

MELT

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MELT

A novel by Heidi Wicks

Melt shifts between two girls who come of age together during two economically turbulent times - the late '90s and present-day - in St. John's, Newfoundland. The women navigate break-ups, tanning beds, spray tans, drifting desires, at least one kid with a raisin up his nose, drunken dancing, infidelity, death, sex in Middle Cove, job loss at the CBC and love loss at the Avalon Mall. Through the pockets of their maddening but beloved city, their friendships and relationships are tested, but their brazen humour and deep-rooted friendship helps them ice-pick through the winter sludge and spring muck and get them through until it's summer once more.

Chapter One

“About here?” Cait slices her index finger across the middle of her right thigh, softly. A knife etching a line in butter.

“Your father’s not lettin’ you get away with a slit that high.” Tilley Brophy plucks the cigarette from her lips and releases a poof of smoke that curls into the shape of an anchor. She jabs the butt into a heavy crystal ashtray and coughs like her freakin’ lungs are about to vault from her body and splat against her half-brown-carpet, half-brown-wood-panel wall in her house by the Village Mall.

“Everyone is doing slits this year.” Jess advocates for her friend, always and forever backing her best friend since they were three-years-old in 1982, up until right now, at the age of 18. 1997.

Jess waits for Tilley to make her way over to do the measurements for her own grad dress. The cool measuring tape and Tilley’s hang-nailed finger tickles and scratches the soft skin from her armpit to her waist, then waist to ankle.

“S’pose you wants a slit too.” Tilley rises from her crouched position and loses her balance. Bumps back against the wall. Jess catches a sniff of Labatt Blue Star from Tilley as she hauls herself back up to standing position.

“Yes, but I’d like mine from the knee down.” Jess is going to the grad with Matt Bohmer, her one true love. On grad night, they have a room booked at the Holiday Inn. They’ll make love that night, for the first time ever. Jess doesn’t want to give away too much, too early.

“I’d still like mine halfway up my thigh.” Cait leans against the other wall, the one that’s covered in floor-to-ceiling mirror. Arms crossed under her perky little boobs. Smug. “In case you were wondering.” Cait’s date is Chad. Swim Team Chad. Guitar-playing Chad. Chlorine-bleach-haired, smooth-bodied Chad. They aren’t an item, nosirreebob. They’ve hooked up a few times. Rolled around in a tent down by The River in Outer Cove. Whatever that relationship status is.

“You. I knows you do, now.” Tilley sneers and side-glances at Caitlyn, whose father, an administrator in the Catholic school system, is going to give Tilley the gears for allowing this. Tilley thinks of her husband, God rest his soul, who would’ve been able to find a way to make her feel better, not shriveled and small. He’d be able to convince her that they’re no better than she is. Teenagers. Brazen as anything. Little snots. Tilley’d love to smack the lips off of ’em, acting like they’re on *Beverly Hills, 90210*.

“What colour are you thinking, Jess?” Cait sizes herself up in the mirror. Runs her hands over her hips, her ass, down her thighs.

“I’m thinking a clean cream. Like the colour of Dream Whip if you put a drop of vanilla extract in there.” Of course. On her Royal Doulton fine china skin, to contrast her black curls. “You?”

“Bright red, I think. Silk.” Of course. Aries. Feisty. Red as the devil, to contrast her whip-straight, cool blonde.

“Kell soo-preeze there.” Tilley curls the measuring tape around her four yellow-tipped fingers. “Alright girls, get your material back to me next week if you wants these done in time. I’ll call ya when I’m ready for your next fitting. And the silk might be a bit

harder to work with, so I might need more time there.” She bores her eyes right into Cait’s.

The girls step out of the house and into the damp March air. Cait fishes the keys out of the pocket of her denim jacket, and they dip into the beat up Honda Civic her father lets her bang around in, slamming into and out of the craters that are city potholes. “I hope our dresses don’t smell like smoke when we pick them up.” She rolls down the window and lights a Virginia Slim into the mauzy sky.

“Meanwhile...” Jess buckles her seatbelt and crinkles her brow at Cait. “Bit hypocritical, isn’t it?”

Miss Priss. “I only have one when I’m stressed, so not very often.”

“What are you so stressed about?”

“Dad.”

“Why, what’s he doing now?”

“He’s just on me about university. Going to MUN. I don’t wanna go to MUN. I wanna go travelling, I wanna get away from here, far, far away.”

“Well, he’s just looking out for you I guess. Worried.”

It grates on Cait’s every last nerve that Jess is so...so exactly like Dream Whip with a drop of vanilla extract. She doesn’t need Jess to defend her father – she needs her to be her best friend.

“He’s confining is what he is.” Through lips shaped like a mini donut, she exhales the cigarette. “Whenever he walks into the room I feel my chest tighten up. I feel just like I’ve just woken up and there’s a pudgy dog with bad breath asleep on my face.”

Jess can tell that Cait is irritated now. She gets upset so easily. That paranoid, sensitive feeling is rising up in her throat, and she knows if she asks Cait if she’s pissed at her, she’s only gonna get more pissed. Best to just leave her when she’s like this, when she’s off somewhere, inside herself, belligerent, yearning for something more because what’s right here isn’t good enough for her and she wants everything to change. Jess pushes down the urge, and it’s so hard, and her heart hurts, because Cait is so important to her and everything she wants is right here and she doesn’t want anything to change.

Chapter Two

“There’s a raisin up his nose!” Dan’s yelp echoes and bounces off the shiny glass floor and the cavernous skyscraper ceiling of the The Rooms.

Jess’ ears prick up, become sewing-needle sharp, and she’s ready to backstitch the situation. “Sam. Come with me right this second, your brother is in trouble.” She grabs his hand and strides across the floor, away from the crafts table, towards the section where the stage is set up. Mascots from CBC kids shows, in costumes with giant heads that teeter against gravity, continue their attempts to entertain the short-attention-spanned, easily distracted audience demographic. Half the families in town have come to the gallery to see these characters, who, with their appearance, brought on what’s like Beatlemania for toddlers.

“Mommmmm, but I wanna –” Sam whines, looking longingly back at the crafts table.

“NOW.” She bores her eyes into his, hauls him, dragging him. Luckily, the floor is slippery so it’s almost like pulling him across the ice surface at a skating rink. She weaves through the crowd with intention as her heart thumps more and more with each stride. Parents and other children scramble out of her way.

Liam is clamped on Dan’s lap, squealing like a pig about to be slaughtered. “I don’t want it out! Don’t want, it ouuuuuuut!!” He pounds his light-up sneakers on the sparkling floor. The crowd starts to disperse from the shrillness of Liam’s screams. People are whispering, their brows knitted in concern.

Dan is so relaxed with the boys, always. “It’s okay buddy, we aren’t letting anything happen to you. You’re okay.” He holds Liam, he’s clamped there tight, but his voice is so level.

Jess and Sam reach them. She slides to a stop and drops to her knees. Thump, thump, her heart’s in her throat. She fishes tweezers from her bag. “Keep him pinned there, Dan.”

“Noooo!” Shrieks Liam.

“Jess, I mean, it’s way up there.” Dan whispers it so Liam doesn’t hear.

“You hold his shoulders, I’ll sit on his legs.” She hisses back.

“It’s okay, buddy.” Dan leans close to his face and kisses his forehead. “Should we go to the hospital for this?” He looks up at Jess.

“It’ll take too long.” She glances at Sam and she recognizes the same panic in his face as she felt in herself as a child. She was diagnosed with her anxiety disorder when she was around his age.

“Dan, do not let him move because if he pokes or hits me I could drive the tweezers up too far.” People are gawking, agog, horrified.

“Nnnnnnooooo! Mommmmyyyy!” Liam’s teeth are clenched, his lip quivers. Red, grunting, crying. But Jess has the long, lean, runner’s thighs of a gazelle and he’s braced there. Trapped like a Vienna Sausage in the tin.

She leans close to his little face and looks right in his eyes. “Liam? Liam. Listen to me, okay? I want you to listen to me.” He stops crying and the big wet pools in his sad beautiful eyes break her heart and for just one split second her bottom lip spasms and she swallows back her own tears. “If you stay still, especially your head, you have to keep your head still -- this will not hurt you and you can have a big treat after we get the raisin out. But if you keep moving, I could accidentally hurt you more and we’ll have to go to the hospital. You don’t want to go to the hospital, right?” Her own mother used to hold her by the shoulders and do breathing exercises, staring right into her eyes, telling her to just concentrate on her breath.

He nods his head and snuffles and her heart, oh her heart, she loves him so much it hurts her whole chest and she feels the love pin-prickle all over her skin.

“You are so brave, Liam, I’m so proud of you.” She focuses in, like she’s taking a macro photo of his tiny nostril. She squints her eyes to sharpen her vision. It’s only in the last couple years she has had to squint to see. The late thirties, it’s a real walk in the friggin’ park. “Keep your head nice...and...still...” She puts the tweezers up there, so nervous, terrified she’s going to jab him in the brain. “Okay...” Kids from their school are watching, hands clapped over their mouths. Somewhere in her own brain zoom a zillion thoughts. *What’ll I make for dinner and is Dad okay, and what is Dad doing for dinner and how lonely is he today on a scale of one to a hundred?* But in this moment, filling her cerebrum and cerebellum and brain stem is just one thought: *Please don’t kill your youngest born.* The tweezers become a cross-stitch needle on one of the towels she used to make as a kid, to focus, to help her calm the anxiety.

“Look at Mommy, boys, she’s a star.” Dan holds Liam’s head in place. His hair is sweaty and slapped to his soaked forehead.

He clenches his chubby little fists tight and his knees and legs are so whip straight. Focus on the nasal cavity. Float the tweezers into his nostril with surgical precision. Saucer-eyed, Liam locks his eyes onto his mother’s.

“Can you feel it yet?” Dan’s voice is only slightly wobbly.

“I think...” She feels the gushy wrinkly skin of the raisin and digs the tweezers in. “...I got it!” She carefully, oh-so-carefully, withdraws the tweezers. The raisin is coated in thick green sludgy snot and she hoists it into the air. “I got it!” The whoosh of relief causes tears to spring to her eyes and *pound-pound-tha-thud-tha-thud* goes her heart and she’s on her way out of it, out of the impending panic and doom. Thank Jesus that’s over. She gathers him up and he flings his arms around her neck, burrows his little face into her neck. Hot wet tears and boogers and sweat soak her skin and t-shirt and her mother’s old dusty rose cashmere cardigan, which may be ruined but she doesn’t give a shit and her mother wouldn’t have given a shit either. Mommy’s boy. She loves both of her boys but there’s something about the youngest. The one you know is your last. His little heart beats so fast through his stripey tee.

“It reminds me of Ernie’s from *Sesame Street*,” he’d said when she put it on him that morning. Then Dan and Sam are also hugging Jess and Liam and they’re all satched:

nerves and adrenaline and sweat and tears and snot and she can't tell which wet comes from who.

"I love you so much, you were so, so brave." She wants them all to stay there forever.

Her day reverie is broken when her phone vibrates in her bag. A game of Fish Pond and her prize is her phone. While fishing for the phone, her fingers brush the lid of the Tupperware container, probably from the '80s or even '70s, that holds the last of the cookies her mother had left in the freezer.

Extracting the phone from her bag, the screen says Dad and there's a picture of her parents, at the cabin, his arm around her mother, her mother's arm on his chest, laughing. "Hi, Dad, how are ya." How many times in the run of a week does he call her? How many times does she call their house, when she knows her father is out for his daily walk, just to listen to her mother's voice on the answering machine? "I know, Dad. I miss her too, so much. Why don't you come for supper? We're leaving the museum now." She jabs the screen to off. Drops the phone back in her bag. "Okay boys," she sniffs, "let's get out of here. I've got treats for the car."

Driving down Lemarchant Road, she stares at the gray, damp sky.

"Hey," Dan takes her hand, his other on the steering wheel. His emerald green, kind, excited, childlike eyes, "You were badass back there."

She looks at him. Her best friend, besides Cait. Her partner. She has known him for so long.

"Thanks." Her heart crackles like the ice on their windshield. It was the kind of ice that looked tough to scrape at first, sturdy. Unmovable. But at first touch, it just slides away.

Chapter Three

Cait and Jake have fucked in every room of this Gower Street house.

Panting.

Moaning.

Groaning.

Grunting.

Slapping.

Slopping.

Crunching the rug into her fists, clenching the shaggy carpet between her fingers until their bodies and beings melt into a pool of salty sweat in front of the fireplace.

Now, boxes of everything they own are lined up next to the door.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Jake. This is our life, packed up in boxes, waiting to be hauled out the front door? I can’t do it.”

“You’re the one who pushed for separation papers. You’re the one who called it quits.”

Their existence together, entwined and immortalized in the photos on the wall going up the stairs.

Jake, 22, holding a clipboard in the reception lounge at CHMR. Cait, 20, standing next to him, one elbow propped on his shoulder, her other hand on her hip. All confidence. Mutual admiration. Adoration.

Cait, 29, Jake, 31: A trip to an island on the Gander River. Cait, perched on the arm of a red Adirondack chair, her hands on her wide-apart knees as she leans to one side. Jake sitting in the chair. Matching straw hats. That was when she still made him laugh.

Cait, 33, Jake, 35: A hospital bed. Newborn Maisie. Jake’s arms hugging Cait. Cheek-to-cheek-to-cheek. “My girls,” he’d call them. Cait swears his eyes are extra glisten-y in this photo. Jake swears they’re not. He brought Cait a Guinness in the hospital and she cried and said she looked gross and he smiled back and said he thought she looked pretty beautiful. He couldn’t wait to get them home from the hospital. In the car, the first song they heard was *Black Velvet* by Alannah Myles and Jake pointed it out, “This is Maisie’s first song on the radio,” and when they got to the house he cuddled Maisie close to his chest to give her a tour. “This is the kitchen, this is the living room, this is the fireplace in front of which your Mommy and me made you.” That’s where Caitlyn turned off the video she made as she followed them around the house.

Cait, 33, Maisie, three-weeks: Both of them, laying on the bed, positioned like mummies in a tomb. “You both have the exact same position when you sleep,” Jake said.

He snuck secret photos of them sleeping all the time. If someone takes a photo of someone while they're sleeping, it's more intimate than a regular photo, Cait thinks.

Those early days with Maisie existed within an intense and torrid ecosystem of love and angst and crashing waves and water lapping the shore.

"Why don't you just breastfeed instead of pumping?" He'd stand over her as she held the baby close, Maisie's sharp gums, baby vampire teeth, sinking into Cait's nipples, sucking, and it hurt so much that Cait thought she might vomit.

The nurse who visited the house said, "Don't you worry my dear, you'll be able to hang yourself up with clothes pins by the time you're done with all this, they'll be that tough."

Great. I'm a cow and I'm gonna have nipples like rubber boots by the time she's said and done.

Jake didn't mean to pressure Cait, he was just worried about Maisie.

"Because it hurts like hell is why, Jake," she wanted to stop breastfeeding. "And I'm afraid she's not getting enough. This way I can measure how much she's getting." Cait would bark it at him. Furious. Wounded. Full of hot tears and a deep feeling he doesn't appreciate her. The salt water would spill from her eyes and the milk would drip from her breasts as she'd wash the bottles and attachments of the breast pump, Jake at her shoulder saying, "Make sure you get all the milk out so it doesn't get mouldy," until she'd dribble into a puddle of sobs on the kitchen floor in front of the sink and Jake would ask why she was crying, like she was being silly.

Trying to sleep train Maisie and Jake insisted on letting her cry it out for hours.

"That's it, that's enough Jake. I'm going in."

"Cait, if you go in there, I am never helping you with the baby again."

"She's been crying for two hours, Jake. This is cruel. I am going in there and I don't give a fuck if you don't ever help me with her again." And Caitlyn would march out of their bedroom, her eyes burning and leaking, her face red with fury and melancholy, her breasts hard and huge and shiny with milk. She'd scoop Maisie out of her crib, and they'd sway in the rocking chair. Four o'clock in the morning. Caitlyn would sing her "Baby Mine", that song from *Dumbo*, about a mother wanting to protect her little baby.

Rest your head close to my heart, never to part, baby of mine...

A constant trickle of tears.

Cait, 35, Jake, 37: On top of Telica volcano in Nicaragua. Sweaty, worn out, fatigued, spent. Done. It took six hours to hike. They fought, the entire way up. Cait stormed ahead, smug because she's in better shape than Jake, getting him back for all the times he stalked ahead of her, disregarded her, made her feel like nothing. At the top, the volcanic crater vaporized sulphur. Deep beneath their earth, their feet, their being, the lava bubbled, *pop-pop-pop* and they saw the hellish orange glow, and might erupt again at any given time. That trip was the final nail in the coffin. She's not even sure why the photo is on the wall.

Now, outside in St. John's, it's a March snowstorm. The moving truck is delayed because of the weather. Cait and Jake sit on the bottom of the wonky-but-stable stairs of their soon to be ex-house. Cait drops her forehead into her palms and her eyes leak, more

salt water, dripping onto the wooden steps, enough of the tears. She yearns to be hard again, like she was when she was young.

“Why are you so upset?” Jake puts his arm around her shoulder.

“Why the fuck do you think I’m upset, Jake?” She lifts her head and spits the words through sobs. “Look what’s in front of us!” She sweeps her arm towards the boxes and hits her fingers on the rails in the process and it hurts like a motherfucker. “Our entire life is about to be dragged away into the shitty fucking snowstorm.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do. I’ve tried to comfort you through this and you tell me to back off. I stay away and give you distance and you’re pissed off then too! Jesus Christ, Cait!”

“I don’t know. I don’t fucking know what’s right anymore.”

“We’ve been through this so many times.”

“I know.”

“We’ll get through this, just take it one step at a time.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

She leans her head onto his shoulder, nuzzles into his neck. His pheromones still intoxicate her. They haven’t worn off. His head, perched on hers. He kisses her forehead. She presses her lips to his neck. They work their way to each other’s lips. Pull each other close. The kisses become deeper, more desperate, and their clothes are off and they stumble to the fireplace, tugging at shirts and belts and jeans. Yanking, desperately, tearfully, angrily, longingly. The same fire that kept their relationship going but also killed it.

He pants, as if in pain, and slides effortlessly inside her. She lobster-claws her legs around his thighs. Pulls him in. They fit perfectly. She rolls on top of him and writhes, the exact way she needs to in order to reach the desired result. Collapses on his body. Their chests stick together into a pool of sweat and tears onto the floor. She lays on her back and the tears stream and drop down her cheeks, dripping onto the hundred-year-old hardwood.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be what you needed.” Jake kisses her cheek.

“I’m sorry too.” She wipes her nose.

They lie there, holding each other, for the longest time. Outside, the snow turns to ice pellets.

Chapter Four

Pancake batter, poured onto the pan, the browned butter spattering onto Jess' wrist.

Liam wiggles his bum from side-to-side in the *Star Wars* pajamas her mother gave him last Christmas. Too short in the legs and arms, but he won't let go of them and Jess is fine with that. He dances from foot to foot, holding his crotch.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom, bud?"

"No."

"I think you do."

The kitchen air thickens with pancake smoke and fried butter. Her developing hangover hasn't quite kicked in yet but she feels it, festering, perched in the back of her throat, preparing to creep into the back of her skull by, oh, midday and thank frig it's a snow day because she couldn't handle a room full of youngsters at Redhill Elementary where she teaches grade three.

Adrian, the music teacher, writhing up and down her body last night. His hands sliding up her sides, over her boobs, but it's okay: he's gay.

"You work it, you sly saucy woman! Sommmme sexay!" His hair, usually neat, his blouse, usually neat, is not neat at the moment. It's half un-buttoned and sweaty and stuck to his chest. "Foxy mama. Just lookatcha."

Teachers know how to party. They have to, to get through it all. Three o'clock, April month, fed up, when is June, when oh when will it friggin' be June? Straight to the liquor store. Argentinian Malbec. *Get it into me.*

The Malbec slopped onto Jess' tank and onto her sculpted shoulder. Adrian licked it off.

"Alright, hold it boy." Jess put her hand on Adrian's chest to keep him at bay. She started to urge, the room spinning and she had to sit down.

At work that day, Amena, one of the Syrian children in her class, hid beneath a work table, afraid a bomb would go off. Jess crouched to her eye level. "You're safe here, honey, I promise."

"Bam! You're dead!" Chris Smith, dressed like a ninja, somehow got his hands on a pack of sugar pills, a.k.a., Rockets. He shot a Nerf gun at Amena, who, quaking in fear, was too paralyzed to even cry. The extra classroom support has been cut. It's just Jess.

The pancakes are golden on the edges and she shouts up the stairs to Dan.

"Dan! MUN is opening at one! Get at the driveway!" Dan is an economics prof at the university. "Hello! Do you hear me up there?" Bubbles of batter *pop-pop-pop* on the pan.

"Yes! I hear you, Jessica!" A *Jesus Christ* is muttered, she knows it, and she hears the bed springs move.

The bubbles get bigger and pop faster and she slides the spatula underneath. Flip. Splat. Over to the other side. A bit black on one side, but she can scrape that off.

"Mom!" Sam, age eight-point-five, shrieks from the rec room downstairs. "Liam punched me in the trachea!"

Slap, slap, pancakes piled on the plate. She closes her eyes. Inhale, two-three-four, exhale, four-three-two. Last fall she made marijuana butter, for cookies for her mother. The cookies she could barely chew, but which gave her the best relief from the chemo.

“Stress gave me cancer, Jessica, I’m sure of it.” Her mother’s eyes drooped. “Don’t let it get to you.”

“Mom! He hit me again!” Sam is crying now. Stomping up the stairs. Face blotchy.

“Here, come here and get your pancakes. Liam.” Maple syrup. Butter. Forks and kid knives with Spiderman on the handles. “Why did you punch Sam in the throat?”

“He was gonna turn off something that I was watching.”

“Sam?” Jess has one hand on her hip as she sprinkles chocolate chips into the leftover batter. “Is that true?”

“Well it was a dumb show!”

“Well, if Liam was watching it, then it was rude for you to switch the channel, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Sniff sniff. Wipes his nose in his sleeve.

“Liam, you should not have punched him in the trachea, in the meantime. Not the best way to deal with that. Do you understand?” Bubbles, tiny detonations in the chocolate chip batter. Little sprays of steam.

“Yes.” Liam shovels the pancakes down.

“What’s going on down here?” Dan skips down the steps, whistling, clad in snowpants and a balaclava. Chipper as always. Doesn’t take much to turn his mood around.

“It’s alright,” *plop plop*, chocolate chip pancakes on the platter, “we worked it out, didn’t we boys.”

Near the end her mother lost her breath so easily, wheezing more often than not. “It’s the screens, they’re not healthy. Give them books, Jessica. The books I read you when you were little.” Her mother was the librarian at the same school Jess teaches at now. For thirty years her mother taught there. That was the way it was when her mother became a teacher. Get a degree at 16, waltz right into a job, stay there for 30 years, retire at 50. Why should Jess expect it to be different when her turn came around? But it is different.

“It was bad then, when I was teaching, in the ’90s. It’s so much worse for your crowd, Jessica.” Cuts. Constant cuts. Jess has seniority, but how will she manage without the student support?

Her mother closed her eyes, her hands so cold.

“Here we go, boys, here’s your next round. They’re loaded with chocolate chips.”

Chapter Five

Ripped bits of colouring sheets, plastic cups sticky with ketchup and ice-cream fingerprints, a *budda boom budda bing* tornado at East Side Mario's in the Holiday Inn. Sam and Liam make explosions, using their Transformer toys to attack their ice cream sundaes. After the raisin incident, Dan had insisted they eat out.

"Your mother is a superhero. Superheroes deserve nights off, hey boys?"

"Yeah!" The boys die to go out for supper. Especially at East Side Mario's, where little balconies and Statues of Liberty and graffiti and mini lights frame the restaurant walls, as if they're dining in a borough of New York City. Jess' father was equally happy to get out of the house and join them. Any little escape is welcome – even if the New York City they are visiting is in a dinky restaurant in the east end of St. John's.

They're seated at the large circular table at the front. As she sits down, Jess spots a server wheeling a room service order from the back of the restaurant on a trolley. Room service orders were always such a pain. Jess worked here through university, after Matt Bohmer went away to Queen's. That first year he was gone, the year they stayed together, he came in to visit her at the restaurant while he was home for Christmas and during the early summer, before they broke up. He has always been that person for her. First love. Gets deep down there and never leaves.

Liam is glued right next to her; the paste from the ice cream on his hand sticks to her. Bits of napkin and crayon-wrapper papier maché on his arms. "Mommy, I love you." His hair smells like ice cream, too, and caramel sauce, breathing him in as she kisses his little head. She stares out the window towards Kent's Pond. The water is flat and still. Black, shining like glass.

On the night of their high school grad, Matt had borrowed his dad's Mustang. Rolled it into the Holiday Inn parking lot, peering around for anyone who might bust them from renting a room underage. Imitating an army cadet, he'd grabbed her hand when they got out of the car. "Let's roll." They crawled amongst the cars, weaving in and out, Jess holding her dress so as not to get it dirty. Matt's arms were on her waist, from behind. Their room smoldered, breathed, like the New York steam system pictured on the walls in the restaurant.

"I'm on the pill." She smiled at him. He smiled back. She just wanted their bare chests together. She pulled down her dress, one strap at a time.

The server arrives with the bill, jolting her from her daydream.

"Drop that right here please!" Dan holds his hand up. "I'm buying supper for the super hero tonight." The boys crack up, beaming. Liam grips Jess so hard she can hardly breathe.

Her breath was short as Matt slipped her other strap off her shoulder. Pulled her dress down, awkwardly, cumbersome. Trying to be smooth. His hands were clammy when he squeezed her breast, massaging it, working his mouth to it quickly, jamming his lips around her nipple and sucking, a little too hard, a little too much tooth, but she was still into it. Her love. Her first love. Her first sex. Ever.

Dan autographs the Visa bill, with flair. One of the first movies they watched together was *Office Space*. Jennifer Aniston works at a restaurant, not unlike East Side

Mario's, at which the more flair one demonstrates on the job, the more they are rewarded. Sometimes during sex, Jess would wear suspenders like Jennifer Aniston's, and she and Dan would make jokes. "You do wanna express yourself, don't you?" he'd say the line from the movie. Dan flicks each of the boys and Jess' father a glass eye candy. Great. More candy. She watches Dan collect his personal effects. Keys. Wallet. Phone.

"Ready, team?" The boys shove their chairs back and Sam's falls backwards and he dashes to the hostess station to rummage through the bin for extra candies.

Cait had told Jess the first time would be painful. "Chad couldn't even find the hole. Then when he found it, he couldn't get it in. He just jabbed at it and rammed it against me. But then when he finally got it in, it hurt like hell. But then it got more fun the second time." Jess knew her first time wouldn't be like that, because she and Matt were in love.

Liam bends like Gumby while attempting to put on his coat, trying to get his other arm in the hole where the sleeve is. Jess' father holds it for him. These little details, these moments that her mother was always so in tune with, her father has tuned in to. Doing the things Cait's mother would've done, helps. She is a part of him. The boys' boots splash the street sludge as they tromp to the minivan.

In the graduation night hotel room, Jess and Matt got in the shower. Naked. Piddly little droplets of water on them, but to them it was sexy. To her it was a romance novel. A scene from *Beverly Hills, 90210*.

Jess' father sits in the front passenger seat, while she sits behind Dan. She watches her husband. The back of his hair. These days, there is an absence of flair. There isn't a desire to sneak through a parking lot like spies not wanting to be caught.

Chapter Six

Cait sits in her new house, empty besides a mountain of boxes containing disassembled furniture from Ikea. Who will help her put it all together? Maybe Jess will, if she can get away from the kids and Dan for long enough. Most likely, Cait will get it together on her own.

Empty. This foreign biosphere, this feeling that she just woke up from a nightmare in a strange hotel room. That feeling, that vacancy, sits with her every day now since her split from Jake became official. She took two days off from work for the move, but she'll take a third one as a mental health day.

The only piece of furniture assembled is her desk chair. She sits on it, spins around, gawks at boxes, and her eyes fill again.

I want my family re-assembled.

Chapter Seven

In the '90s, artificial tanning took place in a halogen-lit coffin that shocked pins and needles on every inch of the skin. Melanoma nirvana. Blissful, unaware. Lying on a sheet of UV-poisoned plastic, nothing between your private parts and the remnants of the previous, sun-deprived wretch's fecal matter but a hand towel and a bit of disinfectant spray. Nar eye protection, no sir. That two-dollar rental fee could go towards a Big Mac combo.

Nowadays, spray tans are the socially acceptable form of artificial, sun-drench therapy in Newfoundland. Going down south on an all-inclusive? You're a Newfoundlander – don't forget to pack your base tan.

"I won't turn orange, will I?" Cait hasn't had a spray tan before and feels like a tool, but tries everything out there to battle the Jake ache.

The girl at the spray tan shop has a blue pixie cut, shaved on one side. She bounces and moves her hands a lot when she talks. Her eyes are wide and bordered with thick black liner. The intonation at the end of each sentence swoops upwards, like she's asking a question every time. "Like, I'd set a timer on my phone? Because, like, if you forget to shower two hours from now it'll just, like keep getting darker and then you could definitely turn orange." She nods enthusiastically and knowingly, like a bobble head doggy bouncing through potholes on the dashboard of a car. "Okay?" She rifles around the room, adjusting the machine. "So just take off all of your clothes and stand just on that garbage bag thingy over there? And I'll be right. Back."

Cait unzips her jeans. Peels off all but her G-string undies and bandana bikini top. That morning, she got a Brazilian. Irena, the Polish woman who waxes her, had slapped lotion on a bunch of tissues afterwards. "Poot this on your poosy." Brazilian bikini waxes are an anomaly amongst women Cait's age, but are becoming more mainstream. They're a dirty little secret. Cait got one when she was very pregnant. Jess told her she was nuts, but to Cait, it just helped her feel clean, together, in control for something impending that she'd have zero control over. "Baby wondering vat happening out there," Irena had said. "Don't worry baby, we just cleaning de doors."

Blue pixie cut returns. "Okay, so just like, hold your arms out to the side, like a t-formation? This'll be a bit cold, just a little warning!"

A blast of cool mist lightly sprays the backs of her shoulders, arms, back, butt, thighs, calves.

Maisie keeps a photo by her bed at Cait's house, the same one that's at Jake's house. They're in a pumpkin patch, grinning from ear to ear. Cait and Jake's arms, cuddled around Maisie and around each other. All so happy. Especially Maisie, love on each side of her, the two people she loves more than anything in the whole world, right there, hugging her close.

"Mommy, Daddy, Maisie." She points her chubby fingers with the indented knuckles at the picture every single bedtime, as Cait wraps her arms around her. Her soft

blonde hair, the same colour as Cait's, smelling like Johnson's baby shampoo. Cait plunks dozens and dozens of kisses all over her cheeks and forehead and the dimple in her chin. Her skin smells like buttered corn on the cob. Maisie erupts in chesty giggles.

"She makes me turn that photo every night so she can see it from her pillow," Jake had told Cait.

"Same thing at my house." They'd locked eyes, just for a second. The skin on her arms seemed static-y, prickly, with his bare arm so close. The grass is always greener?

The cool spritz of the spray tan makes her shiver. Why do women do this kind of shit?

"Okay, so...turn around?" Blue pixie cut puts her big gun-type thing back on its base, which looks like a vacuum cleaner. "The stomach is the most sensitive place, by the way?"

Cait thinks of the photo of her, taken on top of a cliff, swarms of seabirds below. She was five months pregnant. Her black Townie t-shirt pooking just a tiny bit. She felt so peaceful then, above the squawking birds below.

"It should only take, like, a minute or two to dry? You can put your clothes back on and just...meet me out front at the desk?"

"Sure thing. Thanks...what was your name?"

"Oh, it's Ashley?"

"Thanks, Ashley." She touches her stomach, ever-so-lightly. The spot where Maisie used to kick the most. She swears she still feels movement there sometimes. Phantom Fetus Syndrome. What of the baby sister she and Jake were going to have for Maisie? There's still energy between her and Jake. Can the little sister still exist? She touches her thighs to see if they're dry yet. They are not the solid, rock-hard, chocolate-milk coloured thighs of the Caucasian woman on the poster on the wall. They are thighs that were once attached to more than one pair of stirrups in her life.

"Now remember," Ashley looks Cait in the eye as she accepts her Visa. "Don't forget to shower in two hours."

"I won't."

Anything is possible. People spend time apart, and they reconnect. People endure loss, and they heal, and become happy again. There is death, there is life. There is resurgence. Caitlyn packs her Visa away. Strides to her car with her fake sun-kissed body and her bald vagina. A new hope simmers within.

Chapter Eight

Through the glass dome of The Hotel Newfoundland, the night sky is a navy blanket, bedazzled with stars. The courtyard smells like chlorine and tanning-bed-toasted skin.

An umbrella of artificial greenery sprouts from the tiled floor, the summer-green trees are lit with soft white twinkle lights. The girls wear armless dresses. Satin back crepe. Silk. Slits. Some at the knee, others mid-thigh. A man-made oasis, safe from whatever fresh hell threatens from beyond the city's harbour. They could be anywhere – Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver – that's the thing about hotels.

The Class of 1997 has waited for this night – this night, so magical, so pivotal, this rite of passage, this year, this entry into the next phase of life – from the moment the class started high school, they've waited for this night.

"Here we are, a province poor as anything, and they're here lettin' these youngsters have a graduation, at the hotel? Jesus, sure we never even got to walk inside the Hotel Newfoundland unless we were here to clean the toilets!" Caitlyn's father, John, tramps through the sliding doors, his face crimson from the May sun and his own fury.

"Well just because it's something you never did, doesn't mean it's something we can't do. Get with the times, Dad." Caitlyn can't help herself.

He holds her elbow with his meaty paw and leans towards her ear. "Don't. You. Dare. Start with that sauce."

She whips her arm away from his grip and swallows her smirk. She thrives on getting under her father's skin.

Her English teacher, Mrs. Morris, is across the room, sloshing back a glass of wine. Short. Stout. Sweaty. Tonight she's wearing jangly brass bracelets and red lipstick. A royal blue silk blouse, a powder blue paisley pattern swirled into the fabric, tiny pearl buttons lined in gold. Mrs. Morris is the crookedest woman Caitlyn has ever met. She directs a curt nod in Cait's direction. Waddles towards her.

"Looking lovely, my dear." She tosses a mini pepperoni stick through a hula-hoop purple lipstick mouth and yaps through her chomps. "Now. Lovely you're all here celebrating tonight in this opulence and grace. But have you finished *Random Passage* yet? Quiz on Monday. Don't forget."

"Yes, I finished it. I loved it." Suck up. Cait accepts a glass of punch from the bartender. He's quite cute. Some might call him a 'pack'. Clark Kent, becoming Superman when night smothers day.

"Good." A drop of red wine plops onto Mrs. Morris's blouse, on the swoop of her bountiful breast, as she begins to shillyshally away.

Jess and Matt Bohmer seem to float through the sliding doors. Jess' hair is shiny and black under the lights. Matt's sandy tousled locks look freshly shampooed.

"Looking foxy there, lady." Cait hugs Jess as she and Matt approach the bar area. Cait's date, Chad, sidles up and props his chin on Cait's shoulder.

"Wh'sup?" Chad delivers the line like peanut butter spread on warm homemade bread. Slow, soft, gooey. The intonation of a California surfer. Cait remembers how he

whispered in her ear on their way in, *I hid a joint behind the hotel under a rock, just for us*. Her red silk dress feels peanut buttery against her skin.

From the ballroom, a screen with a slideshow flickers with snapshots from the past three years. The Yearbook Committee, the Cheerleaders, the Basketball Team, The Hockey Team, the 24-hour Famine Sleepover, where Brian Conway and Maggie Rocket spent way too long in a sleeping bag.

Stirrup pants.

Palazzo pants.

Baby crop-top tees.

Denim vests.

International flags climbing the crotches of the boys' jeans, lock-ups, actual locks, clutching the button of the girls' jeans. Cait's father had no problem buying her a pair of lock-ups that Christmas. Eight-ball leather jackets. Flags-of-the-world jackets. Suede jackets with a fringe. The last of the Gen-Xers, their faces alight from the flickering slides of the projector. Faces with every expectation, with no expectation.

"Jessica." Cait's father appears, holding a small plate of crackers and cheese, munching away, crumbs lodged in his salt and pepper moustache. Cait hates that moustache. When he kisses her on the cheek it stabs her skin. He leans in towards Jessica. "How does your mother feel about the education reform? She knows it's ridiculous, right?" *Munch munch munch*, cracker crumbs bouncing onto his belly, rolling onto the floor, crunching into the carpet when he shifts his weight.

The Amalgamated and Catholic School Boards are at silent and somewhat-civilized war. John is the principal at St. Theresa's Elementary. Jessica's mother is the librarian at Vanier Elementary. There is no need for two school boards, there is no money for two school boards.

Jessica inches away from John, fearful a wad of chewed cheddar might whap itself onto her satin back crepe. "Actually, I think it makes sense to Mom."

John whips his furious face towards the slideshow. "Twenty-five years." He mutters. *Monch monch*. "Little Barry Doyle, I'll never forget him," he says, catching a glimpse of one of his past pupils. 'Fadder Crith', he had no front teeth, see, 'Wha's Hen-wy Fwog?' – that's what he said, God bless his little heart. Heavy fog he meant."

Jess takes another step to the side. Cait's eyes flick from the screen, noticing the conversation.

"Now they'll have to go to over-crowded schools, only to get a worse education." *Munch*.

"What's going on here now? What're we talking about?" Cait steps away from Chad to chat to her father.

"You kids, you think you're some smart, but the church provides spirituality. You girls could use a touch of that. Those slits in your dresses."

“Oh, well whatta big surprise here! Talking about the education reform again, are we? Once again: double schools, one Catholic, one Protestant, right next to each other, in some tiny community where the school has, like, 20 kids. Yeah. Makes a shit load of sense to me.” *Just fuck right off, will you, Dad?* “Let’s continue to separate us by our religion for another 500 years. It is only 1997, after all.”

“No expense is too much when it comes to education. Family, love, respect – it’s the core of society. A fundamental social and cultural foundation is being changed, Caitlyn. And there’s no need to be so saucy.”

“Heyyyyyy.” Creamy peanut butter spreads onto the scene. “How are you this evening, Mr. Critch? Lookin’ pret-ty handsome there,” says Mrs. California.

“Hmmmph.” John stalks over to Caitlyn’s mother. He has no time for Chad.

“Okay, hey we’ll see ya later Mr. Critch! Great talking to you!” Chad’s eyes are glassy. He lays his arm over Cait’s shoulder. “What an asshole.”

A surprise lurch of protectiveness hoists itself within Cait’s gut. She’s the only one entitled to call the old curmudgeon an asshole. “Did you smoke that joint without me?” Caitlyn hisses into Chad’s ear. She can smell his Irish Spring body wash, a sheet over the chlorine scent, and now there’s an accent pillow of marijuana tossed on top.

“Just one puff, babe.” He places his index finger on the dent under her chin. Kisses her lips. “I’m saving it for you.”

A photo of Jess and Matt blinks into the slideshow. They’re at a hockey game, Jess is in her cheerleading uniform. Cait remembers that hockey game. She was under the Fieldian Gardens bleachers with Chad. Hot breath on cold earlobes. Cold tip-of-nose on hot neck. Cold hands on warm breasts. “Let’s move in there.” Cait had led him towards the warm dressing room, at least that’s what they called it. The one Cait and Jess snuck into at figure skating practices when they were 10, because the big room was too cold. The boiler room was what it really was, and it was just big enough for two. People who didn’t work at the rink weren’t supposed to be in there.

“You have condoms for tonight, right?” Jess whispers in Cait’s ear, as she watches Chad breathing into her ear.

“Yes, *Mom*.” Cait’s own mother, her actual biological mother, not her best friend-mother, made sure she had a condom sewn into the lining of her purse.

“Sex doesn’t equal love, Caitlyn. Remember that,” she’d said, with her hand on Cait’s shoulder.

“Yes Mom, I know.” She’d rolled her eyes. Popped her gum. Caitlyn already knew everything. She didn’t care about love. She cared about having fun. She cared about feeling everything there was to be felt. All the sensations, all the words, all the elation, all the devastation. She craved it, maybe to an unhealthy extent. A ferocious, uncontrolled desire, rooted and swirling and hot. Subterranean. The ferocious craving to rebel. The need to spit *Fuck you, no it isn’t, no I’m not, I’ll prove you wrong*, directly into the eyeballs of everyone and any situation that merely even suggested a thumbs down.

Chapter Nine

Cait:

I need to get stoned. And go to the mall. You in?

Jess:

I haven't been stoned since 1999 when I thought I was dying
after I smoked it.

Cait:

Fair. Well, what about the mall?

And do you mind if I still get stoned?

Jess:

Are you serious? We're almost 40.

Oh so frigging what if we're almost 40.

Cait:

Oh so frigging what if we're almost 40?

Please? I just moved out of my home. I need to do something silly.

Jess:

Ok fine. Lemme just double-check with Dan.
I should be able to get you in an hour?

Cait climbs up into Jess' passenger seat, over the superhero figurines and empty Ring Pop wrappers littering the floor.

"Sorry, my car is a fucking mess." Jess says this every single time Cait gets in her car.

"You do know I have a child too, right? Mine is a bigger fucking mess than yours. I found a hairball in Maisie's car seat the other day. She took it with her after she had her hair cut, had it clutched in her little hand."

"Lovely." Jess glances in the rearview mirror before swerving into the other lane. Whether or not she is fully in this current dimension and this current moment, is

questionable. Her thoughts flit from the kids to her father to her mother to Dan. To Matt, even.

They're gliding over the Prince Philip Parkway, towards the Avalon Mall. The Holiday Inn still has the Christmas red-and-green lit globes on posts surrounding the parking lot.

"It's rotten out." Cait gazes into the drizzly night sky. The cold damp of the early March air hurts her bones. Freezes her skin.

"March is the rottenest of all months." Jess pops her chapped lips together. That morning, Dan had told her she needed to put a bit of Vaseline or something on them.

Cait pulls out a vaporizer pen and switches it on.

"What the hell is that?" Jess shoots Cait the stink eye.

"It's a vaporizer. Don't worry, it doesn't smell like anything, it's just vapour."

"Why do you need that?"

"Because it's relaxing. Jesus, Jess! When did you become such a Nan?"

Arriving at the Mall, Jess rolls the car into a spot next to Sears. "Give me a puff of that."

"What?" Cait has that lovely glassy glow. "Are you fucking serious?"

Jess is tired of being called Mom. Nan. Wife. "Yes I'm fucking serious. Give it to me." She snatches it from Cait. "Is it on?" She shakes the pen furiously. Taps it against the steering wheel."

"Don't get your pee hot here now, give me that." Cait switches it on. "Now, just hold the button down for a second until it heats up."

"Ok... then what do I do? Suck on it or something?"

"Yes, just sip on it, like you're sipping from a tea cup."

Jess sucks too hard.

"Not too hard!"

It's too late. Jess is choking like a lung is about to lurch out of her body and splat onto the dashboard.

"Well, if ya don't cough, ya don't get off, that's what they say." Now Cait is even glassier and glowier. "You're done with that now." She takes the pen and clicks it off. "Let's go to Sears, Nan."

Passing through the sliding doors, through the glass vestibule, the fluorescent lighting assaults their retinas and the smell of the perfume counter stabs their nostrils and tongue. The porch is a time machine into a sprawling Shangri-la of brazen lights and soul-sucking elevator music. The glow from the cosmetic counter is a beacon, beckoning them back into adolescence.

Cait floats towards the Estée Lauder counter.

"Oh my god I fucking loved this in grade nine." She displays a bottle of *Beautiful*, Vanna White-style.

"Oh yes, I remember you wearing that." Jess rolls her eyes.

"What're you rolling your eyes at? You wore that Clinique garbage - *Happy*; no less gross, might I note."

Everything is in halogen-hyper-Technicolour.

"Remember when you were pregnant with Maisie, Happy made you have diarrhea all the time?"

“Yes. Yes I do remember that.”

“I stopped wearing it then.” Jess wore perfume ever since Matt Bohmer bought some for her their first Christmas together.

“Well thank-you so much. I appreciated that.”

A fuchsia skirt-suited woman with very fuchsia lipstick approaches them.

“Ladies? Can I help you find anything?”

Cait: *Oh fuck, I'm so fuckin stoned.*

Jess: *Shiiiiit, what if I know her from school? She is wearing too much bronzer and it is too dark.*

“Nnnno. We’re good! Thank-you!” Jess just wants her to leave. The woman’s overly blonde, overly bouffant hair, sprayed into perfection, is hard enough to knock on. She’s hardly saying anything, but she’s too loud. She’s making Jess’ brain antsy. Cait senses her discomfort and links her arm into Jess.

“Yes, we’re just on our way in to a movie, but thanks so much!” She leads Jess towards the exit into the mall and soon they’re both convulsing. Shoulders shaking, jerking up and down, desperately trying to jail laughter. Finally, the sanctuary of the dimly lit mall, just on the horizon. Warm and fuzzy and silly.

“There’s so much more they can do with the mall you know.” Jess gazes around dreamily.

“Yeah...”

“Sure that’s all Vegas is, one big mall. They could have, like, a fake beach in here. A dome. Build it up and have a mini George Street in here for the wintertime. Like with actual nice restaurants and bars.”

“Totally. Shoulda kept the Sprung greenhouse. That was ahead of its time.” Cait would move into the Sprung greenhouse now if it existed.

They pause in front of The Gap.

“Remember when The Gap opened, when we were in grade 10?” Jess remembers going there with Matt.

“Oh yeah. It was a big deal.”

“Everyone had a Gap hoodie that year after Christmas.” Matt gave her a hoodie with her Clinique *Happy*.

“Before it was The Gap it was Ayre’s department store.” Cait has an early memory of standing in this same spot with her mother when she was around four or five-years-old. “When I was a kid I stood here after a birthday party with my helium balloon. I had on red cords and a white turtleneck and Mom had that stupid mushroom cut on me that every kid in the ’80s had.

“I had that too. Why did our moms cut our bangs all the way back to the crowns of our heads? I don’t get that.”

“No, it was gross. Anyway – I let go of my balloon and there was this other mother and her daughter was just a little ways from us, and the other girl had on this frilly old dress.”

“Like, a Polly Flanders dress?” Jess is convulsing again. She and Cait had matching Polly Flanders dresses when they were kids. They’d picked them out together from The Strawberry Tree. They wore them when they played a piano duet in the Kiwanis Music Festival that year, when they were nine.

Cait cracks up too. “Yeah, probably. It was very frilly. Puffy sleeves and all that crap. Anyway, I bawled when I let go of my balloon of course, and the girl’s mother looks at me and then looks at her daughter and goes, ‘Hold on to your balloon so you don’t lose it like that little boy over there did.’”

Jess lets go of Cait’s arm and bends over, her hands on her knees, crying laughing. “I’m gonna piss myself.” She can barely get the words. Cait helps her up and they head towards the escalators.

The tiles in the mall are the same white tiles they have been since the ’90s. As they float closer to the top of the elevator, the air becomes thick with the smell of buttery popcorn.

“Remember when you got so stoned that time with Matt that he had to bring you to my house and I had to wrap you in a blanket and give you hot chocolate?”

“Um, yes. I’d never smoked weed before and he gave me a full joint. Fuck sakes.”

At the kiosks in the theatre, they jab their fingers at the keypad. Much more deliberation is required to purchase movie tickets whilst stoned.

“The look on your face; you were so terrified.” Cait quakes with giggles, tears springing to her eyes.

“I didn’t know she’d freak out like that!” Jess mimics Matt’s dumb dog voice. Cait remembers him half-amused, half-shitbaked.

They walk, arm-in-arm, into the theatre. Cuddle into the cushy movie thrones. The dim lights and the red cushions are comforting. It’s a safe place, their shoulders wrapped with the buttery air that holds a story from another world, about to temporarily release them from their own reality.

“So.” Jess pulls apart the bag of M&Ms she bought at Lawton’s and snuck into the theatre in her purse. She sniffs inside the bag. “Remember in junior high we’d always say the bag smelled like puke?”

Cait thrashes her hand in and hauls out a few. Crunches down. “Yes. We were gross.”

“So.” Jess crunches a few of the candy. “How are you?”

The pain is immediate, like a stabbing. Cait, amazingly, hadn’t thought about Jake since she got in the car with Jess. A comfort and discomfort of hanging out with Jess is that she knows she’ll always get to talk about her nearest and dearest. It’s back, now. With those four short words, *So, how are you?* The familiar sharpness in her throat, a knife, just floating there, forever threatening to slice her, and let her sadness bleed out all over the place. The M&Ms get harder to chew. They’ve melted together, gummy, lumpy, clumpy, her tongue too weak to churn the paste. Heavy. She can’t form any words. Her chest hurts and her eyes spill over.

“Oh sweetie.” Jess shoves the bag back into her purse. Snuggles closer to Cait. “I hate that you’re going through this. I can’t imagine.”

“I think I made a mistake.”

Now that old disgusting feeling smears the inside of Jess’ chest. Cait is doing it again. Her erratic thinking and reactions.

“What do you mean? Why? You and Jake weren’t happy for a long, long time. You know that.”

“I know...but don’t all couples go through a kind of reckoning period?”

Jess pictures her living room. Dan. Probably sprawled out on the couch by now. The latest craft beer cracked open on the end table next to him. Or he's sprawled out on one of the boys' beds, a book open on his chest, his mouth wide and drooly.

"I guess so. But I mean...you trust yourself, right? You wouldn't have decided to leave unless you were really ready, right?" Would she?

"We were unhappy, that's true. We tried for a really, really long time. But I don't know...he's my family. I just feel so empty without him. It's like a nightmare, you know? You know that feeling if you're staying in a hotel and in a deep sleep, and then you wake up and not know where you are?"

"Yeah. It's grief." Jess feels it every day. Like her insides are rotting.

"I feel like that, every morning. In this new house that's mine, supposedly. Except it's not mine. I want to go home, to Gower." And she's spilling, just spilling, hot salty water, again, and it's dripping all down her cheeks, hot, trickling into her ears and off her earlobes onto her neck.

Jess' arm is around her shoulders, hugging her in. "Just...maybe give yourself some time? Some time to be alone? A cut doesn't heal if you keep picking at it."

Cait knows Jess found that quote on Pinterest. She just knows it. Jess – all her Pinterest research. Sometimes she sends Cait inspirational quotes, in comforting font with a soft pink background, out of the blue. And on a good day, one of those inspirational fucking quotes pops in and Cait wants to hurl the phone straight through her laptop screen. Today, it helps.

"I don't know." She sniffs. Hauls a tissue out of her coat pocket. "I actually kind of feel like I need to do something drastic. Make or break kind of move."

Here we go again. The drama. "Like what?" Jess' nerves tingle.

"I just...we have so much history. We have a child together, a whole life. I feel like I can't move on until I give it all I have. Lay it all on the table, you know?"

"I guess so...but Cait, just...why don't you just try to enjoy your house for a while? Make it your own? This is a new start for you...and you guys did give things a good try, you just said it yourself. Sometimes you have to know when it's time to let something go, gracefully."

The more Jess tries to give her practical advice, the more Cait wants to just give up. Pull out all the stops. Try anything and everything. "There's still something electric between us. I have this feeling that it's not over. I could seduce him."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No. I could. I'll put in the effort. Show him how much I love him."

Jess' insides churn like they're in a meat grinder. "Well, I guess at the end of the day, you've got to find some way to make peace with all of this, and if you think you have more to say then you have to say it. Just listen to yourself." *This is going to be a God damn train wreck.*

"I'm going to write him a letter."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. And then just hold onto it for a while. Decide whether you want to actually give it to him, or if it's a way to just kind of, purge your feelings, you know?"

That was definitely from Pinterest, too. I wonder who Jess is trying to let go of, twenty freaking years after high school? Cait has a pretty solid idea.

The house lights dim, the screen flickers to life and Matthew McConaughey appears, slicked back, driving a Lincoln, sniffing his fingers, musing to himself about life. It's a smooth, sexy road ahead. Confidence and sex appeal, that'll get you pretty far. *I'll be Jake's sexy best friend, that's all.* Cait digs into Jess' bag for the M&Ms. Crunches the chocolate-y candy between her teeth. This time, she can chew them.

Chapter 10

Dear Jake,

I have found my truth.

Our issues were deep and painful. We were miserable. We came to the point where the animosity and resentment bubbled deep beneath our skin and we couldn't see straight. It was a raging hornet's nest. I had to leave before I got stung any more.

When we first split up, we could barely have a conversation. The bubbles were too close to the surface. I was so full of rage and panic, so desperate to hold onto what was lost. The time you drank too much of Dad's scotch at his 60th birthday dinner. You smelled like Pine-Sol. You knocked over a clay jug from Greece, and it broke and Dad's cousin Bart drove a piece up his foot and Dad had to make him a friggin' bread poultice as if it was 1932. The time you accidentally knocked over a candle on the dinner table and then touched Aunt Debbie's boob trying to catch the flame. The first time you met my brother's girlfriend and accidentally spit corn at her. So many accidents.

The first night we kissed, this pounding, sparkly current shocked up through my body, into yours, then back to mine. Zapped together, like some force of natural electricity.

In Nicaragua, we sat in natural volcanic hot springs. Steam floated around us. Ghosts of what was and what could be. We met a couple one day, with two small children. They told us they travelled all over the world. Their kids loved it, they were naturals. "We could do that," you said afterwards. "We could take Maisie all over the world." It was too little, too late for me then. I was too bitter, too wounded, too raw. I despised you, I resented you.

I know now, after time apart, after this threat, what I'm about to lose. When we talk, it's calm and mutually respectful. Before, we were in competition. Now, we are a team.

My heart is still with you. I have realized this over a painful but cathartic ride. I don't want to lose my family. I love you. You are my home. I miss you and me and Maisie and everything else in between.

You're afraid we'll fall into old patterns. Make each other miserable again, and that is valid. We both like control. But with separation, we've learned how to step back from each other, and have our own time with Maisie.

Maybe it's too late. If that's true, if you're really done, I accept that. But your hands are the only ones I want grabbing my great ass. We could take Maisie all over the world. No matter what form our relationship takes, I will be your best friend. Your sexy best friend.

Love Always,

Cait

Chapter 11

“Maisie is having trouble transitioning from one location to the next.” The tall, athletic, blonde, childless Early Childhood Educator – Stacey — sits across the table from Cait and Jake – her legs-for-days folded over and around each other like a twist cone, her arms crossed over her chest. They’d been called in for a disciplinary meeting. “When we go to the gym she objects, she doesn’t want to go, she screams, yells, hurls herself on the floor and just refuses to move.”

“Okay,” Cait folds her arms in response, “and how is the situation handled?”

Jake just glares at the floor frowning, his arms also crossed, his legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles.

“See, the thing is, that she’s in the path of the other children sometimes when she does this. She’s on the stairs when we’re coming down from the gym, she kicks and screams when someone tries to pick her up and it can hurt other children, they can fall down the stairs...is there, anything different going on at home?”

The lump in Cait’s throat is nothing like a smooth beach rock at Middle Cove, but more like a jagged pointy hunk you’d find on Signal Hill.

“Well, yes there is, but we’re very open towards each other with things regarding Maisie.” Cait’s arms fold tighter.

“I called this meeting to just make sure we’re all,” she makes a circular motion with her finger, “active within the same circle of communication.” She releases her hands then. Raises them and opens her arms, like Mother Teresa about to bless the poor, misguided children of Calcutta. “And where we did have a sense you two had separated, we just wanted to confirm it and begin an open dialogue as to how we can make the best of the situation for Maisie, and really help her flourish despite this unfortunate turn of events.”

“Well Stacey,” Cait releases her arms and leans forward on her chair, towards Smug Stacey. Folds her hands and places them on the table, “we’ve been separated for months now, and if anything, Maisie’s routine has become even more stable than before. Right, Jake?”

Jake grumbles awake. “Yeah, I mean, we try to stay in touch, just about things relating to Maisie.”

“So you do touch base, regarding bedtime routines, the way you talk to her when she’s starting to act up, giving her the power to choose herself between two options and helping her feel empowered – all of that?”

Yes, we do communicate and sometimes we even still fuck even though we’re broken up, because we’re on very good terms, you see, Stacey.

“Yes, but you know, the older kids get the more aware they are of their surroundings, so she could be starting to realize that her family is different than other families that she sees amongst her friends at school, or in books or on TV. I didn’t come from two houses, my parents stayed together, so I don’t know. I’m just trying to figure out solutions to make the best for Maisie.”

Oh well aren’t you just the cat’s pajamas, and aren’t we just pieces of pissy, clumpy kitty litter.

Jake speaks, behold. “I get down to her level, crouch down and look her right in the eyes and tell her what we’re going to do, and if she objects, sometimes I ask her if she wants to do it the easy way or the hard way. We’ve never done anything the hard way, let’s just say that.”

A bit authoritarian, in my opinion.

“Well, Jake,” Stacey leans forward towards Jake and looks him kindly in the eyes. “I do like that you’re getting down to her level, that’s so important. I would just suggest that you give her actual options. So, for example, if she won’t leave the playground, you could say something like, ‘We could leave the playground now, and go home and have a little treat, or if we can’t leave the playground now, we won’t be able to have a treat. The longer it takes for you to listen to Daddy, the longer it will take to get your treat.’”

Jake twinkles like a Lite Brite. “That’s a great suggestion, actually. Thanks.”

“Yes, Stacey, that’s a wonderful suggestion, thank-you so much.” *I’m still here too, by the way. Maisie’s mother.*

“You know, as long as we all work together, even the smallest changes might make a difference.” She focuses in on one parent, and that parent is not Cait.

Work together in what capacity, exactly, Stacey? When exactly do you plan on moving in?

The tips of Cait’s ears scorch, and she feels a tug of defensiveness towards her bear cub. “Maisie is really such a sweet kid, you know. I’ve witnessed so many instances of her hugging other kids, helping the ones who are littler than her, helping me in the kitchen. She’s a sweet girl.” Cait’s eyes tingle, and she thinks she might cry. Jake touches her knee. There’s still something left between them. There is.

“Oh! Trust me. I know that. She has so much potential and she’s very loving.” Stacey chimes in, of course.

Potential?

“Thanks for saying that. We appreciate it.” Jake smiles. There is such tightness in Cait’s core, a knot so tight, that she thinks she might have an ulcer.

It’s Jake’s day to pick up Maisie and Cait has to pick her father up from a specialist appointment after she leaves daycare.

“So,” says Jake, as they walk out of the building, “I’ll pick up Maisie after work and drop her to you?”

“Yeah, I should be home by six. Thanks.” Their fingers touch, slightly, as Cait passes Maisie to Jake and they separate to go towards their respective vehicles.

Legs freshly shaved, skin supple with coconut oil, short black silk robe, and she just – *oops!* -- won’t have time to change before Jake arrives with Maisie. Knock at the door.

“Oh hey! Sorry, I just wanted a quick shower.” Motion towards the robe and inappropriate appearance. Flip the still-damp, beach-tousled hair. “Come on in.”

“Looks like you’re getting settled here?” Jake ushers Maisie in.

“Mommy! Look what I got!” Maisie holds up a hand full of dirty pebbles she’d picked up from the driveway.

“Whoa, what’s that? Baby bird poop?”

“Noooo, Mommmmyyy, that’s silly.” Maisie lumbers through the front porch, towards the kitchen, drops the pile of dirt and rocks onto the table. Cait makes sure to walk with a wiggle, right in front of Jake. That magnetic pull, that energy between them; she can feel him looking at her bounce-a-quarter ass.

“Okay, Maisie, don’t get too comfortable – I’m gonna pull on some clothes, and then we’re going to the park, and then we’re going to Poppy and Nanny’s for supper!”

Maisie gasps with glee. Bolts towards Cait. “Mommy!” The silk robe slips away and reveals part of her breast and there’s this moment where he’s right back there, ready to pounce, she can see it in his eyes. “Run away from the monster! Quick!” Maisie looks at Jake, inciting him to run after them. Jake gathers himself then growls as expected. His hands make claws.

“Uh on! Don’t worry, Maisie, I’ll protect you!” Cait shrieks and starts to prance through the small bungalow, away from Jake. “Yikes! The monster!”

“GRRRRRRRR!” Jake does sound genuinely frightening when he plays monster. He pounds and stomps after them, all through the house, to the couch, to the bathroom, around the kitchen table, until they get to Maisie’s room and he pounces on them on her bed. They collapse, the three of them. Cait can feel Jake’s breath on her ear and on the same spot on her neck where the tears trickled in the movie theatre, and after they had sex before leaving Gower Street. She feels a rush of relief that here he is, her security, he’s back, and she wants him with such a profound ache, for him to be back for good, with her, with Maisie, in their family bubble.

“Again! Do it again!”

“Okay.” He quickly stands. “Daddy’s got to go now.”

“No! Quick! Mommy! The monster!”

“One more round?” Cait adjusts her silk robe. Tightens the belt. Makes sure the hem covers her bottom, watches Jake watch her.

“I should get going.”

“No! Again!”

“Grrrr…” Jake’s eyes, evil, his growl low, teasing, “You…better…RUN! GRRRRRR!”

She shrieks again, running pitter-patter around the house, into Cait’s room, collapses on the bed. This time, she feels him next to her and, he’s hard. He jumps up quickly. “Okay, Daddy’s really gotta go now.”

“Okay, we’ll see Daddy soon.” Cait walks him to the door. Maisie is suddenly distracted by a colouring book on the table. “Did you get the letter I left you?”

“Yeah. I got it. I read it.” Jake hands her an envelope. He kisses her on the forehead. “I’ll see you soon.” He pulls the door behind him and it clicks softly shut.

Chapter 12

Jess holds Liam's hand as Sam tromps ahead, towards the waterslide at the Aquarena. When she and Cait were kids, the waterslide was made of what amounted to be a big yellow garbage bag. Swinging from side to side, that first whoosh down, the gushes of water against the slippery plastic would sometimes swoop Jess so far to one side that she thought she might slip right out over the top. Splat. Right onto the cement pool deck. That rush, not knowing what was around each turn of the yellow plastic. How high you would go, how close to the top, how close to falling overboard. A swoop away from quiet, obedient, everyday Jess. The slide would spit her into the pool. Slap her onto the water's surface and then plunge her down into the deep end, where the water was bluer. She'd bat her legs and slog her arms through the water, struggle to the surface, her head a bouncing buoy on the lapping surface.

Nowadays, the waterslide is a hard blue tube. Liam yanks and tugs out of Jess' grip. Patters towards the change rooms.

"Do not run on the pool deck, it's against the rules!" God damnit why does he always always *always* run on the pool deck?

Liam is pissed off because when he shot out of the slide, he got plunged into the pool and he'd forgotten to plug his nose and water shot right up there. Jess remembers the feeling. That assault, that painful jab, zap through the nostrils until it hit your brain like prongs sinking into a hot dog. Involun-tear-ily, your eyes become pools and it hurts. Your nose fills with snot and you just need to blow it all out and you're miserable.

"Liam! Slow! Down!" she calls after him and he slips on his heel and *crack*. Right down on his tailbone.

Once, when she was a kid, another kid came down too close behind her on the waterslide. He kicked her in the head and she got trapped under the water. She thought she might drown. She thrust him out of the way, pulled herself from the water and puked all over the pool deck. Vision blurred, gasping, crying, her mother had rushed to her aid, towed her off, showered her, gave her flat ginger ale from the canteen. "Sometimes you have to watch out for yourself, that's all. It's alright, these things happen. You knew how to look out for yourself."

"Liam, honey, are you okay?" She crouches next to him, her arm around his shoulders. She kisses his teary face.

“It huuuuuuurrrrrtssss.” His mouth is upturned and he’s red and blotchy, heaving sobs.

“Here come on, let me help you to the change room.” She tries to lift him up and he squeals. His poor little tail bone. “Okay, okay, put your arm around my neck.” She is crouched, Liam-level, walking in squat position. It’s a good thing she works out. She glances around for Sam, but he’s already in the change room.

“Owowowowowwww.” Liam pouts and sobs.

“It’s okay, bud, we’re gonna get you all fixed up.” She wishes Dan was here. Dan, forever-chipper Dan. He’d turn it all into a game. Liam would probably be laughing by now if Dan was here. They manage to make it into the change room but Liam can’t even sit on the bench and she doesn’t know how she’s going to get him home. Strap him to the roof rack? She pats him off. Manages to pull on his pants and shirt. Moves him under the hair dryer. “Mom! Stop it! You’re hurting me!” She hopes Sam hasn’t wandered off, like he does sometimes.

“Okay, bud, you’re dry enough now. Let’s find your brother and get you home to the couch.”

“Can,” sniff snort, “can...” cough cough wipe nose in sleeve, “can I watch *The Incredibles* when we get home?”

“Yes my babe, you can watch *The Incredibles*. I’ll give you a treat too, for being so brave.” They are outside the change rooms now, and Jess scans the area by the front desk, the Tim Horton’s counter, the seating area that peers through Plexiglas at the baby pool. No Sam.

“Owowowowow, Mommy,” Liam is pouting and she needs to stay calm, she knows that, but where in the frig is Sam? Inhale, exhale. She scans the area again and her heartbeat quickens and she can hear it in her eardrums.

“Sweetie, can you be even braver for me? Can you use your laser vision to spot where your brother is?”

“Mommy I caaaaannnnn’t.”

“Come on now, Liam, what do you think *The Incredibles* would do in this situation? Do you think they’d cry?” All the while she’s squinting. Scanning the area. More kids are clomping through the sliding doors. Stamping their slushy boots on the sopping, saturated mat. He’s not in the parking lot, is he?

“No.” He sniffs.

“Ok we’re going to go out in the parking lot now, and have a look out there.” She holds Liam’s coat and waits for him to put his arms in.

“Owwwww!”

“Don’t turn your back hon, okay? Just stay straight like you are there.”

“Okay, Mommy.” He walks with straight legs, like he’s straddling a horse.

“Okay, bud, let’s go. This way.” She crouches down and lays his arm around her neck, and walks next to him. This has got to be like doing two-hundred squats. Outside, the fog is thick and white and cold. It’s enough to clip ya, her mother used to say.

“Sam!” She calls out. Her vision blurs. Her heart pounds, and she feels like she did just before she threw up on the pool deck all of those years ago.

“Sam!” Liam calls out. “Whew ahr yew?” He is fairly articulate for a six-year-old, but there are a few words he still baby-fies, and Jess doesn’t correct him because he is her last baby.

“Sam!” The panic is rising and she’s on the verge of heart palpitations. It’s as if the sides of her neck have gills just underneath the skin. When she breathes in and out they flutter and flap.

The red plaid coat is the first thing she sees cutting through the fog. The tousled, sandy hair, the hairline receding, flecks and strands of grey whirled in with the dirty blond, but it’s him. The same stature, the height, the leanness, the ruggedness.

Matt. Fucking. Bohmer. And he’s holding Sam’s hand.

“Jess? Is that you? Holy shit - I mean -- sugar, is that actually you?” He grins and his teeth are still too perfect and too straight and too damn white-but-not-fake-bleached-white-just-natural-white.

“Sam!” She rushes to Sam. Crouches to his level.

“Mommmm!” Liam is holding his butt. “Can we go nowwww????”

“No way,” Matt lets go of Sam’s hand. “This one’s yours?”

“Yes.” Jess clasps Sam to her chest and sniffs his wet, chlorine-scented hair. Dan would’ve made sure all the chlorine was shampooed out if he’d been here. “This one’s mine.” She releases Sam and stands to face Matt. His eyes haven’t changed. Bright. Kind. The colour of blueberries. His hair still mostly the colour of the Northern Bay Sands beach, with a few flecks of Old Man’s Beard-gray hairs swirled in.

“I found this guy out in the parking lot, calling out for his mom.”

“Well, thanks so much for helping him.” How is it that Matt Fucking Bohmer still smells exactly like he did in high school? Like fresh, crisp air, rain, campfire and shampoo. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“Jeez, don’t act so glad to see me.” That twinkle, that teasing in his eyes, is also still there.

“I mean, I thought you were in Ontario.”

“Yeah...the wife and I just moved back actually.”

“Mommmmmm! My bummm! It hurrtrss!” Poor Liam.

“Okay, bud, yes - let’s go.” She puts her arm around Sam’s shoulder. “Matt, nice seeing you.”

“Yeah, you too – hey, are you on Facebook?”

Do not tell him you’re on Facebook.

“Yup, I’m on there.” She smiles at him and her insides swirl like gooey, psychedelic lava lamp liquid. Warm and drippy and fluid.

Uh oh.

“See ya, Sam, buddy. Glad we found your mom.” Matt lays a hand on Sam’s shoulder. Winks at Jess. Only one side of his mouth turns up in a smile.

Matt. Fucking. Bohmer. She spots his wedding band, made of black onyx. Just the kind of wedding band she always imagined he’d wear.

Sometimes on the yellow garbage bag slide, she’d slip too far to one side, in danger of falling over the edge. “Just be careful,” her mother always said. “It’s easy to get swept away in the fun of it all, but if you fell onto the concrete...just keep your wits about you, and stay in control.”

Strapped in the car, Liam wailing, Sam telling him to shut it, she blasts the heat. It flushes her cheeks and burns her eyes until they sting and water, just like they did in front of the bonfire in high school, where she'd snuggle into Matt and his plaid quilted coat.

Chapter 13

Dear Cait,

Thank-you. I know you mean all those things you said, which I love, but it saddens me to see you hurt. I want you to receive the happiness you deserve and still feel that as a couple we are unable to provide that for each other. It would break my heart to see you wait for that if it never comes. I appreciate your heartbreak. It saddens me to no end that Maisie won't have both of her parents with her every day. And us parting was the hardest thing I've ever had to be a part of. But I want her to be in loving environments. We only get one life and I don't want to spend it unhappy and making you unhappy as well.

I feel like I'm living in a nightmare. As many people do when going through divorce or separation, but we all get through it. We find happiness, and life goes on. It is extremely hard. We both get to see Maisie more than some parents who are together see their kids. She'll never feel at a loss for love.

I don't think at this point a resolution is realistic. I don't want you to ruin your own opportunities by believing so. Whatever will be will be. But friendship and kindness to each other is what I'd like to ensure right now. I don't want to fuel hope in areas where I can't guarantee there should be.

I've been on a few dates. I'm seeing someone. Whether I find happiness with her or not, I don't know. But I need to try the best I can and give it an honest effort. I do find it hard to not be physically affectionate with you. We've been that way for so long.

I promise to always love you and treat you with care and friendship, but right now we need to let go of our partnered relationship and see what options work for us. Let's take it a day at a time.

Love,
Jake

Chapter 14

Jess' mom always makes a discreet escape from their dinner parties, to sneak up a plate of dessert to her daughter. Chocolate mousse dessert with a graham cracker crumb base, and Dream Whip on top – her trademark.

Mellie and Karl Smith are coming over tonight, and Jess can't wait for the formalities to be over so she can go to her room and finish *Anne of Avonlea*. Mellie teaches children's literature in the Faculty of Education, and she's always asking Jess why she does or doesn't relate to the characters and story.

Jess' middle brother, Neil, hops from one foot to the other, fiddling with his penis.

"Are we gonna sneak downstairs tonight?" Jess and her brothers have a secret dinner party ritual. After they say hello to the guests, like good little children, they listen for when the plates are being cleared. Then they convene in the hallway to sneak downstairs and spy on their parents in the rec room. Disco parties: that's what her parents call them. There's a closet door at the foot of the stairs that leads into the rec room, and this is where the disco parties unfold. They have never questioned, to this day, why it was a closet door and not a regular door. But to them, that door is magical. Like the wardrobe

in C.S. Lewis novels, it leads to a different world, in another time, where things don't mean the same thing, in this disco-dance-party land that smells like funk.

"We can sneak downstairs if you can stay awake for long enough." Jess is eight and Neil is six. Tom is only four. Whenever they sneak downstairs, her belly feels there are sparklers inside.

Mellie yoo-hoos, "Jessica!" She's dressed in her typical garb. Gaudy, shoulder-padded floral blouse, blue plastic hoop earrings. A Braemar ensemble. Jess' least favourite store. Her mother makes her go with her sometimes, and she hides underneath the circular racks of boring Mom clothes while she waits for her mother to try on high-waisted polyester slacks, with pleats. "Jessica, do you like my new earrings? Kevin?" She looks from Jessica to her father.

"Oh, Mellie, you're always the fashion icon." Jessica's father glances at her mother. Pours a Lamb's and Pepsi for Karl.

Mellie puts her hands on her knees and bends to Jess' eye level. "So Jessica, what are you reading right now?"

"Anne of Avonlea." *Now please be quiet so I can go finish it.*

"Ohhhh!" She claps her hands together and looks at everyone around the room. Always a performance. Wanting to be the centre of attention. Her jaw drops. Karl gawks at her, deadpan, through the bottom of his glass of Lamb's. "Do you just love it?"

"Yeah."

"And what is it about Anne-with-an-E that you relate to?"

She stares at Mellie, right into the pupils of her wide-as-saucers eyes. "I like how Anne doesn't let anyone tell her what to do. She just does whatever she feels is right."

"Okay kids," Jess' mom hands Mellie a glass of white wine, "get on to bed now." She kisses each of the boys. Kisses Jess and winks at her – the secret symbol that dessert will be along shortly.

Jess hears her mother's laugh – full, free, loud – from the kitchen, and she knows it's dessert and Drambuie time. Sure enough, moments later, there's a mouse-quiet knock at the door and there's Mom, holding a plate of dessert. She drunk-tiptoes in, perches on Jess' bed, hands her the plate. "How's the book?" Her eyes are shiny within the frame of her blue eyeliner. Her hair is fluffed more than usual, and the way the light from Jess' Care Bears lamp illuminates it, making her look celestial.

"Anne is a teacher. I think I might be a teacher."

"Like your old mom, hey?" Her mom has a thousand-watt smile. She adores her girl. "Now," she points to the plate, "don't tell the boys about that. They'll be through the ceiling if I give them sugar at this hour."

Jess smiles an almost-shy smile. She adores her mother.

"I won't." She accepts the plate and her mother sucks a dab of crust from her thumb as she hands it off.

"Night sweetie."

"Night, Mommy. I love you." The Dream Whip is cool but melty in her mouth and the crust has crumbled apart, but she dabs up the remains with her finger and sucks the buttery graham cracker crumbs onto her tongue, where they dissolve and slide into her belly and soul.

From the basement she hears the bass thump of the Wonderful Grand Band. Not-quite-disco, in the land of disco. She swings her legs over the side of the bed and pushes the empty plate, white with a blue flower border, under her bed with her foot. She pushes the boys' bedroom door open and peeks in. They are both passed out on the bottom bunk, their hair plastered to their foreheads, their matching Batman pajamas stuck up over their pot bellies. Neil's hand rests on his penis. She flips off the light switch and closes their door. Her heart thumps in her throat as she tiptoes towards the closet door. She hears the pulse of the disco party in her eardrums. This particular trek, alone, without her brothers, feels momentous. *Tha-thump. Tha-thump.* Anne-with-an-E would do this.

You can drink your coffee from a plastic cup, spill it on the floor and never have to wipe it up, at the maaaaallll, at da Babylon Ma-mah-mah-mah-mah, ba-ba-ba-bah! Pays to pee at da mall...

Her nose mere inches from the door, she spies her father doing his best Tommy Sexton kicks. He's kicking, like Tommy does in the video, and clapping his hands underneath each leg as he hurls them into the air. Her mother is shrieking, laughing. Jess doesn't find it very funny, but her mother thinks it's the cat's pyjamas. Mellie does too, of course. Red and blue flashing lights slice through the slats. Laser beams bounce off the disco ball and shoot towards the closet door. The bathroom door, right across from the closet, is open. She can see inside the bathroom.

Babylon Mall fades into *Sonny's Dream* and Jess jolts backwards as her father appears and goes into the bathroom. The door remains open, and she can see him clearly as he splashes water on his face, neck, chest. He unbuttons his shirt, ready to dab away some of his sweat with a towel. A whiff of cheap Avon perfume mixed with the stink of Braemar suddenly assaults her nostrils.

"Oh! Kevin! I didn't realize you were in here." Mellie twists her jet-black, shoe-polished hair around her finger. "It's so warm, isn't it?"

Her mother's laugh, in a spiral with Karl's. Her father's lips, smacked onto Mellie's. It's as if Jess' vision zooms into warp speed until her pupils are a macro lens on their mouths. Soft and wet against each other. Licking and sucking the salty sweat from each other's top lips. Her father gropes Mellie's breast and she pushes her pelvis against his. And, just as sudden as it started, her father pushes Mellie gently away. Turns and splashes water on his face. Turns back to Mellie, who is all overcome. He looks her momentarily in the eyes. *This never happened.*

Jess clamps her hands over her mouth. Her Daddy. The crushing betrayal. The slicing hurt. It's like clamping onto an empty fork and the prongs jab the roof of your mouth. Licking the crumbs off of a butter knife that inadvertently slices your uvula. Mellie's Avon-Braemar stench and the Dream Whip and her mother's graham cracker crumb crust gurgles in her guts and *tha-thump-tha-thump-tha-thump* her eardrums pulsate and pound and a whoosh of the previously digested gushes up her esophagus and just as fast as her father kissed Mellie the dessert is back in the atmosphere, back in this reality, all over Jess' palms and her fingers. She holds her nightgown to her mouth. Crawls up the stairs to the bathroom. Washes her face. Brushes her teeth. Cries herself to sleep.

Chapter 15

“We got it. He’s gonna do it.” Cait slams down the phone in her cubicle at the CBC. The office of finance minister Jordan Baker has agreed to an interview. With Cait. On *The Morning Show*. His first media interview since the dismal budget of 2016 gushed down the rusted water pipes of Newfoundland and Labrador. A \$1.8-billion deficit that’s projected to hike to \$2.2 billion. Tax hikes across the board. Layoffs. Loss of the baby bonus. Best of all, a provincial levy.

“Imagine. People being charged just to live here.” Cait’s father spat over their roast beef Sunday dinner. “To live *here*. Godforsaken here. Imagine.”

“This is as bad as the ’90s.” Her mother ladled gravy over the potatoes.

“Worse.” Her father swirled the gravy through the potatoes, mixing it with the turnip. Dabbed the Yorkshire pudding into the heap, scooping up a mushy, sloppy chunk.

Amy, the intern, scurries up to Cait with her phone.

“Look,” she shoves the phone in Cait’s face, “I made a Snapchat filter.” It’s the minister with devil horns and red eyes, with a border that reads, Yes to Austerity. Twitter hashtags #nrising and #FreeNL are trending. “We can tweet it out to promote the show.”

Cait crumples her brow at the image and Amy very carefully watches her reaction, awaiting the praise she’s expecting to shower her, before a moment of realization hits her. “Oh wait, do you know what Snapchat is?” she says, tenderly.

“Yes, Amy. I know what Snapchat is.” Cait rolls her eyes. “I work in media, and I’m also not one hundred.” She pushes her chair back and stalks towards the studio. “It’s slightly biased for a media outlet to put out,” she calls over her shoulder as Amy scampers behind her, already plodding her thumb against the phone screen, forever-eager. Her self-confidence could blast icebergs out of the Narrows. Her generation has a ransack mentality that is powerful and contagious. Brazen but strategic. Quick and impassioned. They get things done. They take shit and then they spit it right back at whoever delivered it in the first place.

Cait scrambles, these days. To research, to write, to edit, take photographs, shoot video, edit video, book interviews. It’s not like it was 10 years ago when she was hired, and there was no social media worth talking about. There was MySpace, and there was ICQ Messenger. Facebook had just come out, and they were all just silly websites and places for people to show off. A game. An indulgence. Nothing with the power to sway public opinion and launch movements with the pound sign.

“This is pretty huge, Cait.” Jake drops that day’s *Telegram* in front of her on the desk in the studio. Jake and Cait met at CHMR radio at the university. They each had their own show – hers on the local arts scene, his about music in general, where his and a friend’s schtick was acting like greaseball fan nerds with a Polish accent. “Don’t fuck it up, ok?” He winks at her. That same teasing, junior high school humour that sucked her in, except now she grits her teeth and moves the paper out of her way. *Asshole*. She is focused on the task at hand and she has caught a wave of indignation.

Austerity My Ass – On interview morning, in the parking lot outside the studio, protesters swarm the minister’s shiny black Lincoln. The signs are smeared in red spray paint. **Big Bacon Baker** – the minister owns a chain of fast food restaurants.

“How’s the levy fair if me, a poor person, is paying 1.2 percent, and you, a very rich person, are paying 0.2 percent? How’s that fair?” A man with a trucker’s cap shoves his face as close to Minister Baker’s as he can get it.

He weaves his way through the crowd, not responding, working his way to the door. From behind the glass in the studio, Cait hears it all. Voices, so loud, so distressed, so angry. The building seems to heave. Throb. Her organs tremble and her blood bubbles and pops. She walks through the studio towards the porch. Extends her arm to greet the

minister. He grips her hand too tightly and glares into her eyes. Politician's handshake. Must. Assert. Power.

"Good morning Minister, thanks for coming in."

He nods towards the empty receptionist desk. "Certainly a colder feeling in here without Beverly."

"Yes, well, that's what budget cuts do, don't they!" The joke does not fly. "Can I get you a glass of water?"

"Don't have a coffee, do you?"

"Afraid not. Sorry." The CBC can't even afford a drop of coffee or tea to offer guests anymore. The café closed two years ago and it's been a slippery slope since. Cuts, layoffs, contracts not being renewed. Cait has been fearing her appointment with the chopping block, but positive listener feedback has kept her around.

"Well, maybe a drop of vodka in the water?" *Ha ha. Real funny, asshole.*

She forces a fake chuckle and motions towards the hallway that leads into the studio. Walking behind him, his cologne makes bumps on her tongue, towards the back of her throat. Enter studio. *Glug-glug-glug* from the water dispenser. Plunk glass on table. Take a seat. Headphones over ears. Fade-in, fiddle theme music.

"Next up on *The Morning Show*, we've got the one and only Minister of Finance, Mr. Jordan Baker joining us. Welcome Minister Baker, thank you so much for being here this morning."

"Thank you, Caitlyn, for having me." His brow is crunched and he glances at his watch.

"Now, the provincial government has just delivered one of the most dismal budgets in history. There have been tax hikes on gas, cigarettes, insurance, a two per cent increase on HST, even a tax on books, which now makes Newfoundland and Labrador the only province with a book tax. Minister, you were absolutely swarmed walking into the studio. What do you have to say about the anger people are expressing over this?"

"Well, Caitlyn, I can certainly understand why folks are upset. It certainly will make a difference in the lives of citizens. But what I hope folks can understand is that this is temporary, and it's necessary to get the province out of debt."

"Perhaps the most controversial item is the Debt Reduction Levy that is being imposed on all incomes."

"Yes, and the levy is absolutely temporary as well. The bottom line is that it will reduce the deficit by about \$63 million, which even that, is still just a fraction of the budget shortfall."

Outside, the protestors shake their signs. The parking lot heaves with mass, collective fury. This man is a lying motherfucker.

"When will the levy be lifted?"

"We don't know, but we do know it can't be this year and we do promise people that we do want to remove that measure as soon as possible."

"What do you say to the people who believe that the levy is in favour of the rich and further harms the poor and working class?"

Minister Baker does not appreciate the hard-hit so early on.

"The process for paying that is based solely on the taxable income an individual makes. Filing taxes provides an opportunity to do that. Also, employers who update their

tax tables based on taxes would also have an opportunity to provide information to their employees around that.”

The reports say that bankruptcy will escalate in the coming years. Cait is on a single income now. What will happen to her?

“I don’t really understand what that answer means, but let’s get to the phone lines. First we have Greg on the line. Go ahead, Greg.”

“Yes, hello, I just want to say how disappointed I am that you’re doing the opposite of what you said you were going to do when you wanted to get elected.” Greg sounds to be a senior. “All on about diversification, broadening our horizons, making Newfoundland more self-sustainable, it’s all lies, just like government has been doing here since Confederation. You’re a bunch of filthy liars!” He’s yelling now. He might have a heart attack, for frig sakes. “You only wants to line your own pockets!”

“Greg,” Cait has to be diplomatic, as much as it grates her every last nerve, “is there something specific you wanted to ask?” She’d love to tear a strip off Minister Bacon Baker herself.

“It’s just too bad that Newfoundland can’t for once get some decent people in power, people who really cares about our people. I’ve lived here for all my 78 years on this Earth, and I’ve never seen a worse time.” Click.

“Thanks for your call, Greg. Okay Minister is there anything you’d like to say to Greg?”

“Again, I’d just like to stress that these are temporary measures, and we are thinking of this province’s greater interests with the implementation of this budget.”

Another content-free answer. “Next we’ve got Linda on the line, and Linda has concerns about cuts to education. Go ahead, Linda.”

“Hello Minister. I’d like to just say that I am a very concerned parent and my children’s futures are being severely compromised by this budget.” It’s Jess. She can’t call in as a teacher, because teachers aren’t allowed to speak publicly about the conditions in the school system. *Just call in as a parent*, Cait had suggested when Jess learned Cait had landed the interview and started venting about the minister’s dismal performance. Cait’s chest swells with pride at the sound of her friend’s voice over the airwaves.

“I can understand that, Linda, and while I can’t speak directly to education cuts, I will do my very best --”

“There are children with diverse learning needs in classrooms. Teachers just do not have the resources to give them the attention they require. Special needs educators have been cut, teachers get support for just thirty minutes a day, and as a result we are giving our children an inferior education.”

David, for example, is one of the three autistic children in Jess’ classroom. David wears the same blue and white striped shirt every single day. David has a penchant for planes.

“Did you know that there are one thousand and thirty-two pilots employed with Delta Airlines?” He approaches her with this spiel several times a week. “About half of that number are from the western United States?” He speaks urgently. If Jess doesn’t appear fully invested, he will crumble in devastation and panic. “See?” He hands her a photo. “I brought you a photograph of the very first Delta airplane.”

Another child in her classroom has a chromosomal imbalance and operates at the level of a three-year-old. Along with Amena, she has two other ESL students in the room. And now class sizes will increase even more. The “normal” kids, the ones without special needs, the kids like Sam and Liam, are the ones who might suffer the most.

Minister Baker leans into the microphone, his crunched brow lifting and oozing into a sinister, smug, raised-eyebrow pompousness. “Again, I understand your concerns...”

“Do you? Because I don’t think you do!”

“I can guarantee that intense consideration was put into this decision and we would not make these changes if we thought they would compromise our children.”

“Well why is all-day kindergarten continuing?”

“All-day kindergarten is the standard across the country, Linda.”

Cait interjects, “Minister, I think when there are enough human resources in place, that model makes sense, but here teachers aren’t prepared for it. Is that right, Linda?” Cait and Jess had rehearsed this little sketch a couple weeks ago over wine. *Those motherfuckers*, Jess was spitting mad. *Mo’fuckahs, motha fuckas, fuck! You! Mothafuckas!* Cait launched into the Mark Bragg tune that she’d thrashed her body back and forth to at The Ship a good few times since she and Jake split up. Jess had looked at her like she was mental because The Ship is not Jess’ scene.

Angie Wells is a spoiled brat and tattles on Tommy Waterman when he shoots a spitball at her face. Jess is trying to calm down Amena and quite frankly, doesn’t give a fuck that Angie Wells is upset. *Always put yourself in the children’s place*, her mother told her while she was doing her undergrad.

“Did you see that, Mrs. Andrews? Tommy hit me with a spitball!”

“She told me I was a skeet, Miss.” Tommy doesn’t give even one fuck that he hit Angie with a spitball. There’s no rich little snot messing with him, no sirree.

“Angie, that’s terrible, I’m very disappointed you’d say that.” Angie is shocked to be found in the wrong. “But Tommy, you still shouldn’t have shot a spitball.” The bullshit she deals with. No wonder teachers drink so much.

The Minister has pulled out a sheet of paper to read the notes prepared for him.

“There is no clear evidence in the research that shows any effect on educational outcomes for larger class sizes. Yes, larger class sizes will make more work for teachers, but there is no evidence that shows it compromises the outcomes.” The string of statistics squirts from between his lips like Spiderman shooting threads of his web from his wrist and Cait is as spitting mad as the people in the parking lot.

“Excuse me, Minister, but how exactly can you say that outcomes won’t be compromised if the children get less attention?”

The principal pokes her head around Jess’ classroom door. “Sorry, Jessica, could I speak with you for a moment?” There’s a new student. Another new student.

“You have got to be kidding me.” Jess leans by the wall, one eye on the kids, one eye on the principal.

“I just had two ESL kids come in here. Two autistic kids. One is still in diapers.”

“This girl, her parents just transferred here. I think they’re starting a separation. But she’s well adjusted. Sweet girl, really.”

The calls pour in. People who are angry. Heartbroken. Fearful for the future. Cait has just moved into a new house. She has to pay all the bills herself. Because of this, her child benefit will also be reduced. How will she make ends meet?

Protestors stay outside. Sneer at Minister Baker long after he pulls away in his Lincoln. Christine Day, the producer, meets Caitlyn in the porch after the show. “Can we sit for a moment?” They sit in the red leather chairs that flank the vintage radio close to where Beverly used to sit. The building is full of broken-hearted ghosts.

“They’re a good family, though. The parents get along; they’re reasonable with each other. Not like some divorcing couples. They’re educated. Sensible.” Principal Arden eyes Jessica, carefully. She’s one of her best teachers on staff and the principal knows she’s spread thin.

Jess exhales a sharp short breath. “Names?”

“There’s no easy way to say this, Caitlyn.” Christine puts a hand on Cait’s shoulder. “We have to let you go.”

“Their last name is Bohmer. Matthew and Grace are the parents. Their little girl is Savannah – sweetheart. She’s a perfect blend of both of them. Looks like an angel.”

Well ho-ly fuck.

Chapter 16

Cait wrenches a wonky cart out of the stack. She can't find the kind that looks like a car. Of course she can't.

"I want the carrrrr carrrrt!" Maisie whips backwards, thwacking her skull on the car. Delivers Cait a pint-size punt, right to the forehead. Grits her teeth, sucks in air, clenches fists, releases, clenches, releases.

Cait stands out of the car for a moment. Inhales, exhales, her breath moving to the beat of the metronome in her head. The tick-tocks of intense love and extreme rage that whoosh within her, within seconds of each other when dealing with her child always shock her.

"I'm sorry sweetheart, I know it's disappointing that you want a car cart and there's not one here, and trust me, I wish there was one here too, but we just have to use this one for now. Now, if you're happy and use your listening ears, I'll get you a treat in the store!"

Maisie pauses, and perks up.

"What kind of treat?" *Is this negotiation worth me not losing my shit*, in other words?

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe you can even pick it out yourself!" It's obvious, even at three-years-old, that Maisie likes being in control. She comes by it honestly.

"Okay!"

They roll into the supermarket with the wonky cart, and there, in all its power and its glory, is a car cart. Life really does come in waves...crashes against the rocks, and laps against the shore.

"Mommy! Look!"

"I see it, I see it!" They ditch the wonky cart, lease the car cart. And it rolls properly.

Strawberries. Bananas. Blackberries.

"No, I don't want bananas, Mommy. I don't like bananas." This is news.

"Well, that's okay, because these are for me."

Around the periphery of Sobey's:

Apples.

French bread.

Eggs.

Milk, coffee cream, yogurt tubes.

Centre aisles:

Arrowroot biscuits.

Fruit chews.

Peanut butter.

She picks up a tub of smooth and crunchy before putting the crunchy back, realizing it's for Jake.

At the check-out, Maisie chirps, “Choc-lat.” She always over-pronounces the last letter in a word.

“Okay, that’s your treat that you pick? A little chocolate bar?” Cait scans the rack to make sure there’s a very small Dairy Milk. Sugar does not bode well, especially in a child with Maisie-level gumption.

“Yes! Choc-lat!” She hugs the bar to her chest, her tiny Chiclets for teeth, megawatt grin, and it’s one of the Mom moments where Cait’s entire body aches love.

From the corner of her eye, Cait spots a flash of blonde, shiny hair.

“My Stacey!” Maisie has spotted the same stroke, and it turns out that it is attached to the head of her teacher at daycare.

“Maisie! Hello my doll! – Hi, Caitlyn.” My doll? Stacey nods at Caitlyn, smiling hesitantly. There is an air of awkward nervousness about her that is unlike any energy Cait has ever felt from her.

Stacey’s cart is, of course, filled with everything organic. She’s head-to-toe in Lululemon. Black leggings, a red running jacket.

“I got choc-lat.” Maisie boasts, hoisting her bar into the air.

“Oh wow, you’re so lucky. You’ve got a bit of sugar there I see, with those cookies and fruit chews. Careful with that sugar! Don’t want the sugar bugs to eat holes through your teeth!” She holds her fingers up to her mouth like a beaver.

“Yes, well,” Cait interjects, “Maisie had a really good moment where she deserved a treat – she made a good choice. So there’s nothing wrong with a treat every now and then when you deserve it, right Maisie?”

“Yeah, I made a good choice!”

“We sometimes don’t recommend food as rewards.” Stacey utters the words from the side of her mouth, in Caitlyn’s direction. How dare she.

“I appreciate what you’re suggesting, Stacey, but we aren’t in school right now, and I will make the choices with my child, thank-you. I don’t think a bit of chocolate every now and then is going to hurt.”

Stacey recoils, startled by Cait’s directness. “Sorry, yes of course.”

They put the last of the groceries into the bag, and start to wheel away. “It’s okay.” Cait nods, smiles, politely but not warmly, and not sincerely. She has a newfound sense of defensiveness towards Stacey and she’s not sure why.

“Bye My Stacey!” Maisie waves fervently, her eyes wide thinking about the bar.

Back in the car, Maisie demolishes it like a crow face and eyes into a garbage bag on the curb. “Stacey at Daddy’s house!”

In the rearview mirror, her face is smeared with brown.

“What did you say, sweetheart?” Stay cool, Cait.

“Stacey was at Daddy’s house!”

“Oh? What was she doing at Daddy’s house?” It feels like a lump of salt pork from her mother’s Sunday dinner is lodged in Cait’s throat. What the fuck was Stacey doing at Daddy’s house?

“Just…visiting.”

Don’t ask her more about it. Keep it together. Ask Jake instead. Oh yes, ask Jake, you’re God damn right ask Jake. Jab. She hits the screen of the phone screen as Maisie

belts *Penny Lane* from the back seat. She pokes her headset into her ears. "Call. Jake."
She asks Siri to please dial.

"Y-ellow!"

Someone sounds chipper.

"Maisie told me Stacey was at your house."

Pause.

"...did you hear me?"

"Yes. I heard you, Cait."

"So...I think I deserve to know why the daycare worker was at your house, with my child? Has something happened with Maisie that requires an at-home visit?"

"..."

"Jake. I'm sorry - is the phone cutting out here?"

"Cait, you don't need to know every detail of who I date."

Thwack.

"Date?? You're dating Stacey?"

"We've gone for coffee a couple times, she stopped by the house once. That's all."

Another woman. In their house. The house they bought together. With their daughter, also with their daughter all day, who gets more time with their daughter than Cait herself does.

"Fuck you, Jake." She clenches her teeth and mutters it, jabbing her finger at the screen, willing herself not to cry.

Chapter 17

“Not a chance in hell I’m stayin’ in Newfoundland after I graduates.” Bobby Day of Portugal Cove whips a beer bottle cap at the fire.

On clammy nights, the Class of 1997 huddles around bonfires drinking Labatt Blue Star over a bank near Outer Cove Beach. Down by the river, which contours the base of a steep bank of trees and stumps and rocks. They bounce down the bank on their arses, shoes boinging into oblivion on the descent down. With every rainfall, the bank erodes a little bit more.

Fingers corseted around her beer bottle, Jess inhales the smells of pine trees and bark and rocky soil and crackling embers, all of which swirl together in the atmosphere and rest in the fabric of Matt’s waffle shirt.

“Dunno where I’m goin’, but I’m gett’n the fuck outta this shit hole.”

“Yeah, man.” Matt tips back his beer. Jess watches his elegant Adam’s apple swallow it down. “It’s pretty depressing here.”

“You’re goin’, right Bohmer?”

“Yep. Queen’s, I hope.” Matt wants to do environmental studies. Jess snuggles into his shirt. She’s going to Memorial University of Newfoundland. MUN, as it’s affectionately known.

Jess spends one lunch break a week at her nan’s house for peanut butter toast. She walks there from school - up Paton Street, across Elizabeth Avenue, down Baltimore Street. Nan watches *The Young and the Restless* and complains about Katherine Chancellor, that rich snot.

“What are you gonna do after you finishes school, Jessica?” Nan’s eyes don’t leave the screen. She can’t miss seeing Ashley Abbott and Katherine Chancellor slaying each other with saucy comments.

Jess crunches her teeth into her toast. The peanut butter is warm and gooey and fragrant. “I don’t know. Some of my friends are going away. I kind of wish I could too.”

On July 1, 1992, Nan rallied with throngs of vicious fishermen and plant workers on the wharf in Bay Bulls. In the lower intestines of the CBC archives, there's footage of Nan shaking her fist in the face of the federal fisheries minister.

"How come we didn't bring in interim support for fishing families so we didn't have to show the colour of our God damn underwear to every Tom, Dick and Harry up to social services for five-hundred and twenty-two dollars!" Nan's plaid-clad arms jiggle, her hair-netted silver head bobbles, her quivering voice is indignant as her eyes springing with tears on the CBC news. Her index finger, jabbing at the minister's face like she's Ashley Abbott, and he's Katherine Chancellor.

"You don't have to abuse me!" shouts the minister. "I didn't take the God damn fish out of the water!" His tailored jacket, his Old Spice suffocated by the fishermen and women and plant workers' salty tears, guts and souls and way of life, splattered all across the wharf. Nan and Pop lose their car. Nan can't drive Pop to his cancer treatments.

"I knows it's hard to live here sometimes." Nan smooths Vaseline Intensive Care lotion over her hands, ensuring each crevice receives love.

The announcement of the cod moratorium ends with the minister leading the crowd in the *Ode to Newfoundland*. Not one member of the group joins in. They stand there, sullen and betrayed. The minister himself, a local who'd been lured by Ottawa, looks as if he could cry.

"We manages though, you know." She looks away from the screen, at Jess. "Newfoundland is a beautiful place. We're still here. The sun always comes back sooner or later, you know."

Now, just five years after the moratorium, there are threats to cut education. Jess' mother is worried. Her parents get rid of one of their cars. They don't order pizza on Fridays anymore. Jess is told she can either get an up-do or a new dress for the grad, but not both. She chooses a dress.

Chapter 18

Cait does what she's supposed to do to weather a heartbreak:

1. Exercises. Pounds around Quidi Vidi Lake. There's still bits of snow plopped amidst the April guck, but by God, it's poundable. She blasts the Pathological Lovers into her eardrums. Her walks torrent into sprints that don't slow until a new pain crushes the omnipresent heartache.
2. Reads. Jane Austen. Joan Didion. Brontë. Great, sprawling books about hearts that have been shredded in meat grinders.
3. Drinks. She lives Wine Wednesday and Mommy's Sippy Cup and I Only Drink Coffee Until It's Acceptable to Drink Wine. She lives the Mom Blog life in shame, behind closed doors.
4. Maisies. They curl up. They read. Sing and dance to Raffi and Fred Penner: all the songs she sang as a child, when life was blissfully innocent.
5. Mourns. She waits for days to become nights so she can pretzel up and melt into the couch.

Today is warm for April. She wears the same hiking boots she wore on her and Jake's failed, save-the-relationship pilgrimage to Nicaragua last year. She'd tromped ahead of Jake on their volcano hikes. All he did was complain and cast a negative light on everything, which she resented and she'd bite right back.

The guide tells them about the wildlife. "The baby vipers, they are much more dangerous than the adults. They don't know how much venom to release. The adults, they

know if their attacker wants to hurt them. If it's unintentional? They will give a small warning bite. But if they feel a true threat, they kill. Babies do not have the maturity to control themselves, so they just shoot out all their poison at once."

Driving through the country, their car careens around the edge of sharp cliffs, the road a thin ribbon. Cait grips the door handle and swallows her uncertainty and panic.

"So tell me, Cait," Jake grips the steering wheel, "what is it that I do so wrong anyway?"

"Why are we still talking about it? You don't get it. The things you say hurt me, and you don't get it."

"I don't mean that stuff. You take it to heart and you shouldn't."

"Then why do you fucking say it if you know it hurts me? If someone tells you you hurt them, you don't get to say you didn't. You expect me to change my behaviour without considering your own and it makes me fucking sick."

"Well, you don't have to be so fucking sensitive and defensive."

Re-calibrate. The robot voice on the GPS chirps. The lines on the screen move into some pink dead zone with all roads gone. Directionless.

"Bitch! This thing's name is bitch for the rest of this trip." Jake plunks his finger at the screen until it blinks stupidly back to life, after just having conked out from sheer exhaustion.

Now her boots are sogged with spring sludge. Quidi Vidi Gut: mucky and wretched. She strides up a bank, heading towards Cuckold's Cove, and slips onto her hands and knees. Scrapes her palms. Slaps off the mud and plows forward through the slop. Further up, she thwacks branches out of her face.

After their heated and somewhat perilous drive, Cait and Jake finally pull up in San Juan del Sur where the Christ of the Mercy statue greets them. Welcome, children. Take solace in my loving arms. They are hot, sweaty and ragged. They pull up to the Airbnb, Cait's foot propped on the glove compartment.

Jake spies her thigh. "See, why don't you just show leg more often?"

Cait rolls her eyes.

"Guys are idiots. All we want is sex and that calms us down."

"You really are an idiot." She cracks a smile, despite herself. He makes her laugh, and she's a real sucker for people who make her laugh. He's her little girl's daddy. He doesn't mean to release all the venom. They drag their bags inside. Elbow each other out of the way, fighting for first dibs on the shower. She peels away the sweaty sun dress and the stink of the car. She shoves past Jake, surrendering to the water's cool trickle. She lets him join her, his fingers feathering and tapping all over her body. Kisses. Little licks. On the neck, jawline, lips. Frustration, rinsed down the drain. But the doubt is still there, deep in her core.

Kenna's Hill. She slogs past the site of the car accident she had 10 years ago.

"What if you actually died in that car crash and this whole time I've just been imagining you're still alive because I love you so much?" He stroked the back of her hand, in their house, in front of the TV one night. Smiling deep into her eyes, the truth

and the love, enhanced by his wine-weed cocktail, widens his pupils and peers deep into hers. He looks at her like he'd like to climb through them and hug her insides, because of all the love. It might've been the most romantic thing he'd ever said. He isn't the mushy type.

The wind swirls and coils and slaps her across the face. Freezes her cheeks. The furious gusts invade her nostrils, push their way down into her core, chilling her organs. The dampness in the air permeates through her pores, seems to lodge in her guts like the April patches of brown around Quidi Vidi Lake.

A job, oh my God, she doesn't have a job. E.I. will only last 45 weeks, if she's lucky. Things look grim. How will she find work? There is no work. Things are only going to get worse over the next few years.

When she was a child, her father constantly corrected her.

"Stand up straight, don't be rude, don't forget to say the blessing, don't forget to say your prayers."

Her father walks in the room and, instantly, she feels like nothing she does is good enough.

Cait and Jake hike El Hoyo volcano, near Leon. The volcano dirt is dry and flaky and light, and it is hot as hell outside. The two-day trek culminates at the top of the volcano, leaving them staring at a giant crater of sulphur that steams and stinks and God knows when it'll just explode.

"Wow, look at that." Cait stands, sweaty and muddy, her hands on her hips, and she inhales the rotten egg smell. "What's down there." She says it to herself. The gaping hole of nothing and everything -- so dark and mysterious and volatile. The ground they stand upon seems to rumble.

Their tents, neon orange and green and turquoise are pops of colour, like Nerd candies amongst the dry brown grass. Pitched just down over the hill from the crater, they are vulnerable. At any point, they could be guzzled up, melted with molten lava. What the fuck is she doing here anyway?

"What're you staring at?" Jake marches up behind her, gnawing on a Cliff protein bar.

Cait glares at him. "I'm staring at the grass, Jake." She looks back at the crater.

"Come on now, Cait, the name bitch is reserved for the GPS on this trip." He chomps on the bar and pokes her in the ribs and she wishes he'd just fuck off and let her have this moment. Go away. She closes her eyes and pretends he has melted away and it's just her and the smell of sulphur and toasting skin. She cranks her neck to the side and rests her ear on her shoulder. Turns her head forwards a little so she can smell her skin. The smell of toasting skin, for a person who's sun-deprived, is one of life's smallest and most fulfilling and most exotic pleasures. She stays there, in that position, until she hears Jake turn and walk away from her, crunching the dry grass under his hiking boots. Her relief quickly turns to regret as she imagines the sinking disappointment in his gut. He's doing his best, and she knows that.

In 1997, Cait and Jess climb the steps of the Morgentaler Clinic. Cait's chest is a gnarled ball of rubber bands.

“Baby killers!” Angry faces scream on the sides of the steps.

“Keep your rosaries off my ovaries!” Screams the group on the opposite side.

Inside the clinic, the pretty blonde nurse stands by Caitlyn’s head. Her voice is soft like gauze. “Every mother a willing mother, every child a wanted child – that’s our policy. Motherhood is very difficult and you have to be ready. You’re making the right decision, sweetie. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you.” She squeezes Cait’s hand. Rubbing alcohol aroma climbs up Cait’s nostrils and whirls into her brain, like the cotton-ball fog.

The paper-covered steel table is so cold it hurts.

“Feet in the stirrups,” says the doctor. The clinical lights, her skin, her fingers and toes and insides, all so cold. Dead.

The nurse hovers above her, the light behind her glowing like a halo.

“I think the drugs have kicked in,” Cait warbles. Buzzing skin, tingling nose, lips, face. She is heavy on the hard surface. She’s laying on her back, on an iceberg, floating out to sea. A dead body. The instruments clinking on the surgical tray are muffled.

“You’ll feel a kind of tugging pressure now.” The doctor is stern, his voice rough as sand paper.

A clench on her lower abdomen, wrenching rigorously around and around in a circle, hauling and yanking and jerking, her insides tugged downwards. And then, one mighty and final pull. The grand pull-ba. The sensation that her bowels and lower intestines might plop right onto the floor. Something has been extracted. She has been gutted like a fish.

Afterwards, Jess drives down Lemarchant Road, eastbound. Cait’s head rests against the glass of the passenger side door. She stares at Signal Hill in the distance, a fog python slinking around the rock, about to throttle Cabot Tower.

“How do you feel?” Jess keeps her eyes on the road as they glide past the black and white cow pattern painted on Moo Moo’s, as they approach Rawlins Cross.

“Like I’m in a bad dream.”

“It’s okay. Take it easy. The hardest part is over.”

It’s not over. The grieving, the guilt, it’s not over, not by a long shot. They swoop through the intersection at Rawlins Cross. Bannerman Park is on the left. Left again, and Government House is on their right.

“I guess next time you’ll think twice about unprotected sex, hey?” Jess can’t help herself.

Cait’s already-bruised abdomen is sucker-punched by her best friend. “Why did you say that?”

“Well I mean...Cait you have to realize that was a mistake. Why didn’t you make him cling-wrap that thing.”

“Well. Maybe driving me home from my abortion isn’t the right time to bring it up.”

“Sorry. You’re just so impulsive sometimes.”

“Wow. I do apologize.”

“Hey, I’m driving you home here. I’m always here for you, you know that.”

“Well I think you’re being pretty insensitive at the moment.”

They glide past Memorial Stadium, up Kenna's Hill, up Logy Bay Road, left onto Newfoundland Drive, right onto Eastmeadows Avenue, where they both live. Jess pulls up outside Cait's house.

"Wait. I'll help you in."

"Nope. I'm good, thanks."

"Cait, come on. They said you shouldn't walk alone. You could fall."

"Stop it, Jess. I want you to leave me alone now."

Cait's parents aren't home from mass yet. It isn't quite noon. With Bambi legs, she walks up the driveway and turns the key in the door. Locks it behind her. Crawls up the stairs to her bedroom. In the far distance, ships barmp in the harbour and the sound reverberates in her chest. There's a stinging within. Salt water seeping into an open gash. The steel that invaded her body has extracted something that would have been a sturdy, fierce, force of life.

She could go home after she gets to the top of Kenna's Hill, but she wants to keep walking. She loops back down through the cemetery, back towards Quidi Vidi Lake, and pounds the pavement back towards the gut. She blasts past Linda's Inn of Olde. Towards The Plantation. Scrams on towards Cuckold's Cove. The bank is wet – wet like the bank that went down to the river in Outer Cover, where they used to drink. Cait gave no fucks then. Zero. She'd go down to the river, drink Labatt Blue Star, make out with Chad. Any thoughts of her father's bullshit would get pushed right the fuck away. Gonzo. She'd grab Chad's ass and yank him towards her. Get lost in his deep, soft kisses. Swoop through a vortex, a black hole, leaving this universe and entering another. It was like jumping into a volcanic crater and landing in a pool of dreams.

Pounding the sludgy terrain, grasping at tree branches to get to the top of the hill without slipping, *I use sex to avoid reality* -- the realization spears her brain like a mid-afternoon hangover. She makes a promise to herself to go without sex for one full year.

She reaches the top of Cuckold's Cove and plunks her ass down on the freezing cold, wet rock. It soaks her winter leggings through and she fucking vows. She gawks out at the ocean, the blue water wearing a toque of white mist, fuzzy like the wool in one of those stupid fucking kitty cat hats she and Jess wore when they were children – the ones that pulled on over their heads and their dumb kid eyes and mouths poked through the front. Little kitty cat ears on the tops of their heads, their cheeks rosy as pink Popsicles, their noses glistening underneath from drippy icicles of snot.

The vapour in Cuckold's Cove is cold and frigid, unlike the volcanic vapour in front of the El Hoyo crater, which was hot and smothering and stunk of sulphur. Jake had snuck up behind her as she gazed into its pit. Pretended to push her in, laughing. She whirled around and snapped in his face because he frightened the shit out of her, putting her so close to plunging into the deep and historical death of a vicious force of nature. The instability and fragility of their relationship never left the air between them. They had become broken. It's time to let it go.

The moisture sticks to her face. Here, at home, in Newfoundland, plunked on the frigid rock that ribbons the North Atlantic, the brisk air is restorative. Despite the glacial isolation of the atmosphere, it somehow carries new life. She is a mother, and she is God damn ready for it this time.

An iceberg bobs and floats on the horizon, making everything bitter. Things will warm, though. Melt. They always do.

Chapter 19

The day is warm and gray with a whiff of mischief. She shouldn't have answered his Facebook message. She knows she shouldn't have, but she did it anyway.

Matt:

Hey. It was so great seeing you again.
What a sweet surprise after all these years.

Jess:

You too. Really nice.

Matt:

Do you think we could go for a harmless coffee?

Jess:

As long as it's harmless, why not?

She knew God damn well it wouldn't be harmless. Matt breezes through the door of Jumping Bean, which used to be Hava Java, where he and Jess would sit heart-eyed staring at each other.

"Hey." He touches her shoulder.

"Hey." His touch is delivered with an electric shock and she jumps.

"It's brighter in here than it was as Hava Java."

"Oh yes, much less grungy." She picks up her latte and steps to the side.

"Oh, I was going to get yours." He smiles at her, that same sparkly smile.

"No, no need of that. I'm taken care of." Behind the fly of her jeans, there's an old feeling.

He orders his coffee. Black. "Should we go upstairs where we always went? For old times' sake?" He motions towards the room perched atop the stairs at the back of the café.

"Sure. It's a little quieter up there I guess."

The space at the top of the stairs feels like a hug, cozy and tight.

In 1999, Jess and Cait spend a fair amount of time at Junctions. Tonight it's a Bung reunion show. The dude with the shoe-shine, whip-straight black hair and emerald green eyes taps Jess on the shoulders, mouthing, "Hey," through the guitar distortion and sing-screams. She cups her ear. Scrunches her eyebrows, mouths, "What?" and leans her ear towards his mouth. His mouth is wide, his breath warm, weed-y and beer-y. "I heard this might be their last show." She leans her mouth towards his ear, "I know." Body surfers bounce and slam over them and Jess gets a rubber-soled Converse kick to the face. Dan's arm is around her waist. She'd seen him at shows before. And in the Thompson

Student Centre. They'd spoken in the China Kitchen lineup a couple times, whilst waiting for their two-dollar hash browns.

Their embrace is anchored, withstanding shoves and whacks and elbows. He keeps her close. Plants a wild and messy wet one on her and she doesn't mind one bit.

"Good night, you motherfuckers!" The lead singer of Bung is shirtless and barefoot and posed like Jesus Christ on the cross. He pretends to hang himself with one hand and flips the crowd the middle finger with the other. Her ears ringing like an emergency test signal, Jess stumbles into Dan and they stumble together onto the platform outside the bar. Around them people are smoking and kissing and babbling.

Dan's emerald green eyes are hopeful. "Do you wanna go to Classic Café?"

"Yes, I definitely wanna go to Classic Café."

"I lllllike the way you think. Wait – what's your name again?" He crumbles into melodic giggles, his voice hoarse but with a chirpy quality. She holds his hands, which are clammy from the show, but hers are just as clammy so it's all good.

"It's Jess."

"Oh right. Cute. It suits you." He kisses her again, quick, shy, a bit slobbery. "Man, what a fffucking great show." They weave through a trail of stragglers who have trickled into an alleyway across from the bar entrance. The passageway blooms into a small courtyard where people puff plumes of marijuana smoke into the sky and blow each other brainers. Jess yanks him towards the stairs that go from Junctions up to Duckworth Street. She falls behind him, runs her fingers through her sweaty hair and scrunches it to try to make it look beach-wavy.

"Cock dog?" A former glamour puss, now homeless with the uniform of a tattered fur coat and halter top with one breast hanging out, stands by a hot dog cart. Once, she was high society. Once, she had a future. Once, she was less known. Less loved.

"No thanks." Dan doesn't let go of Jess' hand. They look both ways to cross the street. On the other side, they stop to kiss, leaning against the CBC building, its Art Deco lines and borders casting a shadow from the street light across Dan's cheek, as Jess half-lifts her eyelids to glance. The next kiss is a little slower, a little saltier, a little longer. He pulls close to her. He's only slightly taller than her, maybe 5'9", tops, to her 5'6".

She combs her hand through his sleek hair in between kisses. "You're just as sweaty as I am." They stand there, kissing, swaying.

He scrunches her hair. "You're right. You're disgusting." They giggle. They always giggle.

They stride, arms around each other, the last few steps to Classic. The booth in the back corner is empty and they beeline it and each slide into one side. They order toutons and crispy bacon and lots of maple syrup and butter and they devour it and devour each other and Dan adores Jess, always.

Sips his coffee. Bites his croissant. It's a familiar, old, comfortable silence. Just the swoosh of the espresso machine, the babble of the other patrons. The clinking of spoons on cups. Once, when they were teenagers, they were asked to stop making out in that room at the top of the stairs.

“Jess, I’m so sorry about your mom. She was such a caring woman. I always loved her.” He had to go there. Right into her core, her heart, with her mother. It’s like he always knows exactly how to get to her. She doesn’t speak. Just stirs her latte. Stares at the frothy milk, swirled with cinnamon. The buttery cinnamon toast her mother made in the mornings.

“Sorry,” he puts a hand on her arm, “I didn’t mean to make you sad. Want to go?” He looks towards the front door and she drains her cup and says okay.

They walk onto Water Street and the sea salt air lays a cloak of fog over their shoulders. They walk towards the War Memorial and Matt links arms with Jess and she goes right along with it, until she realizes she’s married with two boys she’d take a bullet for. She pulls her arm away, gently, but her heart is still fuzzy. She wishes it wasn’t, but it is.

They walk in silence for a few moments. “Marriage is tough, hey? Mine isn’t great right now. She doesn’t want to talk to me anymore. She just seems...over me.”

“Well, it happens. Kids are tiring. There are always rough times in marriage.”

Matt shoves his hands in his pockets. “Man, it’s freezing.”

“It’s only April. We’ll have another snowstorm yet.”

He inches closer and his arm is touching hers. “How’s Cait? I heard her and Jake split.”

“She’s...you know. She’s having a rough time.”

“I didn’t know him, but from Facebook, they seemed happy.”

Good old Facebook. The platform of performance. “They were the life of the party, really. In their prime, anyway.”

“What happened? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I guess, just...life. People change. They’re both so feisty.”

“Oh, I know Cait’s feisty. Someone just as feisty as her would be a doubly feisty duo.”

“I guess over time they just stopped bringing out the best in each other and it just became all sparks, and not the good kind of sparks, and danger. I guess the good sparks turned bad. Yin-hang, comedy-tragedy kind of thing.”

“Sad.”

“Yeah. Me and Dan were best friends with them. But it just started to be like there was all this latent tension between them all the time. Like a minefield. I guess people either grow together or they grow apart.”

“So...how are you and Dan?” His arm is still touching hers.

“We’re good. He’s a great father.” *Don’t do it. Don’t make yourself vulnerable.*

They walk. They approach her car and his blueberry blue eyes peer into hers, and he’s into her heart again and he’ll always be that person for her.

“Want to sit down for a minute?” He nods at the steps in front of the War Memorial. They sit on the step, crouched there, wordless, touching shoulders for warmth. He moves his hand towards her and they link fingers. Their heads are close, and he turns towards her. No one is around. She feels his warm breath and smells him – his saliva, his skin, just...him - and sees the familiar mouth and she could turn her face in the opposite direction but she doesn’t. She turns towards him and their lips press together and she stays there, her lips against his, warm, and she feels his breath on her cheek while they

sway. She lifts her eyelids partially open, and there, walking down Water Street at the foot of the War Memorial, is Jake and Stacey, and Jake has just pulled his face from Stacey's and he sees Jess, she knows he sees her. She pulls away from Matt, an electric current, a lightning bolt shooting through her body, zapping her chest, numbing her lips and nose and cheeks. Her entire face. All she can think about is her father and Mellie through the slats in the closet door at the foot of her stairs, and her stomach churns and growls and she is going to be sick and she hates herself and she hates the betrayal, beyond any kind of bodily sensation, beyond anything that is graspable in this world and atmosphere.

Chapter 20

A gastronomic cavalcade of cucumber mint cocktails, tuna tacos, and a brash brigade of people, just happy that it's May and summer is coming. Adelaide Oyster House is part of the new, hip St. John's. The host has a long, brown, pointy, gnome-y beard that shines with the devoted practice of applying beard wax. His plaid shirt hangs from his waif-y frame and black horn-rimmed glasses rest on his adorable 20-something nose.

"Guys, it's gonna be about a 30-minute wait, how's that sit with you guys?" His fingers are splayed, paused in front of him, like he's about to start playing bongos, and his face freezes with expectant raised eyebrows.

Jess and Dan look at each other. "We could pop across the street to Blue for a drink first?" Dan seems to be going with every step, he's just so happy to be alive, and to be in this place, at this time, with this person.

"Sure," shrugs Jess, her soul dirty with self-loathing.

The sweet host gives a thumbs up. "I'll give you guys a call when your table's free?" He holds one hand to his ear like it's a phone, with just the pinky and index fingers up. "All good?" He flips both hands into thumbs up and looks hopefully between Jess and Dan. She can't say no. She'll come off like a supremely uncool old mom. So she turns the frown upside down and returns gnome beard boy's thumbs up. "Cool."

"Sure!" Dan scans the place, a cozy party pit, as they turn to head outside. "I feel like I'm in Montreal when I'm in this place." The walls and floors are barn wood, the walls glow purple, the hanging light fixtures barn lanterns – just what you'd expect to find in a hipster gastro establishment.

"It's a fun vibe for sure." Her chest hurts. The War Memorial memory hurts. "Loud though."

"I just love the small plates concept. It's just a more social dining experience. And their craft beer selection is deadly." Dan links his arm into hers as they step onto the sidewalk and cross the street to Blue. Cozies into her. Dan adores Jess, always.

Her dad is home with the boys. Insisted they go out. "Marriage needs just as much care as kids do." He'd been severe, scolding even.

"I don't know, Dad. I appreciate the gesture but we need to watch money."

"I'll pay for it. Cab, booze, food, I'll pay for it all."

"No way. You've been so down since Mom –"

"Give it up, you're going." He looked at her wide-eyed. "This will help me, spending time with the boys."

"But Dan – I don't know if he'll want to go –"

"I'd love to go!" Dan hopped down the steps, grin wide and goofy and that was it. Decision made.

At Blue on Water, they slide onto high bar stools around a two-person, pub height table in the corner, right next to the glass garage door that opens up in the summertime. It's too cold out for that yet, but the sky outside is melting into dusky blue, soon-to-be-black, and there's still some pink. They can pretend it's summer.

A sprightly waitress drops two glasses of water on the table. She's teensy and wears a lot of eye makeup – dramatic midnight blue swoops on the lids. Thick, black, cat-eye liner. “Hey guys!” She's almost as chipper as Dan. “What can I get you today?”

“What's on tap?” Dan folds his hands, propped on the table.

“We've...got...Shock Top, Guinness, Kilkenny, Stella, Rickard's White – ”

“Say no more,” he hoists a finger in the air, “I'll have Shock Top.”

“I will too.” Jess Mona Lisa smiles at the girl.

“Did you guys want a food menu?”

“I think we're good for now, thanks.”

“No prob! I'll be back with your beers.”

Dan breathes in, satisfied, fulfilled, just happy to be where he is in this particular moment. “Isn't St. John's great?”

“Sometimes, yep.”

“On a nice day, it's the greatest place on Earth. Everyone knows everyone, everyone's nice on a sunny day...”

“Yes, we're close-knit here, that's for sure.” Jumping Bean sits right across the street from Blue. She feels like she's sea sick.

The sprite drops their beers on the table. “Enjoy, you guys.”

Dan sips his with his eyes pleasantly closed. Opens them to observe the pleasing yellow-orange colour of the beer. “Remember when there were, like, no restaurants in St. John's?” He's as tickled pink as the sky to be having a night out.

“Yup. There was that Greek place that opened where the Masonic Temple is...I remember that being a pretty big deal.”

“And The Casbah...that was a pretty big deal.”

“That was the first place to be a restaurant AND a bar.”

Dan splays his fingers out behind his head as if his mind is blown. “That concept went away for a while...well there was The Vault.”

“That was too fancy for me. I never went there. It turned into a bar at a certain hour though.”

Dan's phone rings to the tune of Return of the Mac, because he loves Apple products. “I bet that's our table.” He dinks his index finger at the green answer button. “Hello!” He waits. “Yep, we sure do!...Ok, we'll be right over.” He dinks his finger at the red hang-up button. Nods at Jess and her glass. “Time to chug-a-lug, sister.” He picks up his own glass, “I'll race you.”

They both giv'r. The carbonation stings up through her nostrils and zaps her throat and esophagus and every vein and tendon around her collar bones. She slams the glass on the table and swallows. Hard.

Dan finishes just after she does. “Damn, girl! I'm impressed.” He tosses a \$20 on the table and tries to make eye contact with the waitress. He waves at her and points at the table, and she scurries over to collect the bill. “Thanks you guys – have a great night!”

Dan looks both ways before they cross the street back over to Adelaide. “Even though I love all the new places, I still love all the old ones that have been around for ages and ages.”

“What, like The Ship and The Duke?”

“I love those places. The Duke, especially.”

“Nine hours of pints.”

“Nine hours of pints.” Dan puts his arm around Jess. Sam was conceived after nine hours of pints one Paddy’s Day at The Duke.

Inside Adelaide, it’s brash and ballsy and sizzling with frying pans and clanging with pots and cowbell that sound every time someone buys a round for the kitchen. A throbbing bass beat pulses the atmosphere. Twenty-and-thirty-somethings yak excitedly at each other, snap Instagram pics of their Port Rexton beers next to a candle.

“Over here, you guys!” It’s young gnome beard. Their best bud. He leads them to a table along the purple-lit wall. “Someone’ll be right with ya, ok?” He hands them menus and folds his hands, *Namaste*. Gives a karate-style half-bow before bopping back to the front door.

Jess gawks and squints at the oyster menu, scrawled on a chalk board behind the bar. “Oyster virgin. I know nothing about oysters.”

“Omigod oysters are so amazing. Aphrodisiacs.” He winks at her.

“Okay, well you decide then.”

“So you’ll try them?” His eyes light up.

Thinking of the slimy texture, like one of Liam’s biggest boogers, makes her wretch. But Dan is a good man. “Yes. I’ll try an oyster.”

“You don’t have to.”

“You love them though.”

“I DO love them! It’s like a shock of freshness when you eat an oyster. You wake up. Oysters bewitch the mind!”

“Ok ok ok ok, just order them before I change my mind.” She scans the cocktail menu and decides tonight is not the night to scrimp.

A girl with a tight black Nirvana t-shirt, nose ring, acid wash jeans and short, spiky purple hair appears at their table. Pours each of them a glass of cucumber water and leaves the carafe on the table. “Can I get you guys some drinks?”

“I’ll have the El Camino.” Jess points to it on the menu. *The Overcast* newspaper recently declared it the best drink in St. John’s. When it arrives, she sips the frosty neon green mixology. It’s boozy and just what the doctor ordered. Just the prescription to numb her guilt. She drains the glass quickly, motioning to the waitress for another.

“Whoa, horsey!”

She ignores Dan. She’s not in the mood to talk.

“So...I’ll get a platter of Pickle Points from PEI? You’re really gonna do this?”

“Yes Dan, I said I’d do it.”

“Alright. Jesus. What’s your problem?”

“I don’t have a problem, it’s just that I already said I’d do it!”

“We should get other stuff too.”

She looks at her second drink, nearly empty. “Yeah, I want tuna tacos and the Kobe beef lettuce wrap.”

The tables along the purple wall are very close together. The woman at the table next to them catches Jess’ eye and points to her drink. “Awesome, right?” Her eyebrows are raised, as if to say, *Us wives are keeping a delicious secret from our husbands*.

Jess drains El Camino number two and Nirvana t-shirt slides the oysters onto the table. “More drinks?”

“Another one of theeseese, for me.” Jess points at her glass and her eyes are getting droopy. “And I’ll get tuna tacos and the beef lettuce wrap.”

“Probably more water too, please.” Dan adjusts the location of the oysters. “I’ll get a Port Rexton Chasing Sun, please.”

“I don’t know how you drink IPAs.” Jess slurs. “They taste like ear wax.”

He ignores her. “Okay, you ready to try one of these?”

“Ssssure. Why the hell not.”

Ai-ai-aiiii! Yelps and whoops and hollers and cowbell. Someone has bought a round for the kitchen. They are at a fusion hipster New Newfoundland kitchen party. Jess frowns at the yelling.

Dan holds a shell up, puts it into his mouth, tips his head back. The goo slides down his throat. “See? All there is to it. Your turn.”

Jess reaches her index finger and thumb towards a shell. Her balance is off, she can tell, even though she’s just sitting. Raising the shell to her lips, her fingers quiver and she can smell the sea. Suddenly she’s on the ferry from Port aux Basques, age eight, and the ocean is unsettled and the boat swoops up? Down. Up? Down. She throws up over the rail on the side of the boat.

She pushes back her chair. Bolts to the back of the restaurant. Into the restroom. El Camino blasts into the toilet. More El Camino. Into the toilet. Flush the toilet. Sag down to the floor, cheeks flushed, eyes salt-watery. Awash in guilt. Blow nose. Dab face with paper towel. Wash mouth out, apply lip gloss to lying mouth.

Back at the table, Dan doesn’t seem to have noticed Jess’s distress. He’s finished off the oysters and the platter has been removed. A new couple has been seated at the table next to them.

It’s Matt Fucking Bohmer and his fucking wife.

“Jess! Hey!” Matt Fucking Bohmer jumps when she reclaims her seat.

“Oh...Matt? Hey. Wow. Dan, this is Mmmatt.”

“Hey man.” He shakes Matt’s hand.

“Great to meet you, Dan. This is my wife, Grace. Grace, Dan and Jess.”

“This isn’t The Jess, is it?” Grace has long, whip-straight, jet black hair and wears cakey makeup. Blush, lipstick, fake eyelashes. She’s stunning, but the opposite of the type of woman Jess ever imagined Matt would end up with.

Dan pulls his hand from Jess’ and sips his beer. Whenever Matt’s name comes up, he stiffens.

“Yep, same Jess.”

“High school – that was a lonnnng time ago, hey?” Jess looks around for the Nirvana t-shirt. She’s dying for her tuna taco to soak up the El Camino and the regret.

“Come on now, Jess, it wasn’t that long ago, right? We’re all still young at heart, yeah?” Matt’s blue eyes sparkle around the table and land on Jess. He suddenly looks ghoulish under the purple lights. Sallow. Haggard. Evil, even. God damn tequila in the God damn El Camino.

“It feels like a long time ago to me.” She reaches for Dan’s hand. He doesn’t accept it and instead reaches for his beer again. “Two boys at home makes it feel like a really long time ago.”

“Two boys, wow.” Grace adjusts a strand of hair away from her face. Her cheekbones are defined. Possibly from Botox. “You’ve got a really good body for two kids.” A martini is laid in front of her. She sips it without removing her eyes from Jess.

“Well,” Jess slugs some of Dan’s beer, “all I eat are scraps from their plates as they’re being scraped into the garbage can. Maybe that’s why. HA!”

Matt cracks up. Too much.

“They do keep us pretty busy.” Dan crunches his fish taco, his eyes remaining on Matt.

“Anyway,” Jess turns her attention to her own food, “this is a rare chance to eat a real meal, so I’m gonna tuck in here.” Desperately she tries to make eye contact with Dan but he looks anywhere but at her.

Nirvana t-shirt arrives a few minutes later. “Anything else you two?”

“What do you think, Dan? Dessert? There’s a Caramel Log-inspired creation I saw on Instagram earlier.”

“I’m pretty full. Feeling a bit sick, actually.” He flicks his eyes toward Matt, then back at Jess, and they bore right into her. In her own stomach swirls the green drink, the vanilla latte from the other day and the fishy smell of the harbour.

“Jess,” Grace once again crosses the verbal border between their tables. “So you’re our daughter’s teacher! I just didn’t make the connection that you’re the same Jess, I guess because of your married name – isn’t that funny?” Her tight fuschia blouse buttons are undone enough to show off her butt-crack-ish cleavage. “I mean, it’s strange that Matt never mentioned it.” She tosses the remaining pink martini drink down the hatch.

The bill arrives on the table and Jess snatches it up. “Let me give you my Visa.” She whips it out of her purse and hands it over. Punches her PIN into the machine.

Ai-ai-aiiii! Clang pound whoop cheer – the bass thumps louder and it’s right in Jess’ ears, and the longing she feels for Matt and her mother and Dan, as heartache does, stretches down her throat, like long fingers intertwining with her ribcage, pulling it apart, exposing her soul to the elements.

Chapter 21

Maisie is wonderstruck, gaping at the book stacks. “Boooooks!”

The crinkling of the cellophane, wrapped around book covers that smell like someone’s basement. Of knowledge, of the past. Through the decades, people reading fairytales through the lens of each of their own stories. With their children curled into their laps, they orate tales of adventure and mystery and love through their own joy, their own pain, their own loss and it’s all made better by the bursting affection they feel for that child tucked into that lap, like a baby bird in a nest. All of the bruised hearts. Comforted and lulled by words, illustrations, humanity and other-worldliness and long ago lands.

One of Cait’s earliest memories of elementary school is when the librarian gave the class the introductory tour of the library and explained how the Dewey Decimal System worked. Cait adored trolling the shelves, running her fingers along the spines, thinking about being somewhere else and about what she’d do when she got older. Select a book or three or six. *The Story of Ping* – where a little duck in China gets separated from his family, but in the end, they’re reunited. *Millicent and the Wind* – about a lonely, isolated girl who lives on a hill and who wishes for the wind to bring her a friend. Tales of the lonesome who find the familiar or a new connection.

Flip through the Dewey Decimal System cards that slept in pull-out beds inside a case of oak; the strongest of woods – made to last. She loved the sign-out card in the pocket stuck to the back cover. Who signed this one out before her? Who would see her name printed there after she returned it? The person who saw her name could be someone she knew, or maybe not. She loved the idea of that possible anonymity. It was somehow an extension of the story on the pages – who else read that book? Who liked that book? Who was like her? It was the possibility of a secret, unspoken, unrealized-as-of-yet connection between a string of people. She’d draw library cards with crayons in the backs of her own books at home. Years later, she’d spend hours in the bowels of the QEII

Library at the university, trolling through news articles on lit microfilm screens, reading the bylines above the stories, hoping someday someone would read her name on a screen.

Once upon a time, Robert Munsch visited their school. The actual, real-life, Robert Munsch. The Robin Williams of children's literature. Cait couldn't believe a celebrity of such stature, such acclaim, was coming to their school. She gawked up at him in wonder as he read *The Paper Bag Princess*, just the way he did when she listened to him on CBC reading to other children, in other places. He flailed his arms all over the place, leapt up, *wahhhhhh!*-ed – all of the very high energy crazy Robert Munsch shit that was to be expected. He didn't disappoint. In *The Paper Bag Princess*, Princess Elizabeth meets a handsome prince named Ronald, who she's set to wed. He's freakin' gorgeous, Prince Ronald. Spiffy, dashing, always dressed to the nines. Elizabeth can't believe her good fortune, landing such a fellow. But tragically - Prince Ronald gets captured by a fire-breathing dragon! And no one can help him besides the woman who so selflessly adores him. Elizabeth doesn't hesitate -- she ventures on a daring and brave mission to save her prince, all in the name of love and devotion. She trudges through burnt wasteland, the likes you'd find in a Cormac McCarthy novel. She gets all her gorgeous princess clothes burnt right off her so she has to wear a paper bag. Her hair gets singed. She finds the dragon, bribes and manipulates him in order to tucker him right out so he's not guarding Prince Ronald anymore.

Anyway, she finally makes her way to old Ronald, in eager anticipation of a grateful embrace that she's saved him. But instead? He acts like a saucy brat -- an ungrateful, spoiled, self-entitled dickweed. Scolds her for not looking clean enough and princess-y enough. *Oh, well I'm sor-ry if I've braved fire and apocalyptic environmental conditions to save your poncy ass. Screw you, Ronald,* says Princess Elizabeth.

Cait loved it then and she loves it even more now. Cait is woke. She spots the book on the shelf and feels the same electrical current Princess Elizabeth must have felt, and she plucks it off the shelf for her and Maisie to read at home later.

Maisie leaps to reach a book just beyond the height of her. "Want that one, Mommy!"

Nearby, a man with hair coloured like cookies 'n' cream ice cream wears a plain white t-shirt. His daughter looks about Maisie's age, maybe a little younger. They're sitting in the same bookstack and his arm is wrapped around her like she is the Hope diamond. His Roman nose brushes her rosy cheek and she nuzzles into him, her milk chocolate brown hair mussed against his chest. He looks up from the book and so does his daughter, towards Maisie and Cait, and his eyes crinkle into the gentlest and most genuine smile. He stays there, rests his cheek on his daughter's shiny hair, and watches Maisie, boinging for the spine that pooks out slightly beyond the others in the row. Cait smiles at him. He seems amused.

"Mommmyyyy!"

"Yes, hold your horses sweetheart, I'm getting it for you."

The man's daughter is looking, too.

"You want to go read it now, or bring it home?"

"Now. Here." Maisie plunks down right where she's standing. They're only about 10 feet from the man and his daughter.

“Well,” she glances at them, the way parents do to each other when they’re trying to feel out boundaries. *Your kid is wriggling to jump up on that monkey bar, is it ok if I help him?* “Why don’t we go a little ways down, so we don’t interrupt those people. Libraries are for quiet time, so they may be trying to read.”

“No, HERE!”

“Is okay.” The crinkly eyes still twinkle. The man has an Eastern European accent. “We no mind.”

“HERE!”

“Shhh, Maisie, library. Remember? Quiet.” Cait whispers. “Are you sure?” His quiet kindness feels warm and comforting, even just from being in the same vicinity.

“Yes, sure. You are welcome.”

“Sit here, Mommy.” Maisie has skipped right over and plunked herself right next to the man and his daughter. “I’m five.” Maisie looks the girl in the eye. Turning five is a huge deal.

The girl is mildly startled but instantly starts to melt. “I’m four.”

“My name’s Maisie.” Maisie touches the girl’s arm and cocks her head to the side and her mouth stretches into a row of little halogen Chiclets.

“My name’s Ana.” She smiles. She’s some sweet.

“Just like in *Frozen!*”

“Yes, we’ve seen that one a few times, haven’t we?” Cait looks at the man.

“Mommy, she even has sort of the same hair as Anna!”

“We have not seen that one yet. Ana’s friends at school tell her about it all time, right Ana?”

“You can come watch it at our house if you want to! You be Anna, I’ll be Elsa.”

Maisie says that line to Cait almost every day. *You be Anna, I’ll be Elsa.*

“They make friends so easily, hey?” Making parent small-talk is always a bit awkward. It’s the same questions – how old is he/she, what extra-curriculars is he/she doing, how is he/she at daycare, etc., etc.

“It’s a beautiful thing.” He watches the two girls, who have scuttled over on their own, and are flipping through *Z is for Zamboni*, jabbing their fingers at pictures, cackling at God-knows-what. Hopefully not something poop- or pee-related, which is all Maisie and her classmates are about lately.

“It really is. I wish adults were better at that. Too bad we have all of this baggage.” Cait’s attempt a joke, then notices the confusion on the man’s face, and realizes there’s a language barrier. “I mean, it’s too bad we carry all of these yucky experiences with us that prevent us from making friends so easily.”

“Ah, yes. But maybe, you know, we learn from our kids a little bit.” He looks from the girls to Cait, and he looks right at her, but just for a moment, before turning back to the girls.

“What’s your name?” She catches a whiff of him. Not a bad thing.

“Jakob.” Oh for fuck sakes, but he pronounces it *Ya-Kob*, so she determines it’s far enough away from Jake to be okay. Maybe he’s another version of Jake, from another reality, a reality in which a Caitlyn and a Jakob could work out in the end. “And you?”

“Caitlyn. Cait for friends.” The other Jake and his Stacey have been spending more time together. Cait gets the scoop from Maisie. It’s time to move forward, and she

feels increasingly more comfortable about that every day. There are dips – moments, seconds – where she still misses Jake. A song, a smell, a TV show. But those moments fade and become less frequent.

“Nice to meet you, Cait.” He extends his hand and she accepts it.

“And you as well.” She shakes it and his palm is smooth. “Hey, maybe we’re not so bad at making friends after all.” They both laugh. He is not wearing a wedding ring, but who knows what that means. He’s not her type, physically. He’s smaller. But there are people, is the thing, who perk interest, for all sorts of reasons. All of the bruised hearts and fresh starts. There are *Millicent* connections and there are *Ping* connections.

Chapter 22

Outside Adelaide, Dan flags a taxi. Slides into the back, not waiting for Jess to get in first. She walks around the other side to open her door.

“Stirling Crescent, please.” Dan clicks the seatbelt into the holder.

“What is wrong with you?” Jess hisses.

“Wow, I wonder.” He glares out the window. Then, “Look, I know you’re bored, okay? I know you’re restless.”

“I’m not... Dan – ”

“I know you’re sad. I’m sorry I’m not enough.”

“No. Dan, please – “

“I just can’t believe...did something happen with you? And Matt?”

Does he know something?

From the rearview mirror, the cab driver catches Jess’ eye. “Do ye like Irish music?” He asks.

“Sure.” Her insides are hard.

“Give this a listen.” He pops on a tape. Blasts it. “Do ya like that?”

“Sure. Who is it?” She’s desperate for a side conversation. Anything to keep Dan from asking more questions.

“That’s me. And me band.”

“You’re pretty good.”

“Goin’ on a reunion tour soon. Starts in Dublin.”

“Oh, so you were a pretty big deal then?”

“That we were.” The accordion and the stomping feet blast and the salt air wafts through the window. They sit and inhale it in silence.

“But ya know,” finally, the cabbie breaks his meditation, “the memories are just incomparable. They’ll stay with me forever. Those were some a the best times, on them stages, just...havin’ a laugh.” His eyes in the rear view mirror crinkle into a smile.

“So then, what brought you to Newfoundland? You’re Irish, it sounds like?”

“A woman. Course. Ye Newfoundland women, hard to say no to ye. Been married to her for 40 years now.” His laugh bounces out the window. The people outside Merchant Tavern hear him and they wave and laugh along with him and he waves back.

“Yes, that’s true. We’re a handful.” She looks towards Dan, whose glare hasn’t moved from the window. “Any marriage advice?”

“Always put each other first. Always.”

“I saw, by the way.” Dan still doesn’t look away from his window. “I saw the message from him pop up. And then seeing him there tonight...seeing how you two acted. I know, Jess.”

Chapter 23

Jess parks the car in the Lower Battery, the same place she and Cait always park. It’s the first Signal Hill hike of the season. It’s May, but it’s back to icy. Cait zips her coat.

Tightens her laces. “I put those spike thingies on the bottoms of my hikers, did you?”

“I should’ve, but I didn’t. Catch me if I fall.”

“Just hook your daddy long legs around me if you start to stumble.” Cait used to think the name was daddy, not dandy, and she still calls them daddy long legs. When they had sleepovers as kids, Jess’ lanky limbs would flail all over the place. A hand, smacked on Cait’s cheek. An elbow in a shoulder. A bony knee in a ribcage. Cait would yank back

the covers that were often twisted and snarled around Jess' limbs, and huff. Jess would bolt awake and roll her eyes and flip over on her other side.

The sky over the hill is gray and big and taunts a downpour. Droplets of icy rain sporadically prick their cheeks like tiny sewing pins. Nature's exfoliant. Refreshing on the face, a jolt on the system. Awake. Ready to take on the impish elements. They clunk across the section of the trail with the chain rope hooked into the rock. It's meant to be a rail, but it's the most dangerous part. A cliff goes straight down to the right of them. Jess usually walks in front, on account of the daddy long legs. Her hand rests lightly on the chain grazing the top when suddenly her pinky finger hooks into one of the chain links. "Holy fucking Christ, my finger, Jesus Jesus Jesus tonight."

"What the hell happened?"

Jess is on the verge of tears. "I hooked my God damned finger in the chain, owowowowowow." She shakes her hand and dances on her toes and her face is awash in pain. Below, the waves crash and dissolve on the rocks.

"Are you alright? Do you want to go back?"

"No. We're finishing. Oh shit, I just pissed my pants a little bit."

"Don't be an idiot. If you need to go back, we can go back."

"No, no, it's fine."

"It's a long walk."

"It's fine!"

"Alright then." Cait raises her eyebrows and she knows Jess is going to cry on this walk, even more than she's crying right now. Nervous energy, palpable in the atmosphere. Periodic pellets of ice, the throbbing threat of a full on downpour, swelling the air.

Jess trudges forwards, her gut burning, her hand burning, hot, pulsing pain embedded in the damp, dank sky. Numb. Just go numb, for fuck sakes. Trudge onwards. Focus on the feet.

"So," Cait treads lightly, "what's up with Matt Bohmer?" She intends to be gentle with Jess. Wills herself to be gentle with Jess.

Jess' guard shoots up. She can't take Cait's tough love right now. There are times when Cait is so forgiving and gentle and it's just what Jess needs, there are times when she's a loving right bitch and it's exactly what she needs, and there are times when that approach does not work whatsoever, not even a little tiny tweeny bit. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you tell me you saw him at the Aquarena? And that his kid is in your class? I'm just wondering how that's sitting with you. I know what he does to you."

She'd completely forgotten she had told Cait. She doesn't know what's real and what's happening in her head sometimes, these days. *Nobody loves me, everybody hates me, I think I'll go eat worms.* Cait sang it sometimes when they were kids, when Jess was accused of being overly sensitive. Her finger throbs and so do her ears, and her lips feel frostbitten. Numb. She's numb.

"It's okay if you don't wanna talk about it. I'm just worried about you." Cait tries to be patient with Jess when it comes to Matt. He was her first. Puppy love digs way down into the guts and buries a big dog bone to save for later. Part of her regrets not having had high school puppy love. But mostly not. Heartbreak is horrendous, and she

hopes Maisie doesn't tar her carefree high school years over a boy. Plenty of time for that. Jess' need for companionship is something Cait has never fully understood. It's a form of selflessness, but also of insecurity and dependency, as Cait sees it. For as long as Cait can remember, it has been Jess' goal to care for someone else.

They're at the top of the first section of stairs now, on the plateau next to The Narrows. Fort Amherst is across the water. Beyond the vast blue, Cape Spear is a teensy lighthouse in the distance, the size of the miniature figurine she and Maisie put in the fairy garden they built in the backyard last summer. The ghosts over at Cape Spear. They went on a field trip to Cape Spear in grade two. Cait was fascinated with how self-sufficient the Cantwell lighthouse keeper family was with so little. It was like stepping back in time. Feather beds and pillows, pee pots underneath each one. How cold it must've been, up there all by themselves. She pictured them, doing their chores, darning their socks by the fire, watching for weather. But they did it, they did it all.

At the end of the day when they slid back into the green bus seats, Jess and Cait sat together, of course. "I wonder if they got married up there too?" It was all Jess thought about. Getting married. Even in grade two.

"I've seen him a couple of times." She feels so guilty admitting it to Cait. She feels judged.

Cait knew it, she fucking knew it and it was what she was afraid of. Jess getting sucked back into that love and romance vortex, that's not even real. She's so emotional. So nostalgic. The past belongs in the past. Over with the ghosts at Cape Spear. "And how are you with that?" Cait hates Matt for making such a scar.

"I..I'm not okay." The tears trickle a little more now. They're about to start at the set of steps number three. Number two is the hardest, steepest, breathiest, most intense one on Signal.

"What happened?"

"You'll get mad at me if I tell you."

"No I won't." *Don't get mad at her, don't get mad at her.*

"You can't judge me."

"I won't judge you, you're my best friend, you idiot!" Like a seagull about to shit on her head, a swoop of regret thunks Cait's chest. She already knows what Jess is going to say. A man with a neon yellow jacket approaches them. "Hello there," Cait says. It's mandatory for locals to say hello to every other local when hiking on Signal Hill.

"Howdy," the man replies, and tips his baseball cap.

Jess' finger is fully numb now, from the cold, but she still feels it throb. It's a pulse, unrelenting. It might be broken. It'll never properly heal, probably. "Well...we went for a coffee..."

"Right..."

"Went for a walk after..."

"Yeah..."

"Then we sat by the War Memorial, and we ended up kissing."

"Ohhhh fuccck."

"I know." Jess is sobbing now. Gasping for breath as they pound up the third set of steps. Her sneaker slips on the wet wood and she trips forwards. Catches herself on the

hand with her bad pinky finger. “Fuuuuck.” She stops and sits on the step and drops her head in her hands and sobs.

“Oh, Jess.” Cait sits next to her and wraps an arm around her and squeezes her. Rests her head on Jess’.

“I fucked up so badly.”

“How did it happen? Matt is so slimy.”

“What?”

“He is. I’m sorry but he is. I hate him.”

“He...I don’t think he meant it. It just kind of happened.”

“Oh, he fucking meant it.”

“Cait, look. I know you think it’s wrong of me, and you’re judging me. But we were really special to each other.”

Puke. You don’t cheat on your husband. “I know you were. Why did you do it though? Are things not good with Dan?”

Jess knew Cait would judge. “Things with Dan have been...just felt...flat. On my part anyway.”

A woman with a red Running Room jacket on is approaching. They both see her at the same time.

Cait gives Jess an extra squeeze. “Should we walk for a bit? While we talk? It might help.”

Jess sniffs. Cradles her hand and pinky. “Yep.”

“Hi there! Rotten ol’ day, hay?” The woman in red skips past them, two steps at a time.

“Oh yes. Disgusting.” Cait answers.

A gelatinous chunk of seagull shit splats on the step right in front of them.

“Jesus!” Jess jumps backwards and Cait catches her by the shoulders.

“It’s okay,” Cait says, “we just missed it. We just escaped the whooshing plop of shit.”

“So,” Cait encourages Jess to keep going forwards, “what’s going on?”

“I just...Dan is his usual chipper self, and he hasn’t talked to me about Mom. Matt reminds me of when Mom was around, when she wasn’t sick.”

Plop goes the metaphorical seagull shit, right on Cait’s heart. She understands now, on another level, why.

“You’ve got to focus on Dan now. Does he know what happened?”

“No.”

“You gonna tell him?”

“I don’t know. What if he leaves me?”

“Well, not telling him is lying.”

“See, you’re judging me.”

“Well, you are married. Married people shouldn’t lie to each other.”

Jess storms ahead. Her finger sucking every bit of energy from her body. She beats, assaults the steps with her shoes, her breath as sharp as the pain in her chest. She hears Cait behind her, huffing to keep up. The air smells like thawing mud. Farmyard shit. Seagull shit.

At the top of the stairs, even Jess has to take a break, which allows Cait to catch up. “It’s just...” huff, huff, “...marriage is tough, yes, but divorce is even tougher.” She puts her hands on her knees. The first Signal Hill of the year is always a bit of a kick in the teeth. “I don’t want you to have to go through it. It’s horrible.”

“I don’t want that either and I don’t know if telling him is the right thing or not. What if it doesn’t do any good? What if it only hurts him for nothing?”

“So, you’re done with Matt then? You’ve cut him off?”

“Well...not yet.”

“Jess.”

“I know.”

“Really now.”

“I know! Jesus!”

“Well I’m just making sure. Text him. Now. Tell him you’re done and it was a mistake.”

Jess’ throat seems to close off. The air suddenly becomes extra cold and extra warm all at once and she can’t breathe very well. “I will. Later. I promise. I just have to think about exactly what to say.”

Cait seethes. “You say just what I said you should say – that it was a mistake and you don’t want to talk to him again.”

“Cait, he is an important person in my life.”

“Was. Like 20 years ago. And now you’re married. To an amazing husband. Don’t fuck it up.”

“Oh, that’s rich.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Look at your marriage!”

“Are you saying I fucked up my marriage?”

“Well...”

“Well...what? Say it.”

“Well, you’re just...a strong personality is all.”

How dare she. How fucking dare she. Imagine – to have such an inflated idea of oneself that she turns her own faults onto the other person. “I can’t believe you would even suggest that it’s my fault my marriage ended.”

“I didn’t say that! Look, I’m sor –”

“No, I’m really offended, actually. You’re the one who pretty much cheated on your husband, or you’re on your way there, ’cause I know you won’t have the strength to end things with Matt, and I know you’ll end up seeing him again, and it’s going to get worse, because you’re putting yourself in a bad situation because of your emotions. I can’t fucking watch it.”

“That’s what you think of me, is it?”

“Well you think of me as the one who ruined my marriage. I’ve been your best friend for going on 40 years, Jessica, what a fucking thing to say.” Hot tears rage, spill, drip all over her coat. “I’m outta here.” Cait strides ahead. Bolts up the last set of steps. Walks, walks, all the way down the hill, through Quidi Vidi, home.

Jess reaches the Lower Battery. Gets in the car and slams the door shut behind her. Drives to the hospital. Gets her pinky finger set in a brace. Goes home. Takes a lot of painkillers. Calls Matt.

Chapter 24

The rubbery ground on the Bannerman Park playground boings under Cait's Converse, as she chases Maisie, who makes a beeline to the monkey bars. Maisie always bolts directly to the section at the end of the park that has the contemporary, safe version of a merry-go-round. Merry-go-rounds have been deemed unsafe by new playground standards, as children can fly off them if they aren't holding on tight enough. Now, it's a tall, skinny merry-go-round, which can fit four kids, max, so the radius of which a child may fly off is much smaller. Plus, the kids can't help but hold on tightly to the spinning contraption, because if they don't, they'll just be gone right off 'er, right from the get-go. The challenge of the skinny merry-go-round is to hold on with all your might, even when it seems difficult, and don't throw up if you get too dizzy. Get as dizzy as you can, and hold on as tight as you can, and still stay on board. Maisie is a master at the tall skinny merry-go-round. Cait sits on the rock wall about 10 feet away and watches in amazement.

Maisie likes to rule the roost, but Cait is proud because she's inviting other kids on board.

"I'm five." She hears Maisie say it to the girl who has just joined her.

"I'm six." The girl responds, and Cait can see Maisie's face fall, just a bit, because turning five is such a big deal. You can't feel much more superior than when you turn five. Except maybe when you meet someone who's six.

"My name's Maisie."

"My name's Luke."

And just like that, they're best friends. Joined at the hip. Kindred spirits. But only for the duration of that particular visit to the park. Kids are fascinating that way. Making and releasing connections so easily. Relishing their time together, and then completely at peace with letting go. An exemplary model of Buddhist relationship mantra – independence through non-attachment. Savour the experience while you have it. When it's time to let go, it's time to let go. Cait wishes she could be like that. She will strive to be like that, she decides it right then and there.

June in Newfoundland. What a ride. Yesterday was ice pellets. Today is gray, but 20 degrees, but the wind, the Jesus wind. Fierce. Annoying. Like that beast of a dog in the yard behind hers, that barks for 45 minutes straight. But it's still warm, so she'll take warm wind over wind and ice pellets any day. It's the first day of summer today. June 21. And it's warm, whaddya know?

"Mommy!" Maisie has leapt off of the tall skinny roundabout, and wants to be lifted up to the sliding monkey bars. "Up!" Cait walks over, crouches, hoists Maisie up to grab the handle. My God she's getting heavy. And tall. Not like her mother.

"Okay, let go now!" Cait pushes her across and her legs dangle and wiggle and the bar bumps against the other end and she falls off.

"I can do it better!" Luke waits to be lifted up. He goes faster, jumps further.

"No, I can do it better! Again, Mommy. Again!"

"Okay," Cait lifts her again. "Go Maisie!" She cheers her on. "You're a superhero!"

“Mine is better than yours.” Luke is next to Maisie, looking down on her. Maisie holds his glare. Squints her eyes. Turns on her heel and bolts for the spider web climbing structure – all ropes in the shape of a teepee. Luke runs after her, but Maisie has no time for him anymore. The relationship has gone toxic. When it’s time to let go, it’s time to let go. Cait could never stay on there for as long as Maisie can. She’d step off it right away.

“Mommy!” Cait moseys to another spot, further down the rock wall. Maisie is right at the top of the spider’s web. “I’m right at the top, Mommy, just look at me!”

Cait holds her hand above her eyes, like she’s trying to see a far distance. “Oh my goodness, how’s the weather way up there? I can hardly see you, you’re so far away!” Some parents would be frightened to death to let their child go to the top. But Cait doesn’t worry about Maisie. She is sturdy, she is careful, she is smart. She is an inspiration.

“Caitlyn?” Cait turns her head right. From the direction of the splash pad walks a petite woman. Her fingers spread wide, her arms splayed to the sides in *oh-my-goodness* surprise and delight. Her hair, a purr of big, bold, bouncy brown curls that cascade around a petite pixie face and brush her freckled shoulders which are a hanger for her flowery, flowing camisole. Her oversized sunglasses, her bangle bracelets, her stride, which floats and pops like tiny bubbles in a glass of champagne. Melody Angel: a beautiful hippy filmmaker, a friend of Cait in their twenties, who moved to Toronto right after their first two years of university to do film studies at Ryerson. They keep in touch on social media. Cait drools over Melody’s Instagram feed. All of the different sets she’s on, all of the location shoots. The glamour, the freedom, the worldliness.

“Melody? Holy crap!” They hug, and it’s long and happy and she’s one of those friends who is always familiar, even if they haven’t laid eyes on each other in the real, non-social-platform world in nine years. “It’s so amazing to see you!”

“Yeah, I’m here on a shoot, and to see the fam, of course. My nieces are right over there on the swings.” She points towards them. Two little twin girls, Cait guesses they’re four. They’re petite, like Melody. Bird bones. Olive skin.

“Your sister’s kids?” Melody’s sister, Isabel, looks Brazilian. Long, black, straight hair, olive skin, piercing blue eyes.

Cait and Melody met at CHMR, like Cait and Jake, circa 1998, their first year at MUN. Melody was promoting her first film, so Cait was keen to book her on the show.

“Melody Angel’s first short film, *Sheet Say*, lets us eavesdrop on two lovers who’ve just slept together for the first time,” Cait read the intro, “From awkward to astounding, we feel both guilty and dirty, privy to an entire relationship foreshadowed during the tornado of one conversation. What remains after the storm? Can their relationship be rebuilt? Please welcome to the show, the enigmatic Melody Angel.”

Across the round table in the studio, Melody’s eyes are the colour of forest moss. Bright, wild, alive. “Happy to be here, Caitlyn. Thanks *so* much for having me.” She lays her hand on her chest at the word “so”, and nods, gratitude spilling out of her. She kinks her head to the side, and arches her back, adjusting herself in the seat. She reaches up and combs her fingers through her mane of wild curls.

“So, Melody’s film is part of the Women’s Film Festival here in St. John’s, and I was lucky enough to see it in advance of this interview, and man, it is sexy. And unsettling.”

“Thank you so much! Yeah, I’m really stoked it made it into the festival, and yeah, I wanted to zone in on the fear and vulnerability that’s there when you meet someone who could potentially be so important to you.”

“And also the rapture and the bliss.”

“Totally. You know, we’ve all been heart-eyed over someone, right? We know how amazing it is, and how you get just so lost in it.”

Cait met Jake a week before that interview. He came on board as a producer at CHMR. Months later, at a Moist concert in the TSC, he would buy her a beer and make jokes about their future children. “For sure. It’s the best feeling.”

“And then, when you break up, suddenly it’s the worst feeling, amiright?”

“Yeah, and these people really show that so well. It’s the rollercoaster and intensity of falling in love and out of love. They kind of go from fawns to rabbits to lions, and then in the end...well, people will have to see the movie to see which animals they are by the end I guess.”

Melody’s laugh is a lilting song of freedom, musical like a scale played on a flute by a fairy in the woods. “I guess it’s about the test that every romantic relationship has at some point, when your lover drives you insane at some point, and it’s kind of like a reckoning – do you blast past, or does it last?”

After high school, when Matt broke up with Jess, Cait had peeled her off the floor, her face red and blotchy, her eyes leaking a constant trickle, her body heaving and convulsing in sobs.

“Our chapter is over, Jess,” Matt told her. So cold. Almost like he’d planned the amount of time they’d be together in advance. “It’s okay. I’ll always treasure and care for you.” Their chapter was supposed to be forever, that’s what Jess thought.

“You seem wise beyond your 19 years on this topic.”

“Yeah,” Melody combed her hair with her fingers again, “my parents divorced when I was 13, and I was just shattered, of course, but lately, in the last year or so, I just started reading about divorce, marriage, the nature of relationships, and thinking about how marriage doesn’t seem natural and what an anomaly and accomplishment it is when marriages last a very long time. People change, you know? It shouldn’t be seen as a failure if two people grow apart.”

“And so...what did you read?”

“Jane Austin, Joan Didion, Toni Morrison – mostly stuff about women moving through the pain and then the power of heartbreak. Because people do – they become reborn after they have their heart broken. Sounds cheesy and cliché, but it’s like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. It’s a metamorphosis.”

On the playground, Cait walks with Melody as she meanders towards her nieces on the swings. “So Cait,” she lifts one up in each baby swing, and Cait steps in to push one of them, “you were at CBC, yeah? Are you still there?”

“Well actually...nope. I got laid off two months ago.”

“Oh shit. I’m so sorry, Cait, that is horrendous. So, are you working now at all?”

Cait shakes her head and tries not to feel like a loser.

They push the kids in silence, until Maisie realizes her mother is paying attention to another child and bounds over.

“I’m five!” Maisie stands, hands on hips, beaming.

“You are?!” Melody smiles back. “Well, these two are just four. Do you think you could help take care of them?”

“Sure!” She ambles around to the other side of the swings, next to Caitlyn.

“Mommy, you move, I can push her.”

“Sure thing and thank you for being so helpful, my angel.” Cait leans over and kisses Maisie’s chubby cheek. Gives it a slight chew. She must kiss her cheeks twenty times a day, at least.

“You never know when kids will make connections that’ll affect them for life. You know?”

“It really is so awesome how they make friends so easily.”

“Listen to this crazy story. So, when we were kids, we were at Northern Bay Sands one weekend. My sister remembers that we met this girl, and her name was Eunice, which is kind of a strange name for a girl around our age. We got along with her really well, Isabel especially, and our parents were talking to her parents for quite a while. She remembers it much better. Anyway, it was just that one day that we knew Eunice. After that, we all went on our separate ways. But then, get this – the twins started at pre-school, and they got along really well and seemed to have this special connection with their new teacher. When Isabel learned what her name was, it was Eunice, and she couldn’t imagine it was the same person, except that Mom went to pick up the girls one day, and it was! It was the same. Freaking. Person.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“I’m serious. Isn’t that magical?”

“It really, really is.”

“It could be anyone we encounter, you know. And they don’t even have to be in our lives a lot, or even be an especially significant connection in some ways... I don’t know... I just love those little moments of shimmer.”

They stand there for a few moments. Watching the girls swing. “So,” The sun warms Cait’s shoulders, “you’re working on something new here? What is it?”

“Oh,” Melody pushes the swing, “it’s a documentary about post-colonial personality disorder in Newfoundland.”

“Ha! That’s amazing. Not so much about the little shimmers life has to offer. You are one brave soul for tackling that one.”

“Yeah. Just this bizarre blend of pride, and attachment to the things of the Old World. Our mother land. Yet our mother land might be what has held us back for all these years. All of that shit, you know? And who knows – it may have shimmer yet. I haven’t finished my interviews.”

“Oh yeah. The fierce pride, zero confidence conundrum. We want to be independent, but always end up depending on handouts.”

“Which is the fault of the government, of course.”

“Of course.”

“You know what, Cait,” Melody keeps pushing the swing, “Our second AD just had to quit the project because she got called to jury duty. It’s not a paid gig, unfortunately, but you’d make a ton of connections and who knows what could come of it. You could totally have the job, if you want it.”

“Seriously? I’ve never worked in film, though.”

“Doesn’t matter. Honestly, you could just have a meeting with the first AD, he’ll fill you in. You’d be his assistant. Do you know Liam Taylor by any chance?”

Liam is the editor of a local independent publication. Mouthy. Passionate. Dedicated. “I’ve encountered him once or twice, yep.” Cait had rubbed elbows with him at press conferences and always sensed a down-to-earth, friendly warmth about him, despite his flighty reputation.

“Do you have him on Facebook or anything? Do you want to drop him a line? I can also email and connect you two.”

“Yes, email would be ideal. I do have him on Facebook, but it’d be better if you connect us, I think.”

“Consider it done.” She pulls out her phone and bangs out the message. “Oh,” she’s still fluttering her thumbs around the screen, “so I’m having a pre-shoot party at my parents’ place on Forest Road tomorrow night. You should totally come. Bring your husband... what’s his name?”

“Oh – we’ve split up, actually. Jake.”

“Shiiiiit. I’m so sorry, Cait. Jesus, you’ve had a rough go, eh?”

Now she definitely feels like a loser. “Meh. Life.”

“Well... come. Definitely.”

The splash pad suddenly blasts water.

“Mommy!” Maisie is gobsmacked. “The water! The water is on!”

“I know, Maisie, but we didn’t bring a swimming suit!”

“Mommy, but it’s summer, how could you not bring a swimming suit?”

Because yesterday was winter, is why. “I didn’t know sweetheart, I’m sorry.”

The twins wriggle in their baby swings to get to the splash pad. Virtually every kid in the playground either bolts, or jaw-drops, or starts begging their parent or caretaker to jump in the stream. Kids die for water. Maisie is a true Aquarius and can spend hours in water, or playing with water. Kids. In their clothes, leaping for joy, splashing in the water like kids in Harlem jumping in a broken fire hydrant on a 40-degree day. Maisie wriggles. She can’t contain herself. “Okay, but if you go in, we can’t play in the park after you’re done because I don’t have any clothes to change into and we’ll have to go home right away. Okay?”

“Yess! Okay Mommy!” And she’s gone.

“Ok,” Cait waves to Melody, “I gotta run after her. Looks like the girls are having no part of it?”

“No, I guess not,” Melody laughs. “See you tomorrow night then?”

“For sure.” Maisie is with Jake tomorrow night, so it’s perfect.

Melody leans in for a hug. “I’m so glad our paths crossed again.”

“Me too.” Cait gives her an extra squeeze. “See you tomorrow.”

Cait sits by the splash pad, watching Maisie, her face, pure glee, pure bliss, pure sunshine. She is the purest form of happiness. She could watch her there, completely carefree, completely jubilant, giggling with giddy lunacy, for hours.

She scans the crowd. Bannerman is packed to the gills. A woman about her mother’s age standing next to her hauls the t-shirt off of her grandchild. “There’ll be a few shirtless youngsters drivin’ home da’day, I allows.” She laughs, a throaty chortle. “I

never brought no swimming suit, I knows that. Sure it was enough to clip ya out yesterday. Never did I think they'd turn this t'ing on."

"No, me neither. And you know, kids can't resist water." Her eyes are still on Maisie, who is holding hands with another little girl, running through the water tunnel. The air is full of kids laughing.

Across the street, next to Government House, on the road, she sees her. Running. In her hot pink Lululemon capri pants. Stacey. Her long, lean legs seem to almost float over the pavement.

"Stacey's training for a marathon," Jake said it, so smug, on the phone one day. "So she can't watch Maisie tonight. Can you?"

This woman does not get dibs over her child. "Jake, you are supposed to ask me first if Maisie needs watching. It's right there in our separation agreement. You should've asked me first."

"Don't be like that. I'm sorry, okay? Anyway you don't need to be jealous of Stacey. She's good to Maisie, but Maisie knows who her parents are."

"So are you and Stacey serious or something?"

"I don't know."

"Well, should she be spending time around Maisie if you're not serious? Is it a good idea to get some woman attached to Maisie who you don't even know will be around or not?" The anticipation, the anxiety of possibly having to share Maisie slices into her heart. She has no idea how long Stacey will be around, or whether she will be in her life, but it doesn't matter.

Sitting there, watching Stacey stride by the perimeter of the park, the envy and jealousy melts away and Cait fills with self-assurance, and also compassion for Stacey. She'll always be the outsider. Maisie does know who her mother is. Stacey can never take her place. Cait is Maisie's constant, whoever may come in and out of her and Jake's life, no matter what happens. She doesn't know Stacey well. She has reservations about what kind of an influence she'll have on Maisie, if it comes to that. Because that, is what matters. Not her own insecurities – it's about Maisie's happiness and wellbeing, and Maisie seems to like Stacey.

Her gaze drifts back to her daughter, still laughing in the splash, and there is a rainbow, stretching from Maisie towards the sky.

Chapter 25

“Do you want to meet up? I need to talk to you.” Jess’ words warble. Dan has just flicked off the Joy Division documentary as *Love Will Tear Us Apart* scrolled over the end credits. Went up to bed without speaking to her. The majesty, the triumph of that song.

“I can meet you in the park at the end of Eastmeadows Ave.” They used to go there sometimes in high school, with the beers they convinced strangers to buy them. Cait once lost her shoe in the river.

The foggy, navy night blurs like a Van Gogh painting, Jess’ eyes are heavy from crying, her mind fuzzed from wine and the codeine she’s taken for her throbbing finger. She scuffs down the sidewalk, plods down the stairs towards the playground, which unlike Bannerman, still has all of the vintage, unsafe-certified equipment – rusted, jabby, hazardous. She sits on a swing and sways, feeling dizzy at the slightest movement. She spots him out of the corner of her eye, coming from the opposite direction she came from. The Newfoundland Drive end. They’d usually exit the park that way, after drinking, to head towards McDonald’s on their way home.

“Are you okay?” He sits on the swing next to her.

She struggles for what to say. Keeps swinging, hoping the words will come.

Throws up.

“Whoa.” Matt fishes through his pockets for tissues. Chiclets. “You are not okay.” He hands her some tissues and rubs her back.

Tears spring to her eyes. “I don’t know why I have such a hard time letting go of you.”

“Oh Jess. We loved each other. We were young, but you were so special to me. You still are.”

“You are to me, too.” She leans into him, from her swing. Holds her hand out because she sees he has Chiclets. He pops two from the package into her palm, and rubs her back. It feels so good and so right. “I miss Mom so much.”

He squeezes her shoulder. “She was so wonderful.”

“She really liked you.”

“Yeah. We got along. She always made me pie for my birthday ’cause she knew I liked it better than cake.”

“Do you still?”

“You know it.”

“Blueberry?”

“Aw yeah.”

She chuckles and she can still taste the vomit. She feels disgusting, dirty, vile, but relieved to have purged some of the poison. They just sit there for a minute, swaying.

“What happened to your hand?”

“Oh. I was on the trail on Signal and hooked my pinky in the chain rope.”

Matt sucks in air through his teeth, *ssss*. “Yikes. That sounds horrible. Are you okay?” He leans closer to her face, and then they’re touching cheeks and it feels so nice, so familiar.

“Yeah. I’m okay.” She turns her head and they touch lips. He can taste Chiclets and vomit but he doesn’t care, not even one bit. Her eyes fill again, and something heaves in her gut. She puts a hand on his chest and pushes him away. “Matt we can’t talk anymore.” She urges and takes a deep, deep breath. “Like, ever.”

He stares at her and his eyes fill up too, then stares at the ground. Plunks his forehead into his palms, his elbows on his knees.

“It’s just too hard. I’m sorry. I love Dan, and the boys. They’re my life.” She’s leaking, it feels like every orifice of her body is just leaking. Her eyes, her nose, snot running all down her upper lip. She only has about five tissues that she has already used to dab puke from her mouth, so she wipes her nose in her plaid shirt sleeve. “And having these deep feelings for you...it’s messing with my head. Big time.” Her pores, too. She sweats in that way that releases the heaviest of emotions to trickle from her body.

“This just...feels like such an enormous and really deep loss.”

“I know.” She rubs his back this time. She stands up. He sits up. Wraps his arms around her waist and she wraps her arms around his shoulders, his head resting on her chest. They rock, sway, hug. “I’m going to go home now.” She kisses the top of his head. “Please don’t write me anymore. I’m going to delete you from Facebook, too. I’m so sorry, but it’s the only way for me.”

Quietly, he sobs, and the front of her shirt dampens. She pushes him away, gently. “Just know that I’ll always care about you, and wish you well.” She turns and walks back towards the steps towards Eastmeadows Avenue, willing herself to keep walking, tears spilling, sweat pouring, snot bubbling, the whole way back to her house. She walks up the stairs, peels off her clothes, steps in the shower and it’s so hot it nearly scalds her skin. She lets it burn and singe. Washing away all of the emotion, the weight of the day, the fuzz of the pain and substances. She gets out, dries off. Brushes her teeth for 10 minutes. Rubs her tongue raw. Slips into bed, naked, next to Dan. Spoons him. Strokes the front of his chest, kisses his earlobe, gently. He stirs and turns, and they’re kissing, deeply, hungrily, planted firmly in their sheets that are caked with their children’s drool, tucked within the walls adorned with drawings in crayon.

Chapter 26

From: "Melody Angel" <angelfilms@gmail.com>
Date: June 21, 2018 at 2:59:31 PM NDT
To: Caitlyn Critch <caitlyncritch@gmail.com>, Liam Taylor <ltaylor@gmail.com>,
Subject: **Connection**

Hi loves!

Just connecting you two. Liam, Caitlyn is our new second associate director! Please, use your magic to bring her into our community. I've invited her to our gathering tomorrow night, so you two can meet then, and make arrangements from there as appropriate.

Really looking forward to this experience, which I just know will be magical!

Bless,
M

Melody Angel
Director, filmmaker, member of the Illuminati of Life

Forest Avenue is like a movie set. American colonial style houses, neatly aligned windows, an umbrella of trees arching over the street. The leaves drip with droplets of rain from earlier in the day and the street lights illuminate the raindrops and fresh, black

pavement. The dark purple twilight sky is a moody backdrop to the woodstove smoke floating from the backyard to Cait's nostrils.

Melody's parents' house is all intricately patterned hardwood floors and white kitchen cabinets. The off-white walls are splashed with expensive, brightly coloured artwork – scenes of St. John's in all forms and hues, abstract splashes and globs of red and yellow and bright blue and baby blue, green, orange. There's a painting of a burning church in Wesleyville. The painting is black, foreboding, the church's roof ablaze with hellish red, the people in the foreground ghostly, white faces, black cloaks, uncertain of what the future holds.

"Caitlyn!" Melody is wearing a form-fitting red spaghetti-strap dress with a kimono over it. She floats, her arm outstretched, a wine glass in one hand, to the front door to greet Cait. Wraps her arms around her and kisses her cheek, and the liquid in the glass sloshes and her lips are soft and pillowy and glossy. Her breath smells like Sangria and mint. "Come in, come in, enter the wonderful vibe, the spider's web of love, the community of creativity."

The house smells like taco dip; there's a giant platter of it in the middle of the kitchen island. Sushi trays and a jug of sangria are on the counters and through the French doors leading to the deck there's a keg.

"Sangria?" Melody is already pouring it, handing it to Cait.

"Sure, thanks." She sips it and it's frigid and boozy and ignites teensy shocks to her brain.

"Come," Melody tops up her own glass and interlaces her fingers with Cait's, "to the patio. Meet Liam."

There's a ring of about 10 people circled around a fire table on the deck. Someone has just sparked a joint.

"Everyone, meet Caitlyn."

"Hi everyone!" Cait recognizes a couple of faces, including Liam's. Liam's face, boyish, bright, turns towards Cait and the fire light flickers.

"Caitlyn, hey!" He stands and hugs her. "Have a seat." He pulls up an Adirondack chair from the periphery of the circle.

"Excuse me all," Melody glances through the kitchen, as a new guest arrives, "I must go host, I'll see you anon."

Liam sucks on the joint and passes it to Cait. "So," he croaks, "I'm really looking forward to working with you. I loved you on *The Morning Show* and I was super pissed to hear you were let go."

Cait sucks in on the joint, exhales, and lets a few laughs go. "Well thanks for that. I, too, was super pissed."

"Fuck them."

"Yeah. Fuck you, CBC."

It doesn't take long for the stony haze to set in.

"And you know what?" Cait sips the sangria and it tastes even better now, extra frosty, extra flavourful, "Fuck the government, too."

"Yah!" Liam hoists his beer and everyone cheer, "Fuck the government!" He helps himself to a slurp from Cait's glass, "Good thing we're working on this project now. There's no better time."

“Speaking of this project,” Cait leans in, “can you please tell me what it’s actually about?”

They lock eyes momentarily; a mirror: there’s a sense of mischief, a twinkle that crinkles the corner of one eye into a sparkling smile. An indication of a looming and intense attack of amusement that’s familiar to Cait: she’s been told that her eyes smile before her mouth. They crumble, buckle over with laughter. Their laughs match, too. Loud and free, a beckon into the star-spangled sky, which looks like a photography experiment Cait and Jess did in school – black construction paper with pin pricks all over it, held up to a bright light. For one second, Cait wonders how Jess is feeling, what she’s doing, under these stars. The others around the fire table look at the two of them, amused, *Those two are sooo doin’ it tonight.*

“Okay, well, see,” Liam looks away, suddenly shy. Too much eye contact, too much connection, too intense and too fast and it’s a bit scary. Cait feels it in herself too, like the intensity floats from him to her and she looks down for a second too, but she decides she really likes sitting here with him. It’s an instant comfort. As if she has known him for years. The super glue power of a robust laugh. It makes you feel like you’re a kid again and everything is totally fine. “It’s a dig through Newfoundland’s political hidden history of power and corruption. Our repeated cycle of the rich helping the rich and the middle-class and poor being left to fend for themselves. A *Game of Thrones* type show for the rich families here – and you know who they are, don’t you.” He holds her gaze again; that same impish taunt and she loves it and she wants more of it. A lot more of it. In different locations. And not just film locations, either.

“Oh my God, that is amazing! Which blueblood will lay claim to the iron throne, ruling our smiling, windswept land?” She drains the sangria and looks at how close the jug is because she does not want to depart this conversation. “Do people know about this? It’s controversial as all frig. I do love a great conspiracy theory.”

“We’ve been combing through the archives. I’ve got microfiche burned into my retinas...and we’ve lined up interviews with some key players who’re borderline too old and senile and close to death to be too concerned about damaging their reputation. Love those guys.”

“Well there’s so much intrigue around here, like that tunnel they discovered under Bannerman when they were renovating it...”

“The one Richard Squires escaped through when the people tried to murder him back in the ’30s?” He says it with that smirk, eyes wide as loonies. One side of his mouth goes up a little more than the other. Sexy as hell.

She giggles. “Right? Imagine, him and Joey, realizing they can’t pull the wool over the eyes of the people anymore and they’re totally shafted.”

“There’s rumours of tunnels between the Colonial Building and Government House, too.” He’s leaning forwards, towards her.

“It’s just one cycle after another, really. Corrupt government after corrupt government.”

“Well, yeah. Up to the government who suddenly, ‘Oh yeah, we’re a have-province, b’ys! Even Paul McCartney and the seal hunt can’t fuck with us Newfoundlanders! No way, no b’y, not us. And I’m gonna donate my salary to the province. To new business endeavours, which I myself will run in secret, behind closed

doors, under the guise of my cronies, and after I finish putting things in place and acting as a hero, I shall reassume my place as the pompous, saucy-faced weasel businessman and lawyer, so I may continue being rich and going to Florida, well into my sun-tanned future, until I crinkle away and disintegrate under the sun and dissolve into gold dust.” She is mesmerized by him. Wildly entertained. His passion, all riled-up, tingles something deep inside her.

“Yeah really. ‘Have not is no more.’ What a pile of steaming horseshit that was.”

He cracks up. “Maybe it’s conspiracy theories, maybe not. Rumours don’t exist for nothing.”

“And these yokels in there now... inept... liars. So much for diversification. Once again, everything is in oil and now we’re deep in the red.”

“They lie just to get in power. So much for building local enterprise.”

“They’re just fucking us.” *I’d like you to be fucking me.*

“Again.” *Yes please, I’ll take seconds of that as well.*

“Well,” she looks into her empty glass. “It’s time for me to re-wet my whistle. How’re you doing there?” She nods at his beer.

“I could use a top-up,” he nods towards the kitchen, “Shall we?”

“We shall.”

They float into the kitchen. They haven’t even spoken to anyone else around the fire table. They refill.

“Don’t wanna go for a stroll down the road, do you?” His lips look wet and pillowy on the tip of his beer bottle.

“Definitely I do.” She slips into her Birkenstocks in the front porch, feeling pleased about her outfit choice. High waisted floral skort, mid-thigh length. Fitted black tank top. Every single day since her and Jess’ Signal Hill event, Cait has bolted up the Signal stairs until she nearly puked. As a result, her legs are thick and toned and you could punt a soccer ball against her thigh and it’d just ricochet right off. Score. She has been doing pushups: 25 every morning, first thing after getting out of bed. Her shoulders are ripped. And a cognac-colour leather wrap bracelet.

On the street it’s one of those perfect St. John’s nights. Humid, windless, complete calm. It smells of summer – flowers, grass, humidity.

“So, you’re second AD on this? You should be a script editor. Transcribing interviews, even. Although I know that’s below you. It’d fit more with your background.”

She hasn’t thought of that before but it makes total sense. “Don’t they already have that role filled?”

“Yeah, but,” he leans in close, a performance whisper, close enough so that she feels a brush of his lip on her earlobe and shudders, “she sucks.”

Cait laughs and sips her sangria, making sure to get some on her lips so they’ll taste good. “What do you mean, she sucks?”

“She’s only in her 20s, and she’s a bit of a dodo.”

Cait gets a bit of sangria caught in her mouth and fights for it to not come through her nostrils. “Ok, I have not heard that word used since my father called Clyde Wells a dodo all the time back in the ’90s.”

“Well isn’t it a good descriptive word?”

“It is. I don’t disagree with you.”

“Seriously though. This girl should be doing promo and social media once the thing comes out. Makes sense for her to be on set and absorb the process and tone of the film as it’s being made, so she can post authentically. But you are much more suited to script editor, to be involved in some of the interviews, even.”

“Hmmm.” She really wants to jump this guy’s bones. Climb him like a pole. She hasn’t felt this fired up about a career prospect (or a male prospect) in a very long time. “That would be incredibly amazing. I would have all kinds of pink tickled should that occur.”

“Ooo. What kind of pink?” He links a few fingers with her. Looks down at her. He’s tall. Lean. More boyish than Jake.

“Well, it exists in different locations on my body.” She leans into him and their shoulders touch.

He leans back into her and sort of around her until they’ve stopped, facing each other, and she stands on her tippy toes and he bends his neck towards her and their lips connect. The kiss is slow, like leaning into a soft cushion. It’s calm like the night air. Their tongues make their way to each other, gently massaging each other, and they stay like that, for a very long time, kissing softly. Relaxed. Not fervently, not like her and Jake. It’s stable, caring. Cozy. Comfy. Gentle. She doesn’t want to stop kissing him, not for a very long time. She feels him get hard. They finally pull away from each other. “Wow.” His eyes are wide and there’s that one-sided smile. “That was amazing.”

Smiling up at him, they share a corner eye twinkle. “I agree.”

“You know, I’ve admired your work for a long time. I’m inspired by you. I’m really stoked we get to work together. And it has nothing to do with how friggin’ hot you are.”

Laughing, her chest feels full, her insides vibrate, alive, little electric shocks. It’s amazing. How things can turn from shitty to great and great to shitty so instantly. It’s just waves. Waves you sometimes ride until they crash. And then you just wait until the next catchable wave. “I feel the exact same way about you. Both professionally, and also sexily.”

They link all of their fingers together and stroll further down the street.

“Do you want to go to my place? I live by the lake.” She is so ready.

Surprised at his good fortune, “Yes. Yes I friggin’ do.”

Who knows what will happen with this guy. He seems like a dream on this night, but he might be a ladies’ man. Someone so sexy is bound to be trouble. But sure, so what? So fucking what. Because she’s just as sexy, and she’s just as much trouble. He likes connections, finding heart strings between new people -- he has that reputation. But finding connections between souls is magical. She’ll make connections too, and not just with him. The Simone de Beauvoir chapter in the life of Caitlyn Critch. It has a saucy ring to it. Maybe the Liam connection will last for the duration of the shoot, and that’s it. A short chapter. Maybe the chapter will be longer. Two chapters, even. And that’s just fine, and this moment is just fine, and just what does there have to be beyond this particular moment?

Chapter 27

The couch in the therapist's home office is buttery yellow. Well worn. Many broken-hearted bums have sat on this couch. Surrounding them are tokens of comfort. A zen sand garden on the end table. Smooth beach rocks to hold and stroke with idle and fidgety hands. Flowers. Bamboo. Soft spa music. Quotes in calligraphy fonts, with backgrounds like a sunset beach, a moving road, a meadow of marigolds, framed on the wall.

“But let there be spaces in your togetherness. And let the winds of the heavens dance between you. Love one another but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.” – Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*

“Sometimes this broken heart gives birth to anxiety, and panic, sometimes to anger, resentment and blame. But under the hardness...there is a tenderness of genuine sadness. This is our link with all those we have loved.” – Pema Chodron

“Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.” – Earl Grollman

“No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.” – C.S. Lewis

Jess read *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* just after she caught her father kissing Mellie through the closet door at the bottom of the stairs. In the book, the children walk through wardrobes and end up in Narnia, where there is stealing and lying and manipulation and they have to become a lot smarter. Doors. Tunnels. Rites of passage. The world on the other side, though twisted, though mesmerizing, is filled with learning that doesn't really, truly come to fruition until adulthood.

Jess and Dan see the same therapist Cait and Jake saw. That morning, Jess had, again, vomited. Therapy – isn't that the final nail in the imminent divorce coffin? A one-way ticket to the other side of the closet door?

They talk, they talk, they cry and blow their noses and show the therapist pictures of the boys on their phones.

“You two are obviously very much in love, I don't know if you can see that. Can you?”

“I'm...” Jess folds her hands, her palms full of wet tissues. “I'm so afraid he looks at me like this whore now.”

Dan remains silent.

“Dan?” The therapist softly turns her head, her voice also soft, “Do you think that? Have you developed new feelings and resentments towards Jessica because of her infidelity?” Hearing someone say it out loud, that she is a cheater, is like being sliced through the guts. They didn't sleep together but it doesn't matter one bit. She wanted to sleep with him.

“I do.” His head is down. “I'm ashamed to say it, but I do feel differently towards her.”

Jess sobs. She has run out of tissues. The therapist hands her a fresh box from her Costco stack on the shelf.

“Dan,” the therapist places a hand on his knee. “I want you to look at me. Do you realize the pain Jessica has been in since her mother passed away? The wretched, gut-wrenching pain?”

“Yeah, I mean of course I have. I guess...I’ve just been trying to stay happy, for the boys. I don’t want them to be sad.”

It’s so good of Dan. She realizes that. He’s so good.

“Jessica?” The therapist lays a hand on Jessica’s hand. It is so soft and warm and padded, and Jess’ is cold and clammy and skinny and shaking and the therapist must have felt her gross old wet tissue. “Do you notice all of what Dan is doing?”

“Yes of course I do. He’s the most wonderful father. Our boys are so lucky and I’m so sorry I messed up. I will forever feel shame for this and I’ll never forgive myself. The guilt is extreme.”

“Dan,” her hand is still on his knee. He shifts, a little uncomfortable, *Please take your hand off of my knee.* “Do you think Jessica might also wish that you’d ask her a little bit more about her? Instead of focusing on the boys so much, could you in addition, in the nighttime, after the boys are all tucked away, turn your attention to her?”

He moves enough so that she has to take her hand off of his knee. He is instantly more at ease. “I guess...my thing is being funny. So if I can keep things funny, I figure if I can make her laugh, that might help things.”

“And Jessica – ”

“It does, Dan, it does make me laugh. You always do and I love you so much for that. It’s just that sometimes I don’t feel like laughing and I can’t laugh and then I feel bad because you feel bad that I’m not laughing as genuinely as I normally would.”

“You two, you are so in – ”

“Jess, I do love you so much, you know. I always will.”

“I love you, too.”

They turn to each other, crying, arms around each other. Wiping their noses in each other’s shirts. The therapist is also dabbing her eyes.

“May I suggest something?”

They ignore her, wrapped in the moment and each other. Finally, they break away and look at each other, their eyes teary and smiling. Jess looks to the therapist. “Sure.”

“A Healing Separation Agreement.”

“We don’t need that.” Dan is still looking at Jess.

“Well, it’s just kind of a guideline, a plan – “

“No, we don’t need that. Together, we rock.” Dan’s nerdiness engorges Jess’ heart. There’s a framed poster above their bed. A hand, curled into the “rock on” formation, the words Together, We Rock above it. Dan had it designed and mounted and framed for their wedding, and it’s been there ever since. An homage to their love and coolness. Their sense of fun. A shrine and a reminder of the essence of their relationship.

“Jessica, do you want to book a follow-up appointment, for some grief counselling? It could be very use – ”

“No we don’t need that.” Dan is still looking at Jess, while pulling his Visa from his phone case. He hands it to the therapist.

Jess is sobbing to an embarrassing degree. Her emotions feel out of control, so out of control, but she is home. She is safe. With Dan.

Chapter 28

Jess: Hey.

Cait: Hey.

Jess: Are you mad at me?

Cait: No, Jess.

Jess: Are you sure?

Cait: Well...
our last conversation wasn't great.
Are you mad at me?

Jess: I know. I just miss you.

Cait: Miss you too.

Jess: Up for a walk?

Cait: Sure! I just need to get dressed.
I can go in like 30?

Jess: Perf. Where should we go?

Cait: Wanna just sit on Ladies' Lookout?
I can pick up lattes.

Jess: Make mine decaf? Thanks! See you soon.
XOXO

Cait: Decaf it is.

I knows you gets all wiggy on the caffeine. ;)
See you soon. Love you. XOXOXO

It’s a hazy, mauzy peak right on top of Ladies’ Lookout. Highly humid, it’s something of an anomaly: no wind. When St. John’s is sticky, it’s comforting at first. A novelty. At first, people love it. But after a few days, it becomes unsettling. They’re all suffocated. Can’t handle the heat. The humidity will always lift.

Cait is already perched on the hill when Jess arrives, in a tank and biking shorts.

“Hey.” Jess lays a hand on Cait’s shoulder.

“Jesus! You scared the shit out of me.”

“You were lost in thought.” Jess sits next to her, their shoulders and sides pressed together, leaning on each other. “Your shoulders are frigging ripped, by the way. You look fierce. Smokin’.”

“Well thanks,” Cait feigns smug. “I took inspiration from you, actually,” she swaps the smug act for sincerity. “You’re so dedicated to fitness. I’ve been speed walking the hill, and then sprinting up the steps.”

“And working on those guns, obviously.”

“Yep. Good old fashioned push-ups. I can even do three pull-ups now. Feels deadly, I’ll be honest. So...how are you?”

“Oh...better since the last time we were up here. Lots to fill you in on. Dan and I went to therapy. Same woman you and Jake went to, actually. And I told Matt I could never see or talk to him again. You know.”

“Whaaaat? Holy shit, Jess. Whoa. That is a lot in a few months.”

“I know. Life’s like that, though, isn’t it? Anything can change at any time. So much can happen in a year. Then you look back and it’s gone, like it was nothing.”

“So...how did the Matt stuff happen? Did anything else happen with him? I...I’m really sorry for not checking in with you after our last hike. I felt horribly guilty. But at the same time, I knew it was important to have some distance, for both of us. I knew we’d end up talking again. We’re family.”

Jess leans in, lays her head on Cait’s shoulder. “I understand. I do. We’re such different personalities and I sometimes wonder, if we met now, would we be friends? But I’m so glad we did meet and we’re still friends. And just...that we both have someone who has known us through every phase of life. You’re so important to me and I love you so much.”

“Remember when we were kids and you thought you were a lesbian for me?”

They both crack up, and the laughing continues, doesn’t stop, until they’re both having abdominal pain and tears are streaming down their faces. Cait gets what Jess calls the snapping turtle laugh, where she starts laughing so much that there’s no sound coming out. Her mouth is just stuck there, open, and there are tears flooding her cheeks like Rennie’s Mill River. “Yes,” Jess chirps between roars of laughter, “I have a diary entry all about how nice your body looked in your red cords!”

“And we thought we’d be the first female pairs figure skating team in history.”

“We’d practice our moves and lifts in the rec room and make our parents watch our routines.”

“We’d be soaked in sweat. “Our parents definitely thought we were idiots.” God it feels good to laugh that much, Cait thinks. There’s no one she laughs with as much as she laughs with Jess.

“Yeah, and those two times we practiced kissing on each other, you were way more into it than I was.”

“Oh, I totally was. I still think I could’ve gone either way.” Jess still believes it. Sexuality is fluid. She was always closer to the middle than Cait was.

“Hey,” Cait sips her latte. “do you think deep down, you were so afraid of being a lesbian that you were overly devoted to having a boyfriend?”

“Jesus, that’s some serious psych talk.” Jess sips her own drink, and there’s a lift in her chest now, a lightness versus the weight she felt months ago. The comment would’ve bothered her then, but doesn’t at this moment in time. “Who knows, you might be right. Either way, I’m pretty pleased with the way things turned out.”

“Over the past year, since Jake and I split, there’ve definitely been times when I’ve wished I was a lesbian. Women are so much more sensible than men.”

Jess snorted a bit of frothed milk. “Ha! I definitely see what you mean. But I also think it’s just as significant that we don’t try to understand men. Try to be more forgiving of them. They don’t know any better.”

“Yeah. Feminism happened so fast and achieved so much, and the next wave has to be about dialogue between genders. Women have fought so hard to have equal rights, and we’re still fighting the hard fight, and we need to. We’re not there yet. But I do really believe the next step has to be about allowing men to be more in touch with their emotional sides, just as women have pushed to do more traditionally male-centric activities.”

“So what about the man department? Have you been dating at all?”

“Well...yeah. I’ve been seeing someone, actually. I met him on set.”

“On set?”

“Yeah. Been working on a documentary. Do you remember Melody Angel?”

Jess did remember her. She was supremely jealous of her in university. She thought she was trying to take her best friend away. The old feeling surfaces. She takes note, then moves past it. “Yeah, sure I remember her.”

“Well I bumped into her in Bannerman Park a while back, we got to chatting, and she put this opportunity out there and it has been fantastic.”

“That’s great, Cait. I’m so glad for you. And so...there’s a guy? What’s his deal? Who is it?”

“Oh,” Cait’s eyes crinkle in the corners.

“Oh, see, there goes your eyes. You always smile with your eyes when there’s a secret.”

“It’s Liam – “

“Oh my God! That reporter! I swear to Jesus, I always thought you two would be a good match. Swear to God.”

“Ha. Well, we’re giving it a go.”

“And it’s good by the looks of it! Do you think it’s serious?”

“Oh Jesus, no. I’m not in that headspace right now, not one bit. I’m just rediscovering myself, you know? It’s fun. Dating again, that freshness, that air of wondering, of possibility, of where it might or might not go.”

“That’s really cool, Cait. In a way, you’re lucky to be experiencing that. A lot of us old married farts won’t get to do that again.”

“Yes, I s’pose the universe is full of infinite possibilities and trajectories, isn’t it.”

“Absolutely.”

They sit there, looking at the ocean, and the fog is starting to lift and it might be a clear day after all.

“Back to the feminism thing, and understanding men though,” Jess breaks the silence, “I’ve decided it’s a goal of mine to keep working on that, and be less critical and more understanding of Dan.”

“Yes! So did that come up in therapy?”

“Well yeah. We talked about how Dan felt like he had to be the strong one when Mom died,” Jess wells up. She still wells up at any mention or thought of her mother. It will take a while. Maybe the rest of her life. “He had to stay strong, because he’s the man and that’s what men do, but in that focus he sort of forgot about me a bit, maybe even resented me, because he loved Mom too. That’s where we drifted, I think.”

“That makes so much sense. You guys had a huge breakthrough. I’m really proud of you for working so hard to do the right thing. I know how much Matt meant to you, in your own life trajectory, and how important he was and is. It must’ve been excruciating to cut him out. How’d all that happen?”

“I just...I had to cut him off completely. He’s just that person for me. We all have one. But I just told him that I couldn’t have contact with him, and that was it. There were tears. It was brutal.”

Cait doesn’t have a person like that, from her past. Even with Jake, the physical attraction to him has faded. The affection towards him feels more like what she feels towards a sibling. “I guess he’s rooted down pretty deeply in you.”

“He is, and any form of contact at all just makes it worse, brings it back to life. I guess, we’ll always care about each other. First love, all that bullshit.”

“Very true.” Cait wonders if she had the luxury of not seeing Jake anymore, would there still be residual feelings, as if a point of her life is sealed in time, frozen, stuck in a cluster of years, and if she were to step in a time machine and see him again after so many years apart, would the feelings still be there? Sharing a child, she has no choice but to see him, and the feelings have lifted. Stuck, she supposed, within a cluster of years that now exist only in her memory. “So how’d it happen? With Matt?”

“I contacted him and we met up in that park by Eastmeadows.”

“Blast from the past. I haven’t been there in forever. Jam-packed with memories, that place is. Are you a sucker for punishment or what?”

“It was excruciating, Cait. He was bawling. I was drunk and doped on painkillers for my finger I was disgusting, also crying, snot all over my face and hands. We were sitting there on the swings when I told him. Told him I’d always care about him. We did end up kissing, and hugging a lot, but I got up then. Wished him the very best in life. Left him there sitting on the swing with his head in his hands. Walked home, all snotty and

gross, got a shower, went to bed. I knew I was done. Something shifted in my gut, you know?” She lays her hand on her stomach.

“I do know,” she hugs Jess, “I felt the same kind of shift when I realized I was over Jake. And that had nothing to do with Liam, it happened when the documentary possibility came up. I felt like it was a new chapter, or my next phase or something. I think as we age we just trust our guts more. I remember getting those feelings when I was younger, and just kind of discounting them, or not taking them seriously, or telling myself I was being silly.”

“Yeah. I know what you mean. When Matt moved away, I told myself it was true love and he’d come back and we’d get married. But if that same scenario happened now, I’d probably move on a lot quicker.”

“I’m really proud of you for doing the right thing though, Jess. I know it wasn’t easy,” she kisses Jess’ cheek. “How’s your ol’ finger now, anyway?”

“Oh, you know - it’s permanently fucked and disfigured – it still smarts to be honest. But it’s obviously much better.” She holds out her hand and closes it into a fist and re-opens it. Her pinky is a tad gnarly and misshapen.

Cait tries not to look disgusted because she knows Jess will get sensitive. “It’s not that bad,” she lies.

“Well,” Jess says, looking at the sea, “I’m excited for this new dude. Maybe he’ll turn out to be the true love of your life.”

“Maybe. I s’pose it’s possible. But my perspective on relationships has changed. I’m really devoted to training myself to just live in the moment, and not think too much about the future.”

“Uh, newsflash: you’ve always been that way.”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s just that my priorities have changed, you know? I don’t have the same desire to find a partner and settle down. I’m already independent on my own. I have my own projects happening. I have Maisie – and she’s the love of my life, not some man.”

Jess’ eyebrows rise, like she’s never thought of it that way before.

“And Maisie, lately, I look at her now and she has become so much more mature. Going to kindergarten, I can’t believe it. She’s really not a little baby anymore. And we’re friends! We’re really and seriously in love with each other!” Cait wells up over the bursting love she feels for the little rainbow that is her daughter. “It’s just that...I feel like maybe I’ll be okay with not having one man for the rest of my life. Maybe I’ll have a series of relationships that will each be meaningful in their own way. A series of chapters in my life.”

“Oh my God, you’re gonna be like Simone de Beauvoir. I bet you’ll become a lesbian for a while. Damn you, destiny, for mismatching mine and Cait’s trajectories!”

“No, I’ve thought about it, like I said, but I’m just not wired that way, unfortunately.”

“You have always really liked dick, it’s true.”

Cait slaps Jess’ arm. “Dirtbag!”

“Oh yes, you’re so offended, I’m sure.”

They sit there for a few minutes in comfortable silence. On grad night, they crouched on this hill and peed on it before the Class of 1997 watched the sun rise. Just as refined high school students would do.

“Well, please fill me in on whatever orgy gang-bang polyamorous situation you find yourself in, as I continue to lead the boring life of a mother in a conventional nuclear family.”

“I’ll be sure to do that, indeed. But the boys are getting bigger, it’ll give you more independence, right? Maybe you and Dan will become swingers! I heard there’s a cul-de-sac in one particular subdivision that’s all swingers. They have secret codes for street parties, like if the garage is open a bit, that means it’s a free-for-all. Orgy time.”

“Well actually...” Jess leans back on her hands. Pats her tummy with one hand. “You know how I said life can toss you a 180 at any time?”

Cait coughs and spits her drink and has to yank napkins out of her bag to wipe herself off. “Are you fucking kidding me? You’re pregnant? Holy fuck holy fuck holy fuck! That is amazing, Jess, I am so happy for you!”

“It’s pretty wild. A baby at 40. I’m scared shitless, of course. 40. A lot more things can go wrong. I’m going to be exhausted for the rest of my life.”

“Wait – it is Dan’s, right?”

Jess punches Cait in the shoulder and it smarts. “Ow, Jesus, I was kidding. You always do that thing where you put your middle knuckle out more and it fucking hurts.”

“Sorry but you can take it. You know it’s Dan’s, asshole.”

“Nothing is going to go wrong, I feel it. This little girl is going to be incredible. She’ll have you in her. And your mom. It’s going to be a girl, I know it.”

Jess beams at that. She loves her boys more than life itself but there has always been a little ache for a daughter.

“I think it’s all so beautiful,” Cait links her arm with Jess’. “This past year. Could you ever imagine things would be like this when we were growing up?”

“Never.”

“You just never know.”

“You don’t. You don’t ever, ever know.”

Chapter 29

Twenty teens slink into cabs from the hotel room, spiraling upwards to Signal Hill. Ashley Cody pukes outside the hallway. The puke is bright red from her wildberry cooler. Ashley tried to beat the crap out of Jess at a hockey game earlier that winter. Cait's happy she pukes. Serves her right.

"Hedder!" Jason Lester barks at Heather Jenkins from across the room, rubbing the neck of his beer bottle like he's giving it a hand job. "Wanna go outside, 'er wha?"

"Fuck off, Jason." Heather is cool as fuck. She tips her own bottle back, her eyebrows raised, the beer sliding down her throat.

"C'mon, b'y. You knows you wants to." Jason holds his hand to his face, tongue in cheek, now suggesting a blow job.

Cait knows Heather is going to end up giving Jason a blow job. At the last house party, a couple months before, she and her boyfriend had been snake draining each other's throats with their tongues, in front of everyone, probably for an hour straight. Then they broke up and Heather got a slanty, edgy, saucy pixie haircut. Got all brazen. She's ready to roll now and if she needs Jason to do that, he may be of some benefit.

Jess had fallen asleep on one of the hotel beds, her beer bottle still in her hand, spilling it on her palazzo pants and body suit. She jolts awake and Matt takes her bottle, lays it on the nightstand.

"Jeez b'y, watch it will ya?" Some of the beer went on Jason.

“Jiffacaaaaahhhbs,” the taxi dispatch draws on the phone.

“Yeah, four cabs to the Holiday Inn, please.”

Valerie Smith is slumped on the floor against the wall in the tiny hall inside the hotel room door. “Cait, I got one of your shoes and one of my shoes!”

“Well can I have mine back?”

“I dunno where mine is!”

In the cabs, they try to sneak in six of them even though there’s only four seatbelts.

“She’ll get in the trunk, sure.” Jason smirks, jabs his thumb in Heather’s direction.

“Fuck you, Jason, you get in the fucking trunk.” She brushes past Jason and claims her seat in the back. The cab screeches away. Heather looks out the back window and Jason hawks and spits on the ground and Heather loves it. She’s got him in the palm of her hand.

Cait converses with the cabbie – it’s part of the obligation of the shotgun rider. “Cabot Tower parking lot, please.”

The night is wind-free. The streets are barren, that special, dreamlike feeling of a 5:30 a.m. glide up to Signal.

A couple of girls, Jess and Cait included, are on Ladies’ Lookout, their drawers dropped, their arses pointed in the direction of the sea. Jess loses her balance and bounces on the ground. Cait laughs and pulls a tissue from her denim jacket.

“I’m glad you’re my best friend,” Jess takes the tissue. “You even help me when I pee on myself.”

The boys join the girls and they’re all sitting there, peering towards the black mystery, the death, the life, within the Atlantic. They wait. They wait. The sun peeks over the horizon, tickling the dark, at first timid and unsure. It notices, people are watching. There’s pressure. But people are counting on its appearance. It gains guts, then. Brawn. In an instant, it stretches its way across the sky, reaching its arms wide, sprawling across its mighty canvas. A brash, thermonuclear blast of orange energy, powering the sky.

Awash with orange and pink tones, they pulse. Hope. Anxiety. Fear. Power. Will I get a job, will I get a wife, a husband, a family? Will my parents be proud of me? What happens in 10 years, 20 years, 50 years?

None of them know. No one knows.

Pulse.

Move.

Wave.

Crash.

Soar.

Freeze.

Melt.