

Three things cannot be long hidden: the sun, the moon, and the truth.
—BUDDHA

We must let go of the life we have planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for us. —JOSEPH CAMPBELL

The wound is the place where the Light enters you. —RUMI

Where there is great love, there are always miracles. —WILLA CATHER

LIKE A PRAYER

C.J. Hendrix

indigo





~ 1 ~

My day started the way it more often ends, with a dream of my little brother.

Aaron is always whole and perfect and still nine years old in my dreams. His cheeks dimple when he smiles, and his hazel eyes spark with curiosity. But he doesn't smile in this dream. In this one, he stands next to me at the kitchen stove while I cook up fry cakes in a pan of hot oil. It's our mother's recipe with corn flour and cornmeal, the aroma like a combination of donuts and popcorn. My smudged reflection gazes at us from the stove's chrome backsplash, my eyes just shaded hollows and my hair a black veil draped behind my shoulders.

"Careful, okay?" I nudge Aaron with my elbow. "It's real hot. Don't stand too close."

He steps back, strokes the cowlick of caramel-colored hair that sticks out over his left ear. "I'm worried," he says.

"Don't worry, they're almost done. They're going to be perfect." I put my hand on the warm crown of his head just like I used to when he was alive, to reassure him—to remind him I'd always protect him. In this dream, the warmth travels up my arm and blooms in my chest.

"It's not that," he tells me. "It's Dad."

"There's plenty for Dad, too."

"He needs you." His voice has a peculiar kind of urgency, a tightness in the throat I've never heard before.

"Another hangover?"

Aaron shakes his head, bites his lower lip. "He just—he needs you."

Something in my gut tells me to abandon what I'm doing. "Okay, hold on a sec. Wait for me." I set aside the pan of fry cakes and shut off the stove. But when I turn around, Aaron's gone.

And that feeling in my gut grew into a knot and woke me up.

All day, Aaron's voice stayed with me. It wasn't like his nighttime visits when I'd surface from fragments of dreams, open my eyes to find him by my bed and he'd talk to me. This was a pleading whisper that thrummed behind my ears. *He needs you.*

The mindless grind of my workday didn't help. I assembled cardboard boxes, my hands wrapped in nitrile gloves, sweating. *Square it, fold the bottom. Tape the flaps. Stack.* I kept my earbuds pushed in as tight as they'd go and pretended

to listen to music, while my coworkers bitched about politics or broadcast their personal woes. Recent health scares involving unmentionable body parts. Possibly cheating spouses. Crazy relatives who'd gone off their meds. But the wire snaking into my jeans pocket was frayed and useless and not even connected to my phone, not that they'd care if I overheard. It was just a typical workday on the factory side of Telmar-Optics, a place that smelled like well-oiled machinery with an undercurrent of damp gravel—a windowless, fluorescent-lit place filled with an endless vibrating hum. We were all part of that machinery, that hum.

I figured Aaron's daytime voice must be a glitch in my brain because I was stressed-out. My father was his usual disheveled mess at breakfast and I wasn't sure what he needed, not that I could've helped much. Two weeks after my mother died, I'd overheard my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Spanucci, tell my father I had stunted social skills. Maybe those weren't her exact words, but she said I didn't participate in class and spent too much time in my head. She said my brain wasn't wired right. I didn't get what she meant, and I don't think my father did either, probably because of his own kind of wrong-wired brain. Plus we were grieving my mother's unexpected death, an emptiness so unfathomable it seemed impossible to navigate. It's like you've got no compass and you've lost your North. Or at least it feels that way when you're only eleven and your little brother is just three.

Every time my cramped fingers needed a break from box-folding, I pulled out my phone and pretended to choose something new from my non-existent playlist. What I really did was look at selfies of me and Brenna Maris—Brenna with her wide smile and short red hair, me with my puzzled frown and

crow-black ponytail. We looked so mismatched, not like we could ever be a real couple. Most of the pictures were silly and blurred, with our features distorted and the lighting all wrong. In one picture our eyes were clear, but the sunlight had washed out the colors so that we looked like we were floating in a hazy sky. For some reason, that one was my favorite.

I tucked my phone away and wondered if it was still cloudy outside, if the May sun would ever come out. A year ago, I was sure the sun had gone away forever, abandoned our entire town of Springville on the day of the Terrible-D. That's what I'd named it—the thing that had taken Aaron's life and three others, and made me want to quit high school just six weeks and one day before the end of my junior year. I'd never liked school, anyway, which made it seem like an even better idea to get a job instead, like it would prove something to people like Mrs. Spanucci. Not to mention Brenna was already at T-O. She'd worked here her whole senior year and stayed after she graduated because they'd offered her some kind of scholarship. Plus it was the one place in town where you had a chance to earn decent money.

When I applied, I was sure I'd land something important like what my mother did when she worked at T-O. I thought they'd put me in equipment assembly or even testing, since I'd always been good with my hands, like her. I hadn't counted on a job folding boxes, a job that probably wasn't meant for somebody like me, or for anyone capable of thinking beyond the mechanics of box-folding. Most days, it made my arms ache and gave my brain too much time to chew on everything wrong in our lives. And there was an awful lot to chew on. Tomorrow, I'd sit next to my father in a cramped pew at Our Lady of Mercy Church with some of the other families who hadn't run away

from Springville, who'd come in remembrance of the Terrible-D.

Before the five o'clock bell, a few of my coworkers in packing and shipping stopped by to see me. They patted me on the shoulder or put an arm around me, tried to say something reassuring before saying goodbye.

"I'll be thinking about you . . ."

"We'll be at church, too, Zee. Me and the kids."

"Sorry—gotta be out of town with my parents. But you hang in there, girl. Okay?"

"Let me know if you need anything this weekend. I mean that."

Mrs. Falkowski, who taught me how to fold boxes when I first came to T-O, gathered me in her arms for a long hug. Stout and gray-haired, she often complained about her feet or looked cranky about nothing in particular. I knew her hug meant something.

She whispered into my shoulder, "You're in my prayers all the time, honey. Every day."

I thanked her and blinked hard so I wouldn't cry. The rest of our coworkers high-fived and waved goodbye to each other, probably feeling good about their day, while I faced the nagging reality that I hadn't accomplished anything that mattered. I hadn't even seen Brenna to say *Hi*. Some days at work our paths never crossed at all, since she had a more important job than mine, a career kind of job. But I still looked for her—more than I'd ever admit—hoping to at least get a passing wave.

I stepped out of the noise and grime of the warehouse and detoured through the main corridor flanked by rows of office windows. It was quiet and claustrophobic and smelled different in this part of the building, like new furniture and

plastic and somebody's cologne. I got a glimpse of the back of Brenna's head through a meeting room window and smiled when I saw the flame of her wavy hair, how it stood out among all the heads circling the table.

Everyone nodded in agreement and got up to leave, so I waited for Brenna in the hall. Dressed in a crisp white shirt and black khakis, she looked like someone who belonged on that side of the glass. As she came through the door, her earth-brown eyes found me and she winked. And when she smiled, the scar beneath her left eye, caused by a childhood fall from a swing, disappeared. "I'm glad you're still here," she said. "It's been a crazy day."

Her coworkers shuffled past us, some nodding in our direction as if acknowledging a secret. "You need to stay?" I asked.

"Yeah, I need to stay a little longer. I've got a couple things to finish up at my desk."

Brenna worked in T-O's telescopic design. She hadn't decided where to pursue her degree, but she'd taken a few online courses with some of her scholarship money. She talked about becoming a research optometrist. She liked studying optical science and doing stuff with her hands, plus she liked to help people. When I first started in T-O's shipping department, she came to see me during my lunch break nearly every day and asked how I was doing. And she always treated me like I was as smart as she was, even if I acted weird or was quiet.

Brenna slipped her hand around my elbow and guided me a few steps down the hall. My heart spun and skipped inside my chest. She had perfect hands, careful and precise—confident in a way I couldn't describe, but meant for the kind of work she loved to do. Everybody says the eyes are the window to your

soul, but they forget all about the hands. You can tell a lot about someone by their hands.

“Will I see you later?” she asked. “Or can I call you tonight?”

“I should really spend some time with my Dad. He’s been having a rough week. Plus I was thinking I might go to bed early, because of the memorial tomorrow and everything.” I didn’t like talking on the phone, trying to picture her expressions when I could only hear her voice.

“Be careful going home. I heard there’s a couple of reporters making the rounds already.”

“We’re just a backdrop for them, that’s all. So they can talk up some other catastrophe.” I wouldn’t let myself say the real word for that catastrophe. *Shooting*.

“Still,” she said. “Call me later, if you’re up.”

“I’ll try.”

Brenna got both her arms around me and I grabbed her elbows, my awkward way of hugging her back. She smelled like juniper and a trace of mint. “I don’t care what they think,” she said. “And you shouldn’t, either. It’s just a hug, right?”

I knew what she meant. But we both knew it was more than just a regular kind of hug. And everyone else probably knew that, too.

“I’ll be there tomorrow, Zee.”

I nodded. “Maybe we’ll catch up after the service.”

“We need to talk. I miss you.” Brenna pressed her lips to my ear like she wanted to whisper something else, but she kissed me instead.

“I know.” I wished I could talk to her the way she wanted me to, the way I sometimes wanted to.

I could still feel Brenna’s lips against my ear as I drove

home, steering my father's boat and rusted Malibu along the whole four blocks of downtown. I pushed through traffic slowed by a double-parked van from Channel 10, setting up to catch a segment for their evening news. On this first anniversary, we'd relive it, replay the nightmare of what should've been just a normal day. A day that had split me wide open with its hard and punishing blade, when I learned my little brother was dead.

I headed toward home under a still-cloudy sky, ignoring the intruders, wished they had no reason to be here. Until last year, Springville had been just a tiny dot on a map, an unmoored ship drifting west of New York's I-87, south of Albany. Before the Terrible-D—before we'd been fated with the notoriety cursing so many other towns and cities—nobody even knew we existed.

The road eventually cleared beyond Main Street, opening to rows of half-bloomed trees and the same quiet yards I'd known my whole life. I rolled the elastic band off my ponytail, freed my hair and cracked the car window, hoping to catch some scent of spring. But on this cool and gray day, with the wind just right and my driving too slow, all I could smell was the cloud of ethanol and burnt oil that engulfed our old Mali-boat.

I spaced out from thinking too much, or maybe the fumes, and almost missed the driveway. I hit the brakes and pulled a hard right, and the steering protested with a banshee-like noise. I parked in front of the garage, really a barn to our farmhouse, full of busted appliances and unfinished projects. My father liked to save things that were outdated and broken, things he intended to fix, which totally explained the Mali-boat. When I shut off the ignition, the engine shuddered and hissed.

My hands still felt sweaty, even out of their work gloves.

I climbed the side porch steps and called out for our border collie, Rounder. He'd usually wait at the end of the driveway, ready to follow his instincts, then zigzag behind the car bumper and herd me toward the house. He wasn't in sight, which meant my father had probably taken him for a walk, gone out for a while to clear his head like he used to do after work. He needed one of those walks. Because lately he reeked of whiskey more days than not, and I was worried that he hadn't asked me to drop him at his office even once this week. He'd worked a long time at Bissell & Moore, the accounting firm that rearranged numbers for clients like Mr. Walters, a pushy old man whose family owned the entire Springville Industrial Park. Mr. Walters' sons even ran T-O, the place I'd chosen to spend my days, refining box-folding into its own kind of dumb science.

I opened the storm door and turned the knob to the kitchen entry, but it wouldn't budge. Confused, I slid my worn house key into the lock, a key that had been on the Mali-boat key ring forever, but I couldn't remember ever using. We weren't in the habit of locking doors and I wondered if it was just another sign of my father's growing forgetfulness. I jiggled and pushed the key, hoping it might release the tumblers. But it wouldn't work. I wasn't sure if the key had ever worked.

I jumped off the porch and walked around to check the front door, but the storm was hooked shut from the inside. I could still hear Aaron's voice, *Dad needs you*, and now it made my head throb. I went back to the Mali-boat, opened the door and knelt on the ground, and groped under the bench seat. Amid gum wrappers and hairbands and pennies, my fingers found a couple of big paper clips, perfect for lock-picking. I'd

taught myself how to pick when my school locker kept getting jammed because I didn't like asking for help. Back at the kitchen entry, I bent the clips into the shape I needed, prayed they'd work. After raking the cylinder a few times, between deep breaths to calm my head-throbbing, I felt the pins click into place. Finally, the lock released.

I stepped into the kitchen and caught an odd whiff of something I didn't recognize. Then I realized maybe it wasn't a smell at all, but more like that sick-heavy sense of something not being right. I called out to my father, waited to hear his voice calling back. But the only answer I got was the low roar of the gas furnace cranking over like it usually did this time of year, with the evenings still chilly.

I walked through the living room, past our tired furniture and dusty-curtained windows, a room that always ached for more light. I headed upstairs, the treads groaning under my feet, and found Rounder pacing and whining outside my father's bedroom door. It was partly open, and I knew something worse must have happened than him just getting wasted on Jim Beam.

I edged through the door and Rounder pushed past my heels. He arrowed straight for the bed, where my father was curled up with the covers to his waist, his skin grayer than usual. I crept closer, holding my breath. He had on yesterday's clothes, the same ones he'd slept in last night and worn at breakfast—a ratty blue oxford under the navy sweater my mother had knitted for him years ago. He looked seventy-one instead of forty-one, his wire-rimmed glasses askew across his nose, his thinning, sand-colored hair sticking out like dead grass. The narrow fingers of his right hand were half-opened like he'd just let go of something. And near that hand lay a

silver pendant with its tarnished chain, a dime-sized moonstone held in a web of sculpted wire, a piece of jewelry made by my mother. It had been her favorite. I thought he had buried that necklace with her when she died.

I stared at his bristly, unshaven neck, hoping to see the faint pulse of some vessel, a slight rise and fall in his chest. Nothing. My heart jammed in my throat as I reached down and placed my uncertain fingers along his neck, just under his jaw. His skin was cool and loose, and everything under that skin was silent.

I stepped back. I don't know how long I stood there, studying the sunken slope of his face, the wrinkled clothes and thin limbs. My grief snagged somewhere in my chest before I let it go, then I was bawling so hard I thought I'd puke. I rescued the necklace and put it in my jeans pocket. I smoothed my father's hair and pulled the worn bedspread up over his arms and chest, pulled it up as far as I could until only the crown of his sandy-gray head peeked out. I placed my hand there, longing to ask him why, wishing I could've reassured him. I wanted to tell him we could've been okay, remind him that we'd still had each other, that at least we could've held onto that. Guilt clamped down on me as I remembered those times I'd thought of leaving. I kissed his forehead through the bedspread, my damp cheek soaking the cloth, knowing it didn't matter now. Now, he'd left me.

I closed the door to my father's room and Rounder ushered me back to the landing. I collapsed on the top step and slouched against the wall. Rounder leaned into me, the way dogs always do when they know something's wrong. I stroked the feathery wick of white fur between his eyes, and he pushed his nose into my palm.

“We’ve lost everybody,” I told him, this grim reality raking my heart. “Everybody.”

Rounder whimpered, his tongue catching my salty tears, his breath warm on my cheek.



~ 2 ~

It's a simple fact that people will drop out of your life. Depart. Leave you.

Sometimes they drift away in what you might call a slow-D. You can almost see them shrinking, getting smaller and smaller until they disappear on some stretch of horizon, heading to a place you can't follow or even see. The only good thing about a slow-D is that it gives you a chance to say goodbye or a sliver of time to cling, if you needed to.

Then there's the sudden-D, like they got sucked through a black hole straight into another universe. You're left gut-ripped, paralyzed, still holding an emotional rope except there's no one at the other end. The rope's been cut, either by choice or by fate. People offer more sympathy with a sudden-D, not that it helps when everything that's raw inside you is spilling all over

your outside. You try to keep it in, hold tight to every picture or souvenir that proves the person you loved was real, even though it's the same blunt and honest proof they're gone. Really, totally, gone.

But it's not just about how slow or sudden the leaving happens—it's about the darkness that comes to fill the empty space, too. And the depth of darkness depends on who, exactly, has left you. Especially when it's more than one *who*.

That's how I named the Terrible-D.

I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd missed some hint my father had given that he was nearing his own version of D. Maybe I should've known by something he said, or by the way he hugged me in the morning, unexpectedly, that he was close to his own dropping out. That I'd come home on this particular day to find him gone—truly, completely, gone. A slow-D straight from the bottle he'd been hiding in for years, but with the punch of a sudden-D at the end.

After this morning's dream with Aaron, I'd laid in bed and watched the sun finger through my window, wishing I could steal more sleep. But the warm scent of fry cakes had drifted up from the kitchen and woken my stomach up, too. I pressed the pillow against my cheek, imagined Brenna lying next to me—imagined what it might be like to have someone there I could feel close to, if I let myself. I held the pillow for a few warm moments before I let go, then pulled on my robe and wandered downstairs. I found my father hunched at the table as usual, reading the news and checking stock trends on his laptop. Rounder emerged from under the table to greet me, nudging my hand until I rubbed his black velvet ears.

My father had looked up, the sealed line of his mouth parting, smileless. "Good morning, Zee. It's early."

"Morning, Dad."

"Did I wake you?"

"I smelled breakfast."

"I decided to make your mom's fry cakes. We haven't had them in a long time."

I shuffled over to the table and he surprised me by standing up to give me a hug, his arms uncertain and weak. I tightened my embrace around his ribs, as if I had to support him despite my own weariness. I turned away from his breath, stinking with that familiar mix of morning coffee and last night's Jim Beam. I couldn't remember the last time he didn't smell like whiskey.

"Did you sleep at all?" I asked.

"I dozed a bit. On the couch."

He let me go and adjusted his glasses, then sat back down to the news. Rounder settled under the table at his feet. "Most of the local headlines are about tomorrow," he said. "About the memorial service. Hard to believe—a year, already."

"Already," I echoed, and caught my breath.

At the kitchen counter, I poured a cup of coffee. A light dusting of cinnamon covered the oily plate of fry cakes waiting there, right next to yesterday's dishes that still needed washing. I fixed myself a fry cake with some extra cinnamon and joined my father at the table. His hands trembled as he slid the sugar bowl and creamer toward me, the porcelain set with yellowish daisies that had been my mother's favorite. The skin on his hands matched the hue of the flowers, except for his veins bulging in gray-blue lines.

I dumped a spoonful of sugar onto my fry cake and one in my coffee and poured too much milk. The pale brew swelled to the mug's edge and I leaned in to sip it back, my father eyeing

my childish maneuver. His brow arched like it typically did when he had a question forming in his mouth.

“Any dreams last night?”

It was the same question he would ask me every morning if we happened to be sitting together at the table, if he was awake and able to sit with me and not passed out somewhere else in the house. And I gave my same two questions back. “You mean about Mom? Or Aaron?”

“About your brother.”

I nodded, knowing if I didn’t nod when he asked me about Aaron, I’d disappoint him. But I couldn’t tell my father the whole truth—that my dreams about Aaron were more like visitations, especially in that sinking moment when I was falling asleep but really still awake. Usually, he’d just come and sit on the edge of my bed and talk to me—talk like the same nine-year-old brainiac kid he’d been, like he was having his version of a regular day. Like a day at school when he’d learned something new that fascinated him, especially in math or astronomy, and wanted to tell me about it or show me the latest book he was reading.

The first time was just a few days after he died. Aaron tilted his head like he always did when he was thinking, the mop of his hair shiny and liquid-like. He smiled and his cheeks dimpled just like our father’s, and the first word out of his mouth was simply *hey*. For about two seconds I believed maybe the Terrible-D hadn’t happened at all, that it had been nothing but an awful nightmare, and Aaron was standing by my bed to say he couldn’t sleep. Then I realized it had to be his ghost I was seeing and my heart crashed against my ribs, while he kept whispering, *Shhh, shhh . . . it’s okay, you’re okay.*

But I’d lost my voice and couldn’t have screamed even

if I wanted to.

He stayed close until I calmed down. He looked so perfect, his body unmarred and his eyes sparkling, in what he called his *flight body*. He looked the same as that last morning I'd seen him catch the bus for school, wearing cargos and his favorite shirt, the one with the cool rocket ship on the front and constellations on the back. And he still smelled like his favorite chewing gum, strawberry, mixed with that hint of boy sweat I knew so well.

"The only dream I remember was from this morning," I said. "Aaron was helping me make a batch of Mom's fry cakes."

"I wonder if my cooking made you dream that."

I nodded, tried to think of details I could invent to make the whole scene sound happy. "We were goofing around the whole time. You know, making faces and stuff. They came out perfect, though, and we coated them with cinnamon and sugar, same as always. Then we sat down and pigged out."

"I remember you both doing that," my father said.

I wasn't sure if he meant the coating or the pigging out, or both. My Aaron dreams weren't anything like my regular dreams, which were most often filled with empty, abandoned houses that had a lot of doors, with stairways hidden behind every one of them. I'd travel down vaguely familiar hallways and open those doors, climb the creaky narrow steps, searching, though I didn't know what for. Sometimes the houses would be filled with light, but other times they'd be so dark I could barely see. Sometimes I'd get lost and Rounder would show up, barking like a scene from *Lassie*, telling me somebody's in danger. That's when I'd panic and wake up.

My father emptied his coffee cup in one swallow like a shot glass, then took off his glasses. I passed him a napkin for

his eyes and took one for myself. We'd had a whole year to practice this ritual, to invent new ways to not talk about everything that had happened.

I picked at my fry cake, which was limp and slightly burnt and nothing like my mother's thick, golden version. He couldn't ever get the recipe right, usually substituted white flour and hominy for my mother's mix of cornmeal and corn flour. I didn't have the heart to tell him it really did make a difference. "I sort of wish we didn't have to go tomorrow," I said.

My father blew his nose and worked his glasses back on. "But we should." He stood to get more coffee, unsteady and holding his chair.

"Maybe we could get there early, then," I said. "It wouldn't be so bad, if we didn't have reporters coming around, too."

My father shook his head. "They're just using the opportunity to keep attention on these tragedies—to keep the arguments going." He edged back to his seat, struggling with the filled cup. I took it from his hands and set it on the table for him. He sat down slowly, his wet and unanchored eyes roaming the screen of his laptop. "I understand what they're after, but arguing hasn't solved anything. Nothing's changed to help anyone . . . it doesn't change what we're left with. The heartache. The loss."

As soon as the word came of a shooting in town, we went into lockdown at Springville High. Through that paralyzing afternoon, we searched our phones for news, shared updates with each other, prayed. And when they finally released us, I ran alone through the chill of early May—ran toward Springville Primary School, my lungs bursting until

Brenna pulled up in her Honda and offered me a ride. I had a crush on her, and it was like God had sent her to help. She kept telling me *Don't worry, don't worry*, as if trying to convince us both it would all be okay. Her father was Aaron's fourth-grade teacher.

We arrived to discover more than half the town already there. Parents who'd come for end-of-day pickups sobbed and prayed and searched for their children. Through the chaos of cars and SUVs parked where they didn't belong, everyone pushed to get closer. State police kept shouting *Stay back!*, while news vans already circled in for their vulture-fest, wanting to broadcast everything.

I couldn't find Aaron among the children who clung to their rescuers, their teachers, their parents. Somebody told Brenna that her father had already been transported to the trauma center in Albany, but she stayed with me until my father managed to get to the school. She was scared, too, but she didn't want me to be alone, waiting to find out about Aaron.

"They have no idea what it's like," my father said, turning the laptop back toward him. "What you see. What breaks your heart."

I knew exactly what he meant. I'd insisted on going to the morgue with my father the day after, though he tried to talk me out of it.

If my mother had been alive, she would've done the same, gone to see Aaron and touch him one last time. I owed him that—I'd raised him since he was three, after we'd lost her in an almost-sudden-D. My parents were heading home from a Bissell & Moore lawn party, where I'm sure my father's boss kept patting him on the back and refilling his glass until he'd had way too much to drink. My mother had to drive. I

remember my father's story involved a deer in the road, and my mother losing control of their Volkswagen when she swerved. He walked away with a mild concussion and broken collarbone, while she hung on in a coma for three days, her arms and legs bruised to black, her face cut and her eyes stuck half open—just long enough for us to say our goodbyes. After she died, I cocooned Aaron in my bedcovers when he cried, and we made up stories about finding a spaceship so we could fly away to see her. He started calling me Mommy Zee, which soon turned into Mozey. I called him Aero. And we eventually found a new rhythm to our lives that made sense in its own way. But by then, my father was drinking every night.

I wasn't afraid to see Aaron at the morgue, having witnessed my mother's broken body. The brooding young coroner had whispered loudly to my father, his voice echoing in a cool room filled with too much metal. *You don't need to do this.* He'd frowned and shook his head. *Don't let her. I wouldn't advise it.*

She needs to, my father said.

A sheet had been draped over Aaron's body, with the top edge folded down and tucked up just under his chin. The fringe of his hair was pushed back, his forehead washed clean like he'd just taken a bath, his eyelashes the same dark silk they'd always been.

I leaned in, kissed him above the neat arch of his brow. His skin was cold against my lips, that kind of cold you never forget. *I'm sorry, Aero—I'm so sorry.* I traced the outline of the sheet over his body and reached to lift the hem. I couldn't help it.

Don't, please, the coroner said.

Can I just hold his hand?

No . . . no, it's not . . .

I needed to witness the truth of Aaron's last moment, hoping he didn't see what was coming. I lifted the sheet. But all I could see was how I hadn't protected him like I'd always promised, how he must have tried to block the bullets that would find him. My little brother was gone, torn from us by a force that I hoped to make sense of, but couldn't.

My father had to carry me out of there, despite his own exhaustion and grief—his arms were strong enough then. Sitting at the breakfast table, I noticed how thin and wasted they'd grown since that day. I wished I could talk to him about the memories streaming through my brain. "Did you have any dreams last night?" I asked.

He shook his head while scrolling through more news articles. My father rarely shared his dreams, but when he did, those dreams were usually about my mother.

"Not even one about Mom?"

"I didn't sleep that much," he said. "But I had a dream about all of us, a few nights ago. Your mom was expecting Aaron. And you were so excited, you drove us nuts, counting down the days."

"That sounds like a dream that really happened."

My father smiled a little. "That's because it really did happen."

"It's been a while since I've dreamt about Mom," I said. "But I think about her a lot. Especially at work when my mind isn't busy on something else."

"You look more like her every day, you know." My father's eyes shifted up and he gave me a brief glint of acknowledgment. "You've got her clever hands, too."

I wasn't sure if that was true. Mostly, I had my mother's

thick hair and prominent cheekbones, not to mention the bridge of her nose. And my skin was olive like hers, so different than Aaron's or my father's. My parents met at T-O, where she had been part of a special assembly team for their best telescopes before they had computerized tools for that sort of thing. He worked in purchasing while finishing his accounting degree. I don't know what the attraction was between them, but I eventually figured out they were already expecting me when they married.

"Do you still think about her?" I asked.

His smile faded while he pretended to stay focused on his computer. "I think about her every day. And I still blame myself for her being gone."

Some part of me blamed him, too, but I was afraid to tell him that. I said, "I know I'll always blame myself about Aaron."

He shook his head. "Don't do that to yourself, Zee. We thought we knew things. But there was so much we really couldn't know."

His answer sounded like a riddle, one I knew he'd never want to unravel. I asked him if he was staying home from work again.

"I need to stay home."

"You wouldn't have to, if you stopped what you're doing to yourself."

My father wouldn't look at me. "Things will get better, Zee. Somehow, they'll get better."

I wanted to grab his bony shoulders and shake him—shake him and get him to really talk, make him promise me he'd stop drinking, threaten to leave if I had to. But I wasn't sure I mattered that much to him. I'd probably never find out if I mattered at all unless he realized he might lose me, too.

“How are things with you and Brenna?” he asked, deflecting attention back to me.

“What do you mean?” I wondered how much he knew about us.

“You have to let someone in, Zee. You can’t stay closed up like this forever.”

I shook my head, not sure what to say. I stood up and gathered the dirty dishes from the table, and started running water in the sink.

“I’ll clean up,” he said. “You get ready for work.”

“Did Rounder eat yet?”

“I’ll feed him, too. Don’t worry.”

I turned to leave the kitchen and head upstairs, but my father got up from his chair and reached out. It wasn’t like him. I knew his hands mostly as an extension of his intellect, as problem-solvers for anything with equations and nothing with emotions. He hugged me harder than he had in a long time, every thin muscle in his torso straining. He placed one hand on top of my head, trying to ground me, while his heart banged hard and fast against my ear. He hated crying in front of anyone.

When he finally loosened his arms, he cupped my face in his trembling hands. He looked straight into me, even as his eyes seem to fade inside that alcoholic fog enveloping his soul.

“Promise me, Zee . . . promise me you’ll get your GED. Promise you’ll quit that lousy job, go to college. Find a place where you can use your talents. Promise me?” He didn’t wait for a real answer, just kept pouring out words, every one of them chased by the smell of whiskey. “Promise me you’ll go after something better in life. Do that for me. And your mom. And for Aaron. But most importantly, for yourself.”

“How can I promise you anything, Dad?” I bit my lip, pushed back my tears. “I want you to stop drinking. Can you promise *that*? For me?”

“I know I haven’t been the best father. But it’s not the right time to talk about this. Not now.”

“When have we ever talked, really? We can’t even talk about what happened last year, about all of it. About the secrets. About what we didn’t do.”

My father opened his mouth as if to say more, his eyes swimming. His chin receded the way it often did when he spoke, a chin that used to be dimpled like his cheeks, now flattened and narrowed by the years, by too much loss.

He sat back down, silent. There was his answer.

“I have to get ready for work,” I whispered.

My father nodded and I ran upstairs, wiping my face on the sleeves of my robe.