

CHAPTER ONE

The woman was talking to herself. At first I was sure it had to be that she was wearing an earpiece, and her conversation was with someone on the other end of a phone line. I figured that as we got closer to each other on the sidewalk, I'd be able to see what device she was using.

But no.

Maybe it was the amount of gesticulating she was doing with her hands that gave it away. Maybe it was the wild nest of her dirty blond hair, dirty in more ways than one. Maybe it was the disheveled appearance of her mismatched clothing, or the way she would shout every third or fourth word. Whatever the clue was, I finally realized that if she was talking to someone, it was someone in her own head.

Just another day in New York City, I told myself—silently—as I tried to tear my gaze away from her. And I was so focused on what I was trying not to see that I didn't see what I should have seen, and before I knew it I'd been pushed into the narrow space between two buildings.

My back hit the brick wall with a painful thud, and the dirty white face of some guy in a dark blue hoodie was inches from mine. Between our faces was the blade of the knife he held. I barely registered that behind this guy was another guy.

No one said anything. The second guy moved forward and fished through my pockets. He took my phone and my wallet. He lifted the key ring attached to a tiny replica of the Eiffel Tower, which held the keys to Nina's loft, but there was nothing on it to indicate what it opened, so he threw it aside. Then he forced my left wrist against the bricks behind me so he could take my watch, the Garmin Forerunner hiker's watch that Gram had given me for my birthday during my junior year at college.

My mind must have been desperate for something rational in the midst of this chaos, because I remember thinking, *I'll have to buy another watch.*

I felt all this rather than saw it, because my eyes weren't sure whether to focus on the knife or the face of the guy threatening to cut off my nose. And it all happened so fast—and I know this will sound crazy—that I didn't have time to be scared. There was adrenaline, yeah, big time, and I could feel my heart pounding, but my brain didn't register anything until the two thieves dashed out of the alley, my possessions now theirs.

At that point my knees buckled a little, and I leaned against the brick wall as I slid down a few inches and then bent at the waist, hands clinging to my knees for support, my breath coming in harsh gasps. It was probably about two minutes, maybe more, before I had the strength and the stability to look for the key ring.

As I picked it up, the pointy bits of the tower pressing reassuringly into my clenched hand, I thought, *It's a good thing I back up my phone to my laptop frequently.* Looking back, I suspect my frazzled brain was still seeking desperately for an anchor, for something that was normal and predictable and safe. Like buying a new watch.

Key ring in hand, I looked toward the street to make sure my assailants weren't there, but one step forward told me I needed support. I leaned my right hand against the bricks and moved slowly toward the lightness of the street I had so recently been following, a street that had seemed like a normal city street just a few minutes ago and that now seemed like a war zone.

I managed to stand unsupported where the alley opened onto the sidewalk, and my eyes darted in a frenzy in one direction and then another. There was no sign of the thieves, but—hell, there'd been no sign of them before the attack.

I stood rooted to the cement for some amount of time I couldn't have gauged. I must have looked a little wild, because people walking by were giving me odd looks.

Aloud, I said to myself, "They're gonna think you're like that woman."

That irony was enough to make me rub my face and move forward in the direction I'd been going before I'd been nabbed. I'd gone a block and a half

before I could wrap my terrified brain around where I was and where I was going and how to get from where I was to where I'd been going before the sky fell.

Half of my brain wanted to scream, to release the massive lump of pain in my chest that came from the absolute helplessness I'd felt when all that had existed in the world was that shiny knife blade and what it had threatened: the end of me, the end of my life, the end of everything I wanted to be and do and experience, forever and ever.

The other half of my brain was working like mad to control all emotion—whether it was grief or fear or regret or anything else—and just get me back to Nina's Broome Street loft. A voice in my head, which I managed to keep from speaking aloud, said, *Just keep walking. In fifteen minutes, you can collapse and scream all you want.*

I fixed my eyes straight ahead, focusing on nothing, and I kept walking.

It was maybe four o'clock by the time I fumbled my way into Nina's building, up the elevator to her sixth floor loft, and into the foyer, where I sat heavily on the bench to my left. It was an odd piece, made of some kind of wood I didn't recognize. Wood, of course, lends itself to being carved and shaped, but this bench was so unembellished as to be austere, devoid of any characteristic that would allow me to connect with it. Even the grain of the wood was featureless.

I rubbed my hand gently along the edge, glad of something solid beneath me, even this empty thing, and thought—not for the first time—how well it fit into the rest of the loft.

This loft was not really my sister Nina's. It belonged to her boyfriend, Luc Beaumont, a French fashion photographer who, I suspected, wasn't famous enough to have the wealth necessary to underwrite this blandly but expensively appointed space. It seemed likely his family had had something to do with it. And it seemed likely that the blandness would mean the place could be ready quickly to go on the market, if it came to that.

I hadn't met Luc yet, though. When I'd arrived about ten days ago, on August twelfth, he had already left on a trip to visit his family in Normandy and, as Nina had put it, "to rest up before the madness of Fashion Week in New York and then Milan, both in September."

"Visit his family." That phrase seemed to echo through the empty loft. It implied home, which included people who cared about you, people you could rely on—such a long way from this sterile environment my only surviving family member now inhabited.

Where I wanted to be, at that moment, was back in New Hampshire, back in the large colonial-style house where I'd grown up, that house full of memories and comfort, that house that had sheltered and nourished the life I'd lived with my sister Nina, and my brother Neil, and my Gram. I felt a new lump rising in my throat, a lump made of the profound sadness of knowing I could never be in that house again. Nina and I had sold it just last week to a young family from Cincinnati. There was a Mom and a Dad and two boys and a girl. Just like my family had been. Just like my family had stopped being, first because my parents and Gramps had died in a car wreck when I was all of one year old, and then, second, after Neil had been burned to death in a forest fire only a few years ago, and third after Gram had died of a stroke just last March.

Even the Subaru Forester Gram had bought a few years ago, mine after her death, wasn't here with me; it was tucked into the back of the driveway at a friend's house in Concord.

I had no more home.

I stood, still a little shaky, and moved forward into my very temporary home, a place to stay for a few weeks while I sorted myself out. Nina called this a loft, but someone's money had restructured it so that there were distinct rooms. The foyer led into the living room, where a huge circle of thin metal, stuck with flame-shaped bulbs, hung over the couch and two chairs. All three of those pieces were covered with leather of a mottled pale brown, all with low backs and arms, all equally without personality or warmth. To my left, facing

the couch, was a fireplace. Inside it was a wrought-iron—what, candelabra, maybe?—that held several fat, grey candles. The fireplace gave off the air of something that was ornamental rather than functional, but it was summer—hardly the season for fires—so perhaps I was being ungenerous. But it was so different from the fireplace at my real home, which was sometimes stacked with wood and sometimes was in need of cleaning out from having hosted several glowing fires.

I moved across the room to the windows overlooking Broome Street and gazed sightlessly at the building across the way. The fingers of my right hand wrapped around my left wrist before I realized why. Those fingers were feeling the skin where my watch had been, the watch Gram had given me as though it had been a token of acknowledgement that I had successfully followed in Neil's footsteps, that I had figuratively stepped into the hiking boots the fire had burned from his feet. Getting that watch from her was as though she was saying, "Neil would be so proud of you, Nathan. You've become the mountain man he was meant to be."

I could buy another watch. Gram's inheritance—which had come as a complete surprise to Nina and me, given Gram's history of thrift—meant I could buy almost any watch I wanted. But it would never be the same. It wouldn't be a watch on which Gram had asked the jeweler to inscribe "NCB." Nathan Cassidy Bartlett.

Sometime around seven o'clock I heard the lock turn in the door to the hall, and Nina came in. Rustling noises indicated that she was carrying some number of bags. She came into the living room and saw me sitting on the unwelcoming couch, staring at the useless fireplace, a glass of scotch—raided from Luc's collection of beverages—on the glass-and-chrome coffee table in front of me. The scotch was a single-malt, The Glenlivet XXV, which I'd priced online at around four hundred dollars a bottle. The glass Nina saw had been filled twice

before, and there was not much left of my third pour. I didn't look away from the grey candles.

"Nathan? What on earth are you doing, sitting here in the dark?"

"It's not quite dark."

She dropped rather than set her bags on the dining table, which was several feet behind the couch. "It's dark enough." She moved toward the couch, stood behind me for a few seconds, and then walked around where she could face me. "What's going on?"

I looked up at her, struck yet again (perhaps partly because of my inebriated state) at her exotic beauty, an artifact of our vague, somewhat remote Chinese heritage. It had been evident in her teen years, but now that she was in her early twenties she was stunning. The effect was, no doubt, enhanced by her talent at her chosen career in the world of fashion, but she needed little makeup for the clear skin surrounded in a perfect heart shape by her straight, nearly-black hair.

When I didn't speak, she prompted, "This isn't like you, sitting in the dark, getting drunk on scotch. What's going on?"

She was right. It wasn't like me, though I had developed a taste for single malts earlier in the summer, at a hotel in San Francisco, after a spiritual quest on the island of Kaua'i, and after that nearly dying in an airplane when it lost cabin pressure over the Pacific, on its way back to the mainland.

I leaned forward, took another sip, and set the glass down heavily.

"I got jumped. One of them had a knife."

"What? Are you all right?"

I nodded. "On the outside, yeah." I didn't know where to go from there.

"Where were you?"

"Houston Street. I'd just come from visiting that methadone clinic to see how it operates. I was on my way home...." Home. "I was on my way back here when two guys hauled me into an alley." I stared around Nina at the grey candles. My voice sounded flat, but I figured it was better that way than

shouting and yelling, an urge the scotch had helped me quell. “They took my phone, my wallet, and—” I almost lost it here. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “And my watch.”

“The watch Gram gave you?”

“The same.”

She moved around the coffee table and sat beside me on the couch, partially facing me. “But you’re all right? They didn’t cut you, did they?”

I shook my head. “No physical damage.”

She stood, went to the wall and flipped the switch that sent light into that overhead wheel of faux flames, and sat down again.

“Did you tell the police?”

I looked at her. “Why? What on earth good would that do?”

“Nathan, snap out of it. The watch might be in a pawn shop right now. Your wallet, or what’s left of it, might be in a trash bin very near where this happened. And dealing with your phone might be more trouble for them than it’s worth, so it could be in the same bin.” She got up again and fetched her cell phone.

“I understand they took your phone, but you probably walked right past a police station on your way home.” I knew she was dialing nine-one-one.

I started to shake my head, but her attention went to the conversation she was having on the phone. When she hung up, she was all business. She took away my glass and the bottle I’d brought to the couch with me. She made a mug of coffee on the Keurig in the kitchen and brought it to me.

“Drink this. They’ll be here in a few minutes. What bank was your credit card from?”

I told her, and she searched on her phone for a contact number. She dialed and handed the phone to me. I had just finished reporting the theft and was beginning to be able to focus on things when the police arrived, a man and a woman.

I don't remember much of the conversation. After they left, Nina surprised the hell out of me. She hugged me.

Over the Thai dinner that Nina had brought home in the bags, she apologized more than once as though the attack had been her fault. She had, in fact, been the one to suggest that I see how a recovery clinic operated, given my intended career in addiction recovery, after I had added an advanced degree to my undergraduate psychology education.

"I'm so sorry I sent you over there, Nathan. I just thought it would be a good idea for you to see how a clinic like that works. Honestly, in all the time I've lived in New York I've never felt threatened by anyone like that. Nothing like this has ever happened to me, or to Luc."

"I hope it never does. Seriously. It's—it makes you feel useless. I keep thinking I should have fought back."

"No, you should not! A knife, Nathan? No. You did the right thing."

I took what reassurance I could from Nina's comments. It wasn't enough, though, to take away that helpless feeling, that worthless feeling.

Since Neil had died, in the spring of my freshman year at college, I'd worked hard at reinventing myself. I mean, I was no wimp before, but picking up Neil's mountaineering baton had meant that I'd gained a lot of muscle, a lot of strength, and a lot of self-confidence. I'd scaled mountains alone that most people wouldn't hike with help. I'd braved the death-defying Crawler's Ledge on the Kalalau Trail on Kaua'i, helping to save another hiker who had fallen over the edge. And afterward, on that plane? Flying to San Francisco? When the cabin pressure had plunged and those masks had dropped on their snake-like tubing all over the cabin, I'd helped other people. Like the little girl next to me, whose panicked mother had two other children to take care of in the row behind me. Like the people who—for reasons I can't fathom—didn't put their masks on and dropped like flies in the aisle. I hadn't hesitated. I'd held my breath and helped

get some of those people back into their seats and masked before returning to the mask I'd left, so that I could save their lives.

The one glass of scotch, which I'd ordered at the hotel after that, had been celebratory. The scotch I'd drunk tonight had been to escape.

I was not like that. I didn't try to escape difficult things, dangerous things. Maybe my inaction had been sensible, but—shit. Why hadn't I at least tried to defend myself?

And then there was the career I wanted, the career that would put me in direct contact with people who were addicted to things like opioid pills and heroin and crack and fentanyl. People who frequented clinics like the one I'd visited earlier today. And, very probably, people like the two guys who'd jumped me.

I was going to have to develop a very different kind of balls from the ones that made it possible for me to rescue fallen hikers or save unconscious airplane passengers.

Nina had been right. The very next afternoon, while I was hanging around that sterile loft, trying to distract myself by using my laptop to explore graduate programs, Nina called from her office. The police had called her to say they had found my watch, and my wallet, with only the cash missing from it. The phone didn't show up. And the police couldn't return the watch or the wallet until they'd finished processing them, which I took to mean fingerprinting, maybe lifting touch DNA, whatever.

Some of the funk that had settled over me after the attack lifted. But only some of it. Because when I considered going out to get a new phone, I came to a frozen stop inside the main door of Nina's building, unable to step out onto the sidewalk. I stood there, staring through the metal grating embedded in the glass door, at the action on the street outside. Cars drove by, and trucks. The occasional pedestrian passed along the sidewalk. At one point, a teenager—no doubt deaf to the world because of music pumping through his earbuds—

happened to glance at me. Maybe it was my profound stillness that affected him, maybe the blank look on my face, but his whole body shrank suddenly, and he nearly tripped as he took a frantic step sideways.

I let out a barking laugh. And I was just about to open the door and brave the world when I realized that I couldn't get a new phone. Not today. I had no cash, no credit card, no way to prove who I was so I couldn't even write a check. The sudden return of this profound helplessness, this overwhelming sense of inadequacy, brought impotent tears to my eyes. I turned around and headed back up to Nina's loft.

I was curled into a ball on the spare-room bed, feeling profoundly sorry for myself, when I heard the door to the loft open. I glanced at the clock beside the bed: four o'clock. Wait; four o'clock? Nina had been early last night, arriving at seven. I knew work was crazy busy at the fashion magazine where she worked, as everyone was preparing for Fashion Week. So what was she doing home at this hour?

"Nathan?"

I uncurled slowly. "In here."

By the time Nina came into my room I had managed to sit up. She was all smiles.

"Present!" she announced as she tossed a bag onto the bed. It was a white plastic bag with the silver Apple logo on it.

My eyes went wide and I grabbed it. A phone! Nina had bought me a new phone!

I nearly tore the box open, which is pretty impossible; Apple sends its technical offspring into the world packaged in seriously hard cardboard, pure white.

"I got you the same color you had before. Hope that was okay."

I nodded, my eyes glued to the device. "Perfect." I glanced up at my sister. "Thank you."

“They need to hear from you about replacing the number on it with the number you had before, if you still want it. Now I have to get back to work. Not sure what time I’ll be home, and I’ll probably have dinner in the office. But now you can order yourself something, right?”

I grinned at her. “Right.”

“And you can busy yourself setting that thing up.”

“Thanks, Nina. Really.”

“Have fun!”

And she was gone.

A new phone. Nina had taken time out of her frenetic day to go out and buy me a phone. Or maybe she had an assistant who could do that for her. It didn’t matter. She had done it. My eyes watered for the second time that day, this time for a good reason.

It did take me a little effort to get my old phone number assigned to the new phone, but I managed to get the thing set up and restored with data from my laptop by the time my order of tacos with extra guacamole and an order of flan arrived. I sat at the dining table and streamed a *Simpsons* rerun on my computer while I ate. I had almost finished my flan when I heard a key turning in the door. My assumption—that it was Nina returning home a little sooner than expected—was confounded by what sounded like luggage being wheeled in. My last spoonful of flan was frozen in the air halfway to my face as I watched a man walk into the living room.

I knew from a photo Nina had shown me that this was Luc. Luc Beaumont, fashion photographer and world traveler, moderately tall and slender, dark brown hair cut in stylish waves. His shirt, tucked into medium grey slacks, was an artful blend of stripes and accents in hues of blue ranging from dark to nearly white. Draped over his luggage was a jacket in a slightly lighter grey than the slacks.

Instantly I felt like a cliché, the kid brother shoving take-out Mexican food into his face while watching cartoons on a computer screen. My jeans and red-

dirt T-shirt with the pale brown stylized gecko on the front, which I'd bought in Hanalei, were not doing nearly enough to sustain the feelings of existentialism and self-confidence I'd brought home with me after the death-defying hike I'd undertaken on the island of Kaua'i in July.

I set the spoon down.

Luc flicked on the switch for that huge circle of bulbs overhead and then glanced at me, not in alarm, but appearing puzzled over who I was and what I was doing at his dining table. I got off my chair and moved toward him.

"Luc?" I walked with my right hand held out, doing my best to appear confident and deferential at the same time. He extended his hand, and as we shook I added, "I'm Nathan. Nina's brother."

He reclaimed his hand and waved it over his head as if to acknowledge a recovered memory. "Of course. Of course. She said." His accent was not heavy but it was definitely French. "Forgive me while I..."

I stepped aside so he could pull his luggage past me and toward the bedroom he shared with Nina.

As I swallowed the last of my flan and hurried to get the table cleared off and the detritus of my meal dealt with and out of sight, I tried to remember when Nina had said Luc would return. Wasn't he, like, ten days ahead of schedule, something like that? It was August twenty-third, and he wasn't due back until Monday, September second. New York Fashion Week started on the sixth, and Nina was sure Luc wouldn't want me hanging around (she didn't put it like that) while both of them were gearing up for that event, so I'd agreed on that time for a visit with my college roommate and best friend El Speed (Larry Speed) and his new bride Ellie, in Orono, Maine, where they were enrolled in graduate programs.

I had been researching graduate programs for myself, taking a gap year for now, for about the last three weeks, and I had some good candidates. I wanted a psychology program where I could specialize in addiction treatment and recovery, and these days—what with the opioid crisis being what it was—a lot

of institutions were offering some very tempting programs. So I was having a hard time deciding on my top choices. One of them, no doubt, would be the University of Maine, in Orono. El Speed and Ellie had both encouraged me to apply there, and I would, but I couldn't apply to just one program.

So what was Luc doing back here already? And would his presence here mean I had to pack my bags and high-tail it out before I'd planned to? Should I text Nina and let her know he was here? Because, surely, if she'd known he'd arrive today she would have told me. But would that make her crazy work day even crazier? I decided not to text.

I was almost done cleaning up in the kitchen when Luc reappeared, now in jeans. He opened the fridge, and grabbed a small bottle of San Pellegrino sparkling water. He leaned against the island behind him and took a swig.

He asked, "Did Nina happen to say when she'd be back?"

"Late. She said she might be having dinner at work."

"Ah, good. So you and I can have a chat."

I glanced at his almost-handsome face, clear of any facial hair below his eyes. Nina had said he was divorced with a five-year-old daughter living with his ex in New Jersey, I think. She'd said he was, what, thirty-two? Thirty-five? His half-smile was impossible to interpret. Was it an offer of friendship, or did the other half of that smile hide a threat?

He turned toward the living room. I grabbed another bottle of the microbrew I'd had with dinner and followed him. He sat in the chair that faced away from the window, and I settled into the corner of the couch nearest him.

"How is the, uh, the search going? For school?"

So he must be trying to find out when I'll be leaving. Nina and I had already established that once I had a first choice of schools, I'd move to be close to it.

"Good. Too many choices, actually."

"So no decisions yet. You should take your time."

Okay, so I did not know how to interpret this guy.

“Nina tells me you were hiking in Hawai’i.” I was about to respond when he added, “A spiritual quest, she called it.”

Okay. Wow. Thanks for nothing, Nina. How the hell was I supposed to reply to that?

Again, before I could respond, he spoke. “Did you find what you sought?”

Solid ground, now. “I did. Yes.”

“And what was that?”

Several different phrases flashed through my brain. Like, *Who wants to know?* Like, *Why do you ask?* Like, *What, Nina didn’t tell you?* What I finally said was, “Connection. Family connection.”

He looked confused. “But your family is only Nina, correct? And she was here.”

“That’s why it was a spiritual quest.”

“Ah. So, with your dead family. I see.”

He drank from his bottle. I drank from mine. I decided to go on the offensive. “You were just with your family, I understand. In Bernay. France.”

He took another swig and then nodded. And then said nothing.

So I prompted. “You left there a little earlier than you planned, I think.”

He waved a hand near his head, and somehow the meaning was different from what it had been the first time he’d done it. This time there was something dismissive in it.

“I had enough family time. Maybe too much.”

Too much. He’d had too much family time, while I mourned my two family members who had died in the past few years, wishing like hell I had more time with them, embarking on an exotic excursion to try and reconnect with them.

“Interesting. I went all the way to Kaua’i to connect with mine.”

He nodded as he gazed at his water bottle. “I think we want what we don’t have and aren’t satisfied with what we do have. Do you agree?” He looked at me as he lifted the bottle and drained the last of the bubbly water into his mouth.

I'd forgotten that the French are known for their own brand of existentialism. I responded with something Gram used to say. "Happiness isn't getting what you want. It's wanting what you have."

Luc chuckled and gazed back at his bottle. "I wouldn't know."

Dark. Again, I was at a loss with this guy.

He set the empty bottle on the coffee table, crossed one ankle on the opposite knee, and folded his fingers together.

"Still," he said, picking up on a previous thread, "I support your effort. I told Nina, 'Let him do this quest.'" He chuckled. "Even if you don't like this Conroy.' That's what I told her."

He grinned at me as I struggled to think what to say. I came up empty.

"Conroy was a lover, no?" Nina had clearly told him quite a bit.

Lover. Ha! Conroy would have shuddered at the idea. "That's too elegant a word." I gave him an assessing glance. I doubted I could shock him, but—let's see. "He was the trip leader. He and I—we were more like fuck buddies."

Luc laughed. "I have not heard this term. It's very descriptive." He lifted a hand, not quite repeating his waving gesture. "This hike. It was dangerous?"

Had I told Nina that? I couldn't recall. "Part of it, yes."

"This 'Crawler's Ledge.' It sounds ominous."

And just like that, something opened up. Something made me trust this guy enough to describe just how ominous it had been, and just how important a role I had played. I told him about Margot, the only woman on that strenuous hike, and what a trooper she was—never complaining, never asking for help, determined to hold her own.

I told him about being on that "ominous" part of the trail, where the rock face goes nearly straight up to your left while your boots struggle to fit onto the narrow red dirt track, the other side of which is a precipitous plunge hundreds of feet to massive waves crashing against volcanic rock.

I repeated Conroy's warning for Luc: "There's nothing but empty space between you and a fall that will last only until your body smashes onto the

rocks below. It might be carried out to sea in pieces, or it might lie there until it's picked apart by sea birds."

Luc's expression changed from sincere interest to the kind of fascination that says, *Tell me the worst. Don't hold back.*

"Margot was in front of me when this blast of wind came from nowhere. A piece of canvas flew off the pack of the guy in front of her. She lost her balance." I paused for a sip of beer. Luc said nothing, just watched me, waiting for the story to continue.

"She fell over the edge."

"My God."

"It was surreal. It was like the world stood still. Conroy and I dropped to the ground and peered over the edge. I was sure I would see something like what he'd told us about. But instead, there she was, lying on an outcropping maybe eight feet down."

Luc was riveted. He shook his head a couple of times, not quite in disbelief. So I went on with the steps Conroy and I had taken to get her, and then her pack, back up onto the trail.

"She wasn't hurt?" Luc wanted to know.

"She said only her pride. But the fall did a bit of a number on her shoulder."

"A number?"

"Sorry. It was sore where she landed on it."

Margot had sat with her back against the rock face and sobbed for some minutes, Conroy holding her shoulders and just letting her cry. And when she was able to stand, she'd said she couldn't keep going. At that point, we were maybe half-way through the really dangerous part of the trail, but the next day we'd have to come back over it. The Kalalau Trail is not a loop; it's one way in, and the same way out.

I told Luc, "I left with her."

Luc's foot dropped to the floor and he leaned in my direction, his right hand extended. I gave him mine, and we shook again. "You are a noble fellow," he

told me. He sat back in his chair and added, “I think you did not tell Nina this story.”

I laughed as I realized he was correct. “I don’t know why not. I’m sure she could handle it.”

“You protect your sister. This is good, I think.”

I laughed again. “Or maybe I just didn’t want her to think she’d been right about not wanting me to go.”

Luc smiled at me and then stood. “I will make some dinner. You have eaten?”

“Yeah.”

“Come entertain me while I cook.”

I watched from across the island as Luc did marvelous things with eggs and some cheese and linguine. I think parsley was involved. Or maybe it was tarragon? I almost regretted being full of tacos. While he worked, and then as we sat on stools at the island and he ate his dinner, I told him about El Speed, and about Ellie, and about how I was going to visit them in their rented house in Orono. I described how Nina had been the one to come up with the name El Speed, based on the “L. Speed” in the return address of a letter he’d sent me before we even met, after we’d been assigned as roommates by the university. I told Luc about a few of my hiking adventures, including the day I’d met Conroy half-way up Cannon Mountain in New Hampshire. I considered telling Luc how Conroy and I had fucked on the summit of South Kinsman, but before I could make up my mind, I heard Nina’s voice.

“Luc? You’re home?”

He didn’t call out. He waited until she came into view, when he stood and gave her a quick hug and a quicker kiss. “I had enough of France. And enough of the Beaumonts.”

“You probably scared the hell out of Nathan.”

“I don’t think Nathan scares easily.”