



Maki Matsui



Fields

Daisy



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DAISY FIELDS

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Daisy Fields

a novella

MAKI MATSUI

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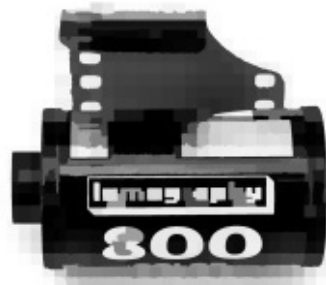
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*To all gentle souls in love
(And their crazy sweethearts)*

*I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*
-William Butler Yeats, "He wishes for the cloths of heaven"

Part One

Kalifornia



1.

She was always lying.

“It’s the loan shark,” she said as she pocketed the envelope that had been left in our mailbox. I’d only had the chance to glimpse the name in the return address: Jackson Jackson. “Have you ever been involved with a loan shark?” she asked.

I had not.

“Keep it that way,” she said. “This guy’s been on my tail for some time. I owe him a *crap* load of money.”

“Really,” I said.

She stole a couple glances at me while I put down the grocery bags to unlock the door. “Yeah, *really*,” she said, already growing defensive. “I was nineteen. Young, beautiful, and naive. I had no idea borrowing a hundred bucks could be such a risky affair.” She paused. “A hundred and fifteen.” Our eyes met. “And seventy-five cents,” she concluded breezily.

“I see,” I said. “He got you with the interest, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it?”

“Um, the interest? Like twenty. A week.”

“Twenty what?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Percent? Bucks?”

“Yeah, can you believe it?”

I waited a moment. “Yen?”

She ignored me. Her gaze hovered spacily over the celery hearts sticking out of one of the bags. *Veggie sticks for dinner*, I thought. After a moment, she took off her sopping sneakers and lined them up neatly beside my boots on the mat. The moment she unbent and caught me smiling, her pout returned.

“It’s not funny, you know,” she said. “If you ever find yourself eighty thousand dollars in debt, you won’t be laughing.”

“Oof,” I said. “That’s a lot. I’m sorry.”

I sounded so serious it caught her off guard. She made that face—the “surprised fish face,” my friends called it. She searched me, first directly, then, turning her head a little to the side, from the corner of her eye. I picked up the grocery bags and stepped into our apartment.

“I’d help you if I had money,” I said.

She smiled uncertainly and began to wiggle in an attempt to shrug off her backpack.

“So...” I said. “You were nineteen when you borrowed a hundred bucks. There’s a twenty percent weekly interest. Now you owe eighty thousand dollars. How old does that make you?”

She stared at me with her mouth open. A smile came into her eyes.

“Do you need a calculator?” I asked.

She adjusted her glasses. “It’s insensitive to ask a lady about her age,” she said. “Really, I’m surprised at you, David.”

She began to wiggle again. I smiled and tapped on my chest, showing her that her chest strap was still clipped.

2.

She was a writer. She published under the name of Ambrosius Mooney, and that was how she signed her first email to me.

I saw your ad. If you're looking for a responsible and respectful flat-mate, you'll never find a better one. I make my bed and clean up after myself and spread newspaper when I clip my toenails. I'm not one of those people who leave dirty socks all over the floor or pee without raising the toilet seat. I'm a vegetarian, but if that's a problem, I can change my ways. I'll go to bed whenever you tell me to. Please get in touch with me ASAP so we can arrange this.

Sincerely,

Your future flat-mate, Ambrosius Mooney

I wrote back:

Hi Ambrosius,

Thanks for your interest. Why don't you stop by this Saturday afternoon? You can take a look around, and we can have a chat to learn a bit about each other. The address is 35A Hewitt Lane. I'll be home any time after 1PM. I hope this will work out. I'm looking forward to meeting you.

Best,

David Nighthart

At seven o'clock that very evening, Ambrosius Mooney was standing on the front porch—a petite, shifty-eyed girl with short, dark hair and glasses, wearing a shapeless corduroy jumper and unlaced sneakers. She'd brought two enormous bags and one giant suitcase.

I blinked. "Um, sorry?"

"I said," she half mumbled, "I'm Ambrosius Mooney, nice to meet you."

“Oh. Okay. Nice to meet you too.”

“Are you David?” she asked suspiciously, glancing at the house number.

“Yeah...I’m David.”

She looked left, right, and behind her before turning back to me. “Could you help me carry these in?”

I cocked my head and touched my chin.

“Please,” she said. “I’m getting frostbite out here.”

“I think we have a few things to talk about,” I said.

“Okay, we can talk all night,” she said. “Just, I can’t leave my stuff here while we do that.”

After a thought, I stepped out to take the two bags. One of them had lost its handles, and the other, when I tried to pick it up, she told me not to use the handles. *They’re hanging on by a thread*, she said. I carried them separately, then came back and helped her get the suitcase over the threshold. One of the wheels came off.

“Oh, great,” she muttered.

Skulking around like a kid waiting to be scolded, she explored the apartment. I managed to pick up my dirty socks before she came into the dining room. She must have seen me throwing something into my bedroom, because I noticed her peeking in as I turned my back to straighten the couch cover. She glanced at the books on the shelves, peered inside the coat closet, checked inside the microwave, and studied the new batch of photographs I had spread out on the dining table.

“Sorry for the clutter,” I said. “I was planning to clean the place on Friday.”

She shook her head. “No, this is really nice.” Her teeth were chattering.

“I’ll turn up the heat,” I said. I swung by the bedroom to change out of my pajama pants.

The kitchen was freezing. I put on the kettle and stood staring at it, holding my elbows and shifting from one bare foot to another. What had I written in my ad? *A twenty-three-year-old man looking for a male housemate*—I was pretty sure. Was she really Ambrosius Mooney? Or was this a scam, a joke? I knew what Mom would say: *Red flags, David—back away slowly!* On the other hand, she would never turn away someone who looked so pale, cold, and tired. I looked out the window. It was beginning to snow.

“Ambrosius” was suddenly standing in the kitchen. I jumped. Would she like tea or hot cocoa? Cocoa was perfect, it turned out, because she was suffering from the worst PMS of her life and sugar would do wonders for her.

“Ah,” I said.

I pushed aside an open book and the photographs to make room on the dining table. We sat down across from each other. Her bangs more or less covered her eyes while she tilted her face over the mug, but I could tell she was studying me.

After a stretch of silence, she spoke. “You can call me Kalifornia. Kalifornia Mooney, with a K.”

I put down my mug. “Kalifornia. With a K.”

She gave me an injured look. “It’s not *my* clever idea.”

“Oh no,” I said. “It’s...just that I thought you were Ambrosius.”

“I see. That’s perfectly understandable. That’s my other name.” Steam from the cocoa was clouding up her glasses, and she wiped them with her fingers. “If you’re gonna kick me out or call the police, now’s the time.”

“I’m sure there’s no need for that,” I said. “Why don’t we just talk it through?”

Her eyes widened. “You are *very different*,” she said. “Okay, do yourself a favor and be really straightforward with me. I’m not known to read people’s thoughts.”

A little bemused but not altogether uncomfortable, I explained to her that I was looking for a male flat-mate, and that I had assumed Ambrosius was a guy’s name. I didn’t refer to what she had written in her email about raising the toilet seat. I apologized in case my advertisement had been unclear.

She listened closely. Her face wore the intent, stubborn expression of someone searching for a loop hole. When I finished, she held up a hand.

“Don’t apologize yet,” she said. “I’m sure this can still be worked out.”

“I’m sorry, Kalifornia,” I said, “but I don’t think this is ideal for either of us.”

“Negative—this *is* pretty much ideal for me,” she said. “It’s such a bad season to be looking for an apartment. Oh, you have no idea. You’re a decent guy, this place is affordable, and it’s in a safe neighborhood on a well-lit street...”

“I hope you don’t mind my asking,” I said. “How did you end up without a shelter in the middle of winter?”

“I...I’m a fugitive,” she said. “I had to leave my previous address in a hurry, because certain *personages* discovered I lived there and started bothering me. Nobody dangerous, just well-meaning people, who nevertheless have the power to...um...” She took an ample pause. “To cripple my wings. And complicate my life. If you know what I mean.” She saw that I didn’t. “I’ll explain it to you,” she said, “all in due season.”

I stared. She stared back. Her hair was mostly straight on the left side, wavy on the right. Diamond-shaped face, puckered lips, big eyes—brown eyes so wide open she looked weirdly enlightened. Her teeth had stopped chattering, and color

was coming into her cheeks. I wanted to offer her some cookies. Would that be like feeding a stray cat? I looked down at my mug.

Either encouraged or discouraged by my silence, she relaunched: “Let me explain why we will be such perfect housemates.”

Her sales pitch lasted two minutes. Who decided it was such a bad idea for a young woman to room with a guy she didn’t know? She’d done it before, never had a problem. In fact, being a fugitive, she saw value in having male presence around her living quarters. *It deters all kinds of knavery*, she said. *Robbers, solicitors, assholes...* She pushed, pleaded, and then bargained. She’d pay the utility for the entire month of February. Even March, if it meant she didn’t have to go back out into the blizzard.

You’ll think me naive—and I was—but she managed to both fascinate me and make me feel sorry.

She ended with an apology. “Ambrosius is my pen name,” she confessed. “I used it so you’d give me a chance to advocate for myself. I thought, you know, once you saw me, the way I am, you’d rethink the whole guy-girl thing and decide it’s not a problem.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that,” I said slowly. “But maybe we can work it out. A trial week, maybe, or two.”

Instead of looking happy, she gave me a blank stare. “Wow,” she said. “There *is* a perk to not being sexy.”

“Excuse me?”

“If I were a hottie, you’d shy away from me. You’d feel threatened, a nice guy like you.”

“What?”

Pixie-lights blinked in her eyes. “It’s okay. I won’t take it personally. I think you’re kind of cute, though. In a beta sort of way.”

What do you say to that?

3.

She turned out to be right—we were very comfortable together. She may have been my best friend. If so, she certainly redefined “friendship” for me. What we had was so different, so much more real than anything else I’d experienced with people outside of my family, up to then.

When she was writing, I cooked, brought cocoa and snacks, and occasionally looked up words and bits of information for her. When she fell asleep at the desk, I covered her with a blanket, saved her work, and turned off the computer. When I went to the dark room, she dropped everything and came with me. She helped me file the finished photographs, smuggling out her favorites to put up in her room. Soon, her room turned into a gallery. When there was no space left on the walls, she zigzagged the ceiling with coarse string and hung pictures with clothespins.

That year, I was working as a freelance photographer, taking pictures of food, clothes, and animals for magazines and advertisements, making just enough money to support myself. As a hobby, I worked with an old film camera that had been in my family for a couple of decades. The clunky, idiosyncratic machine was heavy and needed a lot of babying, but when I aimed it, focused it, and pressed the button, it rewarded me with a real mechanical shutter sound and a snippet of life I couldn’t simply go back and erase the next moment. I photographed whatever I happened to find around me that day. Street scenes where an occasional camera accident might give a pedestrian two faces—rush-hour bridge where the night rain turned the traffic into a series of warped, black mirrors—wonderfully sprouted vegetables on our kitchen counter—and, of course, loved ones and nature from my hometown in Maine, when I was lucky enough to be there.

She was like me. For money, she wrote articles for some small-time tabloids, as well as blurbs and reviews for shops, restaurants, and events she’d never even gone to. In her own time, she wrote stories: Things that bubbled out of her, just as lies and nonsense did when she was in a jovial mood. I read them as they came, putting down Dickens or a history book for the night. I ended up spending many evenings sitting on the floor of her room with a manuscript in my hand. She always sat close by, crunching away on a bowl of trail mix; whenever I would chuckle, she would light up and crane her neck to see what passage I was on.

“Why do you take pictures?” she asked one night as we sat side by side on the floor. I had just finished reading her new work—titled “Something Else”—and it was her custom to prevent me from commenting on her stories by changing the subject as soon as I was done.

“Why do I take pictures?” I said. “You mean, other than for money?”

“Yeah. These ones.” She jerked up her chin toward her ceiling gallery. “The real ones.”

I gave it a thought. “I love that a moment of reality can be an aesthetic object.”

I blushed at my own words, but her eyes grew bright. “That’s lovely.” She looked around. “Your pictures are always beautiful to look at. Even when it’s sad.” She pointed at the picture of a tear-smearing little girl who had just scrambled to her feet after a fall. “I like that.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Speaking of beautiful, I loved your description of the daisy field. It seems to be a motif in some of your stories. It’s sad, though, the decapitation at the end—”

“You especially like people,” she commented, as though she hadn’t heard a word of what I said. “Don’t you?”

“I suppose I do.”

“Sup-pose,” she said. “You talk so funny. Like a homeschooler.”

I grinned.

“I wanna meet your mum someday,” she said. “Sup-pose. I bet she talks like that, too, doesn’t she?”

“I hope you’ll meet her,” I said. I straightened the manuscript, then picked up a pen and dated the title page. I handed it back to her. “What makes you think I like people?” I asked.

“Your photographs. They tell me everything about you.”

We looked around at the wallpaper of pictures. Most of them featured people.

“See?” she said.

“Oh yeah,” I replied. “But, of course, you’re the one who picked these out.”

“You know what else?” She glanced at my face. “You like that girl especially.” She pointed. “That pretty girl over the light switch, the one who works at the health food store.”

Following Kalifornia’s finger, I met Claire’s black and white gaze. The picture showed her just turning around to smile at me, a bag of fresh onions pressed against her chest.

“You like her, don’t you?”

I did, back then. But, out of embarrassment, I shook my head. “I mean,” I said, “only as a friend.”

She grinned. “You’re blushing.” Balancing on her behind, she leaned back and made faces at the mirror on the closet door. After a second, she let herself roll all the way down to the floor. “Do you know how you can tell when a person is in love?”

“No,” I said.

She brushed a strand of hair out of her face. “It’s really easy, at least, for some people. The human eye is actually a little bit like a camera. It’s covered with a thin, transparent film, and when you see something you really like, it opens momentarily, like a shutter, just to see it more vividly.” She made two fists in the air above her face and popped them open. “Snap.”

I raised my eyebrows.

“It’s true,” she continued. “It’s hard to tell when it happens, because it’s quick, and the film is so thin. But I’m one of those people who can read infinitesimal changes in color. The moment the shutters open, I can see that the color of the irises is ever so slightly more vibrant as well. Get it?” She pointed again at Claire. “She has that effect on you. I’ve seen it.”

“Huh.” I decided to roll with it. “Okay. That’s cool. I think you’re mistaken, though.”

“Are you telling me to doubt my own eyes?”

“I don’t have a crush on her.”

She thought for a second. “Then maybe it was the onions,” she concluded. “You do like onions.”

I laughed out loud. There was nothing she liked better than making me laugh.

“Oh, Davy,” she said, sitting up with a grin. “I just can’t wait till you fall for me. You will, too. Boys chase after pretty girls, but men go for the really interesting ones. I’ll be patient.”

4.

I was looking forward to introducing Kalifornia to Mom. But when Mom drove down to Massachusetts with a van load of my siblings on an extended field trip around New England, Kalifornia went AWOL for the day.

“Yeah—I don’t know why,” I told Mom at the end of the visit. “I’ve introduced her to my friends, and she’s never seemed shy.”

She shrugged. “Maybe next time,” she said, lowering her sunglasses over her eyes to try to camouflage her irritation. “I’d like to meet my son’s first housemate. Especially since you can’t seem to tell me anything about her.”

I scratched my neck. I did seem to have trouble answering the most basic questions about Kalifornia. Where was she from? How old was she? What school did she attend and what did she study? Instead, I knew the names of her twenty-two plushies. I knew where she would lose her tune while singing “California Dreamin’.” I knew the rhythm of her thoughts, and the funny little ways it got disrupted when introduced to the tiniest amounts of alcohol. But Mom hadn’t asked about any of that.

“It’s like you’re living with a stranger,” she commented.

“We actually get along really well,” I said.

“Hmm, if you say so.”

Tanned shoulders, crease between her eyebrows, gray hair flying out in all directions. God, I’d missed her.

“Remember when you tested me on Napoleon?” I said. “And I failed?” She had thought that I’d lied about all the reading I had been doing, until she discovered that I knew every last detail about Napoleon’s personal life. I just didn’t remember much about his campaigns.

Her frown melted away. “Okay, David.”

I exchanged a hug with four of my five siblings—Shaun, the newest addition to our family, was still shy with me and avoided a hug by hiding behind the car. Hug with Mom lasted ten seconds. Then they all piled into the van and drove away. As they turned the corner, I thought of Shaun and realized how little I’d seen of my family over the last year.

Five minutes later, Kalifornia returned with her tail between her legs. I didn’t ask her to explain her conspicuous absence from a day we’d planned together—but she volunteered that she’d walked into the mayor and had ended up getting drawn into a political argument. As though she were ever remotely interested in

politics. I asked her if she'd had anything to eat that day, and she said she had. And it must have been granola bars, because all three boxes were gone from the shelf.

5.

Kalifornia never seemed to make friends of her own while she lived with me. She was, it turned out, happy to share mine. Just to make sure I knew our friendship was the only one that really mattered to her, she dutifully forgot the names of my male friends and called all my female friends Jean. I never imagined she would do that to their faces, until I brought her along to our April game night. Claire, Meili, and Ryan found it amusing. Chris was wary of Kal, but he did seem to enjoy not being the “weird one,” for once. Katelyn was less pleased, and visibly so—maybe because she was already in a foul mood, and maybe because her mother’s name was Jean.

That night, after we came home, I printed photographs of all their faces, made them into flashcards, and slipped them under Kalifornia’s door. I heard movements inside, then a giggle. Several minutes later, I received a reply letter in my room. *Fine, Davy, fine.*

I opened the door and caught her walking away, stretching her arms over her head. “Stick around?” I said. “I’m burning the midnight oil. I procrastinated on Katelyn’s project.”

She immediately turned around and came back, leaning against the wall by my door with her hands stuck in her pockets. She’d already taken off her glasses for the evening and looked sleepier than I’d expected. I glanced at the dining room clock. It was going on eleven.

“Actually, you should get some rest,” I said.

She rubbed her eyes—“I’m not even remotely sleepy”—then let out a half-laugh, knowing perfectly well how unconvincing she sounded.

We made a pot of coffee.

“Katelyn’s project” involved editing and curating a large collection of photographs for her first jewelry designer website. Besides the closeup shots of individual pieces, she had managed to persuade Claire to model some of her newest, most daring work.

“Wow, these look super,” Kal said, peeking into the monitor over my shoulder. “You *do* take the best pictures of Claire.” I heard a grin in her voice.

“There were ones I liked better as photographs,” I said mildly, “but Katelyn doesn’t want any smiley pictures for her site.”

“Can I see one where she’s smiling?”

“Sure.” I pulled one up on the monitor.

“My,” she said. “I see why Katelyn doesn’t want that.” I looked up, and she smiled at me. “Nobody will pay any attention to the dang jewelry.”

“Think so?”

“You could frame that one. Or print it on a pillow and sleep with it.”

“You know—” I returned to editing. “On second thought, you should just go back to your own room and stop distracting me.”

She pulled up my armchair beside the desk, picked up a book—*Poetry of W. B. Yeats*—and began to read to me, inserting limericks in between poems. The first one went like this:

*There was a man named Davy
Whose beard was oh-so-wavy
His mom couldn’t stand it,
He looked like a bandit
So she told him, “Davy, shavy.”*

“I don’t have a beard,” I said.

“You’d better take it up with Mr. Yeats,” she said.

“Did you just pull that out of your head?”

She looked at me as though I’d asked a very stupid question. “I’m reading out of the book, David.”

I laughed and shook my head. And so it went.

About halfway through the sixth poem, she lapsed into silence. Her lips puckered slightly the way they always did when she was absorbed in something. I could almost reach over to my bed and grab my film camera without breaking the spell. I turned my eyes back to the screen and blinked a few times. It was I who needed to stay focused.

By the time I finally turned off the computer, it was going on one. Kalifornia was humming with caffeine and poetry. We brushed our teeth, but somehow failed to say goodnight and ended up going out on a walk instead.

“Full moon,” said Kalifornia through clenched teeth. “No wonder! *That’s* what’s troubling my animal blood.”

“Full cup of coffee, more like,” I said.

“Caffeine has no effect on me.”

“Sure,” I laughed. “Why are you talking through your teeth?”

“I’m cold.” She shivered. “It’s also amusing. You should try it.”

We walked through a dim web of maple tree shadows, chatting through our teeth and laughing. Our feet took us downtown, past dark windows, past a couple of open bars. *You’re gonna grind your teeth down, Kal*, I said when we got to the bike path. *No, I’m not*, she said. I stopped, rummaged inside my jacket

pocket, and got out a small can of fruit drops Kit had sent me. Raspberry, orange, or grape?

“Raspberry,” she said, ungluing her teeth at last.

We’d gone about half a mile on the bike path when my phone began to ring, startling us both. I took it out of my pocket. Claire.

“Ooh,” said Kalifornia. “A booty call.”

I picked up. “Hi Claire.”

“David,” she said. “I’m terribly sorry to bother you.”

“It’s alright. I was awake.”

Kalifornia began to make soft chicken calls. I took a fake swing at her, and she leaped away, giggling silently.

“What was that?” said Claire.

“Nothing.”

“Are you at home?”

“No. I’m on a walk.”

Kalifornia had begun to moo, then baa, then cluck again. Stifling laughter, I walked away from her.

“I see,” said Claire. “David, listen. Katelyn needs your help.”

“What’s the matter?”

“She and Ryan had a huge fight. She came to stay with me for the night, and he just called to say he wants to break up.”

“Shoot,” I said. “Is he at his place?”

“Yes. Katelyn thought you might be able to get him to calm down.”

“Now?” I asked.

“If possible. She’s really freaked out. They’ve never talked about breaking up before.”

I looked around. “I think I’m about ten minutes away from Ryan. Tell her I’m on it.”

As I hung up, Kalifornia approached me. “What’s going on?”

I briefly explained the situation. “We can walk to Ryan’s place from here, if that’s okay with you. It’s pretty close.”

She gazed at me for a moment and shrugged. We left the bike path through the grass.

“So you’re telling me,” she said as we cut across the drugstore parking lot, “they called you at this ungodly hour to come rescue their failing marriage?”

“They’re not married.”

“Their failing relationship.”

“They didn’t use to fight so much,” I said. “I think it’s all the career stress. Too bad—they’ve been together since high school, apparently.”

“And you are their man to fix it?” she asked.

“No, but I can give them moral support.”

“At two-thirty in the morning?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Having friends is worse than being an emergency plumber,” she said. “You know, the little that I’ve known of those two, they’re always so snide toward each other. Is this relationship actually worth saving?”

I paused under the streetlight and stared at her. “Well, Katelyn thinks it is. For now, that’s enough for me to go on.”

“I see.” She looked off to the side. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

I began to walk again, then looked back over my shoulder to see her still standing in the pool of light, watching me with pink cheeks. I smiled. “Don’t be sorry, Kal. Let’s go.”

She frowned stubbornly. “Why two such smart people would ever put themselves through a long-term relationship is beyond me.”

I turned away. “Well,” I said, “you can be glad that it’s not your problem.”

“What?” she asked, catching up at a trot.

“Nothing.”

Why were we both suddenly so sore?

When we arrived at Katelyn and Ryan’s place, he was sitting alone at the dining table with an empty bottle of beer, listening to Linkin Park. Kal hung back on the porch. *You guys have your talk*, she said. *I’m gonna sit here and compose a haiku*. I left her my fleece.

6.

I settled into the chair across from Ryan. Despite his size, beard, and the slightly balding head, he reminded me of my brother Syd when he was about eight, trying his darnedest to hold himself together after falling off his bike. I'd come with the best of intentions, but that funny little exchange with Kal had left me somewhat irritable. I let him do the talking—it was usually the best approach with Ryan anyway, when he was feeling upset.

He complained about Katelyn, about himself, about money. He told me how they fell in love, how they got engaged, how they became disenchanted with the idea of marriage and broke off their engagement after college. He talked about his parents, society, and politics, before finally alluding to their fight.

“I can't stand sarcasm,” he said. “I'm not gonna just sit there and take that shit from her. If that's how she's gonna be, then she'd better go try her luck with some other sucker.”

“Hm,” I said.

He was quiet for a while. “I guess she didn't like that I said that,” he muttered. “I think that's what really pissed her off. You're right, I think that's what it is.”

“I didn't say anything,” I commented.

“I wasn't telling her to literally go fuck another guy,” he continued. “What I meant was, it's not my job to put up with her bullshit. Perfectly reasonable. We're both adults, right? But what happens? The same thing as usual. She willfully misunderstands, and then overreacts. I get mad, she runs away, and I'm the bad guy.”

Why couldn't he just admit it? He may not have meant his words literally, but she hadn't misunderstood his intention to hurt her. And, in all likelihood, Katelyn was now ranting to Claire about Ryan in just the same way—that he always took things the wrong way, that she was caught blindsided, and so on. I let out a soft sigh. How many more years of that could this relationship survive? Maybe Kalifornia had a point...

The world is insincere, Davy, Mom always said. *Treasure sincerity*. What could I say to Ryan now? Something honest, but not cruel. Something sincere, helpful, and true. It was hard to think at four o'clock in the morning.

I rocked back my chair and peeked at Kalifornia through the glass door. Her silhouette had grown smaller than the last time I'd looked. Had she curled up

and fallen asleep? She had to be cold. Without another thought, I got to my feet.

Ryan looked up, surprised. "Are you going?" he asked.

"Oh, no," I said. "It's Saturday. I can stay as long as you like. I just want to check on Kal." I lingered another moment. "Why don't you call Katelyn again?"

"What would I say to her?"

"I don't know, let her talk first. Or apologize first, and then let her talk."

"She's not gonna apologize back, you know."

"That's on her, right?" I began to go.

"It's not fair," he said. "For all I know, she'll go on her merry way, thinking she got away with it again."

"Maybe," I said. "Well, what do you want, Ryan? Do you want this to just end?"

He made no answer.

I found Kal asleep on the steps of the porch. She had managed to tuck her whole body inside my fleece, with just the head sticking out. I crouched down.

"Kal."

"Mm."

"Follow me. I'm gonna find a place inside where you can curl up."

"I'm fine."

"Please, come."

I put a hand on her back, and she rose with me, bleary-eyed. We walked into the house together.

"Hey, David," Ryan boomed. He couldn't help it, that was his voice.

"Shh," I said.

"Oh, sorry."

I helped Kalifornia to the couch and covered her with a blanket.

"I had a dream," she mumbled, "that you and I had a baby out of wedlock."

I blushed. "Are you warm?" I asked.

She was already drifting off. I got to my feet and returned to the table.

"I'm gonna go upstairs and call her," Ryan said in the softest voice he could muster. "You can go take a nap."

"Are you gonna try to stay with her?" I asked.

"Yeah."

7.

Half a year after Kalifornia moved in, the shadow of Jackson Jackson crept into our lives.

Even before that envelope arrived in the mail, something was happening to her. I first noticed it after a hike in the Berkshires where the soles of both her sneakers popped off on the way down the mountain. I gave her my shoelaces so she could tie the sneakers back onto her feet. After some struggle, she let me help her. It was a slow descent, and she remained sullen all the way home. She never ordered new shoes, choosing instead to stay in the house for the next five days. At the end of the week, I bought her a pair of sneakers from a shoe store down the street and invited her on a walk down the bike path to break them in. She said she couldn't possibly wear such clean shoes; she excavated an old pair of sandals instead.

At first, I thought it was another case of PMS. But when her chatter began to decrease—when she started going to bed before nine every night—and three weeks passed without her showing me a single new story, I started getting worried.

Then, that rainy evening, she snatched the envelope from Jackson Jackson out of my hand with alarming alacrity.

“Jackson Jackson?” I said.

It's the loan shark, she explained...

That night, she retired to bed at seven thirty in the evening and never turned off the lights in her room.

I watched her over breakfast the next morning. “Can we talk about something, Kal?” I said.

When she looked up from her book and met my gaze, her cheeks flushed over immediately.

“I don't mean to put you on the spot,” I said, “but I have to ask. Truth is—”

“Wait.” She held up both her hands. “I hate it when you put me on the spot.”

I was taken aback. “Well—” I began, wondering how I'd put her on the spot before.

“I *know*—” she cut me off again. “I *know* what you're going to ask. And I don't want you to.”

I put down my coffee. “You don't know what I'm going to ask.”

She downed her orange juice. She was still in her pajamas, wrinkled on the right side, and there were pillow marks on her right ear. The light from the window played against her outline, catching the peach fuzz on her shoulders and cheeks. I momentarily lost the train of my thought. A nice photo op.

She suddenly looked straight at me. "You're going to ask me to be your nude model," she said. "Aren't you?"

"What?"

"I noticed you've been sizing me up."

"I...jeez..." I put a hand to my forehead. "What the hell, Kal..."

Her eyes grew rounder than usual. "And I finally made you swear. Wow!"

She broke out into a patter about her dream from the previous night. *It was a vegetarian nightmare. You and I were on a raft, and you fished up this massive crayfish alien you couldn't figure out how to cook...* I returned to my coffee, choosing to retreat for the moment.

That afternoon, having thought through how to reapproach the conversation, I went to her room, holding out a bowl of sunflower seeds like an offering plate. She accepted it graciously. I sat on the edge of her bed. When she turned her face toward me, I launched without a pause.

"I want to know what was in that envelope, Kal. And I want to know what's going on with you."

Her legs began to swing under the desk. "What's going on with me?"

"Yeah. And what was in that envelope from Jackson Jackson, that you were so keen to hide?"

She stared at her laptop screen. "I told you already, David."

I shook my head. She considered my face, then picked up and consulted her Cheshire Cat plushy. Her legs stopped swinging.

"It's like this," she began at length.

"But give it to me straight, alright?" I said. "No roundabouts, no poetic license, no figurative language."

Her legs started going again. "Jackson Jackson is a loan shark, thirty-one years of age, a rising star in the world of sharks..."

I cleared my throat.

"And I owe him eighty thousand bucks," she said. "The end."

The number eighty thousand was consistent, I noted. "Tell me more."

She groaned. "Well, I tried to run from him. But he has found me. Which means..."

I leaned in, determined to collect at least some clues. Her eyes panned the ceiling and fell on me. She clenched her jaw momentarily.

"Which means," she said, "there is only one course of action."

“What is it?” I asked.

“To stop delaying the inevitable.”

“Which is what?”

“Which is...to face the music.”

“Kal, that doesn’t mean anything.” Then, suddenly noticing how pale she looked, I touched her arm. “I want to help you,” I said, quickly withdrawing my hand again. “All I know is that something’s troubling you terribly. You’re losing sleep. You’re afraid.”

“Oh, Davy. You’re the sweetest and the best. But there’s nothing you can do to help me.”

“There has to be something.”

“No.” She stood up and went to close the curtain. “This is my problem. My mind was made up long before I even met you...”

She turned around and faced me with her hands behind her back. I thought I caught a flash of mischievous light in her eyes. I sat up, not a little disturbed.

“It’s all between me and Jackson Jackson,” she said. “And it shall remain so.”

8.

She was sick, then she was depressed. Then she was going through “a delayed puberty.” In each case, the only way to recover was to spend hours everyday alone with her thoughts. I couldn’t get her out for movies, walks, or concerts. Even the ice cream truck failed to draw her out of the apartment. Eventually, she grew lonely and let me persuade her to tag along on some of my gigs. Since she got carsick at the forty-minute mark, I started limiting myself to local and online gigs.

As implausible as the loan shark story was, I felt uneasy about leaving her alone at home. When a good friend of mine from college invited me to his wedding in New Jersey, I managed to fit the whole trip into a day. I arranged for Claire to visit Kalifornia around dinner time, just to check in. She was still there when I got back past eleven.

“Kalifornia just went to the bathroom,” she said to me. “I’m not sure what you were worried about, but we had a good time. She seemed perfectly normal. Kalifornia-normal.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“No matter how much time I spend with her, I have this feeling that I don’t really know her,” she said. “She doesn’t like to talk about her past, I noticed. And generally, she doesn’t talk about herself.”

I grinned. “Unless it’s all made up. And her stories and lies do tell a great deal about her, in a way.”

“Really?” she said. “Actually, she doesn’t tell me stories, made up or not.”

“She doesn’t?”

Claire shook her head. “Also, this sounds crazy, but did she lose some weight?”

“I think so.”

She leaned against the counter and tied her hair into a ponytail, her bracelets clinking. “I miss our lunches on the store patio, David,” she said. “You skipped the last movie night, too. Where have you been these days?”

“Um...I’m not sure. Here and there.” I yawned. “Sorry, I can’t think.”

She smiled sympathetically. I heard the bathroom door open and Kalifornia humming to herself.

9.

The day I handed her the bottle of vitamin bears and started studying a vegetarian recipe book, Kalifornia made a sudden lifestyle change.

She cold-called Claire and went to a wine-tasting event at a local vineyard. Then she spent five consecutive afternoons exploring the river with a couple of teenage misfits from down the street. She redecorated our living room using driftwood and rocks and threw a haphazard house party for all our friends. She ate diligently until she'd worked herself up to her normal weight.

With Kal suddenly out of the house for so much of the day, I started picking up more gigs again. We caught up in the evening. She was always impatient to tell me about her day. I listened, still a little suspicious and confused about her abrupt transformation. It must have showed; whenever I was especially quiet, she went all out for me. *I went to a free ballet workshop at the arts center*, she might say. *Do you want to see some moves?* Then the tragic notes of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* would fill our apartment, and Kalifornia would dance—eyes peeled, lips pursed, limbs stiff and angular—until I couldn't hold my laughter anymore, and she would stalk off to her room and wait for me to come apologize and read her new story. Boy, she was cranking out a new story every day.

All these acts, too, were lies of sorts.

We started going on evening walks and stayed out later and later. The docks and bridges over the Connecticut River were our favorite haunts, but sometimes, we walked over an hour one way, away from the lights, to the farm fields where we had a better view of the stars. I mapped out the constellations for her, and she shared with me her own versions, complete with their own wacky mythology. She asked me about my family and my childhood, and showed a great deal of interest in my ex-girlfriend. I told her whatever she wanted to know. When I asked her about her family and childhood, I only received tall tales and fascinating but irrelevant details. Everyday, it bothered me more that I still didn't know the answers to those simple questions Mom had asked me about her. I tried not to let it get the best of me.

"I've never known anyone as patient and caring as you," she said one night as we sat on the dock. "Can I have another fruit drop?"

I held out the tin and let her take the last one. I was running low on patience that day. She'd claimed to have spent the afternoon at the library that should

have closed at noon—then she'd pretended that I hadn't seen her pocket another envelope from the mailbox—then, on our evening walk, she'd exasperated me with a long-winded tale of her childhood on a cattle ranch in Texas, where ruffians were gunned down on the streets and people talked with the worst Texan accent I'd ever heard. I was having trouble disguising my frustration. So when she called me patient and caring, I assumed she was just trying to make me feel better. But she had never looked so serious before.

I managed a weary smile. "There *is* a lot of entertainment value to your lies —" I said, "if nothing else."

In the dim light of the boatyard lantern, she turned bright pink. Ridiculous as it was, I suddenly wondered if she ever realized I saw through her lies. She *had* to know. Only last week, she had told me that she'd grown up in Alaska.

But that was maybe beside the point. I'd exposed her, somehow.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That was rude."

She shook her head and began picking at her nails. "You're an angel," she said. "Do you know? I've never stayed in one place for so long. Or been so close to another person."

"Are we close?" I asked, a hint of agitation seeping into my voice.

She continued to blush all the way down to the neckline of her shirt. "Well...I actually happen to think we..." A pause. "Some mystery is nice. Nobody needs to know everything about anyone." Did her voice shake a little? She cleared her throat. "Besides, it would be dangerous for you to know too much about me. On account of Jackson Jackson, I mean." She lowered her voice dramatically. "He's encroaching on me."

I managed to hold back a sigh of frustration. "Alright, Kal. How about you tell me more about this guy? Three facts. Anything. Help me out here."

"Mmm." She took a penny out of her pocket, turned it over in her hand, and tossed it into the water. "You're not gonna believe me anyway."

There was no rancor in her voice. For several seconds, I stared at my feet. Then I leaned slightly and put my forehead on her shoulder. The silence lasted a long time.

I didn't sleep much that night. Early next morning, I got a call from Mom. I didn't want to wake up Kalifornia, so I sat on the porch and talked a good two hours on the phone. I didn't tell Mom anything unusual, but she could tell I was stressed out.

"Why don't you come home for a while?" she said. "Those Bay Staters are getting to you. I really could use your help here, too. Syd's been putting me through hell!"

I got a lump in my throat when I thought about Maine...but, of course, I turned her down. I was just hanging up when the mail truck pulled over. I got to my feet and greeted the driver.

“Rough weather ahead,” he said as he handed me a small pile of mail. “They’re predicting a hailstorm.”

“Is that so?” I said.

“You Millennials should listen to the news more.”

I laughed. “Thanks for the mail.”

As I turned back to the house, Kalifornia came bursting out the front door. She snatched the pile of mail from my hands, scratching my wrist in the process.

“Whoa,” I said.

“I can’t believe this,” she cried. “You were waiting for the mail truck. You’re intercepting my mail now!”

My heart started pounding. My fingernails dug into the palms of my hands. She watched me for a moment, then turned on her heel and hurried up to the porch.

“Hey!” I shouted after her.

She jerked around in the doorway, and her head snapped back toward me. I could almost see her heart in her throat. Then she scuttled into the corridor.

I’d never felt so angry in my life. I didn’t trust myself, so I left, carrying only the phone. Even though my anger softened into pity over the next half an hour, I stayed out until dinnertime.

10.

She was at the table. The moment she saw me, she took off her glasses and covered her face. There were a vase of Michaelmas daisies and two bowls of chilled noodle soup on the table, garnished with sausage octopuses. Under my chopsticks was a note on a small piece of pink paper: *I'm sorry*.

I went and crouched down beside her chair. "I'm not mad at you anymore." I held out my hand, but she didn't move. "It's okay," I said. "I'm sorry I didn't come home sooner."

The sight of a little tear seeping out from between her fingers sent a stab of pain into my chest. I sat down cross-legged on the floor at her feet, feeling close to tears myself.

"Oh, Kal...Kal, I can't live like this."

Looking down, my eyes fell on her small, flat feet, toes curled under as though they were trying to cling to the floor. I took a couple of breaths. When I lifted my face, she was staring fearfully at me, tips of her fingers on her lips. Her eyes were moist, and strands of dark hair clung to her temples. Where had all her laughter and silliness gone?

"It isn't right what I've done to you," she said. "I'm failing to deal with my own personal problems, and that's hurting you. It's not fair."

"Don't say that."

"It's all gotten out of hand. I should have known this would happen. I should have known since the day we met."

"Stop talking like that."

To escape the quiet, heavy sadness of her eyes, I climbed to my feet and went to open the window. Chilly air spilled into the room. When I looked back at her, she'd put her glasses on and was holding her knees to her chest, staring at the table. I approached her from behind, bent down, and slowly put my arms around her neck. After a moment, her pointy chin rested on my forearm. I put my cheek against her neck.

"You're afraid of something," I said.

"Yeah," she replied.

"And you're trying to protect me by telling me stories."

A pause. "Yeah."

"That's all I know." I waited one breath. "There must be something I can do for you."

“You’ve already done so much for me,” she said. “And I’ve trespassed on your hospitality far too long.”

I waited for my throat to relax, but it didn’t. “You’re not thinking of leaving, are you?”

She made a groan. When I gave her a gentle shake, she said, “I didn’t say that.”

“Please don’t.” A strand of her hair had fallen into my hand, and I closed my fingers around it. “Listen, Kal...I don’t need to know what you’re running from. I don’t need to know where you’re from, or why you’re here, or what you owe, to whom—I don’t need to know anything. It’s fine, it’s all fine...as long as you’re with me.”

I held my breath. I saw her fingers tightening around her elbows.

“David—”

She wanted to be near me. I could hear it. There was an ache in her voice that echoed mine.

After a moment, she rose from the chair and led me to the couch to sit beside her. She clung to my right arm and leaned her head against my shoulder, her glasses askew on her face. My breath was slow and shallow, and my heart burned; but I didn’t dare move an inch, for fear she would run away from me.

11.

When she woke up, I was still trying to figure out how to say good morning to her. Was I allowed to put an arm around her? Both arms? Could I hold her hand, or...kiss her?

But before I could say anything, she jumped to her feet as though she'd found herself sleeping against a bear. Baffled and disheartened, I greeted her as normally as I could. She fled to her room without a word. I fell on the couch with a sigh. I hadn't gotten a good night of sleep in two days, and I felt weak.

At breakfast, while I searched for the right words to start a conversation about—well, us—she went back and forth between energetic chatter and dead silence. When our eyes finally met, and I blushed, she quickly collected her dishes and began to leave the table.

“Wait, Kal,” I said.

Just as suddenly as she'd gotten up, she sat back down. “I have something to tell you,” she said rapidly. “My first book of short stories is about to be published.”

We looked at each other. I understood that she was asking for some time to think. *This is how she counts on me*, I thought with bittersweet recognition.

“That's awesome,” I said. “Can I take you out for dinner tonight, to celebrate?”

“Oh...sure...” She squeezed a large amount of honey into her tea. “Or maybe tomorrow. I heard there's a hurricane coming tonight.”

Liar. “Hailstorm, you mean,” I said.

“Hailstorm?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Oh, wow.” She looked embarrassed. “Yeah, a hailstorm, I guess.”

There was a stretch of silence.

“So which stories are going to be in the book?” I asked.

“I don't remember. The important thing is—” she sipped from her cup, “—they need a head-shot of me to put on the back of the book. I have to send it to them by tomorrow, and I've never had a picture taken.”

12.

Silly. There were lots of pictures of her, and many, though not exactly head-shots, were frame-worthy—Kalifornia rocking back her chair, carrying an enormous pile of laundry, showing me a gnarly piece of driftwood, watching the birds from the window with her mouth hanging open. I still keep them in a shoe box.

I meant to show them all to her when the head-shots were done, but I never got the chance. The day we went to the river for her photo shoot, some time between that and the Columbus Day hailstorm, she disappeared with all her stuff, leaving a note on the fridge.

Dear David,

Thank you for everything—I need to go away for a bit, but I'll get in touch with you as soon as I get things under control. Sorry this is such a short letter. I'm in a big, big hurry!

Love,

Kalifornia

My head was hammering, making my eyes go out of focus. I stood in front of the fridge for a long time and tried to read it over again, but I got stuck on each word and never made it to the end.

13.

One more letter arrived over the holidays. She was safe and healthy, she wrote, and working on a solution for her Jackson problem. She had a German shepherd for a bodyguard and was living couch to couch for now, traveling across the country and writing an epic memoir. She missed me, a lot. *Believe me, David, I really do.*

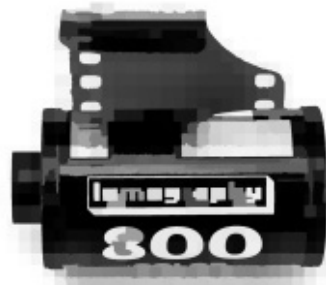
There was no return address, of course. I looked up her two names online for the hundredth time, and found nothing. No book of short stories had ever been published, as far as I could tell. No surprise there, either.

Actually, the only surprising thing in all of this is how stupid I was, I wrote one night in an unaddressed letter that's now also tucked away in the shoe box. It's taken a while, but our friends are finally persuading me that I'd been naive, that you only lied to string me along for some odd, personal pleasure. They don't know half of it. I never told them about Jackson, for instance. Anyway, everything I have said in your defense, they have gently taken down. I've got nothing left, Kal.

I hope you're okay. I still miss you. I think you would like the head-shots we took by the river that afternoon. You wouldn't stay still—the wind was blowing your hair into your face—you were laughing at my fussiness—and you would sometimes set your jaw and look away—but the pictures came out beautiful and vivid. If you saw them, you might say I was hopelessly in love with you, the way my eyes captured all the colors of your face.

Part Two

Claire



1.

All of our friends were waiting for Claire and me to start dating, which is why, when we did, we never told them.

Thinking back, I probably had some trust issues. I assumed from the beginning that Claire would eventually break up with me, and saw my own readiness for it as a sign that my rationality had been fully restored. Still, I didn't want to waste her time, so I did my part to make sure we had a great time together. I was a good boyfriend to her, and she was, of course, amazing. We went on dates, vegged out and cuddled, took care of each other and put each other first. We were a no-brainer—a perfectly balanced couple. If we hadn't known we were such a good match, we probably would never have tried dating.

It started, and ended, like this.

2.

December. It was the first time in three months that I had showed my face at our monthly game night. We were gathering at Chris's place that day. I hadn't talked with Katelyn or Meili since Kalifornia's sudden departure, so I'd mentally prepared myself for solicitous smiles and quiet inquiries into my welfare. When Chris announced my arrival by blasting Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Dani California" on his boombox, I actually didn't believe my ears. It started smack in the middle of the chorus, with *California rest in peace*—

I didn't think of it then, but judging by how fast everybody else reacted, it wasn't the first time Chris had made this joke. Meili practically lunged at the boombox to silence it. The room erupted with protestations, but Ryan's voice drowned out the rest.

"Yo, what the fuck is wrong with you, Chris?"

"Hey, chill," said Chris. "It's just a joke."

"Okay, moving on—" That was Katelyn.

I looked at Chris. He was studying my reaction.

"Well," I said, "that was...scary."

He grinned and patted my back. "Gotta be able to laugh about these things, right brother? I'm just saying, fuck her, and fuck the horse she came on. Repeat after me, Dave—"

"Can you shut up?" Ryan said. "Before I punch you in the mouth?"

"Come on, man. *You* said—"

Ryan threw a nervous glance toward me. "It doesn't matter who said what. Shut up, or I'll take you out."

Chris held up his hands. An awkward lull followed while Meili connected her phone to the Bluetooth and picked a new song. Ryan dropped his seat on the couch and beckoned to me. I went to him, stopping to exchange hugs and holiday greetings with Katelyn and Meili on the way.

Ryan looked at me sheepishly and scratched his big, hairy arms.

"Hey," I said, sitting down.

"Good to see you here."

What had he said to Chris about Kalifornia? Probably all the same stuff he'd said to me, but using stronger language. He looked more embarrassed than remorseful.

"That was shitty of Chris," he said.

“Yeah, it really was,” I said with a soft laugh. “It’s alright.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’m doing well.”

“Liking your new place?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

In those days, I found myself telling a lot of little lies. I didn’t like it—but it sure made things simpler. I was not about to explain to Ryan, for instance, that I’d received a letter from Kalifornia that very morning...and that my mind was now constantly racing back to my kitchen, where the blue envelope sat on the counter, unopened.

Someone broke out a deck of cards. Someone asked about people’s holiday plans and received some replies. *What had Kalifornia written?* I wondered as I arranged my hand. *Another apology? More excuses?* Surely, if she’d wanted to correspond, she would have put a return address on the envelope.

“You, David?” Meili asked.

“Let me see,” I scanned my hand. “Sorry, what are we playing?”

“Poker,” she said. “But I meant, what are your plans for the holidays? Are you driving up to Maine?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“That’s nice. If I had a car, I would drive home, too. I miss the West Coast!”

“All the way to California?” said Chris. “So would David.”

Katelyn hit him on the side, apparently hard enough to draw a sharp “Ow, Jesus.” I didn’t much mind his jokes, stupid as they were. He was an oddball and I sort of liked him that way. I hated the tension in the room, though—so I toyed with the idea of feigning offense so he’d stop picking on me. Then Claire arrived.

Warm greetings rose from around the room. Meili got up to meet her at the doorway. In her left hand, Claire carried a pot of ruby red poinsettias—in her right, a jug of fruit punch, chock full of cranberries and citrus slices.

“Your Christmas fruit punch is here,” she announced, as though it was the jug that had elicited the general enthusiasm. Claire’s fruit punch had become a staple of our December gatherings; but I think everybody would have agreed with me that the festive drink was nothing without the girl who carried it.

Chris rose swiftly and went to fetch the punch glasses from her car. Taking off her jacket and gloves, she set the jug in the middle of the dining table and invited everyone to serve themselves. I stayed on the couch and stretched. In a moment, she joined me with two glasses, taking Ryan’s spot.

“Hi,” she said. “So you did come. Here you go.”

“Thanks.” I took the glass from her. “Cheers.”

“Did you open it?” she asked in a low voice after a sip.

I shook my head.

She thought for a moment. “No return address, you said.”

“Nope.”

“If you like, I’ll come with you after the party. We can disappear together at nine.”

“You know, I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Good.” She looked around. “By the way, I heard Chris giving you a hard time.”

Chris had just joined us at the coffee table. “Uh-oh,” he said.

“Are you going to stand up for yourself, David?” she asked.

“I was about to when you walked in,” I replied. “Hey Chris, shut up, okay?”

“Okay,” he said. “The song was funny, though, right?”

I grinned. “Yeah.”

“You gotta move on you know?”

“I’ve moved on.”

He glanced at my face. “Yeah?” He picked up Claire’s punch glass.

“That’s mine,” she said.

“Oh, sorry.” He picked up his. “Okay, Dave. Good...good.”

3.

“He’s worried about you,” Claire told me on the way to my apartment.

“I can tell. More so than anybody else.” I paused. “Do I seem that...off?”

“Only a little bit,” she said. She turned on the wiper. “Snow, David. Isn’t it pretty?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you’re still a bit on the quiet side,” she continued. “I mean, more than usual. And a little bit in your own world at times.”

“Well, today—”

“There was the letter.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not gonna lie,” she said. “I’m so curious what she wrote.”

We turned into the apartment complex. In the dark, it took me two tries to point out the right driveway. I was still getting used to living in a neighborhood where every building looked the same.

“What are you going to do for a dark room?” Claire asked when we had entered the apartment.

I actually had no plans of having a dark room, but I said, “I’ll figure it out.”

We read Kalifornia’s letter on our feet in the kitchen, snowflakes still melting on our boots and jackets.

“I’m just gonna toss this,” I said when I was done. I folded the letter and tucked it back into the envelope. “I think I should toss this.”

“Why don’t you rip it up, then?” Claire said.

“I don’t know. I feel bad.” I leaned against the counter. I held my breath for a few moments, then blew it out. “She’s safe,” I said. “She’s okay.”

“So it would appear.”

“I shouldn’t have wasted my energy worrying.”

“It’s totally understandable.”

I groaned. “Everybody thinks I’m an idiot.”

“No,” she said. “They think you’re in love. It happens to the best of us.”

“There is no Jackson. She made him up.”

She gave me a speculative look. “Well...we may never find out.”

“Claire.” I opened the envelope and got the letter out again. “Listen to this: *It looks as though my only option is to neutralize him. I don’t know if I’m capable of killing a man, even a ruthless loan shark.* This is classic Kalifornia bullshit.

Not even she could imagine that I would buy this. God, it drives me mad. Why did she even write to me? Look: *I miss you. I really do. The other day, I almost jumped on the Amtrak back to Massachusetts, because I couldn't bear it anymore...*" I paused to swallow. "Why did she have to say that? I didn't wanna know that."

Claire put an arm around my back.

"I'm an idiot," I said again. "I keep thinking—she—I—we—"

"You were more than friends," she said. "You were not lovers, but you loved each other. Nobody but Kalifornia herself could ever have come between you."

She stayed with me past midnight. We set up my WiFi—something I'd been dragging my feet about—and watched *Black Orpheus* together. When I walked her out to the car, there was a two-inch mask of snow covering everything. I got out my ice scraper and helped clear her car. At one point, our eyes met over the windshield, and I paused my hands. Yellow streetlight, snowflakes peppering her knit cap, dark, red hair wet and disarrayed, yet somehow perfect. Did she realize that I was framing a mental picture? She smiled.

I resumed work. "You look beautiful," I said, "in case you didn't know."

"Oh." She wiped a drop of water from her eyelashes. "Thank you."

"No one's ever told you that before, right?"

She laughed. "David."

"Yeah."

"You used to like me, right? Before Kalifornia."

"Hm." I grinned. "Yeah. And even after she turned up, for a couple of months...I think."

I felt surprisingly comfortable saying this. I suddenly wondered if she hadn't been encouraging me a bit, back when we were having lunches regularly on the patio of the health food store. I put the snow scraper in the car and closed the door.

"Careful on the road," I said.

"Yes. Good night."

"Good night."

4.

On Christmas evening, I got a call from Chris. It took a minute for me to extricate myself from Kit and Emilio. When I finally found the only quiet spot in Mom's house, which was her study, I couldn't reach Chris. I left him a text, telling him to call again any time.

He reached me close to midnight and greeted me with an apology for calling late.

"We're all night owls here," I said, closing the living room door behind me just as a collective shout erupted from the mahjong table.

"Sounds like you're having a good time," Chris said. "I'll call tomorrow." He sounded subdued.

"No, stick around," I said. "I was about to take a break from the noise anyway."

"Okay." There was a brief pause. "Merry Christmas, Dave."

"Merry Christmas. You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm alright. I just thought I'd check in on you, make sure you're as alright as I am."

I laughed. "Okay. Got any snow up there?"

"Yeah. Maybe six inches." Chris was a fellow Mainer.

"Five here." I leaned against the window frame in the dark dining room and gazed outside. "Why the sudden call?"

"I was bored. I hate the holidays."

We chatted for about half an hour. When we hung up, I mulled over those words. I knew another person who hated the holidays—my ten-year-old foster brother, Shaun. This Christmas Eve had marked the first anniversary of his arrival at 7 Pine Cove Road.

After Dad and the young ones had all gone to bed, I joined Mom in the kitchen. She was waiting with two mugs of chai.

"There went another Christmas," she sighed.

"Crazy as ever," I said.

"I'm sorry, Davy. You were the only sane soul to ever live in this house. I wish I could at least give you your own room so you could have some quiet."

I reassured her quiet was what I had everyday, and that I needed this. Besides, Syd seemed to love having his own room. "Man, he's grown," I said. "He asked me to teach him how to shave, you know."

“Glory in the highest!” she exclaimed. “He won’t let Dad come anywhere near him now. Did he mention he’s applying to colleges in Massachusetts?”

“No.”

“Says he’s gonna move to that godforsaken state, whether or not he’s accepted.”

I laughed. “Well, I’m ready for him, Mom, if he needs. I don’t particularly like living alone.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly. No doubt she was trying to decide whether to ask me if I’d ever heard from that strange housemate of mine who’d gone missing back in October.

“You know Chris Daley,” I said.

“Mm-hm. Mindy’s son.”

“He called me today. Out of the blue.”

She nodded slowly. “I haven’t talked to Mindy in a long time. I wonder how they’re doing. Holidays must be tough for them.”

“Why?”

“You know—” She paused. “Did you ever hear about Chris’s sister?” I shook my head. “Well, she...took her own life. Three, four years ago. You probably didn’t know Chris back then.”

I finished my chai in silence.

While washing our mugs in the sink, I told her I’d like to go see Chris in the morning. “If you don’t need me for anything,” I added.

“Just get that unholy fuzz off Syd’s face first,” she said. “Take the truck. You’re gonna need studded tires.”

So I did. I thought an hour and a half would get me to his house in the snow; Mom said two, and she was right. He was surprised to see me. After introducing me to his parents, he got me on his four wheeler and drove me through the fresh snow all over his family’s farm. A couple of times, we got stuck and had to shovel ourselves out. We took Mom’s truck to the town for lunch.

On the way back to his house, he asked to stop by the cemetery. We walked among snow-covered granite blocks and white pine trees to Adelaide Daley’s grave.

“Your sister,” I said.

“How do you know?” he asked, brushing the snow off the gravestone.

“Mom told me.”

He stood there staring at her name. I went to the nearest pine tree and picked up a branch from the ground beneath. I dusted the snow off the needles and pine cones, brought it to the grave, and laid it down like flowers over Adelaide.

“I just don’t know why she did it,” he said. “Was she sad? Lonely? What makes people do that? Heartbreak?” He looked at me. “The last time I talked with her, she said she was fine. And then—” He gestured weakly toward the gravestone.

The sky was heavy. Another snow was coming.

5.

Sometimes, when you can't move on for your own sake, you can still find a way to do it for someone else. For me, that someone may have been—oddly enough—Chris. Maybe there was something about me that reminded him of his sister. The more he thought about me, the more he remembered Adelaide, the more he grieved her, the more he worried about me. It seemed as though my heartbreak had thrown him into a sort of depressive echo chamber that he couldn't escape.

I've come to know Chris very well since then, and I can say with certainty that winters are always difficult for him. That year was worse than usual. His holiday break concluded with a particularly nasty fight between his parents. He fled back to Massachusetts for New Year's Eve and ruined Katelyn and Ryan's party by getting into some sort of political argument with them. He started avoiding all his friends except for Claire and me.

It may have been a case of "fake it till you make it," but I did eventually manage to convince Chris that I'd moved on from Kal. He continued to tease me whenever the word "California" popped up in a conversation. When he suddenly stopped doing that some time in the spring, I assumed either he'd forgotten about Kal or the joke had grown stale, even for him.

One Saturday in May, Claire and I were packing up after a full day of labor putting final touches on the old clapboard ice cream shop that was now hers. A song came on the radio—maybe it was "Hotel California." *Oh, where's Chris?* I joked, looking around. She laughed.

"You know," I said, "I thought he'd never stop."

She smiled. "Yeah." She had a thought about that, I could see—but she didn't share it with me.

Before we locked up, we stood in the doorway and looked around the room.

"You were right about going for yummy-cozy instead of slick and chique," she said. "I love the red and yellow. And the mismatched chairs. It makes you want to just grab your cone, sit down, arrange the tables and chairs whatever way you like..."

"Yeah," I said. "No fuss, just friendly and delicious."

She suddenly clung to my arm and gave a soft squeal. "It's really gonna happen! I can't wait till June! I couldn't have done it without you, David."

She practically skipped all the way home. I'd never seen her so childlike—but then, she'd told me she had been dreaming of her ice cream shop since she was eleven.

We had a party planned with all our friends for the opening weekend, but the two of us celebrated quietly that day with a bottle of wine. Settling on her deck with our feet dangling over the river, I remembered the late summer evenings I'd spent sitting on the dock with Kalifornia. I felt nostalgic, but lighthearted.

“We should have invited Chris today,” I said. “He won't come to the party.”

“I thought about it,” Claire said. “But he wouldn't have come tonight, either.”

“Why not?”

“He wouldn't have wanted to butt in.” Her gaze turned to me, pensive and slightly comical. “He thinks you and I should be together. And...you look absolutely shocked.”

I blinked a few times. “Um...well...yes, I am. Because I thought...” I couldn't find an easy way out of this one, so I spilled the truth. “I thought he had a huge crush on you.”

“Oh.” She paused. “I don't think that would stop him from saying what he thinks.”

“I guess not.”

We stared at each other. She never blushed, nor did her hazel eyes stray from my face. After several seconds, we both rolled down on our backs and looked up at the purple sky.

“I've imagined it, you know,” she said. “You're my companion of choice, after all. I'm happy and free when I'm with you.” She gave a soft laugh. “On days we spend together, days like this, I ask myself why I haven't made a move on you already. I know the answer. I don't feel like I need to have you to myself. And I don't think you feel that way about me, either.” She turned her head toward me. “Is that a point in our favor? Or against?”

“I don't know.”

“It does seem unromantic, doesn't it?”

“It does.”

“Can romance be...created?”

We both sank into thought. After a time, I rolled onto my side and propped myself up on my elbow. I loved Claire. There was no doubt in my mind about that. I considered offering her my hand, but she looked comfortable with her hands under her head.

“I don't think romance can be created,” I said after a moment. “Found, maybe.”

“Yes—” She slowly sat up. “What do you think about giving us a shot, David? Tell me honestly. You won’t hurt my feelings.”

Images flashed through my head, of sharing my days, weeks, seasons with her—of meeting her parents, whom she often talked about—of bringing her to Maine, to show her where I grew up. They were comforting images. I couldn’t fault them, just as I couldn’t fault Claire.

“Yeah,” I said. “I would give it a shot.”

She reached out with her right hand. I couldn’t decide if I was supposed to shake it or hold it. I sat up and offered her both of mine.

“Pick one,” I half laughed.

She giggled and took my left. We sat like that and talked into the night. When I left, she kissed me on the cheek, and it felt good.

6.

I got the hang of a lot of things that summer, and life suddenly seemed pretty straightforward, albeit packed. I had a steady flow of new patrons, a number of regulars, and a robust connection with the local hospitality industry that filled my summer weekends with wedding gigs. When I wasn't busy with photography, I was helping out at Claire's increasingly popular ice cream shop, sometimes behind the scenes, sometimes at the register. She was busy and stressed out, but always happy to have me nearby. We set aside Mondays for ourselves to go on extended dates. We left our old stomping grounds and traveled to places where we wouldn't walk into our friends—the Berkshires, Connecticut, New Hampshire. At the top of Mount Greylock, she kissed me on the corner of my mouth. Afterwards, I saw a little pink in her cheeks and felt my heartbeat pick up. I suppose we could have pushed ourselves closer that day, but instead, we wordlessly agreed to let that sink in for now.

Thank god for Claire. If it were up to me, June would have come and gone without our sharing a single tender moment like that. Romancing Claire—*that* was the one thing I couldn't get a hang of. I let three weeks go by without making a single move past holding her hand. Maybe I was psyching myself out. Maybe I was waiting for something to become clearer inside me. Or maybe my heart was still packed away in the closet along with the old film camera and all my photographs, and I was afraid of breaking it out.

One Sunday evening toward the end of June, Katelyn threw a birthday party for Meili. Claire and I drove over together after closing the ice cream shop. Claire was dog tired. Not only had she spent the whole day on her feet, but she had also dealt with her first nightmare customer.

"I'm feeling sad, David," she said in the car on the way to Katelyn's place. "I don't know how long I can pretend to be cheerful. I don't want to be a mope and ruin Meili's party."

Claire, ruin someone's party—I couldn't help but laugh. She joined me.

The party was well-organized, just like everything else Katelyn did. There was a potluck meal, a cake, lots of conversation and a party game. We all hung out on the deck until the citronella candle burned out. As we began to migrate toward the living room, I felt Claire touch my hand. I hung back on the deck with her.

"Are you alright?" I asked her.

She looked sleepy. “I need to go home,” she said. “Could you get a ride with Meili?”

“I can drive you.”

“No, you should stay. You’re having a good time. I’m being a party pooper.”

I grinned. “No, you’re not.”

Katelyn must have unplugged the string lights—the deck suddenly went dark. In the night, I couldn’t see so much as I could feel Claire’s presence near me. I don’t know what got into me. I put both my arms around her and drew her closer. I bent my face toward her—she smelled like chocolate—and pressed my lips to her cheek. I felt her soft breath on my chin, heard the muffled voices in the house, knew they had all gone to the living room. I thought about kissing her lips.

Well, I didn’t. Not then. I went home and stayed awake late into the night, remembering the smile on her face—shy, dazzling—when we rejoined the party in the living room. It suddenly seemed as though it were up to me to let myself fall head over heels for her. Why I hadn’t already, I didn’t know.

I left for Maine the following day. I stopped in front of her apartment to say goodbye.

“I’ll miss you,” she said, her bare feet shuffling on the cold sidewalk.

“I’ll miss you, too,” I said.

“I’ll see you there in three weeks.”

“Yeah.”

And there on a quiet street at six o’clock in the morning—where the chill brought us a little closer, and where the pale golden light from the sky and the blue cotton robe made her hair almost rose-colored—we shared our first and last real kiss.

7.

Mom had made it clear that she had no intention of asking for help after her hip replacement surgery, which meant that it was essential for me to be there to make sure she was resting and behaving herself.

When she didn't come out to greet me with open arms, I took it as a good sign, that she was inside, taking it easy; but instead, I found her at the kitchen sink, fussing with the compost bin. She pretended not to have noticed my arrival. I stopped in the doorway and looked at her stubborn back.

"I really tried, David," Dad whispered to me. "You know how she is with me."

"Think you could handle dinner, Dad?" I asked. "I can handle Mom."

"*Nobody's* gonna handle me," she said without turning around.

"She's all yours," said Dad. "It's Syd and Kit's turn to make dinner."

My eyes grew. "Syd and Kit? Who came up with that combination?"

"I did." He grimaced. "But you're absolutely right. That sounds like a recipe for disaster."

"There's always pizza," I said.

"No, I'll get Lilian to cook with Syd."

"Sounds good, Dad."

I went to the sink and put an arm around Mom's back.

"Oh, hi, David," she said.

"Hi, mother."

"I seem to recall telling you that I don't need help."

"I'm not here to help," I said. "I'm here to keep you in line."

"What a waste of gas and time!"

"You'd better get used to the idea, Mom, because I'm here for the next six weeks."

She looked up at me with bright eyes. "Six! Really?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I led her out of the kitchen.

Kit and Emilio had opted to continue schooling during the summer; they were excited to have me as their teacher for a few weeks. Lilian and Shaun spent every waking hour running around the woods and diving off the dock. *Practically feral*, Mom said with warm satisfaction. She loved to hang outside and watch them. Syd, who had graduated at the end of May, surprised us all by

sticking around during Kit and Emilio's school time. He helped Kit with algebra and Emilio with spelling. While I was there, he tried out a mustache, a goatee, and a stubble, finally settling on the last.

July in Maine reawakened a lot—almost too much—inside me. A yearning for wonder, as I watched Emilio crouch in the garden, waiting for a monarch butterfly to emerge from its chrysalis. A thirst for beauty, as I sat on the dock gazing out while the morning sun wiped the mist from the cove. A sense of aliveness, as I dove into the frigid water that was both painful and soothing. And something else, that I had felt for the first time in the July of my fifteenth year, when I sat with Syd and Kit at my mother's feet and watched her comfort my first foster sibling, Lilian, then four: A longing to have a family of my own some day.

I often found myself imagining a future with Claire, picturing the family we would have, as unreal as it was beautiful. Could we get there? And how? With more kisses? Would our relationship seem more real when we'd had our first argument? After we'd shared our first night?

One evening, while waiting for her to call, I resolved to talk to her about making our relationship public. Then Lilian ran by the window with a garland of oxeye daisies on her head, and a sentence popped into my head: *Running through the daisy field in nothing but her undergarments, she was a picture of freedom and innocence—and none of us knew back then that she was in fact running, not for joy, but for her life...* From the short story "Fugitive: but not with Harrison Ford," by Ambrosius Mooney.

I didn't end up talking to Claire about our relationship that day, and not because I had second thoughts—I plain forgot. It didn't even occur to me, until after we'd already broken up, that I'd dropped that ball.

"Hey—David," Syd said to me one afternoon. "Do you have a girlfriend or anything?" Then he set his jaw and waited.

We were out on a boat we'd bought together from a neighbor when we were thirteen and seven. I'd paid forty dollars, Syd, five. I knew that expression on his face. His question was not one of curiosity, but of life; and when he opened up like that, as far as he and I were concerned, it meant I owed him an answer.

"I do," I said. "Her name is Claire."

"Is it the friend that's coming over next week?"

"Yeah."

"Does Mom know she's your...?"

"I'm sure she suspects."

He stopped rowing. His eyes scanned the horizon and returned to me. "How did you guys meet?" he asked.

“We met at the health food store where she used to work. Now she runs her own ice cream shop.”

“How did you fall for her?”

For a moment, I was stumped. Then I remembered the crush I had had on her in my pre-Kalifornia era. “Well, at first, I just loved her smile and her voice,” I said. “Then it was her openness and cheerfulness, I guess.” I thought of Chris, who never seemed to know what to do with his hands when she was in sight, and felt a pang of guilt. “Well, I’m not doing her justice. You’ll see when you meet her. I wasn’t the first to fall for her, nor will I be the last.”

He looked a little startled. “You’re not gonna stay together?”

“Well, hopefully, we will. Can’t control how others feel, right? Someone will always be moonstruck for Claire, whether or not she’s taken.”

“I guess.” He blushed. “And I think that’s gonna be the same with Maddie.”

I wasn’t surprised to hear her name come up.

“You’re steady, David,” he continued. “You’re a good guy, and you’re wise. Knowing you, I’m sure Claire is also steady and kind and wise. I’m sure Mom will love her, and I’m sure Claire’s parents will be all over you. Gosh, you do everything right.”

A laugh escaped me. “I don’t know where you’re going with this, Syd—but I’ll put it out there that I’ve fallen for some oddballs in my time, too.” He looked at me curiously, but I waved him off. “Go on, tell me about you and Maddie Hanson.”

“We’ve been together since New Year’s Day.”

“So you asked her out at last?”

He flinched. “No. *She* finally did.”

I smiled. “You and I are more alike than you think. But that’s sweet. She must like you a lot.”

“She does—”

He suddenly let go of the oars and ran both his hands through his hair. I caught the oars and began to row. As the boat turned, he rested his elbows on his knees and looked toward the trim yellow house at the mouth of the cove where she lived. His gray eyes, reflecting the light dancing on the waves, momentarily looked larger, brighter. Like the shutters had opened. Snap.

“I think I’m the only mistake she’s made in her life so far,” he said. “What will her dad say when he finds out? He hates me, with good reason. I stole his bike. I’m serious, David. Twice.”

“Sorry,” I said, laughing. “It’s funny though. Karma.”

“Yeah, no shit.” He began to laugh, too. He didn’t say much more during the rest of the boat ride.

We'd gone musseling on High Rocks Beach. When we arrived at home, Shaun came running to collect the buckets. *Mom's mussels and leeks for dinner!* he shouted. It was the first time I heard him call her Mom, and I stood there, sort of breathless, and watched him run up toward the house. When I turned to Syd, he was staring at me with a preoccupied expression.

"Maddie's going to UMaine," he said.

"Long distance relationship, huh?" I said.

"In April, she suggested that she could take a year off instead and move to Massachusetts with me. I told her no way. She's had all her future figured out since she was in ninth grade! I can't ruin that. Besides, what would she do in Massachusetts for a year? Sit and watch me bumble my way through my first year of non-homeschool?"

I had witnessed Syd's growing pains all my life, and it never ceased to humble me. I listened closely and said nothing.

"What do you think?" he continued. "When she goes to school, will she move on from me? She'll meet more people there than we've ever known. Maybe it's stupid of us to take our relationship so seriously. How many people actually marry their high school sweethearts? I should just let her go." He clenched his teeth.

"Saying those words hurt, didn't it?" I said. "They sure were painful to hear."

We took our time climbing the slope to the house. I wished I could think of some words of encouragement, but in the face of Syd's pain and confusion, I felt a bit dazed. The fantasies of the past few weeks vanished like morning mist, and all I wanted was to go back to my apartment, pull out the shoe box, look at some pictures, and fall asleep to a wistful dream.

"Syd," I finally said, "you could stay in Maine."

He looked at me, and I realized this was what he'd been hoping to hear, all along. Things snapped into place.

"See if UMass will let you start next year," I said. "Stick it out in Maine for one more year."

"What would I do here?" he asked gruffly, gesturing toward what I assumed was Maine, which he supposedly hated.

"Find work," I replied.

"Where would I find the kind of work that would pay for an apartment and food and all that? I don't even have a car."

"Live here, in the annex. Help around the property, save on rent, borrow the truck and visit Maddie every weekend—and plan your next move together. Of course, you'll have to clear it with Mom first."

He groaned. “Ugh, is that the best you can come up with?” I shrugged. “But Mom gets on my nerves,” he said. “She can’t keep her opinion to herself, can’t keep her nose out of people’s business. That’s why I haven’t even told her about Maddie and me.”

“Actually,” I said, “she’s known since January 3rd, at the latest.”

“What?”

“She just happened to see you two kissing in the woods. And she hasn’t breathed a word to anyone, not even Dad.” I watched his cheeks turn bright red, and his eyes light up slowly. “You might be interested to find out what else she knows of all your ‘secrets.’”

“Well, she told *you*, clearly!” he exclaimed.

“I don’t count, Syd,” I said. “You know she tells me everything.”

8.

In the morning of the day Claire arrived, Maddie Hanson made her first visit to our house as Syd's girlfriend. She received a warm welcome and was asked to stay for lunch and come back for dinner; she agreed to both. Syd followed our parents' interactions with Maddie with the eyes of an eagle, but he never acted cross toward Mom, and he resisted the urge to jump down Dad's throat when he asked her a long string of questions about her senior project.

I was glad for the chance to get reacquainted with the youngest of the Hanson girls. In the two years or so that I hadn't seen her, she'd grown a lot and was really coming into her own. Athletic, self-possessed, and a little nerdy, she had a sharp and straight gaze that didn't wander. No wonder Syd had been in such a rush to become a man.

Mom had always liked Maddie. She liked everybody, true, but Maddie did have a special place in her heart as one of the neighborhood kids she'd watched grow up. When Claire arrived in the afternoon, Mom took extra care to ensure that Maddie didn't feel overshadowed by the dreamy heart-stealer of a girl she assumed to be my love. She was in seventh heaven, sitting at the dinner table flanked by her two oldest sons' girlfriends.

In truth, by the time Maddie had arrived for dinner, Claire was no longer my girlfriend.

On the way to 7 Pine Cove Road, she had stopped in town and called me, asking me to meet her at the harbor. I had been helping Kit fix a small leak in her boat, but when I heard Claire's breaking voice on the phone, I had dropped everything and gone to find her.

She was sitting on a bench near the clam shack, her hands clasped between her knees. Her back was arched, and even though it was warm, she wore a cotton hoodie with the hood up. When she saw me approach, she got to her feet quickly. We embraced for a long time, then walked hand in hand to the rocky beach, past several families and couples hanging out in the sun, to a quiet stretch of evergreen woods. There, she told me, through renewed sobs, that Chris had asked her out.

"Of course, I turned him down," she said. "I didn't tell him about us. I just said I wasn't interested in him in that way."

"You told him nothing he didn't already know," I put in.

“It’s true. He knew I would turn him down. He said he just wanted to get it off his chest. But he was completely heartbroken anyway. And I could see it.”

So could I, in my mind. It hurt more than I cared to show. “It must have been painful for you, too,” I said.

“It was. But what could I do? I can’t leave him with false hope. I’ve never felt so much as an ounce of attraction toward him.”

She stopped on a flat, level rock, wiped her tears, and gazed out onto the bay. Was she recalling the moment? The flush in her cheeks turned to blush, and she shivered in the sun.

“What does he see in me, that he’s so infatuated?” she wondered out loud.

“Everyone loves you, Claire,” I said. “I’m sure he sees what everybody else sees.”

“But—beyond that, David. What makes people fall head-over-heels in love?” I understood. I had known from the beginning where this was headed.

“Chance? Timing?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” After a moment, I said, “I was taught that the heart is an involuntary muscle.”

“That’s deep,” she said. “But it’s not that simple.”

“Think so?”

“The heart...is very complicated.” She paused. “No, it’s not. It’s everything else that’s complicated.”

“Yeah.”

We looked long at each other.

“David,” she said finally. “I...I don’t know how to say this...”

“Take your time,” I said. “But say what you mean.”

She drew a deep breath. “The way Chris feels toward me...I want to be loved like that. And I want to love like that.”

“I know, Claire. And I would like to see that.”

“That’s not gonna be us. I think.”

“I agree.”

“We were somehow closer when we were just friends. Right, David?”

“In a way, yeah.”

“Could we go back to that...?”

There was a faint note of hope in her voice. I thought back to our first meeting, then to our lunches on the patio. I thought of the picture I’d taken of her turning around to smile at me, the bag of onions at her chest. I thought of her pouncing on my arm at the ice cream shop.

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s make it happen.”

We still held on to each other’s hand.

She smiled sadly. “So dumb. I’ll probably never find a boyfriend like you again.”

I shook my head. “I sure hope you’ll meet someone more worth your time.”

She squeezed my hand. Then we let go.

That day, having chatted late into the night with Claire, Syd, and Maddie, I left Claire in the annex and returned to the house. Mom and Dad were nestled together on the porch swing, enjoying wine and getting bitten by mosquitoes.

“West Nile’s pretty nasty,” I said. “I’m just saying.”

Mom slapped a mosquito on Dad’s knee.

“They don’t stand a chance with her,” he said.

She slapped his arm.

“You don’t think she’s enjoying this rather too much?” I said.

He laughed and shrugged.

“I love Claire, Davy,” Mom said. “I feel like I’ve known her all my life.”

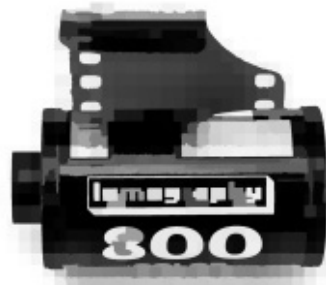
“I’m glad,” I said.

She gazed at me and said no more.

I went to bed. From the couch bed in the screened sun room where I was staying, I could see the second floor window of the shed where the annex was. It stayed lit for ten more minutes, then shut off. On the dock, Syd and Maddie chatted into the night, their laughter sometimes bubbling over like fireworks to light up the dark.

Part Three

Daisy



1.

What a stunning October day it was! Open sky, high clouds, breezes, trees shimmering in pink, gold, orange, and green. It was one of those pockets of time when the beauty of the passing season could somehow make you sense, in no uncertain terms, the inherent peril of being alive. Your heart feels larger, your lungs crave more air than it can receive. Your eyes wander, and your feet just might follow them if you'd allow. Restless joy fills you, but contentment seems infinitely far out of reach.

It wasn't an easy weekend to stay indoors.

Claire, having received the news of her grandmother's sudden hospitalization, had decided to travel to Minnesota over Columbus Day weekend. There were three new hires scheduled to work at the ice cream shop—all students from nearby colleges—so I canceled my bike trip with Katelyn, Ryan, Chris, and Meili and stayed in town to hold the fort. I hadn't helped out at the shop since our breakup, and I felt happy that she had asked me, and without offering to pay.

"No hailstorm in the forecast this year, that's for sure," said one of the new hires when she caught me staring out the rear window of the shop for the second time that Saturday morning.

I had to glance at her name tag. Day. "Yeah," I said. "There was *that* last year."

"It scattered all the foliage before their peak," she said. "Right before my parents' visit. Gosh, I wish I were camping in the White Mountains right now."

"Don't even talk about it."

"We're opening," called the other new girl from the front end of the shop.

Eleven o'clock already! "Okay," I replied, then asked Day in a soft voice. "What was her name again?"

"Marguerite."

"Right."

The three of us made a bet on which flavor would sell the most that day. Marguerite called the pumpkin right away, and Day apple cider, so I went with salted caramel. A mere three minutes after we opened, we heard the bell and a large group of young people streamed in. Leather jackets, stylish sweater dresses, boots, caps, scarves, one strawberry red flannel. *I'll serve*, said Day.

Marguerite had already gone to greet the first customer. I went to the register to ring.

It was a merry crowd, with windblown hair and smiles on their faces, some carrying a small wad of colorful leaves or bouquets of Michaelmas daisies. I imagined that they'd just returned from a morning hike up Mt. Tom. They ordered in quick succession—pumpkin, apple, caramel, pumpkin, chocolate...Marguerite was winning. A girl wearing a gray slouchy cap ordered a cone of mocha with extra sprinkles. She saw me eyeing her Pentax K1000 and smiled as if to invite conversation, but quickly moved on when she saw that the next customer was ready to pay. A man with an Indian accent picked up a dish of apple cider ice cream and was completely blown away by “the American serving size.” One by one, they left with their ice cream and made a huddle in front of the store. A few found tables inside. Someone asked for an extra spoon, someone else for more napkins. The last in line had a chicken-shaped bag, which I momentarily thought was real. I kept glancing at it as I rang her up, a dish of strawberry ice cream for the strawberry red flannel—

“Never liked the autumn-flavors, you know?” she said softly. “Pumpkin? Yuck.”

My heart seized up.

I glanced up at her face, then looked down again quickly. “Three twenty-five,” I said.

She held out the exact change. When I didn't take it, she put it on the counter and left. I stood there for several seconds, looking down at the money—then I bent over, put my elbows on the counter, and buried my face in my hands. Over the ringing in my ears, I heard the sound of the bell as the door closed.

“Marguerite and I are tied!” Day's voice. “David, are you okay?”

I nodded. Drawing a deep breath, I slowly raised my face and looked toward the door. The strawberry girl was standing in the breezeway with the cup of ice cream held at her chest, staring at me with big, brown eyes. Her cheeks were the color of her flannel.

Kalifornia.

I unbent myself, turned, and went to the back room.

When Day came to find me, I was sitting sideways on the staircase with my feet up on the wall and my eyes closed.

“She left right after you,” she said. “The girl who was looking at you from the entrance.”

I looked up at her, registering her puzzlement. I didn't know what to say, besides, *Oh*.

“What did she say to you?” she asked.

I thought for a moment. “That she doesn’t like autumn flavors.”

“Was she rude about it?”

“No. She got strawberry...which is her favorite.”

“What’s the matter? Are you sick?”

“No. Just...remembered something I didn’t want to.”

2.

At ten past two on Sunday, she came by again. With both hands, she clutched a small piece of note paper.

“Um, hi. David.”

This time, I allowed our eyes to lock. No glasses. A few seasonal freckles. She wore a pale yellow dress. She had done something to make her hair equally wavy on both sides of her face—she wore it at shoulder length. Her cheeks were flushed again, and she looked like Claire’s favorite summer treat—lemon sherbet with a strawberry on top.

After a few seconds, I returned to my task, which was to wipe the outdoor tables. From between the chair legs, I saw and recognized the sneakers on her feet. They still looked brand new.

“David?” she said again.

I finished the table I was on and straightened. “Well,” I said. “Ambrosius.”

She shuffled and looked this way and that. I waited for her to speak, but she couldn’t seem to decide what to say. My heart beat uncomfortably fast.

“What do you need?” I finally asked.

“I...um...” She held out the piece of paper. “I wanted to give you my number. In case you thought...there was anything to talk about.”

I looked at it. It was her old number. I felt sick. “I don’t want it,” I managed to say. “I’ve called that number before.”

“I can explain—”

I clenched my jaw. She read my face and stopped herself. Sucking her lip, she looked at the piece of paper in her hands. After a moment, she put it next to the washcloth on the table. I waited for her to leave, then tossed it into the waste bin, got out my cell phone, and erased her from the contact list. *So she never changed her number*, I thought to myself. Her phone had rung every time I had called her. She’d received my voice messages and texts.

I went around to the back of the shop and leaned against the wall. It’s been twelve whole months, I reminded myself. But the pain was real.

I left the shop early that day.

She didn’t come back on Columbus Day. I didn’t return to the ice cream shop after Monday that week.

3.

If the news of Kalifornia's return had spread, it didn't start with me. That week, Katelyn, Ryan, and Meili each found a reason to invite me out. Because I missed the bike trip. Because the weather was amazing. Because they wanted to carpool for groceries. I tried not to read into it.

A week after my first sighting of Kalifornia, Claire cooked me a dinner to thank me for minding the shop in her absence.

"Grandma's doing better each day," she said as she poured me a glass of wine. "I'm so glad I got to go see her. I can't thank you enough for stepping up to the plate for me again."

"Any time," I said.

She watched me. "I think I ought to tell you," she said. "Kalifornia came to see me this morning at the ice cream shop."

I was not unprepared for this. In fact, I'd assumed that, when Kalifornia had shown up at the ice cream shop over the previous weekend, she had originally come to find Claire and ask her for my whereabouts.

"I want you to know, first of all," Claire continued. "I'm not delivering a message from her. She asked me to please *not* tell you anything about her visit. I told her I'd feel dishonest to keep you in the dark, and she said she understood. I think she genuinely regretted coming to me." She sighed. "I hope I didn't come across as cold."

"I appreciate your telling me," I said. "But you don't have to say anything more. I don't want to know."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well, she didn't tell me anything more anyway." She paused. "She'll be hitting up Katelyn next. She asked me if they still live in the same place."

I got a little knot in my stomach. Katelyn could be mean when she wanted to be.

"Maybe I should have told her they moved," Claire said, "for her own sake."

"Yeah, maybe," I said.

When I left Claire at about seven thirty, I swung by Katelyn and Ryan's street on my bike. No sign of Kalifornia. I couldn't tell if I was relieved or disappointed.

Imagine my surprise when I got back to my apartment and found her there on the sidewalk, a bouquet in hand, exchanging fire with Chris Daley.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” he was barking. “You *followed* me here? Are you a stalker?”

“I’m not interested in *you*, stupid,” she returned. “I’m just trying to find David—” She spotted me parking the bike behind Chris and turned neon pink.

“In other words, you *are* a stalker!” Chris said. Then he, too, turned around and saw me. “Oh, I don’t believe this...”

Kalifornia held up the bouquet in front of her like an amulet. Purple and pink Michaelmas daisies, vines of red and orange leaves.

“I just wanted to leave these at the door!” she said rapidly. “I wasn’t going to bother you, I promise. I’m just—I’m just very, um...” I walked toward her, passing right by Chris. She looked alarmed. “Very, very, um...sorry—”

“Damn it, Kal,” I said. “Put it down. Right now. This is poison ivy.”

“What is?”

“These vines. Just toss them in the rhododendron, come on—”

She did. She was about to cover her face in shame, but I caught her wrists in the nick of time.

“Don’t—touch—anything,” I said. “Come. You need warm water and soap.”

She promised she’d only touched the ivy with her hands, but after a thorough hand washing, I had her take a body shower, just in case. The fleece she wore in the woods needed to be washed. I was about to toss it in the washing machine in the kitchen but stopped myself when I noticed Chris watching me. I put it in a plastic bag instead.

“I can come back another time,” he suggested quietly.

I told him to stay, that I should be able to get her out the door reasonably quickly.

I met her in front of the bathroom door. She was glowing from a hot shower. The tips of her hair were wet, making water stains on the straps of her pink tank top.

“Did you wash carefully?” I asked.

She looked up at me with a faint grin on her lips. “Yeah.”

Did I see those pixie lights in her eyes? I was looking at her much too closely. I felt annoyed. What was she grinning for?

“You did that on purpose,” I said.

“What?”

“The poison ivy.”

I didn’t believe that, but it came out of my mouth. And—wow. Light went out of her eyes. She blinked a few times, looked down at the floor with her hair

falling around her face, and muttered, “No, I...” A bullet went through my heart.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted. “You were grinning, and—”

“It’s okay. I understand. I was grinning because...I was thinking about how I made you swear again.” She forced out a soft laugh. “I’m childish and clueless. I don’t mean to make light of...I don’t mean to act like I assume you would...I promised myself...” She lifted her chin a little and looked off to the side. “I’m so uncouth.”

She was fighting back tears, and my brain was in a tangle.

“I’m the one who was uncouth,” I said. “I’m sorry. That was uncalled for.”

“Jeez, David. *Please* don’t apologize.” Then she burst out crying.

What on earth had I hurt her for? After all the nights I’d dreamed of having her back, when she finally came to me and reached out for forgiveness, I’d slammed the door in her face.

When she finally managed to kill the sobs, I took her to the kitchen table and sat her down with Chris. They stayed silent while I heated up some apple cider. Eventually, I set down three mugs on the table and took a chair across from Kalifornia. She drew the mug to herself.

Stay calm, I thought as I sipped. *Forgive her, and let her move on.*

“Are you okay?” I said.

“Yeah,” she replied.

Chris sighed and picked up his mug. “I don’t believe this,” he muttered.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Chris,” I said.

“Never thought I’d see the day David Nighthart would make a girl cry,” he said.

I groaned.

“I didn’t cry because of him,” she said. “I cried because of me.”

He shrugged. “Whatever. I’ll say it again, Dave. I can come back another time.”

“It’s up to you. I’d love it if you’d stay. If you’re comfortable.” I turned to her. “So, Kal.” I waited for her to look up. “What brings you back?”

I thought I was ready for her answer.

“I came,” she said, “in order to tell you the truth—and win you back.”

Chris snorted. I stared at her for several seconds, feeling heat creep into my cheeks. Finally, I cleared my throat.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s...okay.” I put down the mug and rubbed my eyes. “Alright, Kal. Listen. I think it’s only fair for me to tell you that, um, I have absolutely no plans of falling in love with you again.”

“So you *did*, last time,” she said. “That’s what that means.”

“You knew that,” I said. “And more to the point—”

“Yeah, I knew. And that’s why what I did was so cruel.”

“And more to the—” I stopped. “That’s not all. You...” I drew a breath. “You loved me, too. We were as close as you’d allow us to be, which was awfully close, Kal, if not—” I slammed on the brake.

She bowed her head. “I know. You’re right: More to the point, we were practically married.”

“No. What I meant to say was...yes, I was in love with you then, but more to the point, I’m not going to be this time. *That’s* more to the point.”

“Okay,” she said painfully. “You just keep telling yourself that.”

“You know? I will.”

Her shoulders sagged. “I take it that you don’t want to hear my story, then.”

“Well—”

We watched each other in silence for a few seconds. My gaze told her what she needed to know—that, yes, I *would* listen to her stories. How could I not?

I guess Chris also saw it. He got to his feet. “I’m going, Dave. Don’t be stupid, alright?” He looked at Kal. “And *you* watch yourself. He was doing fine without you.”

“None of your business,” she grumbled.

“Good night, Chris,” I sighed.

“G’night.”

When we heard the door close, Kalifornia turned her eyes back on me. She began to smile, then thought better of it; her gaze dropped and lost its focus somewhere above the mug. I caught myself leaning ever so slightly forward. I sat back and waited.

“I grew up in upstate New York,” she began. “My mother left when I was still nursing. I remember her. She was big and beautiful and strong, like an Amazon. She was walking on the daisy field near our woods one day—that’s where I was conceived, actually—and the king of goblins asked her to be his wife. She’d always wanted to see the underground world; but she said no, that she had a husband and a daughter at home.”

Here, she consulted my face. She saw my eyebrows twitch and waited for an objection, but I kept my mouth shut.

“From that day on,” she continued, “the king visited her at all hours of the day and whispered sweet things into her ear. He had a voice like the wind in the pine trees, she told me. He whispered to her about all the adventures awaiting her in the land of goblins, somewhere between the tree roots and the earth’s core. And one morning, after washing my diapers in the river, she swaddled me and put me safely on the rock. She washed herself, waded across the water to the

other shore, and walked away, naked, into the mist.” She held up her hands and wiggled her fingers to show the mist closing like curtains. “And that was it.”

I took another sip from my mug.

“That was my version of the story,” she said after a moment. “Actually, she just ran away one day. Some people in town said Papa must have killed her and buried her in the woods. If that were true, then I played on her grave all my childhood. I was alone in the woods from sunup to sundown, and sometimes into the night. You see, I was making up stories and acting them out.”

She stopped to breathe, but seemed to lose herself in her own thoughts.

“What sorts of stories?” I asked after a long pause.

“There were imaginary tribes living in some parts of the woods,” she resumed. “Sometimes, they were friendly—other times, they were at war. The whole year that I was six, for instance—” Her face darkened. “The Pine Cone Crawlers and the Mushroom Raiders were engaged in a multi-generational conflict. I don’t remember what my role was in the whole situation. I think I may have unwittingly started the war. Anyway, I was kidnapped several times and decapitated in the end.”

“Wow.”

“It was a rainy day, and I lay in the middle of the daisy field sobbing, waiting for my father to call me for dinner, so that I could get up and leave that chapter behind. It was hard, but what could anyone do? Some stories just have to end in tragedy.” She suddenly looked a little embarrassed. “I’m not schizophrenic or anything. I just had an overactive imagination.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I said. “When I was a kid, imaginary things felt far more real than reality.”

Her eyes lit up, and again, she almost smiled. “Anyway...to continue,” she said, quickly returning her gaze to her mug. “Papa’s story also ended in tragedy, and this is how, God’s truth. One February night, when I was eight, he got up in the middle of the night and left, grumbling that his bed was so uncomfortable he finally couldn’t stand it anymore. He’d rather sleep outside on the bench. I was half asleep, but I told him I thought it was too cold outside. Then I fell back asleep. When morning came, I found him half sitting, half lying on the bench by the door, frozen to death.” She met my speechless horror with a sober gaze. “I walked to the nearest neighbor, and he called the police,” she said. “They just couldn’t figure out why a man would freeze himself to death like that. I explained again and again. I told them the truth. He was uncomfortable, he’d been uncomfortable on that bed for years, he finally had enough, so he got up and went to sleep on the bench...which...probably was also very uncomfortable. And he died there.” She sighed and shook her head. “In the end, they made up

their own story for the report, how he got drunk and locked himself out of the house, or something.”

“Good grief,” I said, palm to forehead.

“Two guys lifted his body into the van. One of them kept joking, *Hey, this guy died of discomfort. Can you imagine? Died of discomfort, for Christ’s sake...*” She pressed her lips together for a moment. “Is this more than you wanted to know?”

I shook my head. “Oh, no.”

“You look a little dazed.”

“I’m just shocked,” I said. “I’m terribly sorry.”

She shrugged stiffly. “It was a long time ago. Look, I don’t want you to think I’m asking for pity here.”

“I don’t think that, Kal.”

I’d swallowed that story whole. Maybe it was her subdued tone. Maybe it was the sobs that had preceded it. Maybe it was the way her hands clasped the mug tightly, the way she kept pressing it to her lips without ever taking a sip.

“Tell me more,” I said.

She put the mug down on the table and sat back. “No. That’s all. For tonight.”

“What?”

“I can’t tell you my life story in one sitting,” she said matter-of-factly. “Well, I could, but that wouldn’t buy me enough time.”

I stared at her. “Okay...?”

“Never mind, Davy,” she said. “Call me tomorrow and let me know if you believe the story I just told you. Then I’ll find an opportune time to tell you the next bit.”

“Do I need to believe it to hear more?” I asked suspiciously. “I thought it was your job to persuade me.”

“I’ll tell you either way, as long as you want it. I owe you the truth.” She sat up and chugged the cider until it was gone. “The next bit is about how I ended up being reunited with my mom. It isn’t very exciting. No goblins, for instance, and Mama was no Amazon. She looks a lot like me, actually. If you don’t want another depressing story, though, let me know and I’ll skip it.”

That night, after I had closed the door behind her, I picked up my cell phone and entered her name and number back in. I hesitated before pressing “Save.”

Come on—is it really that easy for her to pull me back into her shenanigans?

The girl who had stolen my heart with all her lies was now trying to win me back with the truth...well, at least, that was what she would have me think. There was something delicious about it. *Arabian Nights*, Ambrosius Mooney edition.

I saved her contact, picked up the plastic bag from the counter, opened it, and tossed her fleece into the washing machine.

4.

She found me at Claire's Ice Cream Shop, sitting at a table and chatting with Day. Day had on a kerchief and an apron and wore her hair in braids. Kalifornia eyed her suspiciously.

"Hey," I greeted.

Day looked at her, at me, then at her again. "Hi," she said cheerfully, rising. "Strawberry ice cream?"

Kalifornia politely ordered a small cone. When Day left, she took her seat. "You haven't called me yet," she said right away.

I watched her, half amused. "I was gonna call you in the evening."

"I've been so antsy waiting for your call that I can't eat or sleep," she said. "I'm losing weight."

"You look about the same as last night."

Pixie lights, again. "I look haggard," she said.

"Well, hopefully the ice cream will help."

"You can have it. I only ordered it so I can have this chair."

Day leaned over the counter with the ice cream cone. "Here it is, anyway," she said pleasantly. "Enjoy."

Kalifornia considered her. She glanced at her name tag as she got up to take the cone. "Day, huh? Never thought of that as a name."

"Nickname," Day replied. "I hate my real name."

"What is your real name? Dorcas?"

"It's Daisy. Daisy Hamilton."

"Oh, god," Kalifornia blurted. "That is awful. You poor thing." She looked genuinely sympathetic. "Okay, Day is not so bad. You could live with that."

"Daisy Hamilton," I said. "I actually think that's sort of sweet."

"Do you think so?" Day said.

"Yeah. It sounds like the sort of name a couple would think of when they're over the moon about their baby girl."

She beamed. Kalifornia looked away petulantly.

"What's your name?" Day asked her.

"Kalifornia."

"With a K," I added with a grin.

She glared at me.

"It was not her clever idea," I said helpfully.

Customers walked in, and Day went to greet them. I got to my feet.

“Where are you going?” Kalifornia asked.

“I have a gig at two,” I said. “Why don’t you pop into the back? Claire’s here.”

“And are you going to call me soon?”

“In the evening.”

She sighed. “I was rather hoping you’d call me at three o’clock this morning, begging me for the next chapter of my life story.”

I laughed. “Well, where would the story go, if the heroine always got what she wanted?”

At my laughter, her eyes lit up like the dawn. I turned and left the shop, suddenly feeling shy. As I removed the lock from my bicycle, I stole another look at her through the picture window. She was looking at the ice cream cone and smiling to herself. For a few seconds, I couldn’t tear my eyes away. Gosh, I hadn’t seen that smile since...

And then, I suddenly remembered with shock—at three o’clock that morning, when I should have been dialing her number, I’d been asleep on the couch, dreaming of a kiss on those very lips. I tore off the lock, got on the bike, and pedaled quickly away from the shop.

5.

“Mama and John had been trying for three years to have a baby,” she said. “When my father died and I was suddenly delivered to their door, they thought it was destiny that brought me to them. And they weren’t wrong, because the woman who drove me to their house—a social worker, maybe, I don’t know—her name was Destiny. Well, that’s how she pronounced it, although it was actually spelled Density, I noticed. Her parents must have been distracted while they were filling out the birth record. Maybe they were too over the moon about their baby girl.”

I was lying on the grassy shore of the pond, looking up at the indigo sky, the clouds, the crows flying—anything but Kalifornia, who was sitting beside me with her knees drawn to her chest. When she leaned over and peered into my face, I sat up so quickly she had to jerk back to avoid collision.

“What?” I said.

“I was just wondering if you were listening to my story,” she said. “The bit about my social worker being named Destiny.”

I hadn’t fully registered that she’d slipped into her story. “Oh,” I said. “Yeah, I heard.”

“I thought you might enjoy that detail. It gives my narrative a certain flair.” She scanned my eyes, which must have been a bit glazed over. She looked disappointed.

“Yeah, that’s funny,” I said. “Go on.” I lay back down.

“You’re not happy with me,” she said.

“That’s not true.”

“You’re happy with me, then?”

I clicked my tongue. “Come on, tell me the story.”

After a soft sigh, she resumed. “So Destiny delivered me to Mama and John’s house. We had a bad start. They cleaned me up, gave me a haircut, started calling me by my middle name, which John thought was nicer—”

“What is it?” I asked.

She groaned. “An. A-N. Blegh. At least, they called me Annie,” she continued, ignoring my grin. “They were perfectly respectable people, you know, but also very opinionated. They thought I should go to bed before them and get up only after sunrise. They wanted me to wash my hands constantly, eat three meals a day, attend school, read only children’s books, and play within a

certain distance of the house, because god forbid I suddenly had the urge to pee, and there was no *toilet bowl* nearby. I did my best to accommodate them, because I was under their roof. But when it eventually sank in that this was going to be the rest of my life, I completely freaked out. Is that poison ivy?”

I looked up. She was pointing to an oak tree in the distance. A shock of red ran up its trunk.

“Probably,” I said.

“I thought so, because the ones I picked were like that, climbing a tree. So beautiful and innocent-looking, those bastards.”

“How are your hands?”

“I think I’m clear. Maybe I’m immune to it.” She showed them to me. “Thank you, Davy.”

“Good,” I said without looking. “How do you grow up in the woods and not know poison ivy?”

I’d done it again. What—did I want to see her cry? I glanced at her. She had looked away and pulled the collar of her fleece jacket up to her ears. From where I lay, I couldn’t see her face or neck.

“I don’t know,” she said after a moment. “I never saw those in my woods.”

“I wasn’t questioning your story,” I said lamely.

“And yet it did not sound like an information-seeking question,” she muttered.

I drew a breath. “I’m sorry. I’m moody today. It’s not your fault.”

She frowned. “I don’t want apologies. It is my fault if you have a hard time believing my stories. I know that.” She picked up a yellow leaf and began to tear it along its veins.

“Tell me about Mama and John,” I said, closing my eyes again.

She remained quiet for another half a minute, then began. “...So I started looking for little ways to escape. At first, I was covert. I’d sneak out onto the roof in the middle of the night, for instance.” She paused to swallow and clear her throat. “I’d give my lunch money to my friend Jimmy without telling Mama. That went on for about a month. I didn’t feel any less trapped, of course—if anything, it all got worse. They said I was ADD and tried to get me all kinds of help. I mean, I get it. But a little less attention and more freedom would have done me wonders.” She swallowed and cleared her throat again. “I got bolder with my mischief. One day, I climbed to the top of a maple tree and watched for over an hour while Mama and her neighbors ran around frantically, looking for me. When she found me and realized what I’d done, she wanted to kill me. But instead, she said she loved me, and that she was glad I was safe.” She stopped.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Give me a second.”

Her voice was unsteady. My heart sank some more.

“Alright,” she said after a while. “Sorry, I was organizing my head. I’m going to skip a few anecdotes.”

“What? Why?”

“They’re not relevant.”

“Well...it’s not as though I’m listening for relevance.”

“I started skipping school and hung out with Jimmy instead,” she went on. “He was homeless and lived near the school. I liked him a lot. But the teacher finally caught me and called Mama into school. I listened to them from the crack in the doorway. He told her I said I preferred Jimmy to her—which was true. But it wasn’t right that he told her. He even said he was thinking of contacting Destiny. Mama was in tears.

“She wouldn’t say anything in the car. When we got home, she got out before me. I ran after her, crying. I was feeling terrible, *terrible*, and I was ready to do anything to make it up to her. She walked into the house. I tried to follow her, and—” She slapped her hands together, then let out a soft laugh. “She slammed the door right on my fingers. A big, solid oak door. It’s a miracle I still have fingers.”

I sat up and rested my arms on my legs. I knew she had a scar that spanned the three middle fingers on her left hand. I half expected her to show it to me, but she didn’t.

“Instead, Mama broke,” she resumed. “*I’m a monster*, she said. She was inconsolable. She entered therapy. Eventually, she and John ended up in marriage counseling, too.”

“Did the state get involved?” I asked.

“No, but I worried, so I lied to everyone about my injury. I said I slammed my own fingers in the door. I thought it was the one thing I could do to make it up to Mama, but in hindsight, it would have been just as well if I’d been removed. She eventually did have a daughter with John, so...”

I rubbed my face and sighed. When I looked up, I found her gazing sadly at me.

“You poor thing,” she said. “This was no fun. I was hoping to make you laugh again, at least a bit.” She picked up her chicken bag. “If you still wanna hear more, call me. But don’t feel obliged.”

She sounded so sober that I looked at her twice. “O...kay,” I said.

She was getting to her feet. Not ready for her to go but even less ready to admit it, I stood up with her.

“By the way, I have those head-shots of you from last fall,” I said. “Do you want them?”

“No. But I’d be happy to take them off your hands.”

“Alright.” Why did she sound like that?

She gave me a smile—a little forced, but still. “Maybe you should keep just one for emergency,” she said. “In case you miss me again some day.”

I froze. We stared at each other for a few seconds.

“Don’t threaten me,” I said, a little lightheaded. “You have no right to do that. You have no power to do that. Don’t threaten me.”

“I was trying to joke.” She shuddered. “God, I can’t get this right. I can’t do it.” Then she turned on her heel and left in a rush.

I came this close to running after her.

6.

That was the day of our October movie night, at Katelyn and Ryan's place. After that conversation with Kalifornia, I was in no mood for company; but I forced myself to go. I arrived in time for dessert, just as I had promised. The usual suspects were there, welcoming me with extra warmth and cheer. Nobody asked me what had kept me from joining them for dinner.

I never liked our movie nights as much as our game nights; I couldn't get used to Katelyn's running commentary or Chris and Ryan's side conversations. The film that night was something comedic and French. I tried to pay attention, but it was hopeless. I spaced out and made the mistake of not laughing during a couple of key moments. Claire, who was sitting next to me on the couch, tapped me on the knee. I tore my eyes away from the blank spot on the wall, to find not only Claire but Katelyn and Chris also looking at me.

"Your mind is elsewhere, David," Katelyn said from the armchair. "Is this not your cup of tea? I thought you'd like this one."

"Sorry," I said. "I got distracted for a minute."

"You want something to drink?" Ryan offered. "I've got more IPA in the fridge."

"No, thanks."

We all turned back to the screen. I blinked and tried to refocus.

Claire leaned toward my ear and whispered: *And how's your involuntary muscle doing these days?* She gave me a tiny wink and went back to the movie. I knew she meant no ill, but I felt a little put-off. Then Chris began to whistle a phrase of "California Dreamin'." Meili elbowed him. With a sigh, I let my head drop back.

"Oh come on," he said. "It's the elephant in the room. Everybody's worried about David. Raise your hand if you're afraid he's losing his mind."

Ryan actually did.

"I mean, one *does* wonder," Katelyn said.

"Intervention!" Chris announced.

"No, guys," I said. "I'm not interested in this topic."

"No intervention," Ryan said. "But could you reassure us that you're not going to get taken advantage of again?"

"She never took advantage of me," I said. "She just...told a lot of lies."

“She lied about literally *everything*,” said Katelyn. “To all of us. Don’t you think it’s a bit psychopathic?”

Claire shifted. “Well, guys...she did come back and is trying to do right by David.”

“She’s just trying to leech onto him again,” said Chris.

“It’s not like he’s rich, though,” Meili put in.

“No, but come on. A housemate who will listen to all your bullshit, pick up after your mess, then wake up in the morning and make you banana pancakes. I could get used to that.”

“David, here’s what I think,” said Ryan, sitting up and half turning to me. “She likes you genuinely. And she wants you to be crazy about her. She doesn’t want you looking at anybody else. But she’ll only ever string you along. She’ll never give you her heart, because people like her don’t know how to do that.”

Katelyn clapped. “Well said, Ry.”

“I’ll second that,” said Chris.

“Me, too,” said Meili. “Maybe it’s something about the way she grew up. It might not be all her fault. But you can’t just let her take you hostage. You’re sweet, smart, thoughtful—we all want to see you happy.”

“You, Claire?” Ryan asked. “What do you think?”

Everyone looked at her. I did, too.

“I think...” she began, then consulted her beer, her lips pressed together. “I’m very sorry, David—but I think Ryan might have a point. I hate to say it. I still consider her a friend.” She sighed. “But I can’t lie: I do worry about you, and I sort of wish she hadn’t suddenly shown up. It’s not fair, after the pain you survived, that she waltz back in like that.”

Hearing it from Claire was painful.

All eyes returned to me. I looked around the room. “Okay,” I said. “Thanks for your concern, guys. I’ll...make sure to keep some distance.”

“If you need any help, talk to us,” said Katelyn. “We all think the world of you, David.”

I felt Claire’s arm around my back.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

Ryan rewound the movie, and everybody got reabsorbed by the screen. Only Chris kept glancing at me from time to time. I gazed into the air between me and the TV. Out of nowhere, I thought of Destiny and her over-the-moon parents, trying to scribble her name on the birth record while cooing over her. A classic Kalifornia-spun tale, designed just to crack me up. My soft chuckle was drowned out by Ryan’s booming laughter.

Early next morning—and I mean *early*—I called her. She picked up after five rings.

“David?”

“Hi, Kal.”

“Hi.”

“Listen,” I said. “I want to hear the next part of your story. But we need to meet somewhere where we won’t be seen by Chris and Katelyn and the rest. Else I won’t hear the end of it. So how about tomorrow at 9PM, on the dock?” I waited. “Kal?”

She laughed softly—a sound that filled me with poignant relief.

“You called me at 3AM,” she said. “On the dot.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Happy now?”

“Yeah.” She paused. “Are you sure about meeting me secretly, though?”

“I am,” I said. “I’m gonna see you, whether they like it or not—and there’s no need to worry them by telling them about it. This is between you and me, anyway.”

“Wouldn’t they feel hurt, if they found out? I’m sure they’re only trying to protect you.”

“They are, and I love them for it. But they don’t understand.”

“Who could blame them for not understanding me?”

“It’s not just you they don’t understand.”

There was another pause. “Well, I don’t get you, either,” she said.

I closed my eyes. Her voice sounded soft and close. I heard her pillow when she shifted. In the chilly weather of spring and fall, she’d used to wear her Bugs Bunny pajamas to bed, two full sizes bigger than her body.

“Here’s what I think,” I said after a moment. “It’s important for you to tell me your whole story, and it’s important for me to hear it. Without that, neither of us will ever have peace again. Isn’t that true?”

She made no reply.

“Tomorrow night at nine, on the dock,” I said. “Please. Be there.”

“Okay,” she said at last. “I just have one request.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to do all the talking tomorrow.”

“Why? What would I talk about?”

“I don’t know, anything. I just like hearing your voice. And I’m sick and tired of hearing mine.”

7.

She'd said "anything," but she hadn't exactly meant it. On the dock at nine o'clock the next night, she requested that I tell her as much as I could bear to about last fall, about my life after her sudden departure. I cringed, but realizing this, too, was needed, I did as she requested. It was difficult, but somehow also comforting. I skipped a lot and understated everything; she watched me, making palpable effort to read between the lines. She apologized, this time not because she'd disappeared on me, but because she'd come back only to start talking about herself.

"I should have come back to listen," she said. "Thank you for being patient with me."

You've been patient with me, too, I said—but she would have none of it.

It was late, but I persuaded her to tell me some of the anecdotes she had skipped the previous day. She shared some stories of mishaps from the early days of her life with Mama and John, before the finger-smashing event. The time she heard the weather forecast from the shower and ran naked out into the street to see if there really was going to be a tornado. The time she explained to a house guest that Mama usually slept in the guest room, because she and John couldn't make babies anyway. And the time she appropriated a whole chicken from the fridge, built a fire in the backyard, and invited Jimmy to a roast. Encouraged by my cringes and laughter, she chattered on for about an hour, lying on her back on the chilly dock and looking up at the stars the whole time. I lay a foot away from her, gazing sometimes at the sky and sometimes at the familiar shape of her ear and the way her hair fell around it. When we parted, she promised to tell me, over the next week or so, how she lied and cheated her way through high school and college.

And she did, in bite size chunks over the next five nights. She often went off on a tangent, waxed eloquent on descriptions of minor characters, and occasionally jumped around in time without warning. She produced wonderful bits of fictional details and embedded them like outlandish jewels into a story that was otherwise less than poetic. A couple of times, she ended a chapter in a wacky cliff hanger, then clean forgot about it by next evening and went her merry way.

After a six-day streak, we got rained in for four. I thought a lot about inviting her to my apartment, but in the end, I decided against it. She was talking much

more comfortably now, and quite content with our boatyard arrangement. Our friendly, one-foot distance felt long to me, but she was thriving there. It was just like last year, and I couldn't say if I loved it or hated it.

We settled into occasional text exchange.

—*More rain this evening, Kal.*

—*Yeah. Tornado warning in Hampshire County, I heard.*

—*Don't even think about it.*

—*Ha ha. That's what this neighborhood needs, a streaking club. Tornado Streakers.*

—*Whereabouts are you, anyway?*

—*Under King's Bridge, in a tent.*

—*You're joking, right?*

—*My whole life is a joke, Davy.*

Thirty minutes later, I texted her again.

—*I just went to look for you under the bridge.*

—*Oh my god, David, you did not. I was joking!!*

—*Okay, good. I figured.*

—*Did you really go?*

—*No.*

—*Liar!*

On Friday, I woke up to a blue sky and high, restless clouds. The previous day, our texts had slowed down to a trickle. Was she writing a story? She seemed cheerful but preoccupied. I decided to wait and let her offer an invitation to meet again.

It felt like a long day. After spending several hours editing photos and corresponding with clients, I dove into my closet and dug out my old film camera. I left the apartment and biked to town, but I couldn't find anything I wanted to photograph. I ended up stopping by the ice cream shop and taking a few pictures there. I chatted with Claire and Day for a while before biking home. It was going on four, and still no word from Kal. I tried not to dwell on it.

About five o'clock in the afternoon, Chris stopped by my apartment with a pizza to share. He avoided eye-contact as he asked me how I was faring. I told him I was doing well. And Kalifornia? Had I seen her recently? I told him honestly that I hadn't seen her once that week. He only said, *I see*—but he didn't look happy, or even relieved.

After Chris had left, I sat on the front steps and looked up at the clear evening sky. The day had passed without a single word from her. I picked up my phone and called Mom.

“Either you are blue, or you are in love,” she said, a mere two minutes into the conversation.

“B ergo A,” I replied.

“Is it Claire?”

“No. It’s Kalifornia.”

“So Miss Mooney is back, is she?”

“Mom, I...I know I’m being stupid about this.”

“Kid, if you weren’t stupid about it, it wouldn’t be love.”

I sighed. “Help me. What do I do?”

“Based only on what I know about the situation,” she said, “which is simply that a twenty-four year old man is calling his old lady to ask for love advice...”

I laughed. “Yeah, kick me while I’m down, why don’t you?”

“Based only on that, I would say you should talk to Miss Mooney soon, if you haven’t already, and speak very honestly about how you feel. Keep it clean, of course.”

“Mom.”

“Davy, do what you’ve always done. Be sincere. Whatever the outcome, I don’t think you’ll regret doing it in the way that feels sincerest to you.” She paused. “Honey, are you okay?”

“I’m afraid, Mom,” I said, wiping a tear. “I think I know why she ran away in the first place, and I’m afraid she might do it again.”

“Ask her to stay with you.”

“I don’t know that I ought to hold her back.”

“Oh, Davy.” There was a stretch of silence. “Do you have the power to hold her back?”

“I think I might.”

“That means she loves you, too, doesn’t it? Wouldn’t that mean she wants to be with you, whether or not she wants to want it?”

“That’s way too subtle, Mom.”

My phone vibrated. A text from Kalifornia.

“Wait,” I said. “Just a sec.” I opened it.

—*May I have an audience with you tonight?*

I suddenly felt queasy. *Of course*, I replied. *9PM on the dock?*

—*Sounds good. See you in a couple hours.*

I took a deep breath and put the phone back to my ear. “Sorry about that,” I said.

“It’s alright,” said Mom.

“Looks like I’m seeing her later today.”

“Oh my,” she said. “Well...thoughts and prayers, Davy.”

8.

She arrived five minutes late, winded and glowing. She apologized for her tardiness, pulled her hair back into a ponytail, and plopped down on the dock two feet away from me.

“I smell sweaty,” she said.

Sweaty or not, I wished she’d come closer.

“It’s good to see you,” I said.

“Likewise. I missed you.”

My chest tightened when she smiled like that. “Kal.”

“Yes?”

I took a moment to brace myself. “Can you tell me what happened last fall?”

She stared at me. “Yes...I can,” she said slowly. “I owe you the truth.”

“I wish you didn’t feel that way,” I said. “But if you’re willing to tell me, I’d like to know.”

She nodded, crossed her legs, and looked down. Several seconds passed.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“How about that poor fellow who took the brunt of it all?” I said jokingly.

“What was his name? Jackson something.”

“Oof.” She squirmed.

“He haunted me in my dreams. Tell me who he was.”

“What a deep hole I’ve dug myself into,” she said. “Jackson Jackson...oh boy...he’s inconsequential, Davy. Actually, he’d find it hysterical if he knew he’d haunted anybody’s dreams.” She sighed. “He was the editor for the high school lit mag. Last September, he dug up some old manuscript of mine in his attic. He was amused and sent it to me for perusal. I’d told him not to use—” She blushed. “Well, anyway, he did.”

Whatever else she was hiding—and I had my theory—I decided to let it go.

“I guess he never suspected that you might spin him into a loan shark,” I said.

“I’m sure not. And that’s all there is to be said about my old friend Jackson. What a stupid name.”

I waited. She unlaced her sneakers, took them off along with her socks, and placed them neatly between us.

“Are they comfortable?” I asked after a moment.

She looked at me tenderly. “Yes, David. They’re the best.”

I returned her gaze until I couldn't, then moved my eyes to the sneakers. She had laced it wrong in one place on the left shoe. I picked it up and began to relace it.

"Thank you, belatedly, for buying these," she said. "And thank you for giving me your shoelaces on the way down the mountain. It was so sweet...so loving of you." Her voice shook slightly. "If only you knew how crazy you made me. That day, when you knelt down and tied my shoes to my feet, I just wanted to scream and run into the woods. Gosh, I was so freaked out."

She stopped. I finished lacing the sneaker and put it back beside the other.

"You ran away from me," I said. "Right?" It was the first time I'd said it aloud, and it hurt.

"I...um..." Her toes curled up. She drew her knees and hid her face between them. "Yes."

"It's alright," I said. "I'm not mad at you. I think I sort of knew it, even back then. I tried to give you a little space. I didn't want to scare you away."

"It wasn't your fault, David," she spoke into her knees. "There's no 'space' when you fall in love with someone." After a pause, she lifted her face. "I was a coward. I couldn't bring myself to talk to you. I couldn't even face my own feelings. Instead, I got into defense mode. I'm sure it makes no sense to anybody but me...but it took years of lying and hours of rationalizing and countless unanswered calls to escape from Mama and John. I put so much energy into building a little bubble around myself where I could just...be free. Be me. I didn't mind being alone. The bubble was good for me."

I drew a breath. "You couldn't be free—you—with me?"

She let out a soft, nervous laugh. "I felt *very* free, *very* me, with you. I didn't get it. I still don't. There must be a trap in this somewhere, right?" She shuddered. "But you know what was worse? By the time I ran away, it was too late. My bubble had somehow turned into a prison. David..." She looked at me and choked up. "I'm sorry—I'm still very afraid."

"I can tell," I said. "What are you afraid of?"

"Everything. Of opening up, of owing debts I can't pay, of failing to make reparations, of hurting you again, of giving away my secrets, giving away my self..."

Oh, Kal...why? I massaged my temples and said, "Those are some heavy worries."

Her gaze grew warmer and deeper, and she clicked her tongue. "See? You make me crazy. The things you say, the things you don't say..."

"I'm sorry."

“No, stop that. You’re perfect.” She covered her face and let out a half painful moan. “Why did you have to go and fall for me? For such a wise person, you’re very foolish.”

She rolled down onto her back, still covering her face. I lay down also. Someone had put a fresh light bulb in the lantern; it was bright enough that I couldn’t see much of the sky. We lay like that for several minutes.

“What can I do?” I said finally. “Tell me what I can do.”

“Anything,” she said. “In my book, you can do no wrong.”

She uncovered her face and, with her eyes squeezed shut, reached out toward me. I put the back of my right hand against the back of her left. Her fingers found my thumb and wrapped themselves around it. How cold they were!

I carried them to my lips.

“Is this okay?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I pressed her fingers to my mouth, my cheek, then my mouth again. Her grasp tightened, momentarily stealing my breath. To lose myself in this, in our love, for the rest of my days—that was the only freedom *I* could imagine.

I scooted closer to her, moving her sneakers out of the way. I put our interlocked hands just above her head and propped myself up on my elbow. Her eyes were still squeezed shut, but when I slid my left hand under her head, she let me turn her face slightly toward me without any resistance.

“Still okay?” I whispered.

She gave me a tiny nod. Slowly, I lowered my lips over hers. We stayed like that for what seemed like half a minute of eternity.

When I drew back, she wiped away some tears.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Maybe that was more than you wanted.”

She shook her head, but fresh tears rose to her eyes.

“If you didn’t like something, you would tell me, right?” I felt shaky and lightheaded. “You don’t have to let me kiss you. Oh please, don’t cry.”

“I’m alright,” she said.

She sat up and went on weeping silently. I watched, heartsick, unable to decide if it was okay for me to even touch her back. Out of the blue, I remembered crying as a child after catching a white butterfly and accidentally tearing its wing.

At one point, she stifled her sobs long enough to turn toward me and utter these words:

“Say the word, David, and I’ll stay.”

9.

“Why didn’t you ask her to stay?” Syd looked incredulous.

I couldn’t explain. Butterflies can touch you, but you can’t touch them. That’s what I was always taught. Don’t chase them, don’t catch them. If you catch one, let it go. If it comes to you, be still.

I couldn’t have asked her to stay.

When Syd came to visit me and show off his first car, I hadn’t seen her in a little over a day. We’d only exchanged a few short texts, without mentioning our conversation or planning another tryst. At nine o’clock the previous evening, I’d jumped on my car and driven to the dock, just in case—but she hadn’t come.

“You gotta ask her to stay, David,” Syd said adamantly. “What if she runs away again?”

A humorless laugh escaped me. I had no answer.

“Oh, come *on*.” Syd put his hands on his temples. He looked as stressed out as though it were Maddy we were talking about. “She likes you, you like her. Generally, that’s enough reasons for two people to get together.”

“She was crying, Syd. She couldn’t stop.”

By the time she’d told me she had to go home, the silent tears had turned to full-fledged sobs that were assailing her whole body. Was it fear? Had our kiss struck a nerve in her trauma-laden soul?

Syd was silent for several seconds. “Maybe she cried because she wasn’t used to—I don’t know—kissing,” he offered, coloring. “Maybe it just made her emotional. I’m not gonna lie, David, when Maddy and I kissed for the first time, I got tears. I still do sometimes, when I think about it. I’m stupid like that.”

“That’s not stupid at all,” I said.

Syd stayed the night and left around noon the following day. On the way out the door, he gave me a long embrace.

“Hey,” he said, “if you see her again, or hear from her—I know you will—let her know you want her to stay. She wants to hear that. I’m sure she does. I thought about it a lot last night.”

I smiled. I’d heard him tossing and turning.

“Tell me you’ll do that, David,” he said. “I’m sure that’s what she’s waiting for.”

“Okay.”

He looked a little suspicious, but decided to move on. “I gotta tell you one thing. Mom fell off the porch.”

“What?” I said. “When?”

“Four days ago. She’s okay, but she’s thrown out her back real bad.”

I touched my forehead. “I talked to her the morning after that.”

“Yeah, she was in bed.”

“She didn’t tell me.”

“No. She said you had too much on your plate.” He patted my back. “I thought she told you everything, David.” There was a faint grin on his face.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But don’t even think about coming up to help, okay? Dad and I have everything under control.”

“Including Mom?”

“Including Momsie. But she’d love a few extra calls, I’m sure.”

“Okay. I’m not supposed to know about this, though—right?”

He shrugged. “She told me not to tell you, and I said I wouldn’t. But then, her not telling you is a lie of sorts, too, so we’re all even. You be honest and tell her I told you. She’ll feel better.”

My phone began to ring. It was Chris.

“Go ahead,” said Syd, turning to leave. “I’ll visit again.”

“Stay longer next time,” I said.

“I will, if all’s well at home.”

Putting on that grownup air. I grinned. “Bring Kit, too,” I challenged.

“No,” he laughed. “See ya, David.”

I picked up the phone. “Hey Chris,” I said, watching Syd get into his second-hand Honda. He suddenly looked like a man.

“David! David!” said Chris. “It’s Kalifornia. I saw her loading luggage into a cab. Suitcases and bags and all.”

“A cab...?”

“I think she’s leaving.”

I leaned against the door. Syd honked and waved as he backed out. My hand floated halfway up.

Chris waited another beat. “Aren’t you gonna ask me where I saw her, or when, or anything?”

“Where did you see her?” I asked. “When...?”

“In front of her house, Dave, jeez. Just now I saw her.”

Where was her house? I began to walk toward the bike rack, crouched by my bike, and touched the lock. My hand was shaking.

“Are you there?” Chris asked.

“I’m putting the phone down for a second,” I said.

For a moment, I couldn’t remember the combination. I gave my head a shake and forced myself to focus. It felt as though it took me five minutes to undo the lock; the moment it opened, it dawned on me that I should have gone up to get my car key instead.

As I got to my feet, I heard a car braking behind me. “Dave!” Chris called from the driver side window.

“Chris—”

My body switched into gear before my brain did. I hurried to the passenger side and climbed in, accidentally bringing the bike lock with me.

He searched my face. “If you’d rather not go,” he said, “just say so.”

“Take me,” I replied.

The car left the curb, cutting the corner as it sped out of the driveway. “It might be too late anyway,” he said.

I clutched the bike lock. “Don’t say that.”

I got out my cell phone and called her. No answer. He stepped on the gas.

I didn’t ask where we were going, nor did I pay any attention to the drive. My mind raced kaleidoscopically among images of Kalifornia—from two winters ago, when she first turned up in my life—to the days and evenings we spent together—to our trysts on the dock, and the kiss—to even her childhood in the woods and the daisy field of my imagination. Some minutes into the ride, a bump in the road brought me back to the car, and it dawned on me that we were headed toward Hewitt Lane—toward our old neighborhood.

“Oh—” I said.

Chris glanced at me. A faint amusement played on his lips. “You’re out of your mind, Dave. Both you and her. I’m sorry I tried to interfere. It wasn’t right. It was none of our business.”

We pulled up in front of the familiar brick multi-family. I stared at our old house in a daze; all along, she’d been here. Her return had been more complete than I’d dared to imagine. It had been a homecoming.

Then, belatedly, my eyes panned the street—there was no cab in sight. We had arrived too late.

I felt myself sinking. My forehead touched the glove compartment. I held my head and stared at the floor of the car. Chris said something—he sounded earnest—but at that moment, words meant exactly nothing in my world. After some moments, I picked myself up, opened the door, and stepped out like a ghost.

The maple tree in the front had shed most of its autumn hues. Before the rain, it must have been something stunning. Last year, the Columbus Day hailstorm had robbed it of its glorious moment—along with Kalifornia—and

brought November early. The worst month of my life. I walked up to the door of our old apartment, feeling now achy, now numb. Windows were dark and empty. I reached for the doorknob, then realized what I was doing and went for the doorbell instead.

I rang the bell. Without a pause, the door swung open...and I found myself staring into the brown circles of her irises.

Chris honked twice behind me. She peeked around me and waved. “Thank you!” she called out.

I leaned my side against the door frame and closed my eyes. When I opened them, she was still standing in front of me, pale, with her brow tensed and her hands clasped tightly at her chest. A jumper dress and roomy cardigan, bare feet nestled in small moccasins. Before I knew it, I’d reached out and taken her by the elbows. She fit neatly between my arms, where she felt sweeter and suppler than in my dreams. I tightened my embrace, and she nearly disappeared in it. For three slow breaths, I held her over the threshold. When I let go, she emerged, misty-eyed, with colors back in her face.

“I gave you a terrible scare, didn’t I?” she said shakily.

I nodded.

“I wasn’t thinking...” she stammered. “It just suddenly seemed like a way to...but it was such a bad idea. My goodness, I’m sorry.” She paused to swallow. “Are you mad at me?”

I held up my hand to show her *a little bit* between my thumb and forefinger. Pain filled her eyes. She clasped my hand in both of hers. I gazed at her, waiting for my heartbeat to slow down. It didn’t, even when I moved my eyes beyond her to the empty dining room, then down to the floor.

“It’s so easy for me to love you,” I finally said, “but loving you is very hard on me.”

“Oh, David...I’m just the worst. I’m a devil.”

I nodded. She spotted the faintest smile on my face.

“But you still seem to like me,” she said cautiously.

There was a question hiding in there, but I didn’t see the need to answer it. After a moment, she went on.

“You want me to stay—but not because you told me to. Right?” A pause. “Bad news is, *I* only want to stay if you said I *had* to, because you’d absolutely lose your mind otherwise.”

She waited several more seconds, but I could only gaze at her. She cleared her throat.

“You rushed over like...like you meant to stop me,” she said. “And the fact that you did means you *do* want me—kinda badly—to stay...?” Her voice grew

softer. “Because I’m willing to be satisfied with that.”

She held her breath. She literally held her breath. I watched her, wondering how long she’d go, and it was a good, long time. When she began to turn from pink to red, I finally allowed myself a soft laugh. She let go of her breath, gasping a little.

“Actually,” I said, “I might ‘absolutely lose my mind’ if I can’t have you right now.” I watched her eyes grow round and round. “But,” I added, “I’m willing to be satisfied with just your lips.”

Gradually, her expression became dreamy, starved. She touched her mouth. I imagined her between the sheets, gazing up at me like that.

“Um...a sleeping bag,” she said faintly. “That’s all I have.”

“Wow, that’s a real turnoff.”

She took one step back into the house. “Is it?”

“No.”

She took another step back. “It’s machine washable.”

We stumbled into the empty dining room. By the window where our table used to be, I stopped and kissed her fingers. When I tried to kiss her mouth, she broke away and went to the living room. I caught her by the arm, stood behind her with my hands on her waist, and pressed my lips into both sides of her neck. She wiggled a little, and I let her go. She tiptoed a couple of steps away and turned once—her hair swaying around her face and a smile glowing on her lips—came prancing lightly back—threw her arms around my neck...

And we kissed until we didn’t know right from left, where I ended or where she began. We fell on the sleeping bag so desperately tangled up there was no hope of ever unraveling again.

10.

When I got up, it was eight o'clock in the evening. I was achy from lying on the wooden floor, but she was sleeping like a baby. I took a cold shower—there was no hot water—put my clothes back on, and went to the kitchen to see what I could find for food.

It had started to rain again. I opened the kitchen window to hear it better. Should I ask her if she would like to visit Maine next weekend? Maybe not—maybe I'd wait on that, make sure she feels comfortable about meeting my family. In fact, why not keep her to myself until Christmas?

My feet took me back to the bedroom. I knelt on the floor, kissed her temple and her naked shoulder, then returned to the kitchen.

By the time she came shuffling out in her Bugs Bunny pajamas, I had made a simple vegetable chowder and toasted some olive bread to go with it.

"Wow, you cleaned the kitchen," she said, looking around. "Thank you. I was dreading that."

"It's my pleasure."

She blushed and smiled. I wanted to carry her right back to the bedroom, but I offered her my hand instead. She came and leaned her head against my chest. If she could ever know how lovesick I was!

"Hungry?" I asked her.

"I'm famished," she said. "It smells so good. Is it soup?"

"Mm-hmm. And I'll serve you some, but only in exchange for one thing."

She picked up her head and eyed me suspiciously. "What?"

"Your name."

"Oh my god." She covered her face and giggled. "Really, David?"

"Yeah, really," I said. "Don't you think I ought to know? Even Jackson Jackson wrote to you by your real name. That's what you were hiding, right?"

She looked up, and pixie lights danced in her eyes. "Promise me you'll never use it."

"I'll make no such promises," I replied honestly.

She stepped away and went to the refrigerator. She opened the door, closed it—opened it again, and closed it slowly. She looked at me over her shoulder.

"It's Daisy," she said. "Daisy Fields."

Psst! Do you want more? Flip the page...

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Daisy Fields*! Know that I had *you*—dear reader—in mind when I wrote this story. I hope that you found a bit of yourself in David and Kalifornia. If you enjoyed the book, please leave a review! For an indie author, a thoughtful review is worth a great deal.

Many thanks to Petra Vengar of Petruška Fairy World, Slovenia, for letting me use her dolls and photography on the covers! These dolls have certainly enlivened David and Kalifornia's world.

Sincerely,

Maki Matsui

Do you want to know what happened when David brought his new girlfriend to Maine for the holidays? Part 4 tells that story. Claim your copy by following this link:

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About the Author

Born and raised in Japan, Maki Matsui has been a lifelong reader and writer, first in Japanese and then in English. She studied English at Williams College and vocal performance at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She makes her home in the hills of Western Massachusetts, where she is better known as a classical singer.

She has published two books—*Back to Troy* (2020) and *Daisy Fields* (2020)—and is currently working on her third title.

Read more at [Maki Matsui's site](#).