading my mind, blushed and looked down at the sandals he’d put on for the walk over from the house.

“Well, he didn’t pay for the entire property,” the director said. “You have the suite at the back of the house. A bit secluded from the rest of the living quarters, with its own bathroom and entrance.”

“But shared kitchen and living room?” I said.

He didn’t want to admit it but nodded. “It’s communal living,” he said, brightening his voice into brochure copy, into a halfhearted sales pitch. “We’re a family-friendly place. We get a lot of grandparents with the whole brood, vacationing families. Intimate—” He cleared his throat. “More private retreats are probably best suited for the hotels in town. Only a few miles away.”

I glanced at the other two. They probably didn’t mind communal living. That’s what they’d come for. And they probably wouldn’t let a little communal living ruin any private moments they had planned, either.

Why had Bix chosen this place? In the last few months of his life, he had picked up a small interest in the night sky, flipping through a magazine or two, but with no patience, as usual, for reading. Out on the town, he might complain about the orange glow of light pollution. His interest in a wide sky coincided with a few other changes, including a few that I had welcomed. He’d been in the process of chilling out, and if a little astronomy was all it took, so be it. Among the many knotty mysteries of paperwork he’d left behind, this reservation hadn’t been the toughest to solve. The dates

were just ahead of our tenth wedding anniversary, and he'd put away a little stash of cash, too. The money had come in handy while I'd figured out widowhood and how to take control of our finances. I had considered letting the reservation pass by, of course. I had been letting a lot of things pass by. But by the time the dates rolled around, I was ready for the change in scenery, for the chance to get out of that house. For the chance to get out of the rut I had created for myself.

This was too much, however. Six people.

I looked around. Everyone was looking at me, impatient. Maybe I had let the silence go on too long. "I'll be on my way. Home," I said. "Not to some backwater Motel 8, thanks. I can be back in Chicago before it gets—if I leave right now, I can get back tonight. I'll need a receipt for my refund."

Paris's chin rose triumphantly. Dev looked relieved. But Erica Ruth and her boss grimaced in exactly the same way. I had a feeling this conversation took place more than once in a while. "We have a no-refund policy," Erica Ruth said.

"Also in the contract," Hoyt said. "The one your husband didn't read."

I was angry and, worse than that, I was going to have to spend at least one night here on principle alone, refund be damned, and worse even than that, I was scared. I hadn't known if I could go through with any of this on my own, and now I would have to find out what I was made of in front of an audience.

"He might have read the contract," I said, forcing my voice through the smallest window possible, the fit so narrow that it creaked. "He might have understood it completely, but he's dead now, so I can't ask him."

Faces around the room fell. If misery was good for any-

thing, it was for reminding other people that their problems were petty and ridiculous. It was good for getting people to shut up.

“I’m so sorry,” Warren Hoyt said, and he might have even meant it.

“But not sorry enough to help me,” I said, and pushed past Paris for the door.

Chapter Two

I stomped past the park's green Jeep, kicking as much gravel as I could displace as I crossed the lot back toward the guest house. Bix had done this to me. He had somehow managed to trick me into this predicament and also into being mad at him again, all from the grave. Duped me into being mad at him for something other than dying. Duped me into feeling something other than fear and betrayal.

The thing was, I was afraid of the dark.

I hadn't always been this way. I used to be a grown-up. Or, I thought I was. It's hard to remember. In the time since Bix had died, I had lost track of the woman I might have once been. She seemed like a person I'd met or read about, instead of some earlier incarnation of myself. She might have been an adult, or she might have been someone who tagged along after her husband from state to state, from one desolate life milestone to another. I'd been too busy to piece her back together. Too busy mourning, I guess, and not just the man but the life I thought I'd been living.

I was shaking from the interaction in the office, from hav-

ing brought up Bix in broad daylight. I hardly talked about him anymore.

I had, at first. I talked about him all the time. I used up all the sympathy of friends, of family, of my entire world, talking about him. No one I knew had lost everything. They ran out of glib cheerfulness, and then the check-in visits stopped, the calls. The invitations. Talking about Bix drained people dry. I had to believe it was more than boredom. Maybe they didn't want to admit that this thing that had happened to me—this annihilation—was possible. Maybe they didn't want to admit it could happen to them.

Bix's mother was the only person who never tired of me. We sat around cups of tea getting cold and took turns saying his name. Between the two of us, we forgave him almost everything.

At the funeral, some of his buddies had wanted to tell stories, funny ones, stories that would have lifted everyone's mood. But I hadn't wanted my mood lifted, not then. I had just learned a great deal about Bix that I hadn't known. And by the end of the day, I would feel even less like having a laugh.

So for a long time, when it happened by accident that a smile might find itself on my lips, I let it fall away. No. I wrenched it off before anyone could see it. I was a widow. Widows weren't allowed to smile.

Eventually, though, I got tired of my own grief, or of the person I was when I was mired in it. I got impatient with myself, with the role. With the story of Bix's death, with the people I had to meet and talk with, the papers I had to read and sign, read and initial here, here, and here, with all the things he'd left behind for me to sort through, discover.

By six or seven months, I had started to see an opening. I wanted to talk about something else. I didn't want to stay in it the way I was, trying to spite the guy who hadn't even survived to see how angry I was at him. I wanted to forgive him, really forgive him, and so I began to try. At some cost, because other people couldn't. That, apparently, was why some people had stayed away in the first place.

I wanted to laugh. I had once liked to laugh, or I wouldn't have been with Bix. And now, nine months later, I wanted—something. A way back. A way forward.

I was stuck. So I didn't talk about him much anymore, a relief to the few who were willing to be around me. And I tried not to think about him as much, either.

Except—at home, in the night, no matter what I allowed myself to think about or talk about, every light source in our house glared out into the dark. It was the only way I could face the long hours of the night alone. The lights were keeping more than the dark at bay.

Now, in this far-north refuge, the sky was still bright and would be for hours. But when the sun fell, these woods would close in around the guest house without the benefit of artificial light. Here in this dark sky park, one of only a handful in the world, all efforts had been made to keep lights minimal and those that were necessary turned toward the earth to avoid light pollution. All this so that we mere humans of the twenty-first century could gaze upon the pristine night sky as our ancestors had done.

The ultimate prank.

Bix had booked this getaway without knowing, of course, what it would mean to send me into the dark. He would have

been with me, watching for the stars to sprinkle the black sky to the horizon, for shooting stars to dart over our heads. The visible Milky Way. When I'd discovered the reservation paperwork, I'd pictured the two of us sitting at the edge of the lake, our fingers entwined in the dark. Imagined days spent taking photographs of the ripples in the water, of leaves waving in the trees. A few nights in a strange bed to invigorate the marriage, who knows?

The trip had seemed like Bix's apology to me, a promise he was making to himself and, without my knowing, to me. It had all seemed terribly romantic.

And it might have been, if he had lived. If he had lived and I hadn't developed a real fear of the dark. And if six total strangers wouldn't be ruining my chance of breaking through that fear with their presence. With their rowdy, happy lives.

I was almost upon the guest house before I realized there were more people moving into it. Two more cars had pulled up behind what I assumed was Dev and Paris's fancy Jaguar. All the vehicles had Midwestern plates—Ohio, and now Michigan and Indiana—and empty racks on top from which all manner of athletic gear had already been dislodged. Two bright yellow kayaks leaned up against the picnic table to the side of the house, warming in the sun. I reached for my camera.

Maybe they'd be out all day on the lake. Maybe it would be fine.

Through the viewfinder, I framed the shot, the kayaks like giant pieces of fruit resting against the rim of a bowl. But I didn't take the photo. Instead, I lowered the camera and tucked it back into the bag.

Six people. Six boisterous athletic types in their sexual

primes, at the beginnings of their lives and relationships, before anything had to be faced or managed or gotten through. I couldn't imagine spending another minute among them. Not for money. Not even on principle. So what if they were on the lake all day? It wasn't the daytime I was worried about.

My phone rang in my pocket. I hadn't had more than two bars of service since Grand Rapids. I pulled the phone out, peered at the service. Spotty. The real estate agent, again.

I braced myself. "Hello?"

"Eden, hell-oh. Where you've *been*?"

"On the road, Griffin, what's up?"

"Just checking in to see if all that driving has given you any *clarity* about what you want to do here," he said breezily. "I know the plan—*Tuesday*—but just in case *epiphanies* came to you."

Griffin had a way of talking that made me think less of myself for listening to him, but he had a good track record of sales and a sense of style that I lacked. He had a sense of ambition that I was missing, too. The reception was bad. His voice seemed to be coming from inside a barrel, and the words cut out.

"No rays of light or thunderbolts," I said, examining a bruise on my forearm. I didn't remember hitting my arm on anything. Was I a danger to myself, as my sister had suggested? "Is there some urgency?"

"Well, I took a look around the house again—" He cut out.

"And?"

"—to get my hands on the place—just move some teeny tiny things—"

"You're breaking up terribly. What are you moving?"

Nothing.

“Griffin? You’re not coming through well.”

“The sofas. All of them,” he said. “They’re out of here. You say the word.”

“And this is going to help sell it?”

“I’ll bring in a few—just—it up a bit—”

“I’m not following you,” I said. I’d tried my phone at the front of the park on arrival. No bars. Texts were coming through. I could see I’d missed one from my sister, but I didn’t want to answer that right now. She would have too many questions for a text conversation, and the phone option was clearly not working well. “I can’t really tell what you’re wanting to do to the place. But what if I decide to stay? Remember the part where we are just thinking things through? Until Tuesday?”

“We could—” He cut out again.

“Griffin, can you please just leave the teeny tiny things where they are for now? Can you hear me? Just until Tuesday, OK?” I looked at the phone to see if we had disconnected. “Hello?”

“A *love* seat—set off the—”

“Tuesday, OK?” I said. “I’ll talk to you then.” I hung up the phone. He would probably use the bad connection to justify doing precisely what he wanted. The phone buzzed in my hand. A text from Griffin: Just one love seat? A shame that texts were getting through at all, really.

I put the phone away.

My suitcase sat somewhere inside. The car with Indiana plates had blocked mine in. Home was at least five hours away. And, even there, at home, teeny tiny things were already changing.

I was suddenly magnificently tired. I put the heels of my hands to my eyes and pressed, letting time march toward sundown and darkness and my own reliable terror. If I could just relax for a minute. If I could just get some sleep. I had not gotten enough sleep since—

And then the woman from the funeral appeared whole cloth in my mind. Navy dress, crumpled tissues in her hand, hair a bit mussed, slept in. The dress was too tight, stretching over her hips. That's what I had to fall back on, the memory of that ill-fitting dress, after she said who she was. *You think you're the only one who lost someone—*

"I'm sure it's not all that bad," a man's voice said. "Not the end of the world, at least."

I dropped my hands, not sure how long I'd been standing there. He was coming around the end of the house and past the kayaks toward me. Presumably he was one of the four additional expected guests and likely the same age as the pair I'd already met, but he seemed somehow older. He had startling good looks, the kind that hardly ever occurred in normal life—chiseled jaw; straight, bright teeth; and chestnut hair that had grown a little long, curling around his ears. He moved like someone comfortable in the world and, even though he wore far more clothes at this introduction than Dev had at his, I found myself imagining the skin underneath. I was staring. I pulled my arms around myself and looked toward the woods. A cloud passed over the sun overhead, its shadow dragging over us.

I shivered. "It might be."

"It might be," the man agreed, cheerful. He passed me and reached inside the open window of the car with Indiana license plates, the one keeping my car from leaving. He

brought out a thick metal watchband and strapped it around his tanned wrist. The watch was a statement piece, the kind of thing that came with a yacht, maybe, not a kayak. Not a beat-up Volkswagen. He pushed the watch up his arm, shook it down to his wrist, then pushed it back up again. “It might be the end of the world,” he said. “But it’s probably not. Almost nothing is.”

Something about him reminded me of Bix, though they looked nothing at all alike. There was no sense in it, really, but I felt a shift in this man’s favor for the similarity, whatever it was. “Did you lose the love of your life?” I said.

The guy stopped and considered the question. “Well, strange you should ask,” he said, letting that sentiment drift between us without anchor. “To be honest, I just found her.”

For a moment I thought he was flirting.

It wasn’t out of the question. A few guys had tried since Bix’s death. I was young for a widow, for one thing, not yet thirty-five, and Bix’s benefits, insurance policies, and stashed cash had left me set up for a life of leisure that attracted a certain kind of attention. I had bumped up against single men—and married men who tried anyway, for sport—in all of the photography courses I’d taken. Lighting 101, portraiture, still life and tabletop photography. I’d had to skip darkroom techniques, obviously. In each of the classes, there were always men readily at hand who treated the course like a singles’ mixer, who thought I looked pretty good or at least pretty available. I could recognize the attempts, but didn’t allow them. I’d had to stop the classes, anyway. They were a waste of money at this point, given I couldn’t seem to take a single frame since Bix had died.

I didn’t want men around me, anyway. Those swimming

trunks on the newel post of the stairs inside had been doubly startling because they were so—male. I hadn't kept any male company, hadn't wanted any male attention. Yet, I wasn't immune to a good smile.

Here was a good smile. I caught my distended reflection in the windshield of the nearest car and ran my fingers through my messy hair, windblown from the drive and maybe a little more carefree than I actually was. I'd had no chance to admire a reflection in a long time but now I did. There she is. How odd that that woman was still there.

"There she is," the guy said. I looked up, startled. He was watching over my shoulder. I turned to find another beautiful creature approaching from the lakeshore, this one with a sheet of sleek honey hair and milky pale skin. The hair was probably dyed, but who could argue that she shouldn't bother? My own pale reflection couldn't compete with that. Not now, not ten years ago. "Hon?" the man called, waving her in. "Come meet someone."

"Hey," the woman said, smiling wide. She had a crooked eyetooth, but the flaw only made her prettier. I liked that she had decided to let that crooked tooth have its place. She leaned in to shake my hand. "I'm Hillary. You must be, uh . . ." She looked uncertainly toward her boyfriend.

"No, I'm—"

"A new friend," the guy said.

"Are you staying in the park, too?" Hillary asked.

"That's, uh . . ."

"We're so excited about tonight," she said. "I want to sleep all day until it gets dark so I can stay up all night."

This was pretty much the same schedule I'd been keeping, minus the part about sleeping at all.

“Hills has been studying the constellations to get ready,” the man said. The way he looked at her made me think of long-ago feelings. The trouble with marriage was that time accumulated over top the things that had brought you together and hid the gleam of those first shiny impressions. Here was brand-new love, pink and fresh as a newborn.

“Malloy,” I said, pulling the name from memory.

His attention wrenched from the girl. He seemed to see me for the first time. “Yeah,” he said. “I—wait, are you with—? Have we met? I can’t place you, I’m sorry.”

Dev and Paris were coming along the back of the cars. She pouted, and he petted at her. She wore a hefty diamond on her left hand but no band. Theirs was a relationship with at least a few miles on the odometer. I looked back at Malloy and Hillary, who clung to one another. The first couple would ruin the second. It would be tiring to watch, like a nature program marathon, predators tearing cute little rodents to pieces all day.

“You don’t know me,” I said. “I was just leaving.”

Paris squealed and ran up to Malloy. She tucked herself against him for a hug. He had to untangle himself from Hillary to make it work. Over Malloy’s shoulder, Paris eyed the other woman.

“At last,” Malloy said, turning himself out of Paris’s embrace. “Pare, Dev. I want you to meet Hillary. Hills, you’ve heard me talk about—”

“But now he only talks of you,” Dev said.

“I’m so excited to meet you,” Hillary said, shaking Dev’s hand.

“I don’t want to interrupt your reunion,” I said. “But could I get you to move your car?”

“You’re not staying at the park?” Malloy said.

“Only,” Paris said, crossing her arms, “to stay at the park would mean she was staying with *us*. Some mix-up.”

A fierce feeling of ownership of the suite rose inside me. Just because there were more of them, didn’t mean I had less title to the room and the shared spaces. Paris had left out the part where they’d made the same mistake Bix had.

“Oh, yeah?” Malloy said. He pulled Dev in, pounding him on the back a few times the way men did to keep their embraces active and sportsmanlike. “That’s great. The more the merrier. The sky is pretty big, after all, so there’re plenty of stars to go around.”

I WENT TO fetch my suitcase. Malloy was the openhearted one in the group, that much was clear. But after I let the wave of indignation pass over me, I saw Paris’s side. Friends trying to recapture their youth and sense of belonging—they had no need of an extra. I could leave now and be done with all this. I’d have to find another way to get back on track. Some other way that hadn’t already occurred to me. I opened the door.

“—thought we were supposed to be honoring memories here or whatever the hell we’re doing. You can’t hide in the bathroom the whole week.”

Upstairs, another young man sat sidesaddle on the bannister, his black sneakers dangling in the air. He was bearded, stout. Behind him, a door was open. Inside, another woman stood at a vanity and fixed her face in the mirror, her curly red bobbed hair turned to him.

“I can’t believe he—”

“Martha.” He’d had his hands raised, gesturing, but, see-

ing me in the doorway, dropped them and hopped off the bannister. He hurried down the stairs. “It’s great to meet you,” he said, drawing out the words as he reached for and pumped my hand. “We missed you guys getting in. We’ve really been looking forward to this, haven’t we, Martha?”

Martha emerged from the bathroom and laid her hands on the rail overlooking the downstairs, another queen surveying all she commanded. She had a wild smile forced onto her pale, freckled face. Her eyes locked with mine, and the fake smile, painted a vibrant red, turned into something else. Her eyes lit up, feasting on me as she took her time down the stairs, one finger trailing along the railing. “You’re not Hillary.”

Hillary and Malloy were just behind me, so entwined as to have difficulty getting through the door. They laughed their way in.

“Oh, right,” the bearded man said. “I’m sorry— Who are you?”

“This is our new neighbor,” Malloy said. “Roommate, actually. She’s in the suite in the back.”

“The suite?” Martha said. She and Paris exchanged looks.

I was starting to understand the alliances and divisions: The group of friends, tight in college, all the stars in their constellation swirling around Malloy and his easygoing grin. And then Hillary, the new girl. It would be just like old times, except not at all. Not with new people.

Malloy’s wuzzy gaze on Hillary hadn’t wavered. He didn’t care that another stranger was in the guest house because he couldn’t see anything but her. Another stranger, in fact, helped cut the tension.

“So you’re . . .” the bearded man said again.

“Eden,” I said. “Eden Wallace. There was a mix-up with the reservations.”

“There was?” Martha said, looking toward Dev. He shook his head.

“Oh, that’s fun. I think it’s one of those things,” Hillary said, her eyes on Malloy. “Like in the movies?”

No one knew what she was talking about. Martha and Paris fought down smiles.

“The meet-cute,” Hillary said. “I think that’s what they call it.”

“*You’re* cute,” Malloy said. “This is Eden, everyone. Eden, this is everyone. And this is my darling Hillary. Isn’t she wonderful?”

THE REST OF everyone turned out to be Sam, with the beard and the belly, and Martha, she of the pin-up lipstick and red curls. They were not a couple, as it turned out, just friends from college who hadn’t brought anyone with them and had agreed to share a room to make things tidy.

Of course, without me in the suite downstairs, lodgings might have been just as easily divided up.

There were hugs between the friends and more careful introductions between Hillary and the others as I stood with my suitcase at my feet. I had meant to be gone by now, but the car from Indiana still sat behind my car’s bumper. I glanced toward the kitchen, where a yellow-faced clock over the stove ticked away the minutes. A window allowed a beam of sunlight to wash over the kitchen, but the angle of light was getting tricky. If I left now, I might get stuck in traffic. I would definitely get stuck in traffic. I lived in Chicago, where getting stuck in traffic was the price of admission. What I

hadn't been caught in, in even the shortest days of winter since Bix had died, was darkness. What would I do, if the sun went down while I was still driving?

Pull over, turn on an ineffective overhead dome light? Wait all night as the battery on the car died and the darkness enveloped me? I pictured, instead, reaching for the door handle and flinging myself into oncoming headlights. And then the swirling lights of emergency, the news cameras catching it all for the sake of those at home. News at ten and eleven.

I didn't know where the end of my sanity was, but I thought it might be just there, in the near shadow of nightfall. But hadn't I come here to face that possibility? That I might not ever make it back from here? And if I did, could I even be returned to the woman I was before I was this small, cowering rabbit of a person? I had to get back to who I had been—or who I would have been without Bix's influence. I had no other choice.

I pulled up the handle on my suitcase, clicking it locked. The group went quiet, then rallied. Paris pulled Martha away and toward the kitchen, and Sam followed.

"Come on," Malloy said to me. "You have to stay one night. Get what you came for."

He had no idea what I'd come for and how likely it was I'd fail to achieve it. Or how many night terrors might arrive in the meantime. "I came here for different reasons than you and your friends," I said at last.

"We just came to . . . get to know each other, have fun," Hillary said. Malloy pulled her in tighter and put a kiss on top of her head. She looked uncertainly to where the other women were whispering heatedly in the hallway on the other

side of the kitchen. She seemed to buoy herself. “And to see the stars, of course.”

“I didn’t actually come to see the stars,” I said. Without Bix to guide my sight upward, I probably would have failed the test anyway. I might have attempted to take a few photos during the day, but I couldn’t really imagine how I would have broken through the fear that kept me locked up tight under bright lights each evening. And even this new plan of somehow talking myself through a single night of darkness, unaided, was a tall order. I took a shaking breath. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Her husband died,” Dev said from the couch.

Hillary made a sound, her hand shooting to her mouth. I had lost track of Dev since we’d gotten through introductions—or more to the point I’d forgotten he existed. I shot him a look. I hadn’t wanted to bring up Bix again. Not in front of young love. Young, delicate, exposed, pink-belly love.

Malloy’s face was a mask when his smile was tucked away. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

It had been long enough now that I often tried to brush away condolences. What to say? “Thank you—”

“This is their anniversary,” Dev said.

Hillary made another sound.

“Well, uh, Tuesday, actually,” I said. “But this—yeah. This was his surprise for me. Surprise.”

“Oh, no,” Hillary breathed. She moved toward me, letting Malloy’s arm drop from her shoulders. “Oh, no, now I get it.”

Dev shrugged and let his head sag to the back of the couch.

“You do?” I said.

“You wanted to be alone,” she said.

I was surprised that she, out of all of them, seemed to understand it. Not that it made any sense at all, since alone was all I ever was. The scenery. I had banked on the change of scenery taking me somewhere I had literally never been. I had the SLR Bix had bought me slung around my neck, a gift to get me started learning, and I had. But now the memory card on the camera was empty, brand new. I hadn't taken a single shot since his death. He had given me this life, these ambitions, and now this place. He had made this all possible. Surely, if nothing else, I could find the gratitude not to waste it.

"Alone with the sky," she said. "With heaven, maybe?"

I couldn't help it. I laughed. Over on the couch, Dev snorted, coughed, and joined me. Once I had started I couldn't seem to stop. "I'm not—" I tried. "I'm not a—what's the word? I don't even know."

"Pilgrim," Malloy said. He wasn't laughing but he had taken Hillary back under his arm to make her comfortable with the hysterics. "We're all pilgrims."

Dev shook his head and lay back again, the hint of a smile still on his face. Sam wandered in to see what was so funny. The women, I assumed, had gone to see the suite, to make Paris at home there before anyone else thought to stake a claim.

I had been thinking *zealot*. "Did you go to some—what school did you all go to?" I said.

"State," Malloy said. His grin rebuilt itself. "Not some weirdo religious enclave, if that's what you wondered. I meant on this earth. We're all pilgrims here upon the earth, sometimes not for long."

If anyone else had said it, I would have torn through him with cynicism. But Malloy seemed to mean it, to understand our fleeting situation here in this house and in this world better

than anyone else could. I couldn't quite laugh at him. For some reason, what he said comforted me, more than most of the platitudes I'd already accepted as condolences. *Pilgrim* made sense to me. I felt like a lowly traveler, anyway—temporary and small against the coming nightfall. My life had shrunken to the tiniest pinprick, like a solitary and distant star in the night sky. I had come here for—something. Bix had wanted us to be here. I wanted to understand why, and when I did, by Tuesday at the latest, I wanted to call Griffin back and tell him what to do about the house. Very tall order.

But to figure it out—well, I couldn't go back home just yet. That's where it all waited. All of it: his things, the bills I soon would not be able to pay. The failures of our life lived there as well as my absolute loss at how to move on.

How many lights could I leave on in the suite without the rest of them noticing? Without some well-meaning ranger coming to tamp down the glow, which would surely go against the park's rules, if the light leaked outside. It was too late to get home before dark now. I'd been lulled by Malloy's smile, by Hillary's innocence, by their brand-new, bright-eyed relationship.

The house was silent, somehow strangely respectful. Malloy squeezed Hillary to him. They couldn't bear to be out of touch with one another's skin, even as they waited for me to agree to gate-crash their first night.

Love. It made no sense.

Wait until they knew. About Bix. About everything. Wait until I had to explain the anniversary was a milestone I wasn't sure we would have reached if Bix had lived to see it.