This Night at the Edge of the World
by nookienostradamus

Summary

It starts the way a pornographic film might: one summer, cable installment technician Matt begins a torrid affair with Madeline, the disaffected widow of a pharmaceutical executive. It seems to be a perfect match - both of them volatile, both of them lost. But it isn’t long before Matt meets Madeline’s son, a reclusive and put-upon young man who is known by his few friends simply as "Techie." As the bond with Madeline begins to deteriorate, Matt becomes increasingly fascinated with Techie, and Techie with him, and a relationship begins that is unlike any either of them has ever had.

Notes

Thanks in advance to the four people who are going to read this.

Title is based on a poem, "And You Thought You Were the Only One," by Mark Bibbins. The last three stanzas are:

He is still there, standing in the hall, insisting
he is someone I once knew and wanted,

come laden with gifts he cannot return.
If I open the door he’ll flash and fade

like heat lightning behind a bank of clouds
one summer night at the edge of the world.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

It was the scar he noticed first. He supposed most people did. The woman at the door didn’t try to cover it with makeup. It lay pink and puckered and strange—a two-pronged fork from the bridge of her nose to an inch or so below her right eye. Matt immediately looked away from it, at her lips, which were nice lips. Nice lips in a very nice, if interrupted, face.

“Miss, uh, Madrigal?” he asked. His sweating fingerpads squealed along the plastic of the clipboard. The edges of the three-ply sheet clipped onto it were already lettuce-rippled with the heat from his hands.

“Mrs.,” she said. “Call me Madeline.”

Matt clenched and unclenched his jaw. “I’m sorry about that, ma’am. I’m from MaxStar Fiber. I called you about half an hour ago telling you we would be here.”

“We?” To Matt’s surprise, the woman took a half-smoked cigarette out of the pocket of her cardigan and put it between her lips.

“My, uh, colleague and I. He’s in the truck getting some of the supplies ready. I’m not sure if I told you on the phone, but this will probably take a few hours. We need to make sure your home is ready for the new fiber optic cables.”

Madeline’s nose twitched. “Do you have a light?”

Matt blinked a couple of times, processing the request. “I don’t smoke, ma’am.” He opened his mouth to continue, but her words overrode his attempt.

“I left my lighter on the hall table. I’ll get it later.” She plucked the cigarette from her mouth and transferred it, shedding slivers of tobacco, into her pocket again.

Matt had a sudden memory of his mother, confronting him in the laundry room with a handful of bloated filter butts that had just been through the wash. Sure, he had smoked a couple times out back of the high school cafeteria, the cigarettes tasting like grease from the smell of the overloaded dumpsters. But he couldn’t imagine having been stupid enough to stick the butts in his pockets as opposed to flicking the dying cherry into the thick cloud of flies. As it turned out, the used-up smokes had been in the pocket of a hoodie he had found at a yard sale, his mother both apologetic and beaming at her son’s supposed good judgment.

“Do you want to come in?” Madeline asked.

“I guess I should,” said Matt. As she stepped aside to usher him into the doorway, a blast of frigid air billowed out, wrapping him, guiding him toward the unseen center of the house. He blinked a couple of times; strong air conditioning leached the moisture from the contact lenses he had finally gotten about six months ago. Irritating, but better than having to push his glasses up his sweating nose every few seconds. “My...um, Quentin will be here in just a few moments, ma’am.”

Madeline, who was already walking, swaying like a day drunk, gave him a dismissive wave and said, “Just leave the door open.”

His chapping lips parted a little at that. He pictured the cool air as a wave, rolling out into the heat to be swallowed up. Matt’s mother, who had been stingy with their own air conditioning during the Kansas City summers, would have been appalled at the sheer mindless waste of it. Judging by the
size of the house though, the Madrigal clan had money to throw around, even if it was out the door on a cool blue tide.

The click of a flintwheel drew his attention back to the darkened interior. A tiny flame hovered and snapped off and Madeline took a long, lung-burning drag on her smoke. “Fuck yes,” was what she might have whispered, if Matt heard her correctly. He had pretty decent ears, hearing-wise. He had embarrassingly prominent ears in terms of size and position, but kept his blond hair in a stubborn, curling crop around their outer edges.

“Hot out there, don’t you think?” This time Matt was meant to hear.

“It feels good in here,” he said.

“I can’t go outside when it’s like this,” she told him, leaning her hip up against one of the occasional tables that flanked the hall. “I feel like I’m a blade of grass, just bending and sagging in the heat, waiting to be stepped on. You know?”

Matt did not.

“I like the cold.” Another drag. “It keeps me upright. What’s your name?”

“Matt.”

Madeline crossed one ankle over the other. “What keeps you upright, Matt?”

He was spared from having to ponder the question or its implications by a knock on the doorframe.

“Excuse me?” The voice seemed muffled by the heat.

“That’s Quentin,” Matt said, feeling the immediate drag of shame at the obviousness of the statement.

Madeline raised her voice just enough that Quentin could hear. “Shut the door behind you, please.” She traced his progress into the house—the click of the door, the scraping of his work boots on the entryway mat—then tilted her head and met Matt’s eyes, smiling but showing no teeth.

“Miss Madrigal?” Quentin said.

“Mrs.,” Matt corrected.

Quentin grinned and held out his hand, which looked dry while sweat ran in the crevices of Matt’s palm. He looked away. Then: “If we could take a look at the existing cable connections, that would be great.”

Madeline waved her hand, the smoke of her cigarette torn apart by the movement. “Have at it.”

“What I mean is…” Matt said, “could you show us the places where the existing cable connections are?”

Rolling her eyes toward the cloud of upward-drifting smoke, Madeline turned and beckoned the two of them toward what appeared to be the kitchen. Unlike most kitchens, which featured cheery and provincial half-curtains, this room’s full-window shades were drawn down against the sun, showing only slits of white around their accordioned edges. The light that Madeline flipped on seemed unnatural, though it came from soft white bulbs embedded in hooded fixtures across the ceiling. The kitchen was a huge space, a rough and irregular polygon with cabinets and counters
around its edges and a substantial granite-topped island in the middle. It looked like it had seen no use since the day the house was built. Of course, that could just be the attentions of a meticulous cleaning team. Matt had a funny feeling, though, that all he would see in the pristine refrigerator were takeout containers and condiments with lids crusted shut.

Madeline stubbed out her cigarette perfunctorily in a ceramic dish and then tossed the butt into the trash without checking to see that it was well and truly snuffed. Quentin looked over at Matt, who shrugged. Past the kitchen, the ceiling broke away and arched over two stories of ungirded spiral stairs, the entire structure on high-tension cables moving with the slightest of swings.

“There’s one up here,” she said, using one of the suspension cables to guide her around in a smooth half-waltz to the foot of the staircase. Only at that moment did Matt notice she was wearing kitten-heeled slides, the soles clacking on each step as they ascended. They crossed the landing to a wide hall, one of the doors of which Madeline pushed open to reveal a huge but sparsely furnished bedroom.

Matt had always found it funny that rich people often decided to have less stuff the more money they made. His mother’s home had been filled to the brim, bordering on cluttered, with mirrors, photos, hideous wall-hangings, resin figurines on the mantel of the fake fireplace. This room held a bed, all storage hidden behind the frosted glass of wardrobe doors within the light gray walls. Over the bed was a painting entirely in white, its texture shifting with the muted glow from a skylight as they moved through the room.

The cable had been disconnected and hung limp, red, suggestive, from its port in the wall. An empty television mount was screwed in above it.

“You can take care of things here,” Madeline told Quentin. To Matt: “You can come downstairs with me.”

The pointed look from Quentin went unheeded as he followed Madeline down the stairs again. This time, they passed behind the kitchen area to a surprisingly bright spot in the house. Two sets of double doors opened to a patio and a pool, kept in the same immaculate condition as the remainder of the house. The perimeter of the pool featured teal sun umbrellas tilted at jaunty angles and lounge chairs that, judging from the paleness of Madeline’s skin, saw no use at all. Matt’s utility vest reflected bright over the ripples of the water.

Then something small and screaming impacted the glass door. The shrieking ended for a split second while its source composed itself, but then the little orange dog went back at it, alternating between howls and barks, its black oil-drop eyes furious and unfocused.

Without breaking stride, Madeline hammered with the side of her fist on the glass, leaving a smear that would probably give the cleaners fits. “Peaches!” she shouted. “Shut up!” She looked back over her shoulder and said, “Shitty dog,” by way of an apology.

There was no shutting up to be had on Peaches’ part, however. The yapping followed them across the ante-terrace and dopplered off into the middle distance as they reached the other wing of the house. It was still loud enough to strike a chord of annoyance in Matt.

Madeline made a sharp turn and opened an unobtrusive door, past which Matt could see steps leading downward into thin, trickling light. This time, when she turned, there was an expression of genuine regret on her face. “Down here,” she said.

The air wafting up from the basement was warmer. Madeline lifted her hand and slid a finger underneath her nose, but to Matt the smell was only slightly stale, edged with the dusty sharpness
that came with the presence of electronic equipment. A humming grew louder as they descended. Half of the huge basement was an abyss of steel shelving, reaching under the opposite wing of the house. But the remainder was paneled with dark wood, some of it recessed in bookshelves on which sat piles of books. Next to them, strange shapes that caught the spare light. A small area that contained a full-sized bed was set off to the right side. It looked as if there was no room to walk between the artificial retaining walls and the mattress. The focal point of the set-up was the huge desk area whose center was tucked into the far corner.

Matt’s eyes went a little wider.

On one side sat a trio of huge monitors, black now in their sleep mode. An enormous PC tower to the left of the monitors thrummed with the force of its cooling fans. In the center was an empty docking station for a laptop computer. On the other side, two iMacs, also with huge black screens, seemed to stare with a digitized curiosity at the two intruders.

“The connection’s over there,” Madrigal said, her voice for the first time sounding not casually blasé but spent.

Matt couldn’t help himself. “Is this your husband’s?”

“My husband is dead.”

Feeling gut-punched with shame, Matt said, “I’m sorry.”

Madeline shrugged. “This...whatever this is...belongs to my son.”

“Wow.” It was a numbfuck response, but there seemed to be no other.

“I wouldn’t even be able to get down here to do this if he wasn’t in class,” Madeline said. “He’s so goddamn protective of this junk. But they make him show up in person at least once a week. Which, of course, he hates. To say that Ryan is a bit of a recluse is to put it mildly, let’s just say that.” There was undisguised bitterness in her voice.

“He’s the youngest?” Matt asked, unsure where the presumptiveness to continue speaking came from.

Madeline sniffed. “He’s the only. It’s just me and Peaches and my precious child whom I never see.”

“I’m sorry,” was all Matt could say once again.

“Hah,” she said. “Don’t be. Life will keep throwing shit at you until you die. It’s what they call the human condition. Allan is the lucky one, in a way.” In response to Matt’s furrowed brows, she clarified. “Allan was my husband.”

Matt opened his mouth.

“And don’t say you’re sorry again,” Madeline said. “I’ve heard enough of that.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Please, honey, don’t call me that. It’s Madeline.” There, a genuine smile, if edged with desperation.

To that he had nothing to say.
“I need a smoke,” Madeline said, touching her lips as if expecting to find a cigarette balanced between them. “Ryan will have a fit if I smoke down here. Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, ma’am, uh...I mean, I may have to go back out to the truck once or twice.”

Madeline was already halfway up the basement stairs, a grimace on her face. “I’ll just leave the front door unlocked. You and Quentin, or whatever—”

“Quentin,” said Matt.

“You can come and go as you like. Ryan’s visiting his grandparents after class, but I can’t let this go into the evening.”

“Does he know you’re upgrading?” Matt asked.

“Oh, yeah,” said Madeline. “It’s just the fact of finding people here in his little sanctuary that would turn his world on end. Not that he’d say anything to me or to you. Oh, he’d just give me the silent treatment for a week.” She put her hand on her hip. “It’s not like we speak much now, but if all I have to listen to day in and day out is that fucking dog I go mad. Is it too much to ask for a mother to have a little interaction with her only child?”

Matt said nothing.

“Anyway, I’m burdening you with all this, when I’m sure you all you want to do is get to work.”

“No, it’s fine,” he told her. And it was. Matt liked the way her eyebrows moved when she spoke, the very occasional glint in her eye that seemed only to come when she was speaking about cigarettes or the monster dog on the patio. Her brown irises went flat, fishlike, when she talked about her husband or her son. He wanted to see even the false glow of a lighter catch her eye again, make her come to brief and artificial life.

Left alone with the hum and rattle of the PC, Matt got to work, moving quickly but attentive to detail, wary of the idea of disappointing Madeline. In the warmth of the tech cave, he felt sweat begin to drip from his hairline. The drops ran down his chin and pattered onto the concrete, but he wiped up every one with his discarded utility vest, fielding an amorphous guilt for the invasion of the space. He touched the bridge of his nose, but there were no glasses to push up.

He had his jumpsuit unzipped partway, its limp arms tied around his waist, exposing his white t-shirt, when he heard a knock on the frame of the basement door.

“Don’t stop on my account,” Madeline said.

Matt scrambled to pull up the jumpsuit, trying and failing to shove his balled fists into the armholes as she came down the stairs.

“I’m sorry it gets so hot,” she said. “I brought you a lemonade.” Condensation from the glass dripped through her fingers and onto the carpet. “It’s from a mix, not fresh or anything.”

“That’s okay,” said Matt. “That’s great.” Jumpsuit still unzipped, he walked to the foot of the stairs. He took the glass, fingers brushing over Madeline’s manicured nails. They were painted a translucent pink with a slight point at the tips. “Thanks.”

She folded herself and sat down on the second-to-last stair. “I would have put bourbon in it, but I wasn’t sure if you’re old enough to drink.”
A twinge of irritation. “I’m twenty-five.”

“Well, then. I suppose, still, you probably shouldn’t drink on the job.” She favored him with another genuine smile.

In addition to making his heart thump, it made Matt conscious of his relative state of undress, and he fumbled at the zipper with fingers that felt thicker than usual. He hoped to God he wasn’t blushing.

Madeline shook her head. “Drink,” she told him. She rolled her shoulders, stretched her neck. “I remember twenty-five. I was married at twenty-five. You’re not married, are you, Matt?”

He shook his head, forgetting to take a sip of the cool lemonade.

“I probably shouldn’t have been, either. Maybe ever. Of course, I wouldn’t have Ryan. I wouldn’t have had Allan, either. Or this.” She gestured up toward the house proper. “That,” she clarified. *Fish eyes.*

“Did you enjoy your cigarette?”

Her eyebrows drew inward, causing three parallel lines to appear between her eyes. “You know, I completely forgot about it. Do you ever do that, Matt? Go into a room and completely forget why you’re there in the first place?”

Matt nodded.

“You don’t talk much, do you, Matt? Man of few words. I like that.”

He felt a surge of annoyance now, watching her lips shape the words. Had she put on lipstick or gloss since she’d last been downstairs? “I talk,” he said. “I just figured you might want me to not talk and finish up here before your son gets home. Right?”

Instead of looking offended, Madeline’s face showed pleased. Even fluttering with the hint of a smirk. “Fair enough.” She rose and placed her hand on the banister, slowly wrapping her fingers around it. “Enjoy your lemonade.”

Forty-five Madeline-less minutes later, the damn connections wouldn’t work. The computers in the room were offline and languishing, their flat blankness accusatory. Shrouded in the basement dark, Matt imagined the sun on its track across the afternoon sky, slowly pissing off Madeline as it went. It was pissing him off, too.

He threw down the tool in his hand and turned away from the cable connection, skimming fingers through his sweaty hair. Light from a small rectangular window, half-covered with an old dish towel, made its way in a buttery slice to one of the nearer bookshelves. One of the strange, gleaming objects caught the light and held it so no matter which way Matt turned his head the glow still pricked his eyes.

Covering the short distance between the wall and the bookshelf, he stared at the thing. A figure made of bright and twisted copper wire looked poised ready to pounce. A lion? A lizard? It was poorly made in any case. He raised his hand and flicked the damn thing off the shelf with his middle finger. It ticked against the tough spine of a hardback book and bounced off, scuttling across the floor and under the bed.

“Fuck!” he shouted.
“I’m sure it’s not that bad,” came the smooth, amused voice from the top of the stairs. *Had she been standing there for long?*

“Oh, uh…” Hand through his hair again, wringing out droplets. “I’m sorry, ma’am—Madeline.”

“Don’t be,” she said, the clip of her heels diffused by the carpeting on the steps. “I don’t trust people who don’t swear.”

“Your son isn’t home, is he?”

“Ryan called from his grandparents’. He’s on his way. But don’t rush.”

“Hey, uh, Matt?” Quentin’s voice filtered down into the basement. “I’m all finished upstairs if you want me to give you a hand down there.”

Matt dug his fingernails into his palms and squeezed his eyes shut. “I’ve got it. Just…fifteen minutes.”

“It’s cool, man.”

He swore if Madeline said something at that moment he was just going to go off, but she seemed to sense the tension in the room, even to shape it and absorb it, challenging him.

Matt breathed.

It wasn’t until he was in the cool of the kitchen again, utility vest on and tools in hand, that he remembered the tiny wire figure he had flicked off its perch in the basement. Too late now. If he was honest with himself it gave him a mild rush of satisfaction to have disrupted the space in a more personal way, regardless of whether this Ryan guy would end up punishing Madeline for it with his silence. Kid sounded like a twat, actually.

“I just have some paperwork I’ll need you to fill out before we’re all done here,” he told Madeline. She had her shoulder pressed against his bicep, smelling of smoke and perfume, pretending to be interested by the contents of the clipboard. With her husband gone, with her self-imposed dark isolation in the huge house, Matt couldn’t imagine who she’d put on perfume for. The insistent ghosts of habit, perhaps. His forefinger shook just a little as he pointed to a printed line on the form.

Madeline followed it with her eyes, no doubt noticing the quiver. She let out a deep breath, rippling the top copy.

“I need your signature right there, just to confirm that you received the services today,” Matt said, trying to keep his voice even. Madeline swayed against him. Maybe she had been drinking.

“Okay, where else?”

“Here.” He pointed. “And here. That just authorizes us to charge the account on file.”

“Glad you have it on file,” said Madeline. “You’d have to come back and explain to me how to set one of these things up.”

A wide-eyed look from Quentin. Matt brushed it off.

“Do you have a pen?” Madeline asked.

“I sure do,” said Matt, digging into his breast pocket. His fingers slid over the stiff edge of a
business card. He drew it out along with the pen, determined not to blush in front of Quentin. “This is my card. Call me if you have any problems.” He handed over the card, which Madeline put in the pocket of her cardigan.

From down the hall came the sound of the front door opening, clicking shut again.

Matt thumbed the pen’s tab. He felt a stare at his back, long before it even could have been there.

Madeline, clipboard in hand, turned away toward the entry hall. “Hi, honey. These folks are just leaving.”

The person that Matt saw when he turned looked not indignant but confused and maybe a little resigned. He was tall, but had a stooped posture, thin shoulders hunched in his yellow t-shirt as if they were drawn toward his chest with a cord. Watching him try to right them in the presence of guests was as painful for Matt as it seemed to be for the young man he assumed was Ryan Madrigal.

If Madeline was pale, then her son was effectively translucent. There was an angry red divot of flesh at the side of his neck where the strap of his laptop bag had been resting. The skin around his eyes was also irritated, as if with severe allergies. Even as Matt watched, Ryan dug a knuckle into the corner of his eye and scrubbed.

“Stop that. Put your drops in,” Madeline said, a bare hint of menace behind the disappointment in her tone.

It made Ryan shrink further down into himself. His lank, reddish hair drooped over his eyes, a veiling mechanism. He blinked with a fan of strawberry blonde lashes, swallowing so hard it was audible.

Matt at last let out the breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

“How are Grandma and Grandpa?” she asked Ryan, who said nothing. She scribbled three illegible marks, uncaring if each seemed to resemble the others. “Are we done?”

“You’re set,” Matt told her. “Thank you for choosing MaxStar.” He removed the top copy of the carbon paper receipt so quickly that half of the remaining sheets peeled off as well, fluttering banners on their way to Madeline’s hand.

She took it and half-crumpled it, now looking only at Ryan.

The twinge of satisfaction Matt had at disturbing the basement space cornered sharply into guilt.

“Have a nice day,” he said, skirting the motionless buoy that was Ryan and riding the cold wave out again.

Back in the truck, Matt knew the exact reason for the laden silence. “Go on,” he told Quentin. “Say it.”

Quentin exploded into movement, hands fluttering from his lap, leaping in his seat. “Man, she wanted your dick!”

Trying to quell a smile, Matt said, “No, she didn’t.” His hands were at last dry on the worn faux leather of the wheel.

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Quentin said. “You know she wanted it. Tell me what she said.”
“When?” His memories of Madeline, the idea of the scar now fading into an obscure distance, were interrupted by the entrance of her weird kid.

“When, man! Did she bring you lemonade?”

Matt nodded. “She said she would have put bourbon in it but didn’t know if I was old enough to drink.”

Another flailing convulsion from Quentin. “Damn,” he stretched the word out. “She was so hot for you. That was a smooth move, giving her your card.”

Matt shook his head. “You know she’s never going to call me, right?”

“Stranger things have happened, my friend. Stranger things have happened.”

The sun was touching the treeline when they pulled into the MaxStar parking lot. Quentin was still vibrating, spinning his theories about Matt and the widow Madrigal, and the lascivious optimism was infectious. He emptied his utility vest pockets and locked the van, slinging the orange vest over his shoulder. Techs were supposed to take their huge canvas totes full of equipment into the supplies room every night, but most of them left stuff locked in the vans, comparatively easy prey for junkies scrounging for metal to sell.

MaxStar did not inspire a great deal of job loyalty or concern.

An image of the wire figure Matt had swept off the bookshelf arose unbidden in his mind; he tried to replace it with thoughts of Madeline’s lips. What didn’t help was the realization (and when had he made this observation?) that Ryan had the same full lips as his mother did. They had been pink and shiny like the scar on her face—healthy, unlike his strange, watery eyes.

He clenched his jaw and shook the image out of his head, then touched the bridge of his nose, pushing up the phantom pair of glasses and wondering when the tic would die off.

He should have known that carelessness with the forms—because of the awkward way they had left Madeline’s house—would come back to bite him in the ass. Here was supervisor Snoke tearing into him for it the next day.

“You ripped off the account number on both copies,” Snoke said. “Both.”

“We can look up her account number,” Matt said. “We have her name and address.”

Snoke huffed. “It just makes more work for Karen and Todd when they’re doing the data entry.”

“Listen,” Matt said. “I’ll look up the account number myself. Save them the trouble.”

“I don’t want you on the computers,” Snoke said, scrubbing a hand over his shiny, bald head. “I make sure that this branch is very organized…”

That was a lie.

“...that people do what they’re getting paid to do.”

“Nothing more,” Matt said, flexing his fingers as they threatened to curl into fists.

“Nothing less,” said Snoke. “Plus, it’s the principle of the thing. Quality service is the impression we put across to the customer.”
Matt squinted, shook his head. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“If you’d listen instead of getting all defensive, maybe you’d understand.”

“Look,” Matt said. “I maybe made thirty extra seconds of work for somebody after a job that took all afternoon.”

“You know what your problem is, Matt? You have no sense of the scope of things.” Snoke was moving closer, narrowing his eyes, setting his jaw.

“You manage a tiny cable operation in Kansas City, Missouri,” Matt said. He was just as tall as Snoke and at least one and a half times as broad.

“That’s not the point.”

“Okay, tell me, Snoke: what is the point?”

“The point is, you’re out of line, Matt.”

Matt laughed, a bark right in Snoke’s face.

“You need to take this a little more seriously, or you’re done here.”

“I’m glad I don’t take this shit as seriously as you do. I’m not going to be stuck in this job for the rest of my life.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“What are you,” Matt asked, “my mom?”

“That’s it,” Snoke said, backing away at last. “You’re out for the day. And I’m writing you up.”

“Fine.” Yet even as Matt turned on his heel and began to walk toward the back, he was cursing his idiot temper. A half day of earnings lost because he couldn’t keep his shit together. Not around Madeline Madrigal and not around his boss. And the truth was he needed this job. MaxStar had been one of the only places that would hire him with a little smudge on his criminal record.

He logged out of the computerized time card system—forget to or intentionally dodge clocking out and they’d dock you an entire day—and walked through the stinking rear hall to the employee parking lot. Matt drove a silver 2001 Chevy Malibu that used to belong to his grandmother. It had come into his parents’ possession when she passed away and they had shuffled it along to him. Manual locks, manual windows. It coughed and rattled but it still got the job done. As long as it gets you from Point A to Point B, as his mother used to say.

He would have to wash it soon. The windows were littered with the brown remains of sticky seeds that fluttered down from the trees around his house. That meant wetting the car down, letting it soak, and then chiseling the tough lumps off with the ice scraper he kept in the back.

Hm.

With the engine running, he yanked on the parking brake and got out, wading into the steady boiling current of exhaust to unlock the thing’s battered trunk. Matt let himself smile for the first time that day. The gear bag from his last practice session was still inside. He could only imagine what it might smell like when he opened the bag, having not been taken home and cleaned, but at least it was there. A little staleness could be suffered through. Trying to scrub out a sudden
memory of the smell in Ryan Madrigal’s little enclave, he hauled the bag out and dumped it in the passenger seat.

West Side Fight was a run-down-looking pile of cinder block, not on the west side of the city proper but at the western edge near the Kansas border. It had a once-bright mural of boxing legends painted on the side of the building near the parking lot. The faces of Muhammad Ali and Joe Louis quavered across the chipped bricks. Ali was missing his nose, like the Egyptian Sphinx. With the outside having been beaten by weather and time, the inside of the gym came as a pleasant surprise to its few visitors. The bags were new and untorn, the ropes in the one small ring at the center were taut.

Matt stood as the greasy, clouded glass door closed behind him, taking in the sounds and scents of the place: swaying speed bags, tight new plastic, sweat. The gym’s owner, Phasma Atkins, hovered by the front counter, which always brought a clench to Matt’s heart because that was the way in which he’d first seen her, the position in which she’d first looked him up and down and said, *Lose the glasses and I think you’ll fit in.*

“Hey,” Matt said, giving a wave, hoping that his posture didn’t show how tightly wound he was after the confrontation with Snoke.

“Daytime visit,” Phasma said, pushing off of the thick glass countertop with one of her huge arms. “To what do we owe the honor?”

“Day off,” Matt told her, dodging her skeptical look. “I see the place is jammed.”

“Daytime visit,” she repeated. West Side Fight didn’t really train kids, which was where the real money was. Phasma’s establishment persisted on word-of-mouth and her reputation, one which had taken her nearly all the way to the ring in Vegas before a separated shoulder ended her career. “The college students aren’t here, either.”

“I just wanted to come in and hit the bags for a couple hours,” Matt told her.

Phasma nodded.

In the blessedly empty locker room, Matt opened his reeking bag and took out his gloves and tape. Taping up was a calming ritual in itself: the loops around the palm, between the thumb and the meat of the hand, threaded through each finger, reinforcing. He was trying and failing to eject the conversation with Snoke from his mind, but he figured he would wear out on the bags and let the singing of his nerves blur it into a tolerable background noise.

He shook out as many of the wrinkles as he could from the satin Title shorts (orange, his favorite color) and stepped into them, making sure to toss the gear in a locker before gloving up. Blinking a couple of times, Matt breathed deep and went out onto the floor, skirting the room toward the heavy bags. Maybe it was the tenor of the day, but he felt somewhat ashamed of being observed by Phasma, so he chose one toward the back and slipped into his stance, his muscles stirring in agreeable memory.

Matt tucked his chin in, feeling the cool air of the gym stretch across his bare back.

One. One-two. One-two.

Very few things sounded as lovely to him as the whack of gloves on canvas. Just now, he wasn’t trying to make the bag sway on its chain. Just touch, fly, float. Stay light and tease. Trying to empty his mind. When he brought in the heavier punches, he wouldn’t want to—as he had first
thought—to picture Snoke’s face on the bag. Feelings made you sloppy, imprecise. For as hamfisted as it seemed to the outside observer, boxing he had come to learn was a precision craft.

*Jab-cross-jab. Jab-cross-left body hook. Double jab-left hook.*

Breaking a light sweat now, Matt doubled down on the power of his punches, burning out his delts and lats with hook after hook. Face-body-face.

“Good,” Phasma said from behind him. “Mix it up. You don’t throw enough uppercuts. You rely too much on wide shots and jabs. Tuck your elbow in and put your core into it.”

“Uh-huh,” Matt said, unsure if as yet he was ready for critique. That, of course, wouldn’t matter to Phasma. He had stepped into her territory; hers was the prerogative.

“Don’t just jab first,” she continued. “Give me a good cross first. Put the power of your hips behind it. On those toes. Good, good.”

Matt felt the building tension in his shoulders uncoil, though, as Phasma moved on, back to touring the empty floor. It was time to go hard. Remembering what Phasma had said, he swung a center-aimed cross first, pivoting and drawing his obliques into it. Then a quick double jab. The uppercut felt somewhat foreign, but he pulled it in from the back, aiming where he imagined Snoke’s weak chin would be.

*No. No.*

With a rapid shake of his head that scattered droplets of sweat, he tried to force himself to focus on the blankness of the bag, give his opponent a faceless neutrality. Matt remembered the sweat dripping over his brow to his chin and onto the concrete floor of Ryan Madrigal’s strange domain, remembered the sweet taste of the lemonade and the brush of his coarse fingertips over Madeline’s soft knuckles as he took the glass from her.

“What are you smiling about?” Phasma asked.

He startled, the reverie broken. “Enjoying myself,” he managed.

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re looking good. Want some ring time?”

At that, Matt stopped, flat-footed at once, his hands falling to his sides. “With...you?”

Phasma threw back her head and laughed, her short blonde hair bouncing around her ears. “Do you see anybody else here?”

All Matt could do for a moment was blink.

“It’s fine if you want to keep going. I’ll keep giving you pointers.”

“No,” he said, pushing through doubt, “that sounds great.”

“Good, good,” Phasma said. “I’ll meet you ringside in five.”

He fought back a surge of nerves. Phasma rarely, if ever, got in her own ring. He had seen it once, when someone from her old pro-circuit days visited. She and the guy had been laughing and joking even as she chipped him down over the course of five rounds.

She had a half-inch on Matt’s six-three, and they probably weighed in about the same. And she, of course, had many more years of experience behind her. A fight with Phasma would be instructive,
and he certainly didn’t expect to beat her. But he didn’t feel as though his mind was clear enough. True, he had pushed Snoke free, shuffled him to a part of his brain where the insistent tapping of the confrontation could barely be heard. Insinuating itself in its place was the image of Madeline—or, rather, parts of her. Her perfumed wrist with a prominent vein fluttering. The translucent tip of her ear showing through the fall of her dark hair. The scar, which superimposed itself on Phasma’s face as they met again by the ring.

Her shorts and gloves were all silver. She wore a black sports bra. Matt couldn’t help but notice the clench and ripple of her abdominal muscles. Would Madeline have the taut and trim midsection of a housewife whose sole intent was to balance cocktails and yoga classes? Would it be softer, with a small bump below the navel from childbearing?

“Ready, space cowboy?” Phasma asked. “Or do you need some more time on the bag?”

Matt shook his head and put his mouth guard in, stepping between the ropes up to the springy surface of the raised ring.

Phasma raised her eyebrows once, the mouth guard distending her upper lip, making her look cat-like.

He nodded in return.

“Go,” she said, the word mangled by plastic.

Matt was immediately up on his toes, picturing the bag, a blank space where Phasma’s face was, trying to concentrate on motion in his periphery. Neither he nor she came out of the gate with a swing.

“Relax your shoulders,” she said.

She feinted a jab right at his nose and he hit a half-crouch, coming back up with a cross. Though she dodged it with ease, she said, “Good, good.”

His double-jab missed its target, but he had his guard up well enough that her hook hit his glove.

“Keep going,” Phasma said.

Bearing in mind her advice, he tucked his elbow in and went for a rear-hand uppercut, going for a right body hook when she tapped it aside. She was too fast, though, not guarding for the body shot but instead sending out a quick jab. Phasma’s glove tapped Matt’s cheekbone, but she pulled away at the last minute.

She had to back away to the ropes when he came at her with a jab-uppercut combo. “Good!”

Matt tried not to grin his mouth guard out. He reset his stance.

Phasma’s eyes were darting now, examining Matt’s entire upper body for a tell on his next move. He tried to do the same.

Her fist shot out with a heavy feint that was almost an entire punch. Matt flinched backward, dropping his left guard, and she pulled back and hit him lightly on the right flank.

“Don’t go easy on me,” Matt said.

Phasma huffed but said nothing, renewing her bobbing, weaving dance. Matt backed up a step,
stretched his neck, and advanced again.

He came in with a very wide left hook but anticipated her forthcoming jab, ducking, and trying for a right body hook.

“Nice!” Phasma said, nodding.

For the first time, Matt saw that eyes he had assumed were brown were actually blue. Madeline’s eyes had been blue, right? No, hazel.

He went for a jab, which she knocked out of the way.

It had been Madeline’s son’s eyes that were deep blue, darker even than Phasma’s.

He drew his eyebrows down and drew his left hand back for an uppercut when Phasma’s glove slammed into his left cheek. Matt stumbled, losing the mouth guard, which bounced onto the floor of the ring, spinning off drops of clear saliva.

“Oh,” Matt said, before he could stop himself.

He heard the scraping of velcro. Phasma had ungloved.

“You bleeding?” she asked.

With grey swirls at the corners of his vision, Matt still managed to right himself and run a finger underneath his upper lip, across his gums. It came away spit-covered but clean. “No,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “You did a good job. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” His voice sounded tight, ungenerous to his own ears. “Fine.” He was blinking back tears from the ache in his cheek.

“Take a minute.”

Matt nodded. While his vision cleared he ungloved and picked up the mouth guard, swiping his forearm across his hairline.

“Nice job switching it up with the uppercuts,” Phasma said. “You just have to watch out for your left side. Make sure your opponent’s right hand is out of commission if you’re trying for an uppercut, otherwise your face is unprotected.”

“Obviously,” Matt said. Clenching his teeth hurt but he couldn’t help it.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” she told him. “You did good. Relax your shoulders and remember your guard. You’re moving much more like an athlete now, Matt.”

With the pain fading, Matt took a breath, let the sound of his own name on Phasma’s lips sink in. Remembering the way that Madeline’s pink mouth had formed the single syllable. “Thanks,” he said.

“Back to the bags?”

“I think I’m done for the day.”

At only two o’clock, the afternoon stretched hot and languorous before him as he loaded his gear into his trunk. When he opened it, heat waves quivered up from its depths, making the lumpy
parking lot outside West Side Fight shimmer. He sat in the driver’s seat, door open, waiting for the laboring air conditioning to take effect.

Only when he was cooler did Matt realize that he was starving. He had chicken salad at his place that would now be on the verge of going bad as the refrigerator struggled, but what he wanted was a burger. Couldn’t really afford it—especially not after the sharp and brutal cut his next biweekly check would take on account of this wasted day—but he figured he was overdue a visit at his parents’ place, and his mom always slipped him a twenty when he left. If he could stretch the half-tank of gas he already had by taking the car only to and from work until Friday, he was pretty sure he could make things work. All seemed to be in a pleasing and rose-tinted fog, anyway, with Phasma’s well-placed punch having knocked something askew in Matt’s tightly wound head, if only for the moment.

Guiding the car back eastward, he found himself after half an hour in the parking lot of the Red Robin on 40. There were any number of burger joints he could have chosen on the way rather than veering south and going to the one where Jessy worked. To be honest he wasn’t even sure if she still had the job there, but it was a familiar run and he was on punch-drunk autopilot.

The restaurant was cool and smelled of fry grease, making Matt’s stomach complain. “Is Jessy here today?” he asked the hostess.

“Yup,” the girl said. “Do you want her section?”

“Yeah,” said Matt. “Sure.” He followed her to a booth over which hung a glass-shaded lamp that broke the light into amber and red roundels and scattered it across the wall. He ducked to avoid knocking his head on the thing as he sat. His heart sped up just a little and he pretended to read the menu as someone approached the table and set a weeping glass in front of him on the laminated wood.

“Hi, there. Welcome to Red Robin.”

It was definitely her voice. Matt looked up and saw that the pale bleach-blonde hair had been replaced with a more conservative brown, though she flouted propriety in a small way by sportig a pink streak.

“Hey, Jessy.” She was not a Jessica; Jessy wasn’t short for anything. It was just her name. Matt had inquired after its origin when they had first started dating two years back. At the time, she had told him that it was a feminized version of Jesse James, as her absentee father had a fascination with the old American outlaw. Later, at a party, she had told another girl that it was the compromise between what her mother had wanted to name her (Betsy) and what her father had wanted to call her, which she claimed was “Jezebel.” Every time afterward—and they would make a joke of it—she thought up a different story.

“Hi?” she said, at last looking up from her notepad. “Do I—oh, shit, Matt.”

“Is that bad?”

“Damn, baby. I didn’t recognize you without your glasses.”

Baby. That one hurt just a little, even after seven months. “It’s me,” he said, turning his hands palm-up.

“Well, come here,” she said, putting the pad of paper on the table. “Give me a hug. I can’t believe you just showed up.”
He was only conscious that he might smell bad from his time at the gym after he had wrapped his arms around her waist. Jessy herself smelled of the same cotton-candy body spray she had used while they were together. The scent had nothing close to the complexity that Madeline’s perfume held, twining through the heavy notes of tobacco. If he stunk, she gave no sign she noticed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Visiting my parents.”

“Don’t they live up in Sugar Creek?”

Matt nodded. “Coming from my boxing gym.”

“Thought I smelled boy sweat,” Jessy said, sticking out her tongue.

_So much for that._

“You’re boxing, huh? That’s pretty cool.”

The two of them had had their final schism after a comparatively mild fight, though Matt had ripped the wind chime from its eyehook on Jessy’s grandmother’s porch and tossed it clanging into the yard. That, and not the reason for the fight, Jessy claimed was the final straw, calling him a “child.” They broke up right there on the front porch and then he had to drive her all the way back into the city with the both of them enrobed in an uncomfortable silence.

He didn’t remember the last word he had said to her.

“Yeah,” he said now.

“Does it…” she started. “I mean, that’s great.”

Matt was certain she had been about to say, _Does it help?_ “I know you can’t really talk. Can I get the bleu cheese burger?”

“Absolutely,” she said, with the tiniest flash of hurt in her eyes at what probably seemed like a dismissal.

“I don’t want to get you in trouble with your manager,” Matt said. “I sort of got in trouble with mine this morning.”

The smile returned to Jessy’s face. “Oh, Matt. Let me go put your order in. I gotta take care of my other tables, but I’ll stop by and chat if I can.”

Because the dinner rush had yet to begin, Matt got his burger and fries within ten minutes. He polished off the entire thing, still dredging soggy fries through ketchup even though he had begun to feel full a long time ago. He gave Jessy a more generous tip than he could afford, effectively canceling out the money his mother would give him, but was gratified when, right before he left, she said, “Text me sometime, okay?”

Rush hour up on the 435 loop dragged out Matt’s arrival time at his parents’ small house until about six o’clock, but he saw the Kia in the driveway and knew that his mom was already home from her job at the fabric store. With his back gone out, Dad couldn’t drive anymore, so they had gotten rid of his Jeep, donating it to the Kidney Foundation instead of selling it, which had been Matt’s suggestion. He hoped the tax write-off had been worth it.
The screen door wailed and Leah was opening the door before Matt even raised his hand to knock.

“Mattie!”

The smell of something in the crock pot curling out on the cooler air made Matt a little nauseous after his huge meal.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Do you want something to eat?”

“No, I ate on the way.”

“Tough day at work?” Leah ushered him onto the caramel-hued carpet of the entry hall.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “It was.”

“Well, come right on in and sit down,” Leah said. “Daddy’s on the couch. I know he wants to see you.”

Harold wasn’t able to turn far enough from his position on the couch to see Matt, but he said, “I hear my son’s voice. How are you, big man?”

Matt’s dad had called him “big man” since as long as he could remember. It was as endearing as it was embarrassing, at least now that he was past high school age. “Hey, Dad. What’s going on? How’s the back?” He sat down on the couch, one cushion away, careful not to jostle Harold as he did.

“Not so great today,” he said. “How’s work?”

“Not so great today.” Matt and his father, people always said, had the same smile, and it bounced between them now.

From the kitchen, Leah called, “Do you want a soda, Mattie?”

“Sure, Mom.” It would be the same rank diet stuff that she drank, but the fries at Red Robin were salted within an inch of their slivered lives and he was thirsty. She came in with a plastic cup that wobbled in her hand, the ice cubes in the soda the huge kind from a tray rather than an ice maker. “Thanks.” He paused. “Saw Jessy today.”

“You two getting back together?” Leah asked.

Matt shook his head. “Just ran into her.”

“Any prospects on the horizon?” Harold asked him, solely for the benefit of satisfying Leah’s curiosity. With Matt soon to pass the halfway mark between twenty and thirty, she tiptoed on the cusp of grandchild fever.

“Not right now.”

And that was the end of it on that subject. Leah told stories about the characters who came into the fabric store where she worked, making them all laugh. She also showed Matt with a pride that was slightly humiliating a resin angel figurine that she had seen at the dollar store and thought too good to pass up. The mood went more somber as Harold said his disability benefits might be cut.

“It’s just a maybe,” he said.
“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Leah said, drawing out one of her old and well-used nuggets.

At about seven-thirty, Matt—antsy now—began the process of trying to leave. It took until eight, with Leah plying him with more soda, and Matt ignoring the hint of pressure in his bladder in favor of begging his way out to his car again.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Harold said from the couch.

Matt hugged his mom goodbye on the gravel drive. He had watched her dip into her wallet earlier, and she now passed a triple-folded twenty-dollar bill into his hand.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Bye, Mattie. Drive safe.”

By the time he had worked his way back into the city and onto the street where his house stood, he had to piss with such urgency that he couldn’t even sprint up the stairs to the bathroom. Kyle wasn’t home yet, so Matt took a shower of overindulgent heat and length, afterward at last taking his contact lenses out for the day. He dressed in clean boxers and lay down, jamming the huge headphones that were last year’s Christmas present over his ears and thumbing his iPod to life.

It was easy to remember Jessy’s smell, the uncomplicated femininity of it. Matt took a deep breath as if the scent lingered, overlaying Old Spice body wash and dirty laundry. He propped himself up on one elbow and eased away one of the earphones so he could hear the telltale squeal of the front door upon Kyle’s return. Then he reached into his boxers and tried to remember the feel of Jessy’s breasts against his ribcage. He pictured running his fingers through her hair, fingering along the pink streak, raising it to his nose to smell her shampoo.

What seeped into his mind was the feel of Madeline Madrigal’s shoulder pressed against his arm. She was small—shorter than Jessy and narrower across the chest. Imagining himself looking down at her face made his cock surge. Matt gripped it tighter, wishing he had a little lotion but unwilling now to make the trip to the bathroom to grab any.

Maybe if she would just rise up on her toes, kiss his neck. He grunted, moving faster.

Madeline was looking at him now...underneath him? Eyes pool-blue. She bit her lip. Matt bit his lip. The front door opened but he was close, very close. In his mind, he buried his face in Madeline’s cigarette-scented hair. Only while he was coming did he remember that her eyes were hazel.
Hating the idea of facing Snoke after the blow-up and likely write-up, Matt still managed to propel himself out of bed. Most of the energy he found for it rode the lingering fog of satisfaction from the night before. He tossed the crusty sock from his bed and onto the pile of laundry. That would have to get done at some point.

Something from downstairs smelled like it was edging into overdone, which meant Kyle was cooking himself breakfast. Matt put on his shorts, indulged in a long and spine-cracking stretch, and opened his bedroom door. The smell was stronger outside: sweet with a caramelized, ashy edge. He shook his head and started down the stairs.

“What did you burn this time, dude?”

Kyle, his dark hair unruly with one stray lock kinked up in an arc, turned around. He had some mass of food tucked into the pocket of his cheek. “Oatmeal.”

“Nice one.”

“This tastes like shit,” Kyle said.

“Put some milk in it,” Matt told him. It was early enough in the morning that the lumpy linoleum kept its coolness. Matt sighed as his bare feet touched down.

“That’s what I did before I microwaved it,” Kyle said.

“Was it the instant stuff?”

“Yeah.”

Matt laughed. “I think you’re supposed to use water.”

“Who puts water in oatmeal?” Kyle asked.

“You boil it in water,” said Matt. “You put the milk in afterward.” It was a sad sight when he opened the fridge; his shelves were empty aside from the bowl of chicken salad and a half-carton of eggs. Kyle’s shelf, the top one, was stocked. Looking at the bag of red apples closest to the edge made Matt’s mouth water. Maybe he would grab one if Kyle left for work soon. He shut the fridge door and scanned the unidentifiable lumps in the freezer before giving up on that venture, too.

Kyle’s stuff filled the pantry, too. Uneaten boxes of cereal, bags of pretzels. There was a box covered with shiny foil stars that turned out to contain some exotic flavor of Pop-Tarts. Nothing there he could really claim as his. Scrambled eggs it was, then. When he turned away from the pantry he could see black splotches on the microwave’s window. Pressing his lips into a tight line, he opened the microwave door. Browed crusts of oatmeal had overflowed onto the glass tray. As the tortured breakfast boiled, it had thrown up gouts onto the walls, and oats even hung down in stalactites from the top. “Shit, man,” Matt said.

“I’ll clean it up after work,” Kyle said, dropping the bowl with half its gray mush uneaten into the sink.

“Let me have one of your Pop-Tarts, then,” Matt said.
“I just got those.”

“You destroyed the microwave.”

“You still owe me a hundred bucks.” Kyle would not let a day go by without reminding Matt about the hundred dollars he had lent him last month so Matt could replace one of the tires on his car at the used tire place out in the industrial district.

“I know, man. I’m getting it. Taking extra days this month.”

“I’m just jerking you around,” Kyle said, with a tone that suggested he was not jerking Matt around at all.

Matt took a deep breath in through his nostrils and opened the fridge. If the eggs had gone rancid he would have to get something on the way to work. He raised the carton to his nose and sniffed, detecting nothing off. There was a clean pan in the cabinet and Matt smacked it onto the prongs of the gas burner. He wished he had some cheese, but at least there was salt and pepper.

“I’m going for my exam next month,” Kyle said.

“What exam?”

“For my license, man.”

“You have to have a license to be an electrician?” Matt asked. He pulled open the top cabinet and found some cooking spray, giving the pan a liberal dose.

“Yeah, bro. They have to make sure you’re not going to mess up the wiring in some house or office building. Start fires. You can actually be liable for that shit,” Kyle said. He was rummaging in the fridge for something else of substance to replace the failed oatmeal. Kyle’s uncle Luke ran an electrical business that got contract work all over the greater KC area. Since Kyle’s older brother, Ben, was significantly handicapped and lived in a group home, Kyle was the one expected to apprentice with Luke. Much as it had been since high school, Kyle accepted the mantle without question but also without enthusiasm. He had been an indifferent running back on the football team, a blithe Homecoming king.

“That’s what’s good about my job,” Matt said, cringing as soon as it came out of his mouth.

“What is?” Kyle asked. He put one of the apples on the counter beside the shells of Matt’s cracked eggs.

“That you, well, you really aren’t on the hook if you fuck something up.” It sounded pathetic. “I mean, you have to go back and fix it, but it’s not, uh, like it’ll kill somebody.”

Kyle sniffed. “Well, lucky for you, I guess. Right?”

“I guess.”

“Okay, man,” Kyle said. “I’m out of here.” He hitched his jeans up over narrow hips; Matt would never understand his refusal to wear a belt. Maybe it was because he had a tool belt when he was on the job, but one would think that would weigh things down further.

Matt thought of his ridiculous nylon vest and bit the inside of his cheek. The yolks had almost hardened in the pan when he went back and paid attention to what he was doing, so it was sunny-side-up and rubbery on the eggs. He shoveled the rest of the sticky chicken salad into a plastic
container and tossed it into a brown paper bag. That would have to do for lunch. It was, however, with little compunction that he took the apple that Kyle had left behind.

Back at MaxStar, he waited for Snoke to break the silence between them out of pride as much as humiliation.

“Got your head screwed on a little straighter today?” Snoke asked.

Refusing to respond to the question asked, Matt said, “What kind of calls do we have?”

Snoke’s jaw muscles flexed and relaxed. “Full install at one of the city buildings.”

Matt breathed out. At least it would occupy him for a while.

“I’m putting Joe and Darius on it,” Snoke said. “You’re taking a residential call.”

Fine by him, then. He only hoped that Quentin wouldn’t get it into his head to get lunch while they were out. Matt couldn’t decide whether it would be worse to get something he couldn’t afford or to try to sit there with nothing, making watery excuses about his lunch back in the employee fridge, while Quentin stuffed his face with fast food burritos.

“Hey, uh, Mr. Snoke?”

“Oh, it’s Mister, today, huh?”

Matt cracked his knuckles. “I have a regular day off tomorrow, and I was wondering, maybe, if I could come in. I can ask somebody if they want me to take their shift.”

“Put it on the boards,” Snoke said. “I guess if someone wants a free day off they’ll talk to you. Otherwise, I can’t put you on.”

Matt nodded, watching the bob of Snoke’s head as he walked away.

Quentin gave a grin as he rounded the door to the break room, holding the printout with the details of the job.

“New account?” Matt asked, with more manufactured cheer in his voice than he wanted.

“Maybe another hot MILF,” Quentin said, nodding.

“Ha, ha.”

As it turned out, it was a house with three women, of the kind Matt had heard termed “young professionals.” The one who opened the door smiled at them but soon fell away to quiet texting on the couch. The other two, who came and went as Matt and Quentin worked, were dressed for their office jobs and passed by in their sensible heels with fierce intent.

Finally, one of the two stopped her pacing in front of Texting-on-the-Couch Girl, put one hand on her be-skirted hip and asked, “Do you think you’ll be okay here?”

“Yeah,” the girl said. Out of the corner of his eye, Matt caught her uncrossing and recrossing her legs, which were clothed in sweatpants despite the season. “I think they’re cool.”

“Okay,” said the other. “Call me if anything goes wrong. You know.”

“We’re almost done, ma’am,” Quentin said.
“Like, how close is ‘almost?’” asked Skirt Girl.

“Twenty minutes max,” Matt said.


The two young women dressed for work left soon after they got the go-ahead, giving pointed looks to Matt and Quentin, who nonetheless gave dutiful Goodbyes.

“T ook the day off?” Quentin asked Texting-on-the-Couch Girl.

“Um,” she said, “could you please not talk to me?”

Back in the van, Quentin and Matt gave one another wide-eyed looks.

“It’s like they think we’re rapists or something,” Quentin said.

“That’s exactly what it was.”

Quentin shook his head. “Goddamn.”

“I guess you can’t be too careful,” Matt said, trying to brush off the residual hurt. The phone in his hip holster buzzed. He fumbled for it underneath the utility vest, at last catching it before the call clicked off. “Hello?”

“Is this Matt the technician?”

“Uh, yes. Can I help you?”

A pause on the other end of the line. “This is Madeline Madrigal. I’m not sure if you remember me.”

Matt’s reply was quick so his jaw didn’t drop. “I do. Yeah, I do. Is something wrong with your service?”

“Holy—” Quentin started, picking up at once what was going on. At least it was in a whisper. Matt hammered him in the chest with the flat of his hand.

“I feel so bad calling you,” she said. “I’m trying to get the upstairs TV to work, and it’s just not recognizing the service or something.”

“No, no,” Matt said. “It’s fine.”

“Can you come over and take a look at it?” She did put across some genuine distress. “I’m so sorry to do this to you.”

“No, no,” he repeated. “I swear it’s not a problem.”

“You’ll be right there,” Quentin whispered.

Whack. “I’ll be right there. Just give me, maybe, twenty minutes.”

“Thank you so much, Matt. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”
“I’ll see you soon.”

Quentin vaulted out of his seat as soon as Matt ended the call. “You have got to be kidding. You do realize that this is the way pornos start, right?”

“Maybe she’s having real trouble.”

“Mm-hm.” The acknowledgement was swimming in sarcasm.

“Well, I can’t exactly go there by myself,” Matt said. There was a part of him—a substantial one, if he was honest—that regretted the fact.

“Hell, yes you can! Drop me off at Taco Bell. I know there’s one on the way. I’ll get some lunch. Maybe you can just get some.”

“I really doubt it,” Matt said, but the tiny thrill of possibility fluttered in his gut.

Having promised to pick Quentin up again at the fast food joint, Matt pulled up a few minutes later into the long driveway at the Madrigal house. Whether intentional or a product of forgetfulness, the little hooded lights that lined the drive were still on even in bright sunlight. It was both welcoming and out-of-place. A breeze had picked up, and it bent the shadow of the maple tree in the front yard over the side of the van. Matt could smell the juniper hedges that flanked the walk. He paused only a second or two before ringing the doorbell.

There was no click of heels, but he saw the distorted smear of Madeline’s hair through the frosted glass inset in the door. It opened.

“Matt,” she said.

Cold air spilled out again, whisked away by the wind. Matt shivered this time. Madeline wasn’t wearing a bra, and he could see the peaks of her nipples underneath the fabric.

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “Please come in.”

He stepped past her and into the house, which smelled of cleaning products and, faintly, cigarettes.

“So hot out there,” she said. “Again. I guess we can’t ask for one day of rain. Though I suppose that makes your job a little harder.”

“Why?” Matt asked.

“Having to run in and out of people’s houses all day.” She headed off toward the kitchen, footsteps muffled by socks rather than her low-heeled slippers.

Matt took a deep breath, let it out. “Rain isn’t much fun,” he said, feeling lame as soon as he said it. It was true, though. He remembered, as a kid, splashing in the runoff near the storm drains by his parents’ house during warm summer rains. Now it was all jogging with clipboard held over his head, protecting his cell phone with one hand.

“I’m sorry about the smell,” said Madeline. “The cleaners came today. I try to be out of the house while they’re working, but I just couldn’t bring myself to go out in that awful heat today.”

“It’s fine,” Matt said.

“Do you want a drink?”
“I’m fine.”

“I’m going to have a Diet Coke,” Madeline said. “Are you sure I can’t offer you one?”

Matt was starting to sweat in his jumpsuit. “I’m not a big fan of diet sodas.”

“You’ve got the metabolism to have the regular ones, anyway. I can’t do that anymore.”

“My mom likes them,” Matt said, feeling in an instant like that was at the top of the list of wrong things to say.

Madeline only laughed. “Mothers do.”

The click and hiss of the opening soda can made Matt’s mouth run dry. “Can I, uh, see the connection that’s giving you problems?”

She pursed her lips over the rim of the can. The gleam had fled from her eyes. “Sure.” After professing thirst, she still left the soda on the counter and walked toward the rear of the huge kitchen. Dutiful, Matt followed, watching the swing of her hips and wondering whether it was affected. She detoured right, though, rather than heading off to the suspended staircase. As the light from the pool patio hit his eyes, Matt was tensed and ready for the incoming dog missile. What was its name? Precious?

There was only blessed silence, the sound of the wind on water discernible through the glass.

“Where’s your dog?”

“She’s at the groomer’s,” Madeline said. “Get the house cleaned, get the dog cleaned.”

“Was she your husband’s dog?” Matt asked, feeling somehow emboldened.

Madeline sniffed. “I bought her, but Allan was really the only person Peaches liked. She would follow him around the house like a little pom-pom at his heels. She had an aneurysm every day when he went to work.”

“Do you…” he paused, wondering if he was being too forward, even though it was obvious Madeline had brought him on this side trek to coax more conversation out of him. “Do you mind if I ask what your husband did?”

“Oh, not at all.” Madeline flicked her hand back at the wrist, a gesture like a 1940s movie starlet might make. The tip of her forefinger touched Matt’s shoulder, brief and electric. “He was an executive at Lighthouse. You know, the pharmaceutical firm up near Kearney.”

“I don’t know it. Sorry.”

A shrug from Madeline. “Look,” she said, placing one finger on the glass and looking out across the patio. “We’re cleaning the pool, too. See that little machine in the water? It sucks out all of the stuff that falls to the bottom. Leaves, dead bugs. A little automated pool boy.”

“Do you ever use the pool?”

Her initial response was only a sad smile; Matt saw its reflection in the glass, the agitated water rippling over her skin. “Sometimes,” she said at last. “At night. I like just floating on my back and watching the moon.”

“What do you do with it in the winter?”
“Cover it. You cover everything in winter and strip it all off again when summer comes.”

“It doesn’t sound like you like winter any more than summer,” Matt said.

Her shoulder brushed his arm again. “Summer, winter: they’re too certain. I’m just used to uncertainty at this point. Come on,” she said, tapping his shoulder with two fingers, “I’ll show you the setup.”

Matt turned and followed as Madeline mounted the suspended steps, feeling the gentle rocking, swaying like the maple tree shadow outside. Everything was moving just a little bit; nothing was still—even as their feet touched down on the landing. In the bedroom, the skylight threw a square of violent white onto the bedspread, desaturating the painting. Matt looked on the wall; there was now a television mounted facing the bed, and a black cord slithered out from behind it and fell to the floor.

“Well, you haven’t got it connected to the cable,” Matt said.

“I’m not stupid, Matt. It’s something I tried, believe me.”

“I do,” he said. “I didn’t mean to suggest you were—”

Madeline sighed and put the heel of her hand to her temple. “I’m sorry. It’s just frustrating. I’m sure you understand.” In a bare moment her hand was on his upper arm. “I get very tired, Matt. Very tired of keeping this house running by myself.”

Matt’s heart was hammering. He made a halfhearted gesture toward the TV, its limp cable. “I can help you. I mean...with this.”

Instead of answering, Madeline turned to face him, looking up. She pushed at the straps of his utility vest. “Take this off.” It was a whisper.

He let her slide it down his arms. It fell in a clattering heap on the floor. The quiet grating sound meant she had hold of the zipper of his jumpsuit and was pulling it down. “Madeline,” he said.

“Say it again.”

“Madeline, I—”

She slipped one hand into the warm recesses of the polyester jumpsuit, skating across his side with small fingers. With the other hand she cupped his groin. Her eyes fluttered shut and she leaned in to press her forehead against Matt’s chest, massaging him.

He couldn’t help it; his cock twitched under her palm.

Madeline raised her head and looked in his eyes, nodding. She drew her hand out from within the jumpsuit and skimmed it down his arm, then interlaced their fingers together. “Come here,” she said, tugging him toward the bed. “Sit down.”

The requisite excuses were on his tongue as soon as his ass impacted the mattress. “I don’t think we should—”

“Shh.” She knelt between his splayed knees. “I want to suck your cock. Just let me suck your cock.”

Then he was tearing at the jumpsuit, trying to get it off his shoulders with the seams straining and
popping.

“That’s right,” Madeline said, and bent to mouth at his growing erection through the fabric. She raised her hand and clutched him hard, almost to the point of pain. “Jesus, you’re big. I knew it.”

Matt felt the crawling tendrils of a blush spread from his collarbones up his neck and into his cheeks. He shimmied out of the jumpsuit until it was pooled around his boots.

Madeline yanked at the elastic of his boxer briefs, springing his cock free then wrapping her slender hand around it.

He braced his hands behind him on the bed and let his head fall back as she took him in her mouth. Thinking that if he looked down and saw her sucking him off he might come right then and there, Matt kept his eyes squeezed shut and concentrated on the sensations. It had been Jessy who had given him his last blow job, and even that had been a couple months before they’d broken up. Jessy’s style was messy but enthusiastic; despite Madeline’s apparent need she was much more reserved and considered. Skilled, certainly.

Matt gasped. He sat up and touched her hair. “I’m gonna come,” he told her. The Mm-hm she gave him with her lips stretched around his cock set him off and his jaw dropped as he spilled into her mouth.

Madeline pulled away immediately, and walked to the adjoining bathroom. He could hear her spitting in the sink, the rush of water from the faucet.

She came back into the room smiling. Matt had to shake himself out of a post-orgasm trance and into action, tucking his spent cock back into his underwear. “Thank you. Can I, you know…”

Madeline shook her head. “Was it good for you, Matt?”

He took a deep breath. “So good.”

“I have to pick up Peaches from the groomer in a few minutes. Can you see yourself out?”

Matt stood and pulled up his jumpsuit, put off guard by the sudden dismissal. “Yeah, sure. Of course.” He paused. “Do you need help with the cable?”

A genuine and ringing laugh. “Nobody watches TV in this house.”

He had to sit for a moment in the baking hot van to compose himself, letting the AC rev up, foot on the brake, hand on the ignition key. At that point he didn’t want to break the unspoken pact, to share the secret pleasure of it with Quentin, although he knew he would do a poor job of hiding it. To his shock, though, Quentin met him outside of the Taco Bell with nothing but a knowing smile and a nod.

A few minutes before end of shift, Matt put out a notice on the board in the common area that he was willing to pick up time the next day. He didn’t expect much to come of it. The poor assholes laboring under Snoke were scrounging just as hard as he was, some of them trying to support families with children. He couldn’t imagine. There had been one pregnancy scare with Jessy, and Matt had at least told himself he was ready for whatever her decision would be. When it turned out to be a false alarm, she was overwhelmingly relieved and Matt found he couldn’t decide whether what he felt was apathy or disappointment. To be attached was not to be reeling. Or, at least, if you were floundering you had another person who had to tread the water with you. He and Madeline had both collided when each of them was unmoored. He shouldn’t expect that it should be any more than a singular encounter, after which both of them would carom off in their separate and
equally uncertain directions. But part of him made active preparation of its disappointment in the idea that he and Madeline Madrigal would never speak to or see each other again.

*I’m very tired of keeping this house running by myself,* she had said. Matt chewed his lip. He felt another twinge of annoyance at Madeline’s useless child, whom he had never even properly met. But why couldn’t the kid pick up the dog? Look away from his ungodly expensive tech setup even once to give his mother a little consideration?

All this concern for someone who very well could have been using him as a toy to assuage her loneliness for fifteen or twenty minutes. Why that thought had a sharp bite to it he couldn’t say, either.

Even with these thoughts, day flowed into night and night into morning all along one steady line, something that Matt was not used to. His typical day was punctuated, riding up on frizzing anger or dipping down when he allowed himself a little contemplation. But this time, he slipped through the fact of his little laptop (a gift four years ago from his grandparents) acting up again, freezing and tumbling into spontaneous re-starts. No one called to offer a shift, but the fact brushed by him, a glancing impact like the smooth drag of Madeline’s bare shoulder.

Even Phasma remarked on it while he was at West Side the following day. “Your upper body isn’t as tense,” she said, swinging by the heavy bags to critique his form. “I’m liking what I’m seeing, Matt.”

He stopped in the middle of a drill: *jab-cross-right hook-left hook-uppercut.* “Thanks.”

She punched him on the bicep. “You get laid last night or something?”

“Something,” he said.

Phasma laughed. “How about a few rounds?”

An inadvertent clench in Matt’s insides. “With you again?”

“How about Jason?”

Jason was one of the other students, a guy in his early thirties. They had greeted each other a couple times but had never talked beyond that. Matt looked around, confused. There was no one else on the gym floor.

“He’s taping up in back,” Phasma said. “Just came in.”

It was easy to miss someone entering the gym; the door was silent except for the whoosh of displaced air. Having a bell at the entrance could throw everything into disarray if someone walked in mid-bout. Matt nodded.

“Is that a ‘yes?’” asked Phasma.

“Uh, sure.”

She clapped him on the shoulder, ignoring the sheen of sweat that made her palm slip. Sweat was something readily, if incidentally, exchanged between people at West Side Fight. A small shudder ran through Matt’s body as he remembered the clamminess beneath his arms, his hand touching Madeline’s hair, so close… He rolled his shoulders and bounced on his toes a couple of times before setting off to the ring.
“Hey, man,” said Jason, coming out of the locker room. He had a few of days’ worth of beard growth but his eyes were keen and his smile a sharp slice. The tape on his hands was black.

Matt pulled off a glove and shook his hand, or at least tried to. Jason had extended his left hand. Matt looked over at Phasma, who wasn’t paying attention to either of them. He had never, ever sparred with a lefty. “Hey. Sorry.”

“No worries, no worries.” Jason tossed his stringy ponytail over his shoulder and held his right hand out, bumping it against Matt’s left glove and making him smile just a little.

“If you guys would take your corners, I’ll give you a few tips. Then we’ll get going,” Phasma told them.

Both Matt and Jason clambered up between the ropes. Matt jogged in his corner, trying to put a blank canvas over Jason’s face as he conferred with Phasma in whispers. When Jason put his mouth guard in, Phasma walked over to Matt’s corner.

“Keep your midsection guarded,” she said. “And your chin. He’s shorter, so he’ll go for his sight line.”

Matt nodded as Phasma helped him on with his right glove.

“His combos are quick but his recovery is slow, and he doesn’t always pull back after a punch. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Matt, his voice low. “What did you tell him about me?”

Phasma arched an eyebrow. “Well, that would spoil the fun.” She switched the toothpick in her mouth from one side to the other, then rang the bell.

Jason bounced a lot more than Matt did, his shuffle more of a hop. He kept his left glove higher than his right, and both in such tight formation that they obscured his face from almost whichever angle Matt looked.

The first jab knocked his glove back toward Matt’s face, but he tensed his bicep at the last minute. “Look at the shoulders, people!” Phasma shouted.

Since Jason had begun with a jab, he went for a hook, throwing his left at Jason’s temple. It would have hit had Jason not ducked out of the way. When he did, Matt noticed that he raised his left elbow almost above the level of his forehead.

Jason sprang up and went for a double jab-cross combo that Matt was able to back away from, when he got smacked in the flank by a body hook.

“Good, Jason,” Phasma said. “Matt, remember what I told you.”

Matt nodded, bouncing, and gave his head a brief shake before advancing again. Overall, the two of them were well matched, even with the height difference. Matt learned in short order when his opponent would go for body blows, and twisted to avoid them, reluctant to let down the guard in front of his face. Jason’s face was nearly off-limits with how closely he kept the gloves together to shield it. They went a few rounds, nearly point-for-point, until Matt saw his opportunity crop up again. He went for a left hook again, which Jason dodged. But Jason also raised his left elbow again, and Matt came in with a cruel right shovel hook that caught him on the edge of his mandible and sent him stumbling.
The bell’s ring was furious.

Phasma, giving Matt a sharp look, walked over to Jason’s side. She heaved herself up into the ring and patted him on the back. “You okay, champ?”

He nodded, though when he pulled out his mouth guard a string of pink saliva dangled from it and fell down his chin, lying among the prickers of his scruff.

Matt fought back the urge to apologize right then and there.

“Guard your chin when you bob and weave, okay? That’s what got you in the end. He’s not going to hit you on the top of your head.”

Another nod from Jason.

“Go hit the bags for a little bit,” Phasma told him, giving him another pat on the shoulder. She waited until he had slithered under the ropes and was smacking hard at a heavy bag before she approached Matt.

Tingling blood was creeping up into his face, but he clenched his jaw.

“Good work,” said Phasma, a smile playing over her lips but not quite solidifying there.

He let his breath out all in a rush. “Thanks.”

“You found his weakness and you exploited it.”

“I tried,” Matt said.

“Don’t give me that false modesty bullshit. You know that was a good hit.”

He nodded. “Okay.”

“You done for the day?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good,” said Phasma. “Come see me after you’re in your civvies again.”

Matt would have to try hard not to grin on his way to the locker room.

Phasma stood at the front desk when he emerged, sweat sticking the fabric of his t-shirt to the space between his shoulder blades. She knocked her fist once, twice against the thick glass of the desk. Inside the counter display case were old trophies, each topped with a golden boxer. The figures were male and female by turn. At the foot of the trophies were jewel-studded belts. Some of them had to be from her old pro-circuit wins. “Hey, listen,” she said. “I hate to do this, but I have to ask you about your dues for this month.”

The warm afterglow of the match fled Matt’s system. “Shit, yeah. I don’t have it right now, but I can get it to you. Next paycheck, I promise. I won’t even come in until then.”

Phasma seemed to consider it. “What do you do, Matt?”

“For work?” Don’t blush.

She nodded.
“Uh, install cable.” The flame of humiliation licked up his throat, bringing bile with it.

“Do you work regular hours? I mean, nine to five?”

“Eight to five, yeah,” he said.

“I’m going to make you an offer. I’d like you to consider it,” Phasma said. “I’ll cut your monthly dues in half if—and only if—you come here to train five nights a week. With me. Two hours every session.”

Matt blinked a couple of times.

“When you’ve got your head together, you let your shoulders relax and you move like a boxer. I watched you pick up on an opponent’s weak spot and use it against him. That’s what boxers do, Matt, not hobbyists who come here when they have the time or the money. So, what do you say? It’s either full dues as soon as you can swing it, or half and you come here on my terms.”

Part of him rebelled at the idea. It would rob him of his free nights. But, then again, what did he really do on those nights but surf the net, lay in bed, maybe jerk off if he was feeling up to it? “Yeah,” he said. “Okay.”

“Okay you’ll train?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” Phasma said, favoring him with a broad smile now. “Monday through Thursday and Saturday afternoon. You get Friday and Sunday off. Miss more than one without a good excuse and I’m revoking this deal. Got it?”

“Uh-huh,” Matt said. “I mean, yeah. Thanks.” Still, he felt immediate regret as soon as the gym door closed behind him and he was out in the blinding sun. It was an unplaceable feeling in large part, but at least some of him was afraid he had closed the door to other opportunities. Not a small amount of that had to do with hope for continued contact with Madeline.

It was a hope that dwindled as the week wore on. Still, the strict training schedule had Matt exhausted even after a couple of days. He would drive out to the west side, go hard for a couple hours, then drive back in a cotton-headed trance and fall into bed. It was because of this that he was sure when Snoke pulled him aside on Thursday that in his workday haze he had screwed something up.

“Had a customer call in about you,” Snoke said.

Matt didn’t allow his expression to change, though his fingers were trembling. “Oh yeah?”

Snoke nodded, the reflected panels of fluorescent lights sliding up and down over his pate. “Job earlier in the week. She said you went above and beyond with customer service.” He looked down at the scrap of paper in his hand. “Said you were, get this: ‘very responsive.’”

Now Matt’s eyes went wide. It could be no one else but Madeline. At least he was almost sure.

“Ring a bell?”

“I always try to give my best service,” Matt said, with a warm curl of pleasure spinning into the pit of his stomach.
“She didn’t mention Quentin.”

The warmth fizzled. “I don’t know why.”

Snoke cocked an eyebrow at him. “Was Quentin there?”

Matt debated lying, but he couldn’t afford another write-up or another confrontation. “He, uh...he had to eat. He’s hypoglycemic.”

“He’s what?”

Trust Snoke not to know. “Low blood sugar. He’ll faint if he doesn’t get food. So I dropped him off at a place where he could eat and went on the call myself. It was an emergency,” he added.

“What was an emergency? The call or Quentin?”

“Both.”

The response still earned him a frown. “There are always supposed to be two MaxStar techs on each job.”

“I know,” Matt said, lowering his eyes in an attempt to look contrite.

“I was going to offer you a spare shift, but now I’m not sure I want to.”

Matt snapped to attention. “I’d really appreciate it. The thing with Quentin, it won’t happen again. I just wanted to make sure my partner was okay and that I got the job done, too.”

“Well,” Snoke said, the sour twist of his mouth still not easing, “you can come in tomorrow if you want. I’ll pair you up with somebody. Make sure you go to all the calls together.”

Matt nodded.

“Don’t forget to clock out,” Snoke shot back at him as he walked away.

Though it was 9 o’clock before he got home from West Side, Matt had an irrepressible urge to call Madeline. He looked through his call history, hitting on the number that had come in on the day he’d gone to see her. Letting his finger hover over the number for a few moments, he finally jabbed at it. The screen went black for a moment, then the call started. It hadn’t gotten through the first ring, though, when he took it away from his ear and ended it, his heart jumping.

He hoped she wouldn’t call back, suddenly ashamed of sitting in his small room with a twin bed and a pile of laundry on the floor. Such a far cry from the airy expanses of her home, most of which probably hadn’t seen a human being since Allan Madrigal died. This was all supposition, of course. Based on observation.

Matt set the phone beside his leg and picked up his laptop. The screen jumped when he opened it and he raised his hand to give it a smack before it finally cleared. He typed “Alan Madrigal” into Google, getting a did you mean ‘Allan Madrigal’ above a slew of selections about early music performers.

He clicked at the top.

The first result was an obituary. Allan Madrigal, forty-seven. The picture showed a thin man with a mild smile and a cap of vibrant red hair. Well, that’s where Ryan got his looks, then. Often, obituaries would skip mention of what had killed the deceased, especially if it was something
embarrassing like a drug overdose. Matt scanned the article, thinking it would be hilarious irony if Madrigal had overdosed on his own product. Nope. No cause of death, of course. Maybe he’d had a heart attack. One of those skinny guys who figured they could eat whatever they wanted only to have their poor decisions come back for coronary retribution.

Matt clicked out and went to the second result, which was a Facebook page. It had been deactivated.

He Googled “Madeline Madrigal.” The first result, once again, was the obituary. “Allan is survived by his wife, Madeline Madrigal, and their son, Ryan.” She appeared to have no social media presence at all.

Out of curiosity, Matt searched for “Ryan Madrigal.” Image results showed one picture: a black-and-white of Ryan standing hunched and uncomfortable next to a pudgy, balding man, holding some kind of trophy. He clicked on it. The article turned out to be a feature from the University News, the campus paper from the University of Missouri - Kansas City. Apparently Ryan had won some sort of coding prize from the school’s Computer Science department. He looked thrilled about it, too. Or not.

Matt sniffed and closed the laptop, setting it next to the bed. He picked up his phone again and looked briefly at the outgoing call to Madeline, then scrolled through his contacts. He paused in front of Jessy’s contact information. After hesitating just a second, he started a new text message.

**Hey.**

Very eloquent. He expected nothing, so when the phone buzzed immediately afterward, he almost dropped it.

**Hey you.**

Matt could feel his heartbeat in his fingertips as he touched the screen. **What’s up?**

**Nothing. Watching TV.**

**What are you watching?**

A pause on Jessy’s end. **You will judge me forever.**

Matt smiled. **Probably.**

**Supernatural.**

**You’re lucky, Matt replied, I don’t even know what that is.**

**Hot guys chasing monsters, Jessy said.**

**So like the bachelor?**

**I hate you so much right now.**

He took a deep breath, held it, let it out in a whistling sigh. **What are you up to this weekend?**

**Working. Of course.**

**Both days?**
Matt waited a full minute. *Wanna get lunch?*

*Oh dude I can’t.*

It was worth a try. Matt was ready to type something along the lines of “no problem; have a good night” when another bubble popped up onscreen.

*What about next week?*

*Off on Tuesday,* Matt texted back.

*Awesome yes let’s do lunch! Anywhere but red fucking robin.*

*Deal.*

The aborted call to Madeline all but forgotten, Matt plugged his phone in and put it on the bedside table. He was asleep in minutes.

Considering it was an extra day and some additional cash, the next morning Matt decided to get breakfast on the way to work. It was mostly so he wouldn’t have to deal with Kyle’s hoard of food or his sledgehammer-heavy “hints” as to the money Matt owed him. He and Quentin had synchronized days off, and he was glad that Quentin wasn’t there. Hopefully Snoke had not said anything to him about the Taco Bell run. Matt wanted to tip him off somehow to get him going along with the hypoglycemia bit, but the thought of contacting Quentin made him queasy. He would just have to deal with it when he came into work tomorrow.

For today, he was paired with a tech even younger than he was, a new hire. The kid was asking Matt questions in the van on the way to their first job, as excited as if he were going to Worlds of Fun to ride roller coasters instead of being glared at by people who were waiting to find fault in a procedure they didn’t understand in the first place. Matt felt *old.* He tasted his breakfast hash browns throughout the entire morning, and only the infusion of a frozen yogurt in the middle of the day (at his partner’s insistence) was able to knock it out.

When they finally took the van back to the parking lot and unpacked their gear, Matt had forgotten he had the night off from training, and was trawling his mind for excuses that might fly with Phasma. It was only when he was halfway to the gym that the fact of it hit home and he cursed himself for wasting the gas. For a minute he considered going in, anyway, but exhaustion won out and he turned back east.

Sitting in his bed at home, he found he was not in the mood for sitting in bed at all. Kyle would probably be out at the bar tonight, but a night of drinking where Matt would be expected to pick up at least a round wasn’t in the financial cards. He looked at his phone again, balanced on his thigh.

It rang three times before someone picked up. Matt almost ended the call right there, but the familiarity and promise in that smoky voice compelled him to gather his courage.

“Madeline?” he said.

“Matt. How are you?”

“Good?” He scrunched his eyes shut and shook his head. Neither indecision nor as casual a tone as he had used with Jessy would fly with Madeline, he suspected. “How are you?”
“You know how it goes,” Madeline said, with both a smile and a sigh in her voice at the same time.

“Yeah,” Matt lied. There was an excruciating span of seconds between their next words that made Matt grimace.

“Did you call me because you want to see me again?” Madeline asked.

“Yes.” It was stilted and spat-out, but at least he had not hesitated.

“I think I’d like that, too.”

“What are you doing tonight? We could, uh, get dinner.”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, then paused. “Why don’t you come over here?”

“Now?”

“Eight o’clock. You don’t need to bring anything. Just yourself. I’ll see you soon, Matt.”

He had his mouth open to say something else, but the call disconnected.

At least an hour before he had to leave, Matt started getting ready. It felt at once idiotic and exhilarating. Down to his last clean undershirt; that would have to be remedied soon. He put on a button-up shirt—hardly crisp but not in terrible condition—and dug actual cologne out of the back of his cupboard in the bathroom. Did cologne expire? It didn’t seem to smell the way he remembered it smelling.

Matt didn’t want to go so far as to wear dress pants, but he did put on a pair of dark jeans. Luckily, the shirt covered the back pocket that was coming unriveted. Into the other back pocket he tucked a couple of condoms. Just in case. That thought seemed silly, though. After Thursday, Madeline had not invited him over tonight to eat grapes and read poetry.

Doing a quick double-check of his often-unruly hair, Matt headed downstairs, hoping that Kyle wasn’t home yet. As it happened, he was in the kitchen preparing the ingredients for what looked like a grilled cheese sandwich. All the more reason to get out of there as soon as possible.

“Whoa,” he said. “What are you all dressed up for?”

“Date?” Matt hated how unsure the word sounded.

“Oh holy shit. No way.” Kyle walked over for a greasy high-five. Matt went to wipe the hand on his jeans but thought better of it. “Is she hot?”

“Really hot.”

“Damn, bro. You got everything you need?”

Matt gave a short laugh. He patted his back pocket. “Thanks.”

“Go get ‘em, tiger.”

He dodged out of the way when Kyle went to punch him lightly on the shoulder, fearing the butter would stain his shirt. “Gotta go.”

“Tell me about it later!” Kyle shouted after him.
Although she would probably never see the thing, Matt parked his car in front of the house two doors down from Madeline’s. The night air was muggy. He had to walk quickly enough that the humidity didn’t muss his hair, but slowly enough that he wouldn’t sweat. Wiping his damp palms on his jeans, he started up the juniper-flanked walk. He took a deep breath and then rang the doorbell.

The hall beyond the glass panel in the door was utterly dark. When Matt put his hand against the jamb, he could feel the insistent air conditioning pushing out. He shifted his feet, rang the doorbell again.

Nothing.

Nothing for long moments. He was trying to check his temper, picking at the skin around his thumbnails. One more time on the doorbell, but there was no movement within the house. Maybe she was out back, in the pool. It wasn’t quite dark yet, but the moon was visible above the treeline as a pale sliver.

*I like just floating on my back and watching the moon.*

With another deep breath and a hand over his hair to smooth it down, he went back down the walk and stepped into the lush grass, headed for the side of the huge house. Where he had expected a hedge row or a wall, there was only a low fence lined with fragrant honeysuckle bushes. The scent was heady and almost overwhelming; Matt was sure at that moment that all of his cheap cologne had evaporated. He raised his arms a little, airing out.

Twilight over the pool water was beautiful. It was also light enough to see that no one swam there or sat in the lounge chairs around its perimeter.

“Dammit.”

A light came on in the hallway that led to the patio. Matt couldn’t decide at first whether to duck down or to wave at the figure that slipped into view. Even stooped, he saw the shadow was far too tall to be Madeline. *Shit.* He stayed frozen as the floodlights over the pool snapped on and one of the sliding glass doors opened. Scrabbling claws on tile preceded the barking by a couple of seconds, but soon Peaches had her bearings and was screaming at Matt, trying to force her head through the space between the iron bars of the fence.

“Peaches,” someone said.

It wasn’t a shout, but it made the dog pause and look back before resuming its frenzied exclamations.

Pale and gangly, Ryan Madrigal walked around the perimeter of the pool, then crouched, snapping his fingers. “Peaches. Come here.”

Wonder of wonders, the thing stopped altogether and turned, trotting back toward the house. Ryan scooped her up in long arms. He stood and stared at Matt, not coming closer but not backing away or running.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Uh,” Matt said, fumbling. “I’m looking for Madel—your mom.”

A pause. “She’s not here.”
Matt bit the inside of his cheek. “Yeah. Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“No.”

“Do you know where she went?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you answer the door?” Matt asked.

Ryan lowered his head, put his nose right by the dog’s fur and breathed in. “Nobody comes here looking for me.”

“You could have answered the door.”

“Why the pool?” Ryan asked.

“Because your mom, um, Madeline told me that she likes to swim at night.”

“She does. Sometimes.”

Matt was trying to picture Madeline in a bikini, but it was hard with her strange kid standing there, haloed by the floodlights so his face was nearly in shadow.

“I could have called the police,” said Ryan.

“But you didn’t.”

“I recognized you. From the other day.”

“I could have been here to rob you. You never know,” Matt said, exasperated.

“Robbers don’t ring the doorbell,” Ryan said. He scratched Peaches behind her fluffy, upright ears.

“The dog likes you, too,” Matt said, unable to stop the words from leaving his mouth.

“What do you mean?”

Matt shuffled, put one hand in his jeans pocket. “Well, it’s just that she said that the dog only liked your father.”

“She’s lonely,” Ryan said.

“The dog?”

“My mom. Lonely people tell other people things they wouldn’t normally say.”

“She has you,” Matt said, letting his tone slip into accusation.

“She doesn’t talk to me.”

“She said you don’t talk to her.”

“Mom says a lot of things, I guess.”

“So it’s not true?” Matt asked.
“I don’t talk to many people,” said Ryan.

“You’re talking to me. Why are you talking to me?”

“Because you’re here. Usually it’s just me and my mom.”

Matt narrowed his eyes, tilted his head. “You don’t have friends from school?”

“Don’t treat me like I’m twelve.”

“Listen, Ryan—”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Your name?”

“The only person who calls me that is Mom.”

“And you don’t like it?” asked Matt.

He stood silent for a moment. “It’s just not what people call me.”

“What do they call you?”

“‘Techie.’”

Matt stifled a laugh. “That makes sense.”

“Why does it make sense?” Techie asked.

Shit.

“Google.”


“I Googled your family,” Matt said. “I wanted to know what happened to your dad.”

“Wow, something Mom didn’t tell you.” Once again, genuine wonder rather than bitterness.

“We’ve only met once.”

“Twice,” Techie said. “You came back to fix the cable upstairs.”

Matt’s mouth dropped open. “You were here?”

“I’m almost always here.”

Matt hoped that the bright patio lights didn’t reveal the flush he felt moving up his chest to his cheeks. “Did your mom...say anything about me?”

Techie shook his head, his stringy hair brushing Peaches’ coat. “Like I said, she doesn’t really talk to me.”
“Did she talk to you before?”

“Before what?”

“Before, you know, your dad died.”

“I think she tolerated me.”

Matt wasn’t sure how to respond, so he said, “Gotcha.”

“You’re a little weird,” Techie told him.

“I’m a little weird?”

“You’re the one standing outside my yard spying on my house.”

Well, no argument there. “I’ll just go.” He was about to ask Techie to tell Madeline he’d dropped by, but realized it was probably futile. He either would or he wouldn’t, but Matt’s money was on the kid not saying a thing.

Techie set Peaches down on the tiles. The little dog looked up at him, one paw raised. “It was a car accident,” he said, looking down at his feet.

“That’s what happened to your dad?” Matt asked.

A nod. “I wasn’t there.”

“The scar…”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt said.

“I doubt it,” said Techie. Then he turned back toward the house.

Matt heard the sliding door swish again and the patio lights went off, pitching him into darkness.
Chapter 3

Quentin wasn’t his usual ebullient self, and unfortunately Matt knew why. “You sort of threw me under the bus, man,” Quentin said, his lips in an accusatory twist.

Matt bit his lip, nodding. “Did you get written up?”

At least a thin smile. “Nope. Snoke just told me to take some energy bars in the van. That was a shock, finding out I faint when I don’t eat enough. I had no idea I did that.”

“Thanks for going along with it,” Matt said.

“Could have used a heads-up.”

“I know, man. I felt like shit about it.”

Quentin punched him on the shoulder. “You have to buy Power Bars or whatever for the van.”

Feeling his heartbeat slow at last, Matt said, “Done.”

“So you think you’re going to see what’s-her-name again?”

Matt took a breath. “I don’t know.” He didn’t want to say anything about the third abortive visit to Madeline’s. Not knowing her well enough to decide if it was an emergency or a whim that took her away from the house the previous night, Matt was still inclined to believe it was the latter. But he was still so enticed that he was ready to give her the benefit of the doubt. This time, he would wait for her to contact him, though.

“She call you since...you know?” Quentin asked.

Matt nodded. Just when he figured he’d had enough lies for a little while: “I couldn’t go over. I had boxing.”

“Oh, man! You’re a fighter?”

“Getting there.”

“What class?”

“Light heavy.”

“My uncle used to fight. Welterweight. Never made it big.”

“In the city?” Matt asked. He couldn’t imagine there was an enormous boxing scene in Kansas City.

“In Baltimore,” Quentin said. “Went out of KC up there for a bigger market. Found a woman instead. Now I have four cousins and Uncle Jerome’s a little on the fat side these days.”

Matt laughed. “Do you have brothers and sisters?”

“Two sisters. One older, one younger. The older one is a physician’s assistant and the younger one is still in high school. She’s going to go to college. Smartest one out of all of us. You got brothers or sisters?”
“No,” Matt said. “Just me.”

“You ever think about going to college?”

All Matt could picture was the lonely, humming setup in Madeline Madrigal’s basement, long white arms cradling the small dog. “It’s not really for me.”

“I thought about it,” Quentin said. “But my mom and dad don’t have the money to even send Deneisha to college, so she has to get loans. I didn’t really want to be in debt for the rest of my life.”

Silent for a moment, Matt scratched his head. “Sometimes I think I’ll be in debt for the rest of my life, anyway.”

“Maybe you can get Miss Rich to pay for you,” Quentin said, grinning.

“Mrs.,” Matt told him, shooting back a grin of his own.

Saturday was the busiest day for installations, always packed full because people would rather not miss work. Matt and Quentin were sweaty and exhausted by the end of the day.

“Man, I can’t wait to kick back and have a beer,” Quentin told him as they lugger their gear into the supply room.

“She wish,” Matt said. “I have practice tonight.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Quentin. “You have to tell me if you ever have a fight. I’d come watch you kick some guy’s ass.”

“Yeah, well, if it happens I’ll let you know. I’m too busy right now getting my ass kicked by a woman.”

“You got it bad.”

Matt cracked up. “No, sorry. My coach is a woman. I’m not that busted up over Mrs. Rich.”

Quentin raised his eyebrows. “Not yet.”

Matt found it amazing how much more easily the combos came to him, how much sharper he was when he wasn’t wound so tightly. After the pleasant surprise of Quentin’s forgiveness earlier, he felt pliable and primed at practice that night. He and Phasma worked the speed bag for a while then did some drills, with the few other patrons looking up from their bags for the rare sight of the former champ in the ring again. Though her punches were sharp and decisive, there was nothing jerky about the way Phasma moved in between them. She was never still, rippling as if she were fabric in a variable wind. It was impossible to find a pattern by which she fought, her tells often dead-ending and turning into hard advances from the other side. Matt was awed, balancing out the frustration of losing.

Phasma sensed it, her trainer’s skills as sharp as her fighter’s. “I’ll start arranging to have you spar with some of our regulars,” she told Matt after having hammered his unprotected cheek for the second-to-last time that night. “I’m sure they’d appreciate some ring time, as well.”

“Are you training any of them?”

“All of them. Or do you mean, ‘am I training them like I’m training you?’”
“The second one,” Matt said.

“A couple,” said Phasma. “But they’re paying me full price.”

“So I’m a special case,” he said with a crooked smile, his left cheek still stinging a little.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Phasma told him, hitting him again.

Sunday dawned bright and hot again, sun seeping through Matt’s window. A day off from work, a night off from boxing. The laundry situation was getting desperate, so he’d have to address that, but otherwise he would be free to take the day as his own. He sank back onto the musty bed linens and pulled his laptop up on top of his chest. A little white dot chased its tail around for at least two minutes on the screen while the hard drive labored, and the boot-up music stuttered.

“Fucking thing,” Matt whispered.

One of the tabs on his browser remained on the UMKC website. He stared briefly at Techie’s awkward picture, then clicked onto the main site. It was easy to navigate, even with the lame speed of his internet connection and the doubled delay from his fading computer. For no reason, Matt typed in “Computer Science” at the top search bar, and was taken to the School of Computing and Engineering. Matt had been decent at math in school. He searched for “Electrical Engineering” and found the required courses. With his throat tight, he clicked on the tuition estimator tool. It was available for both summer and fall. This summer, twelve credit hours—not even a full course load—would cost him four thousand dollars. He barely cleared that in two months at his job.

He ground his teeth together. That amount of money probably sieved through Madeline Madrigal’s hands like water whenever she chose. Techie could go to school for as long as he liked and not deplete the reserves of whatever was left to the family by dear, departed Allan. Matt picked at his chapped lower lip, pulling off a shred of skin with a painful twinge. He touched his mouth and blood came away on his fingers. Sighing, he shut the laptop and placed it on the floor beside his bed again.

Kyle was downstairs eating the second of two Pop-Tarts. “Hey, man!” To Matt’s surprise, Kyle dug into the box and underhand-tossed a pristine packet toward him.

“Thanks,” Matt said, tearing into the brittle foil. “What are you up to today?”

“Giving myself a day off from studying,” Kyle said. “Probably going to grill out at the park with some of my buddies. You want to come with?”

The filling of the pastry was an improbable blue and entirely too sweet. Matt took another bite to give himself time to decide. “Sure,” he said at last, swiping a crumb out of the corner of his mouth.

They hit the grocery store beforehand. Matt needed some essentials, but he wasn’t about to keep bags in Kyle’s hot car while they drank beer and tossed a football around for a couple of hours. He sprung for the hot dogs and one of the six-packs, watching with the usual regret as the cash left his wallet. Kyle got hot dog buns, another six-pack, and charcoal.

Loot safely in the back seat of Kyle’s Dodge Charger, they set out toward Lee’s Summit and Lowenstein Park. The town south of the city was a little further out than Penguin Park, but they’d be much more likely to find a free grill at Lowenstein. Picnic areas were probably all taken up by family reunions and kids’ parties at Penguin.

Kyle’s friends—three guys and two girls—had already requisitioned a small picnic shelter with a beat-up grill when they arrived. There were burgers and a lot more beer on offer. Introductions
were made all around, though there was one guy that Matt vaguely remembered from their graduating class at Powers High School. He shook hands with the rest of them; Kyle gave backpounding hugs to the guys, and even picked up one of the girls and spun her around. Matt had to guess that he was crushing on her a little bit, but she looked so very young.

He couldn’t see Madeline there at all. Ever. Picnics in the park were not her element.

They downed burgers and dogs and tossed around a football a little. Matt begged off on that one, but one of the guys had brought a frisbee. The girl that Kyle was interested in, Rachel, giggled and failed at spinning it, but the other girl, Bella, had a wicked backhand throw.

“She plays ultimate,” Kyle explained.

Matt liked to throw to her, as she would almost always send it hurtling back to him: a painful, clumsy, hand-stinging flirtation. He had to leave the field for a minute when he felt his phone vibrating in the pocket of his shorts.

Pulling it out, he saw a familiar number. **Madeline.** “Hello?”

She didn’t return the greeting. “I’m so sorry, darling. I wasn’t there the other night. I just had to get out of the house.”

**Darling?**

Madeline kept speaking, her words quick and contrite. “I took a long drive. All the way out to Blue Springs Lake, if you can believe it.”

“Don’t apologize,” Matt said. He wondered what kind of car she had.

“I want to see you again. I want you in my bed.” It was brazen, but also matter-of-fact.

“I want that, too.”

“Come see me tonight. Can you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.”

“Good. Seven? I promise I’ll be there.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay, great. See you.”

“Who’s was that?” Kyle asked, his mouth half-stuffed with burger.

Matt hadn’t even been aware he was standing close. “Date.”

“Nice. Same girl?”

“Uh-huh.”

Kyle raised his hand for a high five. It was covered in burger grease and there was a dab of mustard between his forefinger and thumb.

Matt slapped his hand anyway, checking afterwards to see that none of the mustard had transferred.

When they got home, Matt took a stinging shower, wondering what hurt until he realized he had a slight sunburn. The notion that Madeline had soft, expensive sheets that would feel cool on his
burned skin made him half-hard.

He parked down the street from the house again. The summer sky was clouding over and the wind brought the first smell of rain. Matt had to stop halfway to the door and adjust his crotch when he pictured himself fucking Madeline to the sound of ticking raindrops on the skylight. This time he could see her smudged silhouette coming down the entry hall when he rang the doorbell.

A smaller figure, orange and bouncing, passed her by. Peaches. The dog started barking its head off and Madeline scooped it up to no effect whatsoever.

“Hi,” she said with an apologetic expression. She was wearing a pair of sleep shorts and a tank top, her hair curving in loose waves. Peaches’ high-pitched and strained yowling echoed off the walls of the entryway. “Wait here a minute.”

Matt watched her disappear to toss the devil dog out onto the patio.

When she returned, Madeline took his hand and gave it a brief squeeze, beckoning him into the kitchen. “Can I get you a glass of wine?”

“No,” Matt said. “I want you.”

At that she smiled, a hazy and obfuscated expression. “Come upstairs.”

Matt followed her footsteps up the gently rocking stairway. They didn’t stop in the bedroom he had seen before, but continued down the hall to another door. The decoration in the space was just as sparse as in the guest room, but Matt could smell Madeline’s perfume on the air. Maybe she scented her sheets. The bedspread was a cool blue and looked untouched. On each side of the substantial platform bed there hung a painting: one a blue circle on a white background, the other red.

She closed the door after them. Matt turned to her, moving his fingers through her hair, cradling the back of her head. “I want to kiss you.”

“Yes,” Madeline said.

He was careful, subdued, even hesitant, until she slipped her tongue past his lips. “Let me see you,” he said when they broke, tugging up at the hem of her tank.

Obliging, she raised her arms and let him pull the shirt free.

His forearm at the small of her back, he bent down and sucked her nipples, first one then the other. Madeline sighed, her hands stroking his sides. “Come to bed,” she said. She righted herself and slipped off the shorts.

Matt watched her hips, her ass, as she made her way across the room. He shrugged his shirt off and joined her, setting his hands roving over her body again, dipping into the space between her legs and taking a hissing breath in when he found her wet. Nimble fingers unfastened and unzipped his jeans, reaching inside. Matt closed his eyes, remembering how it felt the first time she had touched him. Before stepping out of his pants, he reached into the back pocket and grabbed one of the condoms, throwing the packet on the bed where Madeline sat. She moved backward onto the mattress then held out pale arms toward him. A peal of thunder sounded around the house.

Matt rolled on the condom and crawled onto the bed.
She reached between them and grasped his cock. “Matt,” she said.

“Mm-hm.”

He settled himself over her and let her guide him. She cried out loudly in his ear when he pushed in. To draw out the sensations, make it last for her, his first thrusts were slow and long.

“You feel good,” she said, whispering now.

“I want to make you come,” Matt told her.

“Don’t stop.”

He braced himself with hands beside her head and thrust into her. Madeline raised her hips and wrapped her legs around his waist, letting him move for a long time.

“Come on,” she said.

“You want me to come?”

“Yes.”

At that, Matt sped his thrusts, feeling the yield of her soft thighs against his hip bones. He teetered on the edge for a short while, then toppled over, groaning, one hand steadying himself above her while the other squeezed her breast. Panting soft breaths over her skin, he asked, “Did you come?”

Madeline shook her head. “It’s fine.”

“No,” Matt said, and moved down to dip his head between her legs.

When it was all over, they lay next to one another, Madeline’s head pillowed on Matt’s bicep, her small hand on his breastbone. “Thank you,” Matt said.

“Don’t thank me. I wanted it, too.”

“Why me?”

A shrug. “You were here.”

You’re here. Techie had said that the other night. Matt shook his head.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing. Is—is Ryan here?”

Madeline rolled over onto her back with a sigh. “Oh, I don’t care.”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no,” she said. “It’s fine. I don’t want to think about things today. You help me not think about things. Come again tomorrow night.”

“I can’t,” he said, though the words brought with them a significant dose of regret. “I have practice. I have to be there.”

“Practice for what?”
“Boxing.”

“Oh.” She paused for a long while. Then she turned to him with a sly smile. “I think I’d like to watch you hurt people.”

“I, uh—” Matt struggled for words. “That’s not really the point.”

“Indulge me in my little fantasies, Matt,” Madeline said, speaking his name in a curt syllable. “Do you win?”

“Sometimes.”

“It’s no wonder your body is so beautiful. You have a beautiful body, Matt.”

The blush hurt his rising sunburn. “Yours is incredible. You’re gorgeous.”

“And an amazing cock.” She went on as if she hadn’t heard his compliment.

“Thank you.”

“I want it in me again.”

Matt obliged.

He was thirsty when he left the house, having no idea why he hadn’t asked Madeline for a glass of water. Even though he had touched her everywhere, she still seemed untouchable, removed, as if a single misstep would break the spell and bring her derision down on him.

He had only just gotten in his car, mercifully cooler for the storm that had swept through when he saw a figure coming up the sidewalk. Long stride with head down, wet hair swinging back and forth over his shoulders. It took until the man walked under a streetlight for Matt to see its red sheen. Techie.

He turned the ignition key all the way down, clicking his headlights off. Techie didn’t even raise his head. Matt saw the laptop bag slung crosswise over his narrow torso. He was wearing the same garish yellow shirt that he had been on the first day they had crossed paths.

Techie paused at the front walk, and Matt froze as well, thinking he had been spotted. But then Techie took a deep enough breath that Matt saw it, his shoulders rising and falling. He straightened his posture as if the act cost him more effort than walking up the hill to the house. Then he turned and disappeared behind the juniper.

Matt sat for a moment after Techie had moved out of sight, willing the house’s door to open and close before he started the car.

If Sunday had been rife with new sensations, that Monday was drudgery doubled. Matt and Quentin went on five total calls, getting to two of them just as the window of predicted arrival was about to close. Exasperated homeowners hovered over them; one had been made late for a business dinner and complained loudly on the phone about Quentin and Matt the whole time they were there.

The two of them barely said anything to one another on the van ride back to the dispatch center. Matt didn’t want to think about the drive into the center of the city or about summoning the energy to spar. He couldn’t beg off, though. More than one invalid excuse, Phasma had said, and things were over. Without the half-dues deal, he wouldn’t be able to afford to come back to the gym at all.
Pride and expectation kept him there, as well. Madeline had complimented him, traced her fingers over his abdominals, the lean lines that led from the top of his hip bones to his groin. He wasn’t exactly shredded, but he was in good enough shape—with broad shoulders and defined pectorals—that Madeline took notice. He wanted to be better-looking for her, if for no one else.

Kyle was up watching TV that night when Matt came in: some kind of cops-and-prosecutors show. The two of them couldn’t afford cable, so it was network or nothing. Matt flopped down in the brown velour recliner that they had found on the side of the road. It made a horrible grinding noise when the footrest was pulled up, but other than that it was perfectly good.

“I hate my job, man.”

Kyle took a sip from a warm can of store-brand cola, not taking his eyes off the TV. “Sorry, dude.”

“It’s cool. It’s just—I can’t believe the shit I have to do for fourteen an hour.”

Kyle nodded. “I’m getting fifteen. At least I get to work with people I like.”

Matt shrugged. “I like the people I work with, just not the people I work for.”

“When I pass my exam things are going to get a hell of a lot better,” Kyle said.

Matt’s stomach dropped. “Really?”

Mashing the mute button on the remote, Kyle set it down on the table beside the couch and said, “Yeah. Beginning electricians once they’re licensed can make, like, fifty k.”

“To start?” Matt wasn’t sure his father had even made that much while he was still working at the hand tools factory.

Kyle’s nod was solemn, but there was a hint of a smile on his lips.

Matt clenched his jaw, his teeth squeaking against one another. The most he could hope for at MaxStar in the next year might be a fifty cents-per-hour raise. “Dude, does your uncle need any more apprentices?”

Kyle laughed a little too loud. “He’s full up right now, man.”

“What about when you get licensed?”

“I could put in a good word for you, bro. But he might have a problem with that little thing from a few years ago.”

“Right.” Matt’s fingers curled into his palms, digging. “Right.”

“Whoa, look!” Kyle said, glancing back at the TV screen. “It’s those Pop-Tarts I had. Those were super good, right?”

“I didn’t really like them.”

“Well, fine,” Kyle said, laughing but with a hard edge. “See if I give you any of mine again.”

“I’m going upstairs,” Matt told him.

“Yo, how was your date?” Kyle called when he had reached the foot of the stairs.
“Fine.”

“Did you get some?”

Matt didn’t answer. He wanted to think about Madeline—the feel of her soft skin, the way she smelled, the swirls of her hair as she lay back against the blue bedspread. But the idea of being present, still mired, while Kyle skyrocketed to a decent, livable salary, consumed his thoughts.

He fell into bed, pointedly avoiding looking at the still-undone laundry. He pulled the laptop onto his chest, but the thing took so long to boot up that when the shuddering music finally played, he slammed it shut and threw it into the pile of clothes and towels, turning over and going to sleep.

Matt ended up glad that he hadn’t re-set his alarm for his day off, because just as he was slapping it silent he remembered his therapy appointment that morning. With only about ten minutes before he had to be out of the house, he threw on his jeans from Sunday night and his last clean t-shirt, ran his ratty toothbrush over his teeth, and went out to the car. Kyle had already left for work. There were dishes in the sink; Matt was willing to bet that he would be the one who ended up chiseling off the crusted-over oatmeal in the microwave with a butter knife. Though he didn’t care for them, he took the box with the last remaining Pop-Tarts packet. He tossed the empty box in his back seat.

Dr. Finch had been a fixture in Matt’s life for almost four years. Seeing Finch had been part of the conditions of his parole, though he had stayed on after the term ended. If nothing else, the therapist was a guidepost, a marker for time passed. Or, he thought with no small amount of misery, a marker for time that stayed the same.

As usual, the elevator smelled like cleaning products—not the same light and largely unobtrusive scents as had been in Madeline’s house, but heavy, cheap, pine-scented disinfectants. There was a waft of mildew from the very old carpet as the elevator doors opened. Left, past the bathrooms, then two doors down. Matt entered the waiting room. Shirleigh, the secretary, smiled at him and said, “Well, hey there.”

“How’s life been treating you, Matt?”

“Fine.”

“How’s life been treating you, Matt?”

“Fine.”

“How’s life been treating you well, or ‘fine’ as in ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’”
“Little of both,” Matt said.

“Well, what do you want to talk about? Something that’s happened since we last met?”

“I—” he started, but didn’t really feel like talking about Madeline. “I re-connected with Jessy.”

“Now, Jessy is your former girlfriend,” Finch said, just to verify.

Matt nodded.

“Is that a good thing?”

“I think so. I’m having lunch with her today.”

Finch stroked his mustache. “Do you know if she’s seeing someone?”

Matt shook his head.

“Are you seeing anybody?”

A pause. “Sort of. It’s complicated.”

“It always is when you’re young,” said Finch, his grin too indulgent. “What’s she like?”

“Um, a little older.”

“Okay. Gotcha, gotcha. Well, we don’t have to talk about that if you don’t want to. Would you like to get back with Jessy? I mean, if this were a perfect world?”

“I don’t know,” Matt said. “Maybe.”

“Because I remember last time you had said you missed her, so this could be a good development.” Finch extended his arm over the back of the sofa and pinched one of the tassels on the pillows between his thumb and forefinger. “Of course, so could this new connection. I’m very happy that you’re putting yourself out there again, Matt.”

“Yeah,” Matt said.

They sat in silence for a minute or so. Finch never looked uncomfortable during these frequent periods of quiet. He leveled his gaze at Matt and smiled underneath the mustache, waiting. Finally:

“Have you given any more thought to what we talked about last time? The fact that you might want to be in very good shape, physically, because your dad is disabled?”

“He’s not disabled.”

“Of course, of course,” Finch said. “Because he can’t move like he used to.”

“I didn’t really think about it.”

“Okay, that’s fine. How is the boxing going?”

“Good,” Matt said. “Better.”

“Better how?” Finch asked.

“My coach wants me to train five nights a week.”
“That’s a step up, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“What did you say to that offer?” asked Finch.

“I told her ‘yeah.’”

“Good, good. And that’s in line with your goals of being more physically fit and active, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“How about your job? We talked a little bit last time about how it can make you angry.”

“That’s better, too,” Matt lied.

“Do you think you’re getting some of your aggression out with the boxing?”

“I swore in front of a customer the other day.”

“And how did that make you feel?” asked Finch.

“I guess ashamed.”

Finch nodded. “It’s very big to admit that. Does being angry mostly make you ashamed now?”

Matt took a deep breath and scratched his head. “Sometimes. Is that a good thing?”

“Well,” Finch said, “what I want you to do is feel the anger, but also process it, like I’ve said before. You should say to yourself…” He gestured to Matt.

“Uhh, ‘I see that I’m angry and I’m going to let it pass through me and acknowledge it.’”

“Once you name something, once you recognize it…” Another flip of his hand.

“‘You can control it.’”

“Right. Perfect.”

Another long pause. Matt scraped at the skin around his right first fingernail.

“Now, if I’m correct, you’ve got a birthday coming up. How does that make you feel?”

Matt sighed.

“What was that all about?”

“Insurance,” Matt said.

“Mm-hm. You won’t be on your mother’s insurance anymore. Does your job offer health insurance?”

“Yeah.”

“So that shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Only if you’re at forty hours a week.”
“And you’re not.”

“And you’re not. I keep trying for extra shifts, but I don’t always get them.”

“Well, suppose you get your forty hours a week. Would you go on their plan?”

“It’s a really basic plan,” Matt said. “A lot of the other guys told me. And they take cuts of your paycheck to pay for it.”

“You’re worried you won’t be able to afford it.”

Matt nodded.

“Unfortunately, health insurance is something that you need in this society,” said Finch.

“I know.”

“What is something you may have to give up if you need to go on your company’s health insurance?”

“I don’t know,” Matt said. “Eating out at restaurants, probably.” He thought about the meal he would likely be treating Jessy to in a couple of hours.

“That’s a luxury that some can’t afford, you’re right. Boxing is one of those things you wouldn’t give up, right?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“You’re good at it. Your coach tells you you’re good at it.”

“Yeah.”

“Yes, I think it’s very important that you keep doing it. I also think it’s very important that you continue your therapy.”

“I’ll try,” Matt said, looking past Finch’s head to the curtained window beyond.

When the hour was up, Matt stood and thanked Finch, as usual, shaking his dry, callused hand. He had to wonder what the doc did outside of therapy; his were the hands of a woodworker or a gardener.

Outside of the elevator, he texted Jessy. Where do you want to meet for lunch?

Don’t care, was the reply.

Matt shook his head, sighing. If he picked too cheap a place, Jessy would be disappointed. If he picked too expensive a place, he would be scrambling to make up for the waste, begging Snoke for additional shifts.

Chilis?

Sure. Maybe we could split some appetizers or something. Not so much with tips this week.

Matt breathed out. We can go somewhere else.

No it’s fine. We can split it!
He waited in the parking lot of the restaurant, which had just opened at eleven, until he saw her pull up in her little Nissan. The car was a few years old, but in good shape. Jessy was wearing her hair pulled back except for the bright pink streak, which brushed her shoulder. She had a t-shirt with some band Matt didn’t listen to and a pair of cut-offs. He watched her as she walked to the door. Her face was round, young; it had none of the sharp definition that Madeline’s did.

Turning off the car and jogging up to the door, he said, “Hey.”

“Well, hello, stranger.” Jessy turned for a hug, the blasting air conditioning from within bathing them.

The inside of the restaurant smelled like window cleaner and fry grease. An indifferent hostess grabbed two of the battered menus from a faux wood niche and Jessy and Matt to a green vinyl booth. Matt noticed that the lamp above the table looked very much like the one at Red Robin, but with blue and green glass. “There has to be some company somewhere that makes these kinds of lamps for restaurants,” he said.

Jessy laughed. “It’s probably in China.”

“Seriously.” Matt flipped open his menu, off which the plastic cover was dangling. “Classy establishment.”

“Hey, buddy. You picked it.” Jessy’s lip gloss was a peach color, and a little bit had escaped the line of her lips at the corner of her mouth.

He shrugged, fighting back the urge to dab it away. Madeline probably didn’t wear lip gloss. When not *au naturel*, he could see her in red lipstick.

“So,” she said, “how’ve you been doing for the past, what, six months?”

“Seven,” he said, realizing afterward it might sound a little creepy that he knew the exact amount of time they’d been broken up.


“Yeah it does.”

“So, yeah, what are you up to?”

“Working. Boxing.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, a grin spreading over her face. “How’s that going? Can I see you fight sometime?”

Matt shook his head. “I’m not that good yet.”

A server with blonde hair that fell almost to her waist set two glasses of water and two straws on the table. “Can I start you off with something to drink?” she asked.

“Just water,” Matt said, and Jessy nodded. “What are you doing? Just working?”

“Oh,” she said, swirling the ice around in her drink with the straw, “I applied to KCCC to start in the fall.”
“For what?”

“Physician assistant.”

Matt nodded. “This guy I work with, his sister is one of those. I could see if I could make a few connections for you.”

A smile. She licked her lips and the extra sliver of lip balm disappeared. “Well, I won’t graduate for a while. At least a year and a half.”

“How are you paying for it?”

Jessy rolled her eyes. “Loans.”

“They’re great until you have to pay them back, right?”

“Money sucks,” Jessy said.

Matt sniffed. “Yeah, it does.”

The waitress came back around. “Do you still need a few minutes?”

They scanned the menu, with Matt ending up ordering the stuffed jalapenos and Jessy the potato skins, with an order of fries to split. Since the restaurant was all but empty, the food came out in less than ten minutes.

“And there’s our amazingly healthy lunch,” Matt said, going for a fry then dropping it with a hiss when he felt how hot it was.

“Yeah, well, you’ll burn it all off boxing,” Jessy said. “You going tonight?”

“Every night but Friday and Sunday.”

“Wow. Doesn’t that cut into your social life?”

“What social life?” Matt asked.

“You still living with Kyle?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Is he still a douchebag?”

Matt huffed a laugh. “Kyle is Kyle.”

She reached across and took one of Matt’s deep-fried stuffed peppers. “I can’t believe how good you look with your contacts, Mattie.”

He tried to smile with his mouth half-full of pepper and cheese. “Thanks.”

“I guess you’d need them to box, huh?”

Matt nodded.

Jessy held a fry up in front of her mouth, tracing the line of her lips with its end. “Are you seeing anybody?”
He froze. “Uh, sort of.” Maybe he imagined the flash of hurt in her eyes. “What about you?”

“Yeah. I’ve been dating Travis for a couple of months. He does sales for his dad’s company.”

Matt clenched his fists a couple of times under the table.

“What does your girlfriend do?”

“She’s not really my girlfriend. I mean, we just started seeing each other.”

“Okay. I’m happy for you.”

“I’m happy for you, too.”

With one of the appetizers at half-price, Matt ended up paying the entire check. He and Jessy parted ways with hugs outside the heavy wooden door.

“We should do this again sometime,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe bring your girlfriend...whatever, you know...by the restaurant sometime.”

“Maybe,” Matt said. He could never in a million years imagine Madeline Madrigal at a neighborhood burger joint. “I’ll see you.”

“Yeah. Bye, Mattie.”

He watched her drive away. One of her taillights had gone out. That, of course, was something that Madeline would never allow to happen. Since she had mentioned taking a long drive the other night, Matt was still curious about what kind of car she owned. Perhaps it wasn’t her doing the driving at all; she had simply ordered her chauffeur out to the lake while she sat in the back, a bottle of spring water between her knees and her manicured fingers fluttering over the invisible ripples of air with the window open just a crack. No, she would never allow even a hint of the humid summer air inside the car. Madeline slipped from one inviolable space to another, her skin cool and dry, yielding not to weather but only to touch. Matt’s touch.

He examined his hands: broad, with wide palms and thick fingers. The nails he kept trimmed, in part because of his habit of picking at the skin around them. They had certainly never seen care beyond a gouging out of dirt or grease after a particularly filthy job. He at least wanted to scrub them, make them pink and luminous as her scar, so he could slip them inside her mouth, between her legs. Matt wanted to kiss the scar but he was also afraid that even recognizing the fact of it would break the spell and he would be relegated to a level of lovers more like Jessy, the girl Bella at the picnic. It was an ungenerous thought. What both frightened him most, and what he liked best, about Madeline was her otherworldliness, her sense of removal. He wondered if her husband had been the opposite, comradely and boisterous.

If Allan Madrigal had passed along his physical traits to his son, then Madeline had given Techie his temperament. But even he seemed a little more engaged. Or if not so, at least ready to be. At the edge of either falling backward into Madeline’s imperturbable ennui or moving into proprietary personhood. Matt had no influence over Madeline by virtue of her stasis, nor over Techie, only because he was not a major factor in his life.

Madeline called him on Wednesday and invited him over again, though he had to beg off because of practice at the gym. He was quick to add that he would be free all of Friday, though he couldn’t
imagine trying to take her on a date or meet up outside of her house. It could, truth be told, never be more than sex; he had nothing more to offer her.

So he bathed on Friday afternoon, picking his nails clean and white with a toothpick. There was a local grocery store that had a floral department in which the selections were acceptably fresh (Matt had once taken a tulip bouquet to Jessy by way of apology for one of his many transgressions). Summer flowers were not as eye-catching as those in April or May, but Matt picked a handful of tough-stemmed white lilies sprinkled with red. The bored employee wrapped the bunch in pink cellophane and wrangled a bow around it, the wire ends of the ribbon poking into the meat of Matt’s palm as he carried it out to the car. The low clouds had begun to spit out rain, and he held his free hand over his front right pocket to protect his phone.

After propping the bouquet against the back of the passenger seat, Matt turned on the car and engaged the windshield wipers, only to find that the right-hand wiper was frozen in place. He could see it shuddering, the motor trying and failing to move it.

“Shit.” At least it wasn’t the driver’s side. He figured he could still swing the trip if the rain stayed light. One gentle hand on the bouquet’s ostentatious bow and he pulled out of the parking lot.

Matt noticed the green t-shirt first this time, not the red hair. It was a neon hue almost as bright as his usual yellow. The bus stop had no shelter; Techie was standing with shoulders and eyebrows drawn in, looking up on occasion at the threatening sky and trying to protect his laptop bag from the drizzle. Matt sighed.

Switching lanes after the light turned green, he pulled over and put on his hazards. Rain spattered his arm when he rolled down the window. “Techie, hey.”

Techie cocked his head, the expression on his face lost as if he had never seen Matt before in his life.

Matt supposed he was the last person he expected to see. Someone honked their horn from behind him. “Techie! It’s me. Matt.”

Techie nodded, but made no move to get in the car. Another honk.

“Do you want a ride?”

That snapped him into motion, and he ran around the front of the car, slipping and almost falling on a patch of oil dredged up from the pavement by the rain.

Matt had to grab the lilies and toss them into the backseat as Techie opened the door.

He was wearing a pair of khaki cargo shorts, his pale, skinny legs bare from the calf downward and dusted with rose-gold hair in which shimmered tiny flecks of water. “Thanks,” he said.

The guy behind Matt laid on the horn. “Move, asshole!”

Matt shot him the finger out the window. “Fuck you!” After rolling up the window, he looked over at Techie, whose eyes were wide, his arms clutching the laptop bag over his chest. “Uh. Sorry.”

“People can be rude,” Techie said. It wasn’t clear whether he meant the driver behind them or Matt. Or both.

Matt pulled back out into traffic, a blast of exhaust roiling up from the tailpipe. The single working wiper slid across the windshield, where the beads of water had begun to gather and roll. “Are you
going back to the house—your house—or can I drop you off somewhere?”

“I had a study group today,” Techie told him.

“So...home?”

He squeezed his eyes shut and wrinkled his nose. “Yeah, sorry. I meant...yes, please.” Then he dug the knuckles of both hands into the corners of his swollen eyes with remarkable ferocity.

Matt alternated between watching the road and watching Techie blink as though trying to see through a fog. “Are you okay?”

“Forgot my drops today. Like every day.” There was not regret but bitterness in the words, but the immediate turn of his lips told Matt he was sorry for saying it that way.

Matt had been looking at Techie while Madeline had snapped at him in the hallway on the first day they met, so he remembered the chastised look on his face. “Is that why you took the bus?” he asked.

“I take the bus every time I have to go to class.”

“You don’t have a car?”

“It’s my eyes.” He shrugged. “The allergies make things foggy sometimes. And I’ll get floaters.”

“Floaters?”

When Techie blushed, it was sudden and violent. “Well, you may not know what they are. Sort of sticky things that go across your vision. Sometimes they get stuck in the corners...never mind.”

“No,” Matt said. “I know those. Sometimes on my contacts.”

Techie gave a one-sided smile. “Yeah.”

The rain had begun to fall harder, though the single wiper was still keeping up with its speed.

“So that’s why I don’t drive.”

“Have you always had...?”

“The allergies?”

Matt nodded.

“No. They started when I was in high school. At first they thought it was some kind of infection.” A dramatic look of worry crossed his face. “That’s disgusting. I probably shouldn’t tell you that.”

“It’s okay,” said Matt, who resisted the urge to scratch at his own eyes in psychosomatic sympathy. “Everybody’s disgusting somehow.” He winced.

“It’s either on the outside or the inside,” Techie said.


“What is it?”

“The rain. It’s not letting up.”
“And your windshield wiper is broken,” Techie said.

Matt felt a stab of annoyance at the obviousness. “Yeah.”

“I wish I worked on cars. I mean, instead of computers. Or along with them. I could help you with that.”

“I thought you were a programmer.”

“Oh, I also build computers. And fix them. Do you know anything about cars?”

Matt shook his head. “At least not about how to fix that.”

“That’s why I’m glad I don’t have a car,” Techie said, smiling. “Too many moving parts.”

“Computers don’t have moving parts?”

“Some. They’re not complex things.”

“I don’t know anything about them,” Matt said. “They’re pretty complex to me.”

Techie said nothing. He looked at the windshield as if he could see through it, eyes ticking downward every once in a while, mimicking the abortive jerks of the broken wiper.

Matt couldn’t tell if his silence was judgmental or if he had simply moved on to thinking about something else.

Lightning pulsed through a cloud above the roof of the car.

“It might be bad,” Techie said.

“What might?”

“The rain. I looked at the weather report this morning. Isolated thunderstorms. They said some could be severe.”

“You can’t get your—”

“My what?”

Matt had been about to say, get your mom to drive you to class, but the sudden downpour headed him off. “Fuck,” he said. The working wiper was flailing, but torrents from the other side of the windshield cut rivers across the glass and made it impossible to see but within a split second’s window between swipes. Matt slammed on his hazards and slowed, trying to see a spot to pull over. At last, he banked up the driveway of a dry cleaning place, bumping over the curb with his left rear tire. He let out a breath and turned the wipers off. At once, both of them were encased in a haze of rain.

“What were you going to say?” Techie asked.

“I forgot.”

“Okay.”

Matt listened to the hammering rain, his car sounding like thin, inadequate protection against it.
“I hope my bus would have come before this,” Techie said. “I mean, if you hadn’t picked me up.”

“Does it drop you off right at your house?”

Techie shook his head. “The bus stop is at the entrance to the neighborhood. The one on Trent Street, not Walnut.”

“I didn’t know about that one. I go where my GPS takes me, basically.”

A smile, but Techie dropped his chin so he was looking through the curtain of his hair. “I have a pretty good sense of direction. I can show you the other way if you want.”

“Okay, sure.” The rain was beginning to let up, at least enough that the frantic wiper could do enough of a job to clear Matt’s side of the windshield. “Oh, thank God.”

Techie squinted and looked out the side window as if suddenly assaulted by bright sunlight. He pushed his fists against his eyes again, rubbing.

Matt put the car in reverse. “Do the drops help?”

Looking at his hands as if they had committed treason against the rest of his body, he asked, “What?”

“I said, ‘do the drops help?’” They were back on the road.

Techie sighed. “Sometimes. If it’s good, it itches. If it’s bad, it hurts.”

There was enough of a lull in the rain that Matt could turn the wipers down to the lowest speed. “All the time?”

“Pretty much.”

“My dad’s like that,” Matt said, feeling foolish as soon as he’d said it.

“He has bad allergies?” Techie asked.

“Uh, well, no. His back. Some days it hurts more and some days less.”

“That’s probably worse than my eyes.”

A few seconds’ pause. “Where do I turn to get into the neighborhood the other way?”

“Oh, shit,” Techie said. “I think we missed it.”

Matt let out a laugh, a staccato sound.

“What?”

“I just never heard you swear before.”

“We’ve met twice.”

“Well, it just seems—” Matt started. “Never mind.” He followed the turns along maple-lined suburban streets, ones with which he was becoming more familiar.

“Were you on your way to the house, too?” Techie asked.
Matt cringed inwardly but kept his eyes straight ahead. There it was. “Yeah.”

“I saw the flowers. I assumed they were for my mom.”

Glancing over at last, Matt saw that Techie was looking at him. “Yeah, I was going to—”

“I guess you’re seeing each other.”

Matt bit his lip for a second. “Sort of.”

“Are you sleeping together?”

“That’s none of your fucking business.”

Techie narrowed his eyes, undaunted. “It’s been a year since my dad died.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“My mom,” he said, “she’s not… a happy person.”

“You mean because of your dad?” Matt asked. He pulled into the driveway of Madeline’s home.

“I mean because of her.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“You might,” Techie said. “Later.” He went for the door handle. “Are you coming in?”

Matt took a breath. “No.”

“Do you want me to give the flowers to my mom?” He was out of the car now, laptop bag in hand.

“No! I’ll just...I’ll tell her I wasn’t feeling good.”

“You can come inside if you want,” Techie said, kicking at the asphalt of the driveway with the toe of one battered Chuck Taylor.

“I don’t think so. Not tonight.” Knowing that Techie would be in the house had effectively deflated any desire of Matt’s to be in the same space, even if he was in a different wing. He still wanted sex with Madeline, but not at that expense. It annoyed him that he might have to learn Techie’s class schedule—by trial and error at that—simply because Madeline would never bother to do it. He certainly couldn’t bring her to his place, or try to persuade her out in public with any of the people he knew. She was just a cut above, by her own tacit decree as well as Matt’s.

He avoided pulling over in the same dry cleaner’s parking lot and went all the way home before he called her.

“Matt,” she said. “Where are you?”

“My windshield wiper broke. I couldn’t drive in the rain.”

“You could have called me,” Madeline said. The hurt in her voice could have been either real or affected at that point.

Matt picked at the skin around his thumb. “I’m calling you now.”

“It’s been more than an hour,” Madeline said. “I was worried you were hurt.”
“I’m fine,” Matt said. “I just...I couldn’t fix it.”

“So come over now. It’s not raining anymore.”

He took a deep breath, flexed his fingers in and out. “I really need to get this looked at.”

“Well,” Madeline said with a dismissive sniff, “if you don’t want to see me, all you have to do is say so.”

“I do want to see you. I thought you didn’t want me to be hurt. If I don’t get this fixed, I might be.”

“But it’s not raining anymore. You’re fine.”

“What about next time?”

“Now you’re just making excuses!” The change in the volume of Madeline’s voice was startling enough that Matt had to hold the phone away from his ear.

“I’m not. I—”

“Oh, don’t give me that bullshit, Matt!”

“It’s not bullshit!” he yelled back. “I’m trying to tell you what happened!”

“How dare you shout at me? You child!”

Matt tried to stop himself and couldn’t. “You started it!” He heard nothing from the other end. “Madeline? Madeline?” The call beeped off. She had hung up on him. He threw the phone against the windshield, where it bounced with a cracking noise and landed hard in the passenger seat. “Fuck!” He reached into the backseat for the lilies, kicked open the door, and threw them out into the street.

Wanting to be angry at Madeline alone, Matt still felt a surge of irritation at Techie. If he hadn’t been standing out at the bus stop in the rain like an idiot, Matt might have been there and gone by the time Techie made it back to his house. To Madeline’s house. He fielded an additional stab of annoyance at the fact that he had let the kid’s presence get to him at all. What Madeline chose to do with her time and with whom she chose to spend it was her decision entirely, and not contingent on the whims of her adult child.

How old was Techie? He had to be at least eighteen to be in college unless he was one of those boy geniuses. He looked young, but not so young that someone would mark him as underage. Thin, narrow-shouldered but tall, long-fingered hands, prominent Adam’s apple. The beginnings of a copper scruff on his chin and cheeks, which spoke to almost-daily shaving. Matt had to shave every day; though it was patchy, his facial hair for some reason came in much darker than the hair on his head.

Taking a few deep breaths, he picked up the phone from the seat beside him, checking its housing for cracks. The case had sustained a tiny ding, but the phone itself looked none the worse for his tantrum. He shoved it into his front jeans pocket and got out of the car.

With no boxing practice and the rest of the night stretching ahead of him, Matt considered retreating to his room. Maybe watch some porn if his laptop cooperated. But he was starving and there was no food in the house. He didn’t want to waste gas or too much money, so he walked down to the convenience store at the edge of the neighborhood—a good mile-and-a-half hike—and came back with a bag of cheddar popcorn and a couple of Cokes. His phone buzzed in his pocket
while he was checking out at the store, but he ignored it for the rest of the night.

It rang again after he and Quentin were coming off a job the next day. Matt checked it and put it back into his hip holster.

“That your lady?”

“She’s not my lady.”

“Ooh,” Quentin said. “You have a little lovers’ quarrel?”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t know what her deal is. She screamed at me the other day for nothing.”

“Maybe she’s crazy. But you always have the best sex with the crazy ones. Is it good?”

“Oh, really good,” Matt told him.

“Yup. Thought so. Do you want it again?” asked Quentin.

“Yeah.” Matt touched his fingertips to the top of the phone, which was still as of then.

Quentin grinned. “Then call her back!”

At the end of the work day, sitting in his stifling car in the employee parking lot, Matt finally dialed Madeline’s number.

“Matt!” Her greeting was so loud and sharp that he at first thought she was still angry. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. Thank you for calling me back.”

He said nothing.

“You’re not still angry at me, are you? I promise I’m not angry with you. I never really was. I was just having a bad day. Maybe you shouldn’t have tried to come over at all. It was just a bad, bad day. Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “I get it.”

“Don’t be like that,” she said, though Matt had been struggling to keep his tone neutral. “Come over now.”

“I haven’t showered yet.”

“I’ll put you in the bath,” she said. “Dirty boy.”

Matt felt a clench of want in his empty belly. “I need to eat,” he said.

“I’ll get us some take-out,” said Madeline. “You can clean up and it’ll be here by the time you’re ready. Then we can eat. Or,” she said, “you could fuck me first.”

Matt squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”
Over the next few days, Matt had very little trouble convincing himself that the spat with Madeline had been a one-off, considering that he was in her bed at almost every spare moment afterward. He stopped scamming for extra hours at work, knowing that on his days off she would buy them Thai or Chinese and let him take the leftovers home for the next day. Were he keeping any other schedule, he might worry that the increase in rich food would start taking its toll on his body, but he was still going hard at West Side five nights a week and, as he liked to think, expending any additional calories in his extracurriculars with Madeline.

Matt felt his mind was occupied more than it had been since high school. Work was just a space through which he drifted using residual knowledge. Outside work, he was studying: learning the combinations that would make him a better fighter, learning to call a punch in his mind before it was thrown and to have the guard and retaliatory move ready. It was an endless stacking of possibility and completion, solid at some points and yet the whole structure fragile enough to be sent tumbling with a moment’s hesitation or a wrong decision. At the same time, he was memorizing the topography of Madeline’s body, assessing what she did and didn’t like, both when they had sex and when they spoke.

“Have you told anyone?” Madeline asked him one night. They were sitting out by the pool, Matt with a glass of wine going warm in his hand and Madeline with the remainder of the bottle steadily draining into her own glass.

“About this?”

“About us.” Her tongue slipped out and touched the rim of the glass every time she took a drink.

To Matt it was both vulgar and enchanting. “Is there an ‘us?’” he asked, giving up and setting the glass on the wobbly table by his chair.

“Don’t be maudlin, Matt,” she said, but there was a smile in her voice.

Half of the time he liked the way she spoke his name, half the time it made him unsure of his standing. “No,” he said. “Not really.”

“So I’m your dirty little secret,” she said, clicking her pointed fingernail on the bowl of the wine glass.

“Well, I’m yours,” Matt said.

At that she laughed. “Would you like me to take you out, Matt? To a restaurant, maybe? A cocktail bar? I suppose you don’t own a suit. I’d have to buy you one. Wouldn’t that be fun? Having someone take your measurements, make you something fitted perfectly to your body? It would be the most expensive thing you own.” The last statement left no room for doubt.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Sure.”

“We’ll see,” Madeline said. “Maybe later. It’s so hot I can’t be bothered to go anywhere these days.”

The idea of a later that might mean when it was cooler, in the fall, made Matt’s heartbeat pick up. She didn’t see him as just a summer fling. But stuff like that was for college kids, anyway. There was no reason he couldn’t think about being with Madeline past the end of August. He had nothing
to return to at the end of the summer but her.

“You wouldn’t take me to one of your parties, would you? With your little friends?” she asked.

“If you wanted to go,” he said.

“Be honest, now.”

Matt blinked, watching the fat moon glide over the pool. He could smell the salt water that she used instead of chlorine. “You probably wouldn’t want to go.”

Madeline shook her head. “No, I suppose not.”

At least he’d given the right answer, or one of the panoply. There were an equal number of unsuitable answers. He picked up the wine, sniffed it, and set it back on the table. When he looked over at her, Madeline had her eyes closed as if the moon was too bright.

“I really am much more of a night person,” she said. “I’m glad you get to see me in the evenings, when I’m operating on full power. I just wilt during the day.”

Another test. “You always look great,” Matt said.

She didn’t smile. “I want you to fuck me in a public place.”

“Huh?”

“Like a park or a department store. I’ll tease you until you’re hard, then you can push my skirt up and slide your cock inside…” Madeline took a deep breath and sighed it out. “Would you do that for me?”

The idea both excited him and set a cold seed of dread in the pit of his stomach. “Yeah.”

“Tell me what you’d do,” she said, taking a sip of wine from the bottle. Her tongue flicked out to taste the neck.

Matt paused. “Let’s go back inside. I’ll show you.”

Madeline sat up, shaky, and rolled herself off the lounge chair. “Show me here.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

Matt shivered despite the heat. He stood up.

Madeline took his hand and led him over to the brick wall beside the glass doors. Then she dropped to her knees on the tiles and began to kiss his groin—hot, openmouthed kisses over the fabric.

Despite himself, he was growing hard, and Madeline noticed. She unzipped him and reached inside, freeing his cock. Matt sent a panicked look around the yard. He brought Madeline to her feet and then pulled her over to the corner of the fence, allowing them to be veiled by the darkness of the house’s shadow.

“You’re cheating,” she said.
“Shh.”

“Don’t shush me.”

“Shut up.” He yanked down her shorts and pushed on her back so she was bent over, hands gripping the bar at the top of the half-fence. “Shit,” he said. “I don’t have a—”

“I’m fine,” Madeline said. “Protected. I want to feel you come inside me.”

By that point Matt was achingly hard. He cast another glance toward the hallway by the patio. If Techie was here... if he came to the kitchen for a drink... He shut his eyes tight and pushed into Madeline, starting to thrust right away. He just wanted to get it over with. And it would be easy. She was slick and tight, altogether better than the other times they’d been together. Just a few strokes and he was breathing hard over her back, stifling a moan behind his teeth.

She turned afterward and smiled at him, sweet and filthy. He ushered her back into the house, noticing the thin trail of fluid that slipped down her thigh and dripped onto the patio tiles, bright in the moonlight.

The next morning saw him tumbling out of Madeline’s bed with less than an hour to get to work. He kissed her sleep-warmed cheek and pulled on the clothes from the night before. Kyle was in the kitchen for breakfast when he got home, dashing upstairs to get his jumpsuit.

As usual, there was nothing in the pantry, so Matt tamped down the complaints of his stomach as he zipped the jumpsuit. There were energy bars in the van at work, anyway.

“Dude,” Kyle said.

“What?” Matt froze. “I don’t smell like—?”

Kyle laughed. “Not that I can tell. That’s awesome, though. One of these days you’re going to have to let us meet this girl.”

Matt huffed a humorless laugh. “One of these days.”

“Anyway,” said Kyle, “I’ve been trying to tell you I’m having a party here tonight. I would have told you but you haven’t been around.”

“I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Hard not to, dude. Anyway, it’s Alex’s birthday and we want to get him trashed.”

“Yeah. Yeah,” Matt said. “Fine by me.”

His paycheck when he picked it up at the dispatch center was pathetic, but it didn’t prevent him from stopping for lunch with Quentin at one of those cheap burrito places. Making sure he had enough energy for boxing that evening. He wouldn’t have to worry about dinner; there would be plenty of snack food to graze on at the party.

Luckily, when he got home, stinking and sweating and dying for a shower, only a few people had shown up and were sitting in a tight circle in the living room drinking cheap beer. Matt gave them a wave then bounded up the stairs. He swore during the day that he could still smell Madeline’s perfume drifting up from below the neck of his jumpsuit. If Phasma had noticed anything unusual, she didn’t comment.
When he got out of the shower and had finished toweling off his hair, the number of guests in the house had increased at least twofold. Among them was Bella, the sandy-haired girl with the great frisbee throw, who had been eyeing him at the picnic the other day. Matt shot her a smile and went into the kitchen to grab a beer.

Kyle was there with one of the guys who had also been at the picnic and someone else Matt didn’t recognize. “Hey, buddy. Want a drink?”

Matt nodded. “Give me the Bud Light.” The one he didn’t recognize tossed the can over. It was frigid enough that Matt had to pass it from one hand to the other and back again before trying to open it. There was ice at the lip of the tab.

“This is my housemate, Matt,” Kyle said.

Matt stuck out his hand. The guy he didn’t recognize took it first.

“Gray,” he said. “Like the color.”

“You remember Alex, don’t you?” Kyle asked, gesturing to the one from the picnic.

Matt nodded. “Hey, man. You work with Kyle?”

“Yup,” Alex said.

“Happy birthday,” Matt told him.

“Matt’s got a birthday coming up in a few weeks, too,” Kyle said.

“Don’t remind me”.

“Big one?” asked Gray. His hair was starting to thin out at the front and around his temples.

“Twenty-six.”

“More than halfway to thirty,” Alex said.

Kyle’s smirk was exaggerated. “Halfway to thirty is fifteen, dipshit.”

“You know what I mean,” Alex said, punching him on the shoulder.

“Well, whatever,” said Kyle. “Another excuse to get wasted.”

Instead of offering up some platitude like, Can’t wait, or Yeah, it’ll be fun, Matt took a long swig of the freezing beer and then looked around the kitchen. There were a few bags of corn chips, each in a more frightening flavor than the last. He excused himself from the group, which had moved on to talking about other things, and grabbed a cereal bowl from the cabinet, pouring a few chips out of each bag. He settled at the kitchen counter. Though a good two-thirds of the flavors were revolting, Matt kept eating. He was hungry first and foremost, but also felt a sudden and strong wish not to be there. Maybe to be in Madeline’s bed or in his own, but not in the beer-smelling kitchen of his shared bachelor pad listening to the voices grow louder as they competed with one another.

Soon enough, someone would start music and the decibel level would double, so even if he had been okay with being seen as lame, sleeping was out of the question. Matt crunched another chip with a wince and drank his beer.

Two hours later, he had done a tour of the pathetically small space and had been engaged in a
handful of meaningless conversations. At least the beer was free-flowing. He’d had just enough to get a minor buzz going. Kyle was a good way into his own buzz, having abandoned Alex and Gray to talk to the small, dark-haired girl named Rachel he’d been hitting on at the picnic.

Matt felt a small hand on his bicep. He turned a little too quickly, because Bella flinched away.

“Hey,” she said.

“Sorry.”

“You looked kind of lost in your own world there.”

Matt nodded, stifling a belch. “Uh, yeah.”

“What you drinking?” asked Bella.

He raised the can and sloshed the dregs around in the bottom. Suddenly the beer tasted metallic and foul in his mouth.

“Looks like you need a re-up,” she said, grabbing his beer can and setting it on the formica. “Come get another one with me.”

“What are you having?” He tried to grab a look at the label of the brown bottle she held.

She smiled back over her shoulder. Admittedly, it was a nice smile, full of fence-picket teeth and framed by dimples. “Cider. Want one?”

“If there’s enough.”

“I brought them,” she said, “so you can have whatever you want.” She stopped in front of the fridge, squeaking a couple of excuse me’s in order to wrestle the door open. One six-pack stood empty inside, the other had three bottles left. “Sweet,” she said, taking two of them.

Matt received the cold bottle with gratitude. “Do we even have an opener?” he asked.

“They twist off,” Bella said, demonstrating to the sound of the carbonation’s pop and fizz.

The ridges of the top bit into Matt’s fingers as he wrenched it around and off. Though its taste clashed a little with that of the beer, it was sweet and welcome. “Apple?” he asked.

“Pear.”

“I’ve never heard of pear cider before.”

Bella laughed. “Yeah, I just saw it in the store and figured ‘why not?’”

Matt took a sip and shrugged. “It’s good.”

“So,” she said. “How’ve you been since, what, last Sunday?”

“Busy.”

“With work?”

“Sort of,” he said. Kyle and Rachel were talking in the corner of the room, he bending down to put his lips almost next to her ear. Matt thought of Madeline, spraddle-legged and bent over the low
“Ad sales,” Bella told him. “I totally hate it. Are they hiring where you work?”

Taking another swig of the cider, he said, “You don’t want to work where I work. Where’d you go to school?” He tightened his grip on the bottle, hoping she wouldn’t ask him the same question in return.

“UMKC,” she said. “Like everybody.”

“I know somebody who goes there,” he said, double-cursing himself for perpetuating the college discussion and bringing in Techie.

“What’s her name?”

“His. Ryan Madrigal.”

Bella shrugged. “Don’t know him. But it’s a big school.”

“So you were on the ultimate team?” Matt was fast running out of things to talk about as well as the desire to keep talking. Bella hadn’t lived a complex life—not yet. He found himself judging everyone by the impossible standards Madeline had set.

“Yeah, I still play. There’s a league that plays at the park if you’re interested. You were really good the other day.”

“Oh, nah,” Matt said. “Not my sport.”

“What is your sport?”

“Boxing.”

“Really? Wow. Don’t you, like, get head injuries from that, though?”

“You get knocked around a little bit.”

“I always thought that was sort of a guy thing. Hitting each other for fun. Like ‘Fight Club.’”

Matt clutched the bottle again. The conversation was starting to annoy him. “My coach is a woman.”

At this, Bella looked to be a combination of fascinated and horrified. “Do you ever hit her?”

“I try.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know if I could do that. You know, if I was a guy.”

“It’s not personal,” Matt said.

“No, I know.” Bella pressed her lips into a tight line.

At the same time that he wanted her to move elsewhere, disappear into the party at large, he felt he had to win her good graces, too, before she went. “She hits me a lot,” he said. “A lot.”

Grinning, she said, “I’d wanna see that.”

“You want to watch people beat me up? My girlfriend said it was the other way around.” It had
just slipped out of his mouth but the smile dropped off of Bella’s face at the word.

“Oh,” she said, probably before she could stop herself.

“Hey,” Matt said. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s cool. What’s her name?”

He paused, balanced on the edge. “Madeline.”

“That’s an old-fashioned name. I have a friend named Olivia.” Her voice was tight. She took miniature pulls on the cider and looked around the room.

Matt apologized again for no reason.

Bella waved it off, though with obvious disappointment. “I’m going to go wish the birthday boy a happy one,” she said. “Good to talk to you again.”

“Same,” he said, raising the bottle in her direction. The sigh must have been audible, because Kyle came up to him.

“She blow you off?” he asked.

“I kind of blew her off.”

“Why, dude?” Kyle asked. “She’s hot.”

“I’m kind of, you know, seeing somebody.”

Kyle raised his eyebrows. “So it’s serious, huh?”

Matt chewed his lip. “Sort of. I guess.”

“So when do I get to meet this girl?”

“She’s not really the type you bring around to your house,” Matt said, now with a desperate wish to be elsewhere.

“Whoa, is she a hooker or something?”

“Jesus Christ,” Matt said. “No. She’s just a little older.”

The spark of genuine interest lit up behind Kyle’s eyes. “Like thirty?”

Matt paused. “Forties, I think.”

“Wow, damn. And she’s hot, right?”

He couldn’t help but smile. “Incredibly hot.”

“Damn,” Kyle repeated. “Where did you meet her?”

“Can we stop talking about this?”

“Hell, no, we can’t. I want to know all the juicy details. Tell me you met her on a job.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “She was flirting with me the whole time.”
“Did she give you her number?” Kyle asked.

“I gave her my card.”

His jaw dropped. “And she called you?”

Matt grinned. “Couple days later.”

Kyle slapped Matt on the shoulder. “Buddy, man. Tell me you got your dick sucked.”

_In for a penny, in for a pound._ “Hell, yes I did.”

Kyle’s whoop of joy disrupted a couple of nearby conversations. “That’s incredible. Where does she live?”

“Crescent Heights.”

If it was possible for Kyle’s eyes to go wider, they did. “And she’s rich, too! Oh, my God, man what about her husband?”

“He’s dead.”

“This is the best thing I’ve ever heard,” Kyle told him. He beckoned Alex and Gray over. “Hey, Matt, tell these guys what you told me.”

Amid all the back-pounding and hand-shaking, it was easy to forget the way the night had started. Someone had taken the empty cider bottle from his hand and replaced it with another. When he looked over at Bella, standing by the stairs talking to another girl, she only looked away.

“When do I get to see you fight?” asked Madeline one night. She was lying supine on the rug just below the bed, smoking, with Matt sitting cross-legged beside her, finishing off a tray of lemon chicken.

“It’s just training now.”

“Can I watch you train?”

“Not sure Phasma would like that,” he said, swallowing down a hunk of the greasy meat.

“What kind of a name is ‘Phasma?’” Madeline asked.

Matt shrugged.

Madeline traced a finger from the crease at the top of Matt’s naked thigh to his knee. “If I did come, would they think I was your mother?”

Balancing the chopsticks (which Madeline had taught him to use) on the edge of the tray and setting it down, Matt shook his head. “No. My mother is...older.”

“I could be your mother. If I’d gotten pregnant in college. I had Ryan when I was twenty-four.”

“Was he, um…”

She laughed. “An accident?”

“Yeah, I guess.”
“Well, he certainly wasn’t planned. Allan and I hadn’t been together a long time. We had spoken about marriage, but never about children. I debated not telling him, you know. Just...getting rid of it. But I loved him,” she said. “I did, truly.”

Matt decided not to ask whether she meant her husband or Techie. “You decided not to have any more children?”

“Oh, Allan was working all the time. He wanted to be there for any children.”

The food wasn’t sitting well, an oil-infused mass in Matt’s belly. “So how old is Techie, uh, Ryan?”

Madeline sat up. “God, he’s told you that idiot nickname. He’s had it since high school. Given to him by the kids who used to use him for his answers on homework as well as the ones he fixed computers for. Ungrateful little bastards. I suppose all kids that age are. It takes time to learn gratitude, Matt. Are you grateful?

“For what?”

“For everything you have?”

He opened his mouth to say, *I don’t have a lot*, but he figured that was probably the wrong answer. “Yeah, of course.”

“Let’s talk about other things,” Madeline said, stroking his thigh again.

At the gym the next night, Phasma had him fight Jason again (he won) and a regular named Dauntay, who was much closer to Matt’s weight class. He was also quicker than he looked at first glance. During the second round, he got in an ugly uppercut that sent Matt’s head snapping back.

“You okay, kiddo?” Phasma asked.

Though it stung, Matt nodded, getting back into his stance.

The look in Dauntay’s eyes said he was a man used to winning as well as one who expected to win this time. Matt swore to get in more uppercuts or shovel hooks, like Phasma had told him a couple weeks ago. Keep his chin protected.

But in the fourth round, Dauntay went for an uppercut again, pulling his fist down, and Matt walloped him with a hook to the temple, sending him almost toppling over. There was anger but also admiration on his face when he righted himself.

“We’re going to stop there, folks,” Phasma said, sensing the change in the dynamic. “Listen, though. I did want to talk to you guys about possibly holding a tournament here. Just West Side fighters.”

“When?” Dauntay asked.

“Closer to the end of the summer,” she said. “Not a big deal. We’re not going to go insane with prizes or anything. Just a friendly competition between some of the folks who have been training hard here. You think you’d be up for that?”

“You fighting?” Dauntay asked Phasma, grinning.

“Not a chance.”
Matt stood silent, considering. He first imagined bringing his parents, but his mom would be cringing and squeaking at every hit. Distracting. He could picture Madeline in the small audience. No doubt she would stay silent through each bout, clapping politely no matter the outcome. But it would be a disappointment for her if he lost. Maybe she would lose respect for him. But who else would come? Jessy and her new boyfriend? Ridiculous. Kyle was out of the question, even though Matt inwardly dared him to do better if he were to take the ring.

“Matt?” Phasma nudged him with her elbow.

“Yeah. Sure.”

Dauntay held out his glove, and Matt tapped it with his own, giving it somewhat less force than he would have otherwise.

The idea of the tournament occupied his mind throughout the week. One night, to his own surprise, he actually begged off from going to Madeline’s so he could train. Phasma told him she was impressed with his dedication.

She wouldn’t be as impressed the next night.

“I’m having a really, really bad day, Matt,” Madeline said on the phone.

He could hear the tears at the edge of her voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Can you come over? I’d rather tell you in person.”

“I’ve got boxing tonight. I really can’t.”

Her words went cloudy, muddled. She was crying for real now. “Please. Please, just for tonight. I’m in terrible shape. Matt, come on. I need you.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll be over as soon as I’m out of work.”

He had been conflicted during the brief call with Madeline, but he actively dreaded the call he had to make to Phasma. A guy picked up the phone at the desk, and Matt nearly hung up. “Is Phasma there?”

“Yeah, just a minute.”

A few seconds of silence. Matt could hear the thwack of gloves on bags in the background.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Phasma. This is Matt. I, uh, I won’t be able to come in tonight.”

“Oh yeah? Why?”

“A friend of mine is really hurting bad. She’s in a tough spot.”

The pause was weighty. “Well, that’s good of you to go help her out.”

He sighed. “Thanks.”

“Listen,” Phasma said, her voice drawn tight, “you go ahead and take care of your friend. But if I ask you about it tomorrow and I think for one second you’re bullshitting me, that’s your one free excuse gone.”
“Uh-huh.”
“Got it?”
“Yeah.”
“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He tossed the phone into the passenger seat of the car. If Madeline was just messing with him, teasing him to get him to come over because of the other night, he was going to be furious with her.

When she answered the door, though, he could tell it wasn’t the case. Her face was pale, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. Matt almost stumbled back seeing it; she had never looked so much like her son.

“Oh, thank God,” she said.

Peaches came bounding around the corner at the end of the hallway, stopping for one second to gather her minuscule wits before charging ahead, howling and yapping.

“Shut up!” Madeline screamed down at the dog, which made her stop and look up, wide-eyed. Madeline put her hands over her face. An older man who was walking on the opposite sidewalk turned his head as he went by.

Matt reached down and picked Peaches up. She snarled and thrashed her tiny head back and forth, trying to get at some meat to bite. “I’ll put her out back,” he said, moving past Madeline and into the coolness of the entry hall. When he returned from the patio, she was sitting on one of the kitchen bar stools, looking toward the ceiling as tiny moons of water gathered above her lower lashes. “Hey,” he said, putting his arms around her shoulders. “Hey. What is it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I feel like an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. Don’t cry.”

She slipped off the stool and turned to him, her arms around his waist and her face against his chest. “Have you ever been in love, Matt?”

The question took him aback. He tried his best not to flinch, instead raising a hand to stroke her hair.

“You?” she asked again.

“Um. I don’t think so.”

“I never thought I would be, either. I mean, not before I met Allan. I’m not the type. But he was incredible. Absolutely the kindest person. I know he was gone a great deal with work, but he and I? We never fought. \textit{Never}. When we were together it was always good. Sometimes he would call his parents to watch Ryan and take me on these amazing surprise trips. The Hamptons, Aspen, even Paris. We always said we were going to go to Barcelona. I wanted to go for the architecture. He said he wanted to go for the food. That was Allan. He could eat anything and never gain a pound.”

“You’re the same,” Matt told her. “You always look beautiful.”

“And \textit{you} always know what I want to hear,” she said, looking up at him, stroking his cheek. “Let’s take a drive.”
They walked through the patio area, stopping to let devil dog in, then went into the other wing of the house, past Techie’s door. Matt couldn’t help but give it a second look, peering at the threshold to see if he could detect any light from down there. The garage was just past a huge living room with strange, cradle-shaped couches. It led into a mud room that held nothing but a pair of winter boots and a pink harness and leash for Peaches. Matt guessed that didn’t see much use.

The low light only hinted at the sleek shape inside until Madeline turned on the switch in the garage. Set low to the ground on thin sport wheels was a little coupe of so dark a shade of purple it was almost black. Matt’s eyes went wide.

“They walked through the patio area, stopping to let devil dog in, then went into the other wing of the house, past Techie’s door. Matt couldn’t help but give it a second look, peering at the threshold to see if he could detect any light from down there. The garage was just past a huge living room with strange, cradle-shaped couches. It led into a mud room that held nothing but a pair of winter boots and a pink harness and leash for Peaches. Matt guessed that didn’t see much use.

The low light only hinted at the sleek shape inside until Madeline turned on the switch in the garage. Set low to the ground on thin sport wheels was a little coupe of so dark a shade of purple it was almost black. Matt’s eyes went wide.

“Take a look,” Madeline said, her tone pleased, indulgent.

He went around to the rear of the car, the glow of the bulb overhead slipping over its abbreviated bumper. Audi TT. Obviously the convertible model. He bit back a surge of anger and powerlessness at the shape of his own car. “Nice.”

“Does it surprise you that I drive anymore?” she asked.

Matt raised his head sharply, feeling the tingle of a blush. Had she been the one driving the car when Allan was killed?

She gave a sad smile. “I know what you’re thinking.” There was a tiny chirp as she pointed the ignition fob toward the car and unlocked the doors. “It wasn’t me. Allan was always a very careful driver. What can I say? Even careful drivers make mistakes when they’re under pressure. Go ahead,” she said. “Get in.”

When they were both seated inside on the cool, cream leather seats, Madeline hit a button and the roof began to retract. She watched it go with the sort of smiling awe that a kid going stargazing out of the city for the first time might have. Another button on a small remote lying in one of the cup holders and the garage door began to roar, letting the steamy evening heat billow in.

Madeline turned to look behind her and hit the gas even before the garage door was fully up. Tires scraped on the asphalt as she turned the wheel and knocked the car into drive. Whether she had remembered to close the garage door again Matt couldn’t say, because they were nearly to the end of the street before he thought to look back. The ride was smooth—and fast, as Madeline pushed the car hard. Not to its limits but certainly close. Matt found himself clutching the armrest. Madeline’s long, dark hair was flying around her shoulders, some strands whipping over her face, getting stuck between her lips.

“Where are we going?” He had to shout.

“To the lake,” she yelled back, and stepped on the gas.

After the silent journey, she pulled the car off along Lake Ridge Road, bumping into the weeds at the verge of the street so they could see the water. The moon had waned a good deal and hung like a scythe over the tree line.

“Was this where you were last time?”

Madeline nodded. “It’s so incredibly quiet. If you took away the interstate traffic you would be able to hear your own breath.”

“I’ve never been out here,” Matt said.

“This is where I come to be alone. I don’t ever feel like I’m alone in my house. Or,” she said, “I do,
but I feel like I’m about to not be alone again. Like Allan will come home any minute.”

Matt took a deep breath. “Do you think Tec—Ryan misses his dad?”

“I know he does. Allan loved Ryan. Built him that whole monstrous set-up in the basement. I never encouraged it, but Allan wanted to nurture those talents of his. Social interaction has never been Ryan’s strong suit. Do you still have both your parents?”

“Uh-huh. My dad—he’s on disability. He hurt his back when he was working about two years ago.”

Madeline sniffed. “I always thought that was a bit of an excuse.”

Matt stayed silent, hurt.

“I lost my parents a few years ago,” she said. “My mother had cancer. My father was a do-it-yourself person, even past when he should have been. He fell off a ladder while cleaning out the gutters on the house, the silly bastard. Hit his head and never woke up. He eventually just stopped breathing on his own.”

“Allan’s parents are still alive?”

“Yes. I don’t really see them, but Ryan does. He’ll go to Connecticut with them in a week or so. Allan bought them a summer cottage up there. I suspect Ryan will absolutely fester with only one computer.”

She fell silent for long moments.

The lake wasn’t big enough nor the wind high enough to make any wavelets lap at the shore, so Matt looked at the bobbing floes of algae, cut through by broken branches from the trees above. The water would still be warm from the day but the mud would be cool. Muddy water had always held a bit of a primal fear for him, whether it was not knowing what one might step on, or the chance that one might not step on anything but endless depth.

“You know,” Madeline said. “I think I will go to Barcelona.”

“By yourself?”

“Yes, why not?”

“Isn’t it hot there, too?”

“It’s a different kind of hot. Oh, I can’t wait. I’ll buy my ticket tomorrow. I’ll go while Ryan is in Connecticut.”

Matt sat still for a moment. “Who’s going to take care of the dog?”

Madeline looked over at him, excitement lighting up her face. “You will. Oh, it’s a perfect idea. I’ll give you the keys and the alarm code.”

“Peaches doesn’t like me.” He felt an uncomfortable weight in his gut.

“You handled her perfectly well today. You’ll only have to come twice a day, before work and after. Or even after your boxing. Or, even better, you can stay at the house! I like the idea of you being there when I’m not. Makes me feel like the house is safer.”
Lacking words, Matt stayed silent. A small part of him, even though it was improbable, resented the fact that Madeline had not offered to take him on her trip.

“Please,” she said. “Will you do that for me, Matt?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Perfect,” she repeated. “I’ll book my ticket right away.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Matt, will you hold my hand?”

He did.

When he went home the next morning, all of the beer cans and bottles from the party, which had been lying out and attracting fruit flies, were bagged up and out on the front lawn for pick-up. It still smelled like alcohol inside, but there was a mop and an empty bucket standing by the front door.

Matt goggled. “Can I walk on this?” he called to Kyle, remembering his mother’s admonishments about treading on a newly mopped kitchen floor.

“Yeah, I haven’t started yet,” Kyle said.

Walking in, Matt could see that Kyle was in front of the microwave, the door blocking his face. A scraping sound told him, though, that Kyle was chipping at the hardened oatmeal from a couple weeks back. “What’s going on?”

“House was a mess,” Kyle said, swiping his forearm across his brow.

“Well, yeah. I don’t know...I’ve just never really seen you clean before.”

“First time for everything.”

The unease that Matt had felt ebb through the night with Madeline came rushing back. “I can help if you want,” he said. “Just let me grab a shower.”

“That’d be great,” said Kyle.

Confused, Matt went upstairs and shed the clothes he’d been wearing, starting another pile of laundry on the floor near the closet. No matter how much he did, he never seemed to be able to keep up with it. Back downstairs after his shower in bare feet and an undershirt with a pair of gym shorts, he found the bucket and squirted some dish soap in it, setting it in the sink to run the water.

“Spring cleaning, huh?”

“It was way overdue, man.”

“I get that,” Matt said. The water in the bucket was dangerously close to foaming over its lip. He turned off the tap and hauled the bucket out of the sink, sloshing some on the linoleum.

Kyle stopped chiseling. “You should probably wait until I get this done so I don’t get any of this shit on a clean floor.”

Matt nodded. “Good call. Um, is there anything else I can do?”

“I was going to rent a steam cleaner to do the living room.”

“Damn, man, you’re serious about this. Are you bringing a girl over? That girl Rachel?”
“I’m not bringing a girl here,” Kyle said. “That’s part of the problem.”

Matt leaned the mop up against the kitchen counter. “What do you mean?”

“I feel weird bringing girls over.”

“Yeah?” Matt asked. “So let me know. I’ll go stay at Madeline’s. You can have the house to yourself.”

“No, man,” Kyle said, “I mean I kind of want my own space.”

“Like I said, anytime you want.” Matt wondered if Kyle could detect the frantic edge to his voice.

Kyle sighed. “Hey, listen. Dude, I’m sorry to do this to you, but I’m thinking of moving out at the end of the summer. Once I get my license.”

“And go where?” Matt asked.

“Get my own place. I’d be able to afford it.”

“What about me?” It sounded hopelessly whiny and Matt cringed after he said it.

“You can find another roommate.”

“I don’t know anybody.”

“Go on Craigslist, man. People are always looking for places to live.”

Matt balled his hands into fists. “How do you know you’ll be able to afford your own place?”

“Uncle Luke is already hiring me on. They get really steady work. You know all this.”


Kyle waved his hands in the air, searching for words. “That’s still plenty of time. Our lease isn’t up until the end of August.”

“What if I don’t find another roommate?”

“Can’t you go live somewhere else?”

“What,” Matt said, “like, with my parents?”

“If you have to. I did it right out of high school. It’s not a big deal. Lots of people are doing it.”

“Hell, no. Fuck that.”

“Well, I can’t help you, man. I’m out when the lease is up.”

“Let’s just sign for another six months,” Matt said. “That way you know what you’ll be able to afford as far as a new place goes and I have a little more time to look for another housemate.”

“Listen,” Kyle said, the set of his jaw hard. “I’m really into Rachel. She’s really into me. I want to be able to bring her to a place where it looks like I have an actual job. Like I’m doing something with my life.”

“Are you saying I don’t have one? That I’m not doing anything with my life?”
“No, man. But come on, you gotta admit your job is a little bit of a dead end.”

Matt ground his teeth together. “And that’s my fault?”

“Well,” Kyle said, “not gonna lie. It sort of is. If you hadn’t gone off on that guy a couple years ago you’d probably have a better one.”

“I can’t change the past!”

“Well, you’re not dragging me down with you, okay?” Kyle said. “Why don’t you get your girlfriend to find you a place to live?”

“It’s not like that.”

“She’s always buying you food and stuff. I bet if you asked…”

“I’m not going to ask her,” Matt said. “Ever.”

“Then that’s your problem, too, man. You can’t even get your shit together enough to pay me back the hundred bucks you’ve owed me for weeks now.”

“I’m working on it!”

Kyle’s eyes narrowed. “As far as I’ve seen you’re just working on being that lady’s little boy toy. She calls and you come running. Maybe you should ask for something in return every once in a while.”

“You don’t understand how it is,” Matt said.

“No,” Kyle shot back. “I don’t understand because I’ve got a good thing going here, and it’s going to get a lot better. I’m not stuck like you are. And you don’t even have the balls to ask your rich-ass girlfriend to help you out.”

“Fuck you, Kyle!”

“No, fuck you, Matt!”

“I’m going. You can clean the goddamn house by yourself.” Seething, Matt took the stairs two at a time, anxious to just get his car keys and get out. The bag of boxing gear was already in the car. On the way out, he slammed the door hard enough that he thought it might break one of the panes of glass, but they only shivered in place. Even through the red haze of his fury, he recognized that it was something he would have had to pay for and couldn’t afford. One of the many.

Driving, blowing through stop sign after stop sign, he thought about the ride with Madeline—the smooth and flowing terror of it. The odd and uncharacteristic sweetness of her demeanor as they sat by the lake. He had half-expected her to ask him to fuck her out there; he had not expected confessions and shy hand-holding.

“You’re here early,” Phasma said when he walked in the front door, the displaced pressure whumping as it closed behind him.

“Yeah,” he said. “Wanted some extra time.”

Phasma paused, her blonde eyebrows drawn in. “Okay. Why don’t you get on the bags? I’ll come by and check your form.”
Matt nodded. In the locker room he stared at his own red face, willing the rage to subside, but all he could hear was the shrieking and chafing sound of Kyle knocking off the chunks of fossilized oatmeal in the microwave. He taped up as slowly as he could, but he couldn’t settle himself.

He went hard and fast on the heavy bag when he was back on the floor, throwing mostly jabs and hooks.

“Let me see some shovels,” Phasma said as she walked by.

He pummeled the bag with the move until his biceps were sore.

“Okay,” said Phasma, placing four gentle fingers on his back. “I think that’s good to burn it out. Can you give me some combinations now? Relax your shoulders. You’re tight today. You’re restricting your own movement.”


“Hey. You up for some sparring?” Phasma’s question stopped him mid-strike.

He shuffled and jogged a couple of times, rolled his shoulders. “Sure.”

“Jason just got here. Let him get warmed up and we’ll hop in the ring. Just keep your shoulders low and loose.”

While Jason hit the bags, Matt allowed himself a little break, walking over to the water fountain and crouching in front of the trophy case to examine the names and years engraved on the belts. He felt his head had cleared—at least a lot clearer than it had been.

Jason was in the ring. They slipped in their mouth guards and knocked gloves. When the bell went off, though, Jason was on him right away, advancing with a jab-cross-jab that was formulaic but still ferocious. Matt bobbed down and got in a body hook.

“Just remember, Jason. If you’re all up in his business, he’s going to defend,” Phasma shouted. “Go.”

Matt started in with a double jab-uppercut, ending up hitting Jason’s gloves and then his forearm. He fell back a couple of steps, shaking his head and sucking the spit out of his mouth guard. With Jason’s gloves almost joined in front of his face, Matt went for a double body hook and popped up for a jab that knocked Jason’s glove back into his cheek.

“Yeah!” Matt said.

“Don’t get cocky. That wasn’t a hit.”

Jason’s jab-shovel hook missed Matt’s face and hit his elbow. The impact sent his whole upper body back by just a little.

“Shoulders, Matt!” Phasma yelled. “You’re too stiff.”

A few feints on both their parts, and Matt saw Jason drop his hand for an uppercut. Matt had a hook halfway to the side of Jason’s head when Jason’s right jab hit him straight in the face. His eyes closed on instinct and only after that did the pain come.

Something warm dribbled over his lips. He put his hand below his chin and opened his eyes,
watching the pool of blood form in his palm. “Shit.” Phasma’s hand was on his shoulder; she was handing him a towel. The very act of bracing the rough terrycloth below his nose made it ache. “Fuck.”

“Oh, man,” Jason said. “I am so sorry. I guess I went a little too hard.”

Matt shrugged Phasma away, facing toward the ropes, bent over at the waist. He could feel the blood dripping out of his nostrils, soaking the towel.

He finally turned to see Phasma pacing, her arms crossed over her chest. “Goddammit. You get cocky, you go stiff, you get hit.”

Too sore and dizzy to get angry, Matt only said, “I know.” The second word came out sounding like “dough.” Phasma helped him unglove and get the tape off while he held the towel with alternating hands. He could already feel the flow begin to taper off, and it wasn’t so bad that he could wring the towel out and have it drip.

“I’m just going to go home,” he said at last, licking at the crust of blood above his top lip.

“I don’t think it’s broken,” Phasma told him, “but you really should get that looked at, anyway.”

After the punch-drunkenness began to fade, it occurred to Matt that his house was the last place he cared to be right then. He would honestly relish an hour or so in an air conditioned waiting room, but he couldn’t afford the copay for the clinic fee. “Yeah,” he said, “I should do that.”

Instead, he changed out in the locker room and drove to Madeline’s house, the blood on the towel in the passenger seat beside him growing tacky and stiff. Before going up to the door, he tried to scrub off the maroon stain underneath his nose with a wetted fingertip; he only succeeded in making one of the nostrils bleed again. The crusty towel pressed up against his face, Matt turned the car off and got out, slamming the door behind him.

As soon as he rang the bell he could hear Peaches barking. The sound came closer, then a turnabout and fade eliminated it altogether. Pre-emptive dumping in the back yard.

“Dear God, what happened to you?” Madeline asked when she finally opened the door.

“Can I come in?” It was muffled. He drew the towel away from his nose, but another drop pattered onto the cloth and he crammed it against his aching face once more.

“Did you get in a fight?”

“Sort of.”

“Oh,” Madeline said. “Your boxing.”

He couldn’t tell whether or not there was judgment infused in those two words. “I messed up.”

She shut the door behind them. “I’m getting you a new towel. Then we’re getting rid of that filthy thing.” At the touch of a switch, the lights came on in the darkened kitchen. Madeline had to look in two or three cabinets before she was able to figure out where the dish towels were, cementing Matt’s initial guess that the kitchen went by and large unused. She yanked the bloodied cloth out of his grip and handed over the dry, clean dish cloth, though the bleeding had slowed again.

“I don’t want to ruin your towel,” he said.
“You know very well I don’t use the damn thing.” She threw the stained towel into the trash can with enough force that the container wobbled.

“Are you mad at me?” Matt asked.

Madeline turned to face him with a sigh. “Why did you come to me instead of going to a doctor, you stupid meathead? I can’t be your nursemaid.”

He was shocked into silence for a moment by the careless insult. “I—” he started. “I can’t afford it.”

The sternness drained from her face as he watched. “Oh, honey.” She walked over to him, took the dishtowel, and tipped his chin down. “Let me look at it.”

Matt could feel the skin below his eyes swelling; it was almost a hum that echoed through his nose.

“You’re going to bruise,” said Madeline. “Your poor pretty face.”

“It’s not pretty,” Matt said.

“It is. Your face and your body. Gorgeous and all mine.” She kissed his blood-smudged chin. “Are you mine?”

It hurt to speak, so he nodded.

“Come on, then. Let’s get you to a doctor. Don’t worry, I’ll pay.”

The harried doctor on staff at the urgent care clinic pronounced his nose unbroken, though he recommended ice packs for as long as Matt could stand it. As Madeline had predicted, it would still bruise; a deep purple hue was coming through the pockets of red below his eyes when they left the clinic. With no way of getting out of work the next day (and no financial option to do so, either), he had to drive back to his place to pick up a clean jumpsuit. Though Madeline offered to drive him there, and the swelling under his eyes was intruding on his periphery, he was too embarrassed by the state of the house and the neighborhood to allow her to see the place.

Kyle had been right about one thing, at least. The place they called their home was nowhere to bring guests whose respect they craved. That Kyle might have been right about other things said during their fight Matt didn’t want to think about just then. Luckily, the house was empty when he arrived, the bucket of soapy water and the unused mop still standing by the kitchen counter where he had left them. Seeing that Kyle’s resolve to clean the place had fizzled out prompted a brief surge of satisfaction.

Matt got the cleanest-smelling jumpsuit and a razor and toothbrush, heading back to Madeline’s place afterward. When driving toward the house, he saw light trickling out of the small, rectangular basement window, but he was entirely too tired and achy to care.

Of course it would be Snoke who saw him first the next morning.

“What in the hell happened to you?”

“Accident,” Matt said, trying to squeeze past his manager to get to the equipment room.

“That’s some accident,” Snoke said. “Looks like you were in a bar fight.”

“It was an accident.”
Snoke’s hand shot out and caught him at the elbow. “Listen,” he said, though softly as if imparting a secret, “I’m sure you have your explanations, but I need to ask you to be careful. Stuff like this? It looks unprofessional.”

Matt yanked his arm out of Snoke’s grasp. “Not really something I can help right now.”

“Think about helping it in the future, okay?”

The urge was there—and it was rising—to give Snoke a shiner of his own, but Matt shook his head and made do with storming away to grab his utility vest.

When they met at the van, Quentin’s eyes went huge. “Whoa, buddy!”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Matt told him.

“You can’t just show up with a busted face and say you don’t want to talk about it. That’s not how it works. Your lady do that?”

Matt shot him a withering look.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. You get hit in the ring?”

Tossing the heavy equipment tote into the back, Matt said, “I fucked up.”

Quentin laughed. “Hey, listen. One time, my uncle? He got hit so hard on the side of the head it busted his eardrum. He told us all he could hear for three weeks was a sort of ringing sound. Like bells in his head. You know, like the bells they use before fights. Constantly going off, making him think somebody was about to hit him again out of nowhere.” He put his fists up in an approximation of a fighter’s position, bobbing and weaving and striking out at nothing.

It hurt to smile, but Matt did it anyway.

The day turned out to be an easy one. One housewife even gave Matt a bag of frozen peas to hold over his nose while Quentin did the installation. They turned down the candy she offered from a faceted crystal dish, however.

In his car in the parking lot, Matt angled the rear view mirror away so that he couldn’t see his face. Kyle’s car was in the driveway when he got to the house, so Matt parked on the street. When he walked in, Kyle was sitting in the living room in front of their shitty old TV. If he even heard the door open, he didn’t acknowledge it.

Matt went upstairs, wetted a washcloth down with cool water, and went to sleep with it draped over his face.
“Oh, my goodness!” This from Shirleigh the receptionist at Dr. Finch’s office. “Have you been getting yourself into trouble?”

Matt, silent, clenched his jaw even though it hurt and sat down, looking at the door rather than picking up one of the ratty magazines. He could hear Shirleigh tutting through the sliding glass window.

To his surprise, Dr. Finch took his appearance in stride when he opened the door—not even a widening of the eyes. “Matt,” he said. “Good to see you again. Come on in.” Only when they were seated in the therapy room did his gaze flicker up from his notepad. “I think we’ve known each other long enough and been through enough that I can make assumptions. Were you hit in a boxing match?”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose it looks worse than it is.”

“Yeah.”

“How did that make you feel? Getting hit like that?” Finch asked.

“What does it look like?” Matt stared at his knees.

“So things aren’t going so well right now. That’s what I’m getting from you.”

Matt shook his head, looked out the window. “You think?”

Finch’s equitable nod was infuriating. “And some anger. I’m getting a lot of anger from you today.”

“Yeah, okay? I’m angry. I’m pissed off.”

“Okay,” said Finch. “Let’s explore that. Is part of it because you got hit? Like you feel, maybe, you had a bad or inadequate performance?”

“My whole life is an inadequate performance,” Matt said.

“Wow. That’s quite the statement to make. It seems like some things haven’t gone your way since we saw each other last.” Finch set his notebook and pen down on the couch cushion beside his leg, then leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. “So you got hit when you weren’t expecting to. What else happened?”

“I had a fight with my roommate.”

“Oh, really?” Finch asked. “What was it about?”

“He’s moving out. At the end of the summer,” Matt said.

Finch nodded again. “You don’t want him to.”

“No shit,” Matt said.
“Well,” Finch said. “Don’t just say ‘yes.’ Explain to me why the answer is ‘yes.’”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

A pause. “That’s fine. Maybe we can talk about it next time. What else? Your job?”

“It’s shit.”

“You’re not getting your forty hours per week.”

“No. I just—it sucks and I’m not going anywhere in life,” Matt said, scraping at the knees of his jeans with sweaty fingertips.

Finch cocked his head. “I see.”

Matt rolled his eyes, an exaggerated gesture. “Aren’t you supposed to be telling me that everything doesn’t suck and I’m on the road to recovery or some bullshit?”

“I can’t tell you your perceptions, Matt.”

“Well,” Matt said, “those definitely aren’t my perceptions.”

Finch picked up his notebook again. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So you’re giving up on me, too?” Matt sat back against the couch cushions, taking a pillow and holding it tight over his chest.

“Not remotely,” Finch said. “Who else has given up on you? Or are you saying you’re giving up on yourself?”

Scowling, Matt said, “I don’t know.”

“It’s okay not to know. Life is a bit of a ride. Full of ups, like you’ve had before, and full of downs, like you’re having now.”

Matt only shook his head.

“Are you going to go back to boxing?”

“I don’t know.” It was a petulant answer, but at that moment could have been true. Everything that wasn’t depressingly constant was liminal, toppling. The possibility of losing boxing or the will to continue boxing stood on a fulcrum. He was even “losing” Madeline to her old romantic pursuits for a while, dead husband notwithstanding.

“Fair enough,” Finch said. “If you need help deciding, I would ask that you call me before you make a final decision. Other people are there who can help influence you. Like your mom and dad. Or Jessy.”

“Jessy’s my ex.” He spat out the word, tossing the pillow away.

“So the re-connection didn’t go well.”

“No,” Matt said. “I mean, no, it did. Dammit. But she’s got a boyfriend. We’re not getting back together.”

“What about this other relationship?” Finch asked. “Is it still complicated?”
“Everything is complicated.”

“All right. What I’m hearing from you today is that you don’t really want to talk. Which is fine, but I’d ask you to consider the very real idea that our sessions may be ending soon, depending on how the insurance situation shakes out.”

“Will be ending,” Matt said. “Not ‘may.’ You and I both know I’m not getting the forty hours.”

“I can’t say I know that, just like you can’t.”

Matt thumped his fists against the couch cushion next to his thighs. “No, I can say it. Nothing goes my way. I think it’s about to, then it just stops. And turns to garbage again.”

Finch pinched the bridge of his nose. “It might feel that way now, and you probably can’t see far enough out of the dark tunnel that you can see it getting brighter again, but it will.”

“Whatever.”

“This is sounding a lot like what I heard when we first started seeing each other. Do you remember, Matt?”

“And now even you’re saying things have gone back to shit!”

“That is not remotely what I said. And, like we’ve talked about before, I’m going to need to ask you not to raise your voice during our sessions.”

Matt stood up. “Never mind. You know? I don’t need this. We’re not getting anywhere.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” said Finch. “I hope we can discuss this when we meet next time.”

“You’re always so goddamn calm! Like nothing ever bothered you in your life.”

“I think we’re going to have to end it here,” Finch told him, his mouth turning down below the fluff of the mustache.

“Good. Fine.” Matt went to the door, threw it open, then reached back into the room to grab the handle and slam it on his way out. He could hear Shirleigh’s gasp as he left the waiting room.

Even as early as the walk out to the parking lot he was ashamed of his pathetic little fit. He tried to “recognize the anger and let it pass through him,” but doing so only brought more shame and he would rather just push it out of his mind.

Matt was gratified, though, when Phasma called. She seemed to have an extraordinary sense for her fighters’ attitudes. Better than any instinct Dr. Finch had. She greeted him as she always did, but she wasn’t one to tiptoe around. There was no acting like nothing had happened or dismissing his obvious embarrassment and anger. She only asked him in a level voice to come back to the gym and work technique on the bags until his face healed up.

It might have helped had over the next few days he had not been set off again nearly every time he had to avoid meeting or looking at Kyle within their shared space. He was nearly late for work one day after trying to keep from going down into the kitchen for what meager breakfast he could scrounge. To make things worse, Madeline had declined his offers to meet, saying she was busy packing for Spain. Days and evenings were spent sneaking in and out of his own house to go to work, and filling time off with unnecessary and expensive things like leisurely meals out to avoid going back. On one day he even went back to the Red Robin, but Jessy wasn’t working. He only
finished half of the burger and fries and threw the rest away instead of taking it home.

On Thursday night, Madeline finally called him, asking if he could come over. Matt was at first inclined to play coy after the rejections during the week, but he was so eager to see her again that it overrode any residual bitterness.

She answered the door in the usual shorts and tank top, but this time her face was made up—foundation swept into her hairline and blush swerved over the sharpness of her cheekbones. The scar was all but covered. Matt saw tiny particles of setting powder in the fine, downy hair on her cheeks. The stark black eyeliner gave her a look of perpetual slyness, which he found he liked.

“Sorry for the clown face,” she said. “I had to buy some new makeup today at the department store and they insisted on giving me the full treatment.”

“I like it,” he said. As they walked toward the kitchen he could hear Peaches whining outside the door to the pool patio.

“So I’m leaving tomorrow afternoon, which means you’ll have to come over that evening for the first time to feed Peaches.”

“Okay. I can come earlier in the night because I don’t have boxing.”

She bent and pulled a Diet Coke out of the refrigerator. “Oh, it’s whenever you can.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Until the Sunday after next. And like I said, you are more than welcome to sleep here. It would give me some comfort.”

“What does Peaches do at night?” he asked.

“Sleep, I assume,” Madeline said, popping the tab.

“Well,” he said, “I mean where does she sleep? In your room?”

“Good God, no. I don’t even think she likes the way I smell.”

Matt turned to her and slipped his arms around her waist, leaning in to put his cheek against her temple. “I like the way you smell.”

“Tease,” she said.

“Oh, I’m the tease?”

She laughed and tipped the can of soda all over the front of his shirt.

He let her go, backing up so the granite ridge of the kitchen island hit him in the small of his back. “What? Shit, Madeline!”

“Just take it off,” she said.

He suppressed a flare of anger. “It’s all in my jeans, too.”

“I’ll lick you clean. Come on.” She pulled at the hem of his soaked t-shirt. “Let’s go upstairs.”

He couldn’t help but concede.
Afterward, lying in bed, Madeline lit up a cigarette and tapped the ash onto the pristine modernist bedside table.

Matt winced every time she did it. “What are you going to do in Spain?”

“I don’t know yet. I suppose I’ll take an architecture tour or two. I’ll want to make a trip to the coast. Spanish beaches are extraordinary, or so I’ve heard.”

Matt reached over and stroked her elbow. The skin there was rougher, more crinkled, than he expected. “I can’t imagine you at a beach.”

“I used to love the beach as a child,” Madeline said. “I was brown as a walnut shell back then. Always in the sun.”

“Did you grow up near the ocean?”

“Yes,” she said, sighing out a great cloud of smoke. “I wasn’t always in this land-locked hell.”

“Where?”

“San Jose. That’s in California if you didn’t know. Allan and I met in California. Ryan was born out there. But the investment firm Allan and his partners owned bought Lighthouse and he was the one sent here to to look after it. Of course I followed him. Someday you’ll find out how much you’re willing to do for love.”

As with the many instances when Madeline brought up Allan, Matt wasn’t sure what to say.

She got up out of bed and went into the bathroom. Matt heard the tap running and the tiny sizzle of the cherry on her cigarette going out. She must have left the butt in the sink, because she came out with empty hands. “Come on. I need to show you how to work the alarm.”

His clothes were still damp but not unbearably so. Madeline led him down the swaying steps to the coolness of the front hall. To be standing there like that reminded him of the day they met—the casual intimacy of her request for a light. Being on the other side of the door now, deciphering the inner workings of her home, it was a new brand of intimacy he felt—possibly more profound than that they had discovered in bed.

Matt put the alarm code into his phone so he would remember it; afterward they moved back up toward the kitchen. Madeline showed him where Peaches’ food was kept, the row of tiny foil-covered plastic trays on the bottom shelf of the huge pantry. Then she took his hand and led him past the pool, past the huge living room to the garage. Inside, the overhead light was almost absorbed by the dark metallic curves of the little car.

She pointed to a hook on the wall next to the light switch. “I’m going to leave the keys there. I want you to know that if you’d like, you can drive the car anytime.”

“Oh, no,” Matt said. “It’s fine.”

“Just in case you get a wild hair, okay, dear? Try it out; it might be fun.”

“I don’t want to mess up your car.”

“Let’s mess it up right now,” Madeline said, grinning. “Do you think you can get it up again?”

“What…? Oh.”
She walked down the steps and around, trailing her fingertips across the car’s glossy surface, then hopped so lightly up onto the trunk that it barely moved. “Come here.”

As Matt went to join her, she kicked her shorts away, leaving them to land on the oil-stained concrete. He stood between her parted knees and kissed her long and full, running his hands up underneath her shirt. The height of the back of the car was perfect. All she had to do was lean backward and wrap her legs around Matt’s waist and he was able to push deep inside. When he did, she shouted, the sound ricocheting around the enclosed space, coming back to his ears nearly as loudly as her original cry.

“Hush,” he said. They were closer to Techie’s room here in the garage.

“No,” Madeline breathed into his shoulder, then leaned back and gave an extravagant moan Matt was almost certain the neighbors could have heard.

Fighting back annoyance, he smacked her thigh.

She gave a little squeak, then a longer sigh of pleasure. “Yes,” she said.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes!” she yelled, giggling afterward.

Matt slapped her thigh again.

“That’s it,” she said.

“You like that?”

“I like it when you do it. God, Matt, you’re so strong. You could break me in half. Really hurt me if you wanted to.”

He stopped mid-thrust, confused. “I don’t want to do that.”

“No, of course not.” There was something akin to disappointment on her face. Then she laughed again, running her finger along his jawline. “Don’t be so serious.” She took a deep breath.

“No,” Matt said.

Madeline threw her head back and screamed, “Fuck me!”

It hurt his ears; he ground his teeth and pulled away, slipping free of her.

“Oh, come on,” she said.

Instead of responding, he encircled her waist with one arm and hauled her from her perch on the car. As soon as her uncertain feet hit the concrete he spun her in his arms. She could barely get her hands on the back of the car before he delivered a vicious slap to her ass. He did it again, then again.

“Oh, Matt,” she said. “Yes.”

“Is that what you wanted?” he asked her, now irritated enough to put some strength behind the blows.

She only hummed her pleasure as she arched back into the strokes of his hand. The smacks rang out
within the confines of the garage but Matt was too engrossed to care about the noise anymore. “Keep still,” he said, holding her hips and pushing his cock inside her again, tucking his fingers in the creases of her thighs and yanking her back against him.

“Harder,” she said. “Come on. Don’t hold back. You’re always holding back.”

“Stop talking,” he told her.

Her hands squealed over the smooth metal as he slammed into her. She was reduced only to sharp huffs of breath, creating fans of steam over the car’s rear window.

Matt came with a long groan, his fingertips creating pink divots in the flesh of Madeline’s hips. They stayed as they were for long moments, regaining their equilibrium.

“Why, Madeline?” he asked.

She wriggled away and turned to face him, then stroked a hank of blond hair from his forehead. “Because we can. Don’t you like that we can? That we don’t have to be bound by anything?”

Matt swiped a hand across his brow. “I guess.”

“I want you to feel free,” Madeline said.

“I feel…”

“I’ll miss you so much when I’m in Spain, sweetheart.” She draped her arms over his shoulders, her fingers twining through the damp curls at his nape.

“I’ll miss you, too.” It was true. It would be, he expected, like the summer was on pause, a jumping and staticky freeze frame through which rolled the interference of work, boxing, avoiding Kyle. All resumption contingent on her return and, more importantly, on her continued favor. Matt didn’t know why the idea of her traveling without him bothered him so much. Even within his grasp she was an unknown quantity; he was still making the ridiculous mistake of thinking his reach somehow tempered her. He wanted to be the one to hold her while she solidified, came to her first steady state if not back to it.

“Will you stay the night with me?” Madeline asked.

“Sure. Of course.”

The next morning, Madeline protested with sleepy grumbles to Matt’s touch.

“I’ve got to get something to eat,” he said. “I’m starving.”

She opened one eye. “Take some money from my purse. Go get us breakfast, will you?”

Though he had considered calling her to ask what she’d like, he preferred to let her stay undisturbed, so he returned with an assortment of bagels and flavored cream cheeses to give her the widest possible choice. Madeline ate half of a poppy seed bagel with a thin layer of plain spread before declaring herself unable to take another bite. Matt put down the remainder of hers plus two additional—a plain and a cinnamon raisin—besides. She licked cream cheese from the corner of his mouth and for a while breakfast was forgotten again.

“You’re going to have to leave now, darling,” Madeline said at around eleven o’clock, “or I’m never going to get my packing finished.”
“Okay.” He re-dressed in his soda-stiff shirt and jeans, ignoring the subtle-but-growing reek from his underarms. A shower could wait until he was home. He wanted to be able to take in her scent after he drove away, the not-unpleasant thought occurring to him that he might throw these clothes onto the pile by his closet and have them by dint of his lax habits remain there until she returned.

She even saw him to the door, rising on her toes for a kiss just before the morning’s growing heat tumbled over his back. The closing of that door—the last breath of the air conditioning—felt like a coda.

Kyle’s car was on the street for once, so Matt pulled up the pitted driveway, maneuvering the wheels at the right angle and speed to avoid scraping his undercarriage. Not that it mattered, given the state of the rest of the car. He hauled his boxing gear and jumpsuit out of the trunk, reconsidering the idea of leaving the laundry for another week. With no work and no practice today, there was no excuse. It might even be time to give the car a good hosing down.

Walking into what he assumed was an empty kitchen, he tossed the brown paper bag from the deli into the refrigerator. As he turned back toward the door, Kyle walked in. They stood staring for a few protracted seconds, each measuring the other’s intent.

“Hey,” Kyle said.

“Hey.”

“I finished the microwave.”

“Good for you.”

Kyle took a breath. “Look, man. I said some really shitty things the other day.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “You did.”

“I don’t want it to keep being like this, where we have to avoid each other all the time until—” he stopped short of saying until I move out.

Matt nodded.

“You’ve been my buddy since high school,” Kyle said. “I don’t want to just, like, give that up.”

“Okay, fine.”

“So we’re cool?”

“I guess,” Matt said.

“Cool,” said Kyle, pulling his dark hair out of its ponytail and walking into the kitchen.

“What are you doing here?” Matt asked him.

“Came home for lunch. Your girlfriend get you take-out again?”

“Bagels.”

“Oh, nice,” Kyle said. “Mind if I use one to make a sandwich?”

Matt shook his head. He went out onto the stoop and closed the door before he could catch the sound of Kyle fumbling in the paper bag, drawing out one bagel then deciding he wanted a
different one. The glare of the sun from the roof of his car made him squint. There were only two trees on the lot, one whose shadow now fell across the roof of the house. Both were ragged poplars, shedding their sticky seeds late because of a cool spring. Fine, Matt thought, that was one thing he wouldn’t miss about the house. In fact, there were a lot of things he wouldn’t miss about the place if he had to move out. The big burned spot in the living room carpet where a lamp had fallen and melted the fibers. The one closet door in his room that didn’t shut all the way. An oven you couldn’t tell was off or on because the numbers and hash marks had been worn off the dial. Having to take clothes to the laundromat by the convenience store because the landlord wouldn’t give them access to the washer/dryer connections.

Maybe when Kyle moved out, Matt could just find a better place. It might have to be with two people, but at least they could have good carpeting—or maybe hardwood—a garage, actual on-site laundry. He had lived in this place for two years and it was time to make a step up. Or, at the very least, a lateral step if it didn’t matter, because he would be spending most of his time at Madeline’s house. Hell, at Madeline’s he could live in one wing of the mansion and she might never notice he was there at all. He pictured himself crashed out on the egg-shaped couches in the living room, his clothes in neat piles, only snapping to attention when she came by on her way to the garage. Or if Techie came out of his cave.

From within his pocket, his phone buzzed. The text was from Jessy.

What’s up? she asked.

Nothing. What’s up with you?

Lunch break. Thinking bout you.

Matt’s eyes went a little wider. Really?

Yeah. Let’s hang out again.

He typed, OK.

Where and when?

Matt shook his head. You pick this time.

Tomorrow?

Working, he typed back.

Sunday?

Yeah fine. Where?

Crystle Freeze on Taylor?

Matt smiled. Ice cream sounds good.

Great. See you around 2?

OK. Matt clicked off the phone and went back inside.

The only thing on hand for lunch was bagels, so he had two more once Kyle had picked them over. As the hot afternoon wore on, he imagined Madeline getting ready for her trip. Folding his jeans and undershirts at the laundromat, he pictured her choosing dresses, bathing suits, shoes that could
somehow both be stylish and comfortable if one paid enough money for them. He saw the bulbous key fob for the Audi dangling on its hook in the garage as he rinsed the poplar fuzz from his own car. While tucking into the microwave burrito he’d picked up for dinner, he tried to conjure an image of Madeline’s final stateside meal before boarding her plane. Was it take-out like they usually had? A solitary meal in a favorite restaurant? Was she too exhausted or excited to eat at all?

Matt wished he could see her off at the airport, help her unload her coordinated luggage at the curb, kiss her goodbye. In all likelihood she would take a cab. He had to wonder when Techie was leaving, as well. Perhaps it was the next morning; perhaps he had already gone. He knew only that he would be spending the night alone in her bed that night. That enormous house, empty but for him.

With a couple days’ worth of clean clothes, his laptop, toothbrush, razor, and contact lenses all dumped in with the gear in his boxing bag, Matt drove his Chevy to Crescent Heights and for the first time parked in the long, winding driveway. The car was still shedding droplets of water that squeezed out from the window wells and seams, but they evaporated almost as soon as they contacted the hot asphalt. The maple tree’s shadow hung over a street that was empty as Matt made his way through the tunnel of juniper hedge. Instead of ringing the bell as he normally would, he fumbled with his key ring until the right key was found. It was a smallish brass one, nameless with a square head—probably made at a hardware store. If he put it close to his nose he imagined he could still smell the tooth-twingeing odor of metal in the milling machine. Aside from the sharp warble of the alarm warning tone, the front entry hall was quiet. Fumbling for his phone, Matt tapped in the code and the security keypad beeped off and into dormancy again.

“Hello?” he called.

Something that sounded like a paper shredder started up in the kitchen: the tiny liquid growls and scrabbling nails of a small dog spurred to action. Peaches came spinning around the corner, almost hit the opposite wall, then stood barking at him. She didn’t advance, though, like she did when Madeline was there, all of her courage apparently borrowed. When Matt took a step forward and dropped his bag on the floor, Peaches yipped and went scuttling out of the hallway again.

He shook his head. Though she stood growling at him from the far entrance to the kitchen all the while he was dumping the foul-smelling gravy-and-paste concoction into her bowl, Peaches went at the food right away when he put the dish down. He gave an uncharitable second’s thought to the idea that perhaps Madeline had not fed the dog this morning in order to make her more compliant when Matt came in. The hallway was quiet except for the removed trilling of the cicadas in the maple outside the door as he picked up his gear and started upstairs.

When he made his way down the hall, he was surprised to see the bed unmade. There were probably still bagel crumbs in the sheets, traces of Madeline’s sweet perfume and the heavier scent of her unwashed body. Matt picked up the pillow she had slept on and held it up to his face, astonished at how quickly her olfactory presence faded. He tossed the pillow back onto the bed.

One of the embedded, sliding sections of wardrobe in the wall was open, dark wooden hangers swaying like the suspended steps in miniature. Putting his hand up by the open door, he felt the feathering of cooled, forced air from the vent across the room. He stood and let it wash over his face.

One by one, he went to each of the wardrobe sections, sliding them open and running his hands along the divergent textures of the clothes hanging there. Wool jackets, silk blouses, a thick bathrobe. Some of the doors concealed shelves on which sat folded sweaters, some of them racks for shoes. Even a wide mirror was hidden behind one of the panels, underlain by slim drawers, like a vanity set into the sheetrock of the wall. Matt slid open the top drawer. A couple of lace bras lay
loose inside, framing a white envelope. On the outside was written “Matt” in a looping hand.

Inside the envelope was a small, perfumed note and four new, crisp hundred-dollar bills. Matt had to stop and goggle at the money before he unfolded the scented paper.

Matt, my darling,
I knew you’d come snooping, bad boy. Here is a little something to get you through while I’m gone. Order lemon chicken one night for me. I’ll see you very soon.
Madeline

Giving the room a once over as if he expected to be caught on a hidden camera, Matt stuffed the bills into his wallet and shoved it in his back pocket. He put the folded note back into the envelope and slipped it into his bag.

In the huge bathroom, Matt undressed and stepped into the rainfall shower, its walls studded with jewel-like tiles in shades of blue and green. He had forgotten soap and had to content himself—with a flash of shame—with using Madeline’s floral-scented shampoo as a body wash. There was a sweet and illicit thrill in walking out into the bedroom naked, though he had been unclothed there in front of Madeline many times. Settling on the plush carpet in front of the recessed vanity, he began to open the drawers one at a time. There were two entire drawers of panties, one that held stockings and garter belts that Matt reminded himself to ask Madeline to wear when she returned. One held a couple of books, but they were nothing lascivious: one volume was called The Adult Survivor and the other Serving at the Captain’s Whim. On the cover of the latter was a painted picture of a brawny, bare-chested sailor and a woman in a gown she was quickly and noticeably coming out of. Matt shook his head.

Next to a velvet bag in the final drawer—which turned out to hold a sleek vibrator—there was a shoebox full of documents: letters and pictures. They gave off a strong smell of old paper. Matt was careful not to scrape the contents on the edge of the drawer as he took the box out. Inside at the front was a whole set of letters addressed to “My dearest Madeline.” Feeling guilty, he took one of them out. It turned out to be an account of a family reunion, and it was signed, “All my love forever, Allan.”

A couple of Madeline’s impressive transcripts from her college days had made their way into the box. There were pictures of a dark-haired girl and an older, dark-haired boy, one that Matt assumed was Madeline’s brother. She had never mentioned him. She had never mentioned any family aside from Allan and Techie.

At the back of the stack of papers was a brittle copy of an official document headed Certificate of Live Birth, State of California. January 14 at 5:51 p.m. About three and a half years after Matt was born. He looked at the name, Ryan Allan Madrigal, but it told him nothing more about Madeline’s family.

Slipped inside the second fold of the birth certificate was a hazy black-and-white picture, almost too fuzzy to distinguish. Matt knew what it was right away. On the glossy paper, a nurse or one of the parents had scrawled, It’s a boy!

He tried to arrange the documents in the order they had been in, then put the box back and closed the drawer.

Matt slept in until almost noon, slipping in and out of dreams in Madeline’s bed. He reminded himself to get some groceries with some of the money she had left him, at least something for breakfast at the house. There was something he had to do before going to see Jessy, though.
Seeing Kyle’s car in the driveway sent a clench of regret through him before he even got to the front walk. Kyle was inside on the broken recliner, a box fan blowing on his bare feet, watching TV.

“Hey, man,” Matt said.

Kyle twisted in the chair to look toward the door. “What’s up?”

“Got something for you.”

“Yeah? Is it a beer?”

Matt laughed. “It’s like twelve-thirty, dude.”

“By the way, I had that last bagel,” Kyle said. “Hope that’s okay.”

“Take it. Absolutely.”

Kyle heaved himself out of the chair, the footrest shrieking as it went down. He dusted off the thighs of his jeans even though he had only been sitting. Electrician’s force of habit, Matt had to assume. “Whatcha got for me?”

Matt dug into his wallet and produced one of the hundred-dollar bills.

“No shit!”

“No shit.”

“Thanks, man,” Kyle said, sticking the folded bill into his pocket.

“Now, will you shut up about it?” Matt asked.

“Hey, I wasn’t that bad.”

Matt didn’t want to respond, but he didn’t have to, considering Kyle was already headed back to the chair and the tiny TV. He ran upstairs to pick up some extra clothes and left again without saying goodbye to Kyle.

Lunch was at the sandwich shop, thanks to Madeline. Matt put down a reuben dripping with meat grease and dressing, eschewing the fries that went with the combo, though, since he would be having ice cream with Jessy.

Her car wasn’t outside the old-fashioned custard place called the Crystle Freeze, so he waited with the windows down, catching the scent of the fresh-baked and curling waffle cones inside.

“Mattie!”

When he heard Jessy’s voice he looked up. She and some guy were sitting at one of the wooden picnic tables on the wide porch outside the shop proper. The fringes of the battered umbrella above them swayeded in the slight breeze. Jessy’s smile was beatific. She rose to give him a hug over the railing as he approached, then her eyebrows drew in and she hunched her shoulders.

“What?” Matt asked.

“I know I promised it would be just me and you, but I got pulled over for having a broken taillight, so Travis helped me get my car to the shop a few blocks down.”
At this the guy behind her stood up. He was broad-shouldered and young but with a slight paunch that spoke to days spent behind a computer.

“Travis,” Jessy said, “this is my friend, Matt.”

A little put off but unwilling to let it show, Matt shook Travis’s hand.

“We waited for you,” said Jessy. “They have a pink bubblegum milkshake.”

Matt came around the railing and onto the front porch. “That sounds disgusting.”

“That’s what I told her,” Travis said.

At the window, Jessy decided at the last minute against the bubblegum horror, opting for a peanut butter cup swirl in a chocolate-dipped cone. Travis got a black cherry sundae, and Matt a cookies-and-cream milkshake. Matt offered to pay, but Travis turned him down and paid for all of them.

“For the inconvenience,” he said. “So, what do you do, Matt?” he asked when they sat down.

“I’m a technician.” Matt gave no room for any further questions about his job. “What about you?”

“I sell little electrical parts called inductors,” Travis said, spooning a hot-fudge-dripping gob of ice cream into his mouth. “They’re in everything from, like, cell phones to airplanes.”

It seemed to Matt an odd thing to be proud of, but there was definite pride in Travis’s voice. “Cool,” he said. “How did you meet Jessy?”

Jessy laughed. “How else do people meet waitresses?”

“Yeah,” said Travis. “It was dumb, but I asked for her number with the check. I lucked out.”

“You did,” Matt told him.

“What’s your girlfriend doing, Mattie?”

“She’s traveling in Spain,” he said, now flush with a strange pride of his own.

“Wow,” Jessy said. “That’s so cool. I’ve never been out of the country.”

“Me neither,” Travis said. “Though I might get to go to a sales conference in Hawaii.”


Matt had only traveled outside of the Kansas and Missouri area once, on a vacation with his parents to see one of his aunts in Florida. He remembered a sky so blue it was almost turquoise, the low skyline studded with palm trees. There had been a lot of old people there, too. If he was ever going to retire, he was pretty sure Florida wasn’t the place he would do it. He was going to make sure it also wasn’t Kansas City. A picture of him and Madeline sitting on a coast somewhere sipping violently purple drinks rose unbidden in his mind, but even he knew it was idiotic.

A short while after they finished up their ice cream, Jessy’s phone went off. Her recent text tone was a little bird whistle that would have driven Matt crazy.

“Oh,” she said. “They’re done with my car.”

“I’ll let you guys go,” Matt said. “Thanks for the shake, man.”
“No problem.” Travis stuck out his hand again and Matt took it, his own hand now cool from gripping the cold waxed paper cup. Jessy’s car trouble reminded him when he got back into the Chevy that he had to get the windshield wiper fixed. He hated to spend any of the remaining cash, but the wiper would be essential come fall and winter. It was so drowsy and sweltering now that he couldn’t think of winter in real terms, other than the fact that it felt like absence. Maybe like being away from Madeline, and that made him paranoid all over again.

He stopped by the grocery store for a few essentials after leaving Jessy and Travis. It felt good to finally have enough cash to buy things like cereal and fruit. When he got back to Madeline’s house and was unloading the groceries, he thought about getting in the water, but realized he hadn’t brought his swim shorts. With only the low fence, Matt was in no way ballsy enough to skinny-dip in Madeline Madrigal’s pool. After feeding devil dog, however, he did pop open one of the Cokes from the six-pack he had bought and sat out on one of the lounge chairs watching the afternoon shadows grow long and fall across the glassy blue.

After cereal the next morning, Matt called the auto shop near the Crystle Freeze and asked if they would take a look at his wipers. With only about two hundred dollars left of the four that Madeline had given him, he hoped it would end up being an easy fix. There was that sandwich shop across the street from the place, and it had free wifi so he could look for places to live if his laptop cooperated.

The tech at the garage looked with indifference at Matt’s car. He probably saw way worse beaters come through the door. “What’s the problem, man?” he asked.

“I’m, uh, I’m Matt. I called about looking at the windshield wipers.”

“Yeah? What’s wrong with them?”

Intra-office communication was obviously not a strong suit at KC Top Car Care. “The one on the passenger side isn’t working.”

The tech, whose name tag read ‘Les,’ had Matt put the key in the ignition and turn it slightly, then hit the wipers. Matt was going to be mortified if the left one had decided to start working again of its own accord, but it just stuttered in place.

“Pop the hood for me?” Les asked. He leaned over the car on the passenger side, flipped a tiny wire twice with his fingertip, and said, “Yep.”

“What?” Matt asked.

“Your linkage is out. It links to the motor. You’re gonna need a new one.”

“A new motor?”

“Naw, man. A new linkage.”

“What’s that, well, what’s that gonna cost?”

“Parts and labor I’d say about one-twenty,” Les said.

Matt let out a breath. “Okay, great. Can we do it now?”

Les nodded. “You want to wait?”

After getting the laptop out of the back of the car, Matt gave his phone number to the cashier so
they could call when the job was finished. Finding a break in the mid-afternoon traffic, he ran across the street to the sandwich place and ordered lunch. It took the entire time his order was being prepared for the laptop to boot up. Its shuddering music was loud in the confines of the shop’s tiled walls, and he hit the mute button as soon as he could.

The struggling browser was able to connect to the wifi network, though, and Matt looked at his personal email, of which there was very little, before checking out Craigslist. There were a lot of places looking for new roommates with rooms in his price range, so he copied a few links. Some would be with people who were a little younger, just out of college. Closer to Techie’s age. Matt remembered finding the creased birth certificate, the sonogram photo. All it did was remind him with no small amount of discomfort about the conversation with Finch the week before, so he shoved it out of his mind.

He wouldn’t ever be sure what had triggered it, but the machine started acting especially funky after he hit the ‘back’ button on one of the housing ads. A shape like a little comet chased its tail in a circle for two minutes, then three minutes. Matt couldn’t click on anything on the screen. He was considering a hard re-start when the laptop just went black. The fan was still going but Matt couldn’t see anything, not even the mouse pointer.

“Shit,” he whispered. Looking around the sandwich shop and seeing it empty, he raised his hand and slapped the side of the machine. At that, the fan sped up, the surge of hot air ruffling the waxed paper around his half-finished ham and cheese. A final harsh click, and even the fan went dead. Matt poked at the power button a few times, but he may as well have been playing a piano with snapped strings. “Shit.” This time it was louder, drawing the attention of the bored young man standing behind the counter.

Matt put his head in his hands, struggling to breathe normally, his palms crushed against his eyes. This could not happen now. As a matter of fact, it couldn’t happen anytime. Just like he had told Finch: things looked to be turning around until they swerved to drag him back again. He picked everything up, tossing the half-sandwich in the trash and fighting like nothing before in his life against throwing the laptop in with it. Maybe it just needed some time to cool down. Time to cool down. Matt barked a humorless laugh as he plowed through the door.

Focusing on the still-warm piece of junk under his arm and not paying attention to street traffic, he walked back over to the auto shop. He set the laptop with a clatter in one of the chairs, which reminded him of the blue plastic ones they used to use at high school assemblies, then sat playing online games, draining the battery of his phone until the cashier called his name.

All in all it was one-twenty-two sixty-five. Matt handed over the two remaining hundreds, took his change and his keys, and started toward the door to the back lot.

“‘Scuse me, son.”

Matt turned.

An older man was holding the busted laptop up in the air with one trembling hand. “I think you forgot this.”

Sighing, Matt walked back over and retrieved it. It took every ounce of his willpower to grind out a Thanks.

He tested the wipers before leaving the lot, both this time squealing across the dry windshield. Blasting the air conditioner didn’t do much to fend off the heat that was creeping in as the sun reached its peak. After having considered going straight back to Madeline’s to bask in the fervent
air conditioning, he thought better of it and headed home to get his swim trunks.

With a half-finished Coke going warm and flat by the pool’s tiled edge as he ducked into the water again and again, things seemed a little less terrible. Matt stayed out until he could feel the the tingle of sunburn on his shoulders and nose, then walked dripping into the kitchen, ignoring Peaches’ renewed yapping. After he showered off upstairs, he came back down and left the trunks hanging out on the pool fence to dry.

There was plenty of food in the fridge for another sandwich, though he felt guilty for wasting the one he had bought earlier. Barefoot, Matt walked around the kitchen, past the pool patio and into the other wing of the house. By the door to the basement there was also a set of stairs leading up, these firmly fixed and complete with banister. They were altogether less impressive than the suspended stairs, but Matt was grateful for surer footing. The staircase led to another long hallway, interrupted by doors every few feet. All of them were closed.

Two turned out to be well appointed guest bedrooms (as if he had expected anything different from Madeline and—by extension he assumed—Allan). One was an office equipped with a desk and shelving. By the far wall there was a lone surge protector plugged into the wall outlet, but there was no electronic equipment in the room. He wondered if this had been Allan’s office, or whether it was some well intentioned but abortive attempt to bring Techie out of the basement. At the far end of the hall was an enormous bathroom with a comparably enormous whirlpool tub. Maybe he could convince Madeline to take a bath with him there when the weather got cooler.

He closed all the doors again and went back downstairs, nearly passing the basement entrance when he thought better of it. He stuffed the last of the sandwich in his mouth and brushed the crumbs off his shirt before opening the door. The warm abyss below was pitch dark. There was a light switch by the door frame, though, and he flipped it on, giving at least a little illumination to the stairs. For no reason he could name, his heartbeat sped up as he stepped down. Maybe it was the memory of having gotten to know Madeline here—their lonely and improbable dialogue. It was a lonely and improbable space Matt saw once again as the turned on the light switch at the bottom of the stairs. There was silence where he had expected noise. The huge PC tower lay dormant, to all appearances as irretrievable as his own laptop. Both iMacs were also turned off.

Matt had never used a Mac computer. He crouched in front of the desk, but there didn’t seem to be any buttons next to the sleek screen, and there was no tower in sight. He abandoned those, walking back over to the enormous PC. When he poked at the power button, the thing hummed, lighting up blue and then green, the illumination leaking out from between the cracks in the metal-and-plastic housing like spaceship doors in old movies. He half expected steam or mist to come pouring out, falling and coating the floor over the tops of his bare feet.

The three screens leapt to violent blue life. There was no boot-up music, which Matt thought was a little strange, but he supposed if you could customize computers to this degree you could switch it on and off at will, or take it out altogether. As much as it could have been, considering what it was, the entire setup seemed designed for stealth, not to break the equilibrium of the goings-on upstairs with even the smallest noise. Matt wondered if Techie played video games. There was a pair of headphones Matt could only dream of affording (the knock-offs of which he had back at home) sitting on the desk beside the wireless keyboard.

On the center screen was a password prompt.

Matt extended one finger and typed techie on the screen, where the word showed up as a line of little black dots. He deleted it without pressing anything else. Someone as smart as Techie wouldn’t have an obvious password. It would be something like those wifi names, a jumble of
letters and digits with significance only to him.

Absent any recourse, he mashed the power button on the tower again and the system sighed, its lights blinking off.

He looked into the bed nook, where the covers were nondescript but pulled neatly up to the top of the mattress. Two pillows were propped up against the back wall. Matt leaned in and pressed his hand into one of them, the print slow to fill out again as the foam cells opened. It was an expensive pillow, no doubt.

He walked along the rows of shelves, looking at the titles of the books. *Programming in Ruby. The Fabric of Reality*. One hardback with a tattered dust cover had over-the-top, splashy art on it and carried the title *The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World*. Matt let his lip curl up. *Whatever.*

He couldn’t remember which of the ubiquitous wire figures he had flicked off the shelf. Perhaps it had never been rescued from the recesses under the bed. Picking them up one at a time, he began to recognize some of the shapes. There was definitely a giraffe and a snake, any number of insect forms, and a spider that he could identify only by its eight legs rather than six.

On one of the lower shelves, there was a spool of copper wire and beside it a wire cutter. Matt picked up the loose end, snipped a length of the wire, and wrapped it a couple of times around his forefinger before letting the little curl fall into the trash can by the desk.

Shrugging, he went to the stairs again, with one last look back before he flicked off the light. When he did, he caught the glow seeping in around the corners of the dish towel tacked over the half-window. Another shrug. He mounted the stairs, flipped the last light switch off, and closed the door.

The next day at work, Matt looked for Quentin in the equipment room and on the main floor of the dispatch center, but he couldn’t see him anywhere. It was very much unlike Quentin to be late; Matt didn’t think he had failed to clock in early once since they’d known each other.

A guy with light brown hair and the sad, adolescent-looking beginnings of a beard and mustache walked up to him. “You’re Matt?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m Ted.” He stuck out his hand.

Matt looked around. No one else seemed to be paying attention to their interactions. He shook Ted’s hand. “Are you new?”

“Yeah, I’m paired with you, they told me.”

“Where’s Quentin?”

Ted shrugged.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Uh, hold on a second.” He tracked Snoke down in the management office. “Did Quentin get fired?”

Snoke thumped the edge of a small pile of work orders on the surface of the desk, straightening them. “Quentin’s father passed away.” He didn’t even look up.
“Oh, man.”

“So you’ll be working with Edward today, and probably for a few days.”

“Okay,” Matt said. He and Quentin had never really socialized outside of work, but the news still brought him down as though they had been close friends. Ted or Edward or whatever-his-name-was must have noticed his furrowed brow when he came back out, because he mirrored the expression.

It took him a couple of seconds for him to say anything. “Bad news?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “My partner...the guy I work with usually. His dad died.”

“Oh, damn,” said Ted, scratching the poor excuse for scruff on his chin.

“Yeah,” Matt repeated. “Sucks. So, do you know what you’re doing?”

Instead of looking affronted, Ted laughed. “Yeah, I used to work for FiberTech over in Topeka.”

Matt offered him a slim smile. “Coming over from the competition, huh?”

“Competition doesn’t offer benefits.”

“Yeah, well, good luck with that here.”

“Shit,” Ted said. “I had a feeling.”

Over the course of the day, Matt found Ted to be easygoing and competent. They took lunch at a Wendy’s and bickered about the best fast-food fries.

“Why don’t you go by ‘Ed?’” Matt asked him at one point.

“It’s an old man name, dude.”

“So is ‘Ted.’”

Ted shrugged. “I’m kind of out of options. Are you a Matthew?”

Matt nodded. “My mom always used to say that giving people nicknames as real names was trashy.”

“My mom calls me ‘Teddy.’”

Matt broke up laughing.

As they drove back toward the dispatch center, the fierce heat of the day was at last beginning to wane.

“I’m going to go home and get in the pool,” Matt said. It wasn’t entirely true; he had to go to boxing first.

“Oh, you have a pool? Lucky.”

“Well, it’s my girlfriend’s. I’m watching her house. And her terrible dog.”

“It’s one of those little yappy ones, isn’t it?” Ted asked.
Matt rolled his eyes. “Yeah.”

“I hate those.”

“I get the feeling she doesn’t like it very much, either.”

True to form, Peaches was dancing and yowling as Matt opened the door that night. He was sweaty and tired and wanted nothing more than to get in the water. After giving Peaches her nauseating gravy mash, he took his trunks off the fence rail and changed right there by the patio door.

He walked out a couple of steps, then started running, leaping up and cannonballing into the water. It was warm on the surface but cooler underneath, and it felt unbelievable. The half-moon had cropped up over the roof of the house, and Matt lay back and let the water cradle him, watching the moon’s slow track up into the sky.

Peaches began barking on the other side of the patio door and Matt rolled his eyes, still looking up as the twilight slipped off of emerging stars. The dog shut up soon enough anyway.

He thrashed and spluttered when the patio light came on, strong and blinding. “What the *fuck*?” Rubbing water out of his eyes, one of his contact lenses slipped to the side. When he was able to blink it back into place, he saw a tall, narrow figure standing at the glass door holding the dog.

_Techie._
Chapter 6

Matt and Techie stared at each other, Techie cradling Peaches against his chest. He was wearing his accustomed outfit: a t-shirt and khaki shorts the hems of which dipped a few inches below his knees. From what Matt could see in the harsh patio light, the shirt was dark purple.

It made him acutely aware of his relative state of undress, and he lowered himself further into the water, submerging his shoulders.

Techie let the dog go; she bounced on her hind legs at his heels. He tilted his chin, looking for all the world like a dog himself, head cocked and eyes curious. “What are you doing here?”

Matt felt a surge of anger. “What are you doing here?”

Raising his eyebrows, Techie said, “I live here.”

“No,” Matt said, “I mean what are you doing here now?”

“I just got back.”

“I thought—Madeline said you were supposed to be away with your grandparents.”

Techie nodded. “I was. I have a test tomorrow. For class. I thought I could make it up, but the professor said I can’t miss it.”

Matt sighed. His hands were balled into fists below the water’s surface. “Are you going back?”

A shake of Techie’s head.

Matt sighed again. “Well, shit. Your mom—Madeline—she asked me to watch the house while you two were gone.”

“I figured,” Techie said. “She didn’t tell me, but I’m not surprised.” He walked a few steps toward the edge of the pool, face cast into darkness by the corona of the floodlight behind him. “You don’t have to anymore.”

“Yeah,” Matt said, curt. A few silent moments crawled by between them, what Matt could see of Techie’s face impassive. “Well,” he said, “I’m just going to get out.” He turned and swam to the far side of the pool, using the metal ladder to haul himself up. The night was still warm but his skin prickled with gooseflesh. When he turned, Techie had his hands clutched in front of him, an oddly innocent gesture but with him merely odd. Matt looked around him, scanning the periphery of the pool, the fence, running a hand through his wet hair.

Techie read his gestures. “You don’t have a towel.”

“Forgot it, I guess,” Matt said.

A pause. Techie shifted from one foot to the other. “I can get you one.”

“Um, no. It’s okay.”

“But you’ll track water into the kitchen.” Was there a note of annoyance in his voice?

Matt clutched his head. “Yeah, fine. Okay. Grab me a towel.”
Peaches followed Techie as he disappeared inside the house.

Matt crossed his arms over his chest, shifting his weight back and forth just like Techie had done. He looked back out over the pool, the rippling of the water settling back down as if it had been undisturbed all along.

Techie returned with a bath towel in a color Matt had never seen in the house. He wondered for the first time whether Techie had a shower down in his basement hideaway. The towel fell out of its folds as Techie extended it with a long arm toward Matt, who grabbed it out of his hand and mumbled, “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

It was more than a little weird the way Techie stood and watched him swab the water droplets from his arms and chest. Peaches twined around Techie’s feet, also giving Matt a wary stare. “Where should I put this?” Matt asked, figuring he was dry enough to satisfy Techie’s concern over the kitchen floor.

“I’ll take it,” Techie said, holding his arm out again.

“Yeah,” Matt said, walking past him and depositing the towel in his hand, “I’ll just go change.”

In Madeline’s bedroom, he hung his swim trunks over the glass door of the shower and toweled off again. A great wash of disappointment tumbled over him then. Back to his small room, his grubby little bathroom. The bragging rights to his pool access yanked away. Effectively barred from the house until Madeline returned in two weeks. Though he was irritated with Techie, he was also angry with Madeline in the abstract. Not that she should have been expected to learn her son’s schedule, only that if she had he would have been spared this ignominious exit.

He shoved his clothes, both clean and dirty, into the boxing gear bag, then slung it over his shoulder. The bed he left unmade. If Techie decided to go up into the other part of the house, let him have hard, uncomfortable proof that Matt had been in his mother’s bed.

Techie was standing in the kitchen when he came downstairs.

“You don’t have to see me off,” Matt said, adjusting the heavy bag on his shoulder. “I promise I’m leaving.”

“No,” Techie said, actually blushing. “It’s not that. I was here, anyway. Did you buy the food in the refrigerator?”

Matt gritted his teeth. He would have to leave the groceries behind. “Yeah, man. They’re all yours.”

His brows drawing down, Techie said, “You should take them.”

“Don’t want any reminders I was here, huh?” He raised his voice, unable to help himself.

Techie did nothing short of cringe. “No, no. I mean...you bought them. You should have them.”

“Actually, your mom bought them.”

“Oh. For you?” The hurt in the question was so thick, so palpable that Matt was thrown off guard.

“She left me some, you know, money. For watching the house.”
Techie’s nod was somber. “You should still have them.”

“It’s fine,” Matt said. “I’ll get some more.” He rounded the kitchen island next to which Techie stood.

“Does she trust you?” Techie asked as Matt walked by.

Matt turned, hands outspread, entirely fed up. “Obviously. Or I wouldn’t be here.”

“No, not my mom. Peaches.”

“How in the hell should I know?”

“Does she bark at you?”

“Yeah, she barks at me,” Matt said. “She won’t let me get near her unless I’ve got food. What does this have to do with anything?”

The expression on Techie’s face could have been construed as disappointment. “Just wondering,” he said.

Matt shook his head. “Okay…”

He was turning again when Techie asked, “Do you live close to here?”

Puzzlement suffusing his irritation, Matt said, “Not really.”

Techie was digging in between two of the kitchen tiles with the toe of his shoe. “I’m sorry. It’s late.”

For a moment, Matt thought that Techie was about to insist he stay, but he said nothing more, only studied his shoe. “Yeah, well. Okay.”

“Good night,” Techie said.

Matt was walking away. “You, too.” After the cool, treated air, the heady heat beyond the door hit him hard, coating his skin. A drop of water from his still-damp hair pattered onto the concrete walk. As he was shoving the bag into his battered trunk, it occurred to him that Techie had not asked for the house key, nor had Matt thought to volunteer it. Part of him wanted to keep the thing out of spite. The remainder surrendered to the hesitant memory of Techie’s face when he had asked about the food in the fridge. Should Techie come running out the front door—and Matt couldn’t imagine him running anywhere—he would return the key, but otherwise he would hang onto it, if only to assure Madeline that he hadn’t completely left her in the lurch.

But there was no one standing in the entryway as Matt drove away, and as he looked in the rearview mirror the light at the front of the house snapped off.

The next morning he regretted not at least taking the boxes of cereal. There was precious little of the money from Madeline left after having the wiper fixed, and he would have to spend some of it on breakfast. He pulled into the drive-through lane at a fast food place and ordered the largest meal he could, hoping to make it last at least until the end of the work day.

With Matt expecting once again to see Quentin, Ted’s presence surprised him for a moment before he was able to process it.

“Can I drive today?” Ted asked, waiting by the van with a canvas tote dangling from his fingers.
“You can drive every day,” Matt told him. “I hate driving this thing.”

“I wanted to be a truck driver when I was little,” said Ted. “Always used to have a thing for big machines. My mom has a picture of me sitting up in the cab of this huge earth mover when I was like five, six. Had the biggest, dumbest grin on my face, like I won the kid lottery. It takes literally nothing to make a kid happy, right?”

“I guess,” Matt said.

“You don’t have any kids, do you?”

“Hell, no.”

“What’d you want to be when you grew up?” Ted asked, shoving the truck roughly into gear. “I mean, when you were real little?”

For the life of him, Matt couldn’t remember. It seemed as if his recollections stretched back to the point at which he had first been expected to care for himself and simply stopped there. All childhood memories were seen through the lens of something relatable in adulthood: his favorite foods, his preferred movies or sports. “Firefighter,” he lied.


“It involves walking into fires. What happened with you?”

“With the truck driver thing? I don’t know. I just never did it. I still could, I guess, if I wanted to.”

“Yeah,” Matt said.

“I’d probably make more money,” Ted said, shrugging. “But, man, I know this sounds stupid, but I kind of want to settle down. You know, with a wife and a couple of kids. And I’d want to be there for them.”

Matt shrugged. “You could do it until you find someone.”

“But,” Ted said, gesturing toward the windshield as he drove, “how am I going to find somebody if I’m not ever here? Your girlfriend ever want to get married?”

The question almost made Matt choke. The only person to whom Madeline had ever been married and was ever likely to be married was in the ground. Matt was a substitute but not someone who could stand in Allan’s place. Not for Madeline and certainly not for Techie. “She’s not the type,” Matt said.

“Gotcha,” said Ted, though there was the barest hint of what might have been pity in his tone.

If the close call with Jessy had been more than that, Matt would already be a father. Of course, Madeline never would have happened in that case, and out of a sense of preservation of this unprecedented time, he was grateful. But Ted’s pity got to him, too. This thing with Madeline might be sustainable, but it came with contingencies. Other relationships would, too, of course, but none of them might seem to require so much of him.

Halfway through the day, Matt was ravenous, but he ignored the complaints of his stomach, pushing past it. Fatigue and dizziness had set in by the end of the last job. Ted was wiry and energetic, yet seemed as if he didn’t have to eat at all. Still, after putting their equipment up for the night and locking the van, Ted asked him whether he wanted get a sandwich at what he called “the
best sub place in the city.”

Matt had never heard of the restaurant, and was both interested to try it and desperate for something to eat, but going would make him late for boxing. He fielded the usual questions from Ted about fighting, promising him more in-depth answers the next time they worked together.

The traffic was a nightmare in between the dispatch center and West Side Fight. Matt was still cramming his dinner burrito in his mouth—holding it in one hand and his soft drink in the other, driving with his knee—when he pulled into the lot at the gym. He popped some half-melted gum to spare Phasma and anyone else his salsa breath.

“Hey,” she said as he walked in. “Looking just about normal.”

“Ha,” Matt said. “Thanks?”

“Bags today, then back in the ring tomorrow. What do you say?”

Hesitating for a second beforehand, Matt nodded. Truth be told tomorrow would probably be better; he would have a little more time between him and Techie’s unexpected return, his summary, if implicit, booting from Madeline’s place.

It was the house that he was thinking of more and more as the practice session wore on, though. Leaving the groceries there had been an idiotic move, a waste of money that he no longer had. Hungry again in a food-smelling car on his way back, he decided to veer away from his own house and back toward Madeline’s. At the very worst, he could empty out the boxing bag and throw the food in its reeking interior.

At the front of the house he considered using the key, remembering Techie’s reluctance to answer the door. But with Madeline gone, he had no excuse for not rising up from the depths. Matt rang the bell.

Peaches started in on her frenzy right away.

He pressed the button again.

Wonder of wonders, a few moments later an orange-topped smudge of a person came walking down the hall, following the bouncing fuzzball.

Techie paused at the doorknob before turning it. He stood there in the doorway, wordless, his chin tilted at its questioning angle as Peaches continued to bark. “Peaches,” he finally said, still looking at Matt. The dog fell silent.

“I left my swim trunks,” Matt blurted. It was, he realized, probably not a lie, considering he didn’t remember taking them down from the glass shower door.

Blinking a couple of times, Techie said, “Okay.”

“Can I come in and get them?”

“Oh. Sure.” The door opened fully, letting the flow of cool air tumble out.

Matt stepped over a still-silent Peaches and entered the house again. With only Techie present it held an atmosphere of utter foreignness, wrongness. The geometry was off, even though every wall was in its right place. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Techie shiver. “I’m just...going upstairs.”
The swim trunks, now stiff from the dried salt water, were where he had left them. He picked up the towel that lay in a crumpled heap and threw it over the shower door in their place. Giving Madeline’s room one last look, he turned and went to the stairs. They rocked gently with his footsteps.

Techie was in the kitchen, leaning against the granite island in the center.

Matt sighed. “Do you think I could—?”

“I didn’t eat any of it,” Techie said. “Not even this morning.”

Looking down at the swim shorts in his hand, Matt said, “You could have. I left it.”

“No. I thought you might come back. For the food.”

“Thanks.”

Techie was frowning a little when Matt looked up. “Groceries are expensive.”

“If you need them—” Matt started.

“No,” Techie said, his tone somewhat sharp. “I think you need them more than I do.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Silence, then a deep breath. “The money was yours.”

“Doesn’t your mom give you money, too?” Matt asked. He felt mild surprise at not having used Madeline’s name.

“I don’t ask her for it,” said Techie. He looked up at Matt and then down again.

“Do you have any plastic bags?”

Techie shook his head.

Matt clenched his jaw, forced himself to relax it. “You know what? Just keep them. I have a day off tomorrow and I can go get more. Seriously.” He walked to the edge of the kitchen, but froze when Techie spoke again in a soft voice.

“I know it was you.”

It was a silly idea to play dumb, but Matt did it anyway. “What are you talking about?”

“You went in my room. Moved my stuff around.”

“No, I didn’t.” It sounded lame, even to his own ears.

“The keyboard was out of place.”

“It was already like that.” The self-incriminating words were out Matt’s mouth before he could stop them. He stood silent for a few moments. “Listen. I’m sorry. My laptop is busted. I thought maybe I could get online. Madeline doesn’t have a computer.”

The statement was met with more silence. Just as Matt was about to start making excuses again, Techie asked, “What’s wrong with your laptop?”
“It’s a piece of shit. I don’t know. It’s been acting funny forever. Then the other day it just quit.”

Techie bit his lip. “I could...take a look at it for you.”

Matt stared. “Why?”

“It’s what I do.”

“I mean, why for me?”

Techie shrugged.

“I thought you just built computers,” Matt said.

“I fix them, too. People pay me to do it. That’s why I don’t ask my mom for money. I have enough on my own.”

Perhaps it was Matt’s imagination, but Techie’s shoulders seemed to straighten at the assertion. “Uh, okay,” he said. “Do you want me to just bring it over?”

“Sure,” Techie said.

“When?”

“Tomorrow? You said you had the day off.”

“Oh,” said Matt. “Yeah. So, when?”

“Sometime after five,” Techie said. “I have a class.”

“Oh. I have to be somewhere at six-thirty. Could we maybe do it in the morning?”

Two spots of color appeared high on Techie’s cheeks. “I tend to sleep late in the morning, but, maybe, does ten work?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”


“Sure you don’t want your food?” Techie asked. “You can take it.”

Matt was very close to saying, Maybe just one of the boxes of cereal, but his pride got in the way. “No, I’m good. Go ahead.”

As he turned to go, Techie might have muttered, “Thank you.”

It was because of that little expression of gratitude that Matt wasn’t nearly as irritated with himself the next morning for having nothing in the house for breakfast. With his junk laptop in tow, he stopped by the same bagel shop he had visited the morning before Madeline left, ordering a couple of bagels for himself. He sat, once again parked down the street instead of in the driveway, cramming the remainder of the last one into his mouth. After a quick check of his teeth for stray poppy seeds or cream cheese, he hauled the laptop out of the car and started toward the house. Still having the key presented the usual dilemma at the front door. But this time he was expected, so he rang the bell. Peaches howled for a few seconds before being cut off.
She was slung under Techie’s arm when he answered the door wearing the same quizzical expression he had displayed the day before. He hadn’t shaved yet that day and auburn prickles spread across his cheeks and chin.

“I’m here with the laptop,” Matt said, dodging his gaze.

“Yeah,” Techie said. “Of course.” His eyes seemed more irritated than usual, though it could just be the effect of having recently woken up. He ran a fingertip across his eyelid, clearly trying not to scratch. They stood still for a moment—Matt on the stoop and Techie inside—then Techie stepped out of the way and let him walk into the cool dimness.

The closing of the door shut out the late-morning back-and-forth of birds, the faraway hum of a lawnmower. Matt once again got the feeling of having been transported to an alien space, just off from the surrounding world at large. In the kitchen, he placed the laptop on the island.

When Techie set Peaches down she ran toward the pantry door, one paw up in the air, looking back at Matt. “She thinks you’re here to feed her, too,” Techie said, the corners of his mouth turning up by millimeters. “You’re out of luck, dog,” he said to her.

Matt chuckled despite himself. “Sucks to be you,” he told Peaches.

“Do you want a drink?” Techie asked.

Matt raised the half-full coffee cup in his left hand. “No, I’m good.”

“Coffee?” Techie asked, then shook his head. “I mean, is that coffee?”

“Yeah.”

Techie nodded, swallowed. “I have most of my coffee at night. That’s probably why I’m up so late.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Probably.”

A few seconds of silence. “So, what is the laptop doing?”

“Right now?” Matt asked. “Nothing. Like I said yesterday, I can’t get it to start up.” To demonstrate, he opened it and mashed the power button.


Matt shut the laptop again. “The screen froze, but that was nothing new. It always did that. But then it just went black. The little fan was still on, but then it stopped, too. After I, uh, hit it.”

Techie’s brows drew in. “You hit it and it stopped working?”

“Just the fan. The rest of it went before that.”

“Percussion maintenance.”

“Huh?”

Looking away, blushing a little, Techie said, “Percussion maintenance. It doesn’t really work the way we want it to.”

“I guess not,” Matt said. He tapped blunt fingers on the top of the computer.
“Could be some sort of power supply issue,” said Techie. “Was it acting weird before that?”

“Yeah. All the time. Freezing up and taking forever to boot.”

“Oh.” Techie’s expression was grave. “That sounds like a hard drive thing.”

Matt’s heart began to thump. “Is that bad?”

“It could mean you need a new hard drive.”

Sighing and clenching his fists, Matt swore. “Does that basically mean I might as well get a new computer?”

At that, Techie perked up, rubbing the corners of both eyes and blinking. “Oh, no. It could just mean a new hard drive. That’s better. Cheaper.”

Cheaper, but it still meant spending money that Matt likely didn’t have. He regretted getting the windshield wiper fixed, but it was already done. He had felt so flush with cash, so anxious to have it, that it had just fallen out of his hands all at once. The bagels sat heavy in his stomach, and the thought of drinking any more of the coffee made him feel ill. He popped the plastic lid off and dumped the rest of it down the sink.

“Oh, no. It could just mean a new hard drive. That’s better. Cheaper.”

Sighing and clenching his fists, Matt swore. “Does that basically mean I might as well get a new computer?”

At that, Techie perked up, rubbing the corners of both eyes and blinking. “Oh, no. It could just mean a new hard drive. That’s better. Cheaper.”

Cheaper, but it still meant spending money that Matt likely didn’t have. He regretted getting the windshield wiper fixed, but it was already done. He had felt so flush with cash, so anxious to have it, that it had just fallen out of his hands all at once. The bagels sat heavy in his stomach, and the thought of drinking any more of the coffee made him feel ill. He popped the plastic lid off and dumped the rest of it down the sink.

“Of course, I don’t know anything until I take a look at it,” Techie told him. “I’ll need to take it apart.”

“Maybe I should just take it into a computer store or something,” Matt said, trying to erase the gruffness from his tone.

Techie shook his head. “You could, but if you let me fix it I’ll only charge you for parts. They won’t do that at the store. If you can wait for a day or two while I finish up some other projects that are paying parts and labor, then I can start on this one.”

“I don’t understand,” Matt said. “Why would you do that for me?”

Techie cast his gaze over to Peaches, who was making her slow and dejected way back from the pantry door. “I don’t want to say something that will make you mad at me.”

For a moment Matt stood silent, shocked. Then: “Why would I get mad at you?”

“Wait, the other day when I said you probably needed the food more than I do, you got a little mad.”

“It wasn’t at you,” Matt said, though that was a partial untruth. “It was at...myself.”

Techie paused. “The people I go to school with, they have people helping them take care of themselves. They have parents to give them money. I’m a lot like them in a lot of ways, too, even though I try not to be. They’re not alone, is what I mean.”

“I’m not alone.” Matt said, looking back down the front hallway.

“Sorry,” Techie said. “I knew I’d offend you and I didn’t want to.”

Standing, looking down the hallway, Matt drew a couple of deep breaths.“No,” he said. “I’m sorry. You didn’t offend me. I get mad at stupid stuff.”

“Is that why you hit your computer?”
Absent a good response, Matt nodded.

“Just,” Techie started. “If I fix it, you should come to me first before hitting it again.”

*If it works I won’t hit it,* was almost out of Matt’s mouth, but instead he said, “Okay.”

Techie rubbed at his eyes. “I need to go get my drops. And my phone, so I can get your number.”

“For the computer stuff.”

“Yeah,” Techie said. He blinked and winced, then picked up Matt’s laptop, putting it under his arm as he had the dog earlier. “I’ll be right back.”

Perhaps since the outside temperature had not reached its full before he came into the house, Matt shivered in the strong AC. He rubbed his biceps, tapping his foot. He yawned then took his phone out of his back pocket.

The skin around Techie’s eyes was shining wet when he returned to the kitchen; he must have washed them or put some sort of cream on them. It made him look as though he had been weeping. Matt was put in mind of Madeline the day she begged him to come over. The only time since the first time they met that all they had done was talk.

From his shorts pocket Techie pulled an unmarred and obviously new phone. It was not in a case. Matt’s phone looked lumpy and huge by comparison.

Techie handed his phone over. “Just put your number in right there. Then I’ll text you and you’ll have my number, too.”

“Okay.” Matt typed in his number in the small, white blank and handed the phone back, wary of dropping it. In a few seconds, a text notification appeared on his screen and he saved the number into his contacts. After starting to type “Ryan,” he reconsidered and wrote “Techie” instead.

“It may be a couple days before I can get to it,” Techie repeated.

“It’s cool,” Matt said. “I’ll just use my phone.”

Techie stood silent.

Matt scratched his head. His hair needed a wash. “Thanks. Again. I don’t know why you’re doing this for me, but thanks.”

“Do you want a sandwich? Techie asked.

Evaluating, Matt took a few seconds then said, “I’m still full from breakfast.”

“What do you have at six-thirty?”

Matt thought he had never been so reluctant to answer any question in his life. “Sports.”

“What kind?”

“Um, boxing.”

Techie’s eyes went wide.
Matt could tell he was on the cusp of saying something, but was thinking better of each option. God knew what it was: *You hit people? Does it help you get less mad?* Even just, *Why?*

“I never was any good at sports,” he said at last, his tone apologetic. “Are you good?”

“I don’t know. I’m training hard.”

Techie frowned. “You don’t know if you’re good?”

“Well,” Matt said, his hand circling, helpless, in the air. “I guess you’re not supposed to say you’re good at things when people ask you.”

“That’s stupid,” Techie said. “I’m really good at programming. Like I said, not so much at sports.”

“Okay, fine. I like to think I’m good. I fight people and win.” He paused, then added, “Not so much at programming.”

Techie laughed then. Genuinely laughed.

With nothing to do but stare at each other for a moment, they did so, each uncomfortable but reluctant to be the first one to break contact.

“Do you want a ride to your class?” Matt asked.

“Oh, no,” Techie said, looking at his feet. “I don’t have to leave for a couple hours still.”

Matt didn’t want to press the issue. “Okay. Well, talk to you soon, I guess.”

“Okay.”

The day had heated up by a considerable margin when Matt stepped out into the sunshine. All of a sudden, he felt stupid for parking down the street. Next time he would park in the driveway. He was, of course, uncertain when *next time* would be. It could be when he delivered the money for the computer overhaul. That was if he was able to scrape together the cash. He had no standard by which to judge how much it would cost, so he couldn’t just allow Techie free rein over what he put inside the computer. Struck with a sudden panic, he considered going back, asking for an estimate. It would be silly, though. Make him look desperate. He could call tomorrow and check in.

On the drive to his own house, he used the last of the cash from Madeline to pick up some food, indulging in a bologna-and-cheddar sandwich when he got back. The hours before boxing stretched out unfilled, unfillable. In the end he decided on a nap, his bed seeming impossibly small.

He was awakened by his phone thrumming on his chest. Bleary-eyed, he started and the thing almost fell to the floor. The screen when he saw it read “Quentin.”

“Hey, man,” Matt said. “How are you holding up?”

“You know. It hits on and off.”

Matt didn’t know, and for that at least he was grateful. “Yeah,” he said. “I hear you.”

“Hey, listen,” Quentin said. “I know we don’t hang out really at all outside of work, but I was wondering if you were working tomorrow.”

“No, man. What do you need?”
“Well, I was wondering, maybe, if you would want to come to my dad’s funeral.”

“Oh,” Matt said, stuck for words. “Are you sure? I really don’t know anybody. I don’t know your family.”

“Well, I think of you as a friend. We’ve worked together for a long time. It would just mean a lot to me if you could be there.”

“Sure, yeah. Sure.” Matt had never been to a funeral. He had been too young when his dad’s parents had died, and his mother’s parents were still living, albeit in a nursing home. “Where and when?” He sat up, scrambling for a piece of paper and a pen.

Quentin gave the details, then said, “Thanks, man. My family will be happy to meet you.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He was tired after boxing, but sleep didn’t come for a long time. Of all the people he could have asked, Matt wondered why Quentin had come to him for company at his dad’s funeral. He fielded a sudden surge of guilt for having gotten along well so far with Ted.

Thursday dawned bright and became hotter, the sun seeping through Matt’s window as he dressed for the funeral. He had no black clothes that were appropriate, so he settled for a dark blue button-up shirt and a pair of khakis, hoping he wouldn’t stand out too badly.

Everlasting Grace African Methodist Episcopal Church was smallish and vigorously air conditioned. He walked up the concrete steps to the church door and found Quentin, in a black suit with a black tie, handing out programs for the service.

“Hey, man,” he said when he caught sight of Matt. “So glad you could come.”

“Of course,” Matt told him, taking one of the folded brochures. It was printed on heavy stock and a black-and-white picture of the man Matt had to assume had been Quentin’s dad adorned the front. He was uncertain as to where to sit, so he chose a pew close to the back. The maroon wood coffin was set on a stand at the front of the church, and Matt could tell it was partially open, but he felt prurient trying to pick out the dead man’s features.

He felt as though he had read the brochure over ten times when the service finally started. A single singer led the congregation in a hymn, but later there was a chorus of such sweet harmony that Matt felt his throat constrict. A short woman who had no trouble letting her tears flow freely rose to address the gathering. This, apparently, was Quentin’s mother. The pastor delivered an eloquent eulogy, then Quentin and his two sisters rose to say something as well. Matt tamped down his discomfort at watching Quentin cry; he didn’t feel close enough to be privileged to see something like that. However, when they allowed the congregation to file by and view the body, Quentin got in line next to a dutiful but uncertain Matt.

“Thanks again,” he said. “You don’t have to go up there if you don’t want to. I mean, you didn’t know my dad.”

“It’s fine,” Matt said.

“I wish you could have gotten to know him. He had a quick temper, but he was the funniest guy I ever knew, too.”

“You must have gotten your temper from your mom,” Matt told him, venturing a smile.
“She is the most laid-back woman. She had to be to deal with my dad. Let me tell you, though, he wouldn’t cross her for anything.”

Having not known Quentin’s father in life, Matt couldn’t tell how similar or different he looked now in death. All he knew was that it didn’t appear as if he was sleeping. Something essential was gone. He had never thought of his parents in terms of death, only injury. But Roger White had been seemingly healthy and felled by a heart attack. Matt suppressed a shudder and passed by.

After the viewing, Quentin pulled Matt over to introduce him to the remainder of his family. His mother, Diane, was still dabbing at her eyes, though she transferred the handkerchief into her pocket for a moment to shake Matt’s hand.

“Thank you so much for coming, sweetheart,” Diane said. “I know Quentin appreciates it.”

Matt shook hands next with both of Quentin’s sisters, the elder, Tracy, and the younger, Deneisha. Both had tear tracks on their cheeks, but Deneisha had an energy she could barely contain. She fidgeted and looked around the church, the tiny braids in her hair swinging over her temples. In a way, she reminded Matt of Techie. He guessed that she was as anxious to be shed of the somber atmosphere as he was, however offensive the idea of it might be.

“You’re more than welcome to come by the house for the reception,” Quentin said. It’s free lunch. It’ll be tons of food, just wait. They’ll be telling stories about my dad the whole time.”

“Um, thanks,” Matt said.

“You gotta get going?” Quentin asked.

“Yeah, I really do. Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” said Quentin. “Hey, listen, though. I’m going to take a few weeks off from work. Help my mom out with Dad’s estate and stuff like that. She asked me to, and we’ve got a little life insurance money to back us up for a while.”

Matt frowned. “Has Snoke said you can come back?”

Quentin’s shrug was blithe. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, right?”

“Right,” Matt said, turning away. For however long it would be, Quentin had the benefit of a cushion. Not likely he would have willingly traded his father’s life for it, but money was time. Money meant freedom. What was Madeline doing now? Baking on a beach, perhaps, or sitting in the shade under flowering vines at a sidewalk café. Matt couldn’t differentiate a picture of Spain from one of Italy—or Arkansas, for that matter.

He would have liked a free meal, sure. But the laborious task of dredging up camaraderie with people he would likely never see again set his teeth on edge. He gave Quentin and his family condolences again and walked out of the church into a day so hot it was dizzying. Taking shelter for half an hour in the cool and dark interior of a restaurant, Matt treated himself to a pizza, most of which he could take home for lunches. Plus, it afforded him a snack before boxing practice. He had a sudden and fervent wish for access to Madeline’s pool again; it was only supposed to get hotter as the week dragged on, any clouds torn into nothingness in favor of pitiless day.

Back at his house, with the pizza in the fridge, Matt sat on his bed, considering masturbating since Kyle wouldn’t be home for a couple of hours. He hadn’t yet made up his mind on the matter when his phone buzzed with a text.
It was not Jessy, as he expected, but Techie. He felt a sudden embarrassment for thinking about jerking off, though it was for no reason he could name.

*I’m at the bus stop,* came the text.

*Need a ride…?*

No no. Just saying I won’t be able to look at your computer tonight.

Matt stopped, confused. *Yeah that’s what you said.*

A pause of a couple minutes. *Oh okay I didn’t remember. But tomorrow. I promise.*

It seemed unlikely that he didn’t remember. He had caught onto nearly everything Matt said—his days off, the time he needed to be at the boxing gym. *It’s okay,* he wrote back. *Thanks.* He received no more texts after that.

Because it was far too hot to think about doing anything outside, Matt settled into a half-sleep until it was nearly time to leave for practice. He felt suspended within the day, on the cusp of something unidentifiable but never tumbling over. Maybe a few rounds in the ring would put the hours back into their tracks, let him slide toward the evening feeling useful.

At the very least, he glided through the bag combinations, with Phasma complimenting him on his form and technique. There were no regulars in the gym that night, so he ended up getting in the ring with Phasma herself again. She snuck in a hit every round but two, and came up smiling once after Matt had tapped her on the chin.

And yet the sense of being stuck hit him full force when the door thumped shut behind him. He sat in the car, letting the air conditioning come up full force, wondering if he would move on before he, like Roger White, slipped away. Madeline seemed both the promise of advancement and yet at the same time a sort of plateau. He doubted he could get to know her any better than he did now; the notion stopped his breath in his throat, curling up on itself in a lump.

The following day, he and Ted had an industrial job that took up the entire afternoon.

“You boxing tonight?” Ted asked him as they locked up the van.

“Got tonight off,” Matt said. “Just Fridays and Sundays.”

Ted bounced off the ground, puppylike. “Dude, let’s go to that sub shop. You won’t regret it.”

In the end, hunger won over money concerns and, as it turned out, the place was not as expensive as Matt had expected. He ended up with a footlong Italian Meats sub for about eight dollars. Ted took huge draws on the straw in his equally huge Coke; Matt sipped on water.

“You’re probably grateful for that pool right about now,” said Ted. “It’s a furnace out there and it’s supposed to get worse.”

“Absolutely,” Matt lied.

“I can’t believe your girlfriend has a house.”

“Yeah, she has a really good job.”

“What does she do?”
“Um, sales.”

“Youh,” said Ted. “That’s where the money is. Well, sometimes. I don’t know. I used to do this thing in high school where you sell knives to people.”

“Knives?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, like for your kitchen. Anyway, I was the worst salesman. I unloaded one set total.”

Matt laughed. “My thing about sales is having to call people you don’t know. They’re automatically pissed off, then you get pissed off. It never ends well for anybody.”

“I don’t like the phone,” Ted said. “Text me or nothing. Right?”

As Matt nodded, his phone buzzed in his pocket. “Speaking of,” he said. “Hold up.”

It was Techie. “Hi. Matt.”

“Hey, man. Can I call you back in a little while? I’m eating dinner.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay, sure. Talk to you soon.”

“Yep,” Matt said, and ended the call.

“Who was that?”

“A friend,” Matt said, then flinched back at his own use of the term. “I mean the guy who’s fixing my computer.”

If Ted noticed the disconnect, he said nothing.

Matt waited until he was back home to call Techie. “Hey, what’s up?”

A long pause on the other end. “I took a look at your laptop.”

“Oh okay,” Matt said. “Okay.”

Techie paused again. “It definitely needs a new hard drive.”

“Crap,” Matt said.

“Not a big deal. Very easy to replace. If you’re okay with it, I’d like to upgrade your memory, too. It’ll make it run smoother.”

“Well...what’s this going to cost?”

The next pause was excruciating. “A new drive is going to run you about fifty dollars. Along with the new memory, I’d put it at about a hundred for the whole thing.”

Matt let out a breath.

“Is that bad?” Techie asked.

“No. I think I can do it.” It would involve borrowing some money. His first thought was Kyle, but maybe he could get a loan from his parents and spare himself the attendant harassment. “That’s a lot better than a new computer.”

“Um, sales.”

“Youh,” said Ted. “That’s where the money is. Well, sometimes. I don’t know. I used to do this thing in high school where you sell knives to people.”

“Knives?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, like for your kitchen. Anyway, I was the worst salesman. I unloaded one set total.”

Matt laughed. “My thing about sales is having to call people you don’t know. They’re automatically pissed off, then you get pissed off. It never ends well for anybody.”

“I don’t like the phone,” Ted said. “Text me or nothing. Right?”

As Matt nodded, his phone buzzed in his pocket. “Speaking of,” he said. “Hold up.”

It was Techie. “Hi. Matt.”

“Hey, man. Can I call you back in a little while? I’m eating dinner.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay, sure. Talk to you soon.”

“Yep,” Matt said, and ended the call.

“Who was that?”

“A friend,” Matt said, then flinched back at his own use of the term. “I mean the guy who’s fixing my computer.”

If Ted noticed the disconnect, he said nothing.

Matt waited until he was back home to call Techie. “Hey, what’s up?”

A long pause on the other end. “I took a look at your laptop.”

“Okay.”

Techie paused again. “It definitely needs a new hard drive.”

“Crap,” Matt said.

“Not a big deal. Very easy to replace. If you’re okay with it, I’d like to upgrade your memory, too. It’ll make it run smoother.”

“Well...what’s this going to cost?”

The next pause was excruciating. “A new drive is going to run you about fifty dollars. Along with the new memory, I’d put it at about a hundred for the whole thing.”

Matt let out a breath.

“Is that bad?” Techie asked.

“No. I think I can do it.” It would involve borrowing some money. His first thought was Kyle, but maybe he could get a loan from his parents and spare himself the attendant harassment. “That’s a lot better than a new computer.”
“That’s great. How soon do you need it?”

“Well,” Matt said, “the sooner the better.”

“I’d, well, I’d like to special-order some parts.”

“How long do you think that will take?”

A pause. “About a week.” Then, before Matt could respond, “I could let you use my laptop. I mean, over here if you want to. I can’t really let you borrow it for the week because I need it for class, but you could use it.”


“It’s probably too late now. You have your boxing.”

“No boxing tonight.” It was out of his mouth before he could stop it.

“Well, you can come and use it if you want. It’s up to you.”

An excuse was on the tip of Matt’s tongue but he thought for a moment, considering what he would be doing with the rest of his night, which was in all likelihood lying on his bed staring at his phone. Their usual awkwardness aside, Matt could use the time at Techie’s to look for places to live, which he’d been avoiding since the aborted attempt at the sandwich shop. “Sure,” he said. “Yeah. Be there soon.”

With the last slice of the leftover pizza sitting somewhat uneasily in his belly, Matt got in the car and set off toward Crescent Heights. Cicadas filled the late-afternoon air with their dead-violin noise, loud in the maple tree at the house when he pulled up. In the driveway this time. Techie already knew he had a dumpy car, anyway.

Peaches started her typical volley when he rang the bell, but was silenced in short order. Dressed in a bright blue t-shirt and olive-colored shorts, Techie welcomed Matt inside. The effect of the air conditioning was immediate, raising gooseflesh on Matt’s arms.

“Sorry to keep it so cold,” Techie said. “It gets really hot downstairs.”

“It’s fine,” said Matt. He had an absurd urge to go upstairs and see if Madeline’s bed was still unmade. Chances were good that the cleaners had gotten to it and her room would be pristine again. He wondered if they were even allowed in Techie’s lair. When they reached the kitchen, Matt fought back slight disappointment; Techie had set up his laptop on the counter by one of the barstools. Of course he wouldn’t let him down into the basement again.

Techie, his shoulders hunched, gestured toward the computer.

Matt went over, took his phone out of his pocket and put it on the counter, then sat down. “It’s locked,” he said.

“Oh.” Techie’s concerned expression bordered on comical. “I thought I set it to lock up a little bit later. He walked up beside Matt, all elbows, and typed in his password. He smelled like laundry detergent.

At once, the screen unlocked, opening onto a background that showed a glowing cloud punctuated by stars.
“What’s that?” Matt asked.

“It’s the Crab Nebula. The remnant of a supernova from a long time ago, but the debris is still there. It’s got a super-dense neutron star at the center.”

“Like a galaxy?”

“Not really. More like a big cloud of dust. But beautiful dust.”

Matt shrugged. “Beautiful dust sounds like a contradiction.”

Techie grinned. “The universe is so full of contradictions. I think it’s perfect.”

Giving back a half-smile, Matt clicked on the browser icon and it sprang to life. Techie’s home page was the UMKC website.

“Do you mind if I eat something?” Techie asked.

“Uh-uh.”

“Do you want something?”

“I had pizza earlier,” said Matt.

“I decided I shouldn’t have pizza,” said Techie. “I went and got some groceries yesterday. The stuff you left made me think about eating better. I don’t always eat the right things. Sometimes I forget to eat at all.”

Matt arched an eyebrow. “Well, to be honest, I don’t eat the right things, either. Not really.” You’re young, Madeline might say. You can get away with it. Matt wondered if she ever said anything in the same vein to Techie.

“Oh, well,” was all Techie said. He went over to the refrigerator and leaned in, studying its contents. Perhaps it wasn’t all that much cooler than the surrounding air.

He pulled up Craigslist as Techie puttered about in the fridge, searching the ads for new housemates. A few of the ones he remembered having been there previously were gone. Out of curiosity, he clicked on one that showed a room in a house on the outskirts of Crescent Heights, but the rent was too much, anyway. He sighed.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Techie said. “Is the laptop working for you?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “It’s not the machine. It’s kind of my life.”

Setting a heavy earthenware plate down on the counter beside Matt, Techie pulled up a barstool and sat down. “What are you looking for?”

Matt paused. “A place to live.” He could smell the salt tang of ham and mustard wafting up from the plate.

“What’s wrong with the one you have now?”

“It kind of sucks. Well, it’s just, my roommate is leaving in August and I figured now is a good opportunity to get a better place. You know?”

“Not really,” Techie said. “But I live at my parents’ house.”
“Do you remember California?” Matt asked. His breath caught in his throat when he remembered the instant afterward that he and Techie had never talked about this.

“So not enough to miss it?”

Techie shook his head.

“I think I’d probably like California,” Matt said. “I’d like to be by a beach.”

“Have you ever lived near one?”

“No. Grew up in KC. I went to Florida once,” he said, the admission embarrassing.

“The sea is kind of scary,” Techie said.

“But space isn’t?” asked Matt.

“I’m a lot closer to the sea,” said Techie, his expression serious.

Matt burst out laughing.

Techie gave an indignant huff. “It’s true.” He took a huge bite of the sandwich, a tomato slice squirting out of the far corner and onto the plate.

“Not saying you’re lying,” Matt said, still grinning.

Swallowing down his lump of sandwich, Techie asked, “So where do you want to live?”

*Here*, was his first thought, though he wasn’t at all sure he could handle being around Madeline full-time. “You mean in the city?”

“Yeah.”

“Somewhere close to work,” Matt said. The statement weighed down his gut.

“That makes sense. I’m not really close to the school. It’s a couple of city buses, then a campus shuttle bus.”

“Did you ever…” Matt paused for a moment. “Did you ever think about getting your own place?”

“Oh, yeah!” Techie was ebullient. “I will when I get my degree and start working. Depends on where I end up for work.”

The leaden feeling in Matt’s stomach grew more insistent. “So it may not be KC.”

“Maybe,” Techie said. “Maybe not.”

Fierce envy for the freedom that would be afforded Techie soon coursed through Matt so insistently so that he had to look toward the hall rather than at the man beside him. “Yeah,” he said. “You could really go anywhere.”

“Oh,” said Techie, “you could go anywhere, too! They always need people with your skills.”

“I don’t really have a lot of skills.”
“I don’t think that’s true.”

Scowling, Matt said, “You don’t know me very well.”

“You helped me with a faster connection.”

“Anybody can do that.”

“I can’t,” Techie said.

“Why are you always so positive about everything?” Matt asked.

Techie looked away. “I’m not necessarily.”

“Sure seems like it.”

Techie sat up and pointed at the screen. “What about that one?”

Matt squinted, struggling to see where he was pointing. *Quaint Victorian, centrally located, seeking housemate. M or F okay.* He shrugged and clicked on it. The description seemed promising—wood floors, choice of rooms, one of which was the master bedroom (for a slightly higher monthly rate). It was in a passably good neighborhood. Matt scrolled down to the pictures.

“Oh,” said Techie.

The house looked like it hadn’t been painted since its first coat. The porch sagged; half the gingerbread adornments on the roof and eaves were either hanging off or missing altogether. Another picture showed a narrow staircase leading up to a small landing. Yet another one showed a small bedroom with peeling wallpaper. The lumps in the wood floor were visible. Matt wrinkled his nose.

“Well,” Techie said, “it sounded good.”

Propping his elbows on the counter and putting his head in his hands, Matt groaned. “See what I’m up against?”

“Yeah.” It was soft. Techie slid off the stool and went to deposit his plate in the sink. “Do you want some ice cream?”

As reluctant as he was to impose on Techie’s insistent hospitality, ice cream sounded like the single best thing in the world at that point. “Yeah,” he said. “I really do.”

“We can eat it outside by the pool. Eating ice cream in the cold seems kind of silly.”

Matt wasn’t about to argue that point, either. The kitchen was in deep freeze. “What kind do you have?”

Brushing crumbs from his hands, Techie went over to the freezer and opened the door. “Chocolate, chocolate caramel, or cherry chocolate chunk. Don’t know about you, but I’m going to mix them.”

“All of them?”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, well I’m just going to go for the cherry one.”
Techie requisitioned a couple of bowls from the same weighty set as the plate and they scooped out huge, irregular chunks of ice cream. The spoons were heavy, too; not apt to bend like the cheap ones Matt had at his house. Techie dropped one on the floor.

“Shit,” he said, picking the spoon up then swiping his finger through the puddle of ice cream left on the floor and sticking it in his mouth.

“You do realize that’s disgusting, right?” Matt said.

Straightening up with a furious blush, Techie said, “You saw that?”

“It’s cool. You could probably eat off this floor anyway.”

“Sorry,” Techie said, reaching for a paper towel. “Kind of habit, I guess.”

“You’re a little weird.” Matt couldn’t help but smile.

“Yeah. I get told that a lot. Come on, let’s go outside.”

It had cooled by a few degrees, and the shade of the house hung over the patio and half the pool. Techie squinted up at the trees, then used the knuckles of his right hand to rub his eyes.

“If being outside makes it worse we can go back in,” Matt told him.

“Being me makes it worse. It doesn’t matter where I am.”

Matt didn’t know what to say for a few seconds. Digging into his ice cream at last, he said, “Damn, that’s perfect.”

“I know, right?”

“I guess you don’t really use the pool much.”

“Nah,” Techie said. “Not really. All I have to do to get cool is come upstairs.”

“Yeah, Madeline—” Matt froze.

Techie was hunched over his bowl of ice cream, silent.

“How long have you been down there? I mean, in the basement.”

He didn’t look up. “Since I was fifteen. My dad had it built for me.”

“Wow,” Matt said. “I think my dad could have had a hammer built for me, and that’s all.”

“What do you mean?” Techie asked.

“Oh. He worked at a tools factory. He could get a hammer—never mind. It was kind of a dumb analogy.”

“Do you build things?”

“Nope,” Matt said. “Apparently I just break stuff.”

Techie sat silent again, taking little half-nips from his spoon.

“Have you ordered the parts yet?” Matt asked. “For the computer?”
“Oh,” Techie said. “No. I thought I’d wait until you could see what we were buying so you can veto something if it’s too expensive.”

“Gotcha.”

“You can come over tomorrow and we can look at stuff online.”

“I’m going to my parents’ tomorrow. Then boxing. Maybe Sunday?”

“Sure. Where do your parents live?”

“Sugar Creek,” Matt said.

“I don’t know where that is,” said Techie.

Matt huffed. “It’s not that great. It’s not like here.”

Looking out over the pool, Techie said, “What makes you think here is so great?”

To that, Matt didn’t have an answer.
The fact that he wasn’t working either that day or the next managed to double the guilt over the idea of asking his parents for money. Matt was considering framing it as a request for an advance on his birthday gift, though he hated the assumption that it was there for the taking. On the drive out to Sugar Creek, he thought about what the dynamic had been in a household like Techie’s where someone could rely on the idea of getting everything he wanted. He supposed it had to be much like it had been for him, with the parents willing to give as much as they could, but on a grander scale. He didn’t know if gifts in an unlimited capacity somehow transcended free and selfless giving and lost meaning altogether. Had Techie asked his father for things, or was he just given them based on preferences expressed? Had he once asked his mother for things and been denied? Matt couldn’t be sure if Techie now declined to ask for help from Madeline in order to spare her something, anything from a puncture in the wall of her encompassing grief to a physical reminder of Allan’s absence. It was still possible for people with everything to lose and be forced to go without.

By the time he pulled up the driveway beside his mother’s car, he was no closer to any resolution. He considered turning around before anyone noticed and would have done so had not the screen door creaked open and a pudgy, white hand waved out at him.

Matt shut the car off, sighing and listening to the engine sigh down, too before he stepped out onto the lumpy asphalt.

“Hey, Mattie,” Leah called. “Come on in where it’s cool.”

It wasn’t, as a matter of fact, terribly cool at all within his parents’ home. “Mom, it’s roasting in here,” Matt said.

“I was just leaving the door open to get a breeze.”

Matt put his hand on her shoulder. “It can’t be good for Dad.”

She shot him a look. “You know his back only acts up bad when it’s cold. If anything, I’m doing your father a favor.”

Passing the thermostat in the hall with a longing glance, Matt let his mom lead him into the dark interior of the house. All the curtains were drawn, he presumed to conserve some of the night’s residual coolness.

Harold was laying on the couch in nothing but athletic shorts, his accustomed blanket wedged into the space between the cushions. “Hey, son!” He smiled, but the effort pulled it into a grimace.

“Dad,” Matt said, “if you’re going to lie down, you really should do it in bed like the doctor said. That couch isn’t good for you.”

“Well, then I wouldn’t have been able to see you,” Harold said, wincing.

“I can come into the bedroom.”

“I’m fine. Stop worrying about me. How are you?”

“Come on, Mattie,” Leah said. “To what do we owe the pleasure of this surprise visit?”
Words trickled over Matt’s tongue but didn’t make it to his lips until he was able to grind out, “I just wanted to see you. See how you were.”

“Well,” Harold said, “you’ve seen it.”

If Matt wasn’t mistaken, there was an undertone of bitterness, even an edge of hopelessness, in his father’s words. It could just be the pain talking, which it sometimes did.

“Oh, Hal,” Leah told him, resting her palm on Matt’s bicep. “Let me get you something to drink, hon. Huh?”

Matt shook his head. “No, I’m fine.”

“Do you want something to eat? I just made sausage and potatoes.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’m good.”

Another pointed look. “Well, maybe I’ll pack some for you on the way out, what do you say?”

Without any other response to hand, Matt said, “Okay.”

“Well, come in,” said Leah. “Sit down.”

Matt did, settling himself on the armchair opposite Leah’s with the couch in between. His mother had circles under her eyes that seemed darker than usual; she often didn’t get much sleep because his dad was in pain and shifted a lot during the night. What they really needed was a better bed, a better mattress. Something none of them could afford.

“So, what’s new in your life, kid?” Harold asked.

“Nothing much,” Matt said. “Just the usual.”

“No news is good news, right?” asked Harold.

“Well, I got to house-sit for somebody in Crescent Heights for a couple days.”

“Where’s that?” asked Leah.

“Inside the city.”

“Is it a fancy neighborhood.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Very.”

Leah shifted onto the edge of her chair. “Ooh! Well, I’ll bet that was nice.”

“It’s a...friend of my girlfriend,” Matt told her.

At that, Leah’s eyes grew even wider. “Your girlfriend? Well, tell us about her.”

Matt shook his head. “We only started dating a little while ago.”

“What does she look like?” asked Harold.

Leah tutted and rolled her eyes.

“I’m just curious!” Harold said.
Matt put his hands between his knees. He could feel the sweat begin to trickle down from his armpits into the waistband of his jeans. “Dark hair. Blue eyes. Really...beautiful.”

“Oh, Mattie, that’s great,” Leah said. “Where did you meet her?”

“At a party. Kyle had one at our place and she was there.”

“Ah,” Harold said. “So she’s one of Kyle’s friends.”

Matt’s answer was probably too quick, too dismissive. “No.”

“Are things okay between you and Kyle?” Leah asked. As she raised the plastic cup to her mouth to drink her diet soda, Matt noticed her hand was trembling.

“We had a little fight, that’s all. It’s fine now.”

“Good,” Leah said, swiping a drop of the soda from the corner of her mouth with her tongue. “I know you two have been good friends since high school.”

“Yeah, uh...Dad, you’re sweating. Can’t you guys turn up the AC just a little bit?”

Harold moved, then gritted his teeth. “No, Mattie, it’s okay. I told her to turn it down.”

“And I told him we didn’t have to worry about it yet,” Leah said. “But you know how your father is.”

“Stubborn as a mule and twice as ugly,” Harold shot back, though his breath was short and his voice tight from the pain.

“What do you mean, ‘worry about it yet?’” Matt asked.

Leah sighed, brushing a corona of sweat from her own hairline. “Well, honey, they told us a couple days ago that the fabric store is going out of business.”

“Your fabric store?” Matt felt a headache begin to rise at the base of his skull.

“The whole chain,” Leah said. “Closing every store. There’s just too much competition from online.”

“Well, wait,” he said, “what are they going to do about your jobs?”

A sad half-smile from his mother. “After a month and a half, we just won’t have them.”

Matt’s jaw dropped. “They can’t do that, can they?”

Leah nodded. “Where are you going to work if there aren’t any stores, right?”

Taking a couple of slow breaths, Matt looked from his mom to his dad and back again. “Well, you can find another one.” He hesitated to bring the last word up, make it interrogative.

“Of course I’ll try, kiddo. But a lot of places don’t want to hire older people now.”

Matt sighed. “You’re not older. You’re barely even fifty.”

“Who would you want to pay, Mattie?” Harold asked. “Some eighteen-year-old who doesn’t know any better or a fifty-year-old who actually expects a living wage?”
Leah patted Harold’s sockless foot, which was sticking over the arm of the couch. “We might have to do a little settling, my dear.”

“What about your disability, Dad?” Matt asked. “Are they cutting it?”

“We don’t know that one yet, son.”

Matt shook his head. “This is stupid.”

“Sometimes we make choices, kiddo,” Harold said. “Sometimes choices make us.”

“At the very least we own the house,” Leah said. “It might go all to hell, but we own it.”

The sweat coursing down Matt’s back, soaking into his t-shirt, had gone chilly despite the heat. “What can I do?” he asked. God, to have a fraction of Madeline’s money. Suddenly he was sickened by the thought of her lounging by a Spanish villa, trekking up some vineyard hillside in a place where the sun was less punishment and more pleasantry.

“You just keep doing what you’re doing, hon,” Leah told him. “Your old mom and dad have gotten by on less before. And that was even when we had you to take care of.”

“Just...let me know if I can help you.”

“You’ve got your own things to worry about,” said Leah. “Go be with your new girlfriend, have a good time. We’ll be all right.”

Before leaving, Matt at least convinced his mom to close the front door so they could conserve what little coolness was left within the house. He turned her down on the offer of food, and when she tried to hold out a twenty toward him as he walked off the front stoop, he pushed it back toward her with an insistent hand. Though it had hurt to see the money go—for the sake of his sagging gas gauge needle as well as any progress toward paying Techie for the computer—the gesture had made him feel good. Like he was contributing in the moment, even though he had only failed to put his usual drain on their finances. The powerlessness was ugly, rocky, by the time he got back into town, taking chunks out of his mind and sparing little for boxing that night.

Phasma called it as soon as he walked in. “Leave your shit outside the door, Matt. You bring it in here, it’s not going to get any better, and neither are you.”

He unfurled his clenched fists finger by finger before he got into the locker room, breathing in the smells of metal and disinfectant. He shrugged his sweat-acrid shirt off then paused a moment before reaching into his bag for his tape. Shoulders down. Mind blank. He rolled his head on his neck and breathed.

Beside the bags, Phasma waited for him, arms crossed. “You chill, bro?”

Matt nodded. “I’m good.”

“Good,” she said, “because when you’re warmed up I’d like to see you in the ring with Horacio.” Phasma pointed over ringside, where a tall man with a bristle of black hair stood adjusting his gloves. He raised his hand when he saw they were looking at him, flashing a smile in which was embedded a bright gold tooth.

“Gotcha,” Matt said. As he always did, he tried to erase the faces in his mind while looking at the bag; at least the manager of the fabric store or the owner were already faceless. It was unreal to see his parents confront their oncoming hardships with such equanimity, and unfair that he seemed
incapable of doing the same with his own. Every once in a while as he was growing up, either Harold or Leah, both terminally even-keeled, would make an exasperated joke about Matt inheriting his temper from Harold’s father. Matt could never remember having met the man, so it always seemed an unfair comparison. Like Quentin’s father, Matt’s grandfather had had a sudden heart attack. He imagined the blood hammering through an increasingly overtaxed heart muscle, unable to make capacity or to slow it down. Could he expect the same burnout—hot, inexorable, and altogether too early?

Matt walloped the bag with a hook at the level of his ribcage.

Phasma’s sigh was exaggerated. “If you’re done breaking your wrists,” she said, “how about we let you and Horacio go a few rounds, huh?”

They climbed up into the ring, the man named Horacio giving another brilliant, gold-flecked smile and knocking his glove against Matt’s.

“Horacio,” Phasma said as he put in his mouth guard, “learn the way he moves. Don’t expect him to move the way you do. Matt, keep those shoulders down. I’d say I’d punch you myself but you’re just making Horacio’s job easier. Go!”

Horacio’s shuffle was more of an amble, his grin ever-present, though it seemed now more mocking coupled with his body language. Matt dropped his shoulders and put his guard up. Seeming to heed Phasma’s advice, Horacio waited for Matt to make the first move, which was a feint that turned into a double jab. Just a test. Horacio tended to bring his elbows up when he was guarding, but not so much that Matt could squeeze in a body hook without leaving his face unprotected.

Ducking his head, Horacio went in full-tilt for a body shot. Matt felt the thick brush of his hair against his forearms. He fielded a jab-cross with his gloves, and swung a hook around to contact with Horacio’s temple.

The fight ended up being one of the longest ones Matt could remember, with neither of them finding easy avenues by which winning shots could be taken. But Phasma didn’t once yell at him to keep his shoulders down as he, in turn, watched Horacio’s shoulders for any tells. In the eighth round, Matt fended off a body shot that was followed quickly by another one on the other side. With his elbow already down, Matt struck upward and connected with Horacio’s chin. The grin only wobbled.

“Good!” Horacio said through the thick plastic of the mouth guard. Phasma stopped them not long afterward.

“Nice job, both of you,” she said.

Expelling his sticky guard into his glove, Matt asked Horacio, “Are you new here?”

“Came for some time with Phasma,” he said in a heavily accented voice. “I teach kids in El Salvador.”

“Great, great,” Matt said. “Phasma’s really good.”

Horacio’s nod was fervent. “You can tell she has been training you.”

Matt nodded in return. “Thanks.”

“We might get Horacio to stick around for our tournament later this summer. He hasn’t decided
yet,” Phasma told Matt.

“It depends on if I wear out my welcome with my family here. My sister and her husband, they live here.”

“You teaching their kids to fight?” Matt asked.

“The little girl maybe. Luisa, she was born to fight. Hernán? Maybe not so much. He’s always counting things. Maybe for him it’s more like math, you know?”

“Computer programming,” Matt said.

“Yeah! Something definitely like that.”

Matt imagined a slender, quiet child—like Horacio shrunk down—sitting on a computer in the back of a classroom while kids roughhoused outside the nearest window. It could have been a cliché he picked up from the movies; it could have been close to the truth. Having always been the kid chucking rocks at the others on the playground, Matt knew no different—only that one set of experiences translated well to adulthood and the other was lazily affixed to it at best, haphazard like fingerprints in dough.

Despite the clinging heat, Matt put down the car window on his drive home that night, letting the breeze whip damp hanks of his hair against his neck. He was sure he still had something in the house he could throw together for a snack when he got there. For no good reason, he wanted to sit out on the stoop as evening was swallowed up, listening to the swish of the poplar branches.

Kyle was downstairs in the living room when Matt walked in. There was a brief exchange of greetings, but Matt ducked into the kitchen and made a sandwich and snuck back outside, underneath the noise of the evening news. Insects were calling each other from tree to tree, rising up in a symphonic wave here and then ceding to another colony. What might have been a frog shrieked and trilled.

Matt took a bite of his sandwich, chewing slowly. By the scrubby bushes, he was surprised to catch sight of a slim, brown rabbit, its ears upright. It hopped forward one pace; such an improbable method of movement, its twitching nose a twilit blur. Matt felt a sharp stinging on his bicep. When he looked over, a mosquito had landed and was fattening itself, its thorax distending. He watched it for a second, then slapped it into a bright-red burst on his skin. When he looked back over toward the bushes, the rabbit had gone.

The following morning, Kyle was tucking into a bowl of some sort of awful-smelling grain cereal.

“They make you eat the sawdust now?” Matt asked.

“Ha, ha,” Kyle said, swallowing what looked like a painful lump. “Rachel convinced me to get this stuff. It’s supposed to be healthy. It tastes like six kinds of ass.”

“Had no idea you were such an ass connoisseur.”

“Shut up,” Kyle said. He wrinkled his nose and put the rest of the bowl down the garbage disposal. When it had finished howling and clacking, he asked Matt, “What you got?”

“Lucky Charms. Want some?”

Biting his lip, Kyle thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Nah. That grain stuff fills you up. I guess so you don’t have to eat as much of it. ‘Cause, God…”
“Suit yourself,” Matt said, letting the odor of processed grain products and sugar drift up to meet his nose as he unrolled the plastic bag within the cereal box. Where he expected his mouth to water, though, the scent only rose up stale and uninviting. “Hey man,” he started.

“Huh?”

“What, uh, what are you up to today?”

“I’m gonna sit inside and drink beer where it’s cool. Why? What are you doing?”

Matt re-rolled the plastic bag and put the cereal back on the shelf. “Hopefully getting my computer fixed.”

“It’s busted?” Kyle asked.

“Yeah. I’ve got a guy who’ll do it for cheap.”

“Nice.”

“Listen, uh—”

Kyle’s sigh was heavy. “Not that cheap, huh?”

Matt bit down on the inside of his cheek. “I’d just need, like, eighty. And it’s only until my birthday.”

“Dude,” Kyle said. “Seriously?”

“It’s not that long.”

The pause stretched off into discomfort. “Yeah, fine. I’ll get it in a minute.”

Matt tried to cover up the sound of his exhalation. “Thanks, man. I owe you.”


Matt nodded, a foul and bilious taste suffusing his throat. He went upstairs to take a shower, and was for a second afraid that Kyle had left the house without getting him the promised cash, but the four battered twenties lay underneath the napkin holder on the kitchen table. They felt warm and greasy in Matt’s hand. He transferred the wad of cash to his back pocket, nestled in front of his phone, and walked out to his car.

When Techie answered the door, Peaches had opened her mouth to begin barking but stopped and stayed just like that, the furl of her little pink tongue visible.

“Look at her,” Matt said. “Dumb dog.”

Techie’s smile was slim. He said nothing as they walked into the frigid hallway.

Where Matt had expected to see the laptop set up in the kitchen there was nothing. “If this is a bad time, I can come back. I’ve got all day.”

“No,” Techie said, “it’s not a bad time. Do you want something to drink?” He squeezed his irritated eyes shut for a moment, then opened them wide and blinked.

“I’m okay for now,” Matt said.
“I never used to drink or eat down in my room, but I spend so much time there it gets hard not to bend your own rules.”

Matt furrowed his brow.

Techie went over to the fridge and pulled out two plastic bottles of water. “For later,” he said. “If you want it. Come on.”

About to protest that the heat would be far too great at that point to sit out on the patio, the complaint stopped on Matt’s tongue when Techie led him past the glass doors into the silent darkness of the other wing. The door to his realm was open; the air meandering up to the top of the stairs smelled like warm metal.

“Come on,” Techie said again, starting down the stairs.

“Whoa,” Matt said. “Are you sure?”

Stopping and looking up at him, his blue eyes dark and wide, Techie said, “Yeah. You don’t have to shut the door behind you.”

As Matt descended the stairs, by express permission for the first time, the atmosphere seemed to thicken. He watched dust motes tumble through the cracks of light from the window that was half-covered with the dish towel. Techie’s hair swayed back and forth over the collar of his shirt. All three huge screens were lit up and in use, taken up by browser windows and swaths of code like hieroglyphics.

“I brought another chair down here,” Techie said. “It’s not the best; it’s from the dining room. I hope that’s okay.” He gestured to a chrome-and-plastic chair with a high, straight back that was pulled up alongside Techie’s ergonomic desk chair.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Of course.”

When Techie swung into his seat, the casters grinding along the smooth concrete, for the first time that Matt had seen he looked at home. His limited movements expanded here, his confidence accordioning out.

Matt stood and stared, his hand on the back of the dining room chair.

“Go ahead and sit down,” Techie said. “I’ve pulled up a few things that might work for you.”

“Really, it’s whatever works for you,” Matt said. “I don’t know anything about this.”

Techie clicked through a few of the windows, describing features. All of the contraptions he showed looked like tiny record players, the only difference the color of the metal.

Matt knew the words that Techie said, by and large, but the way they were put together was alien. He shifted in the hard seat, trying to keep his legs from going numb.

“So, what do you think?” Techie asked.

“I only have eighty dollars,” Matt blurted. He could have imagined the flash of disappointment on Techie’s face, though he suspected it had less to do with the budget and more to do with Matt’s failure to grasp the subtleties of the spread before him. He apologized.

“Don’t be sorry,” Techie told him. “I know a lot about this stuff. I don’t know anything about
“I could teach you some moves, if you wanted.”

Techie ducked his head, blushing.

“It’s basically just ‘keep your chin down and your hands up.’”

“The opposite of what I do,” Techie said, brightening a little. He placed his fingers on the keyboard and looked up at the screen again. “Hands down, chin up.” He paused. “We’re kind of opposites in a lot of ways.”

Matt thought of Horacio, of his nephew Hernán. “Yeah,” he said. “I guess.” He didn’t feel any more akin to, say, Kyle, than he did Techie, though. It was a sudden and lonely realization. Matt got up and stretched his legs.

Pushing away from the desk, Techie got to his feet as well, as if he didn’t trust Matt to move around the space unchaperoned.

“I won’t touch anything,” Matt said. “I promise.”

“No,” Techie said, his voice very soft. “It’s okay.”

“What are the little animals?”

A corner of Techie’s mouth quirked up. “Just something I do.”

“Why?”

Techie looked away from Matt, back at the screens of his computer. “I make them when I’m angry or frustrated.” He scratched his eyes. “That’s why there’s a lot of them.”

Matt stopped walking. “I didn’t think you ever got angry.”

Breathing in long and slow, Techie hesitated, then said, “When you came down here, touched my stuff, that made me angry.”

“Sorry,” Matt said, looking down at his shoes. He half-expected Techie to say, It’s okay, but he only stood silent. Matt dug into his pocket and produced the four twenties, holding them out toward Techie. “I don’t know what kind of things to buy. Thanks for trying to help, but I don’t really understand.”

“I know,” Techie said, his tone light and even.

Matt scratched his head. “You have a lot of books. Have you read them all?”

A shake of his head. “Not all of them.”

Matt pointed at *The Beast that Shouted Love at the Heart of the World*. “That one?”

“Oh, yeah,” Techie said, reaching past Matt to pull the volume off the shelf. “I found it at a yard sale. It’s been a few years since I read it.”

“What’s it about?” Matt asked.

“It’s a bunch of stories. The one I really remember was about these guys who were digging
underneath the sea, trying to find this person who sort of dreamed the world into a place with no war and no violence. They wanted to kill him.”

Matt frowned. “Why would they do that?”

“Because people weren’t inventing things anymore. They had no reason to. They were all perfectly happy with the way things were.”

“That kind of sounds like it could be nice,” Matt said. “Maybe boring, but nice.”

“People aren’t meant to be bored, I guess,” said Techie.

“I guess,” Matt said. “But wouldn’t fighting all the time get boring, too?”

“Probably.”

“So maybe people are meant to be bored. I’m bored a lot.”

“I don’t really get bored,” said Techie. “But—”

“But what?”

“I just don’t really get bored.” He traced the toe of his shoe in a semicircle over the floor.

Matt gave a little laugh. “Angry, though.”

“Yeah.”

“Me, too. Mostly about dumb stuff.”

Techie shrugged. “If it’s happening to you, it’s not dumb stuff.”

“No,” Matt said. “It is.”

“I kind of want pizza,” Techie said. “If I get one will you eat some?”

“I’m not going to turn down pizza, dude.”

By the time Matt left Techie’s it was well into the late afternoon, but still far too hot to be anything but miserable outside. There was a superhero movie that he desperately wanted to see—typically he would download it from an illegal site—but having no laptop made the point moot.

In his narrow bed back home, he texted Jessy. Hey you.

A few minutes went by, then: What’s up?

Bored.

You need a hobby, Jessy shot back.

Oh yeah? What’s your hobby?

I design clothes, she wrote.

Matt almost typed, You didn’t do that when we were together, but he ended up going with, You didn’t do that before.
Just started really. I mean only on paper. Used to draw when I was a kid so I’m doing it again.

Let me see some, Matt texted back.

A blushing-face emoji popped up on the screen. Nooo they’re bad.

I don’t believe you.

Only if you let me see you box.

Matt paused, uncertain. Maybe. There’s a tournament at the end of the summer.

OK, Jessy responded. Let me know when.

I will. It went directly against what he had told himself before, but if he was going to participate, he needed at least one person there to cheer him on, to represent. He found he didn’t mind the idea of her bringing Travis, especially if he continued to have days like Saturday.

Matt ended up falling asleep in his clothes and waking about half an hour before he had to be at work. After a perfunctory shower, he threw on a jumpsuit that had only been worn once before and ran down to the car, getting smacked in the face by the heat and humidity as he went out the door.

It was only by running in and pushing past the other milling techs that he was able to clock in right at eight.

As he was jogging back out to the van to meet Ted, Snoke stopped him. “I guess you heard Quentin isn’t coming back for a while.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “He told me.”

“Just letting you know that there are probably going to be a few more shifts on the table if you want them,” Snoke told him. “You may get paired up with different people, and it’s first come, first served, but they’re there.”

Matt nodded. “Yeah. Sure. Yeah, nice. Okay.” He tried to be enthusiastic, not just for Snoke but within his own mind, too. He would need the extra money to pay back Kyle, and it would have to be forty dollars per paycheck set aside if he was going to make the birthday deadline. Maybe he could hope beyond hope that his parents might scrape something up, but it would only end up weighing him down with guilt.

“You look like you had a shit weekend, man,” Ted said as Matt approached the van.

“It wasn’t great.”

Ted heaved himself up into the driver’s seat. He was a few inches shorter than Matt and looked slightly dwarfed in the raised seat, below the high roof. “Wanna talk about it?”

Matt shook his head. “I have a therapist for that.” It was meant to sound jokey and hadn’t emerged that way at all.

“Oh, wow,” Ted said, starting the car.

“It’s not a big deal.” Matt felt the prickle of a blush around his collar.

“No, man, not at all. My sister’s in therapy. I think everybody needs it sometimes, right?”
“Sure,” Matt said.

Ted shook his head. “I mean, I usually get along pretty good, but then I have these days where I, like, can’t force myself to get out of bed. At all. Just a whole day gone. It sucks.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Ted said. “And it’s weird because I’m usually a ball of energy, right? But, man, once a month or so, I turn into this useless lump of nothing. It gets worse when it’s cold and I don’t want to get up anyway.”

“I think if that happened to me it would be worse when it’s hot. Don’t want to go outside.”

“I hear you. So why are you in therapy? It’s cool if you don’t want to talk about it.”

“I don’t,” Matt said. “If that’s okay.”

For a slim couple of seconds Ted removed both hands from the wheel and held them up in mock-surrender. “Not my place to pry, man.”

“Thanks.”

The van’s sub-par air conditioner could barely keep up with the ravaging heat of midday. Matt and Ted sweated through their jumpsuits between jobs. Thin clouds scudded along the treeline but they were no help in dampening the sun that rode high in the bleached-out afternoon sky.

“This sucks,” said Ted, waddling back to the dispatch center. “It looks like I pissed myself.”

Sweat dripped down from between Matt’s shoulder blades and down to where his jumpsuit was cinched a little below his waist. “I feel like I’m swimming.”

“Ooh, damn. You could be swimming later.”

“Huh?”

Ted punched him softly on the arm. “Your girlfriend’s pool, right?”

“Oh,” Matt said. “Yeah.” No more chance of that. He envisioned the rippling pool water, warm on the surface and cool below, and his shoulders sagged.

The thought dogged him as he sat in the car in his reeking jumpsuit, and as he peeled it off, wincing, in the locker room at the gym. Considering he had finally consented to have Matt down in his domain, he couldn’t imagine Techie would object to him asking for access to the pool. Maybe. By the time he was slick-sheened and aching from boxing, he had decided to give the idea a try. All Techie could do was say no. Even at that, perhaps Matt could barter a little of his time for access to the endless air conditioning inside the house. He wasn’t sure, at that, whether his time or attention even qualified as a bargaining chip in Techie’s mind. Techie had always been willing to engage him in conversation, though maybe just by virtue of his being there, as he’d said the first time they spoke. If Matt showed up out of the blue asking you use the pool it might remind Techie of his mother, let unwelcome thoughts of being supplanted and overridden rise again.

The weather was so miserable that Matt figured it was worth a try.

He swung by his house to get his trunks, struggling to control his heart rate as he set off toward Techie’s house. What a stupid thing to get worked up over. He’ll either say ‘yes’ or he won’t. With
the swim shorts draped over his shoulder, his hair curling in the sticky heat, Matt went up and rang the bell. The entry hall was dark and silent. Even Peaches’ usual shrieking was absent.

He rang again. Maybe Techie was taking the dog for a walk, though it seemed significantly less than likely. Matt breathed out, a slow settling. He had his hand up and poised to ring again, but decided better of it. He rubbed the key on his keychain between his fingers, then put the thing back in his pocket. Halfway down the walk, he made up his mind to walk around back, not that looking at the pool would make the heat any less confining. His boots shushed through grass that had grown too long; he had to wonder whether they had a regular landscaper or whether calling them was something Madeline did only when she remembered. The idea of either her or Techie out with a lawnmower was an image that made him chuckle out loud. The laugh clotted in his throat when he got to the low iron fence, pendulous with flowering vines.

Sitting at the edge of the water, his slim chest and slightly rounded belly bare and white, was Techie. Matt blinked a few times, filling with sudden panic as to whether he should go the opposite way or say something. His shoulders slumped as usual, Techie had braced himself with his hands behind him, legs cutting barely-rippling paths through the water. Matt stood open-mouthed and unsure until Techie’s head snapped up. His eyes were blue and wide; there seemed to have been nothing alerting him to Matt’s presence except that presence itself.

“Oh,” Techie said.

“I’m sorry,” Matt blurted out. “I thought you didn’t—uh, you didn’t answer the door.”

“Oh.”

“I just thought I would...well, I came over—it’s really hot and I guess I was hoping…”

“To use the pool?”

Matt hoped Techie couldn’t see him blush from his place at the far end. “I’m really sorry. It’s dumb.”

“It was really hot today,” Techie said. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and sat up a little straighter.

“Yeah.”

A pause, attenuated by Techie’s frank gaze. “You can come in if you want. I was trying to decide whether to get in the water. It’s warm on top but cold underneath.”

“That’s what makes it feel good,” Matt said. “Do you want me to go around?”

“Can you get over the fence?”

Matt sized the thing up. “Sure.” He walked to a portion that was hung with less greenery and slung his leg over, hopping a couple of times as he brought in the other, graceless and laughable. The swim shorts fell off of his shoulder and hit the tile. “I guess I need to change,” he said.

“There’s a bathroom underneath the stairs.” Techie pointed toward Madeline’s wing.

Matt had never noticed a door there. “Okay. Thanks.” As it turned out, the bathroom was decorated in the same colors as the towel Techie had retrieved for him a few days ago. It felt like weeks in the past.
Techie looked up and then looked back at his feet when Matt walked onto the patio.

Though nothing sounded better, it would be rude to leap into the water, so Matt stepped along the concrete lip of the pool until he reached the ladder. Even half-submersion felt incomparable. As soon as his feet touched the rough floor, he went under, the water closing over his head. He rose a little and brushed droplets out of his eyes, unable to suppress a sigh. “That is amazing.”

“Feels good?”

“Totally.”

Techie’s mouth turned down. “I get cold really easily.”

“Swim around a little bit when you get in. You’ll warm up fast.”

Pursing his lips, Techie pushed off with his hands and lowered himself into the pool. “Whoa.”

“Cold?” Matt asked.

“Yeah.” But he clenched his jaw and went down neck-deep in the water. His hair fanned around his shoulders, waving.

Matt didn’t know what to expect beyond a dog paddle, but Techie skimmed through the water with a smooth breaststroke, long white limbs shuddering under the ripples. “How’s it feel?” he asked.

After a pause, Techie said, “Like I’m a kid. Just a little bit.”

Laughing, Matt asked, “Like do you mean?”

“I was never allowed to swim during the day. I would get horrible sunburns. So my dad always took me to the pool in the evenings, when the rest of the kids had gone home.” He stopped and crouched at the shallow end, still submerged to the shoulders. “Story of my life.”

Matt turned a front flip in the pool, rising and shaking his hair out. “Ever had a sunburn that blistered?”

With wide eyes, Techie nodded.

There again—the odd blankness that was Matt’s childhood. “I had one a couple summers ago. I couldn’t sleep. Couldn’t wear shirts. You can’t go around your friends or they’ll slap you on the back and think it’s funny.”

“Those don’t sound like very good friends,” Techie said.

Absent anything to say, Matt turned onto his back and floated, breathing in and rising in the water, then sinking when he exhaled.

“There are pearl divers who can hold their breath up to four minutes,” Techie announced. “Sometimes they can’t get up to the surface fast enough, though, and they drown.”

Brow creasing, Matt said. “That’s stupid. Why would anyone do that?”

Techie shrugged. “People go a little crazy when it comes to things that are valuable.”

“I saw some show that had people who were kind of like superheroes. One guy was magnetic, and another one pulled a truck with just his mouth. I guess the people who can hold their breath are sort
of like that.”

“I guess,” Techie said. “You can train to hold your breath. You can’t train to be magnetic.”

“Batman is a superhero,” Matt said, “but he did it all with training.”

Techie smiled. “And shitloads of money.”

That made Matt laugh. “Are you going to see the new one? The Batman movie?”

“I don’t go to movie theaters, really.”

“It just came out on streaming,” Matt said.

“Oh,” Techie said. “Well, then maybe.”

“I’ll have to wait till I get the laptop again. I usually download them.”

“Illegally?”

Matt looked away. “Well, yeah.”

“You don’t have to,” Techie said.

“I know. I sort of feel bad about it.”

“No, I mean you can watch that one here if you want. We can rent it. If we want popcorn we can hook up the TV in the guest room. It’s just…” he ducked his head, “popcorn gets everywhere if I eat it downstairs.”

“Are you sure?” Matt asked.

“Well, like I said, we’d have to hook up the TV upstairs.”

Matt’s smile was crooked. “I can actually do that.”

Techie gave an answering grin. “I figured.”

“Okay,” Matt said. “Well, what about tomorrow night? I can take some tools from work and come over after boxing.”

Blue eyes went wide again. “Steal them?”

“No, I’d give them back the next day. Nobody will notice they’re gone. Nobody cares that much.”

“Okay,” said Techie. A pause. “I’m going to get out. I’m getting kind of cold again.” He swam over to the ladder, but stopped after lifting himself onto the first rung. “Shit.”

Matt got a chuckle every time Techie swore. “What?”

“I forgot a towel.”

That got a laugh from both of them. “Well,” Matt said, “somebody’s going to have to go in and drip all over the place.”

Techie grimaced. “It’s so cold in there.”
“All right, fine. I’ll go get them.” Matt heaved himself up on the edge, sloshing water in a fan shape across the tile. “But you have to dry the floor.”

When they were dried, after taking turns in the bathroom getting re-dressed, they pulled some of the leftover pizza out of the fridge and ate straight out of the box.

“This is the best way to have leftover pizza,” Techie said.

“I thought you didn’t like cold things,” Matt said.

“I like ice cream.”

“Okay, fair enough.”

Through a big bite of pizza, Techie said, “I don’t like standing at the bus stop when it’s freezing, though. I have a down jacket, but sometimes the wind is so bad it just cuts through.”

Matt tried to imagine Techie dwarfed by a huge coat, shuffling his feet out by the curb. His own winter coat was a pathetic, almost-threadbare wool thing with sleeves that were slightly too short.

“It seems like winter will never come right now.”

“It seems like next week will never come,” Techie said, looking down at his plate.

Matt took a couple of silent bites.

“Do you remember summer vacation?” Techie asked in a soft voice.

“Sort of,” Matt said. “It seems like I’ve been working forever.”

“Seems like I’ve been in school forever. I guess I sort of have been.”

“Why are you taking summer classes?” Matt asked.

A smile. “I just like knowing things. There are so many things that you can’t know. Why not know as many things as you can?” Then the smile dropped from his face. “Of course, the more you know the more you realize you don’t know.”

Matt stopped with the pizza slice halfway up to his mouth. “Isn’t that frustrating?”

“Yes,” Techie said. “But if you let everything like that frustrate you, you’ll never be happy.”

Matt furrowed his brow. It sounded a little like something Dr. Finch would say. “I think I let a lot of things frustrate me.” He paused. “Are you happy?”

Techie gave a shrug of his slim shoulders. “Sometimes. More lately. How about you?”

“Well,” Matt said, chewing. “Today was a pretty good day.”

The next day was just as hot as the last, with Ted and Matt muddling through a sweat-infused series of jobs. Before boxing, Matt considered taking his swim trunks over, as well, just to beg another dip in the pool. But he did really want to see the movie. With the canvas tote beside him in the passenger seat, he headed off toward Techie’s, hoping he didn’t smell too bad.

Key in his pocket and tote over his shoulder, he rang the bell. Like an alarm, Peaches started at it, yowling and yipping until quieted by an equally quiet command from Techie. Dressed in the same blinding yellow shirt in which Matt had first seen him, Techie opened the door and ushered him
into the dimness. Matt felt the sweat begin to evaporate from his body. He carried an extra deodorant stick in the boxing bag and hoped it was enough to keep him from being offensive.

It was odd to say the least—walking up the suspended staircase with Techie on his heels. The extra weight of the bag of tools made it sway a little more. Odder still was walking into the guest room (with a glance down the hall to Madeline’s room) where it had all begun, that first visit seeming like years ago.

The cable still hung unconnected in its port in the wall. Matt set his bag of tools down and scoped out the setup while Techie sat on the floor, attentive.

“Well, this will be easy,” he said with a shade of disappointment. “I don’t really get to show off all of my mad skills.” The slim cable box was mounted on top of the TV, along with the streaming media player. An HDMI cable—purloined from the MaxStar stores since Matt assumed the box that held the TV and its parts was long gone—later, and the thing was set up. “Where’s the remote?” he asked.

Techie shrugged.

Matt walked over to the bed, first checking the right-hand bedside table and, finally, discovering the enormous remote in the left-hand top drawer. He powered the TV on. “Okay, where do we sit?”

“Hm. We could bring some chairs up from the dining room.”

“No offense, but those are really uncomfortable.”

“I guess we could just sit at the foot of the bed,” Techie said.

Both settled there, backs propped up against the sheer plane of the platform bed, and Matt navigated the hideous interface, finally able to find and rent the film. His heart jumped as the first scene began, even though it was bookended by cheesy CG opening credits. When he looked over, Techie had his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them, staring wide-eyed and with his neck at a strange angle.

Through the initial half-hour, Matt sat shifting, the bed hard against his shoulder blades, the thin rug not doing much to prevent his ass from going numb. The next time he looked over, Techie was looking back at him.

“This is really uncomfortable,” Techie said.

Matt laughed. “Yeah it is.”

“Want to sit on the bed?” The question was very quiet, almost inaudible over the roaring of the Batmobile.

“Sure. I don’t know if I can do this for much longer.” Matt hit the pause button and heaved himself up on half-numb legs. Techie was also staggering, his hair swinging. They looked at each other and grinned. Settling himself on the mattress with a pillow behind his back, Matt said, “Oh, God, this is so much better.”

Techie nodded, his gaze back on the TV.

Pausing for a moment, Matt pointed the remote back toward the TV and the headache-inducing action of the movie resumed. At some point, he scooted down on the bed and propped a pillow under his head and Techie did the same. They lay with arms crossed over their stomachs, the
remote in the space between them.

Some of the movie was silly and the dialogue stilted, but the action sequences were sharp and fast, showing off in a spectacular fashion the hundreds of millions of dollars that had gone into making it.

When the end credits began to roll, Matt shrugged his ambivalence and looked over at Techie...who was sleeping. Ruddy eyelashes fanned over his cheeks; his lips were slightly parted. When Matt turned off the TV, the sudden silence in the room was punctuated by the softest of snores. He bit his lip to keep from laughing aloud.

Even placing the remote back in the bedside table drawer didn’t wake Techie. Matt pulled up the blanket from the side of the bed where he had been lying and draped it over him. Hoping Techie wouldn’t wake up in the middle of the night, confused, Matt took one last look at his sleeping form before slinging the tool bag over his shoulder and walking out.

He set the alarm and locked the front door with the key.

The relaxation of the night before—with Matt certain he had a free day the next day—gave way to trepidation when his phone alarm went off, reminding him of his therapy appointment. For a few minutes he considered not going. But it would also be prudent to apologize to Dr. Finch, if only to leave their relationship on a slightly higher note than the one it began with.

Matt’s neck felt sore as he took the elevator up to Finch’s office. He couldn’t tell whether it was the effect of having the pillow balled up under his neck during the movie last night or whether it was the beginning of a stress headache. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door. To his immense relief, Shirleigh wasn’t behind the glass window; it was some other woman—thin and white with dyed red hair, like a poor copy of Techie.

“Sign in,” she said. “The doctor will be with you in just a few moments.”

Matt sat down, eyeing the magazines but ending up sitting with elbows on knees, his hands clutched tight in front of him. He flinched when the door to Finch’s office opened.

“Well, hello, Matt,” Dr. Finch said. “Please come in.”

Nodding, Matt rose and allowed himself to be ushered into the office. They took their usual places on the couches, with Matt considering grabbing one of the throw pillows to hold but forcing himself to keep his hands folded in his lap.

“I’m really glad you decided to join me today,” said Dr. Finch.

Matt shook his head. “Listen, I’m really sorry. You know, about what happened last time.”

Finch smiled under his mustache and shook his head. “Well, I sure appreciate that. I think you were in a bad place. It looks like you’re in a much better place now.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Looks like your face is all healed up.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you end up going back to boxing?”
Matt nodded. “Yeah.”

“Still training like you were?”

“Yeah. My coach says we’re probably going to have a tournament later this summer.”

Finch raised his eyebrows. “I assume that means you’d like to participate?”

“Probably,” Matt said.

“Good, good. Do you think you’re ready?”

“I think I’m just as ready as the other people there.”

Another smile. “So last time you told me you’d had a fight with your roommate, is that right? How did that turn out?”

Matt took a deep breath. “We’re still... weird around each other. We don’t really talk all that much. I guess we haven’t for a while. Since we’ve been working.”

“Would you still consider yourself his friend?”

Frowning, Matt paused for a few seconds. “I don’t know. Somebody I know told me he didn’t sound like a very good friend.”

“Was this your girlfriend?”

Matt shook his head. “Someone else.”

“Are you still in a relationship?”

“Yeah.” It felt like a shifting half-truth.

“Is that going well?” Finch asked.

“She’s away for a while. Traveling.”

“So you’ll be glad to see her when she comes back.”

“Yeah.” Matt reached over and grabbed the throw pillow, holding it over his chest.

Finch pinned him with a look. “Now, I did notice that you’re holding the pillow. That’s something you used to do during our first sessions when you wanted to keep something safe, something just for yourself. Do you remember?”

“No,” Matt lied.

“Okay,” said Finch. “That’s fine. Tell me something else good that has happened since we saw each other last.”

“I got offered more hours at work.”

Finch’s smile was full. “That’s what you wanted, yes?”

Matt shrugged. “Well, I don’t know if I’m going to get as many as I want. I mean, as many as I need to get the insurance.”
“We’ll see,” Finch said. “I hope you do.”

“Me, too. My mom...is getting let go from where she works.”

“Oh, my. When?”

“In a month and a half.”

“But your birthday will have come by then, anyway.”

Matt nodded.

“Well,” said Dr. Finch, “I’m sorry to hear that. For your mom’s sake.”

“It’ll be tough,” Matt said, echoing Leah and rather surprising himself, “but they’ll make it.”

“That’s a really good attitude.”

“Well, I really wish I could help them more.”

“I think you’re helping them just by being successful in your own life,” Finch said.

“I’m getting by.”

“That’s all that matters.”

Matt walked out of the office and back to his car in a fog, confused about the things he had said in front of Finch, the cautious optimism that was optimism nonetheless. Did he really feel that way? Was he putting on a show for Finch as a sort of atonement for their last session? His hand on the searing hot roof of his car, he took a couple of breaths before getting in.

While the air conditioner revved up, he called Techie. “Hey, do you have class today?”

“Yeah,” Techie said.

“Do you want a ride?”

He could hear the smile in Techie’s voice. “Sure.”

Matt had a couple of hours to kill before he had to pick Techie up, so he took a leisurely lunch in a restaurant. The place was next to a discount store, and he figured he would look around. There was a pair of sneakers in his size and he was reluctant to try them on because he had to stretch this paycheck further than it was going at the current rate. At the end, he did give them a go, squishing around the shop on their thick, cushioned soles. He put his own battered pair back on with regret. When he was almost out the door, Matt circled back and picked up the sneakers. If there had been one more person in line before him he may have reconsidered again, but then the clerk was calling him and he handed over the thirty dollars, giddy. He left his old pair in the trash can in front of the store.

Like it was a bus stop, Techie was standing outside the house, squinting up at the sun, when Matt pulled up.

He folded his lanky form, swathed in a red shirt and khakis, into the seat. As soon as he had perched the laptop case on his knees, he rubbed his eyes with furious intent, digging in with the knuckles of his forefinger. “Damn,” he said. “I forgot my drops.”
“Want to go back and get them?” Matt asked.

“Nah,” said Techie, blinking. “I’ll live.”

Shaking his head and huffing a brief laugh, Matt knocked the car into drive and pulled away from the curb.

With his head turned toward the window, Techie said, “I’m sorry I fell asleep during the movie.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Matt said. “The ending wasn’t that great.”

“Let me guess,” Techie said. “Batman wins.”

“Got it in one.”

“Maybe we can watch it again. Downstairs. I won’t fall asleep sitting up.”

“Only if you want to,” said Matt.

“I don’t really watch a lot of movies.”

“Reading books instead?”

Techie’s brows drew inward. “Sometimes. I guess I like things that are about things that could really happen. Not superheroes, I guess.”

“That story you told me about couldn’t really happen. Someone at the bottom of the sea dreaming world peace?”

“It could happen.”

“But, like, making it true?” Matt asked. “All over the world? No way.”

“Probably not,” Techie said, his slim smile a concession. “Just because you think things doesn’t mean they can happen.”

“I wish,” Matt said.

“Me, too.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“When is your class over?” Matt asked.

“Five.”

“I’ll still have time before boxing. Do you want me to pick you up?”
Chapter 8

On Thursday, Matt slept in until noon. The night before had been an amazing one at boxing practice—amazing and taxing all at the same time. Both Jason and Horacio had been there and he’d gotten in some hits worth Phasma’s notice while they sparred. Matt had never fought two people in one night, but he supposed it was better to get used to it considering the upcoming tournament. If it was happening; Phasma had yet to make an announcement on the date.

Having had a leisurely shower, Matt came back to his room to a text from Jessy: *Hang out tonight after work?*

*Can’t. Boxing.*

*Boo. When do you have night off again?*

*Fridays and Sundays.*

*Ooh, she texted back, can’t tomorrow. Sunday maybe.*

Sunday was the day Madeline came back. Matt didn’t want to make assumptions that she would want to see him right away, but it was better safe than sorry. *Probably not. Sorry.*

*You suck,* Jessy shot back.

*Hey well I can come see you today. At work.*

It took a few minutes for her to respond. *Okay. Come after 2 so you miss the lunch rush.*

He tossed the phone on the bed and got dressed, then sat down on the edge of the bed again and picked it up. Scrolling through his contacts, he stopped at Techie’s number. The first text he sent was, *I have an idea.*

At Techie’s house about an hour later, after explaining, Techie was ready to shoot the notion down.

“She said I could,” Matt told him. “She left the keys in the garage so I could take it out if I wanted.”

Techie breathed out, looking at his feet. “I’ve never been in that car.”

“I’ve never driven it,” Matt said.

“Then how do you know how?”

Matt forced back a twinge of irritation. “It’s just a car. You drive one, you can drive them all. Well, mostly.”

“I guess,” Techie said.

“Does that mean ‘yes?’”

“Okay.”

Matt grinned.
With some hesitation, Techie mimicked the smile.

Walking past the huge and dark living room toward the garage made Matt’s heartbeat pick up a notch. The last time he had been in there had been both humiliating and arousing. He was forced to remind himself that Techie couldn’t read his thoughts.

Just as Madeline had promised, the keys to the Audi hung from the tiny hook by the light switch.

Techie rubbed at his eyes when Matt flicked it on. “It’s small,” he said.

“Yeah. Just two seats.” Matt immediately felt dumb—as if that wasn’t obvious. “I, uh...last time I put the seat all the way back so there should be enough leg room for you.”

“Probably,” Techie said, still looking at the car. “I’m not as tall as you.”

“You’re not short,” Matt said.

“My dad was tall.”

After a few moments standing silent on the concrete steps that led down to the garage floor, Matt retrieved the keys from the hook and said, “Ready to go?”

“Sure.” Appearing more lanky and awkward than he had ever done when getting into Matt’s car, Techie settled himself into the passenger seat.

“Got enough room?” Matt asked.

Techie nodded.

Tossing the fob in the cupholder, Matt pressed the ignition button and the car rumbled to life. His eyes went wide. Foot on the brake, he pressed the accelerator a couple of times just to hear the sound echo throughout the enclosed space. It could have been his imagination, but Techie may have given a slight wince.

He hit the button on the garage door opener then, using the least pressure possible, eased the car out into the wide driveway. After stopping a moment to take a breath, Matt slung his arm over the back of Techie’s seat and craned his neck, backing down the remainder of the driveway. When they were out in the street, he looked over at Techie, who nodded.

Matt made sure the car didn’t jump right out of the gate, but he could feel the engine’s power.

“Wow,” Techie said, clutching the edges of his seat.

“Did your dad—” Matt started. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“Um, did your dad have a nice car?”

A nod. “Not really like this one. It was a sedan. That was the one we mostly used. Not that I went out with them much, even before the accident. Not since I was a kid.”

“Your dad still made you take the bus?”

“Oh, he didn’t make me,” Techie said. “I just did it.”
“Doesn’t it take forever to get places?” Matt asked.

One side of Techie’s mouth curled up. “Yeah. But I like sometimes watching the people on the bus, when I can see them okay. Wondering what they’re doing and where they’re going. Do you ever think about that when you’re stuck in traffic?”

Matt shook his head and laughed. “No. It usually just makes me mad. I’m thinking about where I’m going.”

Techie had no reply.

They cruised down I-70, the ride smooth and quiet, heading toward the place where 40 branched off.

“Where are we going?” Techie asked.

“Oh, man,” Matt said. “I totally forgot to say. Do you like burgers?”

“Who doesn’t like burgers?”

“Vegetarians, I guess.”

“There are vegetarian burgers,” Techie said.

Matt made a face. “They’re probably not very good.”

“Do they have them at this restaurant?”

“Don’t know,” Matt said. “Did you want to try one?”

“No,” Techie said, and then laughed. “Is this a special kind of burger place?”

“Just a Red Robin.”

“I’ve never been to one,” Techie said.

“It’s not special, really,” Matt told him, looking out for his exit on the road signs ahead. “But a friend of mine works there.”

“We’re going to see your friend?” Techie’s tone was flat.

Matt looked over. Techie was looking out the window. “She’s really nice. I think you’ll like her.”

“Okay,” Techie said, venturing a smile.

Matt felt like an absolute king pulling into the sun-baked parking lot in the Audi. It would probably be stupid to show Jessy the car, and awkward to explain it to her in front of Techie, but damned if he didn’t want to.

Techie got out, squinting, though he straightened up considerably in the dark, cool interior. “It smells good in here.”

Matt asked the hostess to seat them in Jessy’s section. With pursed lips, she walked them to the booth and informed them that Jessy would be right with them, slapping down the plastic-sheathed menus.
“She must have had a bad day,” Techie said.

“And it’s only two o’clock,” said Matt.

“Hey, Mattie!” Jessy said, walking up with two sweating glasses of water. The pink streak was gone, dyed out of her hair, but the piece still looked auburn against her natural brown. “Who’s this?”

“This is my—this is Techie.”

“Turkey?” she asked.

Matt laughed.

“Techie,” said Techie. “It’s not my real name, but it’s what people call me.”

Jessy extended her hand and Techie took it. “Well, okay. I’ll call you that, then. I’m Jessy. It’s nice to meet you. Do you guys want something else to drink besides water?”

“I’ll take a Coke,” Matt told her.

Techie nodded.

“One for you, too? Okay, cool. Let me get those and I’ll be right back.”

Matt watched Techie playing with the wrapper from the straw. He tied it into a knot, then again, and again until it was a fragile paper braid. Then he dropped it on the table.

“Here are those Cokes, guys,” Jessy said.

Techie rubbed his eyes. “Thanks.”

“You two know what you want? Or do you need a little more time?” she asked.

Matt looked over at Techie, who shrugged. “Yeah, just a little more time.” He paused. “Are you okay?”


Hesitating for a moment, Matt finally said, “We went to high school together.” It wasn’t an untruth, necessarily. They had been in high school at the same time, though in different districts. Matt wasn’t sure why he felt the need to keep from Techie the fact that he and Jessy had dated. “What are you going to get?”

“Oh,” Techie said, and picked up his menu. “Probably just a cheeseburger.”

“The bleu cheese burger is good. It’s got fried onions.”

Techie grimaced. “That sounds horrible.”

Laughing, Matt said, “Fine, fine.”

Sauntering up to the table, Jessy rested her elbows on its shellacked surface and sighed. “I’m too old for this. They just hired a hostess who’s nineteen. Nineteen!”

Matt shook his head. “It hasn’t been that long since you were nineteen.”
“Feels like forever,” Jessy said. Then she looked over at Techie. “No offense.”

“I’m twenty-two,” Techie said. “I’ve always looked younger.”

“Grow a beard,” Matt said.

Another grimace, this one exaggerated. “No.”

At the same time, Jessy said, “Ew, no.” It made the three of them laugh.

Matt ended up ordering his usual, and Techie the barbecue cheeseburger, both with fries. “You doing okay?” he asked Techie again.

“Uh-huh.”

When Jessy returned, she was carrying two plates plus and extra basket of fries. She plunked them down on Matt’s side of the table and swung up into the booth. “Scooch over, Matt. I want to talk to Turkey.” She winked at Techie.

At that point he had just taken a huge bite of his burger and his eyes widened.

Jessy stuffed a couple fries in her mouth, smiled, and shrugged. “So how do you know Mattie?”

Matt’s heart plummeted into his gut. Stupid, stupid for not anticipating that question.

Techie swallowed his lump of burger. “He installed cable in my house.”

Shooting Techie a look of unvarnished gratitude, Matt nodded.

“Oh, how cool! And you became friends?”

Techie cocked his head to the side, watching Matt.

“Yeah,” Matt said.

“What do you do, Turkey?” asked Jessy.

“I’m a programmer. I’m still in school though.” He hung his head slightly.

“At UMKC?”

A nod.

“Ooh,” said Jessy, “I want to go back to school.”

“What do you want to study?” Techie asked.

Next to Matt, Jessy’s cheek took on a little color. “Oh, just physician assistant stuff. It doesn’t take a lot of work.”

Techie frowned. “I’d rather memorize coding languages than memorize anatomy.”

Jessy tossed her head back and laughed. “Yeah, I guess so. Everybody does their own thing.”

The surly hostess walked by with another party in tow, giving Jessy a pointed look before seating them two booths over. Jessy rolled her eyes. “Looks like I better get going. Nice to meet you, Techie.”
With a smile, Techie nodded.

When Jessy brought their check, without saying a thing Techie simply dug into his wallet and produced two twenties and laid them inside the plastic-bound folder.

“I can—”

He only shook his head.

“Thanks,” Matt said.

They both walked out into the afternoon, squinting and shielding their eyes. Matt made the mistake at first of looking for his own car, but Techie pulled him by his sleeve when they passed the Audi.

Matt smiled and unlocked it, and they got in. “Hey,” he said, “do you mind if I put the top down?”

Techie shook his head.

Pushing the button, Matt watched the roof fold in on itself, slipping into the back compartment, which closed with a whisper. He grinned. “Tell me if you want to put it up again.”

“Okay.”

Anticipation hummed in Matt’s chest as they made their way through the traffic lights on 40. When he finally turned on to the I-70 exit, he hit the gas. Air wound around the windshield and brushed over his eyes, making him blink. He could feel the curls at the nape of his neck fluttering. It was a few minutes until he dared to look over at Techie. The sun was wild-bright copper in his red hair, which was streaming around his face and backward over the head rest. He was smiling, strands of hair sticking in his teeth then blowing away again. Matt inched the accelerator forward. Techie’s smile grew wider as he looked back at Matt.

When they returned to the house, they had to punch the remote button a couple of times to get the garage door open.

*Like the house doesn’t want us to come back,* Matt thought, but then shook it out of his head, an idiotic notion. In the relative coolness of the garage, he put the top back up and got out, not without some regret. The burger and fries were thick in his gut and his throat was dry. He hung the keys back up on their hook and closed the door again, the car’s sleek lines shifting then disappearing in the dark. “Are you thirsty?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Techie said. “Do you want another Coke?”

“If you have one,” Matt said. He fell behind and allowed Techie to lead him through the living room, past the closed door to his territory, and into the kitchen. The lights in their hanging sconces were cold and cast strange shadows.

Techie dug into the fridge and tossed Matt a frosty can.

He caught it, suddenly remembering the ice-rimmed can at Kyle’s friend’s party, the awkward conversation with Hannah. *My girlfriend.* “Thanks.”

“Do you want to go downstairs?” Techie asked.

“I wish we could get in the pool.”

Hesitant, Techie said, “We could put our feet in.”
“You’re not going to get burned, are you? I mean, if we’re out there for just a few minutes.”

Techie shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

Out on the patio, they took of their shoes, putting them on the tile. Matt rolled his jeans up as far as they would go and dipped his feet into the cool water.

Techie was able to hike up his shorts and submerge his legs up to the calf. “You got new shoes,” he said.

“Yeah. They were cheap.”

“I really only have one pair of shoes. They’re the ones I like.”

“I have these,” Matt said, “then boots for boxing. And a pair of loafers. I wore them to my co-worker’s dad’s funeral.”

Techie was looking down at slim feet as they sliced through the water.

“Sorry,” said Matt. “I didn’t mean to bring up—”

“No,” Techie said. “It’s okay. I don’t mind talking about my dad.”

“Okay.”

Techie turned and looked back at the shadow of the house as it crept across the patio. His voice was very quiet when he spoke. “I don’t mind talking about my mom, either.”

Matt’s insides churned. “We don’t have to.”

“She’s coming back.” The statement was matter-of-fact with a certain finality.

“Yeah,” Matt said.

“What do you think of her?” Techie asked. “My mom.” As if it needed clarifying.

Rather than trying to dredge up an assessment as to an answer one way or another, he gave the truth. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

Matt paused and took a couple of deep breaths. “I don’t know what she thinks of me from one second to the next, you know? Sometimes when she talks to me, I think she’s talking about me. And sometimes when I think she’s talking about me, she’s really talking about herself. I don’t know. You know her better than me.”

Techie shook his head. “I doubt it.”

“What about your dad?” Matt asked.

“Huh?”

“Do you think he knew your mom?”

“I think he was really in love with her. They were always kissing and holding hands, ever since I can remember.”
“Was she in love with him? She had to be.”

“Not sure,” Techie said. “I think she liked the idea of being in love.”

“I don’t really understand,” said Matt.

A shrug. Techie squinted up at the cloudless sky. “I’m not sure I do, either. What does she tell you about my dad?”

Matt kicked his feet, sending droplets flying from his toes. “Not a lot.” In the silence beyond that statement, Matt swore Techie wanted to ask, *What does she say about me?*

Instead, he said, “She always used to say to my dad, ‘live in the moment.’”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “That sounds like her. Good if the moment is good and bad if the moment is bad.”

At that, Techie smiled.

They sat quiet for a few minutes, Techie occasionally raising his hand to rub at his eyes. “She’ll probably want to see you when she gets back,” he said at last.

“Yeah.”

Another long pause. “Today was fun.”

“Yeah. It was.”

“Do you have work tomorrow?” Techie asked.

Matt nodded. Then: “Do you mind if I come over and use the pool tomorrow night? I don’t have boxing on Fridays.”

“You don’t really have to ask me. Especially not after my mom gets back.”

“It’s your house, too.”

“It was my dad’s house, really. We’re just living in it.”

“Hey,” Matt said, “do you want me to drive you to class next week?”

“What about work?”

“I’ll ask for the day off. I can pick you up, too.”

“Yeah,” Techie said, the resigned half-smile brightening. “Sure.”

“Okay, just tell me what times. I’ll go get dinner or something while you’re in class.”

Deep furrows appeared between Techie’s eyebrows. He frowned. “My mom won’t like it.”

Matt paused. Part of him felt treasonous. “She doesn’t have to know. You can walk to the end of the street like you’re going to the bus stop, and I’ll pick you up there.”

The grin turned full-wattage. “Okay.”

Friday was a scorcher. Matt figured he may as well not have bothered showering before work, but
the promise of the pool at the end of the day—for as long as he wanted—was the carrot dangling in front of his nose.

Ted was his usual ebullient self despite the suffocating heat. There was a forty-five minute window between jobs and the two of them stopped for lunch at a Wendy’s again. The burger, of course, wasn’t nearly as good as the one he’d had yesterday. The air riffling through his hair from a grease-smelling vent overhead in the restaurant was a poor substitute for the feel of the wind over his face as he and Techie barreled down I-70 in the convertible.

“I don’t care what anybody says,” Ted was saying. “These are the best fries.”

“I still like the thicker ones,” Matt said.

Ted wiggled his eyebrows, lascivious. “Yeah, I’ll bet you do.”

“Fuck you, man.”

“You walked right into it, dude!”

“Yeah, okay. Fair enough.”

Ted looked outside the window to his left, the plastic swivel chair he was seated in squealing. “Is it too much to ask maybe for a few clouds? I don’t even need rain, man. Just some clouds to give us a break.”

“I could use some rain,” Matt said. “I got my wipers on my car fixed a little while ago and it hasn’t rained since. Almost like I wasted the money.”

“You’ll be glad you did in the fall,” Ted said.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

“What kind of car do you have?”

Matt looked down into his half-empty carton of fries. “A shitty one.”

“Hah, same. You know when I was in high school I had this hot 1967 Mustang. Bright red. My dad had bought it to work on, but he didn’t know anything about cars, really. It was always breaking down. But man, every time it did, I was the prettiest piece of junk on the side of the road.”

“So,” Matt asked. “What do you drive now?”

“Ugh.” If Matt wasn’t mistaken, Ted was blushing a little.

“I know it’s blue. I’ve seen you walking over to it in the parking lot.”

“It’s fucking powder blue. And it’s a Buick. Yours is white, right?”

“Silver,” Matt said. “A Chevy.” He paused a moment, teetering on the edge of saying something to Ted about the day before, then tipping over that edge. “I got to drive a really hot car yesterday.”

Ted looked up with a mouthful of food. “What kind?”

Matt smiled at the memory. “An Audi TT.”

“What’s that look like?”
“Pull it up on your phone.”

Ted, to Matt’s satisfaction, was properly awed at the image of the car. “Did you just, like, pretend to go buy one so you could test drive?”

“Naw, it’s—it’s my girlfriend’s.”

“Wow,” Ted said. “This is the one with the pool, too, huh?”

Matt nodded.

“You officially suck.”

“Hey,” Matt said. “I bet you could come over and swim this afternoon if you wanted.”

Ted’s eyes went wide. “You think that’d be cool?”

A swell of unease rising, Matt paused. “I think so, yeah. I mean, I’m, uh, house-sitting with someone else but I think he’d be good with it.”

“If you say it’s okay, that would be awesome. I’m melting.”

“Got anything to swim in?”

Ted stroked his chin for a second. “Yeah, I can swim in the shorts I brought to work. Then just go home in my jumpsuit.”

Matt grinned. “Great. Just follow me after work.”

When the shift was done, Matt drove over to Ted’s parking spot, the shame about his own car lessening once he saw the boxy, rusted Buick. He guided them toward Crescent Heights. When he parked in front of the yard one house over, Ted got out of his own car, goggling.

“Whoa,” he said. “This is your girlfriend’s house?”

“That one,” Matt said, pointing.

“Whoa,” Ted repeated.

As they walked between the juniper hedges, Matt weighed his options, the creeping but amorphous guilt he felt growing. At the end of it he decided to use the key for the first time since Techie had come home the week before, allowing Ted into the cool entryway.

“God, it feels good in here,” Ted said.

“It does, doesn’t it?” A strange sort of pride commingled with the guilt, as if Matt had anything to do with the state of the house or its amenities. He walked Ted through the kitchen and out to the patio, sliding the door open to the smell of salt and the trill of insects.

Ted gave a little laugh. “This is awesome.”

“Jump in,” said Matt.

Wasting no time, Ted made a running leap into the cool water, splashing in all directions out over the tiles.
Matt cannonballed in next to him, pushing up off the floor of the pool to burst through the agitated surface, shaking the water from his hair.

“This pool doesn’t stink,” Ted said.

Matt nodded. “It’s saltwater, not chlorine.”

“I’ve never heard of that. Probably expensive right?”

Laughing, Matt said, “Like everything in this house.”

“You are so lucky, dude.” Ted tucked his knees under his chin, held his nose, and turned a backflip in the water, coming up spluttering and sneezing.

Matt did the same. When he came up and was thumbing water out of his eyes, he felt Ted’s hand nudge his shoulder.

“Hey.”

Matt looked up, first at Ted, who was looking toward the patio doors. He turned to see Techie, standing at the open glass door. He was holding a can of Coke, his face blank.

“Oh, hey, man,” Matt said. “This is my friend Ted. He works with me.”

“Nice to meet you,” Techie said, his voice soft. He was not looking at Ted but at Matt.

Matt suddenly felt very cold in the water, his skin going pebbled. “I would have come and got you, but we were absolutely dying to get in.”

A slow nod from Techie. He said nothing further.

“Do you want to come in?” Matt asked.

He shook his head.

“You can sit out here and hang out,” said Matt.

Ted piped up, “Yeah, come on out.”

“No,” Techie said. “I don’t think so.”

Swimming over to the edge of the pool, Matt started to get out. “Hey…”

Techie only turned on his heel and disappeared back into the gloom of the house.

When Matt looked over, Ted was treading water, his eyebrows raised. “He didn’t seem too happy about that.”

“It’s cool,” Matt said, entirely without the conviction to back up the words. His enthusiasm for being in the water was deflated, and it made him a little angry if he was honest with himself. He put out of his mind the idea that Madeline would also have been nonplussed at the least to see a stranger swimming in her pool, choosing to focus his irritation on Techie and what he decided to see as an irrational reaction.

“Should we get out?” Ted asked.
“No, screw it.”

They were only, however, able to spend about ten more minutes moving in aimless circles through the pool before Ted announced he should probably get going.

“Yeah, man,” Matt said. “Sorry.”

Ted shrugged. “It’s cool.” He looked back at the pool with longing as they got up and out.

Matt hadn’t remembered to grab towels, so they stood drip-drying in the slowly cooling evening air, scooting back into the sunlight as the shadow of the house encroached on the space where they stood. He didn’t want to go back inside to go out the front door, so he told Ted to follow him over the fence, through the side of the yard and back to their cars.

“You working tomorrow?” Ted asked.

“Nope. Not until Sunday.”

“Okay. I’m not working until Monday.”

“Cool,” Matt said. “See you, I guess.”

The still-wet swim shorts cold and clinging under his thighs, Matt sat in the car. For a second he considered shutting it off and going back in, but it looked like Ted was waiting for him to leave, so he started the engine and pulled away from the curb. As they parted ways at the entrance to the Crescent Heights neighborhood, Ted didn’t look over at Matt before he pulled out into traffic and was gone.

What stretched before him now was a night free of anything to do, which would probably entail lying in bed. One more full day until Madeline came back. In some ways it had seemed like a second or two that she’d been gone, and in other ways the entire summer. As if as soon as she returned, the wind would pick up and grow cooler, and yellow leaves would begin to shake and fall from the poplar trees. Of course, he had to remind himself that he wouldn’t be living in the same house with the same trees come autumn.

Matt was actively shivering when he returned home, having subjected himself to full-blast air conditioning blowing out over his damp skin. The night was hot and windless. He sighed before going up the steps and into the house. Kyle was gone; the kitchen and living room were silent. It took at least an hour for Matt to fall asleep that night, twisting in his bed, pulling up and kicking off the blanket.

His energy was sapped in the morning, and not made any better by the fact that he had no breakfast food left in the house. Still, he was only able to finish half of the meal he got at the bagel shop, put in mind of Madeline not without a measure of unease.

Madeline.

Techie.

With the other half of the bagel wrapped tight and tossed in the passenger seat, Matt drove to Crescent Heights mired in half-certainty. The scent of juniper was close to overwhelming, the dew still not evaporated from the needle-like leaves. He rang the bell this time.

Peaches barked alone and untended after Matt rang the bell twice more. He was slipping the key to the house between two fingers when he decided to ring one more time, leaning on the bell and
making it stutter-echo through the entry hall.

A familiar form appeared at the end of the entryway, red hair a candle smudge. Matt looked down at his feet even though he knew Techie couldn’t see him.

When he opened the door, Techie’s face held a neutral expression, neither welcoming nor condemning. “Why didn’t you just use the key?”

“It was,” Matt fumbled for words, “kind of a dumb move to do it yesterday.”

“Did you and your friend have fun?” Techie asked.

Matt looked up. “Sort of. Not really.”

To that, Techie said nothing.

“Listen,” Matt said. “I should have asked.”

Techie cocked his head to the side. “You surprised me.”

“Yeah. It was just a spur-of-the-moment thing.”

What Techie didn’t say was, It’s okay or Don’t worry about it. He did ask, “Do you want to come in?”

Matt nodded. For the first time in the entry hall he wondered if the reverse was true in winter; if the house was filled with warmth that boiled out of the door, a benediction on visitors. He wanted at that moment to ask, but it seemed appropriate to show his contrition and let Techie speak first.

“Want a drink?” Techie asked, Peaches dancing at his feet.

“No, thanks.”

“What are you doing today?”

Matt rubbed his chin with his thumb. “Nothing right now. Just boxing later. How about you?”

“I was studying,” Techie said.

“Oh, okay. I can let you go if you want.”

“No, it’s fine. I needed a break.”

They stood in silence for excruciating moments, Matt trying to think of something with which to rupture it.

His chin tilted to the side, Techie asked, “What would you be doing if you weren’t here?”


“What would you do here if you were in the house and I wasn’t?”

Standing slack-jawed, Matt blinked a few times, his breath stuck in his throat for no good reason. “Maybe get in the pool? I don’t know.”

Techie paused. “I would probably be studying. Here or at my grandparents’.”
“Okay.”

“But I’m not. Not right now.”

“No,” Matt said, still befuddled. “You’re talking to me.”

“And you’re not doing any of the other things you would be doing if I wasn’t here.”

Matt sighed. “I don’t get it.”

Techie kicked at the tile softly, the sole of his Chuck Taylor squeaking. “You told Jessy that we were friends. I noticed you trying to say it before, but you never did, not until then.”

Shifting from foot to foot in monumental discomfort, Matt said, “I didn’t know if it was weird.”

“Why would it be weird?” Techie asked.

“We sort of met each other in a weird way.”

Brows furrowed, Techie said, “I don’t think that means we can’t be friends.”

“But when your mom comes back…” Matt began.

“You’ll still pick me up from class. Like you said.”

“Yeah. I mean, on Wednesday.”

“On Wednesdays,” Techie said, light but insistent.

“Oh, like, every week?” Matt asked, something cool settling into the pit of his stomach.

“I’d like that.”

Flustered, Matt said, “Okay, well, when I get that day off work I can definitely do it.”

“You make time to see Jessy.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, sometimes.”

“You have to plan,” Techie said. “Talk to each other. Maybe she has other friends she wants to see. Or a boyfriend.”

“I met her boyfriend,” said Matt. “His name’s Travis.”

“Well,” said Techie, “there you go.”

Passing a hand through his hair, still shuffling, Matt said, “I still don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“Friendships don’t just happen by accident,” Techie said. “You have to plan, talk to each other.”

Matt shrugged. “Ours kind of did.”

For a moment Techie seemed abashed. “Well, this isn’t like anything else. But when my mom gets back…”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “We have to plan. I can’t just do this like I did today.”
Techie smiled at last. “I’m easy to plan for.”

“What do you mean?”

He looked down. “You always know where I am. I’m either in class or I’m here. Or with you.”

“You have other friends,” Matt said.

“I don’t, but it’s okay. I just want to be one of yours.”

“I don’t really have that many friends, either.” Jessy was a strange circumstance: a platonic reconnection with an old girlfriend. He remembered guys from the birthday party—Alex and Gray. Would they come to his birthday party? Possibly, if Kyle invited them. But Matt didn’t care if they were there or not. They were filler. Kyle would be there; he had promised to throw a party for Matt’s birthday at the house. It would be more of a farewell party, a last hurrah before they moved on to different things. Things so different that he probably wouldn’t talk to Kyle much after the move. They would have to time it, make plans. Matt already knew that Kyle would not put in the effort to plan, would find excuses. He himself could find excuses for not seeing Jessy, but this was a tacit but powerful reminder that with Techie he had no recourse. The burden of the friendship was on him now. Techie would always be there. “Okay,” Matt said.

Techie nodded. “Let’s go for a drive?”

Matt struggled to hold back a smile. “In the convertible again?”

“It’s not too far away. We can take your car.”

“What’s not too far away?”

“The place I want to take you,” said Techie. “It’s on my bus route to the grocery store.”

“Okay,” Matt said, giving voice to a little of his disappointment. “I’m parked outside.”

“Stay, Peaches,” Techie said.

“Don’t you need a key?” Matt asked.

Techie grinned. “You have one.”

They locked up and walked out into the the day, the growing heat rising in shivering waves from the concrete. It was strange having Techie in his car again, with the top of his head brushing almost as close to the roof as Matt’s own. The day he had picked Techie up in the rain seemed a million years distant.

Using a soft voice, Techie guided him to the edge of the neighborhood and away in a direction in which Matt had never been. They passed into a territory of houses that were at first a little run down then much more so—places with porches sagging and chicken wire fences with orange Beware of Dog signs. Places worse than where Matt lived.

“You’ll have to park in the driveway of this house here,” Techie said.

Matt cast a wary eye at the crumbled asphalt, through which what his dad used to call helicopter weeds poked up and shuddered.

“It’s okay,” said Techie. “I don’t think anybody lives here anymore.”
The house did look abandoned, with plywood tacked over broken windows from the inside. The space underneath the split-in-half porch looked forbidding and possibly full of crouching nocturnal beasts waiting for evening—skinny cats and opossums.

“We won’t be here for that long,” Techie said, as if reading Matt’s thoughts.

He pulled up onto the lumpy drive and shut the car off.

Techie was already lurching out of the passenger seat. He stood, squinting, the hand shielding his eyes making the red around them look bruise-purple. “It’s back here.”

They walked by what Matt guessed had been the backyard of the abandoned house then into a stand of ratty trees beyond, with Matt absently hoping no one would decide to give stealing his car a try. Through the copse was a playground, though it looked as if no children had been there for a very long time. The equipment was all metal—none of this new, sturdy plastic or fake wood stuff—and much of it was rusted. One swing of the two-swing set was sprawled in the dirt, its chains snapped. Techie sat down on the other one while its rusted anchors gave furious protest.

“That’s going to break,” Matt said.

Techie shrugged. “If I fall then I fall.”

Matt, still standing, skeptical, said, “This looks like a place where people go to smoke meth.”

A smile in his voice, Techie said, “Not during the day.”

“Why do you like it here?”

Techie looked around into the tree branches. “It’s different. Different from what I’m used to. From what I know.” He paused. “And you can find things.”

“Yeah, like needles.”

Techie shook his head, earnest. He got up off the swing and walked to the opposite edge of the playground. To Matt’s shock, he raised his arms, grasped a branch and swung up into one of the trees on the periphery. “Look!” he called.

Matt walked over to the tree where Techie’s green shirt clashed with the more muted purple-green leaves, the dark branches.

“Catch,” Techie said, and tossed something small and round in Matt’s direction.

Catching the cool, smooth object, Matt opened his hand. In his palm was a black cherry.

“It’s a cherry tree,” Techie said. “You should see the blooms in spring.” He laughed and then popped one of the fruits in his mouth.

“You shouldn’t eat that,” Matt said.

“Why not?”

“Who knows what’s on it.” It sounded lame coming out of his mouth, like something his mother might say.

“Try it,” Techie said. “They’re incredible. All the people who come here pick the ones on the lower branches but they miss the top ones because they won’t climb. That’s usually how people
are. They go for the easy stuff.” Taking a handful of cherries, he jumped down from the tree, landing hard with dust mushrooming around his sneakers.

Looking at him, Matt shrugged and put the cherry in his mouth. The skin was crisp, the inside terribly sweet. “Wow.”

“Told you,” said Techie.

Matt smiled, closed-lipped as he was certain his teeth were pink. “I haven’t had cherries in a long time.”

“They’re expensive in the store. But here they’re free.” Techie put another cherry in his mouth. “Do you want another one?”

Matt nodded.

“This is good,” Techie said. “I feel less angry now.”

Matt shook his head, but not in disagreement. “I’ve never met anyone who talks like you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just comes out and says things.”

Removing a cherry pit from his mouth with two fingers, Techie asked, “What do most people do?”

“I don’t know. Wait for you to take the hint about what they’re feeling.”

“Then you wait forever,” Techie said. “People aren’t good at figuring out what other people want from them. They only know what they want.”

“If I come out and say things like that, it gets me into trouble,” Matt said.

“That’s because you don’t say what you’re feeling. You say things that are based on what you’re feeling.”

Matt frowned. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

Techie’s lips carried a reddish stain, as bright as the skin around his eyes. “No, saying things that come from feelings isn’t the same as saying what you feel.”

“Okay, I seriously don’t understand,” Matt said.

“It’s fine,” Teche said, smiling.

Between them, they finished the rest of the cherries. Matt’s car was right where he’d left it, unmolested. The ride home was silent by and large, with Techie leaning forward and looking out the windshield as if he expected to see some phenomenon or monument above the rustling treeline.

When they pulled up to the curb, Techie asked if he wanted to come inside. Matt hesitated for a long while—too long—but breathed out at last and said he really should get home to pick up his boxing gear.

Techie nodded. He rubbed at his eyes with his forefingers. Unspoken between them was the fact of Madeline’s return the next day. “Do you work tomorrow?” Techie asked.
“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Bye, I guess.”

“See you Wednesday,” said Techie.

“Yeah,” said Matt, warmth like a slight blush spreading over his skin. “See you Wednesday.”

He was distracted enough at the gym that night that Dauntay got in a couple of good hits, leaving Phasma shaking her head. Trying to rattle the fog out of his own head did Matt no good. The night at home lay long and monotonous ahead of him as he drove back. His phone offered no comfort as he sat in bed, his back up against the wall. At last he settled down and tried for sleep, wishing he had his laptop.

Matt was a little glad for the fact that Ted wasn’t working the next day. He got paired with an older guy with the improbable name of Steward (not Stuart; he made sure to drive the point home. In the middle of the afternoon, he received a call from Madeline. He was tempted not to pick up, to call her back later, using work as an excuse. But before it went over to voicemail he took the call.

“Hey.”

“Oh, my God, I could fall asleep right now, but I would really like to see you, darling.” Her voice seemed hoarser than it had been, but it could just have been Matt’s imagination, her absence playing tricks on his ears. “Can I see you?”

“Sure. Okay. I work tomorrow, though.”

“No,” Madeline said. “Come over tonight. You don’t have to go hit people, do you? I want to wrap myself around you.” She gave a pleased hum.

“No,” Matt said. “I mean, I don’t have boxing. Let me shower after work then I’ll come over.”

“What’s wrong with showering here?”

Matt clenched his teeth, unclenched them. “I won’t have any clean clothes for work tomorrow.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve lost your sense of spontaneity while I was gone.”

“No,” he said. “I’ll come over. I have to go now.”

“Good. I can’t wait to see you,” Madeline said. “Goodbye for now.”

If Steward thought anything, he said none of it.

Taking a couple of deep breaths in the parking lot, Matt got into his own car and started off toward Crescent Heights.

He let himself into the house with the key. The hall and the kitchen were dark. He looked out toward the walkway that led to the patio, then made his way to the foot of the suspended stairs. It had been since he and Techie watched the silly, sub-par Batman film that he had been up those stairs. A soft glow was trickling out of Madeline’s room, the door not entirely shut.

When he pushed it open, Madeline sat at the foot of the bed in a royal blue balconette bra and thong. She wore a garter belt and black stockings along with black high heels.
Matt breathed in. Madeline got up and walked over to him and traced a finger down the zipper of his jumpsuit. “Welcome back.”

“I didn’t go anywhere,” he said.

“Welcome back to my room, I mean. I know you weren’t here. Ryan came back. His grandparents let me know. I hope for those couple of days Peaches wasn’t an absolute nightmare.”

Matt shook his head. “She was fine. I need to shower.”

Her smile was brilliant, enticing. “Don’t be long.”

Despite the undercurrent of strangeness that followed seeing Madeline again, he couldn’t help the fact that his body responded to the idea of sex with her. He emerged from the bathroom naked and hard, and fucked her from behind, pushing the crotch of her thong out of the way.

Afterward, she took off the lingerie and they lay on the bed with a glass of red wine each. Matt found the taste of the wine less than appealing, so he sipped at it with due politeness.

“You even got a tan,” he said.

“Amazing, isn’t it? And I didn’t feel once as though I was going to melt into the ground. The climate suits me, it really does. I feel revitalized. Like I bloomed back out into the world and it’s been waiting for me.”

“That’s good.”

“It is good,” Madeline said. “Oh,” she said, eyes going wide. “You won’t believe this, but I met a woman there who was also vacationing. She had her husband along with her. Did you know that they live right here in Kansas City? She and I have promised to go out and have brunch. You know, start a regular thing.”

Matt gave her a smile. “That’s great.”

“Oh, but it is so good to see you again,” she said. “I missed you. Every single part of you. Did you miss me?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Of course.”

She pouted. “Try to sound a little more enthusiastic about it.”

“I mean it.” Matt stroked her arm. “I really missed you.”

Madeline moved forward to kiss him and he met her wine-flavored lips. He felt the trickle of liquid over his knuckles as he pulled away. “Oh, shit.”

A burgundy stain was spreading into the sheet below them. As he watched, another drop fell onto the fabric from the base of the glass.

“Goddammit,” Madeline said, too loudly for the space. “Look what you’ve done.”

“I’m sorry.”

She sat up. “Put the thing over on the nightstand or you’ll spill some more.”

Matt rolled over and set the wineglass down, holding his hand underneath it to keep it from
dripping anywhere else on the bed.

Madeline had her hands at her temples when he stood up. “Shit.” She gestured to him. “Well, take them off before it soaks into the mattress.”

He stripped the bed as quickly as he could, but the wine had already spotted the mattress cover.

“This thing was expensive.”

“I’m sorry, Madeline.”

She shook her head. “Oh, go away. Before you do any more damage.”

“What?”

“I said get out!” she shouted, pacing in a small circle around her discarded clothes.

Matt pulled on his jumpsuit with nothing underneath, gathered up the rest of his underclothes and shuffled out the door. Madeline was sitting on the side of the stained bed with her head in her hands.

Not until he was out of the house and inside the car did he realize his hands were shaking.

The next morning, he barely got up early enough to grab breakfast on the way before running into the dispatch center to clock in. Ted was standing by the van as usual. He stepped up into the driver’s seat and started the engine before Matt even opened his door.

“Hey, man,” Matt said.

“Hey.”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

A few moments passed as Ted put the van into gear and pulled out of the lot.

“Looks like it’s going to be another hot one,” Matt said.

“Yeah. Your girlfriend back in town?”

Matt paused. When he spoke, he kept his tone flat, ambiguous. “Yeah.”

“Does that mean that weird guy isn’t going to be there at her house anymore?” Ted asked.

“What weird guy? Techie?”

“His name is ‘Techie?’”

“No, no,” Matt said. “It’s a nickname.”

“He didn’t seem to happy about me being there.”

Matt adjusted the collar of his jumpsuit, pulling it away from the sticky back of his neck. “It’s not that. It’s just, I didn’t ring the bell or anything. He wasn’t expecting me. Us.”

“He lives there?”
Squirming in his seat, Matt said, “Yeah.”

“Why?”

Matt clenched his fists. “He’s my girlfriend’s son.”

“Whoa, what’d she get knocked up when she was fifteen or something?”

“She’s a little older than me.”

Ted frowned. “So why were you taking care of the house? The kid can’t do it by himself? Is he retarded or something?”

“No.” Matt noticed his breathing getting faster.

“So what’s the deal, then?”

“Why do you care?”

Ted shrugged. “It just seems weird, is all.”

“Yeah, well,” Matt said, trying to conceal his blush, “it’s not.”

Ted didn’t say anything more about it that day, but their conversations were perfunctory, stilted.

Tuesday morning came with nothing to do. Matt ran by the grocery store to pick up a few things, then had a solitary breakfast out on the stoop, watching the squirrels run up and down the poplar trunks.

He thought of calling Madeline and nixed it. He thought of calling Techie. It was Jessy he called instead.

“What’s up, cowboy?” she answered.

“Nothing much. You doing anything today?”

“Working, two to ten.”

“Want to grab lunch or something?” Matt asked.

There was concern in her voice. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I dunno. I just have a funny sense about these things.”

Over lunch, Matt did end up telling Jessy about Sunday night, the fight with Madeline.

“So you’re not talking right now?” she asked.

Matt shook his head.

Jessy sighed. “I mean, I guess I would be a little mad if someone spilled wine on my sheets, but not that bad.”

“And it’s not like she can’t afford a new set of sheets or even a new mattress just like that,” Matt told her.
“Maybe Spain wasn’t as good as she said it was.”

Another shake of his head. “I can’t read her. I don’t ever know what she wants or doesn’t want.”

“Well, maybe it wasn’t meant to be.”

Matt couldn’t explain it, but the statement wounded him slightly, as though the falling-out with Madeline had somehow been his fault. “Maybe.”

“Just hang out with your friends. Like Turkey. He’s nice.”

“It’s ‘Techie,’” Matt said.

Jessy smiled, big and wide but with a piece of salad in her teeth. “I know. I’m just fooling around.”

After boxing that night, Matt texted Techie to ask when he should pick him up the next day and where. They agreed on a street two down from Techie’s at three-thirty, which would give them plenty of time to get to the university campus regardless of rush-hour traffic.

For the first time in a long while, the sky was threatening rain when Matt drove out that afternoon. His nerves jangled at the idea Techie might have heard or seen something when he had been over at the house on Sunday night. Matt hoped he had been gone, which was probably too much to ask for in that case.

Techie was standing with an umbrella at the ready, and he gave one more distrustful look to the clouds overhead before sliding into the car beside Matt. “Thanks,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut. “It’s nice to have a car.”

“They’re sometimes more trouble than they’re worth,” Matt said.

“Is your windshield wiper fixed?”

“Yeah. Guess I might need it today.”

Techie’s expression was awed. “It might be a dry thunderstorm. Like they have in the desert. Just endless flashing lightning and thunder but never a drop of rain.”

Matt laughed. “In Kansas City? I doubt it.”

“I don’t think I’d want to live in a desert,” Techie said. “I know some of them are beautiful, like out in the Southwest, but I need to see green.”

“What about a tropical island? Like the Bahamas or something?”

Techie wrinkled his nose. “Too much sun.”

“Well, where do you want to live?”

A shrug. “Here is just fine.”

“Out of any place in the whole world?” Matt asked.

“Don’t know,” Techie said. “I haven’t been many places in the world.”

“Neither have I.”
Techie rubbed his eyes absently. “I don’t know if I’d want to. There are so, so many people.”

It had started to sprinkle. Matt flipped on the wipers to their lowest setting. “Lots of things to see, though.”

“Okay,” Techie said, “where do you want to go?”

“New York City, maybe. The Grand Canyon. I don’t know. It’s just, my point is...there are lots of things to see.”

“Yeah,” Techie said. “I understand.”

At the entrance to the building in which Techie had class, they sat and waited for a break in the rain. It was still pattering on the roof when Techie said he had to go or he would be late. Not knowing the area very well, Matt didn’t want to stray too far before he had to come back, so he hung close to the circumference of the campus, finally finding a 24-hour diner that was probably popular with students living in the dorms there. It served breakfast all day, so he demolished a stack of pancakes and a few strips of bacon, both drowned in maple syrup. He hadn’t considered that Techie might want to eat after class, so he offered to drive back to the diner. They ended up sitting in the same section as he did before, the waitress whose name tag read “Toula” smiling and welcoming him back. Matt sipped a Coke while Techie dug into his ham and cheese omelet.

Back in Crescent Heights, it was still raining, but Techie smiled as he bundled out of the car, opening the large, navy blue umbrella with a thumping sound. “See you next Wednesday,” he said.

“See you,” Matt said. For some reason it was hard to take a full breath as he drove away.

On Thursday, he was considering what to do with the day ahead of him when he got an excited call from Techie.

“The parts for your laptop have come in,” Techie said, his full smile apparent in his voice. “Are you working today?”

“No.”

“Do you want to come over? I can show you how I fix it. It’s really simple.”

Matt paused for a stretch of seconds. “Um, is your mom there?” He heard the sigh from the other end of the line. “Listen, I didn’t mean it like—shit.”

“It’s fine.”

“Techie, I—” Three monotone beeps from the phone. “Techie?” There was no answer.

Matt ended up spending almost the entire day in bed, napping on and off until it was time to go to boxing. He considered a few times calling in sick, committing to the idea and picking up the phone and then setting it back down and rolling over for another snooze. Finally, at around six o’clock he called and told Phasma he wasn’t feeling well. Her Get well soon was acid, suspicious, and he knew at once that he had marked off his freebie excuse, but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Though he hadn’t been to boxing, he drowsed through the next work day as if in a punch-drunk haze.

“What’s wrong with you?” Ted asked at one point.
“Not feeling great.”

“Whatever it is, don’t give it to me,” said Ted.

“I’m not sick. Just...I don’t know.”

“Did you break up with your girlfriend?”

“No. Jesus.”

“Hey, at least that way you wouldn’t have to worry about her weird kid creeping around while you guys are, like, trying to get it on or something.”

“It’s not like that,” Matt said through clenched teeth.

“Do you like him or something?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, are you buddy-buddy with your girlfriend’s kid? Does he think of you as his stepdad or something?”

“No,” Matt said. “Gross.”

“Why is it gross?” Ted asked.

“Why are you asking me all these weird questions?”

“Cause you’ve got a weird thing going on. That’s all I’m saying.”

Matt looked out the window, his hands twisted together in his lap. “Well, stop.”

Ted shrugged.

In the parking lot that night, Matt texted Techie. What does it look like? He wasn’t sure whether to expect a response, but one came only a minute later.

The laptop?

No, Matt typed. The wire animal.

Which one?

Matt took a deep breath. The one you made after I asked if your mom was there. He got no response and had just tossed the phone into the seat beside him when it rang.

“It’s a camel,” Techie said by way of greeting.

Matt smiled. “When I asked if—”

Techie cut him off. “I know. I was...being irrational.”

“No, you weren’t. I just don’t want—”

“I know,” he repeated. “We have to be a little careful. I’ll just fix your laptop then give it to you next Wednesday.”
“No,” Matt said, firm. “I want to see you fix it. Call me when, uh, your mom is out of the house and I’ll come over.”

“What if you’re working?”

Matt paused. “I’ll ditch work.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he lied. “I have extra hours anyway.”

“If you’re sure,” Techie said.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “I’m sure.” He ended the call and drove into the buttery sunlight of the evening.
Chapter 9

The first thing on Madeline’s lips was an apology when she called Friday morning. “I was so tired from traveling,” she said. “I really shouldn’t have asked you over at all. But I missed you so much.”

“Is your mattress ruined?” Matt asked.

“It doesn’t matter about that. The point is, I feel terrible, honey.”

“It’s okay.” The answer was mumbled.

“Can I make it up to you?” Madeline asked. “What about tonight? Will you be my date?”

Matt frowned. “What do you mean?”

An unrestrained laugh from Madeline, bouncing around the speaker of the phone. “I want to take you to a party.”

“Really?” It would be the first time that they had met someplace other that Madeline’s house. The first time, really, that they had been out together, as a couple, with Matt as someone whom she would admit in public to wanting around. Part of him was pleased at the legitimacy that it would lend to whatever it was they had. Another part harbored an amorphous reluctance; by exposing their secret it would pass out of his hands and into uncontrolled space. If this was some sort of passage over into an official relationship, what would he tell Techie?

“Yes, of course,” she said. “You don’t think I’m ashamed of you, do you? You aren’t ashamed of me?”

“No, no. Uh, to both of those.”

“Good. Then I would very much appreciate it if you could be on my arm tonight at this get-together.”

The party was to be held not at Madeline’s own house—much to his relief—but at the home of Amanda, the woman she had met while traveling in Spain. It was agreed that Matt would come to Madeline’s and they would drive out to Leawood in the Audi. Though he was certain he had nothing appropriate to wear, Madeline assured him that it would be a casual, backyard get-together and that there was no need to wear anything special. To be sure, he chose a new-ish t-shirt in a subdued color and a pair of dark jeans.

Madeline herself wore a sundress and sandals, but it was not so fancy that Matt felt out of place by her side. With her wide sunglasses and scarf—her glossy dark hair tucked back into a chignon—she looked like a nineteen-sixties movie heroine. Unconcerned about the state of her updo, Madeline put the top of the convertible down and they drove toward where the orb of the sun hovered above the treeline. Warm air tickled Matt’s forearm as he placed his arm up on the window ledge, tapping his fingers against the side of the car. It was shiny enough to take on his fingerprints, the oily dapples of which interrupted the progress of the light over the metal. He nearly felt ashamed for it.

The place where Amanda (and her husband, James) lived was no smaller a place than Madeline’s house on the other side of the city. It was built in a different style, though, with fluted columns at the broad entryway and a fountain in the front yard.
Matt kept his awe to himself. To his surprise, Madeline took his hand as they sauntered up the walk. Her hand was so cool, small, slim.

A taller blonde woman answered the door when they rang the bell. Madeline shook her hand out of Matt’s grip to move forward and embrace her friend.

“Hello, sweetie,” Madeline said. She had to raise herself slightly to kiss Amanda’s cheek.

In turn, Amanda leaned over and kissed her back, leaving no stain on Madeline’s skin even though she was wearing vivid red lipstick. Matt saw that Amanda’s eyes were dark brown when she looked up to greet him.

“This is Matt,” Madeline said. “I told you about him.”

Amanda raised her dark eyebrows, contrasting sharply with the gold of her hair. Not a single inch of root was showing. “Mm-hmm, yes, you did,” she said, squeezing Madeline’s arm instead of reaching out to shake Matt’s hand. She led Madeline into the house by the elbow, leaving Matt to follow of his own accord.

The décor inside was worlds different from subdued atmosphere in Madeline’s house. Gold-veined marble covered the floor of the enormous, two-story entry hall. Over their heads hung a gold chandelier with too many intricate tiers of shivering crystal beads to count. In the rear, a double spiral staircase led up to a landing, the stairs lined with twisting bronzework banisters.

“Welcome to my home,” Amanda said, still clinging to Madeline’s arm. “Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful, darling,” Madeline said.

They paused just at a door that led off to the house’s right-hand wing, the doorway painted in ostentatious gold leaf. Amanda turned. “What do you think, Matt?”

“It’s amazing,” he said.

Amanda and Madeline giggled, gliding through the door into an expansive kitchen with cream-colored cabinetry and appliances. There were a few plates of hors d’oeuvres set out, some still with plastic wrap over them.

Amanda went to remove it, quick and apologetic. “I decided not to have it catered,” she said, “since it was just going to be us.”

“I certainly didn’t expect it,” Madeline said.

“Let’s have something to drink, shall we?” Amanda said. “What would you like? I have a sauvignon blanc that’s chilling. I could try to whip up a martini. That’s why I wish James could be here tonight.”

Matt craned his neck, trying to see past the kitchen to the back yard, but could only see a slice of green through half a French door.

“The white is fine,” Madeline said.

“Would you like something a bit more masculine, Matt? Maybe a whiskey? I’ve got fresh limes for gin and tonic.” Both women looked at him, eyes expectant, diamond-bright.

“Uh, the wine is fine.”
Amanda cast a look in Madeline’s direction. “Wine it is, then. Matt, be a dear and take the plates out to the garden while I pour, will you?”

“Sure.” He picked up two of the three plates of appetizers and stood for a moment, trying to orient himself.

Madeline laughed.

“It’s just out to the left, honey,” Amanda said.

Past the kitchen was the double set of French doors he’d seen part of. Half-balancing one of the plates, he pushed on the scrollwork knob and the muggy heat of the dying day reached inside to the hallway. The olives were sweating; Matt wondered if Madeline and Amanda would think it was his fault for not bringing them early or late enough. He pushed the door closed behind him with his hip, wondering for a moment if that was what it was like waiting tables like Jessy did. At first it wasn’t clear as to where he should put the food, but around a stand of hedges was a small table. Miniature red, yellow, and white paper lanterns were strung overhead. Flames danced from the round bowls of yellow citronella candles and the sunset was a similarly colored smudge over the fence. Matt smiled. It was something he thought Techie would like to get the chance to see.

Coming back into the house, he stopped, watching Madeline and Amanda whisper close to one another’s ears as if they were schoolgirls.

Amanda raised her voice just slightly as Matt walked back in. “You were right about the view, dear,” she told Madeline. Then to Matt: “If you could take the last plate out that would be great.”

“Of course,” he said. Both women had drinks in their hands but none had yet been offered to him. Ducking between them, he retrieved the last plate and went back out into the oppressive garden air. At least it was scented with jasmine and there came the sound of a softly trickling fountain from a hidden place.

Matt set the last plate on the table when he noticed that there were only two chairs. Looking around, he saw large urns that held topiary plants but nothing else. He nearly ran into Madeline and Amanda on the way back into the kitchen. Amanda pressed a glass of honey-colored liquid into his hand, running her fingertips along his bicep as she passed. Disoriented, he turned and followed them out into the garden proper once again.

The two seated themselves in the chairs and started talking while Matt stood for a moment, looking around, uncertain as to what to do.

“What’s the matter, darling?” Madeline asked.

“Do you want me to, uh, bring out another chair from the kitchen?”

An almost comical look of consternation struck across Amanda’s face. “Oh, I would really rather not get those dirty,” she said.

“Come here,” Madeline told him, patting the brick ledge by her arm. “You can sit here, darling.”

“Oh.” With one last glance back at the warm light from beyond the French doors, Matt walked over and leaned up against the ledge next to Madeline, in an uncomfortable half-sit, half-stand.

“Madeline tells me you met through work, Matt,” Amanda said.

“Oh,” he said. “Yeah.”
“Did she tell you we met in Spain?”

Matt nodded, shifting his rear end.

“A man of few words, our Matt,” Amanda said. “I like that.”

It echoed something that Madeline had once said. Matt was determined to respond with less acrimony. “Sometimes,” he said.

“Goodness,” said Amanda. Her expression was both appraising and predatory. “Tell me, Matt, when do you talk?”

“When I need to, I guess.”

“Oh, Madeline,” Amanda said, a smile turning up the corners of her lips as she reached out to put her hand over Madeline’s smaller one.

“Did you know,” Madeline asked, “that Matt is a boxer?”

“How brutal,” Amanda said.

“No, no,” said Madeline. “It’s an art form.”

“Don’t you get hit? It would be a shame if you got hit,” said Amanda.

“I—” Matt started.

Madeline put a hand on his belly just above his belt, stopping him cold. “He’s very, very good.”

“I’ll bet.”


“Didn’t you hear me before, dear?” Amanda asked. “It’s just us. Though I do wish James could be here. He doesn’t drink wine, though. Can you imagine?”

“Allan loved wine,” Madeline said. “We never had a cellar like he wanted, though.”

*It could be because Techie went where the wine was supposed to go,* Matt thought. He shifted his butt again, trying to dodge discomfort.

Madeline sipped her sauvignon blanc. “Why isn’t James here?”

“Working late. The man takes a vacation then has to make up all the time when he comes back.” Amanda looked up at Matt. “Perhaps next time you’ll go on vacation with Madeline.”

He paused, unsure. “That would be nice.” A good, noncommittal answer.

“Probably not in Europe,” Amanda continued. “It takes a certain type of partner. Of course, Matt, you should have seen the things the men wore on the beaches in Spain. Much less than the women.”

Madeline laughed, the long, tanned column of her throat on display against the lantern lights.

The two women continued talking, veering off into recollections of their time in Spain, leaving Matt feeling antsy and tired all at once.
“Matt?” Madeline said. “Will you be a darling and get us some more wine? It’s in the refrigerator.”

“Uh. Sure."

Madeline leaned over to whisper with Amanda again while Matt walked away. He felt lost, impatient. The bottle of wine that was purportedly in the fridge was nowhere to be found. Amanda and Madeline looked disappointed when he returned empty-handed. “I couldn’t find it,” he said.

Amanda pursed her lips. “Well, not a surprise. I’ll go get us another bottle.”

“I can get it,” Matt said. “Just tell me where.”

“That’s very sweet of you, dear,” Amanda told him, getting up anyway.

“I mean it,” he said.

She only shook her head, sighing. “You just finish yours. I should have had it catered.”

Matt touched Madeline’s shoulder as Amanda walked away, but she shrugged him off and bent to get her purse and reapply her lipstick.

In a few moments, Amanda returned with a new bottle. “Oh, silly me,” she said. “I’d forgotten we’d finished the other one.”

“Do you have a bathroom?” Matt asked.

“Yes, of course.”

He paused. “Where?”

“Inside, to the left. Around the kitchen toward the stairs.”

Nodding, he set off, trying not to curl his fingers into fists. In the bathroom, Matt took a deep breath, looking at his own reflection. As he hadn’t done in a while, he pressed up on the bridge of his nose to adjust the phantom pair of glasses there, then shook his head and stepped out again.

“Are you sure you have to go?” Amanda was saying. “I’ve just opened the bottle. You know James won’t drink it.”

“I’m afraid if I have another glass I won’t be able to drive.”

“I can drive,” Matt said.

“No.” It was sharp and low. “Amanda, dear, we’ll talk again soon. Say goodbye, Matt.”

“Nice to meet you,” Matt said, looking at his feet.

“The pleasure was mine, I’m sure,” Amanda said.

Neither Matt nor Madeline spoke until they reached the car.

When he was sitting in the passenger seat, though, Matt said, “I thought you told me it was a party.”

“It might have been fun if you had stayed a little longer.”

“Me?” Matt asked. “You’re the one who wanted to leave.”
“I could tell you were uncomfortable. I’m not surprised.”

He shook his head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” Madeline said, waving the question away. “I just wanted you to meet Amanda.”

“I barely got to talk to her,” Matt said.

Madeline sighed, putting her hand on his leg. “You have to understand, sweetheart. Those are places you go just to be seen.”

He pushed her hand away. “There wasn’t anybody else there. You just wanted her to see me.”

“Well,” Madeline said, “you have a pretty thing, you want to show it off. Don’t you? I thought you’d be flattered.”

“I’m not a thing,” Matt said.

“Oh, don’t tell me given half the chance you wouldn’t show off my house, my pool, my property to your friends.”

A cavern of cold dread opened up in Matt’s gut. Had she heard about Ted’s visit? Had Techie told her? “I don’t care about your stuff.” It had little conviction.

“Sure,” Madeline said. “You’re twenty-five years old, Matt. You don’t know what it’s like.”

“What what’s like?”

Madeline rolled her eyes. “To be just a collection of things. I have a house, a pool, a yard, a bunch of memories.”

“You have Techie,” Matt said.

She turned her head toward him sharply, making them almost veer off the road. “For fuck’s sake, don’t call him that. Don’t you encourage my son. He doesn’t have any clue what it’s like, either. One of these days, real life is going to come along and wallop him in the face and he’ll figure out that not everything is free.”

Matt remembered the taste of cherries. “I think he knows more than you think he does.”

“And you would know this how?” Madeline asked, a manic laugh trotting behind the question. “Don’t tell me you’ve been hanging around with my dear child. Hoping to teach him a thing or two, maybe? I assure you, he’s insulated to whatever you can bring up. Allan made sure of that.”

“What’s with talking about Allan tonight?”

“Allan was an ass! A dear, sweet, generous, misguided ass. Perhaps you’re one, too.”

“Yeah, maybe I am,” Matt said.

They didn’t speak for the rest of the way back, and Matt leapt out of the car before it was even in the driveway, stalking away to his own ride.

After that, the weekend crawled by. On Saturday, he spent the day on his bed until boxing, wishing he had somewhere to be. Kyle had said he was going back out to the park with Rachel and the others, but Matt had no desire to run into Bella again. On Sunday, he worked alongside Steward,
sweating and languishing but having nothing to return to that night but the struggling air conditioning in his house.

Monday morning, he expected Ted to be outside by the van, but he was alone in the parking lot for five minutes until he went back in and looked around.

“Where’s Ted?” he asked Snoke.

“Gone.”

“He quit?”

“No, he’s out already. Asked to be assigned to a different partner. I don’t know what you did to him, but you’ll be working with Steward.”

Matt huffed. “I didn’t do anything to him.” If it had anything to do with the pool and the encounter with Techie he had no idea, but it pissed him off. “What did he say?”

Snoke sighed. “Just said he wanted to be with a different partner. He didn’t say anything about you.”

“Then why did you say it was my fault?”

“I didn’t,” Snoke said.

Narrowing his eyes, Matt said, “You did. You said, ‘I don’t know what you did to him.’”

“Well, did he do anything to you?”

“No. I thought we were cool.”

“So it must have been you, right?”

“Jesus,” Matt said.

“Do you like your job, Matt?”

The No was almost out of his mouth when he got the last-minute notion to hold his tongue. “I want to keep it.”

“Good,” Snoke said, eyebrows raised. “So go out there with Steward and don’t be late for your first call.”

It had seemed like a long time since Matt had seethed like he did that day. Steward’s plodding silence did nothing to distract him from his anger. He figured he had calmed down enough by the time practice rolled around, but Phasma was leery, sticking close to him as he walloped the heavy bag for warm-up.

In the ring it was Dauntay again, bouncing and circling. He came out with a hard jab-cross, making Matt have to hunker down to protect his face. Matt let him attack a few times, not doing anything but guarding. He bobbed down and came back up with what was supposed to be an uppercut but he turned his hand at the last minute. His glove cracked against Dauntay’s, which in turn hit Dauntay’s face, hard.

All at once he stumbled and swore. “What the hell, man?”
Matt shook his head rapidly, still shuffling. “Sorry.”

Dauntay came out of his crouch with an uppercut that narrowly missed the tip of Matt’s nose as he leaned back. The tell had been an obvious one, and a fierce one. When Dauntay faced him again, he had a thin line of blood running from his left nostril.

“Calm down, the both of you,” Phasma said.

“I’m calm,” Matt said into the vinyl of his gloves, anticipating another fervent attack.

“Bullshit. That means you, too, Dauntay.”

A droplet of blood pattered onto the floor of the ring. Another hit the satin of Matt’s shorts as Dauntay lunged forward for a belt-line body shot.

“Hey!” Matt shouted. He came in with a shovel but Dauntay backed away before it connected.

Another jab-hook-hook from Dauntay and Matt drove forward with a backhand jab of his own, which Dauntay slapped out of the way with his incoming fist. They ended up grappling, head-to-head as the bell began its furious ringing.

“All right,” Phasma said. “That’s enough for today. And if either of you man-children wants to be in the tournament, that better be enough of this idiocy altogether.”

Both Matt and Dauntay looked down at their feet.

“I tell everyone—not just you two—that if boxing becomes personal, then it’s just fighting. If you let a guy get to you, then it’s honestly no better than bare-knuckling it out on some street corner on a Friday night over what someone did or didn’t say to your girlfriend. You reduce the sport. You take the honor out of it. I have addressed this specifically with both of you. You let feelings get in, you get sloppy. You get sloppy, you get hit. Whatever it is, whether it comes from out there or in here, I want it stopped dead as soon as you get to the edge of this ring. Otherwise, you’re just another punk in trouble. Now, knock gloves, go change, and go the hell home.”

In the lot outside West Side, Matt had his phone in his hand. His first instinct was to call Madeline, but the sour taste from Friday night had not fled, and he wasn’t even sure she would pick up. He considered calling Techie, but he had no idea what he would say. He called his mother.

“Hey, Mattie,” she said. “What’s the occasion?”

“No occasion,” he said. “Just calling to see how you’re doing. You and Dad.”

“Oh, you know,” she said, the smile still full in her voice. “We’re getting by.”

At that, Matt was stuck as to what to say, so he just mumbled, “Okay.”

“Sure there isn’t anything you need to talk about, kiddo?”

“I hit a guy,” he said, half-teasing.

“Oh, Mattie. Not again.”

“At boxing.”

The relief in his mother’s voice was palpable. “Oh, oh. I guess that’s good, right?”
“It wasn’t a very good hit. But his nose was bleeding.”

“And you feel bad about it?” Leah asked.

A couple of breaths. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

“Well,” his mom said, drawing out the syllable, “I think that Dr. Finch might say that’s a good thing. What do you think?”

“Maybe.”

“Of course,” she said, “if it’s boxing, I guess you have to get used to hitting people. You’ll find your balance, Mattie. I know you will.” Leah laughed. “You have to hit the right people for the right reasons!”

Matt’s laugh was half-hearted.

“Oh, listen, hon. Your dad and I did want to ask about your birthday this year.”

“Uh,” Matt said, “I think Kyle is having a party at the house.”

Leah sniffed. “I think that’s the kind parents are not invited to. But what we wanted to do was take you out to dinner.”

“Mom, you really shouldn’t. Save your money.”

“Well,” she said, “it won’t be anything fancy, but we would really like to. Maybe you could bring your girlfriend. We’d love to meet her.”

Matt’s throat clenched. “Maybe.”

“Or just a friend. Regardless, it would be something Dad and I want to do for you. You’ve made so much progress, and we’re just so proud of you.”

Grateful his mother couldn’t see him blush—even though it was because he felt like he hadn’t made any progress at all—he said, “Thanks.”

“Okay, honey. We’ll call in a week or so and make plans as it gets closer to your birthday, all right?”

“Sure,” Matt said. “Bye, Mom.”

The next day, loading his blood-stained boxing shorts into the wash at the laundromat, he wished he could just go over and see Techie the way he used to. I’m easy to plan for. But it wasn’t that simple. Madeline had come back and changed things, driven them underneath the surface. There were times when Matt almost wished he didn’t know Techie, or that Techie lived somewhere else, was someone else. It would make it convenient for everyone, including Madeline. Matt wouldn’t have to sneak around, hiding each one from the other. Even if it were on its way to being over between him and Madeline, there would be no shift in the dynamic between Techie and him. They would still have to sneak around, only it would be both of them hiding like naughty children from Madeline then. She could ruin it all. Or maybe it had been getting to know Techie that had ruined his relationship with Madeline. Maybe, Matt hesitated to think, it was him doing the ruining.

Techie was quiet the next day when Matt picked him up for class.

“What’s up?” he asked. “How have you been?”
“Bored,” Techie said.

“I thought you never got bored.”

Techie’s smile was faint. “I said I don’t get bored very often.”

“Why are you bored?” Matt asked.

“All I do is study and sleep. And go to class.”

Matt frowned. “That was good enough before.”

“Before what?”

Shifting in his seat and hanging back on the accelerator a little, Matt said, “I don’t know. You just said you never really got bored.”

Techie shrugged. “I guess it’s more frustration.”

“What about?”

“I want to see you,” Techie said. “And I can’t.”

A prickle of gooseflesh made its way over Matt’s skin. “You’re seeing me now.”

Techie said nothing, only shook his head.

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

“I got frustrated yesterday,” Matt said.

“What about?”

“I don’t know. Everything. All this.”

“What do you do when you get frustrated?” Techie asked.

Matt gave a little laugh. “Get mad, usually.”

“Did you?”

A pause. “No. It was different, I guess.” He took a breath. “Like getting mad wouldn’t help.”

Techie smiled, tilting his chin down. “Does it ever help?”

“No really,” Matt said. “But sometimes I can’t stop myself.”

“Getting mad is okay. It’s what you do when you get mad that matters.”

“You make animals out of wire,” Matt said.

Techie looked out the window, away from Matt.

“Are you angry at me?” Matt asked, swallowing hard.

“No,” Techie said. “I’m mad at my mom. She won’t leave the house. Not ever. And I know that when she does, then you’ll be able to come over. But she just...doesn’t.”
Matt wanted so much in that instant to tell Techie about the “party” at Amanda’s, how frustrated he had been, but he sat silent instead.

“And I’m bored with making wire animals, and, just…all of this.” He spat the last words, causing Matt to flinch. After looking out the window a long while, fists clenched on his thighs, Techie at last said, “I want things to be how they were.”

“Me, too.”

Techie looked over at him. “But they can’t. And I understand that.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt said.

“It’s not your fault. You don’t have any control over it.”

“Yeah, that’s why it was so hard to get mad about it the other day, because I didn’t have any control over it. Like beating my fists against a brick wall.”

Techie nodded, then they fell silent again.

While he was in class this time, Matt sat again at the diner but only drank a milkshake, waiting to see if Techie would be hungry when he got out. He was, saying he hadn’t eaten since breakfast that morning, so they went back to the diner and this time got full meals: Techie a burger and fries and Matt the fried chicken with mashed potatoes.

“Maybe I’ll come here with my parents,” Matt said. “It’s pretty good and pretty cheap. It’s a long drive, though.”

“Yeah,” Techie said. “You said they live outside the city.”

Matt nodded, pushing a few kernels of corn onto his spoonful of mashed potatoes with his finger.

“Are they coming to visit you?”

“They want to take me out for my birthday.”

Techie’s entire face lit up. “It’s your birthday?”

“In, like, three weeks, yeah.”

“We should—” Techie started, but then looked down at his plate. He picked up a fry and twirled it in the smear of ketchup at the plate’s edge.

“What?” Matt asked.

“I was going to say we should do something, but we probably can’t.”

Matt stayed silent.

Softly, without looking up, Techie asked, “Does my mom know?”

“No,” Matt said. Seeing the half-smile that Techie tried to hide somehow made him feel better.

On Thursday, he met Steward by the door to the parking lot. “Hi,” he said, determined to try to ease the dynamic between them if Steward was going to be his permanent partner.
“Hello,” Steward said. “Hot out there.”

“Sure is.” Matt had never been certain as to how to speak to people who were a fair bit older than he was though not in positions of authority. Steward couldn’t have been much older than Madeline or her friend Amanda, but he stood at Matt’s level and that made for some unease. Steward was older than the man whose cable they were installing that morning—a guy who owned a nice three-bedroom house with his wife and was watching their two little kids while she worked.

“Pass me the splitter?” Steward asked as they worked.

Matt did.

“You going back to school come fall?”

At first, he wasn’t sure that Steward had been talking to him and not their client. “Say what?”

“I said, ‘Are you going back to school this fall?’”

Matt swiped his forearm across his brow, making a point not to look over. “No.”

“Neither am I,” Steward said, then let out a low chuckle. “Never did go to college,” he added.

A pause, then Matt said, “Me neither.”

“You know, I wanted to,” said Steward. “Long time ago.” He handed the tool back over and Matt slipped it into one of the side pockets of the canvas tote.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I ran my daddy’s company instead. He had a business for forty-six years that painted houses. Real good little business, right in downtown KC.”

“That must have been nice.”

“Wasn’t,” Steward said, straight-faced. “I ran that thing right into the ground. Good that the old man wasn’t alive to see me do it.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why?’”

Blinking, Matt said, “Why wasn’t it good? I mean, running the company.”

Steward’s gaze went hazy, unfocused. “It was the last thing I wanted to do. I didn’t want to do it, and I wasn’t any good at it.”

“Did your dad make you?”

“He made it clear that it was the only choice I had if I was to stay in the good graces of my family.” He pointed at his own jumpsuited chest. “Only child here.”

“Me, too,” Matt said.

“What do your parents want you to do?” Steward asked.

Blushing a little, Matt mumbled, “Stay out of trouble.”
At that, Steward burst out laughing, a hearty and rolling sound, making Matt jump. “That’s what I want for my kids, too.”

“How many do you have?”

“Two. One boy and one girl. They live with my ex-wife.”

“I’m sorry,” Matt said.

Steward shook his head. “It’s all good. Your parents still together?”

Matt nodded. “Yeah.”

Resting his forearm on his knee and wiping at a drop of sweat underneath his chin, Steward looked over at him. “What do you want to do?”

Matt looked away, but there were no ready answers to be found in the suite of leather living room furniture on which the client’s tiny daughter played. “Stay out of trouble, too, I guess.”

“Do you get in trouble a lot?” It wasn’t a condescension or a rebuke, merely a flat and honest inquiry, like Techie often made.

“Not as much as I used to, probably.”

Steward sighed out through his nose. “Well, I suppose that’s good. But part of being young is getting into a little trouble here and there.” His grin was crooked.

Matt raised his eyebrows. “I think I’ve had enough.”

“You’re growing up,” Steward said. “You learn to stop looking for trouble and start realizing that trouble is going to find you.”

His gut unsettled, Matt asked, “So it never stops?”

“Oh, my goodness, no,” said Steward. “And just when you think you’ve figured out how to solve one problem another one crops up that has no good solution whatever.”

Matt sighed. “Thanks for the pep talk.”

“That doesn’t mean it has to be bad all the time.”

“Isn’t that exactly what that means?”

Scratching the corner of his mouth, Steward shifted his weight onto the other knee. “I wanted to go to art school. My daddy said I would run his company instead. When he retired, that’s what I did, and that company no longer exists. My wife divorced me, and I have very much less money than I used to have. But I would rather be doing this than that.”

Matt’s eyes went wide. “Installing cable?”

“That’s only part of it,” Steward said. He dug his phone out of his jumpsuit pocket, polished the clouded screen as much as he could, and held it up to Matt’s eyes. The background of the phone was a landscape: a low-lying river with golden-topped weeds rising at an angle on the left side of the picture. A single leaf floated on the muddy water.

“What’s that?” Matt asked.
“One of my paintings,” said Steward.

Matt felt lightheaded. “You *painted* that?”

“Sure did.”

“Is it in a museum or something?”

Laughing, Steward shook his head. “I sell them at art fairs. Things like the Jazz Festival downtown and the city Art Fest. I don’t always do well—sometimes I don’t sell anything at all—but when I do, it feels incredible.”

“Huh.”

“And that’s my One Thing.”

“What one thing?”

“You find one thing and keep hold of it, and that’s what gets you through everything else,” Steward said.

“Oh.” Matt wondered whether he knew of anything he could hold onto like that. He knew Phasma had one; take boxing away and she might as well cease to exist. But he drew a blank when it came to people like his parents. For some people he supposed it might be their jobs, which wasn’t the case for either him or for Steward, but might be for someone like Techie. Maybe Madeline’s had been Allan. Could it be a person? And what if the one thing was taken away? Allan had died. It was possible that Steward could lose an arm or go blind and not be able to paint anymore. It had to be a dumb idea to hang all of your expectations on a single thing or person. Matt scowled.

“If you haven’t found it yet,” Steward said, seeing Matt’s expression, “you will. You don’t always know right off the bat.”

“Okay,” Matt said. He pretended to look through the tool bag. At about four o’clock, his phone buzzed. They were finishing up the day’s final call. He checked the screen. *Techie.* “Hey.”

“My mom just left.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. But you can come over.”

“Okay,” Matt said. “I have to get my car. We’re finishing up here.”

“Hurry,” Techie said. “I don’t know how long she’ll be gone.”

“Got somewhere to be?” Steward asked.

Shoving the tools into the tote, Matt said, “Yeah. Picking up my computer. It just got fixed.”

“I can drop you off somewhere if need be,” Steward said.

“Nah. I have to get my car anyway. Can we just...go soon?”

Nodding, Steward stood, the joint in his knee cracking, and went to have the client sign the paperwork. Matt rushed out to the van, hoping that Madeline had decided to take a drive down to the lake or something. Maybe she was at another party at Amanda’s, this time with James, the
absent, wine-averse husband.

Luckily, Steward picked up on the sense of urgency that had Matt bouncing in his seat, and he got everything ready to take into the building while Matt pressed the accelerator, shoving the engine as hard as it would go. Running past Steward when they got to the dispatch center, Matt got his things from his locker and ran out again to the staff lot. He hoped he didn’t smell too terrible.

In case Madeline came back—if she hadn’t already—Matt parked down on the street where he picked Techie up on Wednesdays and walked toward the house, looking back often over his shoulder. The neighborhood was quiet except for the drone of the cicadas. The juniper smelled sharp against the lazy scents of summer afternoon: hot grass and a far-off grill.

Matt took a deep breath and rung the bell.

He almost smiled when Peaches began yapping her head off, though it quickly turned to trepidation. Perhaps Madeline had already come back and she would be the one carrying the little monster down the hallway, smoke-smelling and savage. But Techie’s auburn head bounced into view. He jogged, leaving Peaches in the proverbial dust down the hallway, and opened the door with his face flushed.

“Come in,” he said. “She only left an hour ago.”

The cool tendrils of the AC reached underneath Matt’s arms and around his neck, swabbing away some of the day’s sweat. “Thanks.”

“I got us Cokes,” Techie said when they were in the kitchen. “Come downstairs.”

Matt bid a reluctant farewell to the frigidity of the upstairs rooms as he and Techie made their way into the basement. “I parked on Roundtree,” he said.

Techie shot a smile back at him. “Good.”

“You have no idea when she’s getting back?” Matt asked.

“Nope. But at least she won’t see your car.”

“What if we don’t finish fixing it—I mean you don’t—before she comes back? Or I have to go to boxing?”

Techie stopped walking and looked over his shoulder. His smile was sheepish. “Well, probably not much chance of that,” he said.

Matt furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

“Okay,” Techie said, “just sit down.” He had pulled in one of the terribly uncomfortable dining room chairs, its back pressed up against the armrest of his own ergonomic chair. “You can have my seat,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.” Techie went to one of the shelves while Matt sat down. Scattered across the face of the desk were two or three more wire creatures, a confused-looking menagerie.

Matt picked one of them up. “Is this the camel?” he asked.

“Huh?”
He held it up, zooming it through the slice of light coming from the half-window and making it spark like a cable.

Techie squinted. He came back over, Matt’s laptop slung underneath his arm, and looked at the tiny figure. “Yeah.” Setting the laptop down, he reached across Matt to grab one of the other ones. Matt caught a whiff of Techie’s shampoo as his hair brushed over his arm. “This is a funnel-web spider. And there’s a calot over there.”

“A what?” Matt asked.

Laughing, Techie said. “It’s a creature from Burroughs’ Mars novels. I only ever read one, and it was kind of silly, but it was written in the nineteen-twenties.”

“So not very good, then.” It wasn’t a question.

Techie laughed again. “There were some good things written in the nineteen-twenties. The Great Gatsby.”

Matt made a face. “We had to read that in high school. I never finished it.”

“It was very sad,” Techie said.

“Really?”

A nod.

“But you still liked it?”

“People like sad stories.”

“I don’t think so.” Matt envisioned Steward, sitting in a tiny apartment, dabbing paint onto a canvas and humming. He pictured Madeline, out by the lake with the top of the car down, her nose and cheeks going brown in the afternoon sun.

Techie shrugged.

“So how do we do this?” Matt asked.

“It’s already done.”

“What?”

“That’s what I was saying before,” Techie told him. “It’s already done. I couldn’t wait when the parts came in, so I just fixed it.”

“You didn’t wait for me?”

Techie looked abashed, his hair swinging over his eyes. “Sometimes you really want to do something and you can’t help yourself, even though you try.”

After waiting a moment, Matt burst into laughter. “Yeah, story of my life.”

Grinning, Techie gestured to the laptop. The housing was just the same—scuffed and dented. It looked no different.

Matt said so.
Tecchie rolled his eyes. “It’s not what’s on the outside that counts, obviously. And since it was your birthday...or, rather, since it will be,” he said, “I downloaded the latest version of your operating system.”

They opened up the laptop. The screen was unchanged; it still had the little scratch in the far right-hand corner. Matt’s heart was pounding for no good reason as Techie powered it on.

The thing flickered and hummed right away, zipping to life with the swirling introduction of its new operating system.

“It’s a lot faster now,” Techie said, with definite pride in his voice. The screen showed a blank box. He scooted the chair closer to the desk, elbowing Matt in the sternum before he backed away an inch or two and yielded to Matt in setting up his own password. “Go ahead,” he said. “I won’t look.”

“It’s okay,” Matt said.

“Try to make it complicated,” Techie said. “Not your dog’s name or something.”

Matt smiled. “I don’t have a dog.”

“You know what I mean. A combination of letters and numbers with special characters is best. You can substitute numbers for letters. I have an app on my Macs that generates random passwords, long nonsense strings. But you want something you can remember.”

“Like what?”

Tecchie angled the laptop toward him a little but not so much that Matt didn’t still have full view of the screen. He typed in:

T3chn1c1@n

“That’s just a random set of letters and numbers, like you said,” Matt told him.

“No,” Techie said. “Look. It says ‘Technician.’ It’s just that some of the letters are numbers.”

“Oh,” Matt said. “Yeah. Okay, that’s fine.”

“No,” Techie said, bumping Matt’s shoulder with his own. “It has to be something that no one else knows.”

“I don’t mind if you know it.”

“Just give it a try.” It was a whisper.

Two characters into the new password, Techie gave a low sigh. Matt looked over. His eyes were closed. Matt turned back to the keyboard and pressed another key. Then another. He deleted the character, typed something else, not sure whether he would remember it. Techie’s shoulder brushed his.

There came the sweet smell of shampoo again, a bare second before he felt soft lips on his neck. He stopped, hands hovering above the keyboard, breath caught in his throat.

His pulse hammered.

A kiss at the edge of his jaw.
Techie wasn’t touching him in any other way. He moved, silent, and kissed Matt’s cheek.

Matt shut his eyes, still not breathing. Techie kissed him at the corner of his mouth. As he turned his head, his nose brushed Techie’s and then their lips were pressed together. Neither moved for a long span of seconds. Then Techie broke away by millimeters and leaned in again to press a firmer kiss to Matt’s lips. He waited, did it again.

“Do you like it?” he breathed in a whisper over Matt’s mouth.

Matt exhaled. “I think so.”

Only then did Techie raise his hands and place his fingertips on Matt’s cheekbones. Matt pushed a little into the kiss this time, letting his hands fall into his lap. He felt the ridge of Techie’s teeth against his upper lip and he leaned forward. His mind buzzed...and then went more thoroughly blank than it had at any time during a boxing match.

Techie took Matt’s bottom lip gently in between his own lips, pulling slightly. He opened his mouth a little over Matt’s, then slipped the tip of his tongue between his lips. Softly, just once.

“Wait,” Matt muttered, his eyes still closed.

“Please,” Techie said. “I don’t want to stop.” He moved forward again and Matt was drawn, ensconced. The kisses they shared were open-mouthed but still reserved, cautious.

If he paused for a single moment to consider that the blood was rising to his face, his skin tingling, that he was touching and kissing Techie, he might have moved away. What Matt knew was that, despite the strange brush and prickle of stubble against his chin, Techie’s lips were soft and yielding and his own body was responding.

Techie slotted his knees in between Matt’s and curled his fingers around the nape of Matt’s neck, drawing him toward him. “I waited for so long,” he said against Matt’s lips. “Seems like forever.”

Matt gripped Techie’s arms and opened his mouth wider, allowing Techie’s tongue entrance.

Techie stroked Matt’s cheekbone and his jaw, humming with supreme contentment into their kisses. And they stayed there for a long time, backs and necks going sore, leaning across where there once had been a divide.

“I have to go,” Matt said, sneaking a look at the display on the laptop screen. More time had passed than he had thought.

“No, you don’t,” Techie said, kissing his lips again.

He put his palms against Techie’s shoulders. “I do. I have to go to boxing.”

“Why?” Techie’s eyes were wide and bright.

Matt sighed. “I used up my one free excuse. If I don’t go, I won’t be in the tournament.”

Techie took his hand. “Stay,” he said.

Matt winced, pulling his hand out of Techie’s grasp. “I really can’t.” He stood up and closed the laptop. “I have to go.”

“When will I see you again?” Techie asked. “Wednesday?”
“Yeah,” Matt said. “Of course.” His cheeks flamed with a blush. He picked up the laptop and put it under his arm.

Techie touched his fingers. “I can’t wait that long.”

“We’ll figure something out.”

“Matt.” Techie stood up, his hands clutched over his groin.

Matt looked back.

“Please.”

“Soon,” Matt said. “I promise.” He didn’t look back as he went up the stairs. Barely able to see in the blazing sunlight, he walked back to his car, the laptop warm in his grasp.

Boxing practice passed in a fog, with Matt purposely asking to stay on the bags and out of the ring. Phasma shook her head but respected his wishes. In bed later that night, he ran his fingertips over and over his mouth, remembering.

Every day—every day—he wanted to call Techie. Every day he was terrified to do so. The weekend passed without a word. Matt mostly sat in his room with the laptop, trying to laugh at funny videos in between half-hearted attempts to look for a place to live. The close of the summer was approaching, after all, the nights growing shorter by stealthy minutes each day.

He leapt when he heard the phone buzz on Monday night. It was Madeline. His finger hovering over the screen for a second, he dismissed the call instead.

On the notice board on Tuesday, there was a call for a spare shift the next day. As Matt signed up, he felt like a rope was wound around his insides, pulling tight.

Hey, he texted Techie that night, I picked up a shift at work for tomorrow. I really need the money. Okay, was what came back a few minutes later. No further texts followed.

Matt sat on the edge of his bed for a long while afterward, head braced in his hands. Wednesday came and went, and Thursday.

Friday was a day off of work and Matt woke with tight dread in his chest at the hours that stretched before him. Ignoring his hunger, he pulled the laptop onto his chest. There was a new ad for a room—one he hadn’t seen before—that looked promising. It was in a pretty nice part of town in a house with three other people, but it had its own private bathroom and the rate they were asking for was beyond amazing. Pictures of the house showed new-ish construction, a neat, if spare, little lawn out front.

Matt dialed the number shown on the ad.

A guy picked up after three rings “Hello?”

“Hi,” Matt said. “I’m calling about the room you have to rent. Is it taken yet?”

“Nope,” the man said. “Did you want to come by and see it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I really would.”

“Great. Well, I don’t get off work until five. Do you think you can come after that?”
With the night off from boxing, he would have plenty of time to look around. “Sure,” he said. “Does five-thirty sound okay?”

“Yeah, man. Let me give you the address.”

Matt hung up the phone with what felt like his first unconstrained smile since the week before. By the time he could convince himself to get out of bed it was nearly noon, so he decided to go grab lunch. He decided on the sub shop that he had been to with Ted, pleased to find the idea of stepping inside the restaurant didn’t make him as angry or resentful as he thought it might. After settling at one of the outdoor tables with an umbrella, he was about to unwrap the sandwich when his phone rang. His heart started thumping at once.

Madeline again.

“Hey,” he said.

Her response was only a quiet, “Hello.” No darling or dear. “Where are you?” she asked.

“I’m having lunch.”

A long pause on the other end of the line. “I miss you.”

Matt had no idea what to say to that, so he stayed silent.

“Tell me you miss me.”

“Madeline—”

“No, it’s fine,” she said. “I’ve acted terribly. I realize that. I think I pushed you away. It’s something I do, I’m afraid.”

“What do you want me to do, Madeline?”

“Come see me. At the house. Like it used to be. Can you come tonight?”

Matt paused. “I don’t think so.”

“But you don’t have your boxing. I remember that!”

“I’m seeing a place I might live.”

“Well, surely that can’t take all night,” Madeline snapped.

He sighed. “I’ve got to go, Madeline.”

She gasped. “I didn’t mean that to come out the way it sounded. I’m just lonely. And tired. I’d like very much to sleep in someone’s arms. I could sleep a day. A week!”

A headache was beginning to gather at the base of Matt’s skull. “Maybe, okay?”

“All right, sweetheart. Call me back. Don’t forget about me.”

Matt shook his head and ended the call, suddenly unable to think about eating without feeling queasy.

Over the course of the rest of the afternoon, he managed to finish off half of the sandwich, but still
felt strangely lightheaded. He had to concentrate more than usual on the road as he drove to the address he had been given earlier. The house was at the edge of a solidly middle class suburb. Two young maple trees stood in the yard in fresh heaps of dirt; they had obviously been a recent addition to the home.

Matt pulled onto the smooth pavement of the driveway, parking behind a burgundy Toyota. A middle-aged guy with a salt-and-pepper beard answered the door. Though it was not who Matt was expecting, he shook the guy’s hand anyway.

“I’m Cal,” he said. “I own the house.”

“Matt. Do you live here?”

“Nope, that would be my daughter and a few of her friends from college. We’re looking for someone to take the basement room.”

Matt had to reach out and brace himself on the door jamb as a whirl of vertigo passed through him. He squinted as if seeing the sharp prick of light from one of Techie’s wire figures.

“You okay, man?” Cal asked.

“I don’t think I ate enough today,” Matt told him.

They walked into the living room. Cal’s expression went grave. “Now, before we go down, I do have to tell you that the basement flooded a few months back. We had to tear up all the carpeting. But if you don’t mind bare floors, it’s a serviceable little place.”

Matt nodded. His stomach felt bunched up, uncomfortably mobile within his belly. The sensation gave way to an active cramp when Cal opened the door and the reek of mildew rushed up to meet Matt’s nose.

As if he didn’t notice the smell at all, Cal walked down the steps. A wood-walled basement lay beyond, the remnants of carpet still sticking out at odd angles from below a warped baseboard. The paneling was stained to about six inches up the wall.

“This is it,” Cal said.

Matt couldn’t say anything.

Cal walked over to a small door, also paneled, and opened it, flipping on the light. “And here’s your bathroom.”

The fixtures on the inside of the tiny room were pink. There was no shower, only a sink and toilet, which had no lid on the tank. Shining in the light of the bare bulb was a drifting spider’s web swaying from its anchors on the stained ceiling tiles.

Matt gagged. He turned and ran, hand covering his mouth. At least he got to the outside of the house before the half-sandwich came back up right onto Cal’s lawn.

“You’re seriously not okay, bud,” Cal said, poking his head out of the front door. “You should really go to a doctor.”

“Yeah,” Matt said, bent over at the waist, spitting into the grass. “Yeah.”

A foul taste in his mouth, he stumbled over to his car and got in, cranking the engine and flooring
it, tires screeching as he drove away. It wasn’t ten minutes before he had to pull to the side of the road and heave mouthfuls of bile onto the curb. After that, he sat in the car for a few minutes, letting his breathing regulate.

Matt stopped into a 7-11 for a bottle of water and a pack of gum. He stood out by the propane canisters at the side of the store, rinsing his mouth out again and again until the bottle was halfway gone. Then he drank the rest. His face still felt like it was on fire, his hands tingling and fingertips numb.

Of course. Of course it hadn’t been a good place. What had he been expecting for that kind of price? He wondered if it was too late to try to get someone to live in the house he had now. At least he wouldn’t be stuck in a moldy basement hellhole, having to beg turns in the upstairs shower and going to work stinking of mildew anyway.

“Fuck,” he said. He tossed the empty bottle of water against the wall and it ricocheted off, rocketing past him and bumping into the grass. Swearing again, he fired off a jab from his right shoulder. Each knuckle cracked in succession as it impacted the brick. Unwilling to wait until the sting crawled up his arm, Matt threw a cross at the same spot on the wall, the raw edge of the masonry taking off a chunk of skin from the top of his knuckle.

_Jab-cross-jab-cross._ On until the pain hit at last. Flaps of skin were crinkled up, their tracks oozing blood. The wounds throbbed in time with Matt’s heartbeat.

He fumbled his phone out of his pocket, staining the edges of the fabric burgundy.

Techie answered after the first ring.

“I need to see you,” Matt said. “Please.”

“Come over,” Techie said. “I’ll be here.”
Chapter 10

He was sort of stuck for what to do after parking down the street. Ringing the bell was out of the question in case Madeline was there. Part of him was in pain and didn’t care, but the more logical part—which had taken over swiftly when he’d seen the damage done—compelled him around to the side of the house. He was unable to knock as his knuckles were swelling and the agony already radiating up his arms, so he smacked his palm against the small, dirty window.

Techie moved the dish towel to the side, eyes huge. He held up his forefinger, then dropped the towel. When he came back, he pressed a note—printed in block letters—to the window.

GO TO THE POOL & I WILL MEET YOU. SHE’S UPSTAIRS.

Matt nodded. They looked at one another for a moment before the towel went down again and Matt set off to the pool patio. Sticking close to the side of the house, he slung one leg and then the other over the fence, crushing some of the flowers on the twisting vines. One popped off and fell to the tile and Matt paused to pick it up and toss it over to the grass.

Heart thumping, he waited until Techie tapped on the inside of the glass. The door slid open with excruciating slowness, whispering in its track. Matt slipped inside and shifted from one foot to the other, tense, as Techie closed the door with the same cautious speed. Techie tried to take his hand to lead him toward the other wing, but Matt flinched and twisted out of his grasp, the pain leaping up in a hot spark.

Techie looked back at him and Matt held up his ruined hand, an apologetic grimace on his face.

Nodding, Techie led the way to the basement door, which was already open. He let Matt go down the stairs first, then shut the door with a barely audible click. Techie had a look of concern on his face when he came down the stairs after Matt. “What did you do?” he whispered.

Matt shook his head. “I’m an idiot.”

“No, you’re not. Let me see.”

They walked into the full light over the desk. Taking extreme care only to touch his palms, Techie raised Matt’s hands and squinted at them. He looked up, stricken.

“I punched a wall,” Matt said.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I was just mad at everything. I saw this place, and it just sucked. And I was thinking that I’d never—” He stopped himself and breathed out, slow and resigned. “You were the only person I thought of calling.”

Techie’s smile was sad. “I have some painkillers. For my eyes when they get bad. There’s one of the Cokes from the other day. It’s warm by now but it’ll work.”

“Oh okay.”

Techie winced as he popped the tab. Dark soda fizzed up in a dome over the top. He sipped away the liquid that had bubbled out, then handed the can to Matt, who took it with a half-smile. From one of the bookshelves, he pulled a prescription bottle. “I usually just take half, but you can
probably have a whole one.” He opened the top and tapped one white pill out into his pale palm.

Matt took it with gratitude, swallowing it down with a slug of the warm Coke. “Thanks.”

Nodding, Techie put the bottle down on the desk. He looked at Matt until Matt was forced to look away under the scrutiny. “I missed you on Wednesday.”

“I know. That was stupid, too. I was just…”

“Confused?”

He nodded. “A little.”

“I thought you liked it,” Techie said. “I liked it.”

“I did. It’s just—I never…” Matt looked down at his feet.

Techie’s voice was soft. “Me neither.”

At that, Matt raised his head. “I mean I have, but…”

“No, I understand,” Techie said. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

“How are your hands?”

Matt tried to flex his fingers. “They still hurt.”

With very slow movements, Techie reached down and took one of Matt’s hands in his own. His fingers were cool compared to the feverish cast of the injured skin.

Matt allowed him to bring it up closer to his eyes, to inspect the scabbing wounds.

Looking up at Matt, meeting his eyes, Techie brought Matt’s hand up to his lips and pressed them lightly against the first knuckle.

Matt couldn’t breathe.

Moving down knuckle by knuckle, Techie kissed Matt’s hand, unconcerned about the scabs, the torn skin.

Though it was warm in the basement cave, Matt shivered.

Techie let Matt’s hand drift down. Slow and deliberate, he raised the other one and kissed each battered knuckle in turn.

When it was over, they stood looking at each other.

Techie tipped his chin in the inquisitive way he’d always done.

Matt took his face between bruised hands and kissed his lips.

Techie made a little sound into Matt’s mouth; it might have been encouragement or surrender. It didn’t matter. They stood and kissed one another, Matt’s fingers threaded through Techie’s hair and Techie’s slim hands on Matt’s waist.
“Come here,” Matt said, soft and low, and pulled Techie over to the edge of the bed, where he sat. Uncertain as to what to do at first, Techie bent and kissed him again, until Matt encircled his narrow waist with his arms and pulled Techie close. His knees folded and he straddled Matt’s hips. Pressed together, chest-to-chest, Matt brushed Techie’s ruddy hair from his shoulder and laid a line of kisses down the slope of his neck. He could feel Techie’s soft, quick breaths on his own neck. At the join of his shoulder, he pressed his nose against the skin and inhaled. “I like the way you smell,” Matt said against his t-shirt.

Techie’s laugh was nervous, just on the edge of too loud. He apologized.

“Don’t say you’re sorry,” Matt told him.

“Okay.” Techie rubbed one eye, an unconscious motion. “Can I kiss you again?”

Matt nodded. He remarked to himself how strange it was: the contrast between soft lips and the slight scrape of unshaven skin, wondering how it might feel for Techie. Techie’s tongue was slick and languid in his mouth. Matt broke away and nipped at his bottom lip with his teeth, the little sound Techie made in the back of his throat heady incentive. He jumped when he felt tentative fingers underneath the hem of his t-shirt. Techie apologized again.

“No, no,” Matt said. “It’s okay. Just wasn’t...expecting.”

“Can I?” It was a whisper.

“Yeah.”

Techie wasted no time slipping his hands up underneath the fabric, skimming over Matt’s bare back. “You’re so warm,” he said, his lips against Matt’s chin. As they kissed, Techie covered as much of Matt’s skin as he could with his palms, reaching up under the sleeves to caress his shoulders and pushing his hands up his chest, resting over his thudding heart.

When Matt leaned back slightly, pulling his own shirt over his head and discarding it on the bed beside them, Techie’s jaw dropped.

“You’re incredible,” he said.

Matt shook his head as Techie traced his collarbones with his thumbs.

“Yes,” Techie said, “you are.”

Wrapping his arms around Techie’s waist, Matt pulled him against his chest, the t-shirt material sticking in the sheen of sweat on his sternum. It took him a few confused seconds to figure out the source of the gentle prodding at his belly.

Techie was hard.

Matt’s head spun for just a moment, but he anchored himself in the sensations: Techie’s mouth on his own, his hands on his biceps.

Squeezing Matt’s hips in between his skinny thighs, Techie pushed himself against Matt, draping his arms over his shoulders. Matt skimmed his tongue along Techie’s neck, licking over his Adam’s apple and into the divot between his clavicles. Having sweet pressure against him, Matt
was growing hard as well.

Techie made that sweet little noise in the back of his throat again and pushed his hips forward, grinding against Matt’s lap.

Tentative, Matt slipped his hands downward to cup Techie’s ass, bringing him closer still. It was at once both strange and intoxicating to feel the stiffness trapped between them.

As Matt closed his mouth over the soft spot where shoulder and neck converged, scraping his teeth lightly over the skin, Techie gave a soft grunt. At once, he went rigid and sat up, his cheeks splotched with red, pink-rimmed eyes wide. “I’m sorry,” he said, the blush spreading as Matt watched. “I’m so sorry.”

“What?” Matt asked, adrenaline spiking in response to Techie’s panic.

Techie’s brows drew in and he looked down into the space between their bodies.

Matt did, as well, and that’s when he saw the spot of wetness spreading over the front of Techie’s shorts. “Oh,” he said.

Apologizing again, Techie backed away, stood up, clutching his hands over his groin.


“I didn’t mean to.”

Matt was shaking his head. “It’s fine. Don’t worry.”

Techie turned away. The back of his neck where the hair had been swept out of the way was deep red.

“No,” Matt said, getting up. He touched Techie’s back, feeling antsy and powerless. “It’s okay.” There was one terrible second when he feared Techie might start crying and he had no idea what he would do—besides run.

But Techie stood up straighter, still facing away from Matt. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Of course. Come back.”

At that Techie shook his head. “Let me change.”

Even though Techie couldn’t see it, Matt nodded then backed away. He sat, tense, on the edge of the bed, while Techie disappeared into a corner of the basement room Matt had never seen. He heard the rustling of cloth. Techie sneezed.

He returned with a pair of athletic shorts on and a brilliant blush still suffusing his skin. In addition to his face and neck, it pooled at the insides of his arms, stretched to his fingertips. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing,” Matt said. “It’s fine.”

Shivering slightly, Techie sat down on the bed next to Matt, his elbows on his knees.

After letting his hand hover for a split second, Matt placed it on Techie’s back, rubbing in small circles.

Techie sat up and put his hand on Matt’s thigh. “I want to—”
“No,” Matt said, smiling. “It’s okay. I’m good.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Um, next time.”

Techie’s grin was brilliant. “Do you want more of that Coke? I’m sorry it’s hot.”


“How do your hands feel?” He stood up and retrieved the can, placing it in Matt’s grip.

“I can barely feel them at all,” Matt said.

“Good.”

Techie looked up at the stairs, his expression forlorn. “I wish I could go upstairs and get you bandages. I don’t really think we even have any, though.”

“It’s okay. My boxing coach is going to kill me.”

A stricken expression crossed Techie’s face. “You don’t have to go, do you?”

Matt hesitated. “No. No boxing tonight.”

“So you can stay a little longer?”

“Uh-huh.”

Smiling and ducking his head, Techie picked up one of Matt’s hands by the wrist and placed it over his own, palm-to-palm. “Your hands are big,” he said.

“Yours are, too.”

“Not as broad,” Techie said. “You’re broader all around. I really like your shoulders. When I saw you swimming—”

Matt turned his head, cheeks tingling. “Stop.”

“Okay. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I mean, more.”

“I’m not uncomfortable,” Matt said. It was true. His heart had stopped thrumming. Everything seemed slowed down in a pleasant way, with the suggestion of an afterglow.

“Do you want your shirt back?” Techie asked.

“Not now. It’s hot in here.” He set the can down on the floor and lay back on the bed, skin against the cool coverlet, sighing.

Techie lay back as well, his hand still propping Matt’s up between them.

Both looked at the ceiling.

“What did you think when I kissed you?” Techie asked.

“Huh. Not much of anything. My mind was fuzzy.”
“I guess that’s good.”

Matt didn’t respond.

“You kissed me this time,” Techie said. “I’m glad you did.”

“Me, too.”

Both paused again to stare at the swirl of dust motes moving through the slice of light from the window.

Remembering knocking on that window earlier made Matt’s knuckles throb in a detached way. “I really like the laptop,” he said.

“You do?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

“I can show you how to do some things with it,” Techie said. “If you want.”

Matt breathed in. “Sure.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Um, just boxing.”

“Okay. We could go to lunch,” Techie said. “If you want.”

“Yeah, we could do that.”

His voice was softer. “Only if you want to.”

“I do,” Matt said.

Techie smiled and looked over. “Good.”

“I have to work Sunday.”

“We don’t have to see each other every day.”

“I know,” Matt said.

Techie slotted his fingers in between Matt’s, taking care not to squeeze. “Are we still on for Wednesday?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.” Matt flinched when the phone in his pocket buzzed. “Hold on,” he said. A spiral of cool dread threaded through his guts upon seeing the screen. It was Madeline. He looked at it for a couple of seconds then dismissed the call.

“Anything important?” Techie asked.

“No.”

They stayed on the bed for a very long time, holding hands as well as could be done with Matt’s ruined knuckles. They never heard Madeline come downstairs, never heard the garage door open. When the pain returned like a slowly warming stove burner, Matt said he should probably go. Techie gave him another pain pill and kissed him on the cheek. He watched at the glass door, at
least as long as Matt could see him before he was over the pool patio fence and back off into the warm evening.

Madeline didn’t call again until the next morning, but even then her voice was sweet. “I got so much rest last night,” she said. “You were probably right not to come over. I just find myself so tired lately. I’m convinced it’s the sun. Maybe I need to go back to Spain. You could come with me, like Amanda said!”

Matt listened to her go on and on.

“Would you like to come over and swim? You could get in the water and, well, I could watch you.” A brittle laugh followed on. “Matt?”

“Yeah?”

“How is Ryan?”

He froze. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, don’t lie. It’s perfectly fine. I know you see him occasionally. One can’t help it. He just crops up at inconvenient times.”

“He’s fine,” Matt said.

“I’m glad that you two can at least be civil to each other. Ryan loved Allan so very much. I figured he might be upset if he saw someone as trying to take his place.”

“I’m not trying to take his place.”

“No,” Madeline said, quiet but with an undercurrent of manic energy. “I suppose not.” She took a deep breath. “Well, I wouldn’t want you to, anyway. Bygones are bygones. It’s a new era.” Another pause. “When can I see you next?”

Matt curled his aching fingers into his palms as far as he could stand it. “I’m working a lot. I need the hours.”

“Do you need money, darling? Just tell me. Don’t be ashamed. I’ll give you what you need.”

“It’s fine,” Matt said. “Really.”

“Men,” Madeline said with a laugh. “Always have to be cowboys. Well, perhaps your example can rub off a bit on my son.”

“I have to go.”

“Oh, fine, then. Go on. Call me soon.” Before she ended the call he heard the click of a lighter, the fine crackle of burning paper and tobacco.

Matt had to shake a fog as thick as cigarette smoke out of his head. Taking a shower helped some. Afterward he sat in his underwear and wiped down his boxing gloves with cleansing towelettes. He scrubbed off his mouth guard with his old, ratty toothbrush, sprayed disinfectant inside his boots, folded his shorts neatly and placed them in the bottom of the gear bag.

*Leaving now,* he texted Techie after getting dressed. *See you soon.*

When Techie met him on Roundtree Avenue, he was carrying a handful of reusable shopping bags,
“What are those for?” Matt asked.

Techie smiled. “Cover.”

Matt frowned, uncomprehending.

Shaking his head, Techie said, “I figure we could pick up some groceries on the way back, so it just looks to my mom like I took a shopping trip.” He hesitated a second. “If that’s okay with you.”


“We could go to the burger place again.”

“Jessy’s?”

“Sure,” Techie said. “I liked her.”

“I wasn’t sure you did,” Matt said.

“I just wanted to spend time with you.”

Matt smiled. “Okay, we can go to Red Robin. Can’t put the top down on this car.”

“We could open the windows,” Techie said.

Each of them had thoroughly mussed hair from the wind whipping around the car by the time they pulled into the restaurant lot. A couple of Techie’s shopping bags had been thrown off the seat and landed in the footwells in the back. Matt laughed as Techie reached to gather them up, his long, red hair sticking to the cloth ceiling of the car with spidery static electricity.

“Hey, Mattie,” Jessy said when she saw them in her section. “Hey, Turkey. What’s the occasion?”

Techie shrugged but smiled at Jessy.

“Just wanted to see your pretty face,” Matt said, shooting a quick glance over at Techie. “How’s Travis?”

Jessy cocked her head; she hadn’t been expecting the question. “Well, he’s just fine. We’re going to the State Fair next weekend. You know, 4-H kids with pigs and cows, a few stupid rides.”

“That sounds like fun,” Techie said.

Laughing, Jessy told him, “I can’t imagine you at a state fair. First off, you’d have to have a million SPF sunscreen.”

“We can get him a cowboy hat,” Matt said.

All three laughed.

“Seriously, though, if you guys want to come with, we’re going a week from today.”

Matt looked over at Techie, who blinked and grinned. “Sure,” Matt said. “I’ll take the day off of work.”
“Great,” Jessy said.

They ordered their meals, Matt with his usual and Techie this time going for a bacon ranch burger.

Matt had just taken a huge bite of the steaming sandwich when Techie asked, “Have you heard from my mom?”

He nearly spit the burger out.

“Sorry,” Techie said.

Matt shook his head and tried to swallow. “Yeah. This morning.”

Techie’s brows drew inward. “What did she say?”

“She asked about you.”

Eyes going wide, Techie held his glass of Coke a little tighter. “She knows about Wednesdays?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Matt said.

“Does she... know about yesterday?”

“I don’t think so.”

Techie sighed. He barely touched the rest of his meal, dragging limp fries through an increasingly abstract tableau of ketchup. He declined when Jessy offered to box up the rest of the burger. Matt drove them to what Techie said was his usual grocery store in order to avoid arousing suspicion.

“You could have just put your burger in the bottom of one of the bags,” Matt said. “She wouldn’t see it.”

Speaking toward his feet, Techie said, “She’d see it in the fridge.”

Matt walked silently alongside the cart as Techie put in sliced lunchmeat, bread, a bag of apples, a few cans of soup even though the weather was roasting hot. “I, uh, wanted to tell you—” he started.

“Yeah?” Techie looked up, his eyes bright.

“I sort of didn’t exactly tell the truth when I told you about how I met Jessy.”

“You didn’t go to high school together?”

Matt’s throat felt tight. “At the same time, yeah. But I met her afterward. We dated for a while.”

Techie nodded. “Okay.”

“Does that bother you?” Matt asked.

“No,” Techie said, with calm finality. “Could you pass me the AppleJacks?”

When Matt pulled up to the curb on Roundtree, they weren’t sure how to part. Techie ran his fingertip gently down the back of Matt’s hand as it rested on the gearshift. “You don’t have to kiss me,” he said. “I know what it’s like.”

Matt felt guilty about his relief. “I don’t think there’s anybody around here.”
“Later,” Techie said.

Trying to avoid Phasma until he could go in the back and tape up was the goal when he got in at West Side. Matt ducked his head as she coached Jason, hiding his battered hands behind the gear bag. The wrap itself pinched and stung, but he shook off the pain and headed out onto the floor, his gloves tucked under his arms.

It was the trouble he had getting them on rather than the scabbing down the tops of his fingers that had Phasma suspicious almost at once. “All thumbs today, Matt?”

“Yes,” he said, turning his body away from her and using his teeth to try to yank the glove down onto his swollen hand.

She came over to help and said nothing, until his wince when she pulled the glove on entirely sealed his fate. “You hurt your hand?”

“No,” Matt said.

“So, ‘not really’ means, ‘I hurt my hand a little?’”

“Yeah.”

“Fine,” she said. “Let me see.”

“I’m okay.”

“Let me see.”

Matt held out his gloved hand and Phasma, with a look of annoyance, pulled the glove off. The knuckles closest to his palm were covered by the tape job but the second were bare and scraped. Purple skin could still be seen underneath the gauze.

She dropped the hand. “Are you kidding me right now?”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Matt said.

Phasma knocked him in the back of his head with his own glove. “I don’t care if it doesn’t hurt. You fight with your paws looking like that and it’s going to hurt later. What the hell did you do?”

Matt breathed out through clenched teeth. “I punched a wall.”

Phasma looked up, over his shoulder as if she couldn’t bear to look at his face, and shook her head. “It was stupid,” she said. “I know.”

“No,” she said. “You obviously don’t know. Go after a bag with that, much less someone else, and you’ve got at best broken skin. At worst a broken hand. If it’s not there already.” Her tone was resigned. “Our tournament is three weeks from today. I was about to announce it. But if you don’t give yourself time to heal, you won’t even participate, much less do well. I’m seriously considering not letting you take part anyway. This is bullshit and you know it, Matt. You’re a grown man, not a kid playing. If this is a game for you, take your business elsewhere. I don’t want to see that. We don’t train kids.”

Matt stood, his mouth hanging open. He had expected anger, yes, but not the disappointment with which he was met. “I’m sorry,” he said.
“Apologies aren’t going to un-break your hands. And they’re not going to get you in the ring. I
want you to leave now.”

“But—”

“A week. A full week. I don’t want to see you until next Monday. And then—only then—will I
decide whether or not you can be part of the tournament here at West Side Fight.”

Flooded at once with rage at the dismissal and with relief at the fact that she was allowing him to
come back, Matt stood, weight on the balls of his feet, deciding on action. When he clenched his
fist, it hurt, and that was the decision made for him. He nodded, too choked up and on edge to say
anything.

Phasma handed him his glove.

Matt slowly unwrapped his hands in the locker room, something hypnotic in the way the tape
would flicker in front of the wounds on his knuckles, obscuring them for an instant before they
became visible again. A light-and-shadow show in white and purple. He rolled the tape back up
and stuck it in his bag, shorts once again folded and stored next to the boots, the gloves.

One week. It could be a week of endless nights with his laptop perched on his chest, watching and
resenting the slow healing of his destroyed flesh. Or it could be a chance to see more of Techie
when he wasn’t working. Matt thought back on the things they had done, feeling no shame or
hesitation but instead a sort of pragmatic wonder. He wanted to see Techie again, of course. He
wanted to kiss him again. He wanted to make him come again, but this time be the deliberate
architect of his pleasure.

Matt watched his hands on the wheel as he drove home—the broken skin but also the places where
Techie’s lips had been.

On Sunday, he and Steward set out for a job installing in a soon-to-open store at Kansas City’s
high-end mall. The walkways were packed, people walking in both directions, skirting mid-path
kiosks where sales representatives hawked expensive skin care products and fine jewelry.

The space they were in—painted in white with spare white fixtures—was apparently set to be a
computer store when it was finished. Matt figured the installation made sense. Exposed to the rest
of the mall behind huge floor-to-ceiling windows, he and Steward worked, pausing on occasion to
watch the city’s most well-appointed go by with shopping bags full of designer clothing, watches,
purses.

Matt was concentrating on a connection near the far wall when he happened to look up to see a
dark-haired figure standing in front of the window. Thinking it impossible at first, he looked back
down after glancing at the woman there. But then Madeline knocked on the window, mouthing his
name.

Her smile was exuberant.

“Hold on a second,” Matt told Steward, who had also stopped working and was staring up at
Madeline.

“You know that person?”


He slipped underneath the half-open security gate on the front entrance. He dusted the knees of his
jumpsuit off, blushing as they shed sheetrock dust on the faux marble.

Smiling wide, Madeline reached out to embrace him. She kissed his cheek just as she had Amanda’s.

“Madeline, hey. What are you doing here?”

She rolled her eyes. “Shopping. Isn’t that typically what people do in a place like this?”

Looking down, Matt saw she held no bags but her handbag. Perhaps she had only just gotten there. “Of course,” he said. “Yeah. Are you okay?”

“Well,” she said, “I was feeling a bit wistful until I saw you. And my day’s just gotten that much better. Oh, darling, what are the chances?”

Matt snuck a glance over at Steward, who hurried to look busy. He clenched his teeth. “I really have to get back to work.”

“Is that your boss in there?” she asked.

“No. It’s just a co-worker.”

She took his hand and pulled him away from the storefront, toward an emergency exit between it and the next store. “You can spare some time. Have lunch with me.”

“I can’t,” Matt said.

Madeline looked over her shoulder. When she turned back to Matt, her expression was wicked. “Let’s duck in here for a few minutes.” She nodded toward the emergency exit. “Nobody will see us.”

“And do what?” Matt asked.

Pouting, Madeline said, “I’m upset that you don’t remember. Don’t you remember when I said I wanted you to fuck me in a public place?”

Matt’s eyes went wide. “Madeline, no.”

“Don’t be stupid. It’s perfect.” She grabbed his upper arm, her nails biting into his skin through the fabric of the jumpsuit. “No one will see us. I promise.” She went over to the door, reaching for the bar across it.

“Stop.”

“What?”

“I think that door has an alarm on it. Do you want security all over us?”

She smiled again, devilish. “They can watch.”

“Madeline, stop.”

“You used to be fun, Matt,” she said, venom in her voice. “Why did everything change when I came back from Spain?”

Matt took her by the wrist. “You’re the one who changed. I don’t know what happened.”
She shook out of his grip. Her voice was louder now. “I’ve always been the same. *Always.*”

“Shh. Come on.”

She was aghast. “Don’t you shush me, you little child. I should have known. I should have known before getting myself into this.” Her eyes were shining with tears.

“Please don’t cry.”

“I’m sick of you telling me what to do.” One tear spilled down her cheek, traced her jaw until it trembled at her chin. “I’m not allowed to have anything without someone taking it away from me.”

“Who’s taking from you?” Matt asked. He touched her shoulder.

The ferocity with which she shrugged him off was almost a spasm. “You know exactly who.” They were starting to draw notice now; other shoppers slowed and turned their heads.

A chill settled into Matt’s chest. “I don’t know. Come on. Let’s talk after work, okay? I’ll call you.”

Madeline put her hand on his sternum. “I want to *see* you. I want you to make love to me again.”

Matt exhaled, stuck for words.

“You don’t want to see me, is that it?”

“It’s not—” Matt was interrupted by the crack of her hand across his cheek, leaving his ear ringing. He put his own hand up to his face. He wanted to grab Madeline’s shoulder with the other, shake her, but too many people were watching. Instead, he just walked around her, ducking back underneath the security gate. People were coming up to Madeline, asking her if she was okay. Casting nasty looks inside at Matt.

Steward, to his infinite credit, said nothing.

The reedy whistling in his ear had stopped by the time Matt made his way home that night. It seemed as if he still felt the imprint of Madeline’s small palm against his skin, though there were no marks to be seen. In a way, it all felt like it had happened to someone else, someone in a movie he had seen. Mostly because he hadn’t gotten angry. Just resigned. Pitying, even, but not angry. He hadn’t had the time or luxury to let rage flare up and stick, to color the remainder of his day.

Back at home, he saw that Kyle had started to collect boxes, most of them from the liquor store near the laundromat. For the time being they sat empty. Matt wondered for a second whether Kyle even had enough stuff in the house to fill them, but then he realized that most of the dishes were his. The couch, the TV, the kitchen bar stools, they were all Kyle’s. He had his bed and could possibly barter to get the broken recliner into the deal, but there was very little else.

Sitting up on the bed he had had since he was twelve years old, Matt tried to concentrate on finding another apartment, but kept clicking away to funny videos, giving in entirely as the sun sank and bathed his room in purple twilight. He fell asleep with the laptop on his chest.

No work the next morning, but it was his last session before his birthday with Dr. Finch. The day dawned watery and lazy, with a thick cloud cover that made time seem like it lagged behind action.

Shirleigh was back in the office this time. Matt ducked his head when he signed in, trying not to meet her eyes. She gave a prim *Mm-hm* when he was finished and took the clipboard back inside
the vestibule.

“Welcome,” Dr. Finch said, opening the door almost as soon as Matt sat down. “Come on in.”

Matt walked through the door and into the room with the couches for what might be the final time, committing to memory despite himself the scents of disinfectant and well-used fabric.

“How are you?” Finch asked.

“Good,” Matt said.

“How’s it going? That’s great to hear. So that’s two sessions in a row where you’ve been feeling better.”

Matt nodded.

Finch’s gaze flickered down. “May I ask you what happened to your hands?”

“Accident at work.”

“Well,” Finch said, “that probably has to affect your boxing. Am I right?”

A nod. “I’m off for a week.”

Finch steepled his fingers below his chin. “What are you going to do with that time?”

“Probably try to find a place to live.”

“You’re parting ways with your roommate. Is it because of the fight?”

Matt shook his head.

“It’s just time, then, I guess.”

“Yeah.”

“Did your girlfriend come back from her traveling?”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Matt said. “Maybe she never was.”

“You sound a little unhappy about that. Am I reading it correctly?” Finch asked.

Matt paused for a moment. “Maybe a little. It’s just not what I thought it was.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s okay.”

“Is it really?” asked Finch.

“Yeah, actually.”

Finch’s mustache rose with his smile. “Well, on to bigger and better things, right?”

“I guess.”

“So,” Finch said, “tell me about work. You said you were being offered more hours. Have you gotten your insurance yet?”
Matt shook his head. “Probably won’t.”

“That’s got to be a little scary.”

He paused, nodded.

Finch smiled again, leaning forward. “I think that’s very big of you to admit to being afraid.”

“Okay.”

“So.” He sat back. “I guess this is going to be our last session for a while.”

“Yeah,” Matt said.

“It’s been a pleasure working with you, Matt. I’m glad you decided to continue as long as we have. I want you to know that if you ever need to reach out to me, you’re more than welcome to. I think we’ve made some progress, but I definitely think that there are more things we could have explored during our time together. What do you think?”

Matt sat silent for a long minute. “I don’t know. I feel different.”

Another indulgent smile. “That’s good. Therapy is a journey. If you don’t feel different at the end, then I haven’t been doing my job.”

There seemed to be some admonishment in Finch’s tone, but Matt couldn’t tell if it was directed toward him or back at Finch himself. Suddenly he was anxious to get out of there, to walk out into the muggy, overcast day and put Dr. Finch behind him.

“Where do you think you’ll go from here?”

“The same way.”

At the end of it, they shook hands and Matt left the office, not looking back at Shirleigh or the couches or the abused magazines. The rest of the day was cloudy, but it never once rained.

After work the next day, he got a call from his parents.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Leah said. “How are you?”

“I’m good. What’s going on, Mom?”

“Nothing bad. Just wanted to talk about your birthday dinner.”

Matt scowled, though he knew she couldn’t see it. “I really don’t think you should. Save your money.”

Her tone was curt. “It’s already decided, okay? Your dad and I think you deserve a little congratulations.”

“Okay.”

“Is Saturday all right?”

Matt began to say Yes, but stopped himself. “Me and a couple of friends were thinking about going to the State Fair that day.”
“Well, that sounds like so much fun,” she said. “What about Sunday?”

“Sure.”

“Have any idea where you want to go?” Leah asked.

“I think so. There’s a diner down here by the college.”

There was disappointment mixed with relief in her voice. “Well, that sounds nice, hon.” The following pause was weighty. “Were you thinking about bringing anybody? Your girlfriend?”

“We broke up,” Matt said.

“Oh, Mattie,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“What about one of your friends?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Maybe.”

Techie called him in the morning on Wednesday asking whether they could go to the diner before class. Matt ended up picking him up an hour early.

“Thanks,” Techie said. “I’m starving.”

“No breakfast?”

He looked down at his lap. “No.”

Techie ate with a ravenous gusto at the restaurant, polishing off a tall stack of pancakes, bacon, sausage, and two eggs.

“Damn,” Matt said. “It’s like you haven’t eaten in a week.”

Still swirling a bite of pancake in the remaining syrup on his plate, hunched over, Techie said, “My mom threw away all the food I bought the other day.”

Matt’s mouth dropped open. “You’re joking.”

He shook his head. “I’m sure if I asked she would blame it on the cleaners, but I know it was her.”

“Why the hell would she do that?” Matt’s hands curled into fists on the tabletop.

Techie shrugged. “Punishing me for something. I don’t know what it is.”

Matt breathed out hard through his nose. “I do.”

Raising his head, a troubled expression on his face, Techie asked, “What? Did I do something?”

“No. I did.”

Techie’s shoulders sagged. “You did something to my mom?” The tone was resigned, not concerned.

“I was in the mall, doing a job. Madeline...she saw me there. She wanted to get back together.”
His eyebrows were drawn in, but Matt could see that Techie was trying to suppress a smile.
“You’re not seeing her anymore?”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t know what we had. But it’s gone now.”

Techie sighed. “She threw out my food to get back at you.”

“And she hit me. Right in the face.”

“So she knows. About us.”

“She knows we hang out,” Matt said, keeping his voice low. “I don’t think she knows any more than that.”

“What if she does?”

“What can she do about it?” asked Matt.

Hanging his head, Techie said, “Things like this.”

Matt pushed at the uneaten crust of his reuben sandwich.

“I wish I didn’t live there,” said Techie. “It’s stupid and childish, but I wish my dad was still here.”

“It’s not stupid to miss your dad,” Matt told him. “I’d feel awful if one of my parents was gone. It doesn’t matter how long ago it was.”

Techie was silent for a while. Then: “What are your parents like?”

Matt tapped his foot, trying to think of how to describe Harold and Leah. “Just, well, parents, I guess.” He blushed a little; Techie’s mother wasn’t like others he had known. “I used to get mad at them a lot for doing things that parents do. You know, like making me come home too early or making me clean the house. Stupid things that kids get mad about. I’m sure I told them I hated them a couple times.”

“Really?” Techie asked. “I don’t think I ever told my mom or dad I hated them.”

Abashed, Matt said, “We get along now.”

“I do love my mom,” Techie said after a while.

“Was she always like this?”

“She’s always been like her. I don’t know any other way to describe it.”

“What were her parents like?” Matt asked.

“I don’t know,” Techie said. “I never met them.”

“She didn’t talk to them?”

Shaking his head, Techie said, “If she did, it was never in front of me.”

After a minute or so, when Techie had taken the last bite of his greasy bacon, Matt said, “I’m bringing my parents here on Sunday.”

“To the diner?”
“Yeah. They’re taking me out to eat for my birthday.”

Techie smiled. “That’s nice.”

“Do you maybe want to come?”

His eyes widening, Techie asked, “Why?”

Matt laughed. “They said they wanted me to bring somebody.” He paused. “A friend.”

Techie smiled again.

After dropping Techie off, Matt didn’t want to go home right away. He was still full from their huge meal at the diner, so getting food was out of the question, though he considered for a minute or two getting a milkshake at the Crystle Freeze. In the end, he swung by the grocery store to pick up a few non-perishable breakfast items. Techie could hide them in his room since Madeline never went down there. He picked up a couple of things for himself, too, leaving the things for Techie in the car just in case Kyle decided to help himself between now and the next time they saw each other.

Kyle was in the kitchen when he got in, which would probably be why it smelled like an imminent fire hazard. “Shit,” he said. “Sorry, man.”

Matt laughed and went over to the pantry to put his few purchases away. “What is it this time?”

“Grilled cheese. I can’t keep from burning the bread.”

“Did you put butter on the outside?”

“On the outside?”

Shaking his head, Matt said, “Yeah, that’s how it gets brown on the outside. If you just throw the bread in dry it burns.”

“Good to know,” Kyle said. He paused for a moment. “Hey, bro. What are we going to do about your birthday? You wanna get wasted?”

Matt took a deep breath. “Sure. When?”

“Saturday?”

“I’ll be out that day.”

Kyle dumped the burned sandwich bits directly from the frying pan into the trash. “Next Saturday?”

“I’ve got boxing at night. Friday?”

“Sounds cool to me. We’ll go get booze the day before or something. People will bring shit, too.”

Matt nodded. “Invite whoever you want.”

“Awesome.”

As Matt walked upstairs he could hear Kyle muttering, “Butter on the outside.”
It was Techie’s call that woke him up the next morning. He answered, groggy, but the urgency in Techie’s voice cleared the fog inside his head.

“Can you come over?”


“She left.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Can you come over?”

Sitting up in bed, Matt scrubbed a hand through his messy hair. “Yeah, okay. Okay. I’ll, uh, call in sick to work.”

There was a leaden feeling in his gut as he drove to Crescent Heights. When he got to Roundtree Avenue, he texted Techie to see if Madeline had returned yet. She hadn’t, and he was able to go up and let himself into the house with the key. Peaches barked until he lowered his hand to her nose, and she licked his finger. Carrying the two plastic bags of food, Matt made his way past the dark kitchen, the bright patio, into Techie’s wing of the house. Beaming, Techie met him at the door to the basement, wearing lounge pants and a brown t-shirt, the most subdued color Matt had ever seen him in.

Matt stopped in his tracks, confused. “What’s wrong?”

Techie cocked his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“When you called me over here it sounded like something was up.”

“Oh,” Techie said, his face falling. “I just wanted to see you. I thought, you know, since my mom is gone…”

Matt sighed.

“I made you miss work because you were worried,” said Techie. His tangled hair swung in front of his eyes.

“It’s okay,” Matt said, his frustration dissipating. “I didn’t really want to go to work today, anyway.” He held out the bags. “Breakfast.”

Techie’s grin was exuberant. “Want to go downstairs?”

They sat on Techie’s bed eating Pop-Tarts and watching the square of robin’s egg blue visible through the tiny window grow deeper in color as the sun moved higher. Because of the angle of the house, warm light wouldn’t begin pouring directly through until later in the afternoon; for now, the space over Techie’s desk was lit with a wintery whiteness. Any season could have swept down outside the house and neither of them would know.

Matt found himself wondering what would take the place of Techie’s shorts and t-shirt when the weather got colder. Cargo pants and sweaters? He couldn’t recall ever having seen Techie wear jeans.

“That was good, Matt,” Techie said. “Thanks. I was hungry.”

“Keep these down here so your mom doesn’t find them,” Matt told him.
Techie nodded.

The time stretching in front of them before Madeline’s return could be minutes; it could be hours. “What do you want to do?” Matt asked.

When Techie spoke, it wasn’t an answer to the question. He traced his fingertips over Matt’s busted knuckles. “Your hands look a little better.” His expression was heavy-lidded, satisfied.

“Do they?”

“Don’t they hurt when you’re boxing?”

Matt looked down. “I’m not going again until they heal.”

“Oh,” Techie said. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it was my fault.”

“What happened again?” Techie asked.

“I went to see a place I thought I could move to. It was a basement like this, but really disgusting. The price was so good, and I thought it would be okay, but it just wasn’t. Like always.”

Techie said nothing in response. Instead, he slipped his arm around Matt’s waist and put his head on his shoulder.

Matt kissed his knotted hair.

Sitting up at once, eyes bright, Techie put his hand on Matt’s cheek and kissed him on the mouth.

“I probably taste like Pop-Tarts,” Matt whispered, sliding his hand around the back of Techie’s neck.

“Me, too.” He looped his arms around Matt’s neck and pulled him downward onto the bed.

Matt followed, his lips against Techie’s, crashing into a deep kiss when they made it all the way down. “Right now?” he asked, the sugar frosting sweet on his tongue.

“Right now,” Techie said.

They kissed for long minutes. Matt placed his hand on Techie’s chest and drew it downward. Looking into his eyes for signs of hesitation, Matt put his fingertips at the edge of Techie’s shirt hem. When Techie nodded, he pushed his fingers up underneath the fabric. The surface of Techie’s skin twitched at the contact. His hand was sweating, but Matt tried to brush as smooth a track as he could over Techie’s abdomen, his chest. He ran his fingertips up Techie’s sides, making him squirm, felt the soft, damp hair under his arms.

It was hard to avoid staring at Techie’s crotch, where his erection showed plain behind the fabric of his sleep pants. Matt quit trying not to look. He pulled his hand out from underneath Techie’s and slid it lower. When he skimmed his fingers over the waistband of the pants, Techie nodded, fast and fervent. His pulse jumping, Matt lay his palm flat against the hardness there, marveling at how warm it felt underneath his hand. Techie shut his eyes and bared his throat, breathing in with a shudder. He did it again when Matt curled his fingers. Matt squeezed gently a couple of times.

“Do you want to…” Techie said.
“Yeah,” Matt said, releasing him. His heartbeat now thunderous in his ears, he slid his hand below the waistband, fingers reaching into springy red hair. It was at once familiar and altogether unusual having his hand wrapped around another man’s cock. A different size, a strange angle, but not unpleasant. He stroked upward once and Techie gasped. “Good?” he asked.

Techie nodded, looking up at Matt. “It won’t be long,” he said.

“Okay.” He gave a couple more cautious strokes, and when Techie responded well he tightened his grip a little, beginning to move.

Techie was panting. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah.”

It took only a few more seconds before Techie squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his jaw. He gave a short cry and then Matt felt warmth blossom over the back of his hand, between fabric and skin. Though he didn’t know how Techie liked it, he stroked him softly through it the way he liked. It seemed to be pleasant enough. Techie at last reached down and held his wrist, stopping the movement.

Then he rose on his elbow and kissed Matt on the mouth, the cheek, the jaw, his breathing slowing little by little.

“Do you have something…?” Matt asked. The fluid on his hand was already going cool.

“Um,” Techie said. “Just use the sheet. I’ll wash it later.”

Matt nodded and drew his hand out, moving it quickly over to Techie’s side and wiping it down on the sheet next to him.

Techie sat up and pushed Matt backward against the bed.

“You don’t have to,” Matt said.

“I want to.” He started in on the button of Matt’s jeans, slipping it free then lowering the zipper.

Eager now at seeing Techie’s eagerness, Matt helped him slide the jeans off, down his thighs. Techie pulled away the waistband of his boxers so hard Matt heard a stitch rip.

“Sorry,” Techie said with a sheepish smile.

Matt was about to smile back, but Techie wrapped his hand around his cock with a grip that was not the least bit tentative.

“Wow,” Techie whispered.

“Wow what?” Matt’s voice was tight in anticipation of pleasure.

“You’re big.”

“Is that bad?”

Techie shook his head. He eased the boxers down over Matt’s hips then sighed, pleased.

“You might need some, uh…”

“Oh,” Techie said. “Yeah. Right under the bed.”
Matt groped below the falling blankets until his fingertips slid along the plastic surface of a bottle of lotion. Straining, he pulled it up. He held it out to Techie, but Techie pushed it away toward him. “Show me the way you like it.”

More abashed than he would have expected, Matt dabbed a little of the lotion onto his palm then smoothed it over his cock. Unable to look Techie in the eye, he began to stroke himself. After watching for only a moment or two, Techie put his hand over Matt’s and tried to mimic the motion. Matt at last drew his hand away and let Techie settle his fingers around him.

He started slowly but it felt good.

“Yeah,” Matt said, low and breathy.

Techie sped his pace by a little, keeping the strokes smooth and long, lighter on the upstroke and tighter on the down, the way he had felt Matt do it. “Good?” he asked.

“Yes,” Matt said. “Don’t stop.” Part of him wanted to close his eyes, but the other part wanted to watch Techie’s face, rapt as it was. He watched the slim, white hand on his cock instead.

“You’re beautiful,” Techie said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I thought about doing this. For you.”

“Keep going. It feels good.” Matt relished the cool huffs of Techie’s breath over his heated skin. Techie twisted his grip just slightly. “I think about you,” he said.

The familiar heat began to pool in Matt’s belly. He could feel the fibers of the blanket below him prickling his hypersensitive skin.

“I think about you when I—when I’m touching myself.”

“Don’t stop,” Matt said. “It’s so good.”

Techie sped up his fist, his slim bicep flexing. “I want you to—”

“Yeah, so close.”

Techie moved his hand faster, faster yet. The lotion was going dry but Matt didn’t want him to let up. “Please…”

“Yes,” Techie said.

Then Matt’s back was arching off the bed and he was calling out, feeling the droplets hit his chest and belly. “Don’t stop,” he said. “Please. Keep going. Just for a little while.” He closed his eyes as Techie stroked him, then breathed out heavily and opened them. “Thank you,” he said. “That was really good.”

“Really?”

Matt nodded. He pulled up a corner of the sheet and wiped himself clean. “Was it good for you?”

“Yeah,” Techie said with a soft smile. “I need a shower.”

“Me, too.”

“We can take one. We just have to go upstairs.”
“You mean together?”

“Sure,” said Techie. “I mean, if you want.”

Matt hesitated. “Okay.”

The shower in the bathroom by the pool wasn’t as big as Madeline’s. Matt’s heart pounded as they went inside, afraid that Madeline would open the front door at any moment, come clicking down the hall in her designer heels. His pulse refused to let up as he undressed, hesitant. Techie apparently faced the same trepidation, even considering what they had just done; his cheeks and neck were flushed as he stepped out of his pants.

Matt turned on the shower and stepped in, letting the water run over his hair, his face. He could tell when Techie joined him by the long-fingered hand at his waist. “Go ahead,” he said, squeezing past Techie to allow him to step under the spray. The scent of the same shampoo he had smelled when Techie first kissed him filled the room, making Matt’s head feel cloudy and buoyant.

It seemed an impossibility—even in the face of reality—that Matt was standing here, naked, watching the man who had talked to him at the pool fence on an evening that seemed like it happened a lifetime ago. He moved forward and put his hands on Techie’s shoulders as Techie stood facing the spray, sliding them down the wet skin of his back. The water poured over them, running between Matt’s fingers.

Techie sighed.

Beyond his control, Matt’s cock twitched against Techie’s cleft. Techie turned, but his expression wasn’t surprised; it was earnest. “I want you to do that. I mean...I want to do that with you.”

“How?”

Techie laughed. “No, we don’t have what we need.”

“Oh,” said Matt. “Yeah.”

When they were finished, they stepped out of the shower and dried with the same towel, redressing afterward. Matt sniffed the underarms of his t-shirt, which he judged acceptable.

“So what do you want to do now?” Techie asked. “I can help you look for a place to live.”

“I should probably go,” Matt said. “Just in case, you know…”

Biting his lip, Techie nodded. “Are you working tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’ll call you.”

“Okay.”

Techie walked him to the door, hesitating for a second or two before kissing his cheek.

Matt walked through the juniper bower and into the full, white sunlight, squinting. It was because of the insistent sun that he didn’t see the Audi at first, its slick lines both bright and dark. He met Madeline’s eye—only for a second—then broke into a run.
Chapter 11

Matt waited only until he got to his car to call Techie. “She saw me,” he said.

“Shit,” said Techie. “I think she went upstairs. She didn’t say anything to me, but she almost never does.”

“Do you think she’ll do anything?” Matt asked.

“Like what?”

Matt clenched the one hand he wasn’t holding the phone with into a tight fist. “I don’t know. She threw away your food last time. What if she does something like that?”

Techie sighed. “I’ll deal with it.”

“I don’t want you to deal with it alone.”

A pause. “I already know I don’t have to.”

“Tell me if you want me to come back. I’ll come back.”

“No,” Techie said softly. “I’ll be okay.”

“Maybe I could take you out tomorrow night after work?”

“Yeah.” The smile was apparent in his voice. “I’d like that. Probably best to be out of the house. I don’t know if my mom is going to be leaving again anytime soon.”

“I can do that,” Matt said.

For the rest of the day, Matt kept checking his phone for word from Techie, expecting fallout at any moment. Maybe Madeline would throw away his books, his computers. Would she yell at him the way she had yelled at Matt in the past? He hated the idea of Techie silently taking abuse then wandering down again to his lair to make yet another impotent wire sculpture. Or perhaps her mistreatment was her silence, and Techie had been forced to stomach it all along. He hadn’t only lost one parent when Allan died.

The sleep Matt had that night, when it finally came, was uneasy. He stopped at the bagel shop before work for a huge cup of coffee, without which he was certain he wouldn’t make it through the day.

At the dispatch center, just as he was about to walk out to the van and meet Steward, Snoke pulled him aside. “Surprised to see you here today.”

“Why?” Matt asked.

“Well, I thought you were sick.”

Matt’s scalp began to tingle. “It wasn’t—I mean, I think I had food poisoning.”

“All better now?” The tone slid along the edge of condescension.

“Much better, yeah.”
“Well, you’re going to have to wait here for a while. We’ve got another guy who might be out sick.”


“I figured you wouldn’t be here so I sent him out with someone else.”

Matt’s shoulders tensed. “I would have called if I was still sick.”

Snoke sniffed. “I can’t take those kinds of chances. Listen, if my other guy comes in, I’ll pair you two up. If not, I’m going to have to cancel his jobs and you may as well go home.”

“Let me do them by myself,” Matt said. “I’m one of the guys who’s been here the longest. You know I can do it.”

“That’s not the point,” Snoke said. “We go out in pairs for safety reasons. Ours and the client’s.”

Matt shook his head. “You just want to punish me for calling in sick yesterday.”

“Well?” Snoke asked. “Were you sick?”

“Yes, I was sick!”

“Lower your voice, Matt.”

Words began to form in the back of Matt’s throat, but he tamped them down, breathing hard. “I’m sorry. Okay? I just need the hours.”

“Well, I’m sorry, too,” Snoke said. “But you didn’t seem that desperate for hours when you took off tomorrow and Sunday.”

Matt’s jaw ached. He squeezed his eyes shut for a second. “It’s not my fault I was sick.”

“You have to accept the consequences.”

“No, if they’re unfair consequences.”

“I get to decide what’s fair and not fair,” said Snoke. “And right now, you don’t have a choice. So why don’t you go home and cool off, and I’ll see you on Monday.”

Matt paused, gathering himself. “Fine.” He walked out of the dispatch center into the employee lot, where his car was already simmering in the morning’s heat. As he let the AC ramp up with the doors open, he called Techie. They agreed that Matt would pick him up as soon as possible. No more sneaking into the house, at least for the time being.

Matt’s heartbeat bumped up when he saw the familiar figure walking toward the car, his red-rimmed eyes matching the shade of his hair in the strong sunlight. The glow bathed everything and restricted shadows to short, impotent splotches. “Hey.”

“Hi.”

“Do you want to get something to eat?” Matt asked.

“Sure,” Techie said. He stared down into his lap at his folded hands.

Matt looked over a couple of times as he drove, his unease growing. “You’re quiet today.”
“Yeah,” Techie said. “It’s my mom.”

Horror blossomed in Matt’s chest. “What did she do?”

Techie’s brow was furrowed deeply. “She asked me about school. She got us takeout.”

Matt was stunned silent for a moment. “Huh?”

“I know,” Techie said. “We had dinner together. At the kitchen table. I didn’t know what to say.”

Pulling over into the nearest drive, which happened to be a fast food burrito place, Matt put the car in park and looked over at Techie. “What did you talk about?”

“Well, like I said, she asked about school. How it was going. She didn’t know how close I was to finishing my degree or anything.”

“That’s it? She just asked you about school?”

“She asked me if I missed my dad,” Techie said, scratching at his eye.

Matt frowned. “That’s a stupid question.”

“I guess,” said Techie. “I told her I did.”

Nodding, Matt asked, “What else did she say?”

“She said that no one will ever replace him in her heart.”

“She wasn’t talking about me, was she?”

“Was she?”

“No,” Matt said. “I haven’t talked to her since she went off on me in the mall.” He picked at the hangnail on his thumb, pulling until it hurt.

Techie shook his head. “She said no one would ever replace me, either.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Matt asked.

A shrug. “Maybe she thinks you’re taking me away? I’ve never really had a lot of friends.”

“It didn’t seem like she cared much about whether you were there or not before I came.”

“I don’t know,” Techie said. “Maybe now it’s a real possibility.”

Matt paused. His face tingled with the beginnings of a blush. “I’d take you away if I could.”

Techie smiled. “I know.”

When Techie asked him what he wanted to eat, Matt suggested Chinese, but Techie had already had takeout the night before. They didn’t talk any more about the conversation with Madeline. At a Mexican place that did tacos a la carte, Techie ate five to Matt’s three.

“Where do you want to go?” Techie asked when they had finished.

“I have an idea.”
Though he wasn’t sure he remembered the way, Matt smiled to himself when he at last pulled up into the cracked driveway at the abandoned house. He hadn’t wanted to glance over until they got there, but he knew Techie was grinning. When they got out, Matt let Techie lead the way into the broken playground. He stood in the clearing, on the hard and dusty ground, eyes closed, letting the splinters of light from the leaves at the periphery scatter over his pale arms.

Matt watched, his breath stilled.

“|I love this place,” Techie said at last.

“Because it’s different,” Matt said.

Looking over at him, Techie nodded.

“They didn’t have playgrounds when you were growing up?” Matt asked, half-teasing.

“We had one in the back yard, before they put the pool in. My dad had it built for me. I was really the only person who used it.” He shrugged and gave a small smile. “No friends.”

“Yeah.”

“I remember it was big. There was a tower, with a pole through the center that you could slide down,” Techie said. “And there were swings. Two of them. Like here. I don’t remember much more. I think I was six or seven when my mom asked to have the pool put in. They dug up the whole back yard. I wasn’t allowed to go out there for two months because of the hole in the ground.”

“What did they do with the playground?” Matt asked.

“I don’t know.” Techie walked toward the cherry tree, its leaf-shadows skittering over the dirt.

Matt followed.

“Look,” Techie said, his voice barely louder than a whisper. “They’re falling.”

Around the circumference of the trunk were mounded shapes, black and red. Overripe and shriveled, the cherries lay in a thick carpet. Matt picked up his foot to see if he had crushed any underneath the sole.

“Nobody eats the ones at the top,” said Techie, “so they just sit there until they fall off.” He gave a low laugh. “I don’t know what would be worse, being eaten or not being touched until you rot.”

“I guess it’s one or the other,” Matt said.

“Only for cherries.”

Matt paused. “Want to climb?”

Techie turned. “It’ll mess up your new shoes.”

“They’re not that new anymore.”

Looking back up at the tree, Techie said, “Okay.”

Wading through the sea of rotting fruit, Matt picked his way to the trunk. There was only one branch low enough to use as a starting foothold. He stopped. “You first,” he said to Techie.
“Why?”

“You know how.”

Techie smiled. “It’s easy.” He grabbed onto a higher limb and put the toe of his sneaker in where the lower one branched off then swung up so both feet were on the lowest one. Rubber soles scraping, he pulled himself up another two branches and sat on the third, legs dangling.

Matt’s shoe slipped once because of the slick fruit, but then he managed to get a toehold and push himself up, as well.

“You can go one higher,” Techie said.

“It’s not going to break, is it?” Matt asked. “I’m heavy.”

“It won’t break.”

When Matt was seated on the saddle-like limb, his chest against the trunk, he looked up. Techie was staring at the greenery above them, which would sway for a moment when touched by the wind then go almost still. Never completely motionless.

“What are you looking at?” Matt asked.

“Nothing,” Techie said. “But nothing in a good way. It’s like TV static.”

“I don’t get it,” Matt said.

Techie smiled down at him. “It’s like putting something in your mind when you’re thinking too much. Something that takes over everything else.”

“They say to do that in boxing, too. Put a blank where the face is. Faces are for emotions, but shoulders are for punches.”

When Techie laughed it was a quavering thing because of the wind.

“What’s so funny?” Matt asked.

“Aren’t you supposed to punch people in the face?”

“Oh,” Matt said. “Yeah, but you look at their shoulders to see where the punch is coming from.”

“What would happen if you looked at their face?”

Matt shrugged. “You might get hit. You don’t really want to look at their expression, because it might make you feel something. Maybe they’re really angry or they’re laughing at you.”

“You don’t want to feel anything?” Techie asked.

“Getting mad makes you sloppy. Get sloppy, get hit.”

“Oh,” Techie said. Then, more quietly: “You’ve been hit before. Was it because you got mad?”

Matt waited a moment before nodding. When Jason had punched him square in the face it had been after the fight with Kyle. Madeline had called him a stupid meathead.

“Have you hit anybody?” Techie asked. His tone had some forced lightness to it.
“Yeah. A couple weeks ago I hit a guy’s glove and it hit him in the face. It was actually kind of funny—”

“What about outside of boxing?”

Gape-mouthed, Matt stared up at Techie. His skin tingled and his stomach dropped.

“You said my mom hit you the other day…”

“I didn’t hit her back!”

“No,” Techie said. “I know.”

“Okay,” Matt said, suddenly angry. The wind shushed through their silence.

“Matt,” Techie said.

Matt huffed a sigh.

“I’m sorry.”

“No,” Matt said. “I’m not pissed off because I didn’t hit someone. I’m pissed because I did.”

“What happened?” Techie asked.

After three or four breaths, Matt said, “I was twenty-two. Not really that long ago. I was out in my mom and dad’s car. I didn’t have my own back then. Some guy cut me off in traffic. He put on the brakes and I ran into him. I pull over to the side like you learn in driver’s ed, but I’m just...so mad I can barely see. I walk over to his car and he starts into me, like, ‘You were following me too close!’ And I’m telling him that he cut me off. We’re just sitting there yelling at each other for what seems like forever. I’m getting madder and madder.”

“Did he hit you?”

“No,” Matt said. “I, uh...I grabbed him by the hair and knocked his head on the roof of the car. He had a little cut near his eye. Really little. But it’s amazing how much blood there was. He got quiet after that.” Matt shook his head. “I didn’t see the cop who stopped to check out the accident, but he saw me hit the guy.”

Techie’s eyes were wide. “You got arrested?”

“Yeah,” Matt said, his shoulders sagging. “They asked the guy if he wanted to press charges, and he did. I got charged with assault, but they pleaded it down and I ended up getting two years of probation. That’s why I have this shit job and why I can’t get another one. I wish I had done it when I was under eighteen. Shit, I wish I hadn’t done it at all.” He was afraid to look up.

“You’re not that same person,” Techie told him. It was said with assurance.

Matt shook his head. “I still get mad. Still do stupid stuff when I’m mad.”

“You didn’t do anything when my mom hit you.”

“I would never hit her.”

“You were just mad at me, and you didn’t do anything.”
Matt looked up to see Techie staring down at him, a slight smile on his face. Matt’s eyes stung, his throat clotted. “I would cut off my arm before I did anything to you. I’d never, ever hurt you.”

Techie put his slim, white hand on Matt’s shoulder. “I know.”

When they had swung down from the tree, feet splashing into the soggy purple leavings, Techie reached over and took Matt’s hand for a moment—just a brief squeeze. Matt felt the phone in his back pocket spring to life, buzzing with insistence. He squeezed Techie’s hand then dropped it, reaching into his pocket.

“Hey, Jessy.”

“You guys still on for the fair tomorrow?” Jessy’s voice was bright, rapid.

“Yeah, I took the day off work,” Matt said.

“What about Turkey?”

Matt looked over at Techie. “Hold on,” he told Jessy. He took the phone away from his ear. “You still want to come to the state fair tomorrow, right?”

Techie nodded and gave a little wave.

“He’s in,” Matt told Jessy. “And he says hi.”

“Say hi for me. So we’re meeting in the Red Robin parking lot at seven.”

“Seven?” asked Matt.

Laughing, Jessy said, “Yeah, it’s about an hour and a half to Sedalia. We want to have a full day. So you better be there on time.”

Matt winced. “Okay, we will.” He ended the call. To Techie: “We’re meeting at Red Robin at seven tomorrow morning.”

Techie shuffled his feet. “Can you pick me up? It would take forever to take the bus out there.”

“Yeah, of course,” Matt said. “I was planning on it. I’ll probably be there tomorrow at six-thirty. I mean at our usual spot.”

“Okay, I’ll be there, too. Is there anything you want me to bring?”

Smiling, Matt said, “Just you. And sunscreen, probably.”

He was up and out the door the next morning long before Kyle rolled out of bed, eschewing his usual jeans for a pair of cargo shorts he hadn’t put on in a year or so. It was going to be hot. Smiling at the burgundy smears on his sneakers, he put them on and headed out to the car. First stop was the bank. Matt withdrew forty dollars—all he could afford—and hoped it would take him far enough. The new sun at his back, he drove toward Crescent Heights, making it with a minute to spare before six thirty. Techie was already standing there, his hands in his pockets. His shirt was a shade of yellow that Matt swore could be seen from the space station.

“New shirt?” Matt asked.

Techie looked down at his own front, pulling the fabric out as if he had forgotten what he was wearing. “Light colors reflect sun rays,” he said, then shrugged. “I figured it would keep me cool.”
Matt laughed. “I stopped at the bank. Do you need to get cash?”

Shaking his head, Techie dug a folded pair of hundred dollar bills from his pocket. “Do you think I’ll need any more than that?”

“Jesus,” Matt said. “I think you’re good.” He couldn’t see Jessy’s car when they pulled into the lot, but as soon as they parked, Jessy got out of a dark blue Hyundai and waved them down. “Hey,” she said, grinning. “Travis said we can take his car.”

The sedan smelled of chemicals when they got in. Both Techie and Matt scraped their shoe soles along the pavement to grind off any cherry residue before stepping onto the pristine floor mats.

It was a bit beyond Matt why—outside of showing it off—Travis would want to take his new car to the inherently filthy state fairgrounds, but he wasn’t about to look that particular gift horse in the mouth. “We’ll give you some gas money,” he told Travis.

Then they were off and headed eastward with the sun in their eyes, filling the car with excited chatter.

“So,” Jessy asked everyone, “what’s the one thing that you really want to do at the fair?”

“Just one?” Travis asked.

“The one you want to do most,” she said.

“Eat,” Matt said. “I want fried dough. Or a deep-fried Snickers bar or something.”

“I want to ride the ferris wheel,” Jessie announced. “At night, so you can see the whole fairground lit up.”

Travis looked over at her with a smile. “I want to play games. Like balloon races or those little basketball games where you can win prizes. I’ll win you a big stuffed unicorn or something.”

“Ugh,” Jessy said. “Then I have to lug it around all day.”

“I want to see the animals,” Techie said.

“Well, the fair opens at nine, so I think we’ll have time to do all of that,” said Jessy.

On the flat plain, Matt could see the fairground for what seemed like miles before they reached it. People were already milling around the front entrance, which was a makeshift gate at least three stories tall, flanked with striped awnings. Bored country kids waited at the turnstiles. Some attendees were already holding large, yellow tickets, but Jessy had to ask where to get them.

At the booth, Techie went first. He said, “Four, please,” and peeled off one of the hundred-dollar bills. Eyes widened behind him.

“We’ll get lunch,” Jessy said, nudging Travis with her elbow.

Even though it was early yet, when they walked through the gate and onto the fairground proper, Matt could already smell roasting hot dogs and fryer grease. The tang of manure and the dry, pleasing scent of hay underlaid it all. He looked down at the layer of gray dust gathering on his shoes, then resolved not to look down again. Travis’s car was going to be a disaster when they arrived back home.

Jessy had gotten a printed map of the entire grounds with which she was fumbling in the warm
wind. “Looks like the 4-H barns are just over there. You want to check out the animals first, Turkey?”

Techie looked over at Matt then nodded.

The odor became a stench the closer they came to the barns, but Techie didn’t seem to mind. Matt breathed through his mouth, but swore he could taste the reek.

“Oh, look! How adorable!” Jessy was inside the barn and was pointing out something in a pen. The something turned out to be a pair of miniature donkeys. Unafraid, they came up to the edge of the pen, barely able to put their tiny muzzles over the top bar. Jessy reached out and petted the fuzz over one set of sniffing nostrils. “Come on, Turkey,” she said.

Techie reached out with long fingers and patted the second donkey’s muzzle, then traced a line from the white star on its forehead to its upper lip.

Matt smiled.

They moved down the rows, looking at skittish sheep and goats, strutting roosters, pigs. The shy-but-proud kids who had raised the animals would often wave and encourage their pets to go greet the four of them.

“I never had a pet of my own,” Techie told Matt.

“What about Peaches?”

“My mom bought her. I wanted a kitten. But my allergies were too bad.”

“Are you going to be okay here?”

He blinked. “I need to wash my hands afterward. But I brought my drops. Still, it’ll probably hurt pretty badly by the end of the day.”

“You should have told me,” Matt said.

“No,” Techie said, smiling. “I wanted to go.” He smoothed the flat of his hand over the nose of a black-and-white Holstein cow whose coat seemed somehow bright and untouched by the billowing dust within the barn. “Did you ever have a pet?”

Matt tried to pet the cow, too, but it lifted its head and turned back to the fuzzy-haired child that stood behind the pen. “My parents had an old dog when I was born. I think I was five when he died. I didn’t really understand that he wasn’t coming back.”

“And you never got another one?”

“I think my parents had enough problems trying to take care of me.” Matt laughed. “They never had another kid, either.”

“Yeah,” Techie said, looking down at his dirty Chuck Taylors.

Matt bumped him with his shoulder. “What would you name a kitten if you got one?”

Techie beamed. “Andromeda.”

Outside of the stifling atmosphere of the barns, the scent of food was tantalizing. “You guys want to get something to eat?” Matt asked. They had to stop at one of the portable restroom stations so...
Techie could wash his hands. Matt could tell he was trying very hard not to rub at his eyes. “Got your drops?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Techie said, with a sigh of relief.

“There’s a Philly cheesesteak stand over there that smells amazing,” Travis said, pointing.

Jessy made a face. “I don’t think I want to eat what I was just petting.”

“It’s not the same cow.”

“Still,” she said.

Travis slipped his arm around Jessy’s waist. “So...chicken?”

She kissed his cheek. “I really hate you right now.”

Settling on slices of cheese pizza and Cokes, the four of them sat on a splintery picnic bench. Matt swabbed away the film of grease around his lips with a paper napkin.

“How’s it going so far, Turkey?” Jessy asked.

Techie dug the knuckle of his forefinger into his eye then sneezed. “Great.”

“I can’t wait to ride the ferris wheel,” said Jessy. The huge ride dominated the skyline of the fair, dwarfing some of the other rides—even the swinging pirate ship. Its slow progress up, over, and down repeated itself again and again.

“Let’s do it now,” Travis said.

“No, no,” she said. “We have to wait until it’s dark. It’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen.”

When Matt looked over, Techie was looking at him.

“So,” Travis said, “who wants to hit the midway?”

“Midway to what?” Matt asked.

Techie nudged him. “It’s what they call the part with all the games.”

With a slight blush, Matt said, “Not yet. I have to get some fried dough.” He looked over at Techie, then nudged him back. “Split it with me?”

“Sure,” Techie said.

The squiggles of dough were crispy and too hot to touch at first, smothered with powdered sugar. Jessy pretended to sneeze and blew the excess sugar from her plate all over the front of Travis’s shirt, prompting some indignant noises. Techie took small fingerfuls, tearing and tapping off the powder onto the grease-laden paper plate before bringing it up to his lips. Beautiful lips. He still ended up with a white smudge on the tip of his nose. Matt mimed wiping his nose and Techie caught the hint.

“I’m ready for my close-up.” Jessy had patted the sugar around her nostrils and was swaying, her hands describing swirls in the air.

Everyone laughed.
“I’ll be in my trailer,” she added.

The midway was filled with carnival music punctuated by sighs of disappointment from children who had failed to knock down the bottles or flip their plastic frogs onto lily pads in the middle of shallow, chlorinated pools. Harried adults forked over more dollars for additional tries.

They let Travis have his lead when it came to which games to play. He shunned the ones he thought were “too easy,” like balloon darts or the water-powered horse races. When Matt asked Techie if he wanted to play anything, he only shrugged. Matt and Travis went head-to-head on the basketball goal, but after spending three dollars each neither of them had made a basket. Jessy cooed over the shiny-scaled and pastel stuffed lizards at the frog pond, but even she couldn’t send one of the cheap plastic things sailing anywhere other than the water. Matt thought Travis looked relieved; he no doubt wanted to be the one to step up and win her something.

At the booth where the aim was to knock over a stack of bottles, Travis hit four of the six, but Matt got all of them. Flushed with pride, he told Techie to pick a prize from the menagerie hanging above from the awning.

He chose an enormous purple bear, its neck already somewhat limp and devoid of stuffing, but he seemed embarrassed when it was handed over to him.

“Aww,” Jessy said. “That’s cute.”

Travis had picked out a small black-and-white stuffed cat for Jessy, which she held by its tail, swinging it in arcs as wide and slow as the pirate ship ride.

“Here,” Techie said, holding out the bear toward Jessy. “Take this one.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “It’s okay. You won it.”

“Matt won it. But I don’t need it. I don’t have any room.”

With a regretful tone, Travis said, “Come on, Jess. It’s what you wanted.”

She smiled and took the bear by its arm, hugging it. “Do you want my cat?” she asked Techie.

“Sure.”

When she tossed it his way, he almost fumbled it into the dirt, but caught its long tail at the last moment with a relieved smile. Still, he brushed off its face as if it had fallen.

“It only has whiskers on one side,” Matt said. “Do you want to get another one?”

Techie put the toy under his arm. “Nope.”

“Let’s go ride things!” Jessy shouted, jumping up and down, the bear flopping.

“You’ll need a seat for him,” Travis said.

“He can sit between us.”

As they wandered off toward the cluster of clattering rides, Matt poked Techie gently in the ribs, making him twist and jump.

“What?” Techie asked.
Matt pointed toward the toy he held. “Andromeda.”

Techie’s smile was secretive but brilliant.

Matt opted out of most of the rides; just looking at the spinning cars made him ill. Jessy and Travis plowed through the entire setup methodically, careering from one to the next without recovering their equilibrium. Techie and Matt joined them on a few, including a “haunted house” ride that ran a rickety track through a dark and redolent space populated by animatronic skeletons and featuring plastic ribbons that would trail over the faces of riders like spiderwebs.

Jessy’s stubborn refusal to try the ferris wheel until it was dark put them back at the food stands at dusk. Techie got corn on the cob dipped in liquid butter and Matt opted for corn dogs with a liberal splashing of mustard. Jessy and Travis were feeding each other ice cream from a shared cup.

“You guys want to stick around for the concert?” Travis asked, folding and unfolding the paper guide to the fair.

“We’ll get home so late,” Jessy said. “I have to work tomorrow.”

“What is it?” Techie asked, rubbing at his eyes.

“Some band called Steppenwolf,” Travis said. “Ever heard of them?”

“Nope,” Matt said.

“I think they’re from the seventies,” Techie told them.

“So a bunch of old guys trying to rock out,” Jessy said. “Nice.”

By the time all of the fairy lights had flickered on and the food stands had turned on the lamps dangling from the eaves, the line at the ferris wheel had unexpectedly tapered off.

Jessy, slinging the stuffed bear around, said to Travis, “I think this means we can get our own car.” She turned to Matt and Techie. “Sorry, guys. I want a romantic ride.”

“Yeah,” Travis said, rolling his eyes. “You, me, and Ronald.”

Matt laughed and Techie joined in. “You named it ‘Ronald?’”

“Doesn’t he look like a Ronald?” Jessy asked with a wink.

At the top of the ramp leading to the ferris wheel’s platform, the sleepy attendant asked Jessy how many were riding.

“Two,” she said, taking Travis’s hand.

“Three, counting the bear,” he said.

Matt waited behind the line with Techie while Jessy and Travis boarded.

“How many?” the attendant asked.

“Two,” Techie said. “And a half,” he added, holding up the stuffed cat and making Matt chuckle.

The blue-painted car swung gently as they climbed in, one on each bench, facing each other. Techie put the cat on the seat beside him.
To Matt’s surprise, after the door shut and they began moving, Techie slipped over to sit beside Matt, his slight weight moving the swinging car only a little.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Matt said back. “Are you having a good time?”

Techie nodded.

“How are your eyes?”

Looking out across the shrinking landscape of lighted booths then back at Matt, Techie said, “I can see what’s important.”

The wheel stopped at what was almost its zenith to let more riders on, leaving the car creaking and swinging.

“I’m always afraid these things are going to break,” Matt said.

“If we fall then we fall,” said Techie.

“God, don’t say that.”

Twisting around to glance behind and above them, Techie whispered, “Look.”

When Matt craned his neck to see the next car over, he caught sight of Travis and Jessy sharing deep kisses, Jessy’s small hand on Travis’s cheek and Ronald the bear lying neglected in the seat across from them, his plastic eyes catching reflected light.

“That bear looks creepy,” Matt said, a sudden lump in his throat.

“I wish we could do that,” Techie whispered. “I wish I could…”

“What?”

He only half-smiled and reached over to take Matt’s hand.

Matt rubbed what he was certain was a calloused thumb over Techie’s smooth knuckles, feeling in turn the rises and the divots between them. The ferris wheel started again, taking them uninterrupted to the top.

“Jessy was right,” Techie said.

Matt huffed a laugh. “She usually is.” The fairground twinkled below them, winking with the wind and dust.

“I’m glad I got a chance to meet her.”

“Yeah,” Matt said, noticing not even a slight sting of regret when he said, “it seems like Travis is really good for her.”

“Do you want to be like they are?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Techie hesitated, “together.”
“Well, aren’t we?” Matt asked.

“I don’t want to see anybody else,” said Techie. “I don’t want to be with anybody else.”

“No,” Matt said. “Me neither.”

As the wheel turned and their car descended, Techie pulled his hand away. “I hate this.”

Matt nodded. “I know.”

They both adjusted their expressions, smiling as they exited the car, both ducking to avoid hitting their heads on the doorway. Techie reached back inside and grabbed the stuffed cat.

“See?” Jessy said. “Wasn’t that magic?”

“Yeah,” Techie said. “I liked the lights.”

Matt thought better of making a comment about Jessy and Travis’s mid-air makeout session, opting instead to nod and say, “I hate to do it, but we should probably go home.”

“I know,” Jessy said. “Oh, well. We had fun, though, didn’t we?”

The thin strains of faraway rock music began to drift over to them, wafting on and off in the variable wind like the smells from the food stands. The four of them started the long trek out to the parking lot.

“Ronald will have to sit between you two,” Jessy said, sticking out her tongue. “Remember to buckle him in.”

“Ronald is going in the trunk,” said Travis, spinning his keys around his finger.

Matt tried his best to scrape off the dirt that had accumulated in the treads of his shoes, but it was largely to no avail. Travis stomped on the grass, trying to do the same thing but ultimately giving up himself.

They piled in the car, still dogged by the residual scents of hay and grease.

A few miles out, Matt could still see the lights over the plain. He flinched then smiled when a purple flower of light burst over the fairground. It was followed by red, blue, white—a gold burst that fell like a chandelier for endless seconds. “Hey.” He nudged Techie softly.

Techie’s head lolled, coming to rest on Matt’s shoulder. He was fast asleep.

Unconcerned for once about consequences, Matt dropped Techie off right in front of his house, switching his headlights off until Techie had gotten inside the door. He had yet to find out from his parents what time lunch would be, but it was agreed that Matt would pick Techie up and they would meet Leah and Harold at the diner.

The next afternoon, his mother called and asked for the address of the restaurant. Matt had to look it up on the computer, having not thought about it until then. He only knew that it was his and Techie’s spot.

If he left right then, he could swing by and pick up Techie and meet his parents at approximately the time they had given. Throwing on a t-shirt and jeans, Matt went out to the car and headed toward Crescent Heights. Much to his surprise, Techie was wearing a button-down shirt, making him feel suddenly underdressed. He looked to be in supreme discomfort in the thing, as he kept...
tugging at the cuffs and collar.

“Whoa,” Matt said. “You didn’t have to dress up.”

Techie’s voice held the slightest tremor. “I’m meeting your parents.”

“They, uh…” Matt started.

“They don’t know. It’s okay.”

If Matt heard correctly there was a hint of disappointment in Techie’s tone.

“You know,” he said as he got in the car, “you should probably introduce me as Ryan.”

Matt grimaced. “It sounds so weird.”

“So will ‘Techie.’ At least to them.”

“Okay, I guess.”

Techie gave a slim smile. “Maybe sometime later.”

“Yeah,” Matt said, trying to echo the smile.

Of course, Matt’s parents had already gotten a table at the diner when Matt and Techie walked in. They had sweating cups of water in front of them, the straws still wrapped. There was only one glass of water on the other side of the table.

“Hi, Mattie,” Leah said, getting up to hug him.

Harold stayed seated. Matt figured it must be a bad back day, and he shot his dad a concerned look until he gave him a thumbs-up. “Happy birthday, son.”

“Now, who’s this?” Leah asked, looking Techie up and down but smiling all the while.

“This is my friend, uh, Ryan,” Matt said.

Leah grinned. “Oh, wonderful. Well, come here. All Mattie’s friends get hugs.”

Techie stood stiff as Leah wrapped him in a warm embrace.

“Good lord,” she said. “Let’s get this child some food. You’re made of nothing, Ryan.”

Matt laughed. “He eats like a horse, too.”

Making Matt hide his face a little, Leah called across the diner to their server for another glass of water. Techie ordered a chocolate milkshake and Leah ordered a diet soda (“Light on the ice, please”). They went through the routine introductions: asking Techie what he does, where he’s from, how he and Matt met.

“So you’re going to be a computer programmer,” Harold said. “I hear there’s good money in that.”

“Maybe,” Techie said, ducking his head. “For more experienced programmers.”

Matt cut in. “Tec—Ryan is really good. He fixed my computer, too.”

“That was awfully nice of you, Ryan,” Leah said.
“What do your parents do?” asked Harold.

“Dad—”

“What?”

“My mom doesn’t work,” Techie said. “My dad, um, passed away last year.”

Leah’s brows drew in. “Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.”

When the server came by to take their order, Harold opted for a burger and Leah for a grilled chicken salad, which Matt ordered as well. Techie had a BLT sandwich.

“A salad, Mattie? Really?”

“I have to have something green to make up for all the junk I ate yesterday.”

“What did you do yesterday?” Leah asked.

“We went to the State Fair. Me and...Ryan and Jessy and her boyfriend, Travis.”

“Jessy your ex?” asked Harold.

“Hal,” said Leah.

Matt nodded. “We’re kind of friends now.”

“She’s really nice,” Techie said.

In a conspiratorial tone, Leah leaned in and asked, “What’s her new boyfriend like? Probably not as good looking as you, huh?”

“Mom!”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Was that rude?”

Techie shook his head.

“He’s a good guy,” Matt said.

“So what did you do at the fair?” Harold asked, looking past Leah’s head for signs of the server returning with their plates. “Ate a lot, I guess.”

“Travis and Jessy rode all the rides,” Matt told them. “We saw a whole bunch of the animals.”

Quietly, Techie said, “Matt won Jessy a giant purple bear.”

“Oh, do tell,” Leah said. “Trying to take her away from her new beau?”

Matt rolled his eyes. “Mom, jeez.” He snuck a look over at Techie. “And no. No chance.”

The food was quick to come and they sat, largely silent as they ate.

“Is Kyle doing something for your birthday?” Leah asked. “You said he might.”

Matt tried to hold back a frown. “Yeah, he’s throwing a party this Friday.”
“Are you going, Ryan?” asked Leah.

Techie looked over at Matt.

“Yeah,” Matt said, looking over at Techie in turn. “If you want to.”

“Sure,” Techie said.

As the server came and collected their plates, she asked whether anyone wanted a slice of pie or an ice cream sundae. All four of them begged off. Techie said he had to run to the bathroom, and Matt got out of the booth to let him by.

“He seems like a very nice young man,” Leah said. “Somehow very different from some of your other friends.”

“He’s great,” Matt said, trying to silence his mother with a look.

Shoulders hunched, Techie came back to the table and scooted into the booth again.

Harold signaled the server over. “Could we get the check, please?”

“Oh,” she said, “you’re all taken care of.”

“What do you mean?”

She pointed at Techie. “That guy paid.”

Harold and Leah’s jaws dropped in tandem.

“No, no,” Harold said. “Give the young man his money back. I’ll pay.”

“Please,” Techie said, in the most assertive voice Matt had ever heard from him. “I insist.”

At that, Leah smiled. “Thank you, hon. Are you sure?”

“Totally.”

Matt might have imagined his mother’s shoulders relaxing with relief, but he was still almost twisted inside with a surge of affection for Techie. He put his hand under the table and ran two fingers along Techie’s arm.

Outside the diner they said their goodbyes, both Harold and Leah thanking Techie and Harold shaking his hand over and over.


“Thanks, Mom.”

Techie and Matt walked back to Matt’s car, quiet for a few moments.

Then Matt said, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I know,” said Techie.

“Thanks.”
“Happy birthday. Is it really today?”

“No, it’s Tuesday,” Matt said. “I have to work.”

Matt started the car and Techie turned his head to look at him. “I don’t really want to go home yet.”

“Okay. We don’t have to.”

“What should we do?”

Matt thought for a moment. “We could go to the lake.”

“What lake?”

“I don’t know what it’s called. It’s pretty, though.”

Techie grinned. “Okay.”

With Matt’s gas tank indicator still at about halfway, he got on 40 the way he remembered Madeline driving in the Audi a millennium ago. The sun’s rays were slanting through the trees, flicking on and off the car in indecipherable code. They rode with the windows down, Techie’s hair flying. He had his hands knotted on his lap but a slight smile on his face.

“I like your parents,” Techie said. “I like how they call you ‘Mattie.’”

“Oh, God, my mom has called me that since forever. Listen, I’m sorry they asked about your parents.”

“It’s no problem. Everybody does. It’s not like it’s not true that my dad’s dead.” He looked out the window.

Matt was silent for a while. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the party.”

“You did,” Techie said. “Just now.”

“Do you want to come? I won’t know very many people there, either. It’s really just an excuse for my housemate and his friends to get drunk.”

A pause. “Yeah. I do.”

When the water was in sight, Matt looked for the sign he had seen: Lake Ridge Road. He pulled onto a street called Turkey Hollow, which made him laugh under his breath, then they were on the byway at the northeastern end of the lake. He couldn’t remember exactly where Madeline had gone last time, but if he drove down to the waterfront and angled the car right they could probably see the sunset, at least before it dropped off behind the trees.

The wind over the water lifted the ends of Techie’s hair as Matt parked the car just off the shoulder of the road.

“Do you mind if I take this off?” Techie asked, unbuttoning the cuffs of his dress shirt.

“No, of course not.” When he saw that Techie had on a bright green t-shirt underneath, he grinned.

“So this is it,” Matt said, looking through the windshield to where the limp dusk wind played a little with the water. “I guess it’s not as nice as I remembered.”
“No,” Techie said. “It’s pretty. Did you come here when you were a kid?”

Matt shook his head. “I came here for the first time with Madeline.”

Techie’s gaze was questioning, but not offended. “What did you talk about?”

“Your dad,” Matt said. “She was in a really bad place that day. I remember coming into the house, seeing that she’d been crying.”

Techie nodded.

Matt paused a few seconds. “She told me how her parents died.”

At that, Techie’s eyes went wide. “She talked about her parents?”

“A little bit. She didn’t really tell me anything about them.”

“Was it a car accident?” Techie asked.

“No,” Matt said. “They were sick, or something.”

“I wish I had gotten to know them,” Techie said. The light on his forehead and cheeks was turning a slow and limpid orange.

Matt scratched his chin. “Maybe she didn’t want you to.”

Techie’s voice was brittle. “She didn’t want me to know anything about her. She doesn’t really want to know anything about me.”

“She keeps your birth certificate. And the...what-do-you-call-it...the sonogram from before you were born.” At seeing Techie’s shock, Matt said, “She didn’t show them to me. I sort of snooped. When she was in Spain. Remember when you told me she liked the idea of being in love with your dad? Maybe more than she actually liked him?”

Techie nodded, slow and solemn. “She likes the idea of me. Not what I am.”

“It’s not because…”

“Because what?”

“You know,” Matt said, blushing. “You like guys.”

With a sad smile, Techie said, “No. My dad didn’t care because he loved me. My mom doesn’t care because it doesn’t affect her. Well, didn’t care, until it did.”

“You think she knows.”

“She’s not stupid,” Techie said. “Just selfish. Anyway, don’t you like guys?”

“I like you.”

Techie blinked, then smiled. “I like you, too. I like kissing you. I like the way your hands feel.” He stopped, rubbed at his eyes. “I like it when you touch me.”

“Um, I like touching you.”

Looking around them at the silent lake, the silent road, Techie said, “Will you kiss me? I don’t
think there’s anyone here.”

Unable to help himself, Matt shot a glance over his shoulder. When he looked back, Techie was staring at his lap, but Matt reached out, tipped his chin up, brought him closer. The kisses they shared were slow and familiar, indulgent.

Techie reached over the center console and put his hand in Matt’s lap, rubbing circles.

Matt closed his eyes and breathed in.

“I want you,” Techie said.

Opening his eyes, Matt said, “We can’t do it here.”

“No,” Techie said, “but soon. Do you know what we need?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Uh, yeah. I’ll pick some up tomorrow.” He was getting hard under Techie’s touch.

Techie went for the button of Matt’s jeans with nimble fingers, popping it free. He pinched the zipper tab between thumb and forefinger and pulled.

“Wait,” Matt said.

“It’s okay,” Techie told him. “This is what I wanted to do at the fair.” He reached into Matt’s boxers and drew out his half-hard cock. The car was filled with a wild pink-red glow as Techie leaned over and took Matt’s cock in his mouth. It was so sweet; it almost doubled Matt over. Instead, with another look around the verge of the lake, he tipped his seat back a little and let Techie suck him to hardness. Techie wrapped him in a firm grip and took him in as far as he could into his mouth. He gagged a little, but it was earnest.

“Oh, yeah,” Matt said, placing his hand on Techie’s back.

Techie hummed in response, sending an electric shudder up Matt’s spine. His breath ruffled Techie’s hair, which was bronzed in the fading daylight. Techie moved his hand, tucked a strand of hair behind his ear, then returned the slim, clever fingers to Matt’s cock.

His vision going brown around the edges, Matt tried to keep from raising his hips, just allowing Techie free rein. He dragged his short fingernails down Techie’s back. “Oh, God. Baby, you feel so good.”

Techie stopped and sat up, his lips wet and red. “Say it again.”

Confused, Matt asked, “You feel good?”

“No. The other thing.”

“Baby,” Matt said.

Techie smiled and bent down, shutting his eyes and closing his lips around Matt’s cock once again.

Matt stroked his hair. “You feel amazing, baby. Don’t stop.” The sounds Techie was making were turning Matt on just as much as the mouth on his cock. He was close to the edge largely before he was even aware of it. “Techie,” he said. “I’m going to come.”

In response, Techie only hummed again and did something with his tongue that had Matt gasping.
Biting his lip, Matt shivered and came hard, reveling in the sensation of Techie swallowing around him.

He stayed for a long time, letting Matt go slowly soft in his mouth. Every swipe of his tongue was at once pleasure and torment, and Matt finally had to take him by the shoulder and say, “Please…”

Techie sat up and passed the back of his hand over his lips.

“Damn,” Matt said, stroking his cheek, “that was incredible.” He put his hand over Techie’s groin but Techie moved it away.

“It’s okay. I just wanted to make you feel good.”

“You do. You always do.”

They drove back holding hands. Matt dropped Techie off in front of his house again, the lights inside long since gone dark, if they were ever on at all. Madeline seemed a spirit—both haunting the house and disappeared from it, with Matt and Techie’s anxiety the only thing keeping her tethered.

Between work and boxing the next day, Matt—his heart thumping—stopped into a pharmacy. He knew approximately where to find what he was looking for. Mixed in with the condoms and contraceptives, he saw a small, clear bottle. *Personal Lubricant,* it read. He was close to sticking it in his pocket he was so uneasy about checking it out, but the last thing he needed was a shoplifting rap. He bought a bottle of Coke along with it, unable to look at the cashier. Considering leaving it in the car while he was at the gym, he wasn’t sure whether the heat would affect it, so he popped it into the bottom of his gear bag and prayed no one had the audacity to rummage through it while he was fighting.

Afterward, sweaty and wrung out, he got back into his car to find a text from Jessy.

*Hey birthday boy. Want to get dinner tomorrow?*

*I’m working,* he texted back. *Then boxing.*

*You’re no fun.*

*My boss is no fun.*

*How about I bring you dinner at work? We can eat in the car. I’ll get you a bleu burger from RR.*

Matt felt his mouth start to water at the idea.

*Wow. Hard to pass that up.*

*Then don’t,* Jessy texted. *I can meet you where you work. Txt me the address. What time?*

*5?* Matt shot back.

*Done.*

He was almost home when he realized he had forgotten to send her a *Thanks.* The promise of a fat burger before boxing was the only thing that kept him going through a grueling schedule of installations the next day. He had to wave Jessy down as she sped past the dispatch center. She made a very illegal u-turn down the street and came back, driving into the employee lot.

“Good thing there wasn’t a cop,” Matt said, eyes going wide at the two grease-stained paper bags that Jessy hauled out of the passenger seat of her car.
“Never been pulled over yet.” She rapped her knuckles against Matt’s head. “Knock on wood.”

“Oh, ha, ha,” he said.

“Let’s eat in my car. Yours has been sitting out all day.”

Matt gave a noise of assent, grateful to hold off having to get into his baking hot car for another few minutes. “Oh, man,” he said, climbing in to a blast of air conditioning. “You got us drinks, too.”

“I put a shitload of ice in them, so they might be really weak by now. But yeah,” Jessy said, “who’s the man?”

Making a confused face, Matt said, “You are?”

“Damn right.” She took a huge bite of her own burger, which dripped Ranch dressing out the back onto her pile of fries. “So, how does it feel to be twenty-six?”

“Same as twenty-five,” Matt said, swallowing a lump of meat and bread. “Maybe a little more scary.”

“Why?”

“I’m going off my parents’ insurance. Got nothing to fall back on, pretty much.”

“Get married to somebody who has insurance,” Jessy laughed.

“Ugh,” Matt said. “I am so not ready to be married.”

“Just dating?”

“Yeah,” Matt said, cautious. “Just dating. Hey, do you want to come to my birthday thing on Friday? Just a few people getting together at the house. Lots of beer.”

Jessy screwed up her face. “No offense, but if it’s just Kyle and his friends, I’d rather not.”

He laughed. “You called it.”

“Is Turkey going?”

“Yeah.”

“Just...take care of him.”

“Kyle’s not that much of a dick, I don’t think.”

“I mean in general.”

A sliver of worry sliced into Matt’s belly. “Okay...”

“He’s a good guy,” Jessy said, her burger all but forgotten.

“Yeah,” Matt said, still confused. “He is.”

“I wish you could see the way he looks at you,” Jessy said, her voice soft.

“What? How does he look at me?”
She let a soft smile creep onto her face. “The same way you look at him.”

“Wait,” Matt said. “You think I’m—we’re…”

Jessy put a hand on his arm. “It’s okay if you were. If you are. I think it’s awesome, actually.”

“He’s the best friend I’ve had in a long time,” Matt said, letting his shoulders relax a little. “Apart from you.”

“Turkey’s great. You’re great, um, together.”

With a debate raging in his mind for a few moments, Matt paused. Then he let out a deep breath. “Thanks.”

Jessy beamed and squeezed his hand.

“I just wanted to let you know,” Matt said, “I really like Travis. He’s good for you.”

She ducked her head, her smile going shy. “I like him, too.”

“Invite me to the wedding. Only if he has insurance.”

“I hate you,” Jessy said, smiling and punching him softly on the arm.
Chapter 12

Techie’s strawberry-blond brows were drawn low over his irritated eyes when Matt pulled up to the pick-up spot on Roundtree. He was rubbing his hands together so hard they broke out in red blotches.

“What’s going on?” Matt asked as he pushed the passenger door open for Techie.

Seemingly able to breathe at last once he was in the car, Techie let his clenched hands relax in his lap. “I think my mom is having another one of her bad days. It happens sometimes.”

“I know,” Matt said. “I’ve seen it. Did she say anything to you?”

Shaking his head, Techie looked down at his knees. “I could hear her walking all night. From one end of the house to the other. I know because she had her shoes on. From the kitchen to the garage and back. Sometimes she would stop in front of my door—I could hear it—but she never knocked and she never said anything.”

“Did you see her this morning?”

“No,” Techie said. “I guess she was finally asleep.”

Matt exhaled. “Are you worried about her?”

“She’s my mom.”

“Okay. What do you want to do?”

Techie sighed, a brief and flustered noise. “I don’t know.”

“Do you have any way to contact any of her friends?” Matt asked.

Techie tilted his head. “She has friends?”

“At least one that I know of. I went to a party at her place once. Something like that. It wasn’t very fun.”

Scratching his head and blinking, Techie said, “When we spoke that one time last week, all she talked about was Dad.”

Matt swore. “I have no idea what to do.”

“Me neither.”

They sat enrobed in silence on the trip to the college.

“I’ll pick you up in a couple of hours,” Matt said as he pulled up to the computer science building, as if Techie needed his reassurance. No sooner had he turned onto the street where the diner sat than his phone buzzed in his pocket. He nearly ran a red light when Madeline’s name appeared on the screen.

He was jostled in the car as he made a sharp right, bumping up the curb and into a weed-strewn lot. Just before the call ended he accepted it.
“Matt?” Madeline’s voice was weak and watery.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, Matt,” she said, an ugly hiccuping sob following on his name.

“What’s wrong?”

“I need to see you. I need to see someone. I know I don’t deserve it, Matt, but please. I’m having such a terrible time.”

Matt clutched the phone, remembering the sting of her slap across his cheek. “What about Amanda?”

“She’s in Napa.” Madeline gave a short wail. “I thought she would be a better friend, but she’s too concerned about her tacky house and her stupid husband. I wouldn’t call you, darling, but I don’t have anybody. Not anyone.”

He paused. “What can I do?”

Inside her own pause he could hear her heaving breath. “Come see me.”

“I have to—”

“I know!” Madeline shouted. “I mean, I know. I know you have to pick up Ryan. But just give me an hour. Give me someone to talk to for a single hour. I have no one, Matt.”

Biting the inside of his cheek, Matt said, “Okay. An hour. But I can’t stay, Madeline.”

“I don’t expect you to, dear. Oh, Matt. I’ll see you soon.”

It was with his heart pounding and a sour taste in his mouth that Matt entered the Crescent Heights neighborhood. Parking in front of the house next door had the hazy familiarity of déjà vu, seeming at once urgent and removed. The scent of the juniper hedge was one he could now only associate with Techie—rich and fresh as the smell of the soft skin below his ear.

Matt rang the doorbell. No sign of Peaches, which meant she was probably already banished to the back patio. When Madeline answered the door, Matt almost stepped back. She was no one he had seen before. There were deep purple circles underneath her eyes; her skin looked wan and slack. Four pink marks rode over the flesh of her forehead and cheek; she had raked her nails down the side of her face at some point that morning or the night before.

“Madeline,” he said.

Her smile was agony. “Hello, Matt. I know I look a fright. Can you come in?”

Nodding slowly, Matt said, “Sure.”

In the low light of the entryway, Madeline’s abused face was easier to look at, with the harsh edges chiseled off by the soft dark. “I’m having some wine,” she said. “You won’t judge me, will you, darling?”

Matt shook his head.

She slumped against the counter in the quiet kitchen, a half-full glass of red balanced between her second and third fingers.
Feeling both impotent and discomfited, Matt asked, “What’s wrong?”

Madeline’s laugh was cutting. “What isn’t wrong?”

“Techie—I mean, Ryan—”

“No,” she said. “You can call him that. Who am I to care anymore?”

Continuing more quietly, Matt said, “He said that you were pacing around the house last night.”

“He said that, did he?”

“Yeah, and that he was worried about you.”

“Is he really?” Madeline asked, her expression going wistful. “I swear I don’t think I can tell anymore. I can’t read anyone. I used to be so good at telling people’s moods. And believe me, with a father like mine, you had to be able to tell what he was thinking from minute to minute. But now, I could look at you and not know whether you’re happy, or sad, or angry, or you just don’t care.”

“I do care,” Matt said.

Madeline drained the glass of wine. “That’s good to know.”

“Were you pacing around the house last night?”

“I’m afraid I was. I would walk to that damned garage, bound and determined to take my car out and just...wrap it around a tree. Sometimes I had the keys in my hand before I would chicken out, walk back, drink some more.”

“Why didn’t you talk to Techie?”

“Oh, I thought about it,” she said. “I truly did. A couple of times I stopped in front of his door. I know Ryan likes to stay up late.” Madeline squeezed her eyes shut, pinching the bridge of her nose as if fending off a sudden headache. “But you can’t ask your children for things like that. Children are the ones who need you. They’re weak. You have to be strong.”

Soft and low, Matt said, “Techie’s not weak.”

“He doesn’t ever speak to me!”

“You don’t talk to him.”

Madeline scowled. “Oh that’s what Allan was always good at. Reaching out past the divide. Allan was my link.”

“To Techie?” Matt asked.

“To life,” said Madeline, unshed tears swimming above her lower lashes. “You could have been that, too. You were so close. But, then, I suppose that’s too much responsibility to put on someone who just isn’t mature enough.”

“I tried to reach across to you.”

“Yes,” she said. “I realize now that isn’t possible.”

“Why?”
A sudden expression of serenity crossed her face. “I’m not across the divide, Matt. I am the divide. I’m afraid you’ll always have to reach over me to get to Ryan.”

Matt paused. “That’s what it feels like.”

“And that makes me feel a little better. It means I’ll always be in your life somehow.”

“It can’t be like this, Madeline.”

She waved her hand, fingers coming dangerously close to sweeping the glass off the counter. “No, no. Of course not. If you thought I minded that you take him to class, take him other places, I have to tell you I don’t. You and Ryan should have your play dates. I won’t get in the way.”

“What do you want from me?” Matt asked.

“Just consideration. Just respect of my feelings. Maybe you and I can talk every once in a while.”

“You hit me, Madeline.”

“Oh, you can hit me back. I won’t say a thing.”

“No! I don’t want to do that.”

“That’s why you’re a real prince, Matt. So kind to my Ryan. All I ask is that you be a little kind to me, as well.” She ducked her head, her smile wicked. “I promise I won’t try too hard to talk you back into my bed.” Madeline ran her sharp-nailed fingertip down Matt’s bicep.

He moved away.

“I understand,” she said. “I wouldn’t want to touch me looking like this, either. But you’ve made me feel so much better just being here. Don’t I have a little more color?”

Matt said nothing.

“You do realize what this means, dear?” she asked. “You can have your cake and eat it, too. What man gets to say that? Your time with me and your time with Ryan. You don’t have to compromise. Maybe we could all have dinner together. What do you think?”

He took a deep breath. “Madeline…”

She shook her head. “Oh, all right. I know I’ve misbehaved. Are you seeing someone else? Is that it? I shouldn’t have hit you. It was a bad decision. Trust me when I say I know that now.”

Sighing, Matt looked away, toward the entry hall. He felt small fingers on his arm.

“It is that, isn’t it? You’ve found someone else.”

Silent, Matt hoped she couldn’t see his blush in the dim light.

With a shaky sigh, Madeline said, “I suppose I always knew it would come to that. Someone closer to your age, I hope. We’re so different, you and I.”

“I have to pick up Techie.”

“Of course you do. Are you bringing him back here?”
Matt shook his head. “We usually eat after his class.”

Her smile had a sharp edge to it. “Oh, that’s sweet. You have a little routine.”

“I have to go.” He walked toward the entry hall.

“Matt?” came the quavering voice, thin as paper. “Are you fucking my son?”

He stopped cold. Before he could think of anything to say or turn around to face Madeline again something exploded by the side of his head. Tiny shards of the wineglass scattered onto his shoes, into the folds of his shirt.

At last he turned.

“God damn you.”

“Madeline—”

“No, no,” she said, teeth clenched. “You don’t get to talk now. I knew it. I don’t know how, but I knew it. He’s hellbent on taking everything away from me. He took Allan, and now he’s taking you.”

“Allan died in a car accident. Nobody took him away but himself.”

“It shouldn’t have been him!”

“You don’t dare say that.”

She put the heel of her hand to her forehead. “You’re right. I love Ryan. Since before he was even an idea. Do you? Do you love him, too? Tell me, Matt, does my sweet, fragile little son suck cock better than I do?”

“I’m leaving, Madeline.”

“Go!” she screamed. She walked over to the kitchen island, taking the bottle of wine by the neck and hurling it end-over-end toward Matt. He only just managed to duck as it burst on the corner of the wall, half-soaking him in redolent liquid. “Get out of here! Don’t you ever come back! This is my house and nobody else’s!”

Matt’s shirt and jeans were shedding droplets of red as he stepped out onto the stoop. He jogged to his car, now anxious to pick up Techie, though he was out of Madeline’s reach. When he was starting the car, however, the garage door opened and the Audi came tearing out, bumping into and over an ornamental shrub by the driveway. Tires shrieked on pavement as she slammed the car into drive and hit the gas.

Driving a little more recklessly than he should have, Matt headed off toward the college. Techie was waiting outside of his building, clutching the laptop bag to his chest.

“Sorry,” Matt said as he got in the car.

Techie’s forehead crinkled. “What’s that smell?”

Reluctant to speak at first, Matt said, “Wine.”

“Why?”
“Um, your mom threw a bottle at me.”

Techie goggled. “You saw my mom? How is she?”


“Should I go home and see her?”

“She left the house. Peeled out of the driveway right when I was driving away. She had been drinking.”

Techie looked over at Matt, his expression pained. “We should call the police.”

“Seriously?” Matt asked.

Nodding with grave slowness, Techie said, “She could hurt herself or somebody else.”

“Has she ever done this before?”

“No.”

“Hey,” Matt said, reaching over with his wine-sticky hand to take Techie’s. “If she didn’t know before, she knows now.”

“Shit.”

Matt couldn’t help but smile a little. He liked it when Techie swore.

Techie sighed. “Let’s go back to the house. If she’s not there, we should call the police.”

“Okay.”

The Audi was still missing when they returned, the garage door gaping. Matt and Techie went in that way, using the button on the wall to close it. Peaches yapped for a few seconds until she realized who had come in. Techie got on his phone to call emergency services and gave a description of Madeline and of the car.

When he ended the call, Matt said, “You know her license plate number?”

Techie shrugged. “I feel like I should.”

_Children are the ones who need you. They’re weak._ Matt sniffed.

“What?” Techie asked.

“Nothing.”

Going to the fridge for a couple of Cokes, Techie said, “Let’s go downstairs.”

“What if your mom comes back?”

“We’ll deal with it.”

It was warm in the tech cave, the light wan as the hours faded into evening. They popped the tabs on the cold sodas and drank.

“Are you worried about her? Matt asked.
“Are you?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Matt said. “She was in bad shape when she left.”

“I guess that’s why you came over,” Techie said.

“What do you mean?”

Techie shrugged. “Because you were worried about her.”

“I don’t want her to be miserable.”

Placing his hand on Matt’s shoulder, Techie said, “That’s because you’re kind.”

“I’ve never felt kind before. I always felt like I was kind of an asshole.”

Techie said nothing, just put his arms around Matt’s waist and rested his head on his shoulder.

Matt held him, feeling at once as if he could break him with a wrong move and also that Techie was larger and more powerful than he seemed.

“Do you want to lie down?” Techie asked.

“I’m really uncomfortable in these clothes.”

Techie looked at his feet. “I probably don’t have anything that would fit you.”

“It’s okay. I guess I could wear my boxing shorts.” When Techie nodded, Matt went upstairs again, looking back toward the darkened living room for signs of Madeline’s return. The zipper of his gear bag was hot, the sparring gear within heat-wilted and pliable. At least the shorts were inside. As was the little bottle he had bought at the pharmacy. His heartbeat picked up a little as he returned inside.

“Can I shower?” he called from the top of the basement stairs. It was an unusual experience not having to be quiet because Madeline was in the house. It echoed with her absence and yet with them both inside, moving freely, it felt at last full.

Matt showered and put on the shorts, wincing a little at the smell of sweat around the waistband. He carried his filthy clothes downstairs again, leaving them in a pile near the desk.

Unabashed, Techie stared.

Matt looked down at his chest. “What? Did I miss a spot?”

Techie shook his head. “You’re amazing.”

“No, I’m not,” Matt told him, ducking his head.

“Yes, you are,” said Techie. “I like your body. I like everything about it.” He walked up to Matt, took a little of the satiny material of the shorts between his fingers. “It’s bright. Like something I would wear.”

Matt smiled. “It’s my favorite color.”

“I’ve never seen you in it. Not until now.”
“My gloves are orange, too.”

Techie paused. “Do you have to go tonight?”

Matt considered telling the truth. But he didn’t want to leave Techie alone in case Madeline returned. God only knew what she would do or say if she found him there as well. “I can take the night off. It’s fine.” He hoped Techie didn’t notice the little hitch in his chest as he said the words. Phasma was not forgiving.

After an hour, when the Cokes were finished, Techie went up to get two more, feeding the dog, as well. “Are you hungry?” he asked. “We could order something.”

“Not really,” Matt told him.

“Yeah,” Techie said, shuffling the toe of his foot along the unfinished basement floor. “Me neither.”

Trepidation and anxiety turned to boredom as the hours in which Madeline was gone stretched out. Matt and Techie were lying on the bed on their backs, staring up at the ceiling and talking.

“What was she going to do about Peaches?” Matt asked. He turned his head to face Techie, who shrugged.

“I guess assume I would take care of her. Or we would.”

“I don’t think Madeline wants to think about us doing anything together right now.”

Techie stayed silent for long moments. “Let’s not talk about my mom anymore. What happens happens.” He rolled to his side, putting a warm hand on Matt’s bare chest.

Matt grasped the hand and raised it to his lips.

Just as he had done that first time, Techie leaned in past Matt’s shoulder and kissed his neck, slowly across his jaw to his mouth.

Putting a broad hand on his cheek, Matt kissed him deeply in return.

“Did you get it?” Techie asked when they broke.

At first he was unsure what Techie was talking about, but then he remembered the little bottle in the bottom of his gear bag. “Yeah,” he said. “Hold on.”

Techie sat up as Matt scooted off the bed and went to the sad pile of wine-stained clothing near the desk.

He pushed the ruined clothes aside and reached into the bag, drawing the bottle out. “I hope it’s the right kind,” he said, as he handed it to Techie.

“I think so,” Techie said, squinting at it. “I don’t see how it could not be.”

“It’s just...I really don’t want to hurt you.”

Techie smiled, and the expression caused Matt’s chest to ache. “You won’t hurt me. I’m ready. I want this.”

“I want it, too.”
They stood for a couple of seconds, not talking, Techie just holding the small bottle, looking at Matt. He tilted his chin.

“How do we—? How do you—?”

Standing and putting a slim hand on his chest, Techie said, “Just do what we always do. Let it happen.” He ran that same hand up to Matt’s neck, his cheek.

Matt turned his head and kissed Techie’s palm.

Techie ran his thumb over Matt’s lower lip.

At once Matt thought if he didn’t kiss Techie again he would explode; their lips met and his mouth opened over Techie’s. Techie pushed deep into the kiss, letting Matt explore his mouth with his tongue. It was at once comforting and entirely new, given context and intent.

Matt ran his hands up Techie’s sides, below his shirt. Then he pulled him against his chest, tipping Techie’s chin up to kiss him again.

Techie kissed down his neck, running his tongue along Matt’s collarbones.

Matt pushed his hands up underneath Techie’s shirt again, passing a hand over his belly, moving upward to gently pinch his nipples.

Techie breathed a little sigh into his shoulder.

“I want to see you,” Matt said.

Stepping back, Techie pulled off his shirt, shoulders immediately drawing in toward his chest.

“No,” Matt said, taking hold of his biceps, pulling him upward. “You’re, uh...you’re beautiful.”

Techie shook his head. He raised a hand to scratch at his eyes.

Matt pulled it away and kissed both eyes, one after the other.

Techie looked up at him afterward with something like wonder.

Kissing down Techie’s chest, Matt sank to his knees and unfastened the button on Techie’s shorts. He traced his lips through the small line of coppery hair underneath the waistband of his underwear, then unzipped the shorts. They fell from Techie’s narrow hips and he stepped out of them. Matt put his palm over Techie’s cock, which was half-hard already.

“No,” Techie said. His blush spread downward from his hairline.

“No?”

“No yet. I want to...I want to come when you’re inside me.”

Matt squeezed his eyes shut, breathing fast over Techie’s stomach. “Okay.” He stood up, his gaze never leaving Techie’s soft skin, now mottled with his violent flush.

Techie reached into Matt’s shorts, encircling his cock with his hand.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Touch me.”
Tugging at the elastic with one hand, Techie stroked Matt with the other, bringing him to full hardness.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Matt nodded. “Okay, uh. Lie down on the bed?”

A nod in return. He sat on the bed and moved back until only his feet dangled off the edge.

Techie went for the waistband of his underwear, but Matt said, “Let me take them off.” He straddled Techie’s thighs and eased the fabric down over his cock. “I wish I could…”

“Please,” Techie said. “Just wait.”

Matt picked up the bottle where it lay by Techie’s shoulder. He uncapped it and stared down for a moment at his own cock, unsure.

“You have to use your fingers first,” Techie said.

“Oh.” Matt dribbled a little of the lube over his forefinger, slinging his leg back over Techie’s legs. Techie brought his knees up toward his chest. “Just one to start. Then more.”

Matt, fielding horrible uncertainty, lowered his hand and touched Techie, who sighed at the contact. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Pushing his fingertip inside, Matt’s jaw dropped at the slick tightness.

“It’s okay,” Techie told him. “You can go deeper.”

Barely suppressing a groan, Matt pushed his finger in all the way to the knuckle. “Does that feel good?”

“Yeah. Don’t stop. You can move.”

Matt did, awed at the sensation. “Do you want me to put another one in?”

Techie nodded, watching Matt’s hand move, his eyes red-rimmed and wide.

Matt put more of the lube on his fingers, then with a wince, he pushed his middle finger in alongside the first. “Does it hurt?”

“You can stop asking me that. I promise it doesn’t.”

“It’s just...when I—”

“We’ll go slow. When we get there.”

After a few long minutes, Techie asked for another finger, making Matt’s cock twitch and ache. He couldn’t stop watching his hand, the fingers moving in and out of Techie’s body, the muscle stretched around them.

“Now,” Techie said. “I need it.”
Matt nodded, drawing his fingers out. He uncapped the bottle and spread what was probably too much lube over himself; it dripped off him and onto the blanket.

Settling himself between Techie’s spread legs, he tried to guide his cock, slipping a couple of times. “I’m sorry.”

Techie moved his hips and said, “There.”

Then Matt was pushing in, slowly as he possibly could. The feeling was incredible. He wanted more, wanted all of it, but he stopped himself.

Techie’s eyes were closed; he was taking deep breaths.

“Does it—”

Techie opened his eyes. “No. Keep going. I want you.”

Matt moved forward by what felt like millimeters at a time. When he was fully seated within Techie’s body, he sighed, and Techie did the same. “It’s good?”

“Just stay there,” Techie said. “For a second.” He breathed in long and slow. Then: “You can move.”

Matt tipped his hips a little, both reluctant and at the same time desperate to chase the sensation of moving within Techie.

“Yes,” Techie said. He wrapped his arms around Matt’s neck and drew him near, shifting his cock inside him again.

“Oh, fuck,” Matt said, thrusting slowly. “Oh, my God.”

“I want to be good for you,” Techie said, his eyelids fluttering.

“You are,” Matt told him. “Fuck, baby, you feel so good.” He lengthened his thrusts, propping himself up on his hands and moving deeper.

Techie was letting slip little sighs. His eyes flew open when Matt grasped his cock.

“I want you to come,” Matt said.

“Yeah. Don’t stop touching me. I’m close.”

“Uh-huh.”

Only a few strokes and Techie shuddered and cried out, coming hard, the fluid hitting his chin and pooling in the hollow of his throat. “Just like that,” he said. “Just like that.”

Matt sighed, aching, desperate to come watching Techie get off.

Techie muttered something that Matt couldn’t hear.

“What?” He bent closer. “What’d you say, baby?”

“Fuck me,” Techie whispered.

Matt groaned, speeding his hips. He sighed over Techie’s chest, the cooling liquid there. Then he
sat back on his heels, wrapping his arms around Techie’s thighs. Watching his cock move in and out of Techie’s body was the most erotic thing he had ever seen.

“Come here,” Techie said, beckoning him down again to rest, chest-to-chest.

Matt leaned over and Techie put his legs around his waist, raising his hips, allowing Matt even deeper.

“I’m not going to last much longer,” Matt said.

“It’s okay,” Techie said, kissing Matt’s cheekbone. “Come in me.”

Trying and failing to stifle his cry, Matt thrust hard into Techie, letting the waves of his orgasm spill over and through him. Then he was panting, his skin tingling, trying to regain his equilibrium.

Techie stroked fingers through the sweaty curls at his nape.

When Matt looked up at him, he was smiling. “Did it feel good?”

“Better than good. I want to do it again.”

“Damn,” Matt said. “Give me a few minutes.”

Laughing, his expression the purest reflection of joy, Techie said, “I meant later.”

Matt slipped free and rolled to his side, putting his hand over Techie’s sternum.

Techie looked over at him. “You have beautiful eyes.”

Sniffing, Matt said, “They’re just brown. Your eyes are nicer.”

After pulling up a corner of the sheet to wipe down his front, Techie also moved to his side, pressing his back against Matt’s chest.

Matt draped an arm over him, fingers playing through the slim trail of red hair descending from below his navel. “I like this.”

“I’m too soft. Too much time sitting around in front of computers,” Techie said. “Not like you.”

“No,” Matt said. “Stay soft. Stay the way you are.” He paused, silent for a moment, then said, “I guess we never heard anything from the cops.”

“Not yet.” Techie’s voice was tight.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring it up.”

Sighing, Techie said, “No. I just hate the way that we never talk. I mean, my mom and I, but even though I never speak to her she still invades every corner of my life.”

“If I had met you first…” Matt started.

“We’d still have to deal with her. She frustrates me, but I don’t want to cut ties like she did with her family. I do love her.”

Matt pulled Techie close. “I think her parents hurt her. A lot. At least her dad did.”

A short nod. “She never hurt me. Not physically. She just didn’t know what to do with me. I don’t
think she ever should have had children.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It doesn’t mean I don’t want to be here.” He drew Matt’s hand up to his mouth and kissed the knuckles, now pink and white with healed skin. “I’d rather be here than anywhere else.”

They showered and slept, Matt with Techie wrapped in his arms, kissing his white shoulders until he drowsed off. Madeline didn’t come home that night. In the morning, Techie woke Matt with kisses on his fingers and Matt pulled him willingly onto hands and knees and slipped inside him again.

“Do you have to work today?” Techie asked when they were sweat-sheened and satisfied in each other’s embrace.

“No. Tomorrow.”

“I thought tomorrow was your birthday party.”

Something twisted a little in Matt’s gut. “After work.”

“What are you doing today?” Techie asked, his voice brightening. “You can stay here.”

“Well, at some point I promised Kyle I’d go out and help him buy the beer for the party.”

“Your roommate.” It wasn’t a question.


Smiling, Techie said, “Not much. I’ve had beer at student events, but it’s not what I usually think about when it comes to drinks.”

Matt kissed his temple. “We’ll get you some Cokes, too.” When he texted Kyle, he was at work. *Still in bed,* Matt texted back.

*Didn’t hear you come back last night. I was a little buzzed.*

*Didn’t come back last night.*

*Oh reaaaaally is this the rich girlfriend?* Kyle asked.

*Something like that.*

*Go get it Matt!!*

Matt could see Kyle’s smile of lascivious congratulation and it made him feel a little sick. *Beer run today?* he texted back.

*Yeah,* Kyle shot back. *After work.*

*I’ve got all day,* Matt said. To Techie: “I need to get some clothes. The ones I have here are still covered in wine.”

“Oh,” Techie said. “They’re probably ruined. We should have been soaking them in cold water.”

Rubbing his knuckles with fondness against Techie’s head, Matt said, “Oh, so you’re a laundry
genius now? Not just a computer genius?"

With a blank expression, Techie told him, “I’ve been doing my own laundry since I was ten.”

Matt said nothing.

After a few moments, Techie said, “Do you want to go?”

“Well, I guess you get to see my crappy place,” Matt said.

The jeans and shirt were cardboard-stiff and reeked of old alcohol when Matt put them on. Even Techie winced. Both of them were hungry, but it was decided that Matt should get a change of clothes before they went out. He tried to tamp down his embarrassment in pulling up in front of the old brown house, but Techie seemed unconcerned. Matt pulled on a fresh t-shirt and jeans, and was packing up his jumpsuit and another set of clothes when the phone he had thrown on the bed began buzzing. His heart sank when he saw the screen. Phasma.

“You do realize that you’re done, right?” she said, irritation permeating her voice. “No tournament, and your special deal is off.”

“I know,” Matt said.

“You had so much and you threw it all away.”

He looked over at Techie, whose face showed deep concern. “It was worth it.”

“I sure hope so. I had a lot of faith in you, Matt. You let me down.”

After a pause, he said, “Sometimes you have to let people down. To get what you need.”

“Just don’t come back to me with regrets and whining. You’re over, Matt. Good luck.” She ended the call.

He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly, emotion warring in his head.

“What was that?” Techie asked.

“The boxing gym.”

Face looking stricken, Techie put a hand up to his mouth. “You were supposed to go last night. And you didn’t.”

“I wanted to stay with you.”

“Were they angry?”

Matt clenched and unclenched his fists, not in anger but conflicted over what to say to Techie. At last, he breathed, “I got kicked out.”

“Because of me?”

Matt shook his head. “Because of myself. It was my decision.”

Techie’s sigh sounded a little like a sob. “You knew you would be?”

A nod. “I don’t care. I’ll find another gym.” No one, of course, would cut him the same deal as
Phasma had. Though part of what he’d said was a lie, there was a strange, flat, and not entirely unwelcome serenity attached to the finality of his dismissal. Something about the night before had filled a need he hadn’t known he possessed until the missing piece became available. A bit of him wanted to say that was just fuzzy satiation talking, that he would regret it later. And yet it registered as distant, unimportant as he stood in his room next to his narrow bed looking at Techie.

“I don’t want you to lose what you love to do because of me,” Techie said, hanging his head.

Matt stroked his hair. “I’m not losing anything. You’re the most important thing.”

“I won’t leave you,” Techie said.

Through the day there was still no word of Madeline. She could have left the city or driven off the edge of the earth for all they knew. By an unspoken agreement, Techie and Matt had not returned to Techie’s house, though. At about five-thirty, Kyle rolled into the driveway and they went out to greet him.

“Hey, man,” Matt said.

“Hey. Who’s your friend?”

“Uh, Ryan,” Matt said.

“Hi, ‘Uh, Ryan,’” said Kyle, not extending a hand to shake.

“It’s just that everybody calls me something else,” Techie said.

“What do they call you?”


“Techie,” Kyle repeated. “I’m down with that. You guys want to go get some booze?”

Looking over at Matt, Techie shrugged.

“Sure,” Matt said.

They took Kyle’s car. Matt offered to let Techie take the front passenger seat, but he declined, sitting in the back and fastening his seatbelt, keeping his hands in his lap.

“Where are you from, Techie?” Kyle asked.

“California. But I’ve lived most of my life here.”

Kyle barked a laugh. “Yeah, you sort of look like a surfer dude. Not too many waves to ride in KC.”

“No,” was all that Techie said in response.

At the liquor store, they picked up a cheap handle of vodka for punch, and two twenty-four-packs of decent beer. When the cashier rung them up, Techie stepped in front of them and pulled out his wallet.

“No way,” Matt said.

“Yes. It’s the least I can do.”
Kyle shrugged and grinned. “Thanks, California.”

Back at the house, Kyle asked them if they wanted to crack a couple of beers, but Matt was reluctant to have Techie talk to Kyle for too long so he declined, saying he had to drop Techie off back at his house.

“Are you sure you want me to come to this party?” Techie asked as Matt drove back to Crescent Heights.

“I need someone there to talk to,” Matt said, forcing a smile.

“You don’t like your roommate very much.”

“We’re a little different,” Matt said.

“How do you know him?”

“We went to high school together. For real this time.”

“Oh!” Techie brightened. “Is Jessy coming to the party?”

“No. She hates Kyle.”

After that Techie stayed silent, watching the road ahead.

They didn’t talk about the upcoming party or Matt’s work. Instead, they drank Cokes and watched the shadows fall over the patio, over the pool. At twilight, Techie led Matt downstairs and undressed him and rode him slowly with Matt’s big hands on his bony hips.

The following morning, with Madeline still absent, Matt rose, kissed Techie’s forehead, and put on his jumpsuit.

In the dispatch center, he was shocked to see Quentin talking to Snoke. Quentin gave a subtle wave, then came right over when his discussion with Snoke was finished.

“Hey, man!”

Matt went in for a hug. “Hey. Good to have you back. How’s everyone? How’s your mom?”

“She’s hanging in there,” Quentin said. “Taking it one day at a time. What’s new in your world? Still fighting?”

“Sure, yeah,” Matt lied.

Quentin elbowed him. “How’s your sugar momma?”

“That ended a while ago.”

“Aw, man. Sorry to hear that. You seeing anybody else?”

Nodding, Matt said, “Yeah.”

“She pretty?”

He nodded. “Redhead.”

Quentin raised his eyebrows. “I’d say tell me more, but I’m working with some guy named Ted
“Yeah,” Matt said, pointing toward Steward. “I work with that guy. He’s pretty okay.”

“Ready to roll?” Steward called.

Nodding at him, Matt looked back at Quentin and gave him another grin. “It’s good to see you.”

“Same,” Quentin said, clapping Matt on the back.

Matt tried to ignore his growing unease throughout the day, seriously considering begging off and staying at Techie’s, letting Kyle have his party with his friends. But he texted Techie at the end of the shift nonetheless, asking if he was ready to go.

A few seconds later, the text came back, *Sure.*

Matt was talking fast and loud in the car, unable to stop himself. “I’m not going to get drunk,” he said. “Just a couple of beers and I’ll be totally sober when I drive us back. I promise. I sort of feel like I owe these guys at least stopping in, and you did buy the beer. I want you to be able to have at least one, if you want it. Does that sound okay? Then we’ll head back.”

“Matt,” Techie said. “I’ll be fine. I know how to take care of myself.”

“I know.” A pause. Then, softer: “I know.”

There was no parking available in front of the house, all of it taken up by cars in various states of disrepair. It made Matt feel better about his junky ride, though he was ashamed that Techie, who was used to such luxury, had to see all these lower-class trappings. Music filled the entry hall from a speaker in the kitchen. It was hooked up to somebody’s phone. The reek of beer was heavy on the air already.

“Hey, guys,” Kyle said. “That’s one hell of a loud t-shirt, California.”

“You can spot me in a crowd,” Techie said.

Kyle laughed and crumpled his beer can in his hand. “Time for another one of those.”

Matt and Techie followed him to the fridge. “Do you want something?” Matt asked.

“Gray brought Coronas,” said Kyle.

Techie peered inside. “I’ll just have a Coke.”

“Don’t make me think you’re no fun, California.”

Matt shook his head. “Just get him a Coke, huh?”

Kyle shrugged. “And what do you want, birthday boy?”

“I’ll take a Bud.”

His beer breath rolling out into the open air, Kyle said, “Here ya go.”

“Thanks,” said Techie.

Kyle shut the fridge too hard. “Hey, hey. That girl Bella is here.”
“Ah, shit,” Matt said.

“Did you date her, too?” asked Techie, guileless.

Kyle broke up into laughter. “ Been telling California about your conquests, dude?”

“No.” And to Techie: “Let’s go into the back yard.”

A few people were hovering in groups outside, sipping beers in the long evening light.

“Great,” Matt said. “Kyle’s already drunk.”

“What does he do when he gets drunk?” Techie asked.

“Just gets more like Kyle.”

Techie took a sip of his drink, looking over the scrubby, dying grass of the back lawn. “We can avoid him.”

“Hey,” said someone at Matt’s shoulder.

He nearly jumped. Looking over, he saw the dark-haired girl that Kyle was into. Rachel—he was pretty sure he remembered her name. “Hey.”

“Haven’t seen you around all summer,” she said.

“I’ve been here,” Matt told her. “I thought Kyle said he didn’t like to bring you here.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “He can be so dramatic. Have you noticed?”

“Yeah,” Matt said.

Techie stepped forward, extending his hand. “I’m Ryan.”


“I just met him yesterday,” said Techie.

Matt cut in. “He knows me.”

“Gotcha,” Rachel said. “Gotcha. Nice to meet you.”

A few minutes of conversation had Matt in legitimate wonder as to why a girl like Rachel would date a guy like Kyle. But he was beefy and he was good-looking and he had a steady job, or at least the promise of one.

Matt followed Rachel’s gaze when she looked across the yard to the back door.

“Speak of the devil,” she said.

Kyle and another friend walked out and down the wobbly concrete steps.

Matt grimaced when Rachel waved to him.

“Hey, guys,” said Kyle. “Hey, sexy. Why aren’t you inside, babe? The party’s mostly in there. There’s going to be a lot of mosquitoes out here in a few minutes.”
Rachel moved over and came up on tiptoe to kiss Kyle’s neck, moving his mass of wavy, dark hair out of the way. “You know I hate Steve Miller Band.”

“That was Andrew. I made him change it.”

“Well, why don’t you get me another beer before the mosquitoes come out?” she asked.

“Yeah, see,” Kyle said, “we’re almost out of beer. Like, less people than I thought brought some. Do you think you could go on a beer run, Matt? I would but I’m sort of shitfaced right now.”

“Fine,” Matt said. “Give me some cash.”

Kyle laughed. “Hell no. You still owe me money. Besides, if you can’t pay, California there has a ton of money.”

Matt lowered his eyebrows. “I’m not asking him to pay again.”

“You didn’t ask him the first time.”

“You know what I mean,” Matt said. “It’s your turn.”

“Fuck that.”

“It’s all right,” Techie said.

“No,” said Matt.

“How’d you get all that money anyway?” Kyle asked Techie.

“He fixes computers,” Matt said.

“Come on, my guy, why don’t you let him answer for himself? He *can* talk. I mean he’s not autistic or something, right?” Kyle looked over at Techie. “You really do seem like a guy who fixes computers. Oh, shit! Wait, are you the guy who fixed Matt’s?”

“Yes,” Techie said.

Kyle turned back to Matt. “The way I figure it, then, he *owes* me, ‘cause I lent you the money to fix your machine.”

“I’ll get that money back to you,” Matt said through clenched teeth. “Just not now.”

Looking over at Techie but pointing at Matt, Kyle stage-whispered, “‘Not now’ means ‘not ever.’”

“That’s not true,” Techie said.

“How do you know?” Kyle asked, his tone now sour. “Did you lend him some money, too?” He looked over at Matt. “Man, I’m going to be pissed if you managed to pay back your freak friend here before—”

Then his words stopped because Matt’s fist plowed into his mouth. Matt could feel Kyle’s teeth punching through his lip hard enough to cut his freshly healed knuckles.

Staggering back, Kyle put a hand up to his face. Blood dripped through his fingers and into the dust. He spat out a word accompanied by copious red spray. It could have been a swear or it could have been *help.*
When Matt shook his stinging fist, drops of blood flew and landed, sticky-dark, on Techie’s shirt. He wasn’t certain why he stumbled at first until it occurred to him that Rachel had shoved him off balance.

“You asshole!” she shouted, her voice dopplering in and out.

Matt felt Techie’s cool hands on his skin.

“We need to go,” Techie said.

“My tooth is loose!” Kyle screamed with another fountain of pink mist. Rachel put her hand on his shoulder but he slapped it away, making her squeak.

The rest of the people in the yard were staring, wide-eyed. Matt looked at Kyle’s stunned, nameless friend, who turned and ran, letting himself out of the backyard gate with a nervous rattling sound.

“Anybody else?” Matt asked, looking around.

Techie’s voice was soft in his ear. “Matt.”

Clutching his bleeding hand, Matt let Techie lead him back into the cacophonous house. It was so loud with music and talking that no one had heard the altercation outside, but now they were staring, confused.

Techie got a dish towel from the kitchen and pressed it over the back of Matt’s hand. “We should leave,” he said.

Someone came in from the back, the screen door slamming open then closed again. “Get some ice!” Seeing that Matt and Techie were blocking the fridge, though, he froze, the panicked urgency of his search for an alternative nearly comical.

“What happened?” a girl by Matt’s shoulder asked.

“Let’s go,” Techie said, his voice low but forceful. “Now.”

Before the news could make it through the house, he and Matt pushed to the front door. Within the crush of bodies it seemed to take an eternity. The surge and hush of cicadas outside was split by the stuttered wail off a siren. Blue and red lights danced over the front of the house.

Matt stumbled off the porch.

“That’s him,” said Kyle, his elocution ruined. “That’s the guy.”

“Fuck,” Matt whispered.

The cop getting out of the car was shorter than Matt. “Sir,” he said. “I received a call from this gentleman over here says you hit him. I can see you’ve done something to your hand. Do you mind if I take a look?”

Matt looked at Techie instead, his heart plunging down to rest, leaden, in his belly.

Techie nodded.

Letting the dish towel fall away, Matt held his hand out, palm-down. Blood welled in the fresh cuts and slid between his fingers.
“Sir,” the cop said, “I’m going to need you to put your hands over your head now, okay? I want you to get on your knees.”

“Matt,” Techie said, his voice strained with agony.

Matt went down heavy on both knees, the injured hand above him dripping blood into his hair.

Coming up behind him, the cop cuffed first one hand then the other behind his back, then pulled at his wrists to get him to stand up. A short, choked sound behind him. Matt didn’t look back, knowing he would see Techie trying not to cry. He just followed the cop to the car and got in the back, very nearly smacking his head on the door.

The distantly familiar process of booking at the station took a couple of hours. He had been stewing in a holding cell for another two when finally they allowed him to call someone. Though he knew they would find out at some point, Matt couldn’t bear to call his parents. He called Techie instead.

“Hey,” was all he was able to say at first, his throat closing.

“Are you all right?” Techie asked.

“I’m an idiot. I’m such an idiot. I’m sorry, Techie. You never should have gotten mixed up with me.” His stinging eyes ran over, a tear slipping down each of his cheeks. He swabbed them away, wincing at the pain in his hand.

“Hush,” Techie said. “I’m coming to get you.”

“No. Don’t you dare. I did it. I’m going to pay for it.”

There was a pause on the other end. Then, with conviction: “I’m coming to get you.” The call ended.

Back in the holding cell, Matt gave in to his listlessness. This time, it wouldn’t end with probation. Not on the second count. He would go to prison. Perhaps not for a long time, but a felony assault conviction and a sub-par public defender would guarantee him at least some time to serve. It would be the end of his job, the end of his employability.

He hadn’t realized he’d fallen asleep, head-in-hands, until an officer called his name. “Someone posted bond for you, so you’re okay to go for now, kid.”

Hands clutched in front of him, Techie met him in the parking lot.

Matt couldn’t look at his eyes. He stared at his feet. “How did you get here?”

“I took a cab,” came the soft reply. “The buses don’t run this late.”

“Why?”

“They can’t afford to run them.”

Shaking his head, Matt said, “No. Why did you do this?”

“I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

Techie’s hand on his shoulder set the tears flowing then. He sobbed in the parking lot, soaking the shoulder of Techie’s bright shirt, now barely visible in the darkness.
Matt’s car was still at the house, so he and Techie took another cab. Techie gave the driver an unfamiliar address. After a twenty-minute ride, they pulled into the u-shaped front lot of a Holiday Inn Express. Matt looked over at Techie, wondering.

“My mom came back,” he said. “I took a cab from your house because I didn’t know which buses run close. When I came back, her car was in the garage. The door was open again.”

“Did she say anything?”

“I didn’t talk to her. I just didn’t want to be there.”

Matt waited a few steps behind while Techie checked in at the front desk. Their room smelled of disinfectants and bleach, making Matt’s mind race with startling clarity back to the hallway that led to Dr. Finch’s office.

“Here we are,” Techie said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I wonder what the people at the desk think.”

Techie’s mouth set in a hard line. “Let them think whatever they want. I don’t care.”

Matt hung his head. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” He sat down next to Techie, close but not touching. When Techie put his arm around his shoulders, he sank into the embrace, eyes burning once again.

Techie guided him down to lay his head in his lap. Matt curled up, feet hanging off the edge of the bed, cheek on Techie’s skinny thigh as Techie stroked his blood-sticky hair.

“I’m all wrong for you,” Matt told him. “I’m a burden.”

“No.”

Matt clutched Techie’s knee. “You were the calm one. Through the whole thing. I was the one who went off. I shouldn’t have hit him.”

Techie sighed. “He’s terrible.”

“We should have just left. You had the right idea all along. I just can’t listen. I thought you had changed me, but I was wrong. I’ll never change.”

“You did it for me,” Techie said.

Matt crushed his fist against his forehead. “And I’d do it again. I’d do it again and again. That’s why I’ll never change.”

“You already have.”

“No,” Matt said. “You’re better off without me. You can handle yourself. You don’t need me.” He flinched when a warm tear fell onto his temple.

“Yes,” said Techie. “I do need you.”

When it was almost dawn, they fell asleep facing one another on top of the blanket, each holding the other’s hand.

They slept until noon, then ordered room service burgers and fries as a late breakfast in bed.
“I need my car,” Matt said, licking grease off of his fingers. “And I need it before Monday.”

“Why?”

“I have to work.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Thank God, no,” said Matt. “Monday. I have an extra jumpsuit in the trunk from when I stayed over at your place, so that’ll be okay. I won’t have to go inside the house.”

Techie looked down at his plate. “I hate this sneaking around. Hiding.”

“We don’t have any choice for now. But we will. I’ll make sure we do. Somehow.”

“Okay,” Techie said.

Digging his keys, wallet, and phone out of the plastic bag that they had given him at the detention center, Matt told Techie he’d be back. Wide-eyed, Techie nodded.

He took a cab, cleaning out all of his cash on hand. The driver dropped him a block down from his own; luckily he wasn’t parked in front of the house. His car was still where he had left it. The road simmered in the heat haze and the car was boiling hot, but at least it started up when he turned the key. Maybe Kyle would see it gone and assume that someone, like Matt’s parents, had been sent for it. They weren’t going to know about it until they absolutely had to.

With the car, they had more freedom to travel—at least at a less expensive rate. On Saturday night, they went to the Chinese buffet.

“This sort of reminds me of takeout with your mom,” Matt said, twirling lo mein on his bent fork.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Did your dad cook?” Matt asked Techie.

“Not really. He was too busy.”

Matt frowned. “Did your mom?”

Techie laughed. “No. We used to have a chef.”

“What about your parents?” Techie asked. “Do they cook?”

Matt paused. “My mom does. My dad did sometimes when he was working, but it was mostly my mom. It’s still mostly her, even though he’s home.”

“His back,” Techie said.

A nod and a short, humorless laugh. “Like your eyes. Some days bad, some days worse.”

Techie smiled vaguely into his beef and broccoli. “They’ve been feeling better lately.” As punctuation—and refutation—he squinted and rubbed at the corner of one of them.

Both he and Matt laughed, a dry and fragile sound.
Sunday morning, the day stretched out long and uncertain in front of them.

“I wish I could get some clothes,” Techie said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “These need to be washed.”

Matt, who was lying back, a mound of pillows behind his head, said, “So take them off.”

“Huh?”

Nudging Techie’s thigh with his foot, Matt repeated it. “Take them off. No one here to see but me if you’re walking around naked.”

Techie’s blush was immediate.

“What am I going to say?” Matt asked, sitting up. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before. Here.” He shrugged off his shirt and tossed it to the ground by the bed, then started in on the button of his jeans.

His color deepening, Techie looked toward the wall. “I can’t see you...like that...and not want to...”

“Then don’t,” Matt said. Jeans unzipped, he moved forward to tug at Techie’s shirt hem.

Wincing as if he had been tickled, Techie laughed and popped up off the bed. Matt was about to protest when he turned back and took the shirt off.

“Come here,” Matt said, his voice low. “I want to try something.” He extended his hand and Techie took it, allowing himself to be pulled onto the mattress. Matt almost laughed at the undignified squeak Techie let out when he leapt up and threw his arms around his waist, tackling him to the bed. Bedsprings groaned in weary protest. Propped up on his elbow now, Matt traced two fingers down Techie’s chest, smiling a little as he trailed them along the waistband of the shorts.

Techie shivered, his abdomen contracting.

“Yeah,” Matt said, kissing his belly. He slipped the button free and lowered the zipper, breathing hot over Techie’s skin.

“What are you doing?” Techie asked, a quaver in his voice.

“Shh.” Matt hooked his fingers below the elastic of Techie’s underwear and pulled, releasing a scent that was singularly Techie’s.

“I probably smell,” Techie said, pawing at Matt’s hands.

“So do I.” He tugged again. “Lift up.” As Techie did, Matt slid the shorts down and away, taking a deep breath. He wrapped his fingers around Techie’s half-hard cock, which was familiar, and guided it into his mouth, which was not.

Techie writhed.

Matt had to put a hand on his stomach to keep him still. The feel and the taste were odd but not unpleasant. He tried to remember and to duplicate what he liked, licking along the underside of Techie’s cock, covering his teeth with his lips and applying gentle suction to the head.

“Oh, my God,” Techie breathed.
When Matt wrapped his hand tighter around the base and began to bob his head, Techie whimpered and pushed his fingers into Matt’s hair. It was hard not to gag a little with the strange pressure at the back of his throat, but he was encouraged by the sounds Techie was making: small huffs of breath and short whines that had Matt getting hard as well.

“Stop,” Techie said.


“No, no. It’s good. Very good. I’m just...I’m really close.”

“Okay,” Matt said.

“You don’t have to, I mean—” But then Techie was arching up as Matt slid his cock into his mouth again. “Oh, Matt.”

Tense and waiting, Matt still didn’t expect the flood of salty liquid that poured out over his tongue as Techie came. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to swallow, but coughed, some of the fluid leaking from his lower lip and back onto Techie’s wet, spent cock. He swallowed again. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That was bad.”

“No, no.” Techie stroked his hair. “That was good. Really good.”

Matt wiped his mouth with his hand. “I’ve never done it before.”

Techie was smiling, his skin blotchy with arousal. “You were wonderful. Here,” he said reaching down toward Matt’s unzipped jeans, “let me.”

Shaking his head, Matt said, “No. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.” But he allowed Matt to lay his head on his chest.

“You bailed me out,” said Matt.

Techie kissed his forehead. “I told you. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else?”

“You didn’t get the money from your mom.”

“No, but I had savings.”

Matt sat up, his expression concerned. “Had? It’s gone?”

Techie looked away, toward the far wall. “Almost.”

“Techie, no.”

“I’d do it again,” he said. “Again and again. Every time.”

Matt paused, pushing his nose into Techie’s shoulder. “We need to stop spending money on hotel rooms.”

A sigh. “I know. I’m going to have to go back to my house sometime.”

“If you want me to be there, I will,” Matt told him.

“I do,” Techie said.
Matt went to work on Monday clad only in boxers underneath his jumpsuit. Techie had said he would try to find some place to do laundry close to the hotel while Matt worked. Under other circumstances, Matt would have suggested that Techie buy himself new clothes, but knowing what he did about his budget and his sacrifice, he stayed quiet, even offered to find a laundromat after work. However, Techie did have a good point that he would have nothing to do during the day besides sit in the room and stream videos on his laptop or watch TV.

They had eaten and drunk, touched each other and held each other, but had not yet decided when they would go back to face Madeline. All Matt knew was that he wanted to be with Techie, side by side, when it happened.

When he got home that evening, a small stack of neatly folded jeans and shirts awaited him. He kissed Techie with gratitude, then showered and put on the clean clothes. “Want to order a pizza?” he asked. “I’ll pay.”

“Sure,” Techie said.

Using a roll of the sad single-ply toilet paper as napkins, they plowed through three pieces each of the pepperoni-and-sausage monstrosity, having to throw the rest away because there was no refrigerator in the room. Matt patted his full belly afterward, fielding a stab of guilt at the fact that he no longer had an outlet for the spare calories.

“You don’t work tomorrow, do you?” asked Techie, something in his gaze hesitant and even mournful.

Matt read it right away. “No. Is that when you want to go?”

Techie nodded, slow and grave.

Matt took his grease-spotted hand in his own and kissed each fingertip. “How do we know she’s going to be there?”

His shoulders sagged. “I’ll have to call.”

“Okay.”

“Do you think I should call tonight, just to make sure she’s going to be around?”

Taking a deep breath and letting it out, Matt said, “We have to stop avoiding her. It was going to happen sooner or later.”

Techie nodded again. He paused, looking over toward the window. “I’m afraid.”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Me, too.”
Picking up his phone from the bedside table, Techie glanced over at Matt, who gave a nod.

Matt could hear his own breathing harsh in his ears, the thud of his heartbeat.

“Mom?” Techie said into the phone.

It occurred to Matt with a sudden and violent shock that this would be the first time since he had met either of them that he would hear Techie and Madeline talking directly to one another.

_I am the divide_, she had said.

“In a hotel,” Techie told Madeline. “I’d like to come home tomorrow.” He looked over at Matt.

Matt dug the short stubs of his nails into his palms.

“Yeah,” Techie said. “I want to talk to you, too.”

Muffled words from Madeline.

“He’s here,” said Techie, putting his hand on Matt’s knee.

Matt heard the percussive crack of Madeline’s desperate laughter.

Techie winced. Then: “Yes.” Then: “Okay.” He looked as if he wanted to say something more, but as he pulled it away from his face, Matt saw the screen had gone dark.

“What did she say? She asked if I was here,” he said.

A nod. “She asked if you were coming tomorrow.”

“You told her ‘yes.’”

“Uh-huh.”

Matt uncurled his fists with some effort. “What did she say to that?”

Techie paused, looking down into his lap, then looked up again. “She said she had some things she wanted to say to you, too.” He put his phone back on the nightstand.

“Come here,” Matt said, reaching out to draw Techie close to him. “I’ll be there.”

Putting his fingertips on Matt’s cheek, Techie said, “I don’t want to do it alone, but I do. Do you understand?”

Matt nodded. “I think she was wrong. I think she’s already said as much as she can to me.”

Techie rested his head on Matt’s bicep until his arm went numb. He had to gently move a pillow underneath him when he had fallen asleep. Matt drifted off after an hour or two of watching Techie’s eyes move behind the pinkened lids, watching the fan of red-gold lashes on his cheeks. And marveling. And marveling.

They finished their coffee at the bagel shop the next morning and rode in silence to Crescent Heights. Techie had not checked out of the hotel, though they were fast running out of money to pay for any further nights there. When they pulled up in front of the house, Matt had a sudden memory of parking against the curb in the MaxStar van, chatting with Quentin. _Just another job._
Techie let himself in with his key—it was only at that point Matt remembered that he had one of his own. Peaches came tearing around the corner, prepared to bark, but instead she skidded to a halt in front of both of them and danced on her hind legs, begging to sniff at their hands.

The entryway had never seemed longer or darker. Madeline was sitting at the counter in the kitchen, wearing a sleep shirt and shorts. She looked better than she had a few days ago, but not by much.

“Hello, darling,” she said, her voice abused and rough. It was not clear to whom she spoke. She stared not at but past their heads.

“Hi, Mom,” Techie said.

“Have you been using your drops?”

He nodded, but this time squared his shoulders instead of shrinking away.

“You look good,” Madeline said, again, to neither Techie nor Matt but to a space between them. “I know I’ve looked better. You’ve both seen me at my worst. Matt, the other day. Ryan, when your father died.” A tear shimmered and fell down her cheek.

At that moment Matt felt a surge of pity for her.

“It seems like it was yesterday,” Madeline said. “It really does. I know you think about your father, Ryan. What do you think he would make of me?”

Techie paused. “He’d want you to be happy.”

Madeline sighed, her smile belying her words. “I don’t know if I ever have been. I think about things—bright points. They’re in the back of my head, fuzzy like they happened to someone else. Do you understand?” This time she was looking at Techie.

“No,” he said.

“You wouldn’t, of course,” she said. “Allan shielded you from so much. He shielded you from me when I couldn’t cope. He was the best thing for us.”

“He’s gone, Mom,” Techie said.

Another tear shone in the weak overhead light. White daylight zigzagged across the floor from beyond the shades. “I know. Every day I know it. And he gets fuzzier and fuzzier, too. I can’t keep anything.”

Techie said nothing.

“You know, Matt,” Madeline said, “I never did want you to replace Allan in any way.”

“I know,” Matt said.

“There were times I think we could have been good together. I should never have hurt you. It was wrong. I did it, and I let you slip through my hands. Oh, well. Live and learn.” She sobbed a laugh. “And now, here you are. Do you want my blessing or something? There was a steely edge to the question.

“I don’t need it,” Techie said. “We don’t need it.”
Madeline sat up straighter. “You’re going to be ridiculed. You know that? Not that it’s really a change for you.”

Matt stepped forward, but Techie held up a hand.

“I tried to protect you from that,” she said.

“No,” said Techie. “You tried to protect yourself from what people thought of me.”

“It’s the same thing. You’re part of me. I’m part of you.”

Techie nodded. “Yes.”

“I need you to think long and hard about what this means.” She motioned to both Techie and Matt. “You can’t go out in public, the two of you. Not like that.”

“You didn’t want to be seen in public with me,” Matt told her, unable to hold his tongue.

“You’re not in our class, dear.”

“Stop, Mom,” Techie said. “Just stop.”

“You’re right. Every time I try I can’t make any headway. Stubborn, stubborn boys. Do you know what I did yesterday after you called, Ryan? I had the internet service shut down. Isn’t that a funny thing, Matt? Like we’ve come full circle.”

Techie couldn’t help a small gasp.

Matt bit his lip hard enough to leave marks.

“I want to remember you, Ryan,” Madeline said. “A bright point.”

“I’m still here,” Techie said.

She tilted her head in quite the same way that Techie often did. “I know.” Madeline took a deep breath. “I’m going away for a week. When I come back, I want you out of my house.”

Matt could see Techie’s shoulders shudder. He ached to put his hand on Techie’s back, bear him up.

Techie flinched when Madeline stood.

She moved toward him, but instead of rushing at him or turning away she held out her arms.

Techie went to her and she hugged him and kissed his cheek. “I love you, Ryan.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

When they left to go back down the hallway to the door, Madeline may or may not have been crying. Techie was okay until they got in the car and Matt looked over at him. Then he fell into tears, clutching at Matt’s arm. Matt tried his best to hold him, remembering his own breakdown in the dark and echoing parking lot of the detention center.

Matt drove them in silence back to the hotel, glancing over on occasion to see Techie rubbing at his terribly irritated, tear-swollen eyes. He had to lead Techie back through the lobby and up the elevator to their room, which had been made over with sterile neatness, because of the state of his
vision.

His voice was weak. “Let me just lay down for a little while.”

“Sure,” Matt said. “Of course.” He got on the bed beside Techie, who was clenching his fists in order to avoid scratching his eyes any further. Matt put his hands over those fists, and soon the tension eased, allowing their fingers to interlace.

“I couldn’t do this without you,” Techie said.

“Without me you wouldn’t need to do this.”

“Not that,” Techie said, blue peeking through the swollen lids. “Standing up to my mom. You taught me how. You changed me.”

Matt shook his head. “You did that all yourself. You defended me. Defended us.” He was shocked when Techie laughed.

“I guess that makes us even.”

Huffing a brief laugh, Matt said, “You didn’t slug your mom.”

“No, but I hurt her.”

“She hurt you, too!”

Techie’s smile was sad. “I don’t think there was a way out of this unless people got hurt. Not if we want to stay together. We do, don’t we?”

The vulnerability in that question made Matt’s heart contract. “Yes,” he said. “We do.”

Techie kissed his wrist.

“I guess we don’t know when your mom is leaving,” Matt said.

Techie sat up. “As soon as possible would be my guess. We’ll have to be there to take care of Peaches.”

Matt felt at least part of the weight that lay on his shoulders lift. “Oh, yeah. We can stay at your place for the week.”

“There’s no wifi, but we can get by with our phones.”

Matt nodded. “All those computers and no way to use them.”

“They may not be mine for much longer,” Techie said.

Brow furrowing, Matt asked, “What do you mean?”

“Money,” Techie said. “I need it to find a new place to live. I’ll probably have to sell all of the computers but my laptop.”

“Shit,” Matt said, heaving a sigh. “I need to find a place to live, too.”

Techie sat up, frowning. “You don’t want to live with me?”

The sheer simplicity of the realization made Matt’s jaw drop. “Oh,” he said. “Yeah, of course I do.
We can get an apartment by the college, maybe.”

Looking down at the bedspread, Techie said, “I probably won’t be going to school anymore. I’ll have to get a job, like you. It may be a little harder because I don’t have a degree, but I’ll figure it out.”

Again, Matt was dumbfounded by Techie’s calm and accepting practicality. In turn, it spurred somewhat of the same in him. “What about when I,” he swallowed hard, “go to prison? You’ll have to pay for the whole place yourself. For who knows how long.”

“Then I’ll do that,” Techie said. “Somehow.”

Matt hung his head. “I’m not worth all this.”

Techie’s voice was sharp and it made Matt look up in surprise. “Stop saying that. Now.”

Blinking, Matt said, “Okay.”

With his head sinking onto Matt’s shoulder, Techie said, “Let’s stay here for the night and then go back to...my mom’s house. It’s not really mine anymore.”

Matt nodded and kissed Techie’s hair.

The following day, Matt dropped Techie off at the house in Crescent Heights, then went to pack up some clothes while Kyle was at work. He stared at his narrow bed, which he would probably sell for a total of fifty dollars, but at least it was some cash. They could move Techie’s bed to their new place. The uncomplicated joy of the idea made him smile, though it was tempered when he began to wonder about the feel of the hard prison bunks. Trying his best to shove it out of his head, Matt slung the gear bag—now devoid of sparring gear, gloves, shorts—over his shoulder and left the room.

When he’d put the bag in the passenger seat, his phone buzzed. It was a text from Jessy.

Hey sailor, got time off today?

I guess, Matt texted back.

Just wanted to see you. And Turkey. A lot’s been going on.

Matt gave a brief laugh. Tell me about it.

I will! She added a winking face emoji.

Lunch? he asked.

Oooh let’s go to the Crystle Freeze. I’m craving ice cream bad.

Matt had to smile. Sure. Give me an hour?

Roger.

He texted Techie, who was more than willing to come with them.

At least now you can pick me up at the front of the house, he said. Techie had changed into a bright blue shirt and his accustomed khaki shorts, the seams of which dangled around his skinny calves like bells.
Matt was enraptured, almost as though he was seeing it anew.

At the Crystle Freeze on Taylor Avenue, Matt could see Jessy’s little car, though she herself—wearing a pink tank top and shorts—was already in the line at the window.

She came to the back of the line to join them when they approached, giving each a hug. “Hey Mattie. Hey, Turkey. Sorry I got in line. I couldn’t wait. I’m *starving*.”

“No problem,” Matt said. “Travis not feeding you?”

To that she only smiled briefly and turned toward the window.

Techie and Matt bought fried clam strips and french fries to share, and each got a milkshake. Jessy ordered no savory food, just a huge banana split.

“Wow,” Matt said. “Going straight for dessert.”

Jessie grinned in return, but tears were already pooling and spilling from her eyes.

“Oh, my God.” Matt got up and went to put his arm around her. “What’s going on? Did you and Travis break up?”

She shook her head, sniffing and wiping at her eyes. “I should have gotten a napkin.”

Techie stood up and brought her a whole handful of fluttering paper.

“Yes, Turkey.”

“What’s up?” Matt asked.

Jessy sniffed, long and loud. “I’m getting married.”

Matt watched Techie’s eyes go wide. He tugged Jessy toward him in a firmer hug. “Is that bad?”

Another shake of her head. “Just...a little sooner than I guess I wanted to.”

“But he proposed?” Techie asked.

“He sort of had to,” said Jessy.

“Huh?” asked Matt.

“You dork,” she said, wiping her nose with the bunch of napkins. “I’m pregnant.”


“Yeah,” she said. “For real this time. I got a test at the doctor’s office yesterday. Of course, I told Travis and he immediately said he’d marry me and we’d raise the baby.”

Matt and Techie smiled at one another. “That’s good,” Matt said. “He’s a quality guy.”

“So why are you crying?” Techie asked.

“I’m happy,” Jessy said, then sobbed. “And I’m scared.”

“You’re going to make the best mom ever,” Matt said.
She cried into the handful of napkins. “I hope so.”

“There’s no doubt,” Techie told her.

“I’m so afraid to screw up,” Jessy said. “I don’t know if I’m ready for this. But at the same time, I want it.”

“If you want it, that’s all that matters,” Techie said. “I promise.”

“Thanks, guys. I mean, Travis has been great, of course. We told his folks but we haven’t told mine yet. My mom will be over the moon.” Genuine joy lit up her red, blotchy face.

“Come on, kiddo,” Matt said. “Your ice cream is melting.”

“Oh, shit.” Then she laughed. “I better swear while I can, right?”

“I’ll be there for you, okay?” Matt said. “If I can.”

“You will,” Techie said. “And so will I.”

She half-laughed, half-sobbed again. “That means you get to be Uncle Mattie and Uncle Turkey.”

“No,” Matt said, “I take it back. That kid’s going to grow up with problems.” He laughed and Techie and Jessy joined in.

Later, in the car on the way back to Madeline’s, Techie put his hand on Matt’s and said, “I really do think Jessy will make a great mother.”

Matt smiled. “No doubt about it. Actually, when we were dating we had a scare once. I thought I was about to be in the same boat Travis is in.”

“Were you happy?”

“I wasn’t ready.”

“Well,” said Techie, his tone solemn. “You won’t have that problem with me.”

After pausing for a split second, Matt threw his head back and laughed until the sound ricocheted around the car.

“Do you know what we should do when we get home?” Techie asked, then blushed and corrected himself. “I mean, back.”

“No, what?”

“Get in the pool.”

Matt grinned. “Seriously?”

“It’s hot,” said Techie. “And it could be the last time.”

“Okay,” Matt said. “Just be careful of your skin.”

Of course, Matt hadn’t thought to bring his swim shorts, so he got in the pool in a pair of boxers with Techie trying to hide a secret smile. After so many days of sun, the water was warmed through, and Matt found it more pleasurable to float on its salt-smelling surface than to actively
swim. It was early enough that leaf shadows still pirouetted over the tile.

“This is where I first talked to you,” Techie said, skimming his arms just underneath the water, making lazy ripples. “What did you think of me?”

Matt laughed. “If you really want to know, I thought you were an inconvenience.”

“Same,” said Techie, his tone light.

“You thought I was an inconvenience, too?”

“No. I knew I was.” He turned toward the house.

Matt swam up behind him, slipping his arms around his narrow waist. “Hey,” he said, breath moving the flaccid strands of Techie’s wet hair.

Techie leaned his head back against Matt’s shoulder, squinting in the pervasive white light. “It doesn’t ever have to be dark in our apartment, if we want,” he said. “We can open all the blinds. Have as many lamps as we want for night. I’m tired of the dark.”

“I’m tired of the heat,” Matt said. “But at the same time I want it to go on forever.”

“And you wouldn’t have to go anywhere. August for the rest of eternity.”

Matt laughed and his chest bumped Techie’s back. “I’ve never seen you in anything but shorts and t-shirts.”

Techie turned. “You’ve seen me naked.”

“You know what I mean. What do you wear in the winter?”

“Sweatshirts, mostly. And pants.”

“I still have to wear my jumpsuits at work, but they aren’t as bad in winter.” Matt pressed his fingers into Techie’s shoulders. “You’re getting pink.”

“I’m always pink.” He paused. “I guess we should get out.”

Matt nodded. He helped Techie out of the water, looking back with a little bit of longing at its unsettled blue surface.

Techie shivered after closing the glass door behind them. “It’s cold in here.”

“It always is.”

He looked at Matt: earnest, guileless. “Warm me up.”

Downstairs by the bed, Techie stripped Matt out of his wet, cooling boxers and sank to his knees on the hard floor, taking Matt’s cock in his mouth.

Matt put a gentle hand on the top of Techie’s head and Techie looked up at him. “You look so good,” Matt whispered. After a minute, he backed away and pulled Techie to his feet. “Come on,” he said. “I want to be inside you.”

Techie nodded.
Matt sat at the edge of the bed and pulled Techie into his lap, kissing him. Techie kissed back, fervent, his hands buried in Matt’s hair. Lying back, Matt pulled Techie along with him, until he was straddling his hips.

Techie sat on his heels and wrapped his hand around Matt’s cock, his eyes bright with desire. “You’re so big.”

“You take all of it,” Matt said, putting his hands on Techie’s thighs.

“I love it.”

The bottle was still by the pillow. Matt grabbed it and handed it to Techie. “Ride me,” he said.

Techie, his own cock flushed and hard, rose onto his knees and uncapped the bottle.

Matt inhaled sharply at the cool drizzle of liquid over his hot skin. Then Techie was guiding him, sinking down on him, and the world closed in, only Techie’s face and body white on the gray blur of the background. Matt let him set the pace at first, content to feel the slide in and out of the tight warmth of Techie’s body.

Then he began to move his hips in slow waves. Techie’s cock was leaking on his belly. “Touch yourself,” Matt said. “I want to see.”

Groaning, Techie took himself in hand and began to stroke—slowly at the start, with a rhythm that matched Matt’s thrusts. Before long he began to move faster, his arm flexing and relaxing with the effort. “Do you want me to come?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Matt said. “Come on my chest.”

“I need you deeper.”

His hands around Techie’s waist, Matt pulled him downward, raising his hips at the same time, pushing up off the bed.

Tilting his head back, Techie breathed out hard and came, his body shuddering.

“God, you look so beautiful,” Matt said.

Techie braced his hands on Matt’s chest, moving faster and harder.

“Don’t stop,” Matt said. “I want to come inside you.”

“Yes,” Techie said.

And then Matt was coming, calling out into the darkened room. He held Techie tight afterward, nibbling the tip of his ear until he laughed and squirmed away. “You feel incredible,” he said.

“So do you.”

“I can’t believe we’ll have to be out of here in a few days,” Matt said. “Forever.”

Techie nuzzled into his chest. “I should start listing the computers for sale. We’ll need the money for the move.”

“I’ll sell my bed and my dresser. It’s all stuff from when I was a kid, anyway.”
Nodding, Techie said, “We’re going to have to hire somebody to get the bed out of here. I can’t lift it.”

“I could,” Matt said, “if I had someone to help out.” He laughed and poked Techie’s belly with his forefinger. “No friends.”

“That’s not true. You could ask Travis.”

Matt scratched his chin. “Yeah. I guess I am friends with my ex-girlfriend’s boyfriend.”

“Fiancé,” Techie said.

Shaking his head, Matt said, “When did we all grow up?”

His tone only half-joking, Techie said, “Yesterday.”

They got up early the next morning so Matt could drop Techie off at a coffee shop where he could use the wifi to start putting his computers up for sale. He had taken pictures of them with his phone the night before, and Matt was a hundred percent sure that Techie knew the specs well enough that he didn’t have to be looking at them to put up an ad. With reassurance from Techie that he was fine taking the bus back to the house, Matt went on to work.

As they stopped for lunch at a fast food place, Matt noticed Steward looking at him.

Before he could get out a What’s up? Steward said, “You look happy these days.”

Matt’s brow creased. “Really?”

“That surprises you?”

“Well, there’s been a whole lot of bad stuff going down in my life. I’m not sure why someone would think I look happy.”

Steward shrugged. “Don’t know. You just do.”

“Okay.”

“So, not one thing is going right in your life?” asked Steward.

“Yeah,” Matt said, allowing a little smile. “One thing.”

That evening when his phone went off, he expected it to be a call from Techie. Phasma’s name popped up on the screen instead. His heart leapt automatically, though he tried to tell himself it was either a mistake or he had left something at the gym.

“Hey, Matt,” she said.

“Hi, Phasma.”

“How are you doing?”

“Uh, okay.”

She paused, as if her next statement was physically painful. “I may have something you could do. You know, if you want to keep boxing.”
“Really?”

“My friend Jim runs Metro Boxing and Martial Arts,” she said. “It’s right downtown. Do you know it at all?”

“No.”

“They’ve got some spots for people who want to help with the kids’ program. You’d be able to do it in return for some coaching sessions with their staff.”

“Wow,” Matt said. His skin was tingling and his throat was tight.

“Do you get on well with kids?”

Matt took a breath. “I don’t know. I guess. I’m going to be an uncle. Sort of”

“Well, it takes a lot of patience.” Phasma emphasized the final word.

Stuck for anything to say, Matt stayed silent.

“I’m letting you in on this because I think you can handle it. Do you think you could?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “I mean, yeah.”

Another pause. “Good. I’ve already talked to Jim about it. All you need to do is stop in there some day after work. Just hear what he’s got to say, then you can decide whether you want to be involved. Okay?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

“Great, Matt. Good luck.”

“Oh,” he said, “tell Dauntay and Jason and Horacio I said good luck at the tournament.”


Techie was thrilled when Matt gave him the news that night. To Matt’s great surprise, Techie had stopped by a grocery store on the bus ride back from the coffee shop and picked up some things for dinner. The days were noticeably shorter as the summer waned; it was nearly dusk when they went out onto the patio with their sandwiches and sodas.

“I’ll definitely miss this view,” Matt said, pointing out over the expanse of the pool.

“Maybe we’ll have a pool at our apartment complex,” Techie said, though something in his voice sounded mournful, as well.

“Will you miss your mom?”

Techie shrugged and gave a soft smile. “I grew up missing her.” He looked over at Matt. “What about you?”

“No,” he said, then paused for a second. “Once she told me she was just a collection of stuff: a pool, a house, a dog.”

“I don’t want to be that,” Techie said. Then he smiled. “I do wish I was twenty-five, though.”
Matt frowned. “Why? It wasn’t that great.”

“It would make things a lot easier.”

“I don’t understand,” Matt said.

“Oh,” said Techie. “I have a trust fund. It matures when I’m twenty-five. Then I wouldn’t have to sell my computers and I could finish school and we could live wherever we wanted, even a house with a pool.”

Matt goggled. “Are you serious?”

Techie nodded. “And my mom can’t touch it unless she releases it early. It automatically goes to me no matter what.”

“Holy shit,” Matt said.

More quietly, Techie said, “I could help you with legal stuff. A good lawyer.”

Matt shook his head. “I wouldn’t let you.”

Techie said nothing, placing his plate on the side table and drawing his knees up to his chest to watch the pool descend into darkness in the shadow of the huge house.

With no work the next day, it was hard for Matt to pry himself out of Techie’s arms. But he wanted to get to his old place to pick up the boxing gear he had left on the bed. Techie offered to accompany him but he declined, saying he wouldn’t be away long.

His heart plunged when he saw that Kyle’s car was in the driveway, and he almost considered turning around before realizing that the house was nearly ready for occupancy by another group of people. He needed to sell the bed and dresser. Leave almost every trace of the place behind.

The creaking of the screen door gave away his entrance. Much as in the aftermath of their fight, Kyle—who was packing up his kitchen utensils and plates into the boxes he’d gotten from the liquor store—stopped with a juice pitcher in his hand and stared, this time with flat menace. He had a line of black stitches in his lip with ugly bruising around it.

“Somebody bailed you out. Was it your rich friend?”

“Yes,” Matt said.

Kyle put the pitcher down next to the sink. “You cost me twelve hundred dollars, bro.”

Matt was silent.

Pointing to his lip, Kyle said: “This. I’m going to have a scar for the rest of my life. And the tooth.”

“I know.”

“What happened, man? We used to be friends.”

Matt could only tell the truth. “I don’t know.”

“You gotta control that temper,” Kyle said, shaking his head.

“Yeah.”
Kyle leaned forward. “Listen, man. I’m going to make you a deal. You get the twelve hundred by the end of the week—plus my eighty bucks—and I’ll drop the charges.”

Matt fought with all he had not to curl his fingers into fists. “You know I can’t do that.”

Kyle shrugged. “Sorry, dude. I guess I’ll see you in court.”

Matt only said, “I need to get some stuff here. Then I’m going.”

“Your call. End of the week. If you can scam that much off your weird friend, call me. I’m trying to cut you a break.”

“Yeah,” said Matt. “Whatever.” He was breathing hard as he mounted the stairs. The boxing gear, its orange color sharp against the blue blanket, still lay on the bed, looking deflated and strange. Still, he gathered it up and put the bag over his shoulder. Absolution was out of his reach yet again. He sighed and went down the stairs, letting the screen door scream and thump closed on his exit.

In the car, he looked up the number for Metro Boxing and asked for Jim. The director’s voice went cheerful when Matt mentioned Phasma’s name, and he said he had a little time that afternoon to see him if he came into the gym.

It motivated him to hold out the vain hope that he could scrounge the money together, force Kyle to drop the charges. If he was even serious about the offer. Matt had injured not just Kyle’s face but his vanity, and that was hard to buy back—if it was possible at all.

Matt used the last few dollars in his account to top up his gas tank then headed downtown. Metro dwarfed West Side, not only in space but obviously in funds. Matt walked open-mouthed into the facility, which had a forest of heavy bags, two rings, and a karate studio with a padded floor visible through a wall of windows.

“Hey,” said a guy a little shorter than Matt. He was balding in a U-shaped pattern but had buzzed his hair down almost to the scalp to compensate. “Welcome to Metro. Thinking about lessons? Fitness?”

“I’m looking for Jim,” Matt said.

The guy smiled and said, “I’m Jim. Are you Matt?”

“Yeah.”

When Jim stuck out his hand, Matt took it.

“Nice grip, there, Matt. Phasma told me a lot about you.”

Matt’s shoulders sagged. “Oh.”

Watching him, though, Jim laughed. “I promise it was all good stuff. She says you’re an up-and-coming fighter. You ever worked with kids before?”

Matt shook his head.

“Oh, they’re lots of fun. Cute to see them bopping each other around. We typically start adult-style classes when they’re about twelve but, man, do the little kids enjoy it. Gets out that aggression. And the girls are worse than the boys.”

Managing a laugh, Matt said, “Good to know.”
“Let me show you around a little,” Jim said, clapping Matt on the back.

Everything about Metro was state-of-the-art. Matt left with a waiver and an agreement that he would co-work weeknight peewee classes from six to seven o’clock in exchange for training time on his days off or on weekend nights. However long the deal lasted because of the trial or his prison term he couldn’t know, but he had no intention of letting Jim in on it until it was down to the wire.

At the house, with the strong scent of juniper and cut grass in the humid air, Techie met him at the door and practically leapt into his arms. His face was glowing.

“Hey,” Matt said. “Hey, good to see you, too.”

“No,” Techie said. “You don’t understand.”

Matt frowned. “I guess I don’t.”

“I got an email today.”

“Okay...and?”

Techie grinned. “My mom released the trust fund.”

“No.”

Techie stopped smiling and tilted his head. “No, what?”

Matt shook his head. “Stuff like this doesn’t happen to me.” He could feel Peaches’ tiny paws on his leg.

“Yes,” Techie said, stroking Matt’s cheek. “It’s real and it happened.”

“Why would she do that?”

“She doesn’t want me to be unhappy.”

“We would have been fine on our own,” Matt said.

“I know,” Techie told him. “I know. But this makes it so much better. We can live wherever we want. I can keep going to school and finish my degree. You won’t have to always worry about money.”

Matt looked away. “I don’t want you to be the one taking care of me.”

“I won’t be. And you won’t have to take care of me. I’ll still fix computers and when I graduate I’ll get a job. We can keep the money for other things.”

Shaking his head again, Matt said, “I’m going to be useless to you after I go to prison.”

“No,” said Techie. “Because you’re going to have an amazing lawyer.”

An internal debate raging, Matt finally winced and gave the news of Kyle’s offer.

It was now Techie’s turn to stand dumbfounded. “We have to be there when he drops the charges. Right at the station. We can’t just give him the money and take his word for it.”
“We can’t just give him the money if I don’t have it!”

Techie let out a long sigh. “Matt?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up. We’re going to the bank.”

Matt had never seen that much money in cash form at once. He stared as the clerk slid the crisp hundreds into an envelope. Even Kyle’s eyes went wide when he saw the contents, though Techie withheld it until they got to the station and made certain that Kyle had revoked the charges against Matt.

They even got a Sorry, man out of Kyle as he took the envelope, folded it, and tucked it into his back pocket.

Only after they were in the car was Matt able to allow himself to smile.

“I’m starving,” Techie said, his own smile bright and eager. “Do you want to get some dinner?”

Matt nodded as he put the car in drive. “Sure. Actually, I know a place with great subs. Best in the city.”

“You’ll have to show me more of the city,” Techie said. “I don’t know very much about it.”

Thousands of sun-shaped reflections bounced off the shapes of other cars as they passed, flicking through Techie’s hair.

Matt wanted to watch it all day: where and how the shadow of his nose fell, the curve below his bottom lip. “I know a lot of the fast food places,” he said, laughing. “That’s about it.”

At the restaurant, Techie put down a footlong meatball sub with no hesitation or difficulty.

Matt had to wrap up the end piece of his Italian Meats special and take it with them when they left. “What do you want to do now?” he asked. “We could go to the lake, go to your cherry tree.”

“Let’s go someplace different,” Techie said.

Matt followed the directions he was given, slightly puzzled when they pulled through an open iron gate with stone pillars.

“I think it closes at dusk, but we have enough time,” Techie said. “It’s a short walk. You have to park here, though. They won’t let us go any further in the car.”

“Sure,” Matt said, pulling in next to a building made of the same stone as the gates. When they walked around back of the building, a rolling door was open and a man inside was crouched beside a riding mower, tool in hand. “What is this?” Matt asked.

Techie only smiled. After looking to see that they were alone, he took Matt’s hand. Over a rise and past a copse of trees, hundreds of irregular shapes—some small and some absolutely monolithic—rose from the ground along the low hills beyond. Matt squeezed Techie’s hand.

They walked past polished crypts and brooding angels, statues of all shapes—from a carven lamb on a child’s grave to a granite obelisk. “Some of these are really old,” Techie said. At a fork in the road, he led them down the right-hand path, passing into an area of flatter land with newer-looking headstones. Breaking right again and walking through the rows, Techie at last stopped at a marker
that still shone so evenly it reflected the grass.

Carved on its face was:

ALLAN ROSS MADRIGAL. BELOVED HUSBAND. BELOVED FATHER.

“Hey, Dad,” Techie said, his voice soft.

Silent, Matt watched Techie run his fingers across the front ridge of the stone then pass his hand across its face, leaving tiny, humid impressions.

“I had to figure out what to put on it,” Techie said. “Mom wasn’t in any shape to make decisions like that.”

“It’s nice,” Matt told him. “I like it.” He wondered whether what he might put on his own father’s grave, when he passed away, would be much different.

Techie pointed to the grassy space beside the headstone, though. “She did know enough that she wanted to buy a plot next to him. For whenever that happens.”

“I hope it’s a long time from now.”

“Me, too.”

“Do you think you’ll ever talk to her again?” Matt asked.

“I hope so.”

“Yeah.” After a few moments, Matt said, “Well, my parents definitely like you.”

Techie looked over, an expression of shock on his face. “They know?”

“Not exactly. Not yet.” He took a breath. “But I want them to.”

“And you think they’ll be okay with it?”

Matt shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t see why not. Obviously it’s never come up before.”

“Well,” Techie said. “I’m here for you.”

“I know.”

The next day, while Matt was at work, Techie said he would call a moving service to get a quote on taking the computers and the bed out of the basement. As for everything else in their new home, they would have to buy it: desks, a sofa, things for the kitchen—everything. Techie also promised to start looking online at apartment complexes near the college campus so they could go see a few places in the next couple of days.

In the employee lot that evening, Matt got a call from his mother. His heart hammering, he picked up.

“Hey, Mattie,” Leah said.

“What’s wrong?”

There was a pause at the other end of the line, then she said, “Well, nothing’s wrong. Why? Is
there something wrong there?"

Letting out his relief in a whoosh of breath, Matt passed a hand through his hair and said, “No.”

“I was just checking in on you, kiddo,” his mom said. “See how you’re doing. You’re getting ready
to move, right?”

“Yes. I’m moving in with—with Ryan.”

“Oh, your little friend with the red hair. Wasn’t he the sweetest? You know, your dad and I talked
about that the whole drive back from lunch.”

“Yes,” Matt said. “He’s a great guy.”

“Well, you tell him one of these days that I’ll make dinner for you two here, okay?”

“I will.”

“No, Mattie, I mean really do tell him that.”

“Mom,” he said. “I’m going to. I promise. We’ll come visit soon.”

“Great, great. Okay, hon. I’ll let you go,” Leah said. “I’m sure you’re busy moving.”

“Yeah. Hey, Mom?”

“What, honey?”

“I love you. Tell Dad I love him too.”

“Aw, you’re too sweet. We love you too, Mattie. Bye, now.”

When Matt got back to Crescent Heights that evening, Techie was in a flurry again. “I think I found
it!” he nearly yelled.

“Found what?” Matt asked, catching long, flailing limbs.

“Our new place. It’s right near the school, and by the highway you can use to get to work.”

Smiling, Matt said, “You looked up the address where I work?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Okay, show me,” Matt said.

Techie’s face fell, but only a little. “I really want to pull it up on the computer, but I can’t. Do you
have to work tomorrow?”

Matt shook his head. “No. I’ll probably never get forty hours a week, let’s face it.”

“Good,” Techie said. “I mean, that’s not good, but it’s good that you can come with me. To see it.”

The following day dawned with a cloud cover and a wind that swept some of the residual heat
away.

Going out to the car, Techie looked up, squinting. “It hasn’t rained for so long.”
“Well,” said Matt, “maybe it will hold off until we’re done seeing this apartment.”

Very nearly vibrating in his seat, Techie told Matt to set off on their usual route toward the diner. Watching the GPS app on his phone, he signaled that they should turn off onto a street whose entrance was partially blocked by a tall yew hedge. The street sign poked out from above the foliage by only a foot or so.

“Is this Black House Road?” Techie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Then the next one on the left should be Oak Knoll.”

“I take that one?” Matt asked.

“Yeah. The complex is just a little down the street.”

The cluster of buildings Techie indicated were painted a gray-blue with white trim. They were gathered behind an iron fence with a gate much like the one at the cemetery. The gates were open and Matt drove in, parking in front of a low brick building with a sign that read, *Leasing Office*.

A blonde woman with a crooked smile met them at the door. “Are you Ryan and Matt?”

Techie nodded.

“You’re expecting us?” Matt asked.

The woman, whose name tag said “Allison,” laughed. “Yes, Ryan called us yesterday to arrange this appointment.”

They were escorted in a golf cart to one of the buildings on the far side of the complex. Allison led them up two flights of stairs to a third-level apartment. All of the walls inside were white and the place still smelled of paint.

“We’re airing it out,” said Allison, her tone apologetic.

Indeed, the windows were open and the blinds raised. The taut screens vibrated only a little in their frames as the wind navigated the crannies of the building.

“There’s new wood flooring all throughout and new tile in the kitchen,” Allison told them. “You’re also one of the units to have a fireplace, though it’s electric because we can’t have fires or grills anywhere but in the park area. But it’s still warm on a cold night!”

Techie looked over at Matt, who shrugged, echoing his smile.

The place had a large living area, a good-sized kitchen (“We’d better learn to do some cooking instead of getting takeout all the time,” Techie said.), two bathrooms, and two bedrooms.

When Techie watched Matt’s brows draw in a little when Allison showed them the second bedroom, he made sure to brightly announce, “This will make a perfect office.”

Blushing nonetheless, Matt grinned.

“What do you think?” Techie asked when they had a moment away from their chipper guide.

“I think it’s huge.”
“Not like my house,” Techie said. “I mean, my mom’s house.”

“No. But it’s nicer than any place I’ve ever lived.” He paused for a moment, looking around the space. “We’ll need so much furniture.”

“We’ll get it, Techie said.

“Okay,” said Matt.

“Okay” was what they told Allison, as well. She beamed and preened as they filled out the paperwork in the leasing office and Techie put the security deposit down.

“Welcome to Oak Vista, gentlemen,” she said. “We have a lot of other young people here. We have events every other Thursday night, so maybe you could meet some of your neighbors. Oh, and there’s a dog park.”

“We don’t need a dog park,” Matt said.

“Sure we do,” Techie piped up. “Where is Peaches going to play?”

“So we’re taking the dog?” Matt asked later when they had returned to the basement of Madeline Madrigal’s home.

“Are you okay with that? I don’t think Mom would keep her. She doesn’t like her very much.”

“Sure,” Matt said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

Techie joined him. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “Stuff’s just happening really fast. Good stuff. I’m not used to it.”

“Me, neither,” Techie said. “So, you liked the place?”

“Yeah. I really did.”

Techie laughed. “Good, because we don’t have a lot more time to figure something out.”

“You want to lie down?” Matt asked.

“Sure.”

Matt tried to tackle him into the sheets, but Techie resisted, saying, “Hold on. I want to take the towel down from the window. I want to see outside.”

“It’s raining,” Matt said.

“Fine. I want to see the rain.”

Matt laughed. “You’re a little weird.”

“I always have been,” Techie said, yanking out the pushpins that held the old dish towel in place over the slim window.

On the bed, Matt beckoned to him. “Come here.”

Techie went to his arms. “I can’t believe I won’t be down here anymore,” he said. “It’s been almost seven years.”
“That’s a long time,” Matt said.

“It is and it isn’t,” said Techie. “We’re just young.”

At the same time that he felt wrung out by the last few days, Matt also felt an energy that had been siphoned away bit by bit returning. “I feel young and old at the same time.”

“Yeah,” Techie said. “Same.”

Matt paused then stroked his fingertips over Techie’s arm. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Techie shook his head.

“It’s true. Don’t tell me it’s not true.”

“I’m not. I don’t need to be the best thing, though. I just want to be there when other good things happen to you.”

“You will be.”

Techie paused, listening to the rain drum against the windowpane. “Have you ever been asleep, in a dream—one of those where you can’t move or you can’t escape?” he asked. “No matter how hard you fight you can’t get out? Or maybe you’re trying to get closer to something, but it always seems like it’s a million miles away? But then you finally can open your eyes and move and it all fades into light again. That’s what you are to me.”

“The dream?” Matt asked, propping himself up on his elbow.

“No,” Techie said. “Waking up.”

Matt bent to kiss him, then, and they stayed as they were for a long while.

End Notes

Come see me on tumblr, should you care to.

Works inspired by this one Day It Will Please Us to Remember Even This by Eastmava

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!