

**MIRA**

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## Abstract

Mira is on a quest to learn who her genetic father is. But the more questions she asks about the sperm donor her parents used to create her, the more she risks destroying the most important relationships in her life. This is a coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of new ways of family building through ART (Assisted Reproductive Technology). Mira's journey of discovery interrogates greater practical and moral implications of sperm donation and this secretive industry. Does Mira have a right to know who her genetic father is? What sacrifices should she be willing to take on to achieve this goal? What role does blood play in identity formation? Set on the shores of Georgian Bay, Ontario the narrative references stories borrowed from mythology to explore contemporary conundrums regarding the use of reproductive technologies and their connection to age-old themes of human identity.

## Acknowledgements

Contrary to my former naïve beliefs about the lonely, self-sufficient life of the writer, the truth about a book is that its creation takes a village.

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## Part One

### Chapter One

When Mira's aunt and uncle divorced, her cousin Vicky decided neither girl needed a father.

"What am I supposed to do with mine?" Mira asked, afraid Vicky might suggest something sinister.

"Ignore him," Vicky said, "unless you need something from him."

There were reasons Mira might choose to ignore Lewis. The praise he expected over his cooking, for example. He would spend hours on a Sunday creating a creamy beef stroganoff, a savoury tourtiere, or a seafood pasta, then sigh and whimper over his family's simple thank you. What he wanted was fanfare. Inevitably Mira and her mother would thank him, profusely and in great detail, and he would return to his regular chatty ways. What would happen if she ignored him? Probably nothing, and it was a more bearable suggestion than doing away with him completely. Mira realized that was her idea, not Vicky's.

"That's ridiculous, I can't live that way."

"Suit yourself," Vicky said. "He won't get any special attention from me. I'm done with fathers forever."

At age seven Vicky had already been cool and calculating. Mira admired her stubbornness but suspected she would someday regret her decision. The exchange took place when Mira was nine but she remembered it, years later, the day Lewis entered the café carrying a big brown cardboard box. She was working behind the bar. She felt the blast of humid air and the vibration in the floor when the door slammed behind him. He ignored the hostess and headed toward Mira, his thinning hair blown back in the breeze of the air conditioner.

Lewis greeted his daughter as though they'd been in the middle of a conversation. "Here's the shirts, so you don't have to pick them up from the clinic." He stood there jiggling the box, like an entertainer awaiting applause.

Under the bar the wine fridge hummed. Laughter erupted from a foursome seated in a booth. She was meant to sell the t-shirts. She found it unbelievable that he would bring them to her, here. But Lewis being Lewis, it was also unsurprising. She uncapped three bottles of beer and placed them on a tray for one of the servers. Lewis surveyed the familiar faces sprinkled among the tourists in the room around them, and when he spoke again, he was turned away from her. "They should be sold before the end-of-summer dock party." His voice projected across the room. The sound of it made her want to hide amongst the dish bins, paper towels and water bottles. She wrung out a bar cloth and began to wipe at a puddle on the counter. "Our celebrities will be the stars of the parade. You know, the actors who met through Third Gate." He was proud of the dating business he managed. That he approached her at work to demand her support was infuriating, but any anger she might have expressed was overshadowed by a pang of guilt. Why shouldn't he expect her to sell the shirts? She'd always agreed to, before. "They'll charm the crowds! I'm going to introduce you to them, My-My, everyone loves them." When he was excited he called her My-My, the name she had supposedly called herself when she was learning to talk.

He set the box on the counter, too close to her face. The very thought of these shirts, to be returned with the owner's imbedded aroma, induced a feeling of suffocation, mixed with revulsion. Lewis blinked, and she mimicked his action. It was a reflexive gesture she'd only recently become aware of. She moved away and wiped another spot, and reminded herself that it wasn't unusual for Lewis to act impulsively. She just had to get used to him again.

She said, “Could we do this later?”

Lewis’s face crumpled, collapsing in on itself, as though he’d removed his false teeth. A sugar addiction had caused him to have all of his natural teeth removed, and his dentures were ever so slightly large for his mouth. His jaw sagged, even his eyes drooped. She blinked furiously.

She took the box from him.

She willed her face into an expression of sympathy though her jaw was clenched. He must have forgotten about the volunteer work she was already committed to for the end-of-summer event. “You do know I’m taking the seniors to the parade?”

Her words seemed to fly over his head for he said, “Wait till you see the float I have planned for the parade!”

It was possible he hadn’t heard her. A male server called, “Heads up,” as he rushed by with a plate of battered pickerel and several orders of burgers and fries. Two more servers, heads bowed in discussion, emerged from the kitchen. Lewis slapped the counter cheerfully and said, “Better go—see you!” With another slam of the door that rattled the clam shells in the decorative net above the bar, he was gone.

Two tables were still occupied. The lunch rush was winding down. Three servers and the hostess crowded near Mira where Lewis had stood on the opposite side of the counter, curious about the box. They avoided the half-gate that guarded the entrance to the bar. It was made of railway ties, a thick frame with a stabilizing X frame in the centre. It had a magnetic latch and was bolted into the wall on cast iron hinges. The whole contraption was so cumbersome that it required a direct, intentional hip-check to get in or out. The servers had bruises on their thighs,

hips and buttocks from this gate. To be inside of it was to be master of the place, like a DJ at a dance club. It was her favourite work station in the Bay Café.

Mira mashed a filter into a basket and began to scoop coffee grounds. “Coffee ready in five, come and get it—I have to take this to the back.” She rammed the box against the gate on her way through.

Tanille, the hostess, shoved her hand in through the cardboard flaps and plucked out a shirt. In bold, black letters it read: *Looking for love? The nose knows!*

“What’s this?”

“Only one of the biggest dating businesses in the country. Based local. Her dad,” said Bryan, with a nod to Mira.

“What’s the nose got to do with it?” Tanille asked.

Mira rested the box on one knee and balled the shirt to stuff it back in through the flaps.

“The guy wears the shirt for three nights,” Mira said hurriedly. She’d explained this hundreds of times before as a salesperson for Third Gate. “He puts it in a baggie and brings it to the clinic. Then girls—women—sniff baggies until they find one they like.”

Tanille’s porcelain skin crinkled as she exclaimed, “Ee...euw!”

“There’s going to be a DNA test one day so you don’t have to do the sniff thing. Something to do with male pheromones, which trigger a sexual response in a potential partner. But the test isn’t available yet, so my dad keeps making shirts.”

Tanille’s eyes were wide. “People do this?”

Mira lifted one arm and with her other hand wafted the air from her armpit outwards, just to see Tanille’s skin wrinkle again. “Who knew you could have a whole business based on body odour, right?” She winked at Bryan, then walked off down the hall with the box. This is funny.

The previous night at the dinner table she'd caught herself watching Lewis. He cut his entire steak into tiny pieces before taking a single bite with his silly teeth. It aggravated her to hear him go on about how Third Gate sponsored town events like the spring fiddler's festival, the fall party on the dock and the winter ice sculpture contest, because the fiddler's event, for example, hadn't even taken place for several years. When her parents picked her up from Sudbury the first question he'd asked her was not, "How was first year university, honey?" but rather, "When are you going to use Third Gate to find a date?" He must have rehearsed it because he chuckled at his own rhyme. She felt like an adult trapped in a five-year-old's body, yearning for escape. She didn't bother to remind him that she had tried it, once. The smell test had not translated from theoretical match to romance made in heaven.

She went into the staff room and threw the box on the love seat. She was taking off her apron when she heard a crash. It had more force behind it than the accidental drop of something breakable. Angry voices followed, confirming intent. Mira gripped the door frame with clammy hands. There was a commotion at the end of the hall, outside the boss's office. Mira's blood buzzed in her ears.

"This way," barked Harry, the café owner. Without making any physical contact, he stepped around Steve, a busser, to direct him toward the kitchen. He was careful to prevent Steve from going to the front where he could make a spectacle in front of the customers who still lingered over dessert.

"Not cool, man, not cool!" said Steve in a small, high-pitched whine. A tingling sensation fizzed in Mira's fingers and trickled slowly down her spine. The boss was an imposing, six foot five figure. His features were large and sharply outlined—a long, narrow nose, wide jaw, broad shoulders. Mira could hear the fear in Steve's voice. She was aware of his troubled love

life, his fragmented work history, but was unaware of any behaviour that might have warranted the boss's reprimand. Harry walked into his personal space so that Steve had no choice but to step sideways into the kitchen. Mira tried to decide whether it was Harry's physical intimidation, or the rumours about him that scared Steve most in that moment. Swearing, Steve slammed into something that rattled on his way to the rear exit.

No one knew for sure where Harry was from, but the stories were enough to at least puzzle, if not scare even the most skeptical staff members. Some said he had been shipwrecked on a journey from Nova Scotia up the St. Lawrence to the Great Lakes, that he'd killed his crew to save himself. Others said he had escaped persecution for a crime committed out west. There was one story that described in gruesome detail how he'd killed a business partner with nothing but a bread knife. There was never a body, or an investigation. Just these wild stories, this dark mythology, as alive as the man himself.

She held her breath as Harry walked past her on his way to the front. His pale blue shirt was button-down and neatly pressed. The tattoo of the prow of a ship showed under the short sleeve on his muscled right arm. She was amazed, in light of the size of him, how quietly he moved. His hands were clasped lightly behind his back, those massive hands, distorted by a condition that made them look like they'd been fed air through a tire pump—gigantism, localized mainly in his thumbs. The stories about Harry as a kind of monster who evaded capture would fade, only to be revived with each new hire, like schoolyard chants passed down through generations. He must have known what was said—there were no secrets in the restaurant. Other downtown businesses presented flowery, country themed displays in their windows, or a more modern aesthetic of greys and buffed metals. But Harry's place was different—it had what Mira

thought of as a Gothic atmosphere, with its torturous bar gate, exposed wood beams, and oversized, nautical decor.

He had already walked past her but stopped suddenly and turned. She wasn't sure he had even seen the box until he said, "Someone once tried to convince me to open a gift shop in here." There was a barometer on the wall next to the door frame, above the light switch for the staff room. Harry tapped a finger on the dome of glass, as was his habit, to check the pressure and gauge any changes in the weather. He was looking at it when he said, "People don't come here to shop. They come to eat, drink and be entertained."

She opened her mouth to ask Harry if she could keep the box here, just for now, but closed it again just as quickly.

## Chapter Two

Back when they were too young to make any major decisions for themselves, Mira and Vicky spent most summer days on Chantal's boat. Vicky liked to lay out on the transom and work on her tan, but sometimes Mira convinced her to go into the cubby under the bow. This was Mira's favourite place to tell her stories. She always had a bag of books with her, but she wouldn't read those to Vicky. She invented stories about the two of them embarking on great adventures, meeting unusual characters and visiting far away places.

A few days after Lewis had brought her the box, Mira pulled it out of her closet and went to search for her cousin. She walked out of her neighbourhood, with its manicured gardens and young trees, to the trail that ran parallel to the southern shore of Georgian Bay. She followed this paved path through Copeland Harbour Park, around the back of the Bay Café, then up Main Street.

Vicky was in the ice cream parlour. It was in the original location of the diner where their grandparents had met sixty years earlier. It had been a Poppe Shoppe in the seventies, then the Ice Cream Palace in the eighties, and was now, simply, The Parlour. The interior was a background of white tiled walls and floors, neon green bar stools, and metal light fixtures that poked out of the ceiling like invading spaceships. Vicky was wearing royal blue short shorts and a hot pink tank top that should have clashed with her auburn bob, but only made her hair, her blue eyes and her lightly freckled skin more striking. The girls sitting with her all wore variations—in lemon yellow, green, and purple—of the same outfit. Mira slouched in her baggy Copeland High School t-shirt and torn jean shorts. Do Wah Ditty Ditty mixed under the techno beats. The hyper shiny atmosphere made her teeth ache.

Vicky was both employee and patron of The Parlour. Her role here was all part of their plans for the future; work hard now, save money for being out on their own later. Mira averted her eyes from the bulletin board on the wall next to the washroom, with its boastful poster about how The Parlour was fifth on Third Gate's top ten first date suggestions. She was proud of the fact that Harry would never display one of Lewis's adverts. But then, the Bay Café was not on that list.

Vicky's runner's legs wrapped around the base of her stool. She held a cold drink in one hand and directed conversation with a nod or a shake of her head. There was gossip in the air, full of names Mira didn't know. She climbed up onto the stool next to Vicky, dropping the box on the floor. Vicky kicked it. "We're not doing this again? I'm only selling them if we cut them into crop tops." She grinned mischievously.

They had both sold the shirts for Lewis, back when they could use them to rev up their popularity. As Mira had explained to Tanille, it was a business based on body odour, something their teenaged peers had found hilarious. Vicky's reaction was the kind of conspiratorial comfort Mira was looking for. But the box made her grumpy and she responded only half-jokingly.

"Older people don't mind the shirts as they are."

"You would know." Vicky never missed an opportunity to tease Mira about her volunteer work. She had even gone as far as to label the Copeland Care Home, "pee palace" and, "drooler's dome."

Mira was possessed by a sudden urge to shove the plastic cup in her cousin's face. She'd lashed out in this way once when they were young. Only three at the time, Vicky had grabbed Mira's bag of books, then opened them up to crumple the pages. When gentle urging to stop hadn't worked Mira lost her temper and bashed her cousin's face with the hard plastic head of

her Jenny doll. The memory of that misdemeanour reverberated across time to rear its ugly head now, when Mira felt least equipped to ward it off. What she yearned to hear from Vicky was that she should just say no to Lewis and be free of the shirts. But they both knew she wouldn't. Mira held the counter and twisted her hips so that her stool swiveled one way, then the other, and her legs kicked the underside of the counter, the box, and grazed Vicky's shin.

Vicky leaned into the counter with an air of fatigue rather than that flash of fight when she mentioned cutting up the shirts. Over the music there was a discussion going on about the next beach party. Not enough people had shown up at the last one, the guys got bored and went to the bar to start a fight. Someone had pulled a knife, someone else was gouged in the thigh and had required a dozen stitches. They were laughing at the fact that the injured guy, too stupid to stay out of trouble, was the one rounding up the crowds for the next bash. Vicky sat listlessly flicking her straw with one finger, and stared over the counter at the colourful menu board. What was wrong with her? She knew that menu by heart, she didn't ever need to look at it. Nauseated by the music and the stupid conversation, Mira hopped off the stool. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"To the beach."

"Now?"

"Why not?" Mira scowled down at the box as though it was a child she had to find a babysitter for.

Vicky tapped her foot on the cardboard and shrugged. "Sell the shirts at the party."

This wasn't what Mira was thinking. "Put it in a dumpster maybe." She shook her head. "You know what happens at these parties—if I lose them, we'll both be in trouble." She wanted Vicky to be in on this with her, to share the responsibility of the shirts like she had back in high

school. But Vicky wasn't the one in possession of the box. "Fine. Let's drop this off at your house, then we'll go get beer."

Chantal had thrown a party at her house once, a creative way to unload the shirts—they had sold several dozen that night, with orders for more. The age difference between the girls being what it was—not too great that the cousins couldn't be best friends, but too much to have their peers mix—it was the only time Vicky's grade ten, and Mira's grade twelve friends ever mingled. The experience of the party, and walking up and down the halls of their high school together for weeks afterwards, when everyone wanted a shirt, would never be replicated. Mira wound her finger in a strand of hair and pulled until her digit turned purple. She was alone in this mission. Lewis hadn't asked Vicky, he'd asked Mira. She said, "I'll never get away."

"I will. I put a down payment on my tuition," Vicky said.

"You mean, Blake did..."

The sharp, decisive look returned to Vicky's face. "You should have seen mom, she was brilliant. She threatened to get the lawyers involved again if he didn't put the money for first year directly in my account." The only promise Blake had ever been expected to follow through with, thanks to Chantal's determination, was paying for Vicky's university tuition. This was a big deal after years of disappointments—Vicky had never spent a single Christmas with Blake, and he'd only had her over to his condo twice, in all the years since the divorce.

Mira picked up the box slowly. It seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. But it was hers to bear, not Vicky's. "I'm glad you're all set to go away," she said, remembering how hard it had been for her to say goodbye to Vicky last summer, when she was on her way to school and Vicky wasn't old enough yet. "You're going to love university. This will be a great year. For both of us." The weight of the box lightened slightly as she felt Vicky grab the door behind her to follow

her out of The Parlour. They stood a moment as their air-conditioned skin adjusted to the waves of heat emanating from the sidewalk. Two teen moms pushing strollers forced them off the curb on their way in for soft scoops. From the dock at the bottom of the street came the deep bellow of the Copeland Queen, announcing her afternoon departure to take tourists on a boat cruise of the Thirty Thousand Islands.

Chantal's place was the same house on Seventh Street that she and Ghislaine had grown up in. It had been left to the sisters after their parents died in a car accident when Mira was fourteen, and Vicky twelve. At the time, Ghislaine and Lewis had just moved into their newly constructed home on the opposite end of town. Chantal was happy to leave the apartment she'd been living in with Vicky after Blake left, and move back into her childhood home.

"Thanks," she said.

"What for?"

Mira couldn't explain the expansive sense of happiness that came over her—maybe it was being alone with her cousin. They'd both been so busy this summer, they hadn't had any time alone since Mira got back. It didn't surprise her that Vicky wasn't going to help her sell the shirts. For now, she would be glad to leave the box somewhere Lewis wouldn't look for it. Mira assumed a goofy face. "For just being you."

Vicky snorted. "You're a nut."

They walked past a squat brown brick house and Mira smiled at Mrs. Abbott, the neighbour she and Vicky used to sell dried flowers to when they were bored with their lemonade

stand. Vicky complained that Mira was moving too fast, and she made an effort to slow her steps. The more lethargic her cousin was, the more energy she seemed to gather. She was eager to peel the box away from her side. Her desire to hide it from Lewis was becoming superstitious—if he couldn't see it, then he wouldn't harass her for an update on sales. She tipped it sideways and nearly dropped it. She was aware of how ridiculous she must look, carrying the box all over town, and how it smelled, growing musty with her sweat. She couldn't wait to put it down, but then what? She would still have to deal with it, and soon. Or, she could keep it hidden, and hope that Lewis would forget about it. Maybe she was a nut. He wouldn't have made the very public effort to present it to her if he was capable of forgetting about it. The situation was making her crazy, and it was only the beginning of the summer.

Chantal was bent over on the front lawn, deadheading her geraniums and tossing the brown bits into the juniper bushes at the edge of her property. She stood and wiped her hands on her overalls. "There's my girls! Get your bathing suits—we're going for an evening boat ride."

"Can't, got plans." Vicky slammed the granny door on her way in through the front porch. She flopped onto the love seat and flung an arm over her face.

"What's with her, and what's in the box?"

"Don't know, and—let's just pretend that the box is invisible." Mira shifted it to her other hip. She hung her head and muttered, "Third Gate shirts, if you must know..."

Chantal grunted. "Just tell him no."

Though this was exactly what Mira had wanted to hear from Vicky, it had a different connotation, coming from Chantal. Her aunt loved to point out Lewis's inadequacies, and Mira felt bad for him. He was the only man in a family of women. Three of them, excluding Mira, were practically red-heads, well, auburn, with personalities to match. It was the sisters, not

Lewis, who made all the big decisions in the family. “It’s no big deal. I’m going to leave it here overnight, if that’s okay? I’ll deal with it tomorrow.”

Chantal shrugged, and turned back to her flowers. “Whatever you like.”

Mira tiptoed past Vicky on her way into the house through the porch. Vicky’s eyes were closed. Maybe if she had a nap now, she’d be more fun to be around later. Mira regretted having to pass up the boat ride—she loved being on the water—but the urge to drink had more pull at the moment. The boat had been her grandfather’s and, like the house, was an asset Chantal had inherited. Ghislaine had absorbed her parents’ investments, and in this way the sisters had managed to avoid any rivalry over the division of the estate.

Mira was more at home in this house than at her parents’ place. At least half of her childhood had been spent here. The front door creaked on its hinges. The scent of it had something to do with how you expect the shed of a woodworker to smell—full of tools and scraps of raw materials, old canvas, buckets of sawdust. It was the odour of old, loved things—complicated, but not unpleasant. The rooms were clean and dust-free, for Chantal was a diligent housekeeper—she just liked having a lot of stuff around. Rows of pots with lush herbs lined the windowsills, and the shelves were full of books. Mira put the box on the floor and touched their spines, the stories she’d curled up with during fall and winter nights or during long, lazy summer days: Narnia, Middle Earth, the girl Aerin who fought dragons, and all those child siblings or cousins who solved mysteries. There were dozens of travel guides with pages Mira and Vicky had marked to explore: Mira wanted to visit Shakespeare and Co. Bookstore in Paris, and castles in England. Vicky wanted to shop in the Lucerna Arcade in Prague and meet cute men in Barcelona and Venice. She was standing there stupidly absorbing the cozy, peaceful atmosphere when a car pulled into the driveway. Her mother’s voice called, “Hallo!”

The box! The only thing worse than having it in her possession and running into Lewis, was having it with her and seeing her mother. During the brief moments Mira had spent with Ghislaine this summer so far, they hadn't spoken about the shirts. But that didn't mean her mother wasn't privy to Lewis's plans.

Ghislaine wore a jacket with irregular splashes of flowers in red and pink, lime and orange, and matching lime green capris. Mira wondered why she was dressed like an old lady. She had time, before the sisters came into the house together, to carry the box down the hall and into the spare room. She paused when she heard Vicky speak—she wasn't asleep, after all. Leave it to Ghislaine to motivate her cousin to rise from her slumber. Mira used to tell Vicky, "When you don't get along with your mom, you have your aunt," and this had proven true for each of them, especially during their troublesome teen years. You couldn't get away with keeping a secret from your mom—neither aunt would ever lie to her sister—but you could shelter with the other mother and cool your overheated emotions when you needed to.

Mira had to restrain the energy that made her want to chuck the box against the back wall of the closet. She placed it quietly on the floor then slid it all the way in with her foot, and closed the folding door. Satisfied that it was properly hidden, she went to the window and swished her hands back and forth in the curtains—another ritual, like touching the book spines. The curtains were a background of deep forest green, with a layered pattern of vines, flowers, fruit, starbursts and open bird's wings, busy with varied yet orderly shapes in colours like rust orange, royal blue, gold and cream, all of it rearranging and changing when the fabric moved. She couldn't recall when, exactly, she'd started doing it, but she couldn't leave the room without fondling the curtains.

Ghislaine was like a department store mannequin in her loud outfit. Mira hugged her, cautiously at first, as though there was a bomb planted somewhere on her mother's body she had to be careful not to detonate. Then she slumped into her for a moment, enjoying the cool surface of the jacket against her skin. Her mother hugged her back and looked over Mira's shoulder at her sister before pulling away. "I see you haven't thrown out the old junk yet." Her eyes swept the side table with several Penguin Classics, magazines and notepads, the stacks of books on the floor in easy reach of the couch and the chair, the worn furniture.

"I was waiting for the garbage woman," Chantal said, sitting in her favourite chair and swinging one leg over the other. "And look! She's here."

Ghislaine said, "Do you still keep those decorating magazines around?"

Chantal crossed her arms. "Oh so now you're interested in the old junk."

Ghislaine brushed past her and headed for the spare room. "I think I know where they are."

"What do you need them for? I thought you were finally done decorating your house."

"Third Gate office. The foyer needs an update."

Chantal followed her sister down the hall, and Mira bounced on her toes behind them. It would be good if Ghislaine recognized the box with Chantal there, because Chantal would defend Mira against having to take on the responsibility of the shirts; but also bad, for the same reason. Her aunt would have something to say about it, and it wouldn't be gentle.

Ghislaine was pulling open the folding door. "What's this?" The flowers on Ghislaine's jacket seemed to tremble.

"That," said Chantal, "is a nuisance. What's he doing with more shirts, anyway? And why dump them on Mira? Isn't there some other kid he could—"

“The business,” Ghislaine said, with an irritated hiss through her teeth directed at her sister and her daughter, “is expanding and *he* needs help he can rely on.”

“Don’t you think she has enough to do? She’s in university, for crying out loud, not some bored high schooler—”

Mira stepped between them. “It’s okay. Vicky and I are going to a party tonight, we can—”

“No, it’s not.” Chantal said. “The town is saturated. What he wants are the tourists, you see?”

Mira bit the inside of her cheek. It was true—Lewis hadn’t brought the shirts to her at the café on a whim; he had planned it that way, to encourage her to sell them to Harry’s customers—especially the out-of-towners. It made her angry, as much for the fact that she had tried to overlook it, as for the fact that she would have to stop Chantal before she caused a row within the family over it.

Ghislaine said, “They will be sold in time for the dock party.”

This statement was so final that no one said anything until Chantal slammed her palm against the closet door. “That’s not the point! We’re talking about him using Mira, when he could have found another way.”

Mira said quickly, “Mom why are you dressed like that?” Despite all the evidence—Lewis showing up at her work when he could have just talked to her at home, and the deliberate yet casual way he’d left the box with her, then departed immediately after without hearing her protests—she wanted to believe that maybe there was some kind of father-daughter bonding reason he’d chosen to pass the shirts along to her. But in the spit and sizzle of energy that passed

between her mom and her aunt, there was something Mira found oddly comforting. She enjoyed listening to them go off at each other but felt, this time, responsible for not letting it escalate.

Ghislaine smoothed her hands down over the lapels of the three-quarter sleeved jacket.

“Lewis and I have a meeting with a new potential investor.”

“I knew it!” Chantal said. “More money solicitation. What do you need it for, anyway?”

“For a major new expansion. Lewis is planning a significant new service to be offered by Third Gate.”

Chantal snorted, “What now? Free delivery by stork?”

“Never you mind, ” said Ghislaine, “But it’s cutting edge, and it’s expensive, so we need new investors.”

Mira reached down next to the box and lifted her arms triumphantly. “Look! Here’s the magazines.” There was another pause as Ghislaine shuffled through the half dozen or so Mira handed to her. Then she turned to leave the room. This was enough to disperse them back toward the kitchen.

Mira breathed a sigh of relief that the ugly moment had passed. They joined Vicky, who was sitting on the kitchen counter. On the wall behind her, the alternating pattern of peaches and plums were faded in the late afternoon sun. Ghislaine didn’t hide her disgust. “I honestly can’t understand why you don’t update this kitchen. You have the money. Hell I’d help you—”

“Daiquiris?” Chantal said, raising her blender in the air like a trophy.

“I know why mom and dad didn’t renovate,” Ghislaine went on, “they were saving for us to go to school. But you have Blake to pay for Vicky’s tuition—”

“Maybe I’m partial to the wallpaper. You can’t get this stuff now, it’s obsolete.”

“Your house is a museum.”

“*My* house, yes. And since we’re not—” Chantal opened the freezer to pull out the mix, “going boating, we might as well drink.”

Mira registered the disappointment in Chantal’s face—a look that her daughter seemed to take as accusation. Vicky repeated the excuse about the plans that precluded the boat ride offer. Then she and Ghislaine turned to talk about science electives Vicky could take in first year.

Chantal scooped ice into the container, plugged in the blender, squeezed the pomegranate-coloured mix in but did not talk. Mira wondered suddenly if her aunt was lonely. Chantal claimed to have met men on her travels, but if she had carried on a relationship with any of them, she hadn’t shared this information with her family. Most of the time, she said her life was full as it was. But, Mira thought, wouldn’t she want to meet someone, and have companionship, someone to grow old with? Had Blake been so horrible to live with that she never wanted to go down that path again? Chantal didn’t need her family to go on the boat with her, she could have gone alone—but she preferred not to. She liked to pack a cooler full of snacks, and beach bags with towels and sun hats, and pile into the boat for fun, “All together,” she liked to say, “under the good healing sun.” Ghislaine hardly ever went out on the boat anymore. Lewis had a fear of being on the water. Mira almost changed her mind about the beach party, but Vicky was already looking for her mom’s car keys, taking Ghislaine’s instead and guiding Mira out so they could get beer before their sweet drink, and Chantal was pulling four pineapple-shaped glasses from an upper cupboard.

When they were all back in Chantal’s kitchen and sipping from their kitschy glasses, Vicky asked why Lewis was still selling the shirts. Mira shot her a death stare, not wanting the topic to be re-opened. But she relayed an expanded version of what she’d said to Tanille, about

the research into a DNA test. “He needs to keep the shirts going until the human leukocyte antigen—”

“Yeah, yeah, never mind the science...”

“Until the hormone test is available. For marketing.” She glanced at her mom, who looked pleased.

“That’s right,” Ghislaine said. She turned to Vicky. “It wouldn’t do you any harm to learn the science. What if the PR firm you end up working for has a pharma client? And Lewis’s work is important. He’s helping people, not just here, but—”

Chantal said, “What a good guy, with his DNA test to help people find the perfect partner.”

Ghislaine was huffy. “His work benefits many. We’ve been reviewing the numbers, and the growth has been astounding. There are more people out there than you think who see the dating service as a last resort to find someone.”

“Look at you, nurse turned businesswoman. It’s a niche market! Meanwhile, our local hospital needs some of that government funding, and where’s it going to? A dating service. Yes, I know about the application.”

Ghislaine shot back, “Well it hasn’t been accepted yet. Another ‘niche market’ as you put it, is the fertility referral service. The number of people who need help with that, and have nowhere else to go, being too far from a major centre...”

“Doesn’t anybody have a phone book? You can look things up online now too, you know.”

“Like you said—it’s a niche market, people need this service.”

Chantal pshawed. “Tell them to adopt a local teen’s baby—plenty of them around.” Her eyes went round with surprise. Chantal had crossed a line and she knew it, straying into Ghislaine’s personal hardship. Twenty years ago, Ghislaine had had to make alternate plans to have Mira, because Lewis was infertile.

Ghislaine slammed her glass down on the counter. “What about us? Should I have solicited a local teen to give Lewis and I a baby?” She picked up the glass again and gestured towards Mira. “Instead of what I’ve got?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Well you said it.”

Chantal lowered her voice to a consoling tone as Vicky, whose eyes glittered with laughter, started to back slowly out of the kitchen with her drink. She nodded to Mira, and the two of them ran to Vicky’s room.

“Why can’t my mom keep her mouth shut?” Vicky whispered, her voice squeaking slightly with repressed giggles.

They sat side by side on the floor, their backs against Vicky’s bed, cradling their drinks. “My mom baits her.”

“They’re programmed to press each other’s buttons.”

“They wouldn’t be who they are without.”

Vicky nodded agreement. “Do you think your mom is glad that Lewis isn’t your real dad?”

Mira could have been angered by this question, and the retort, *Lewis is my real dad*, was on the tip of her tongue. But anger wasn’t what she felt. She was too glad to have Vicky’s

conspiratorial tone back within her own orbit, as the words flew around in the kitchen, to respond negatively. She thought about it for a minute. “I mean, he’s kinda an awkward-looking fellow...”

Vicky howled with laughter.

Pleased, Mira added, “My biological father was obviously much better looking.”

Vicky wiped the tears of laughter from her face. Her smile faded and she grew thoughtful. “Do you think you’ll ever know?”

“Know what?”

“Not what, who. Do you think you’ll ever know who your dad is?”

This was a much more difficult question for Mira to respond to than the discussion around their mothers’ hot buttons. They had never discussed the existence of her genetic father. Her parents had told her that Lewis was her dad in every way besides genetics. He had had an unfortunate illness as a child that led to his infertility, so her parents had found another way to have a baby together. Mira had lived with this sense of Lewis’s vulnerability, and her own mysterious conception. But there was also a sense in her family that these things were not to be discussed outside the home. And she’d never done so with Chantal or Vicky.

Mira swallowed more of her drink then, as cheerfully as possible, said, “Probably not.”

## Chapter Three

Bryan made a valiant attempt to build up the kindling for the fire but with Sean hovering over his shoulder, flicking his own lighter on and off, he became flustered and the teepee of twigs collapsed.

“Haven’t you got it yet?”

“Back off, let me.”

*Snap. Snap.* A sound like sandpaper gloves rubbing together.

“Should’ve brought a jerry can,” said Sean. He tried to elbow Bryan out of the way and they both fell into the pile of crumpled newspaper and twigs, and rolled on the ground in an awkward, flailing embrace. Some of the girls backed away, giggling.

There was a portable disk player raspy with Pearl Jam. Mira took the lighter from Bryan and crouched low to light it. The boys continued to jostle nearby.

“Can you stop for a minute,” Mira said. She held her hands protectively over the faint flame.

Sean had Bryan in a headlock. Bryan let out a howl as Sean flicked his head with a willow branch. He yelled even louder once he was released and covered his eye with one hand.

“Serves you right,” Mira said, annoyed. She liked them better in the café, where their movements were more deliberate, less clumsy. Vicky handed over small pieces of wood, then larger ones, and together they grew the flames.

One of the girls was talking to Vicky about a guy who had just moved to town. Mira could never remember the names of these girls. She accepted the beer offered—Angela, that was it. Most likely to get pregnant and work as a cashier the rest of her life, according to Vicky. Mira

found it strange that Vicky bothered to hang out with them at all. But Vicky was a master at compartmentalizing.

Mira hadn't intended to come to any of these parties this summer—the people were all younger than her, and she never got drunk enough to enjoy being around them. Cases of beer rattled as they were unloaded from the trunk of a car into a cooler. Mira made up her mind to at least try to enjoy the evening, for Vicky. Most of her own friends had taken jobs away up north, or were doing summer school. When she got together with any of her friends in town, it was either in someone's backyard, or at a bar. But some of this group were still underage, and the ones who were nineteen hadn't gotten out of the habit of drinking in parks. Mira felt wrong here, as though all the gains she'd achieved by being older, and a university student, were at risk of being reduced by their proximity. Or maybe this was Vicky's influence over her. Vicky loudly mocked one of the girls for saying she thought that wineskins were made from roadkill. Mira finished her beer and reached for another.

"I heard the new guy lives alone," said Angela. "Is he cute? Did you meet him at The Parlour?"

"I was on my way to the post office when he was moving into his apartment," Vicky said. "He stopped me to ask about the Copeland college campus. I said it was nothing more than a building in the middle of a field, not much of a campus." Under her cool demeanour, Mira knew that Vicky was counting down the days until her move to Toronto. If either of them was going to make a disaster of their plans and end up stuck at the cash next to Angela, it was Mira. She had already yo-yo'd between going away and coming back during her gap year, and again this summer. She had gone to Costa Rica for a few weeks with a friend the winter after her own high school graduation, and the rest of the year she lived at home and worked at the café.

Angela was quiet for a whole minute, then asked about the new guy again. Vicky said they'd meet him later, because she had invited him. When Angela moved off to try to get Sean's attention, Vicky talked to Mira excitedly about the communications program she would begin at Ryerson in Toronto in the fall. Vicky planned to go the co-op route to ensure she'd have a full-time job following graduation. Mira nurtured a sliver of envy for her cousin's confident way of dealing with the world. Vicky's plans left no time for returning to Copeland once she left, aside from Christmas vacations. Mira's plans were more vague. She was in an arts program at Laurentian in Sudbury—or The Suds, as it was affectionately called by the students—with no declared major. She had only a general idea of completing a degree and getting a job. What to do, specifically, still eluded her vision of escape from this small town, and, more importantly, from under the roof of her parents.

Angela returned to her place by the fire full of new vigour. "Hey Vicky, how's the ex? Is Luke still trying to get back together?"

Vicky made a gagging noise. "No way am I doing long distance."

"Won't you miss him?"

Vicky snorted.

"But I saw you talking the other day. He'll say you strung him along."

"Not that I care, but he's away for the rest of the summer." Vicky kicked the green end of a log further into the centre of the fire. She got up and went to get two more beers from the cooler.

Sean greeted each new person who arrived with a headlock and an aggressive rubbing of his knuckles against their scalps. The smoke drifted one way, then another. Bodies formed a half-circle facing the fire. There was just enough light left in the sky that Mira could see a flock of

birds, disturbed, lift off out of the branches of a nearby oak tree. The breeze tossed the smoke so that it dipped in and out of the firelight. One of the girls commented on the multitude of stars that formed the milky way. Someone farted and the explosive laughter was a propulsive kind of madness. Joints were passed around, and there was talk of the hypnotic nature of star-gazing. Sean's input was to claim that he could get them to do anything he wanted if he hypnotized them. Bryan said that hypnotism didn't work on him, and Sean called him an evolutionary dead-end. He said, "In the future, we'll all be living in our minds. The physical world will be obsolete."

Mira wished they'd all shut up for a moment to enjoy the night. She said, "I don't believe that." She sat down next to her cousin but at that moment something beyond the firelight caught Vicky's attention, and she darted away, leaving Mira next to Bryan.

"What do you believe?" Bryan said. He put his face close enough that she could see each individual eyelash, and flecks of gold in his brown iris. "You'll be gone again soon. Won't you?" She wasn't sure whether he was hopeful she'd stay, or that she'd go. He was leaning on his right hand so that that side of his body touched the left side of hers.

"Why do you get all the best shifts?"

Mira wasn't sure at first where the voice came from, or how she knew that the question was directed at her. She started to say it was because she'd been working at the café longer than any of them, but partway through this sentence she met Sean's gaze. His eyes bored right through her with a severity that she wasn't prepared for. Sean had been hired a few months back, when Mira was still in Sudbury. She didn't know him well, but his threatening tone caused a chill at the back of her neck. She looked for Bryan but he was on his feet, heading towards the cooler.

“You get all the evening shifts and he has me come in mornings,” Sean said. He was standing above her, flipping and catching an empty beer bottle so that the reflected firelight provided the effect of a circus act. “No one gets good tips before two.” He paused his motion and stared at her with a sinister smile. “I think the boss has a thing for Mira.”

A few voices said, Wha-? They sounded like bird calls from far away. Several pairs of eyes looked at Mira, and their faces in the orange light appeared flawless.

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” one of them said.

Mira peered into the darkness, searching for Vicky. There was a rhythmic sound, like a door swinging on a hinge. Then out of the shadows a black and red lumber jacket came forward, and a ukulele on a strap. Vicky said, “Everyone, this is Finn.”

Sean’s shoulders and head seemed to loom in mid-air in the dancing firelight. He tossed the bottle into the flames, then went to the cooler and started passing around more beers. He got no more reaction over the topic of Harry and Mira, so he tried something else. “I’ve got a thing you *guys* will want to know.” Mira was too relieved for the change in topic to ponder his emphasis. “Heard about the easy cash?” There was an obedient silence. “Twenty-five bucks—paid for this case.”

Mira’s brain, only a little tipsy from the beer, tried to warn her of some obscure danger, hinted at in Sean’s leering tone, but came up against a dead end.

“How?” from several male voices.

“Jizz in a cup, baby.” He took a triumphant swig of his beer.

“No way!”

“Yes-way.”

Mira's thumb made a squeal like a skidding tire down the neck of her beer bottle. The bad feeling spread from her gut to her limbs. Sean didn't care who he hooked, as long as he could have some fun. If she had remained standing, she could have stepped back out of the circle of firelight to make herself invisible. Her butt was glued to the ground, her body rigid.

Sean said, "Sperm. For money, honey." Mira felt like she was caught under too many blankets, trying to get warm without suffocating. Sean was laughing. "I did it the other day. They're paying perfect specimens—like myself—for sperm." His cackle blended with the sounds of the crackling fire. "Gonna be a whole lotta little me's running around the province soon."

Mira tried to concentrate on the waving arms of flame to calm the turmoil in her mind. She considered making a denial of the claim about Harry—a tradeoff of one uncomfortable topic for another—but her brain was moving more slowly than usual. She didn't want to hear any more, but his voice filled the air as he elaborated on his experience. "What are you into? Girl on girl, massive dildos, Latino? Whatever you want. Piles of porn in the room, bro."

Mira's beer was empty. She stood. "Is that all you want? A new masturbatory experience?" An unexpected heat expanded in her body. She was bloated but not drunk enough.

"Masterba-wha?" Sean bent forward under the strain of his belly laugh. He stood up again and said, "If you'd do it for me, I wouldn't have to." He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, wiggling it in her face.

Mira made an effort not to flinch or back away from him. "So you're gonna be a daddy."

To her horror, Sean laughed even harder. "Not. I signed a form that says I will never give consent to have some brat come looking for me."

Her body felt foreign, unreal, like a cardboard cutout of herself. Someone put on Roy Orbison but Sean yelled for Black Sabbath instead. Mira was furious with him for gloating about

the money. He was making the whole process into something disgusting—it made her own conception repulsive. And what about his right to remain anonymous? Wouldn't any baby born from his donated sperm be just like her, a real person—not some brat—who would someday be curious about her paternal family? She wouldn't want to know it was Sean.

“Your sperm isn't worth the piss in a bottle.” Mira had an indent in her hand from the cap of the last beer Sean had passed around. She decided she wasn't going to finish it, precisely because he'd given it to her. The heat building inside her evaporated the alcohol she'd already consumed. She could feel it wafting out of her pores. She stepped closer to the fire, tipped her beer and watched a line of steam rise from the flames as she emptied the carbonated liquid that pissed into the coals.

“Perfectly good beer,” said Sean, but he wasn't angry. Someone laughed. Other voices rose and fell, more giggles. Mira pressed her fingers into her eye sockets. The swirling static behind her lids made helix patterns, like a moving version of the galaxy. Mira stepped further away from the flickering light, intent on leaving. But she paused, noticing the way Vicky's mouth softened but her eyes brightened, and how she hung off the sleeve of Finn's lumber shirt. Sean proceeded to perform his stupid dance in front of the girls on the opposite side of the fire. Though he disgusted her she felt, also, a begrudging admiration for the way he managed to turn any insult to his advantage. What would it be like to be able to do that? She imagined it would feel powerful, and she wished she possessed that kind of authority. Instead, she stood there imagining what it would be like to peel off parts of herself and toss them into the fire—her skin, her limp hair, her arms. He moved his mocking dance towards her, and ground his hips into her stomach. She turned away.

The music was turned off again and there was a new sound, low and tentative as wind chimes, with a rhythm that matched the movement of Finn's arm, the one not in Vicky's captivity. Bryan was next to her again, saying—as though he'd had Mira's attention this whole time—he had a sister at UBC. "I can't decide what to do. In my parents' house...no one seems to think I'm good enough for university."

Bryan pulled at the sleeve of his shirt, his lips puffed like a pouting child. She scratched a mosquito bite at the back of her neck, and her anger turned inward. Infertility—Lewis's—had caused her parents to use a sperm donor to conceive her. Did Sean know this? Maybe, maybe not. She was taking this personally, but Sean's actions had nothing to do with her, or her father. She put her chin in the collar of her jacket. The two semesters of university she'd already completed faded away like a vapour, insubstantial as ashes from the fire. Her whole life seemed completely, pathetically insignificant. Bryan had dragged the cooler over so that it was between them. She pulled another beer out, and drank it, fast. It was stupid to stay. There was no enjoyment for her here, she hadn't even wanted to come in the first place.

Bryan said, "Slow down, girl—or let me catch up."

"I need—" she gulped more from the bottle. The night would get more messy, someone would barf. The only thing to do was to get really, really smashed, oblivious to all of it.

The strumming sound grew more intense, louder than the portable disc player had been. Vicky was all movement and energy, flashing teeth and bursts of laughter, the opposite to how she'd been earlier in the day when she'd looked like she could have fallen asleep anywhere. This was the way she acted when she had the hots for someone, which meant that Finn wasn't just any guy; he was the guy. Mira stared at them, uncaring if anyone noticed her. The lumber jacket appeared to hide a narrow frame—you could tell by Finn's neck, rising from the collar. He

looked at Vicky whenever she spoke, and paid only polite attention to anyone else around them. He seemed too young to be here, Mira thought. This was the kind of judgement always passed on someone new in this town. Mira was disgusted with herself for thinking it. She clinked bottles with Bryan, but after the second fast beer in a row, she had to sit. She moved her fingers over her eyes and the patterns were old, they were new. They were sperm squiggling through time. Sperm sold for beer money. She pressed harder.

When she took her hands away from her face Finn was seated, Vicky next to him. His elbows in that oversized coat were pointed out like bird's wings as he strummed his ukulele. She thought she could pick out something like Crimson and Clover, but then the strumming sped up and she wasn't sure what it was supposed to be. Vicky was so close to him Mira thought maybe it was affecting his attempt to play.

Eventually she did look away. The cooler had been passed around the circle of people until she couldn't see where it was anymore. Whenever Mira wanted another beer, Bryan was there to get one for her. She lost count of how many she consumed. She was on her feet for most of the night, feeding the fire, dancing, drinking. She pulled Vicky aside once to tell her not to screw up their pact.

"What pact?"

"Don't get attached. Remember? No-no-no serious relationships. Or needy friends to hold us back from freedom."

Vicky pulled her arm away and reached for the last beers, floating in a pool of melted ice. She laughed. "Not. A. Chance." She opened two beers, handed one to Mira, and they cheered, "To freedom!"

Finn played a couple more songs while someone rummaged for another CD. When Spirit of the West came on, Mira allowed Sean to spin her around in a chaotic dance and when he dipped her, she threw her head back and dug her nails into his shoulders. She would remember this, and the way he picked her up, gripping her ass so tight she knew he'd kiss her if she let him. She kept her face turned away from his. There was a moment after her wild dance with Sean when Bryan pulled her down to the ground to hold her on his lap.

Her last recall of the night was when the batteries died on the portable CD player. Finn began to sing again, a sweet, sincere cover of Skydiggers' *I Will Give You Everything*. The bonfire lit up his face. The pattern of reflected flame made shadow puppets of Finn's cheekbones, and Mira recognized something in the shape of his face, a familiarity she couldn't place in the sharp stare of his eyes before his gaze softened and he slowed the strums on his instrument to conclude the song. The world was spinning by then. Swish and flush, rush and gnash. There was a glow she saw blurrily in Finn's eyes, she decided they were blue. Fire reflected in the corners of the whites where smile lines spread away from that watery light.

## Chapter Four

Early morning boaters putted away from the marina. They picked up speed once they reached the main channel, their wakes curling out in white foam shaped like peacock tails and motored out of Copeland Bay toward the Thirty Thousand Islands under a clear blue sky. Mira stood in the gravel parking lot, balancing her bike between her legs. She had the day off and meant to be on the water, but had forgotten that Chantal was out of town, covering another story about Y2K preparations. Apocalyptic predictions of hellfire coming down on the world at the stroke of midnight at the end of December had waned somewhat since spring. These had been replaced by cheerful ideas for a New Year's Eve safety kit, how-to stories on the best ways to celebrate the new millennium and lists of organizations that claimed one hundred percent readiness for the big event.

Mira biked around the garden in the centre of the parking lot where the statue of a boy and girl poured water from a jug into a fountain. Black-eyed Susans and echinacea bobbed amidst hostas, pink astilbe, orange lilies and white daisies. She had to stop in front of the marine supplies store with all things boat related—ropes and rigging, lifejackets, marine radios, cabin and deck hardware, charts and barometers—as a truck backed a trailer with a forty-foot cruiser into the service bay at the side of the building. She pedalled hard, uphill, sweating out the booze from the night before until she was nearly out of town. She tried to convince herself that the bike ride was good for her, but she felt an underlying nausea that was hard to ignore. She wished for grey skies and rain, which would have justified a day in bed. But the sun beat down, relentless. She paused on the ridge of land before the hill that wound down to a valley surrounded by farmers' fields. To stop was to feel the full force of the sickening heat so she turned around, coasting toward the town dock at the foot of Main Street.

An older couple wearing matching Tilley hats walked by with canes, and there were a few men standing on the wharf with fishing lines in the water. Mira leaned her bike against the short side of a table under the picnic shelter and sat. A man lifted a bucket full of fish from his boat, called out to his neighbour, and when he received an appreciatory remark about the three bass, he placed the bucket on the dock. He wore coveralls, the top rolled down to reveal a stained grey t-shirt. The coveralls were much too hot for this time of the year. Some men seemed to prefer to live in a standard uniform, rather than change, sensibly, for the weather. He laid his chopping board on his transom and wiped his knife on the leg of his pants. He held the scaly body of a small-mouth bass in his left hand, then smacked its head to kill it before he made the first cut below the gill.

A large figure moving smoothly, without bounce or jolt down the main dock caught her attention. It took her a moment to realize it was her boss, Harry. He put his tackle box and fishing rod down on the dock and began to unsnap and unzip the cover of the stern half of his boat. She observed his careful concentration on the task. He was such a different man from her father. Lewis would have first found someone to strike up a conversation with before making his way to the boat. But Lewis wasn't a boater. Mira tried to remember the last time her mom had been out on Chantal's boat. Not last year, or the one before that. Had she decided, like Lewis, that water was for fish? This was a cover for his phobia—Lewis was afraid of open water. Mira decided that if she ever married someone who didn't like the lake, she would go boating anyway, with or without him. She changed her mind: she wouldn't marry someone who didn't like the lake.

Harry was seated in the captain's chair. He flipped a switch, and the blower came on. His boat was a Limestone, beautiful, sleek, built for the choppy waters of Georgian Bay with its deep

V hull. She knew all about Limestones—Chantal always said that if she ever won a lottery, that’s the boat she’d buy—and had always wanted to ride in one. Emboldened, she locked her bike to the picnic table, then walked around the wharf and down to Harry’s slip. “She’s a beauty.”

He finished folding the navy canvas cover and tossed it into the bow cabin. “She is.”

Mira ran her hand along the exposed zipper on the side curtain. “Got an extra line?”

“Sure.”

Houses on the opposite shore were just visible in the lush deciduous backdrop. The lake shimmered, sunshine coruscating off the light waves like a sequined coat. Was it really that easy to invite herself on Harry’s boat? To do anything with Lewis that wasn’t his idea required long hours of planning and negotiation. “So, I can come with you?”

Harry’s expression didn’t change. “I don’t think so.” He started the motor, turned off the blower, then got out of the boat to untie the bow line. He had to walk past her again in that quiet, stealthy way of his, to step over the gunwale. He untied the stern line and settled back behind the wheel.

The horizon gathered layers of stratus clouds. Harry touched the fingers of his left hand to his temple in an amicable gesture of farewell as he reversed out of his slip.

She resumed her position on the picnic table, too annoyed at being dismissed to feel ashamed by the rejection. Her limbs were liquid warmth, loose in the bones and solid in the flesh. Nothing ventured, nothing lost. She was about to lay back and close her eyes on the world when a woman’s voice, yelling, broke through the calm. Mira sat up. The Limestone was almost at the end of the row of boat slips but stopped suddenly.

“Get back here!”

The Limestone reversed. Harry appeared to be backing into the slip—quite expertly, Mira thought—but suddenly throttled forward, barely missing an albacore sailboat that was having a bit of trouble maneuvering into the slip opposite Harry’s. The albacore captain swore, swerved, and missed crashing his bow into the corner of one of the docks by a mere millimetre. He gave Harry the finger, and Harry’s face turned a red so deep it was almost purple.

“I meant what I said, you can’t keep doing this! Get back here!”

Harry leapt up from his seat, crunching his head against the navy cover, and with a gesture that was uncharacteristically spasmodic, he swore under his breath and rubbed one massive hand against his scalp. He ducked to unzip the panel above his head, rolled it back and tried to stand but the roll unrolled, he blundered about with it some more while his boat steered diagonally out into the channel. He kept looking over his shoulder, losing his grip of the steering wheel, failing to make a smooth get-away from the dock and the woman. Mira thought she saw his lips move, but if he said anything she couldn’t hear what it was.

“I never asked for this! Why am I here? You’ll never, I swear, NEVER see us again!”

Harry finally gave up on the cover and let it flap behind his head. He sat to steer the Limestone north, then took off, full speed, up the main channel. Mira’s heart was thumping. She’d never, in all the years she’d worked for him, witnessed Harry in such a clumsy, compromised situation. Who was that woman, and what had she meant by “us”?

A rush of images ran through her mind: Harry tapping the barometer. Harry pouring scotch for one of the wealthier customers who came in and sat at the bar. Harry able to make one of the servers cry, from six feet away, by simply reminding her not to be late.

Another image, of Harry with the homeless man who used to loiter outside the back of the café. On her first day bussing she had struggled under the weight of a bin she’d made

excessively heavy with too many plates, cutlery, glasses, in an effort to impress her boss and co-workers. She had wrangled the bin up onto the counter, relieved she hadn't dropped it. The wide-as-he-was-tall guy who washed dishes had made a joke about her mule-like capabilities, and she'd looked out through the open kitchen door. There was Harry, carrying a plate of food—not a pile of scraped leftovers, but a full, properly laid out plate of burger, fries and garden salad. At the time, she thought he must be taking his own lunch out there, but in the same moment realized how unlikely it would be for the owner to eat next to the dumpster. Mira hadn't told anyone about the food delivery she'd witnessed.

The combination of these images broke apart and scrambled in her mind so that Harry was part man, part monster. Who was that woman, and what had he done to her? The question thrilled her.

The woman was gone, and the Limestone, out of sight. The heat closed in on her, a suffocating embrace. She lay back on the table, swatted a mosquito from her ear, and rubbed at a tender bite on her finger. Someone was calling her but for a moment she was too engrossed with her itching skin to respond to the voice.

“Mira? Hey. You asleep?”

She pushed up onto an elbow and saw a figure in silhouette. “Bryan?” She sat up slowly, careful to avoid a head rush.

He rocked the handlebars of his bike between his palms. “On my way to the beach. Come along?”

She remembered the warmth of his body next to hers at the campfire. He was wearing board shorts and a Beastie Boys t-shirt. The veins stood out in his hands, and his tan line cut across his tricep. He put a foot on one pedal and the muscle above his knee flexed into a tight

knot. She thought about telling him about the scene she'd just witnessed but changed her mind. It was her secret. When Bryan looked at her there was a sense of anticipation in his expression, as though he was afraid she'd disappear. Was he worthy of sharing in the secret? She didn't think so, but maybe. She climbed down off the picnic table and brushed her hands over her shorts. Was Bryan checking out her legs? Did he notice the shape of her breasts in her v-neck shirt? He raised one knee to place a foot on his pedal, in ready position to move.

"Sure, I'll come." She unlocked her bike and they pushed off. To cross the parking lot they rode beside each other. The warm sun poured over her bare thighs below the high hem of her terrycloth shorts, the ones she always wore over her bikini, and sweat pooled beneath her butt cheeks.

She remembered him talking about his older sister, so she asked about her. Bryan said she went away to school out west and hadn't come back, except for Christmas. His voice was nice, not particularly low but deep enough, and pleasant. It was the voice of someone mild, and eager-to-please.

"And you? Are you going to be eye candy at the café the rest of your life?"

His laugh was appropriately bashful. He admitted uncertainty. "I'll probably end up at a college—something mechanical—but not yet. What's the rush?"

When they reached the paved trail, he smiled and gestured for her to go ahead of him. She straightened her arms and arched her back. She was a strong cyclist, and though she didn't have long, thin legs like Vicky's, hers were muscular and tanned. She'd left the elastic out of her hair so that it blew back over her shoulders or caressed her face when she turned her head to glance at him. He met her gaze when she did this.

At the beach, she leaned her bike against a tree, and he placed his next to hers. They sat in the shade and ran their hands through the sand. He was a year younger and had started working at the café in the winter, while she was away. He asked her what it was like living in Sudbury, and she told him about her roommate, Octavia, and the endless essays she'd had to write in first year.

"Any boyfriends?" His tone was bold, but he looked down, jiggling a small stone in his cupped palm.

"A few." He didn't respond but nodded gravely. She pressed her hand to his shoulder and shoved him playfully. "None right now."

"Oh. Good. I mean, that's good."

She laughed. "Let's swim."

They kicked off their sandals and dropped their t-shirts and her shorts into a pile, then ran to the water. When the water closed over her skin she stayed under for a whole minute, holding herself in blissful suspension. When she broke the surface Bryan was still standing, mid-thigh deep, so she splashed him, and he lunged for her. With a squeal she swam away, then stood where the water covered only to the tops of her legs, held her hair away from her neck with one hand and beckoned to him with the other. When he was within touching distance she grabbed her ass with both hands, then dove back underwater.

She swam front crawl until she was deep enough to tread water. He was right behind her. She tickled his ribs, and he grabbed her hands and pulled her closer, so that the length of her body pressed up against him. A floating raft full of screaming kids nearly capsized next to them, so they pulled apart. She could have swum out much farther, energized by the water, but Bryan was calling to her to let him catch up. The raft had moved back towards the beach.

“Come on, baby,” she said, and decided she needed to motivate him to stay in the water with her. Out here in the water she was strong and buoyed by the fact that Bryan was clearly into her. When he smiled and kicked closer she floated on her back, and pulled one bikini triangle aside to flash him her breast. His mouth fell open. Before he could reach for her again she took a breath and ducked underwater, arms over head, then held his ankles and pulled herself upward along his body. He was ready for her. He held her face and pressed his mouth against hers. Her legs were around his waist and he was panting between kisses. Water dripped from their hair, over their faces, and into their mouths. She pushed her forehead into his so they could catch their breath.

“Let’s do that again...”

He called her back, but she dolphin-kicked just beyond his reach. He dipped his head back so that the water caught the lock of dark hair that had fallen over his forehead. She wanted to look at him some more, to play with him, he was irresistible as Adonis. But he was tiring in the deep water. She side-stroked around him, a shark stalking her prey. Unbidden, the image of Finn strumming his ukulele came into her mind. She was surprised to realize she remembered the shape of Finn’s hands so clearly, wide at the thumb knuckles, with long, musician fingers.

She allowed Bryan to catch her in the shallower water. He stood up and held onto her thighs. She closed her eyes and kissed him again. Butterfly wings flitted around in her ribcage. This was purely physical, she told herself. He carried her most of the way back to shore. Laughing, they wiped water droplets off each other’s necks with their shirts.

When she bent to pick up her shorts he said, “Let’s go on a date.”

He took her hand in a careful way that made her blush. Purely physical. “Are you asking me out?” She kissed him and put his hand on her breast as they walked their bikes to the path.

Their clothes stuck to their skin like shrunken wet suits. They pedaled back to where they had started. The dock was busier with people now, groups enjoying drinks on their boats, others strolled by, licking ice cream cones.

“Movie? Dinner? When are you free?”

There was a poster taped to a lamp post with a note about a public lecture. “How about...” she said, then paused, as she read the title: Should We Seek To Alter Human Nature?

“What are you looking at?” He followed her gaze to the poster.

“I’ve never liked that word, Lecture. It’s like something your mother blasts you with when you walk in the house with muddy shoes.” She wanted to know more about the event, but it was the kind of thing you did with a serious boyfriend—not someone you planned to only have fun with over the summer. “I think a movie,” she said, deciding that Bryan was not, in fact, worthy of knowing her secret about Harry.

Bryan grabbed her hand and held it with both of his while he kissed her. His palms were warm, and enclosed hers in a tender way. She liked how his eyes on her made her whole body hum. She liked that he was asking her out. No smell test, no need for a shirt to set them up. She pulled her hand gently from his grasp, thinking about the darkness of the movie theatre, and how fun it would be to make out with him there.

## Chapter Five

“It’s fine for you,” Vicky said as they unloaded the Bingo barrel from the trunk of Ghislaine’s car. “You love the old farts.”

Mira shrugged, an attempt at nonchalance. “Sure. I’d rather organize entertainment for seniors, than pick up garbage.”

“You don’t even need volunteer hours anymore. You just *looove* them.”

“I love Bertha. It’s more than a coincidence that she happens to be Octavia’s grandmother.”

“How is your roommate?”

“Octavia? Good. She’s glad I’m here to check in on Bertha. Her work schedule means she probably won’t get to see her grandma at all this summer.” She lifted a bag of Bingo blotters out of the trunk, thinking about how Bertha used to stand on the curb and watch the kids walking to and from school. The first time Mira stopped to talk to her she said, “Let’s see—a girl your age, about ten? I thought so. Tea with just a little sugar, and a story. Sound good?” Bertha had served Mira tea on a tray with two cups, a clay teapot and matching bowl for sugar, and a tiny silver spoon. Her dining room table was full of rolls of material, ribbons, buttons, wide-brimmed hats and crumpled mounds of tulle. Mira had made it a habit to visit the old woman once a week when she was in Grade Four.

Vicky said, “Have you brought the box back to Lewis yet?”

Mira handed her a container of Bingo cards. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Don’t wait too long. You’ll lose your nerve, then end up doing something stupid.”

“Like what?”

Vicky thought for a moment. “Remember the time we ‘borrowed’ the caboose from Lewis’s train set to bribe those boys into letting us try their cigarettes?”

Mira laughed behind her hand. “It was months before we got it back. By then he’d bought a new one and still accused every kid on the street of being a thief!”

“He never even knew.”

Mira said, “This time he’d have no one to blame but me.”

Vicky gave her a quick slap on the arm. “Just do it.” A group of teens, girls in bikini tops, boys in board shorts, shirtless, walked by, laughing. “You probably have more old friends, than friends your own age.”

“Maybe I like being around people who don’t feel the need to evaluate me all the time.” Mira slammed the trunk. She didn’t want to be grouchy. She wanted this to be a fun way for her and Vicky to spend the day together. They didn’t have many left before they each went off to school, Mira north, and Vicky south. She was gripped by a sudden nostalgia that always got her when she heard that Tom Cochrane song—East, West, North, South, whatever. Good Times. “Tell me another story about our childhood.”

Vicky kicked the sidewalk. “You’re the storyteller. Like Finn.”

“Does Finn hang around old people too? Do you make fun of him?”

Vicky looked hard at Mira. “He’s like you. Uncompetitive.”

“Boss around-able?”

“He’s got this thing...” They had arrived at the door, and Vicky stared at it, waiting for Mira to open it. “About stories. He’s super close with his mom, Holly, and she’s this great storyteller.” Mira asked her to relate one. “Adventure stuff, I can’t remember details. I don’t have an ear for stories, like you do.”

Mira led Vicky into the school gymnasium pushing the Bingo barrel on its cart ahead of her. Beads of sweat made a ticklish journey from her temples down her jaw. She was suffocated by an irrational, implosive temper she suffered in silence. She worried she wouldn't be capable of summoning her usual gaiety amongst the crowd of white-haired Bingo players. Mira didn't trust her own mood. She had no grasp on how she expected this day to go. She shoved open the gym door with so much gusto it screeched on its hinges. But when she saw that the tables were already set up in a dozen rows, she wanted to hug the committee member who had been in here earlier. There were streamers in the corners and one bunch of pink helium balloons at the centre of the stage, held in place with a rock wrapped in shiny paper. She was calmed by the intricacy of the details in this traditional community event.

Mira directed Vicky to count the cards and the packets of pins as the crowd slowly began to enter. The room was poorly lit and the players, about fifty of them, were mostly silent. Mira wished she had her portable ghetto blaster. Every foot shuffle and each low murmur echoed under the high ceiling.

"About Finn..." Vicky stood so close to Mira that she had to twist herself sideways to reach the bottom shelf of the cart.

"Should I be worried?"

"About what?" Vicky spun the Bingo bin. The balls made a satisfying sound as they bounced and rolled against each other.

Mira recalled the graceful shape of Finn's hands. "It becoming too serious between you two, that's what."

Vicky waved a hand in front of her face. "He's just... interesting. Do you know that he makes his own instruments? He grew up in a place even smaller than Copeland."

“Then he’s definitely not your type.”

She frowned. “Maybe once you get to know him...”

“Okay now I’m seriously worried. You can’t really mean to convince me to like him, because—”

“He’d probably be interested in you. I should keep you two away from each other.”

Mira forgot to keep her voice low, and her laugh echoed across the room. Several faces turned in their direction. Speaking in a whisper this time, she said not to worry, and told Vicky about Bryan.

Vicky jabbed her with an elbow. “It’s about time!” In response to Mira’s raised eyebrows she added, “I always pictured you and Bryan together.”

“You never...” A brief, uncharitable thought crossed her mind; that Bryan was less appealing to her with Vicky’s encouragement. It made her want to cancel her date with him, rebel against the approval. She forced herself to remember the sensation of Bryan’s hands gripping her hips, his chest under her palms. She rearranged her expression in accordance with Vicky’s congratulatory gesture. She needed cooperation from Vicky today, not hostility.

Vicky said, “I can’t decide what I want with Finn.” She stared at a wall across the way, a handful of Bingo cards in her hands.

“Why question it?”

Vicky shrugged, and moved away to pass around the cards. There was congestion at the door as a woman paused on her way in to comment on Mavis’ blue hair. Next to Mavis was a man who’d had a tooth pulled so recently that when he smiled, a piece of gauze appeared like a plush toy’s stuffing from his gums.

As Mira finished setting up at the front of the room there was a polite murmur and some gentle laughter. When they were nearly set up she called out, “Everyone have their cards?” Not everyone did, because there they were—half of them—still in Vicky’s hands. Another twenty minutes before they got them all passed around. Mira got the first game started while Vicky found a place to sit.

When Mrs. Davis won the first game, she started to stand but leaned into the table, knocking her markers off her card.

“Is she dying?” Vicky muttered.

It was after a game that seemed to drag on for hours, during which time even Mira, aside from calling, was silent, that Reg Wilkes won with the surprise of a person waking from a long nap, and the pace of three successive games picked up. Vicky handed out prizes—items Mira had solicited from local businesses, most of them left-over from past years. Mira wished she had acquired the proper license to serve cold beer. She felt something rising in her, claustrophobia. The seconds felt like minutes. Sixty years ago this same crowd would have been on their feet, drinks in hand, jiving and talking over the music of a live band. She was seeing them as they were, now, through Vicky’s eyes, and it made her sad. She called, “Oh-oh-oh, we’ve got a brand new number to offer you here, I’ll bet it’s a rare one, come on, Mavis, Gert, we’re counting on you to take one of these mementos home with you tonight!”

Vicky yawned and looked to the double-door exit as though she wished something would come through them—the Tooth Fairy, a clown, anything to break the static scene of this overheated room. But nothing did, and Vicky, without resisting a show of boredom, put her forehead on the table.

The ball bin made a noise like rusted clockwork. But there was an agitation to the sound, like choking, even as Mira stopped spinning and removed a ball. Then a chair fell over, and Vicky lifted her head. Mira saw her look toward the door as though it was the only place a sound could possibly come from. But it wasn't coming from there. She shook Vicky's shoulder.

"Vicky! Now!" Mira shouted at Vicky as she crouched on the ground, next to the body that lay spread out on the floor.

"I don't—" Vicky said.

"Get help," Mira ordered. Vicky didn't respond. Mira saw that she was looking at the doors as though they were full of danger, not the promise of rescue. "Hallway phone, 911," Mira shouted. Finally Vicky turned to her right and hurried around the perimeter of the gym.

The elderly woman was breathing, but appeared to be unconscious. Mira spoke to her gently and touched the plasticine softness of her wrinkled cheek and hand. Mavis' blue hair was cheerful atop her lax features. Those closest looked on with mild curiosity, but without panic. A man told Mira, "She had her hip replaced last winter."

Two ambulance attendants, one male, one female, walked into the gymnasium ahead of Vicky. Mira got out of the way and the first responders leaned over Mavis, quickly checked her breathing and her pulse, then gave the all-clear. Her eyes fluttered, and opened. One attendant asked her name and she responded. The attendant asked if there was a next of kin in the room. The man who had mentioned her hip replacement gestured for Mira. He pulled a small notebook from his breast pocket, and when he flipped through the pages it was like a bird in his hands. He found what he was looking for he handed it over.

Vicky left the room again to make the call. Mavis was sitting up when her great nephew entered the room. She grinned widely, and the whole room seemed to smile with her. Then she called him by the name of her brother.

The nephew cheerfully explained to the attendants that this was nothing new—she often confused family members. “She remembers people she’s known the longest. Alzheimer’s runs in the family.” He wasn’t bad looking. In fact, he was very cute, in his khaki shorts and royal blue t-shirt.

Vicky had obviously noticed him, too. With an air of authority she said, “She dropped right out of her chair.” The great-nephew nodded thoughtfully, watching her. “She should be okay now.”

What made Vicky the expert? Mira flapped her elbows like chicken wings to fan her sticky armpits. “She just had—” Mira began, but the male attendant was giving instructions to his partner.

The great-nephew snapped his fingers. He said to Vicky, “You’re a Tremblay, aren’t you?”

One corner of Vicky’s mouth turned up in the playful way Mira recognized as her flirting face. “Sure am.”

“Related to Chantal? My mom was a secretary with her at the lawyer’s office in the eighties.”

Mira attempted to speak to the attendants. “She j-just had...” and felt her face flush over the stutter. “She had a hip replacement.” Was it even relevant? What was relevant to Mira in this moment, was the fact that she and Vicky were related through their mothers—Mira every bit a Tremblay as Vicky—but only Vicky was being identified as such. He was merely flirting with

Vicky. It would have been more annoying if he'd flirted with both of them. Still, Mira felt rotten to be excluded, and remained fixated on the envy that swirled around her thoughts like poisoned gas.

The attendants were at the door, each holding one of Mavis's elbows. Vicky leaned down and picked up the purse that was on the floor, and Mira felt her face grow hot—she should have noticed it. It was a few more minutes before they were all through the gym door, Vicky and the boy chatting the whole time.

“Hey—” Mira said, to no one in particular, trying to shift her focus back to the game. The ball bin on its stand next to her seemed larger than it had before. She couldn't remember whether they were in the middle of a round, or about to start a new one.

## Chapter Six

It was already well into July and the box was no less full than it had been, but more awkward to carry. It was smooshed down on one side from the way she'd been holding it under her arm, and the bottom threatened to open and spill out the contents. She set out for Third Gate with the intention of returning the box to Lewis.

Mira dreaded going into the Third Gate office. The place had a hushed atmosphere similar to a doctor's office, but with a subversiveness that felt, to Mira, like empty promises. There was none of the energy of the café, only a few people slipping surreptitiously in and out at any given time. And it wasn't fear of the unknown that caused her trepidation. She knew perfectly well what went on in there, and why it was cloaked in controversy.

Third Gate's occupation of the building—at the top of the hill, almost all the way out of downtown—was less than a decade old. In the beginning it had been cavernous with its own emptiness. There was a large foyer and one hallway with half a dozen offices and several meeting rooms. Lewis had hired a woman to manage the classified ads while he focused on sponsorship. She had sat at the front desk, while Lewis moved into the biggest office nearest the foyer. Then he hired a young man—a student, Mira recalled, fresh out of a college program—to move the business online. A more recent hire worked to build a national database of fertility doctors. There was an aesthetician who occupied the spa room at the end of the hall on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

The marketing campaign introducing the new spa was brilliant. *“Come relax in a quiet location near the serene waters of Georgian Bay. Discover your very own blissful beginnings. A change of scenery, a change of pace. Magnify the chances of conception away from the hustle and bustle of the city. Relax and find hope by the Bay. Privacy protected, confidentiality*

*guaranteed.*” In spite of her distaste for the business Chantal had agreed to attend the round of press conferences with Lewis, Ghislaine, and two other new contract employees, nurses with public relations experience. Chantal massaged their ideas into a few tag lines but it was Lewis who put the meat on the bones of these slogans. He knew the market, was aware of what women were willing to do or try to have a baby. He was aware of the rounds of drugs that played havoc with their emotions, implantations of embryos that ended in heartbreaking miscarriage then back again on the drugs and try, try again. He knew that to reach these women who had already made up their minds about engaging with medical intervention to make a baby, he had to convince them that they could have these treatments on the weekend along with a facial or a massage. It wasn’t hard to get them to join the lines of cottage country traffic to get to Copeland rather than sit in the city on pins and needles awaiting next appointments.

Copeland’s town council were divided, at first, about the clinic. Those opposed did so on moral and ethical grounds, concerned that their hometown, with a reputation as an ideal retirement community, would get caught up in the politics of unsavoury social experiments. Though assisted-reproduction technologies had been around since the late seventies, the industry hadn’t yet shaken the negative connotations it had grown up with. Fears about how tampering with genetic material would lead to human cloning still lingered in the collective unconscious. There were cases reported almost every week about new legal challenges posed by the tangly web of assisted reproduction, about sex selection, manipulation of DNA and commodification of the human body. During family dinners, Chantal never failed to point out that laws to guide the industry’s development were still in development themselves. She accused Lewis of playing with fire, engaging in the Wild West of ART, assisted reproductive technologies. What do you do, Chantal had demanded during one heated discussion at her dining room table, with frozen

embryos of couples undergoing a complicated divorce? Does a parent of a deceased sperm donor have access rights to the child? Lewis didn't seem worried about Chantal's questions, for he would only ever smile in response to her pointed finger.

Chantal was the one who had attended the town council meetings. "It seems there are so many new situations and no one can agree. Do we really want to be tangled in all that?" said one councillor. "It has nothing to do with you, if you don't want it to. These laws are not created at the municipal level—we can continue to worry about infrastructure and zoning, let the lawyers and the provincial courts decide about the ethics of ART." And so went the debate, but nothing was decided and eventually council moved on to more pressing matters. Third Gate continued its quiet expansion unhindered. It all seemed uncomfortably sci-fi to Mira, who preferred a good fantasy, or historical fiction novel to the uncertain reality of the clinic. Compared with the café, Third Gate seemed less established, as though it could disappear and no one would really notice. But people would notice—here it was, one car pulling in and two pulling out of the parking lot, proving her wrong. The building was real. She was the one who was insignificant. Thinking of it this way gave Mira a vertiginous feeling, like she herself could disappear and not be remembered.

The sense of expectation was, on this day, almost unbearable. She tried to bring into focus words she would use to return the unsold shirts. *No time... I have other things....* Nothing was adequate. Her palms were sweating. This was uncomfortable territory—Lewis's domain, not hers. The institutional atmosphere had always made her uncomfortable. She entered through the foyer and put the box on the coffee table. It did smell nice in here, flowery, but not overpowering. Perhaps this conversation would be okay—almost like their first real adult talk.

That would be refreshing. He would be understanding, even admit that he had been wrong to dump the shirts on her.

There was a tiny fountain inside the double doors. The odour was essential oils, lavender mixed with something fruity. She heard his voice before she saw him. “I see,” Lewis was saying. “I have the potentials right here.”

The spa was new since last year. Vicky had availed of the facial service and described the exfoliating, pinching and squeezing, which sounded to Mira more like torture than relaxation. Her eyes had a hard time adjusting to the light inside—warm like honey, a shade that matched the scent. It was Friday. There was one other person in the waiting room, a woman who looked to be in her thirties, who was summoned by an even younger woman in scrubs, and taken down the hall for her spa treatment. The receptionist was a silhouette—Mira thought she saw her wave, so she waved back, then realized the woman was on the phone. Through the glass panel next to his open door she could see Lewis seated behind his grey Ikea desk, head bent, the telephone cord wrapped around one hand.

She sat in one of the upholstered chairs that looked like it had been scavenged from a garage sale. Mira could pick out her mother’s touches, the metal wall art, the birch branches in the slate grey floor vase. The receptionist finished her call, nodded to Mira, then looked back down at her computer. On the feature wall to Mira’s left was a poster of Chloe Brink and Justin Pearce, the couple Lewis called his celebrity clients. Chloe was from Copeland and had appeared in commercials for toothpaste and chewing gum, and a CBC television special. Justin was from Winnipeg, also an actor. Of all his clients, Lewis was most proud of these two.

Mira turned away from the brag wall. There was a lumina lamp in one corner, and another lamp on a side table with a bulbous metal base. The spa music was a soothing background for her father's voice.

"Absolutely. It facilitates... Yes, and where there were limitations...for sure. A resort for the infertile. I like it."

He made a note on a pad on his desk, then his gaze found her. His fingers flickered in a subtle greeting. He laughed at intervals as he spoke, with what she thought was forced modesty. "—built on resources—now our resource is people." On the wall behind him was a poster of Earth from space, blue and watery with swirls of white and streaks of green marbling its surface. "They're willing to make sacrifices...family-building...should be offered every possible option, yes, I agree."

Mira was distracted by a ticking. The sound reminded her of the clock that used to be in her grandparents' kitchen. When she was only just starting to notice time, she used to believe that the clock was built right into the wall. When her grandfather removed it once to replace the battery, it was like the veil of the world coming down, or seeing the mechanics of the magic trick revealed.

"About the laws." Lewis leaned forward and his face was blocked by the open door. "In fact they don't exist." The laughter had left his tone, he was speaking more quickly now. "*Proceed With Care.*" He held up a pamphlet, with a Government of Canada logo in one corner. "Nothing's come of it. It's up to us to proceed. The demand is only growing." He leaned back in his chair. "...Anonymity, that's right." Lewis stood and looked at the Earth, his back to her. Uninterested in a view of him that didn't include his face, she swiveled to the wall behind the receptionist and saw the clock. It was vintage, about the size of a dinner plate, with bold numbers

in a rounded font. She crossed her legs and bounced one foot, trying to ignore what he was saying, and remind herself that she was here to return the shirts.

Lewis laughed, a deep, startling sound. Then he said, “I’ll wait to hear from your accountant.”

Nature sounds buzzed around her head like insects. Lewis hung up the phone and came out of his office. “Mira!” She stood into his open arms. He smelled of just a faint whiff of deodorant beneath dry-cleaned clothes. “You’ve been working so hard, I’ve hardly had a chance to see you all summer!” He stepped back and looked at her, but turned away just as quickly. “So nice you came for a visit. I’m in between calls, and on my way out later—must get to the bank—but you caught me, great timing!”

A day long ago came into her mind, when Lewis had taken her to see the Blue Jay’s play baseball at SkyDome in Toronto. They ate hot dogs, with gobs of bright green relish, and he talked about player stats and trades, things she’d had no particular interest in herself, but she’d been happy to listen. Lewis was still talking, about meetings and conferences, pointing out pictures on the wall. She followed him into his office. When he wasn’t speaking, the air was so quiet that small noises were magnified—the trickling water, the buzz of a fax machine or computer. She tried to experience it through his eyes—the gallery of happy couple clients had expanded, stretched further down the hall than she remembered. “Looks like things are...expanding.”

“You wouldn’t believe it. New things are happening all the time!”

She couldn’t find a way to break into his running monologue. She gestured to the file folders, some open, others piled to one side, on his desk. “What are you working on?”

Lewis scratched the top of his head with one of the folders. “Have a seat,” he said. Mira remained standing. He was smiling, and might have been waiting for her to say something. But she felt that he was on the verge of telling her more, and hope bloomed inside of her—maybe he was going to realize that she’d brought the shirts to return them. That would make this so much easier. She scolded herself for leaving the box in the waiting room.

“I wanted to talk more about the dock party,” he said. “You can wear a shirt on the day, too. To show we’re a real family business.”

Of course he was excited for the end-of-summer event—he was an extrovert who was thrilled to welcome floods of people to Copeland. But he was hedging on her participation in the business. She braced herself against his disappointment when she declined, once and for all, to participate. But it was necessary. She had spent weeks planning to get a busload of residents from the Copeland Care Home to that event, and she couldn’t let them down. Her father would have to understand “About that...”

Lewis sat at his desk and flipped through more papers he’d lifted from a drawer. It was as though he’d forgotten about inviting her to sit. In her struggle to find the right words to tell him why she was here, the thought of her unknown bio-dad washed through her. It was an undercurrent of unspoken desire that mingled in a nauseating soup in her belly. She worried about hurting his feelings at even the slightest indication that she did not think of him as her complete father—as though the symbolism of returning the shirts would sever whatever ties they had completely. She felt the need to introduce her part of the conversation with an assurance that their own relationship was unconditionally secure.

He blinked. She blinked.

“I wanted to tell you—”

“Ah! Here it is,” he said, holding up a stack of papers. He tucked them into the folder.

He had by now organized his papers into several file folders. She wanted to interrupt his train of thought, to offer the piece of information she was here to convey, that would disappear in the next moment if she failed to utter it. But he was neck-deep in papers now, shuffling, filing, tapping the stack then separating it. She was unprepared, in the midst of his busyness, to tell him anything just to satisfy her own needs. But why offer her such a warm welcome, why invite her in, if he wasn't willing to listen to her? To ask him directly about her bio-dad could have been a distraction, but it might also hurt Lewis. He was the man who had helped her with multiplication tables, read to her, coached her through university applications. It seemed like the most ludicrous thing to ask her father about her father. It was one thing to be grumpy about the t-shirts, to both mock and be a little bit proud of his success with the dating business. But to mix her desire to know this other man, to have to ask Lewis about him, seemed too low a blow, even in the name of honesty. And so she waited for him to speak.

“The spa has been such a huge hit!” He tapped the bottom edge of several more pages, then pulled a stapler out of his top drawer. “Since we tapped into the Toronto market business has exploded. Did you know that the population here more than doubles in the summer, with boaters and cottagers from the city? We're also attracting a lot of winter visitors with miles of open trails for snowmobilers, hills for skiers, ice for skating, you name it. Many of the cottages are being winterized. And even though it's only a two-hour drive, mostly along a controlled-access highway, many of these visitors think of this area as a place far from the prying eyes of neighbours. A perfect location for this business. I've got all these catalogues to go through and hiring. And now this major addition to the business.”

On a credenza behind his desk was a picture of the three of them, Ghislaine, Lewis and Mira at her high school graduation. Next to that was another, a wooden square with an embroidered, Biblical quote. Ephesians 1:5. *He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.* Lewis's mother had made this for him, had left this note to her only son. The sight of it made Mira sad, because it reminded her of what she knew about his unhappy childhood. His mother—who Mira hardly considered her grandmother, for she had died before Mira was born—had refused to hear anything from Lewis that was invented, no stories, no fantasies. Mira knew this from her mother, not from Lewis. Ghislaine had created an impression of Lewis's childhood that was bleak, and guided by religious doctrine more than motherly affection.

“Then they want to start a family.”

Mira had to recall what he was talking about—clients.

“Infertility, as your mother and I know,” he glanced at her then looked away quickly, “is a debilitating struggle for a couple. That's what the spa is for, to help them relax.” She remembered the comment about a “resort for the infertile.” He leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, and turned slightly so that he was looking out the window to his left. “They already trust us...now we can guide them on their journey to family-building.” He looked up then, not at her but at a spot above her shoulder where her good angel might have sat, and grinned and grinned. “This new tool—offers new hope for local couples, struggling like we did.”

“You're talking about the spa?”

He looked at her for a moment, as though deciding something. “It's more than the spa. That serves its own purpose. Now we can offer our clients a choice of...donors. We've purchased a freezer, specially designed for biological material.”

Mira sat motionless in the cool glow of Lewis's recent accomplishment, torn between thankfulness for her life, and a bewildered sense of dangerous, violent confusion, like Frankenstein's monster.

He was saying, "...the best part is that what we offer, with this new bit—what my colleagues have so generously offered to invest in—is happily ever after."

It sounded so ridiculous she almost laughed. Her mind was moving slowly, as slowly as it was the night of the campfire, the night when Sean announced...

He was pushing a glossy pamphlet across his desk towards her. "*Find your happily ever after!*" She turned it over. On the back was an address in California. The name of the company was, unbelievably, Viking Express. "What is it?"

"The sperm bank we're associated with. Connections, through Third Gate's investors."

He was like a schoolboy who had just found himself the winner of a coveted award. Meanwhile, Mira experienced that feverish sensation of space-distortion, as though her body had shrunk in an expanding room, or expanded between compressing walls. The scope of the sperm business had grown exponentially in the space of a few minutes. But it hadn't, really—the brochure in her hand had not been produced in that moment, out of thin air. It had been in production for—how long, a year? Several years? A decade? So was this where Sean had donated? Not at some clinic in Toronto, but right here, at her father's clinic in Copeland?

She looked at the picture of the earth from space, beautifully simple in its tricoloured marbling, which masked the complicated lives lived in all the deep crevices, hills, wide valleys, busy cities and small towns on its surface. She already knew the answer, from Sean's haughty explanation, but she asked anyway. "Is there ever going to be a way for me to know—"

“You, my dear, will know everything—someday, all in good time, I have no doubt, that’s how smart you are...”

He was smiling at her. What was he smiling at, exactly? She swallowed, confused. “Why the anonymity?”

With her eyes still on the poster of the earth, she saw him through her peripheral vision, but this was enough to know that he wasn’t smiling anymore. “To protect everyone involved.” She opened her mouth but he spoke again. “This is the way it’s done.”

Was that enough reason to withhold missing genetic information from her, and from others who would be conceived with the help of a sperm donor? He said, “I am so proud of this work. It’s been years in the making.”

She wondered what else had been years in the making. How many donors? How many babies born? She already had less than a lukewarm feeling about the dating business—how did he think she was supposed to feel about this? “But the anonymity... What about...choice?”

He leaned forward. “You must understand, given our situation... You are all I have of myself to pass along.” Startled, she met his eyes, blinking. This wasn’t only about his clients. It was about her, too.

Lewis’s eyes were watery, his mouth a half-smile. He looked at her with such desperate need for understanding that she felt all her inner functions—pump of blood, exchange of oxygen—pause. Her rights: null and void in the face of Lewis’s frailty of flesh. With a gasp, all her organs came back online, she stepped back and the chair fell over behind her. Lewis ignored her clumsiness and turned to gaze at the framed quote, a magnetic movement that drew her eyes there as well. She left the chair where it was, as though she could pretend she’d knocked it over on purpose to show that she was bigger, more powerful than his dismissive statements.

She swallowed and retreated into herself. In the pause when she might have been able to work up the courage to tell him she couldn't let it go, that the anonymity made her feel empty in a way she couldn't explain, her heartbeat thumped in her ears. She had to put a hand on his desk to still herself.

"I've worked hard at this," he said. "To get it all..." he shoved his palms on top of the files and slid them forward to make room for the next ones he pulled out of a drawer, "...to this point."

She left quietly. He was so busy with his papers, he hardly seemed to notice. She was careful not to look at the receptionist, afraid she would cry, but so many emotions assaulted her at once that they all balled and hardened together to form a kind of plaque on her insides. With her jaw clenched she bent stiffly to pick up the mashed box she'd left on the coffee table. She was halfway across the parking lot before she realized she'd meant to leave the shirts there with him.

## Chapter Seven

Bryan's parents were cruising the North Channel on their boat for the week, so he asked Mira to stay with him. The first evening they drank wine coolers and he cooked burgers from a box on the barbecue. They went to a late showing of The Matrix. Movie theatre hand caresses turned into heavy petting. They were the first ones out of the theatre, and fast-walked back to his house where they continued on the couch in his living room. She went the washroom, and when she returned she noticed the photos on the mantle.

"Tell me about your family," she said.

He gestured to the photos. "There they are."

She scrutinized them closely. Bryan resembled his father, and his expression matched his sister's, whose matched their mother's.

"Aside from hair colour, there's no doubt you're all related. I'll bet you even like the same sports as your dad," she teased.

He shrugged. She climbed on top of him and kissed him. Bryan rubbed her shoulders. She sat back, anticipating his roaming hands, but he seemed to be waiting for her to make the next move. She took off her shirt, then helped him out of his.

She licked his earlobe and stroked his hips, and his breath deepened. He reached into her shorts to take hold of her ass, and she thrust her hips against him. He writhed beneath her to undo the top button of his fly and pull his hard-on up out of the seam. She stood up and took off her shorts, her bra. He got down on his knees and grabbed her underwear with his teeth. He wasn't getting it off fast enough, and she gouged her hip with her thumbnail trying to help him. He kissed the scratch, but she pulled him up to push his shorts and underwear to the floor. Completely nude, she ran upstairs to find his bedroom.

He followed her, then sat on his bed, turning on a lamp before he reached for her. He watched her face as they lay down together. His body covered hers completely, he was hard, and she was excited to get him inside her. He kissed her chin, her neck, trying to engage her in more foreplay, but she wanted none of it—she'd been horny since the theatre, he'd touched her only fleetingly, and now she touched her own wetness—she was ready. But once he entered her he moved so fast that her mind wandered. She thought about Bryan and his sister, with their genetically linked smiles. She didn't come, but didn't expect to. Later, when he went down on her, she imagined her cunt as a strawberry, and his mouth, warm and wet, licking and sucking the berry juice out of her. The orgasm more than made up for not having come before.

Mira woke up in Bryan's bed. His posters were sports heroes she didn't know, his paraphernalia unfamiliar. A few trophies from baseball were on the dresser. He sat up and wrapped his arms around her. She twisted out of his embrace.

"I want ice cream." They ate it with two spoons, right out of the tub. "Vicky and I used to do this during sleepovers. We'd snoop in the freezer when no one else was awake. Her mom always had ice cream, a choice of flavours."

"What's your favourite?" He watched her with an adorable grin on his face, made her feel like her words were gold.

"Any kind of chocolate, of course."

She asked him to tell her more about himself. He shrugged. "I like the money I make at the café. I like baseball... live music, and I like...being with you." He put down his spoon to reach for her and nuzzled her neck with his face. She asked him what he'd thought of the movie.

He was enthusiastic. “I knew it was supposed to be great effects, but it was even better than I thought. And the whole idea—wild.”

Mira waited for him to say more. When he didn’t, she shuddered. “It creeps me out.”

His face took on a soft, dopey expression, like a hound dog with droopy eyes. “So, you didn’t like it?”

She rubbed his thigh to reassure him. “I had a great time.” She remembered the conversation from the night of the campfire. “I hate to think of some idiot like Sean controlling us all with his mind.”

Bryan’s eyebrows went up. “He’s pretty smart, you know.”

“No!”

Bryan nodded. “He’s going to some Ivy League school, I can’t remember which one.”

Mira grunted. “You don’t believe me?”

“I have no reason, either way.” He was so endearingly afraid of displeasing her.

His lips puffed out in a pout.

“But if you say so.” She was reminded of Lewis, and how hard she tried to not say the wrong thing for fear of hurting him. She remembered Steve getting thrown out of the café at the beginning of summer, and thought, I am surrounded by wounded animals.

He put his hand over his forehead, rubbing his temples. “I wish I could remember the name of the program, something to do with the brain...” She pictured his head behind his hand as a mostly hollow space, with a few random, useless facts pinging around.

“Neurology?”

He squeezed her shoulder. “That’s it! I think.” She left her spoon in a chocolatey puddle on the counter, replaced the lid and put the ice cream back in the freezer. “You still aren’t impressed. I thought all you university girls were wowed by smart guys...”

“You can be smart, and still be an asshole.”

“He comes on pretty strong, but he’s harmless. I think he’s just super bored here.”

They flirted at work all week. There was the brush of his hand on her back, or a gentle hip-check and a sly smile between them. Once when she was working behind the bar, Bryan leaned into her neck and paused, like he was about to say something. Instead, his breath caused a delightful chill to run down her spine. When Bryan backed through the heavy gate with his eyes still on Mira they were both startled to hear a loud, “Yeow!” from Sean, for Bryan had slammed the corner of the gate into his thigh.

“Get a room,” Sean said, not under his breath.

Mira was giddy with Bryan’s attention. She was more aware of herself, knowing he was watching her. And to her relief, Sean wasn’t teasing her about Harry anymore.

In the evenings at Bryan’s house, they ate and showered together, probed into stories about their families, their childhoods. They barely discussed hopes for the future, except once. When he told her how emphatically he did not want to be a dad, did not intend to bring children into “this overpopulated world,” she said nothing. She had always assumed she would have children

someday, but that day was not now, so she shrugged, and didn't offer her own opinion. She sometimes had the sense of having to pull conversation out of him, to ask a silly question about his favourite TV show or colour to get him to talk. But communication between them in bed made up for whatever might have been lacking in their verbal exchanges. He watched her closely and learned quickly what she wanted. They fell asleep tangled in each other's limbs and woke spooning.

On the Friday that his parents were due to return from their cruise there was a light drizzle that stuck to the windows and blurred the foliage in the yard. Fearing that the fun time they'd had together would be spoiled if she overstayed, and wanting to avoid words of love she sensed he was working up to, she told him she had things to do, and went back to her house.

Bryan called on the Sunday to invite her to walk with him down by the lake during their split shift. She hesitated. The sky had darkened throughout the morning, but it wasn't the threat of rain that gave her pause. What crossed her mind was a notion of disloyalty to Harry. It was irrational—she wasn't committed to Harry in any way, except as his employee. She should have been thinking about her pact with Vicky to not get attached to anyone this summer. She accepted his invitation.

This time, Mira's house was empty. They had two hours before their evening shifts began. She led him to her bedroom. On their way down the hall, a feeling of remorse overtook her. Bryan's proximity was nice, his hand in hers was nice, so why did she have to question this moment with him? She was here, now, about to sleep with him again, and why not? She pulled his hand to her waist, hoping he'd start to caress her even before they arrived at her bed. He obliged, but it wasn't enough to distract her. From the corner of her eye she saw her open closet door with the soggy-sided cardboard box in the shadows beneath the clothes on hangers. She

couldn't get comfortable, and shifted sideways to get out from under him, to put herself on top. "Single bed," she said, comparing her quarters to his. They kissed, and took off their shirts, then their shorts and underwear. Bryan engaged in his ritualistic slow, careful tearing of the condom package. His breath filled the sausage shape and Mira had an urge to pop it between her hands to hear what sound it would make if it broke like that, full of air. Bryan was concentrating on waving it all around to check for holes, like a magician conjuring a rabbit from a hat. At his house, this inspection had amused her. But now, she found it dramatic and unnecessary. She reached across him to turn off her bedside lamp. With the blind closed, the day cloud-dark and no light on, they were in a twilight shade. Bryan asked her to turn the light back on. "What's the big deal?" she asked.

"With the light? I just want to see you," he said.

"You're not even looking at me. You're obsessed with the condom. You know there's a billion in one chance you'll find a hole? Better luck winning a lottery."

He froze mid-inspection, both hands up near his face and that ridiculous balloon waving between them. The condom drooped as he relaxed his grip. His eyes darted between her and the lamp.

"Well?" she said.

"Could you..." He reached down with one hand to rub himself, for his erection was fading along with the air in the condom. "Geez, I'm just being careful. Back off!" He was hard again but still cross. "What's the point of using it if it doesn't work?"

In her mind she conceded, but there was a pitch to his voice that kept her anger piqued. "What's the point in sex if it's all concern and no fun?" She scooted across his lap and stood to put on her tank top.

“I don’t understand. I’m sorry...”

She stood in her top and nothing else, her back to him, hands on hips. “I understand. You don’t want babies. I get that. Why be sorry?”

Until this point, it seemed he had been willing to overlook whatever trap she was setting for him. Now, he made a fist with one hand and pressed it to his forehead. “For whatever your problem is, I guess.”

She didn’t expect him to understand—the reason for her outburst was a mystery, even to her. Bryan still held the condom limp and dangling in one hand. He looked so pathetic sitting there naked, legs crossed, shrivelled and disappointed, and she thought about the sperm stuck inside of him, sperm that was worth something—beer money—if he chose to sell it. A lump rose in her throat. “It’s just...unsexy.”

“Safe sex is...unsexy?”

She found her shorts and extracted her underwear, hiding her face behind her hair. “Your room is...better.” She tried to laugh but if he believed her mood to be jovial, then his stupidity made her even more sad.

She knew he was watching her as he got dressed. She busied herself with her hairbrush, running the bristles back and forth on her hand, then through her hair. With each stroke she accused herself, *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.* This was not how this summer was supposed to be—it was to be work, save money, have a bit of fun, then leave.

He apologized again, asked if she was okay and she smiled her bravest smile, even if it was only her mouth that moved. Then she pecked his face with the formality of a mother kissing a child. “I’m sorry, too. It’s good, your concern.” When he didn’t move, she added, “We’re out of time.”

## Chapter Eight

Octavia called during the third week of July to let Mira know that she'd found an apartment for them to share for second year. "It's small, but the location is close to campus and groceries, and it's in this cute building with a fire escape."

Mira hadn't realized how much she'd missed Octavia until she heard her voice. "I'm sure it's perfect."

"We'll have to pay rent starting August."

"No problem, I'll mail you a cheque."

Mira talked about the café, her cousin, and Bryan. Octavia was a counsellor at a kids' summer camp in Orillia. She said that Jamal from school had visited her, but other than that, she only saw her old friends, no one else from university. She had been in Sudbury for a few days to visit family, which was why she had offered to go apartment shopping. Mira relayed nothing of any substance. All of the things she really wanted to say would have to be spoken of in person.

The first thing she heard when she arrived at work that day was Harry's voice. His tone resembled the suppressed energy of a motor unable to turn over. The café was more quiet than usual, with a hush that seemed to emanate from an unknown source. Bryan was already there and greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, then hurried off toward the kitchen. Tanille was crouching over the guestbook as though she wanted to sink into it and disappear. There were two tables filled, and even the customers spoke in only the softest tones. Mira prepared her own tables and was relieved when two more groups came in and she was too busy to think about the tension in the room.

Harry was hunched, Scrooge-like, over his desk when Mira went into his office to write on the supplies list. He made a sound like an animal growling, but a tired animal, so that it came

out like a growl-yawn. The door to the office opened in the centre of the long side of the rectangular space. Piled against the wall to the right of the office door, opposite Harry's desk, was a graveyard of computer equipment—clunky monitors, keyboards, towers in a row like tombstones. Mira didn't know why he kept them, but she indulged for a moment in a vision of Harry tossing them there in a fit of rage. She had seen the awkward way he had to poke at a keyboard with two pencils. Maybe his oversized digits didn't work properly on a regular keyboard, maybe his hands made him angry and he took out his frustrations on old computers.

Afraid to look at him and risk interrupting this fantastic little story she had going on in her head she focused, instead, on the stash of discarded technology. The pile wasn't so haphazard after all. The towers were lined up next to the monitors, and the keyboards placed neatly on top.

She recalled what Harry had been saying as she entered the hushed, uncomfortable silence of the café that afternoon. "I don't care what you do when you leave here, when you come back, be on time, be presentable—" She had seen his jaw clench as though he was trying to chomp on the shell of a walnut. She did not want to see that again, least of all when she was alone in this room with him. The room was so still and the longer she stood in one place, the more difficult it became to step boldly to his desk to complete her task. It was her duty to make a note that they were low on gin, tabasco and napkins. He made another sound of frustration and from her peripheral view she saw his fist raise. Without looking at him she listened for the thud, but there was only that grunting noise. The list was on his desk, mere inches from his elbow, and her skin tingled with a sense of danger at the thought of approaching him.

Finally she worked up the courage to stop waiting for him to acknowledge her, and cleared her throat. He looked up and his eyes were wide, only just noticing her. She said, "Can I help you with...?"

“Schedule,” he muttered. His arm jerked and papers scattered. Mira turned her face away politely, conscious of not embarrassing him for the rare show of clumsiness. The papers rustled. As though this were too small a gesture to satisfy him, he pushed back his chair and slammed both fists on his desk.

Her hairline broke out in a sweat. She should have left the office at this point. But he shook his head and when he sighed, his shoulders dropped several inches. Mira remembered other occasions when she had witnessed his temper flare. Usually, he was able to maintain control, as he had the day Steve left, but sometimes a server showing up late for the third time in a row or causing some other infraction made him to raise his voice. The more she thought about it the more she realized that these episodes never amounted to anything. She stepped toward his desk but then the memory of Sean’s mocking tone about Harry having feelings for her made her hesitate—what if Harry did like her, in that way? What if it was safe for her, but no one else, to barge into his office? What if the other servers noticed?

She bent to gather the papers from the floor to hide the heat she felt in her cheeks. Sean had planted this cruel and ridiculous idea in her mind and it was growing. But at the same time, she realized that she didn’t have to believe in Harry’s anger the way the others did. He had never hit anyone, or made any physical contact with a single employee, that she knew of. She recalled a server who had once said Harry had shoved her aggressively, but she had quit soon after that—she had probably exaggerated. Instead of feeling his anger as a threat, Mira saw it as a spark exploding on contact with oxygen, but without enough heat to keep the flame going.

She looked at the calendar and without glancing at the list he’d tossed aside she bent down, took the pencil from his hand and made the necessary changes.

“But the—”

She erased and scribbled until everything was filled in. “The servers, especially the girls, tell me things every day. Siobhan has to babysit her brother’s kids while he moves on Saturday. Bryan has baseball but Chris is available. Done.” She returned the pencil to his desk.

“Done,” he repeated. He smiled. She felt gratitude as though, by allowing her to help him, he’d given her something in return. She felt something rise up inside of her, as though the burden of his dark mythology had suddenly lifted, to reveal Harry the Human—not the monster—beneath.

She remembered the reason she’d first come in here, and said so.

He said, “Here. Take my pencil.”

She moved toward him, still wrapped in the positive energy flowing between them. It only took her two steps to reach Harry’s chair. She experienced a sense of elation, mixed with doom, something she might have described as mischief as she bent to write on the list, and offered him her flirty smile. She imagined telling Harry all of the things she had wanted to share with Octavia—the things she hadn’t had a chance to talk about with Vicky, either—about Lewis’s secret sperm business, and how it made her want to set the Third Gate office on fire. He was pulling another sheet out from under a pile on his desk. It occurred to her that he had another week’s worth of scheduling he needed help with.

She was standing so close that if she leaned to her right, her hip would touch his shoulder. She dropped the pencil on the desk. Harry raised one hand as though to wave to her, she stepped closer into the space between his knees and he paused, the hand hovering mid-air.

Her own hand was raised in the air, mirroring his, before she realized what she was doing. She glanced over his head at the blank wall behind him, but her eyes were drawn back to

his face—a face that wasn't accustomed to smiling but was so handsome. These thoughts made her face burn with heat. His brow creased and she realized his expression was one of concern.

She curled her fingers in toward her palm, stepped backward, slamming her butt into the edge of Harry's desk. She stepped sideways realizing, as she did so, that Harry had carefully pushed his chair backwards on its castors to give her space to get herself out from between his knees.

What had she been thinking, stepping so close to him like that?

Her pulse radiated up and out of her chest so that she thought he might see it, might sense the vibrations of the blood in her veins. She didn't dare swallow. She was frozen between the surprising pleasure of admiring him, and the confusion over what it meant. She looked intently over her shoulder to see if the door was closed tight, then down at the floor to avoid eye contact.

There was knocking. The door. Mira brushed both hands up, then outwards and down in a heart-shape over her face. She grabbed the schedule off the desk. "I'll post this now," she said. When she opened the office door, she was forced to step sideways to avoid slamming into Bryan. She avoided his eyes, too, and hurried past him.

Her hands shook as she plucked the pins off the old schedule, lined up the new one and tacked it in place. She tried to close her mind to all thoughts but was already asking herself whether she had wanted something to happen between her and Harry, while simultaneously feeling confused, or dirty, for even considering it.

She looked straight ahead and did not brush her hair from her face on her way to the exit. The sunlight made her wince. She paused in that place where she had no immediate plans, unwilling to commit to a direction.

She walked away from the café toward the park on the water. She had always thought of the café having the atmosphere of a ship, complete with a rowdy crew. There was order beneath the chaos there, a camaraderie despite the tense atmosphere, contained but also open to the world, to whoever might walk in through the door. To be near the water was antidote to that inside space.

She was working up her anger to keep the tears at bay, trying to convince herself that it was Harry, not her, who had crossed a line, slapping his face in hindsight, or yelling at him, some clever line to make him feel small. But when she recalled the feeling of warmth as she stood so close to him, she felt something inside her that was somehow bigger than the tiny thrills she had experienced with Bryan. It was like a cascading of all fluid parts, both a gripping and a letting go of all the uncertainty inside her. She crossed the playground to a place where she could look out at the lake—a landscape into which she could empty all her feelings.

There were squeals and shouts from the nearby playground. Children were running, panting, counting, calling and falling. She balled up her apron, working it like clay in her hands. Back in the café her insides had felt like they were coming apart. Out here, in the fresh air, everything inside of her moved back together—heart in chest, not stomach, stomach in abdomen, not throat. Why hadn't she just filled out the schedule, then left? She closed her eyes and listened to the children, to the water, the breeze in the upper boughs of the trees. It was a relief to be outside, in the open air she felt something close to what she had always imagined levitation would feel like—a suspension of disbelief that allows your mind to rise above your mortal body. She stood listening to the water lapping at the shore, and hearing in that calm, familiar sound, the hopelessness of having something to tell, and no one to tell it to.

## Chapter Nine

Mira had left her window open despite her parents' request to keep it closed when the air conditioning was on, and woke to the soothing, cooing sounds of mourning doves. She loved the song of those birds, they reminded her of endlessly hot and happy summer days of childhood. A creak in the hall drew her fully awake, but she didn't get up right away. It was probably Lewis—he always got up first—but she wasn't ready to talk to him yet.

When she finally did go downstairs, she was surprised to see that it was her mom in the kitchen. She was wearing her robe, and her hair was a nest at the back of her head. Even when she was crumpled from sleep and unshowered, Ghislaine looked regal, as though someone would come into the room and offer to lay out her wardrobe for her. Usually Lewis made her coffee. Mira asked where he was—she'd forgotten that he wasn't home—he was away at a conference. He'd be gone the rest of the week. She was relieved, then realized she couldn't remember the last time she and her mom had been alone, without Lewis or Chantal present. The sun was streaming into the back of the house and made big bright rectangles on the table and floor where it entered through the sliding glass door. The house was silent except for the low buzz of the refrigerator.

Before Mira could say good morning there was a sudden clatter, the sound of spilling liquid and her mother's exclamation, "Oh Jeez! Damn!!"

Mira grabbed a tea towel. She mopped up rivulets of fresh coffee and reached out to push the carafe back under the brew spout. "What are you doing? Can't you wait for it to finish?"

Ghislaine pursed her lips and did not offer to help, as though Mira was the one to blame for the mess.

Mira pushed her towards a chair and presented her with the mug that read, I Eat Worry For Breakfast. A puddle remained under the coffee maker. She found a dry spot on the tea towel and wiped carefully. She waited for the brew cycle to finish before she poured her own cup.

Ghislaine asked for confirmation of where she had been the past week.

“Sorry, I should have—”

Ghislaine waved a hand in the air. “I was only wondering, was it that nice young man who likes you, Ben, or, what’s his name, Ryan?”

Mira frowned. “You mean Bryan? How did—”

“Vicky told me. She came over yesterday for my help in choosing science courses for the fall.”

Mira put her face into her mug, braced for a lecture on her own careless dismissal of university science courses.

“The greatest number of doors are open—to women especially—who have business or science degrees.” Direct hit: Mira was working on a general arts degree.

“Good family,” Ghislaine said. “His father manages a food distribution company in Barrie and his mother owns my favourite clothing shop here in town.”

Ghislaine had had no end of criticism for the last guy Mira dated. Her mother had called him “boy,” despite the fact that he was older than Mira. But he hadn’t had any ambitions about post-secondary education, which meant no adult status in Ghislaine’s mind. “Bryan works at the café full time,” Mira said cheerfully, hoping to have the last word on the matter. “No more school for Bryan.”

Ghislaine grunted. “Cross him off the list.”

Mira took an unnecessarily loud slurp. “Why do you do that?”

“What, don’t I have a right?”

Mira guffawed. “Right to an opinion.”

“That’s all it is.”

“That works with dad, but not me.”

“What works with you, Mira?”

Mira shrugged, sulked. “You think your way is right—so different from Grandma—”

“What’s Grandma got to do with it?”

“You said she was passive. You complained about that. How she deferred to Grandpa on every decision. You want me to be like you—controlling.”

Ghislaine’s expression was more amused than ruffled. “We all have our opinions.”

Mira thought about the simplicity of her grandparents’ lives. They had both been from farming families near Copeland. Mira’s grandfather had achieved a degree from the University of Toronto and returned to a management job at one of the plants in town, but her grandmother had never left the farm until she was married. Grandpa had been an icon of manhood, which had probably led Chantal to be forever dissatisfied with the male species. He had supported his family, fixed anything that broke, left the housework to his wife, and deferred to her on decisions about the children.

“It’s true,” Ghislaine huffed, “Mom didn’t do enough to keep Dad interested. They ran out of things to talk about. Things are different, now. You can afford to be more choosy.”

“Very subtle.” Mira wished she had somewhere to be, but the plans her mom had asked about were non-existent. Without a reason to escape she suffered this prickly exertion of power, allowed it to bring out the worst in her. “If you’re so set on choosing things for me—” She really

didn't have enough reason to lash out. Ghislaine gave her an expectant look. Mira sat down across from her.

Ghislaine watched her intently. Encouraged by her interest, Mira said, "I want to know something... I want to know who donated. To make me."

"There's nothing to tell."

"What do you mean? What if he's a criminal? What if he's in jail, or has a record—"

"Don't be silly. Do you really think we'd choose someone like that?"

"If you don't tell me then I'll imagine something."

Ghislaine rolled her eyes. "For goodness' sake, Mira. This is all in your head."

Mira went out through the sliding glass door and stood on the deck. She wished she could avoid these outbursts with her mother. It was a thing you said to a child, *it's all in your head*. She was being shoved aside, allowed only to think prescribed things, ask only approved questions. How could she defend her right to ask against her mother's dismissiveness?

She went back inside. Ghislaine's elbows rested on the table and her shoulders looked less rigid, like the coffee had hit her bloodstream and loosened her limbs. Mira felt a mix of shame and anger. Didn't she have a right to ask? And if so, why did it feel so bad to want to know? Her question was urgent, and out of reach. An illogical suspicion that her biological father might be close by arose in her, but if this was the case, why hadn't her parents told her? She couldn't come up with any useful words to express the urgency of her question to her mother. She said, "Just tell me—do you know who it was?"

The pause didn't last as long as Mira expected before Ghislaine said, simply, "We enlisted help—it was through our network. I don't know more than that." She got up to place her mug in the sink. "We won't tell your father you asked."

“Why not?” Even as she said this Mira shrank into herself, overcome by a sense of foreboding.

“You know why not.”

Mira bit her lip and looked into the blinding sunlight through the window. She said, “I always have to be so careful about *his* feelings! Poor Lewis, he’s infertile, he’s...”

“Mira!”

“What about *me*? I wonder all the time what there is about me that came from this other person.”

Ghislaine drank her last sip and went to the sink to deposit her mug there. She crossed the floor but paused in the doorway. “Donation is anonymous. End of discussion.”

Mira could feel it almost as if it happened—a metaphorical door, slamming shut. “I don’t believe you!” She banged a fist on the table. Ghislaine was running a thumb across her collar bone, staring at Mira, calm as if they were talking about the weather. Mira wanted to grab that digit and bend it back, make her scream. Her mother’s body was self-contained, one leg crossed in front of the other, her elbows in tight to her sides. She stood as though protected from her daughter’s hysteria by a forcefield. Mira thought of the schoolyard chant, *I know something you don’t know*. The donor, Mira realized, wasn’t hers. The donor was her mother’s. Even though Ghislaine was the only one in the house Mira shared genetic material with, she couldn’t have felt more disconnected from her.

Ghislaine was tightening the wrap of her housecoat on her way out of the kitchen. The mussed hair at the back of her head was an angry tangle, ugly, but powerful. Mira had a brief thought that if she shouted, maybe the hair on her mother’s head would unwind itself and fall limp. “You’re just like your mother,” she said.

Ghislaine turned, one hand still on the tie at her waist, the other wrapped across her rib cage. “Excuse me?”

“You’re doing the passive thing—ignoring my questions for his sake.”

Ghislaine’s hands rose toward her face in a gesture of uncertainty before settling on her hips. “You’re making a big deal out of nothing—”

“It’s not nothing!” They were both shouting.

Ghislaine stepped closer. Mira could smell the coffee on her breath. “We gave you life. You squander it.”

Their bodies leaned toward each other. Mira felt very tall all of a sudden, justified in her position. If this was the way it was between them, that a question so important to her could be twisted into something for her to be ashamed of, used as ammunition in a fight, then she would turn it all inside-out. She said, “Doesn’t it ever bother you, you had a stranger’s sperm in you?”

They were standing so close together that she only had a second to consider what might happen next. Her mother’s hand rose into the air then came down across her left cheek. Mira’s quick intake of breath was involuntary. She felt her eyes water. The slap was sharp and the shock of it dislodged something deep inside her she had never felt before.

Ghislaine’s eyes flickered regret tinged with triumph. Then she shook her head and balled her hand into a fist. “Dammit Mira, I told you—it’s all in your head. Let it go!”

The sensation of pain emptied out of her, leaving only a simmering anger. Mira’s voice sounded far away, like someone calling for help from the bottom of a well. “I have a right to know!” She waited for her mother to come to her senses, to apologize. Her face was tense but she remained motionless, her lips pressed together. “Do you hear me? I have a right to know my own father!”

## Chapter Ten

The bus was parked, motor running, outside the Copeland Care Home. The driver stood next to the wheelchair ramp waiting for the crowd of residents to organize themselves and begin loading. Mira made several trips back and forth from the lobby to the bus, loading boxes of disposable plates, cups, cutlery, flags and streamers, sun hats, extra sunglasses, and the satchel of medications with its clipboard attached. Each time she walked past the box of Third Gate t-shirts she was reminded that it was still full. She knew it was too late to sell them, but having the box with her meant she could trick herself into believing her own good intentions. She avoided eye contact with the driver but he stopped her with a raised arm and said, “You told me there would be four boxes. That makes five. What is it?”

Mira’s shoulders sagged. “Something I was supposed to take care of but didn’t.” A rushing sensation tore through her chest while her mind spun through her “To Do” list. The parade would take up the whole afternoon, and she still had to pack to return to school the next day. This was her favourite Copeland event—she wouldn’t get to see it, let alone enjoy it, if she couldn’t get this group moving. “I’ll just put it—”

“I don’t want to get on a bus!” a deep voice bellowed from under the awning. It was Stuart, arms up in front of his head as a nurse pushed him toward the bus. He pounded the armrests with flexed hands and scrunched up his face like a toddler mid-tantrum.

She put the box back down on the ground, then wove through the army of wheelchairs and walker-pushers. “What is it, Stuart? What’s the matter?”

“The bus. I was told, a parade. Not a bus!” He crossed his arms. His jowls quivered.

“But—we have to get there. This is the only way.”

A loud fart belched through the air from behind Stuart. Bertha tilted her head sweetly.

“My boyfriend’s coming for a visit.”

“Really Bertha? What’s his name?”

“Arthur.” She smiled slyly. “Arthur-itis.”

“See. She doesn’t want to go either,” said Stuart. The nurse wheeled another chair through the door but had to stop because the ones already parked outside were in the way. There was no room for Mira to pull any of them ahead because the box of shirts was blocking the ramp, and now she had to console Stuart.

Some of the other residents were making noises that Stuart took as agreement to his revolt. “Neither do they.” His face relaxed, but his arms remained crossed. The driver checked his watch.

Mira put a hand to her forehead. “Look, everyone. We talked about this. We just have to get to the waterfront, and then the parade will begin. There’s a tent for shade, snacks and punch waiting for you.” She glanced upward at the blue sky. “Bertha, didn’t you tell me the sun never fails to shine in Copeland on this last Saturday of summer? It’s a perfect day for an outing.”

“Miss?” The driver called. “I said, that last box. It’s not coming.” He gave the box a shove with the toe of his sneaker.

Mira had lobbied hard to make this happen. She’d acquired approval from the families of each resident who wanted to go, and had the liability documents signed for administration. But now, all she wanted was to throw herself on the ground in a Stuart-tantrum to protest the grumbling seniors and the stubborn bus driver. “Fine,” she said huffily. She made her way back to the ramp and picked up the box. The weight of it shifted in her hands and, without a sound, the bottom opened. Fifty white t-shirts with dating service messages spilled onto the curb at her feet.

Mira flung her head back and stared up, past the monstrous oak trees. The sky was so thoroughly bleached by sunlight, it almost matched the shirts. She looked back down at the mess on the ground. Lewis had put her on the spot without the slightest consideration of her own commitments. She squeezed the cardboard and stared helplessly at the escaped shirts. There was no way she could put the box back together again.

“What’s that?” Another resident, Iva, was looking at the pile at Mira’s feet.

“They’re...” Mira was about to repeat to Iva what she had told the bus driver. The shirts weren’t her responsibility. Getting the seniors to the parade was. “These are for you!” She swiped a few shirts off the ground and shook them out, then a few more. They were still as white as the bleached sky. “Matching shirts.” She draped one over her head and laughed, repeating the word, “Matching.”

“Let me see,” Bertha said. When Mira put a shirt in the old woman’s stiff, knuckly hands she cuddled it against her chest like a teddy bear.

Mira made sure that the shirts she passed around were all large. Even Stuart accepted one, and the driver could no longer complain about the extra box. “Let’s get you into these.” The nurses shrugged and helped Mira to fit shirts over soft white hair and down around slumping torsos. *Looking for love? The nose knows!* The bus driver stopped looking at his watch. He shook his head and said, “Oh, my!”

Mira stuffed the extra shirts into her backpack and the folded cardboard into the waste bin on the curb. The seniors were loaded onto the bus, and they were off.

There was a marching band, jugglers, knife-swallowers, and a pair of stilt-walkers. There were kids dressed as clowns, and clowns dressed as kids with bags of stuffed toys to toss into the crowd. There was a procession of floats sponsored by local businesses—Winnie the Pooh and friends decorated by the children’s toy store on Main Street, a garden-themed float, a riding stable float with kids on rocking horses, and a float by the model railway club. There were new ones, too, like the Town’s replica of the Crystal Palace which would also be part of Copeland’s Millennium New Year’s celebrations.

As Lewis predicted, his celebrities were the stars of the parade. Chloe Brink and Justin Pearce sat on a pedestal on the Third Gate float, a king and queen on golden chairs with silver crowns, waving their delicate hands and flashing their bright white teeth. They glittered like time-travelling deities visiting from the ancient world. Every few minutes, Chloe stood to run her hand over her pregnant belly. Mira had to look closely to see that their long, sleeveless vests weren’t paisley—they were blue, with golden sperm squiggling in all directions. Under these garments, their shirts matched those of the seniors.

The Copeland Care Home residents made a procession of their own with silver, gold, purple and green streamers dangling from the handlebars of wheelchairs and walkers. The marshal placed them in front of Third Gate toward the rear of the parade. They would walk only as far as the end of the parking lot, then head up to the marquee erected just for them. The logos on the bright white t-shirts were partially obscured under sagging bosoms, or under jackets, but anyone who bothered to look would have known what they said.

*Let Your Senses Guide You!*

*Meet Your Match!*

Family members of the residents approached to praise Mira for getting their mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, great-aunts and uncles out of the home to take part in this event.

“My mother hasn’t smiled this wide in decades.”

“My father actually had something to say when I greeted him!”

The mood shifted when Stuart’s family approached. His daughter, Bess, was notorious for her criticism. She complained about the food at the Home, a lack of cleanliness and activities for a man like Stuart, whatever that meant. Bess had wanted to move him to another care home closer to her house, but Stuart had refused. Bess approached with her finger pointing. “Why is my father wearing a *dating business* t-shirt? What is the meaning of this?”

Mira gripped the handlebars of Stuart’s chair. “They’re...matching.” She made the mistake of laughing. “They’re a team. Team CCH.” The last word was inflected as though she was asking, not telling Bess. Stuart offered a toothy grin.

Bess ignored her father and deepened her scowl. “We’ll see about that.”

The parade hadn’t moved yet. The marching band went over their drills, and the baton-twirlers spun through the crowd. Bess turned and walked away, and Mira sighed with relief. But her solace was spoiled when that infuriating woman came back with Lewis at her side.

He scanned the crowd of seniors, mouth open. “Bess, I, I don’t know.” Then he crossed one arm over his chest and put his other hand over his mouth. Mira gripped the green streamer that hung from the handle of Stuart’s chair. When Lewis turned his gaze on her, his expression was part anger and—what she feared most—hurt. “Are those—what are you—Mira?”

Bess said, “Who allowed it? I’m going to take this up with administration.” She bent down to her father as though he needed consoling. Stuart smacked his gums and peered over her shoulder as one of the stilt walkers nearly fell into a group of young dancers.

The parade director made the call for five minutes ’till go time. Mira adjusted Stuart’s chair, and those around him, to face the direction the parade would travel. Stuart made a point of looking up at her and saying, “Thank you.”

Mira stood behind Lewis, anxious to keep her face averted as she tried to speak to him. “Dad—I wanted to tell you.”

“What?” The word, whispered so that Bess wouldn’t hear, sounded like spit from his mouth. “What I promote is youth, and vitality. How could you?” A sick taste rose in her throat as she realized Bess would probably be there to help push Stuart’s chair the whole time. She swallowed. Lewis cleared his throat and said to Bess, “Dating is not only for the young, you know.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bess said. “You’ve made them look—”

“Dating is not the same at his stage of life. Look at them.” He gestured at the sea of white hair and wheeled contraptions. “They aren’t looking for anything like what you, or I... For them it’s about companionship. Not...lust.”

Bess gasped. “I’m going to—”

“Listen,” Lewis said. “This parade... It’s all about locally-owned businesses. Like your Sew ’n Things.” He looked at her float, behind the one made by the little league baseball organization, and in front of the one representing Sunshine Park. She followed his gaze. “I’d like to discuss your ideas about embroidery for my shirts.”

Bess's expression softened. The business was one she and her husband had started together. One of the children who was meant to pose as a spool of wool jumped down from the Sew 'n Things float to greet a dog in the crowd. With a startled cry, Bess ran off after him.

Mira focused her gaze on the top of Lewis's thin blonde hair, trying to understand why it pained her so much to hurt him. Her impression of him was losing clarity the more she learned about him this summer, his clandestine sperm donation business, his impulse to steer her role in his life toward his business. He was becoming less and less familiar to her, more stranger than father. If he was a stranger, then why should it bother her to disappoint him?

The problem was that her brain yearned toward familiarity. He swung his arms and flexed his fingers, the way he always did when he walked beside her. He turned to face her suddenly and said, "What's going on here? I thought you said the shirts were sold?"

Mira blurted, "You wanted me to take care of them. I did!"

Lewis's face moved through several contortions before he settled on an expression of forced pleasantness. "I want you to explain to me why you lied—"

"I never said I would sell them! You put me on the spot, you—"

He grabbed her elbow and squeezed. A shadow from a cloud passing in front of the sun dulled the lightness of his hair so that she saw where it was threaded with grey. He said, "They aren't pyjamas. The shirts are a tool for something we call marketing." He drew out the words, *pyjamas* and *marketing* in an annoying drawl like a schoolyard bully. "They are not to be paraded—"

He was cut off by the commotion as the assembly stretched out to get ready to proceed. The crowd was thin here since many onlookers had moved up the road where the parade would

climb the hill before looping back here for the picnic. The space where they stood was bordered by wheelchairs.

“We must discuss cost recuperation,” Lewis said.

“You expect me to pay you for them?” Her voice was the hiss of air released from a balloon. “You’ve never paid me for selling your shirts.”

“We’ll discuss it later.” Lewis’s voice was low, his expression mild surprise but heavy reproach.

The start gun was an explosion she felt in her bones. She was jostled in the shuffle and press of wheelchairs, adults and small children, the crowd like a single entity that was rolling, jumping, moving in a tense effort at forward progress. Jugglers and fire breathers spun and danced, but she couldn’t feel the excitement these entertainers used to convey inside her, couldn’t summon the buoyancy she once felt when she watched them. “I don’t owe you anything.” It sounded so final in her own ears. For the first time in her life she felt freed from her habitual desire to please him. But her skin prickled with that private question, *Who is my genetic father, my other one, the one I come from?* and this sensation returned her to anger. “You’ve taken enough from me.”

His face was an infuriating mask of neutrality. For a moment she could sense his frustration, a shift in his mood, mingled with the hope of reunion and understanding. But then Lewis looked back at his own float with an expression of pride, and smiled. “Well then you can burn them for all I care.” He melted back into the crowd, away from her, behind a group of teens with noisemakers that honked and blared.

She shuffled forward, swallowing hard, the sting of rejection hot in her veins.

Another gun went off and a refreshed cheer rose from the crowd as the parade settled into a steady pace. Her temples throbbed. She had believed—she realized now—in an answer she felt he owed her, with a longing to end this mystery and start to put the missing pieces of her own identity into place. She hadn't realized until just then how emphatically she had believed it to be true. She stumbled and stubbed her toe on Stuart's chair.

She would have walked blindly through the crowd and on to who knows where, except that at that moment, Iva hooked her fingers onto Mira's forearm. Through a blur of tears Mira understood that the old woman needed her assistance.

Iva pushed a walker. At Iva's pace it felt like it would take them half the day to get to the seniors' tent. But the pace of the parade was no faster. From the smell of things, Iva also needed a trip to the washroom. "I'll just grab something from the tent," Mira said, trying to remember if there was a change of clothes in amongst all of the supplies she'd gathered for the day. "We'll go up to the café and use the washroom there, okay?"

There was a barbecue nearby, manned by some of the residents' families. Nurses and other support staff were at the tent, pouring punch and laying out condiments and cake. Mira barely noticed when one of the nurses took Iva from her grasp. Her hands were shaking. Someone offered her a styrofoam cup. The grape juice was so sweet it made her wince. She wanted an excuse to escape the crowd, the faces, the joy she couldn't feel, the excitement of the day that was completely unavailable to her.

The rest of the seniors were coming toward the tent now, needing refreshment. Mira filled cups and plates and passed them out, oblivious to the chatter about floats and bright costumes that swirled about her. Hours seemed to pass in this mechanical way. She had lost sight

of Lewis and the Third Gate float. She was dressing a hot dog for Bertha when something crashed into her, nearly knocking her into the table.

“Found you!” Bryan had her in a bear hug, his chest heaving. The warmth of him was stifling. She pushed away, mortified by his display of desperate affection, and bumped her hip against something hard. It was the streamer-decorated handle of Stuart’s chair. “Young man,” Stuart said. “Take your hands off. Is that how you boys approach a woman these days?”

Bryan’s eyes widened, his cheeks flushed a deep red. “I’m her...”

“Accoster. Back away.” Stuart jutted out his chin gallantly.

“N-no,” Bryan waved his hands in the air. The look of gratitude on finding her changed to a plea for Mira’s help. She bent to dig the medication satchel and clipboard out from one of the boxes under the table. She considered crawling in beneath the tablecloth to hide. Bryan begged her to talk to him, she told him to go away.

“Is it so wrong for me to want to talk to my girlfriend?” He accentuated the last word and put his arm around her. Stuart placed his hands on his arm rests and made a threatening face as though he would try to stand. He and Bryan stared at each other.

Mira pushed against Bryan’s chest. “We can do this another time.”

“Another time?” He repeated this over and over until she slapped him lightly on the cheek. He stopped talking but continued to reach for her. Each time he touched her she moved away, and he found another point of contact. She swallowed hard and bit her fist, fighting the urge to cry.

He captured her hand. “Weren’t you even going to see me before you leave, tomorrow?”

She swung out of his grasp, and that’s when she became aware of their audience. Not only Stuart, but several other elders in their chairs were staring. She was squashed between their

kind, patient and familiar presence, and Bryan's gaze that was an uncomfortable pressure. He moved when she moved. Desperate to deflect attention and to squash his belief that any outpouring of emotion from her had anything to do with him, she picked up the bag of packaged cookies and began handing them out.

No one wanted a cookie. Bertha dropped hers on the ground.

"It's your fault," she said to Bryan, failing to come up with an insult to make him go away. She threw the rest of the cookies onto the table. She was furious with herself for giving Bryan the attention he sought. The only defence she had against him was to repel him with anger, but she'd already used up most of that emotion on Lewis. She set her face in a glare. "If you really cared, you'd know you have to leave. Now."

His hands dropped to his sides. For a moment he didn't seem capable of a response. He gestured at the scattered packaged cookies, the faces watching them. "I could have helped you with all this. Why didn't you ask me for help?" Several pairs of eyebrows wriggled, caterpillars in fluffy bangs.

"None of this—" she gestured vaguely, "is the problem. Never mind." Angry tears overflowed down her cheeks. Bryan stepped forward to comfort her, but she moved behind Stuart's chair. The image of the over-inspected condom in Bryan's hands in the half-dark of her room came into her mind. "Your concerns are...so small. And I don't need you." She sagged under the weight of the day's events, Lewis's concern for his business instead of her. There was no room in her thoughts for Bryan. "I can do this on my own!" she shouted.

Bryan stood his ground. He reached for her again and held her shoulders. She twisted them in an effort to be free of him, but he only held on tighter. He said, "I don't accept that. I won't let you go so easily."

“Stop!”

“Is there a problem here?” Mira saw the walkie talkie, then the Security vest. She didn’t know where he had materialized from, only that his arrival was the best thing to happen all day.

Bryan touched her chin gently. She bowed her head and spoke softly, so only he could hear. “Go away.”

When Stuart yawned loudly, the chaos of the day split into fractured chapters. The broken box, the spilled shirts. The look of pride Lewis revealed for his business that sliced all of her hopes and naive expectations—the stories she’d told herself, about herself—into oblivion. She was still standing under the shade of the tent next to the table with the boxes and crumpled napkins. Nurses were pushing wheelchairs in a line toward the waiting bus. Mira focused her attention on these small facts so as to ignore Bryan, still looking over his shoulder, but halfway across the lot.

The crowd had thinned from one massive concentration of moving bodies. Clumps of people swarmed the various food trucks, children skipped or pulled their parents’ arms and cried for ice cream. The security guard was nowhere in sight. Bryan circled back around to her. He didn’t say a word. He leaned on an overflowing garbage bag to compress it, knotted it closed and carried it past the Indian food truck to the bin behind the café. When he came back Mira was failing in her effort to fold a tablecloth. It was like a butterfly that evaded being captured. Bryan took it from her, rolled it, and packed it away. Then he tipped the table on its side, folded the legs and carried it to the bus. The residents were all loaded. No one had asked for her help in this process. She was the final act of a circus. An announcer’s voice in her head said, You thought you were going to be dazzled by performers, but all along the real surprise awaited—Mira will walk the high wire, through rings of fire, without a net!

Several styrofoam cups rolled across the ground and landed against the box of plastic cutlery and paper napkins. The sight of this cube of cardboard drained the last of the fight right out of her. She'd had enough, of boxes, of arguing. Bryan came back from delivering the table and stood next to her. She sensed his anticipation. A gust of wind blew the cylindrical package of cups against the toe of her shoe, and she kicked it away.

## Part Two

### Chapter Eleven

It was after the first Friday class she attended—she'd skipped at least three—when Mira went back to the apartment and couldn't get in the door. She locked, then unlocked it, but it was immovable as a boulder. She was self-conscious. She knocked on the door very quietly, whispering, "Octavia? Hello?" No response. What if someone came into the building and thought she was trying to break into this apartment? That had happened in another building downtown just the other day. The police were called. She banged on the door and called out a little louder this time. "Octavia! Please?"

There was a scraping sound on the other side. She hammered harder. "Can you open?"

Someone or something obliged, and the door moved. The fist-sized opening revealed a pile of fence slats in a heap on the floor. She pushed and the pile scattered. She stepped inside onto a mess of colourful bristol boards, neon green, pink, yellow and white.

"What do you think?"

Mira stood in the entranceway hugging herself, unsure whether she wanted to be on this side of the door after all. It didn't feel like the cozy apartment she shared with her friend. The bristol board rectangles bore messages. Some of them were nailed or glued to wooden spindles. One of the neon green signs flapped as Chris from her classics class held it up and waved a greeting.

*Donor Conceived kids have rights too! Stand up for the rights of DC people!* Mira pierced her palms with her fingernails. "You having a bonfire?" She couldn't get any further without stepping on something or someone.

Octavia said, “We’re having a rally!” Next to her was a girl wearing a flower print dress, and a tall guy in a Rastafarian hat. Three others, wearing overalls, bent over more signs, blocking the way to the bedrooms. There was another group by the window. Besides Chris, Mira didn’t recognize any of them.

“I assume they are all, you know.” She wanted to creep back out through the door, which stood ajar since some of the signs now lay across the threshold. She was blocked in on all sides by this eclectic, hippie crowd and their crafts.

“DC? Some, like Chris. Others just want to support the cause.”

Mira didn’t know other DC people. She regretted the impulse that had led her to tell Octavia every detail of her summer. A guy in a plaid shirt asked how much longer until it was time to go. Someone else offered to go get coffees.

Mira stepped less than gracefully over wood and bristol board and nearly fell on her ass when one foot landed on a marker cap. She grabbed Octavia and pulled her to the only unoccupied corner of the kitchen, between the fridge and the sink. “What exactly are you doing?”

“We.” She grinned. “Shouting into the forest!” Her eyes were clear, she wasn’t stoned. She clapped her hands and shouted, “Nearly go-time, people!”

A knot twisted in Mira’s belly. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you’re ready.”

“I don’t know if I can go shouting this across campus.”

Octavia opened the fridge, grabbed a beer and pressed it into Mira’s hands. “Drop your bag, drink this.”

At the far end of the room Chris was leaning against the wall, a sign dangling from his hand. So he was DC. But the others? Without asking, it was impossible to tell. Unknown paternity was not a sign on Bristol board you were born with. Mira felt a sudden need to survey each of them, to hear their stories. She asked Octavia how she'd convinced Chris to join them.

“He was reluctant, at first—”

“I can't imagine why.” It occurred to Mira that Octavia must have been one of those incessantly curious kids who constantly asks, Why? Mira wished she possessed her friend's resourcefulness. Having these people here made her aware of the loneliness she'd been ignoring by not talking about what scared her most. “It would be nice...to have some answers.”

“There, see—”

“But how will this, what can Chris do—”

“He's just as confused as you, about where he comes from. The other night at the bar, he talked to me for hours. I convinced him he should take control of his own life. If you don't, you give all your power to the marketplace.”

Mira swallowed the sharp lump in her throat. “But...” This ship was about to pull anchor. She thought about how shitty it had been to learn about the addition to the Third Gate business, and how impossible it was to explain to Lewis how she felt about it. “I can't go stomping around campus with these,” she gestured to the mess of signs on the floor. She wanted to reach out and pull everyone into a circle—something Octavia would surely approve of—and share their stories. But at the same time, she was inclined to make all of it go away and kick these people out of her apartment.

“Do you have a better plan?”

Mira finished her beer. “You’re wrong.” She moved her hands onto the counter behind her and her elbow made contact with the corner of the fridge. The sharp pain that reverberated up her arm was a flare of desire flickering between panic, and hope. If she drew any more negative attention from Lewis, she’d never get an answer from him. Despite the uncertain way she’d left things with her family, she still hoped to glean some new piece of information about her origins. “This isn’t my choice.” Instead of being empowered, she was giving all her power away to strangers. “A rally... won’t make anything happen.”

“I disagree.” Octavia opened the fridge and put another beer in Mira’s hand. “You want to do something about your situation, but you’re afraid to take action. If you didn’t want that, you would have been outta here by now. Drink your beer, and let’s go.”

It was almost cute, really, the gathering of willing accomplices, the signs with their precise slogans, and Octavia with her latest mission. Mira was touched. All that energy and dedication would serve her friend as a teacher. If that was what she was still planning on being. At the beginning of the semester, Octavia had talked about becoming an ophthalmologist, and registered for an extra course in science. The week after that she dropped the science course, then mused over animal psychology.

Mira rubbed the beer label with her thumb. “I’ve already made a mess of things at home...”

“Nothing to lose then!”

“This could be worse than the shirts.” She envisioned Octavia driving this rally all the way to the steps of Parliament in Ottawa. This vision did not elicit a feeling of justice. “I can’t stop the business plan, I don’t agree with it, but—”

“Damn right you don’t. Anonymity is wrong!”

Mira grabbed Octavia's waving arms. "But that doesn't make Lewis wrong, and me right. Or vice versa."

"It could."

Mira thought briefly of the fact that her own parents had been clients in the same sort of business arrangement. "Who's right, ever? We're not God, we don't..."

"All I'm saying," Octavia said, linking her arm through Mira's, "is that you have a right to your own position."

"But to do this thing you're proposing—"

"With other people," Octavia said, "instead of being such a loner with this problem all the time."

"Bertha would never bully me like this."

Octavia gripped Mira's hand and leaned back, swinging their arms. "Oh yes she would! My grandmother was fierce in her day." She swayed side to side and started singing Cheryl Crow's, *All I Wanna Do*, a song they'd listened to a thousand times when they first met. Mira unhooked her fingers and hugged her friend to stop her nauseating dance. Octavia swiped the knitted hat off the head of a boy who walked by, and put it over her hair, then picked up one of the signs. Mira did adore her roommate. That she had organized all this, without Mira even knowing, was a little bit like having someone throw her a surprise party. She thought about how easy it was for Lewis to adapt his business, how simply he seemed to be able to evolve with the changing demands of society. In contrast, all she wanted was to hang out with friends—seniors, young people, age didn't matter—and just wait for it all to make sense. She smirked, trying to conceal the emotion that pricked at the corners of her eyes. There were no rules, no playbook for

assisted reproduction. Nothing important would be accomplished here. She took the sign Octavia handed her.

Octavia took the knitted hat off her head, shook it out, then placed it on Mira. “Rallies are all about rights. Rights of the unborn child. Rights of the underrepresented.” She touched Mira’s cheek. “Don’t you have rights?”

Alarmed, Mira said, “I hope this isn’t anything like a pro-life rally. People get killed.”

Octavia laughed and turned to hand out more signs.

Lost in her thoughts, Mira had to stifle a yelp when she turned and stepped on Chris’s foot. He had come up behind her without making a sound.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

They stood there like two people on a blind date. Mira inclined her head toward the beer in her hand. “Did you want one?” He nodded and she got another beer from the fridge, silently mourning the fact that there was now one less for her.

“So...you’ve succumbed to the pressure of my roommate.”

“Yeah.” He looked over his shoulder as though testing the air for privacy. Then he said, “How’d they do it for you?”

“Beg your pardon?”

He gulped back the entire beer, placed the bottle on the counter. “For me it was...” he stared at the ceiling as though working a calculation in his head. “Three or four, I think...all donated. So no one would know which...”

Mira stared. Had Octavia put him up to declaring this personal revelation? Then his exact meaning struck her full force. “Oh—oh! You mean, sperm?” Chris ducked his head, wiped his mouth on the neck of his shirt. “How do you know? Did your parents offer that information?”

A girl with a bandana over thick, brown dreds came into the kitchen carrying markers, a hammer, and a box of nails tilted precariously in her hands. Mira helped her unload the tools onto the counter. Chris said it wasn’t his parents who told him. “My uncle spilled it one Christmas.” He looked down at his hands where his thumbs flicked against each other. “Typical, right? Drunk relative, truth revealed.”

Mira didn’t know if it was typical at all. “How did your parents respond?”

Chris stared at her as though she’d asked him for a demonstration on how he wiped his butt. “They didn’t.”

Was that how it had been done for her? A group whack-off, a single dose collaboration? It was possible: Lewis had friends from university he talked about, friends Mira had never met. Maybe... “Is that...confirmed?”

He shrugged. “It’s how it was done. Back then.”

Dreadlocks girl said, “Oh you had sperm soup!” Chris’s eyes circled the air above their heads. Mira thought of how Lewis had said, *This is the way it’s done*. Dreads said, “My parents used a clinic. They’re helping me to locate my donor.”

“Any leads?” Chris asked.

The girl’s whole face changed shape, from oval to round when she smiled. “There was one man who responded to our request—it wasn’t him because the timing didn’t match—but he was so sorry he couldn’t help, so apologetic. He was sure that whoever is my dad, would want to know me.”

Her warmth was a fire Mira wanted to feed. “When I found out...” She tried to recall how they had told her. She thought of Lewis saying, We are a bit different, but we are still a family. “You know how kids sometimes believe that the number of children equals the number of times their parents have sex? Like when you’re young enough to not know that they’d do it for any other purpose.” Chris and Dreads nodded. Mira opened the fridge, passed them each a beer. “I remember thinking, immaculate conception. Like, if the seed that made me didn’t come from my dad... For a long time I actually believed that my parents were exempt from the dirty deed.”

Chris laughed so hard he had to wipe tears from his eyes. “You thought you were immaculately conceived?”

Dreds nodded enthusiastically. “I know what you mean! At that age, sex was like, if you didn’t have to, why would anyone *do* that?”

Mira was relieved to turn away from the conversation and accept the sweater Octavia handed to her. She added her coat to her layers. She found herself pressed into a compact knot of bodies all the way down the stairs, out into the crisp fall air, and up the sidewalk to campus. Mira was half filled with the sense of being united in a mission, even if it was only temporary, but this didn’t erase the fact that she hardly knew Octavia’s acquaintances, or their stories. She didn’t know the name of the girl with the dreadlocks, or the guy in plaid, the group in overalls. Still, they were in on something together for this moment, now.

They stood outside the Great Hall and waved their signs, a dozen people, some donor conceived, some friends of DC people. The light buzz from the beer she’d drunk, the conversation, and the business of rocking side to side to keep warm kept her from thinking too much about Chris’s sperm soup. One passerby asked if they’d heard about the fertility doctor who’d destroyed all his donor records. Dreads started to cry a little when she heard this, and

Chris put his arm around her. Mira burst out in an uncontrollable giggling fit. Her hands were cold, her beer buzz wearing off. Now her only distraction was to wonder whether Chris and Dreads would get together later.

“Octavia.” She said this more loudly than she had intended. “Time to go.”

But Octavia wasn’t done yet. She was shouting and pointing in the direction of the parking lot. Across the courtyard a group was moving in the direction of the pub. One of them was a guy Mira had dated briefly the previous year, and she instinctively huddled behind Octavia, wary of being seen. Someone elbowed her and she wriggled backward but the crowd pressed closer in on her. The heat of panic flickered in her belly. To the others, this was just another part of their university experience, a rally, a cause that, quite frankly, could have been about anything—better food in the cafeteria, better electives, lower tuition.

She tried to reignite her awe of Octavia’s audacity to organize the rally. But when another elbow jabbed her shoulder, she was so cold from standing still that the hurt went through her like an electric shock. She didn’t want to be noticed. She wanted to go to the bar, to be in the company of alcohol-induced happy people. Her toes were cold, her hands numb, and her shoulders ached from holding the sign.

A camera flashed, she heard a clattering and felt her toes explode into a thousand shards. Her sign lay across her feet. The camera belonged to the campus newspaper, the Lambda. She didn’t pick up her sign but crouched down to punch her boots with her fists to encourage her circulation. Someone was talking to the reporter. Octavia lifted her by the elbow. There was nowhere for her to hide.

The reporter asked Mira what it was she wanted. Mira blinked. Her toes throbbed. She said the first thing that came to her. “I have no idea whose hair I have.”

Octavia said, “Medical records. That could be important...”

Octavia was still talking, but all Mira could think about was getting to the bar. The reporter moved through the group, asking each of them a question. “Are you angry with your parents for using a sperm donor? What would you say to your donor if you met him? Would you be willing to go to court to change the rules about anonymity?” Mira could hear nothing but the questions, and they went on, and on, and on.

## Chapter Twelve

There was a program funded by the City to connect children in daycare with senior residents in old age homes throughout the city. Mira put her name down as a volunteer to plan an hour of activities for toddlers and seniors to spend together. Avoiding the spread of germs between these two vulnerable groups was a priority, so the policy strictly forbade any physical contact—no patty-cake, no little ones on seniors' laps. Mira considered putting the kids behind glass and having each group look at each other like zoo animals. She decided books would be a safe choice.

The City library reminded her of its counterpart in Copeland, a small, brick building where she'd spent many an afternoon as a child. The musty carpet and worn paper smells were familiar, the rows of metal shelves and a wall of windows on one side of the space. Decorations for the theme of Fall, made from construction paper leaves in the shapes of oak, maple and poplar leaves were glued and taped to yarn and hung from the ceiling. There were featured books of the month fanned out in a curated display of primary colours on the first shelf when you entered from outside.

She went to the children's section and filled her arms with books from the low shelves. Looking at the covers she was instantly lost in the bright pictures and simple words, roly-poly characters engaging in slapstick humour, curious characters exploring serious topics like divorce, adoption, cancer, or a move to a new house or school. When she found the P.D. Eastman book, *Are You My Mother?* she was overcome with a sense of zooming back in time to her own childhood. She sat and opened it up carefully, the pictures so familiar in such a distant way that she had to read the whole thing through, just to savour the memory of it. She had read this book at Aunt Chantal's house. Vicky and Chantal used to make a ritual of it. During nights when Mira

slept over there, Ghislaine would stay into the evening, sharing a bottle of wine with her sister. Chantal would read aloud. Each time the little bird asked, “Are you my mother?” Chantal and Vicky beamed at each other. Chantal’s words, “Of course I’m your mother!” were perfectly timed to Vicky’s chant, “Of course, you’re my mother!” Ghislaine would sit stiffly next to Mira on Chantal’s living room floor, across from them. Vicky would look up expectantly, waiting for Mira and Ghislaine to repeat the refrain. Mira had wanted so badly to mimic the huge grin her cousin wore. But there was a restraint that held her voice on mute. It wasn’t the little bird standing on the terrifying teeth of the giant steam shovel that made her stare at the floor. It was her mother’s inability to match her sister’s enthusiasm as she mumbled, “Of course I’m your mother.” Mira had felt left out of these intimate moments, denied the pleasure of the ritual.

There was no way Mira could read this book aloud without welling up with emotion. She finished reading it silently to herself, with its happy ending of the baby bird reuniting with its warm, feathery mother. A small boy in green camo rubber boots pulled his thumb out of his mouth to point to one of the books next to her, a book with an anthropomorphized tractor on the cover. She handed the book to him and he toddled off toward his mother.

Mira gathered the pile of books she’d chosen—minus the PD Eastman—and went to check them out. Two plastic grocery bags full of books jabbed her shins on her way back to the apartment, where she was assaulted by the ringing of the phone. She fumbled for the lamp switch. Still in her shoes, she lifted the receiver from its perch with a sense of anticipation that annoyed her. This feeling was only exacerbated by her mother’s voice, exploding at a starting volume on bust. “I’m glad I finally caught you. If you called more often, I’d know the best times to reach you.”

Ghislaine didn't give her space to speak before she launched into a list of things she had done in the past several weeks. Ghislaine was using her free time these days to work with Lewis at the clinic. She took credit for changes made to kits that Third Gate sent to clients to make them appear more individual and less mass produced. Mira had no inclination to ask for clarity about the kits—she didn't want to know whether they were for dating clients, or sperm seekers. The expected request for an apology after their fight never came, and Mira wondered, had her mother forgotten all about it? She turned off the kitchen switch. The lamp was now the only light on inside.

"Things are so busy..." Ghislaine's voice trailed off as though she'd finally run out of steam.

Mira held the phone between her cheek and shoulder and sat on the floor. She made two piles as she unpacked the books from the plastic bags. "Yes?" She was hesitant, unable to detect the accusatory tone she'd expected from her mother.

"Busy is good." Ghislaine paused. Her casual tone was becoming more irritating to Mira than a lecture would have been. Their fight in the summer had been irrational, it was true, but there were things left unsaid, things now sucked into a maelstrom. "We have to consider hiring."

"What's it to me?" she said. She tucked her face into the neck of her shirt as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

Ghislaine cleared her throat and Mira winced at the intimacy of the sound. "Vicky already has an internship arranged for next summer."

Mira exhaled, a sigh of defeat. "There it is," she said. Ghislaine waited for her to explain. Mira crunched something under her bum, and cursed as she realized it was her pencil. Her mother's criticism was so irritatingly subtle. "I know, she's better than me, smarter, younger." It

was true, Mira didn't have firm plans, not like Vicky. "I'm doing it, mom, the required post-secondary thing. Isn't that enough?" Mira felt the dreaded welling of self-doubt. "I only just finished a big assignment." The words rang out sulkily. Why did her mother call, now, to rub in her cousin's successes against her own shortcomings? She doubled down on her blame, cursing her mother for storming her innermost barricades.

"Your father and I would like you to take the job at the Third Gate office. He can offer you full time—"

"At the clinic?"

"Every other Friday off if you'd like."

"Mom," she said. "I don't need you to find me a job."

"If you supported your father—"

"I don't want it." There was a horribly empty silence as Mira held her breath, and listened for her mother's. Breath alone would be a much better way for them to communicate, she thought—through the natural exchange of air, a simple whisper in and out of their two sets of lungs. "Find someone else."

"Not just anyone. Someone we can trust. Like Harry trusts you, and if you are planning," her voice rose in pitch, "on working at the café again I'd like you to think about us, and reconsider. The business is engaged in cutting edge developments—don't waste this opportunity."

"Cutting edge?" Mira forced a laugh, it came out as a bark. Her lack of faith in everything about Third Gate grew in strength. "Say I agree—in its developments—I'm not in the sciences. How does it benefit me? I can make more at the café."

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Do you really want to get stuck, a server, for the rest of your life?”

Mira measured her mother’s disappointment against her own sense of self-worth. She was more smug than hurt by the comment about her loyalty to Harry. The mention of Vicky’s preparedness for her future in comparison with her own was the jab that stung. One voice inside of her cried out against the unfairness of the judgement while another voice, strangely detached, rationalized that parental love was unconditional.

With certain conditions.

“You have no idea,” Ghislaine said. Mira made all sorts of faces she was glad her mother couldn’t see. “You might find it interesting. If you listened.”

“It’s...not for me.”

“You know,” her mother said, slowing her words to sharp precision, “thousands of people, Mira, have availed of dating services. More and more people, all the time.”

It occurred to her that they were having two different conversations, skirting something neither of them was prepared to mention—the sperm donation business. Mira felt a panic rise inside of her, a fear of disappearing. If they couldn’t talk about the aspect of the business that concerned her, then did she even exist?

She said, “It isn’t just a dating service anymore, is it.” Mira imagined her mother’s quick intake of breath, but Ghislaine was silent for once. “If you could understand me, then you’d know that the other part, you’d...” She stopped short of telling her to shut the whole thing down. Why couldn’t her mother acknowledge that the business affected her very sense of self? Mira might have explained this, except for the rally. That event was the impossible topic that loomed large in her psyche, her very own Pandora’s box of secrets.

Ghislaine said, “Everything is in line with current protocol.”

“And that makes it all right? What a terrible word. Protocol. There’s no rules, this...business...could change tomorrow when something better comes along. But the café...” She paced around the kitchen with its odiferous history—onion, hamburger, burnt toaster crumbs, buttery microwave popcorn. “People always have to eat.”

The front window picked up the faint glow from the lamp. A streetlight outside sandwiched the glass between these opposite points of illumination so that it appeared not transparent, but black. Mira suddenly felt foolish. Why was she going to university, if she planned on being a server for the rest of her life? It wasn’t what she meant.

She struggled to hold onto an outlet for her confusion. “Don’t you think...it’s a bit of a hoax—the dating business—a promise to find the perfect partner through a sample of sweat.”

Her mother paused again but this time the breathing was aimed into the mouthpiece. “Where do you think the café will get you?” Mira counted the seconds of her mother’s exasperated pause. “I think it’s served you well, given you money, and customer service experience. But it’s time you added to your experience, Mira. We’ll keep the position open until the end of the year.”

“The end of the year? A lot can happen.” Maybe Y2K would turn out to be catastrophic after all and everyone would have to start all over again from scratch. Maybe they could all go back to old fashioned ways of doing things—sex for babies, introductions from family, friends, or chance meetings to find meaningful relationships. “I’ve gotta go, mom. I have a thing with seniors.”

“So much volunteer work,” Ghislaine sighed. “Too bad you couldn’t make something of that.” Then she said, as though only just thinking of it, “You should know what the business

does, that it's helping people." Mira faced the centre of the apartment and the darkness was like the brush of a cool hand on the back of her neck. Her silence was an invitation for unsought motherly advice. "Don't wait too long to let us help with your next steps."

Like your clients' next steps, Mira thought. She realized that the business was no longer just the place where Lewis worked, and Ghislaine now, too—it was their entire philosophy. She rubbed the phone against her hair. "Bad...connection mom. Gotta go," she said, and hung up.

## Chapter Thirteen

She did not go looking for the article about the rally. Octavia had dropped a copy of *The Lambda* on the couch. As she read, Mira had a vertiginous sensation accompanied by an image of herself being carried along in a fast-running stream. She watched herself float past a sandy beach, a rocky outcrop, and a stretch of spruce forest, moving faster and faster away from the safety of shore.

The article, titled, *Give Us Back Our Identity*, was the front page feature of the October 28<sup>th</sup> issue. Mira's face was small but right there in the centre of the crowd with their waving signs. When she looked closely at her pea-sized image she saw that she was smiling.

In place of any sort of reasonable journalistic story the article was written as a mock conversation between donor conceived people and the anonymous donors who had helped conceive them.

*We're not asking much. Not for financial or emotional support. Only some basic health information to alert us to things we might expect. Maybe your favourite colour. If you choose to disclose your political leanings that's entirely up to you. Otherwise, we don't need to know. Some of us have already learned fun facts like, My bio-dad likes to bite an orange segment from the middle and hold it between his teeth while he swallows the juice. Or, he went through a brief Metallica phase when he was in high school, but now he listens to Chopin.*

"What donors don't understand is this right you claim to *full identity*. Full, like, you want to know everything about us? And, you know, that seems to be much more than these fun facts you're talking about now."

*We aren't changing our story. It's been the same for kids who were adopted. We just want some basic information. Any family history of cancer, for example.*

“You said *basic*, but now you say *full*. Which is it? Are you saying you want *basic* information, or do you want to uncover *full identity*? Because for us, those things seem to be two entirely different things!”

*We aren't trying to confuse you. We believe what we are asking is quite clear. Height. Hair colour. Maybe your grandmothers's height or hair colour. Did your grandfathers live into their 70s? Were they bald? Any cases of early onset menopause? Just some basic facts.*

“See, now that all sounds *basic*, but to go back a generation, seems... We're not sure, but that would require a bit more digging, wouldn't it?”

*No need to make it complicated. It's just that, when we look in the mirror, we want to be able to pinpoint where some of our features might come from.*

“Oh, see, now you're talking looks. Blue eyes, a straight nose, full lips. We could do that. But could we describe ourselves as we were at the time when we donated? Some of us have aged better than others. We'd rather not discuss our hairy backs, our cataracts.”

*You aren't taking this very seriously.*

“We were promised anonymity!”

*Not by us, you weren't.*

A note at the bottom of the article said that one of the drama classes was considering making it into a play for the mini Fringe Fest to take place on campus the coming summer.

Mira thought about setting the drama department on fire. In a panic, she called her aunt. But she found she was unable to explain her fear that her mom and dad might see the article. She knew if she tried to read the article to Chantal, that she would choke a little on the words of the imaginary donor conceived kids. The DC voice was in control, purposefully confusing the responding donor voice that followed. It gave her chills just to hold the newsprint in her fingers.

She thought about Sean, and the undisclosed number of faceless men entering Third Gate, probably through a back door where they could access a dark, private room filled with porn, to have their sperm collected and frozen by Lewis. The article renewed her anger toward Lewis, and she needed to talk to someone who would indulge her. But would Chantal see it that way?

Mira said, "I'm not sure I belong here."

There was a pause, time enough for Mira to imagine that perhaps her mother was at Chantal's that very minute, listening in on the conversation, clandestinely checking up on Mira. She waited for what felt like too long to be standing there saying nothing. She listened to Chantal swallow, and something in the background that might have been a toilet, batter being mixed, or a window crank turning. Finally Chantal said, "I understand. Everyone has doubts about their success in school..." Her voice faded and Mira worried she was bored with the conversation. Maybe Chantal, like her sister, believed that Vicky, two years younger, was already so far ahead of Mira, and what was the older cousin doing, anyway?

But then it struck her that Chantal was choosing her words carefully. She felt dreadful for implicating her aunt in her own confusion. She should have called her parents, spoken with them honestly about the article. Her hands began to shake. "It's okay," Mira said quickly. "It's just mid-term jitters."

She imagined Chantal nodding. "Is it, though..."

"Well—"

"Listen pumpkin, just tell me what you want."

Mira bit her lip. She felt herself floating in a dense fluid, suspended between up and down. She wanted to believe that certain answers could pull her to the surface, but..."It's okay," she repeated.

“Alright then.” Chantal’s voice snapped into focus. “Come visit me as soon as you’re back for Christmas break.”

Mira was disappointed in the conversation. It hadn’t solved anything. When it was over, she took the newspaper and shoved it deep in the kitchen garbage bin.

## Chapter Fourteen

Vicky's exams were done before Mira's so it was decided that she would be the one to collect her cousin and bring her home for the holidays. She planned to take the bus from Toronto, spend a night in Copeland, then drive Ghislaine's car to the Suds. She told Mira she was bringing a surprise.

On the day Vicky was set to arrive there was a faint knock and Mira flung her apartment door open, threw herself forward to grasp her cousin in an exaggerated bear hug. Vicky grunted in protest and Mira stopped squealing hellos for there, holding Vicky's bag, was Finn. Vicky held a fistful of his jacket which she used to pull him across the threshold like a huntress with her prey.

Mira crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. "So...." Finn's presence implied things had developed between him and Vicky. She was about to ask if the "surprise" meant she'd have to give up her own bed, but then Finn flopped onto the couch and declared it was perfect.

Confused, Mira corralled Vicky into the kitchen. "The sleeping arrangement...?"

Vicky opened the fridge door and spoke uncertainly from inside the cold appliance.

"Separate..." She moved things around on the shelves—a plate of uncovered leftover pizza, a packet of sandwich meat, scraps of vegetables and jars of condiments.

"Okay, then," Mira said, after a pause during which Finn asked where she kept her CDs. "There's a case next to the tv." She turned back to Vicky. "I guess you'll crash in my room. I'd planned on you and I being up all night watching movies on the couch." She expected some kind of retort, or at least an eye roll, but Vicky's expression showed uncharacteristic relief, or defeat—Mira wasn't sure which.

It was mid-afternoon and none of them had eaten since breakfast, so they put together a few sandwiches of ham, pickles and iceberg lettuce. Mira asked about the mood in Copeland.

“Lewis is in complain mode.” There was the eye roll.

Mira nodded. “He’s habitually mooney this time of year.”

“True. He’s all, red nose, puffy face.” Vicky pulled down on her cheeks, crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue. They both laughed.

“Don’t confuse seasonal affective disorder with a cold—which for him is the apocalypse,” Mira said. “Dad’s are so needy, right?”

She had meant to solicit a response from Finn, but Vicky snorted. “Pathetic.” Finn had a pocket knife he was weaving through his fingers. Mira stared at his hands as Vicky continued. “Lewis has your mom doing all this admin work for him. She’s barely taking any nursing shifts. Even though she’s probably needed at the hospital more than at his clinic.”

“Does your mom let him...bully her?” Finn asked. His fingers were still as he spoke, as though he could only do one thing—fidget, or talk—but not both at the same time.

Vicky burst out laughing. “Ghislaire? Bullied by Lewis? Not likely.”

Mira smiled and nodded confirmation. “But he’s got her convinced that he’s helping people.”

“And you don’t agree?” Finn said.

His expression was so sincere it burnt Mira. For a moment she considered that he might have his own reasons for asking about her relationship with her parents, but she didn’t ask. Embarrassed, she said, “Not exactly.”

“He *believes* he helps people,” said Vicky. “He’s got business confused with his warped sense of goodness.”

Mira said, “What is goodness, anyway? If he believes it, I mean.”

“He’s all talk,” said Vicky.

How could she be so certain? Given what Mira now knew about Third Gate and its expansion into sperm donation, there was nothing about Lewis’s business that could be so easily dismissed. She hadn’t had a chance to tell Vicky any of this, and now she couldn’t talk about it, not in front of Finn. She reacted unthinkingly, deflecting her confusion back towards Vicky.

“What about Blake? Are you going to see him over the holidays?”

“You mean the deadbeat? No way,” Vicky said, standing purposefully to carry her plate to the sink. “It’s not like he ever makes an effort to see me. Why bother?”

Absent fathers, thought Mira. Neither of them possessed more than a small vocabulary for the topic of fathers. Once, in high school, Vicky had used, “Going to see my dad,” as an alibi to sneak off to an overnight party. Mira had felt obliged to cover for Vicky, but also, uncomfortable about lying to Chantal. When she urged Vicky to visit her dad for real, Vicky had stormed out on her cousin.

Mira glanced at Finn, hoping he’d help change the topic. “Have you been to Toronto?”

Finn opened his mouth, then closed it as he glanced at Vicky. Did he need her permission to speak? “Once or twice.”

Mira wasn’t sure if that meant ever, in his life, or once or twice, to visit Vicky. She said, “Has she told you about the scavenger hunts?”

Vicky put her face in her hands. “Not this.”

“She wanted to leave Copeland so badly, she begged our moms—”

“I never begged. I was just plotting for a little fun.”

“She’s wanted a ticket to the city forever. She was always asking her mom or mine to take her to Toronto. They always put it off. So I came up with the scavenger hunts.”

“Long, boring lists of things we had to find, and do—”

“Which was incentive enough to get our moms to take us. The four of us went once a year, and stayed in a hotel. If it wasn’t for my plans, we never would have gone.”

“Well I live there now,” said Vicky.

Finn nodded. “Everyone wants to get out of a small town. At least for a while.”

“And then what—go back?” Mira said, spitefully. There was something left unsaid in Vicky’s statement about how she was finally living in Toronto, just like she had always wanted. Was it a jab at Mira for leaving, and going back? “I mean...” Finn was watching her. Why was he even here? “Sorry. I was just teasing my cousin. A little help?” He continued to look at Vicky through serious, watchful eyes. Was he so in awe of her cousin that he was incapable of making fun of her?

Vicky pulled her chair closer to the table and started talking about her new life. She described the massive lecture halls, the excitement of learning where to shop, where to meet people, which coffee shops and pubs were affordable, and which were off limits to a student’s living standard.

Mira watched Finn’s face, which reflected Vicky’s exuberance. He was like a puppy waiting for his owner to take him for a walk.

“We get it, right, Finn? She’s in loooove with her new life.” She paused, staring at him. No blush. No expression. Just the movement of his fingers and that silly chunk of metal.

“He knows he’ll have the best tour guide when he finally comes to visit me.” Vicky didn’t look at him, but moved her arm on the table so that it touched his.

Tired of trying to figure out the dynamic between them, and talk of subways and the things you only see in the city, Mira said, “Can you believe it’s going to be a new millennium?” She had one more thing to do in town, and was glad she would have an excuse to be away from them for a couple hours. Three’s a crowd, she thought.

“As long as the world doesn’t end,” Finn said. His face showed a trace of humour.

Mira waved a hand dismissively. “It’s all hype, Y2K.”

“Of course it is,” Vicky said.

Mira stood up and stretched. “I have to go.”

“I thought you had your last exam this morning?” Vicky said.

“One more thing—”

“Lemme guess: The Diaper Dome.”

Mira had organized a Christmas party at the senior’s home where she’d been volunteering. “You’re both welcome...”

“We’re not going to a pee chalet, we’re on vacation,” said Vicky. “Now show me your DVD’s.”

By the time Mira had her coat and boots on Vicky was deciding between *Pretty Woman*, *Ever After*, and *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Mira said, “If you get any sappier I’m going to have to send you to boot camp.” Vicky grabbed her prey again, pulled him to the couch where he sat, rather stiffly, Mira thought, next to her. Vicky unwrapped an Aero bar and showed Mira a chocolate grin.

Mira trotted down the stairs as quickly as possible, anxious to be outside. The cool air helped clear away the awkwardness she’d felt inside. Her cousin seemed... she wasn’t sure.

Smitten? Mira felt the flutter of unease again, the same feeling she'd experienced when seeing the new softness in Vicky's demeanour in the summer.

On her way to the senior's home Mira stopped at her campus mailbox. There was an official-looking piece of mail from the uni, and she frowned, wondering how her marks could be in so quickly when she hadn't expected them until after Christmas. It was a single piece of paper with very few lines of text below the official greeting and return address. The message only required two words to squash whatever positivity was inside of her—the others were superfluous. Academic Probation. She wouldn't have been more shocked if an anvil had fallen from the sky onto her head. She thought about Vicky, cozied up in the apartment without an academic worry, and misty with her affection for Finn. She thought about Finn, who seemed the type of person who could roam the earth, education or no, and find someplace to fit in. She thought about her parents and crumpled the paper. They could not know. Vicky could not know. She carried this mystified, numbing dread with her to the seniors' home.

Mrs. Weir was about a decade too young to be living in a care home. She was fretting over a gift she wanted to send her granddaughter. She lived in the home because her MS made self-care impossible, but her mind was sound. She bore a frustration about the things she could no longer do for herself, and today her agitation was heightened.

"I ordered a Royal Doulton figurine for my granddaughter weeks ago—she's going to have a baby, my very first great-grandchild. Now they say it won't arrive in time for Christmas. Eaton's never made this kind of mistake!" She blew her nose somewhere in the vicinity of her sleeve.

A nurse came over with a box of tissues. "Mrs. Weir, there's a perfectly good explanation. It's the Y2K bug."

“Not that again,” Mira said.

The nurse, who had never appreciated Mira’s volunteer work, had, in fact, complained that Mira being there was more work for her, turned cold eyes toward her. “My brother-in-law works for Royal Doulton. They had to prepare their computer systems for the date rollover. But it caused delays in deliveries.” She turned back to Mrs. Weir and adjusted her elbow on the armrest. “We have to be patient.”

Mrs. Weir’s tremulous face pinched even tighter in a scowl. “Computers have made a big mess of everything.”

There was no consoling her. She wailed about postal delays, and her general unease about the new millennium.

The nurse said, “Remember the Red Cross campaign: Be Prepared, Not Scared. See, they were prepared, it’ll all sort itself out.”

“We’re at the mercy of others. No one thinks how these things affect those of us with so little time left.” Mrs. Weir wiped her eyes.

Was the old woman scared, or just frustrated? Mira thought about Lewis’s clients, all those people at the mercy of his matchmaking. Did he feel like God when he brought people together? How much of it was their own choice, and how much was chance? She tried to imagine being curled up with Vicky and Finn on her couch, watching sappy romantic movies. She wanted to be back in that place where she’d felt excited, not worried, about the new millennium, but that motto, Be Prepared, seemed more like a road block, than a guide.

Mira carried this new sense of dread with her as she left the event. She had counted on the seniors to not be afraid. They were her oasis of sanity, of resigned stability. She had always imagined that at their stage of life there was discomfort, but nothing left to fear. They’d already

survived wars, disease, loss. People like Bertha, who could joke about her arthritis, and Stuart, who could slyly get his way, gave her courage and trust in an achieved level of peace in her own distant future. She was rattled by how much Mrs. Weir was affected by Y2K. It seemed unnatural that she should worry about it.

She walked through downtown on her way back, with a vague idea about searching for Royal Doulton figurines. The sky was overcast but the air was dry, crisp. Christmas decorations on lamp posts and in shop windows added a coziness to the atmosphere that cheered her up. She started to look for a boutique shop—she could offer Mrs. Weir a stand-in gift for her granddaughter.

She found an adorable figurine of a little girl cuddling a kitten, and delivered it to the front desk of the Home for Mrs. Weir. On her way back to the apartment she decided they would all go out that night, have a few drinks, and she would corner Vicky and get her to explain exactly what she felt for Finn.

## Chapter Fifteen

Vicky fell asleep in a starfish position. Mira tossed her comforter over her, then went back out to the living room where Octavia and Finn were laughing together. At the bar Finn had spent a long while talking about music and outdoor activities with Mira's friends and acquaintances. He drifted off sometimes, like at the door to the bar when everyone else handed over the five-dollar cover charge, and he had stood there digging around in his pockets before producing small change.

On her way to bed Octavia pronounced, "Yours is a happy ending." Her eyes were half-closed and she made an exaggerated gesture of reverence, hands together and head bowed, then drifted out of the room a little less gracefully than a storybook fairy.

Finn watched her go, mouth open. Mira shrugged and giggled, explaining that Octavia was somewhat of a drama queen with an inclination for mysticism. "I love her for that. She's practical about useful things—she's the one who found this place for us—but sometimes she's...out there." Finn looked at her curiously. "Octavia calls herself a Pagan—nature is her God. Sometimes I think, maybe God is her God, like maybe, all things spiritual are the same, you know? She doesn't discriminate. She's open to almost everything. It's...refreshing."

"She reminds me of my mom," Finn said.

"I can't imagine what that would be like—she's nothing like my mom."

Finn said that his mom had always encouraged him to work hard in school, to master the core subjects like math and science. "But she practices Wiccan in secret."

"Why in secret?"

Finn looked over his shoulder, a thief checking to see if he'd been caught. "So my dad... He did not have an open mind."

“Didn’t—past tense?”

Finn startled her by laughing. He was sitting up on the couch, but he slid to the floor where he appeared to be more comfortable, knees splayed open, arms wide, giddy with some internal knowledge. Mira watched him, fascinated, excluded. She went to the kitchen, came back with two beers. When she handed him one he shook his head, and stopped laughing.

“What, are you too good to accept my beer?” His eyes, when he looked up at her, were round as the “o” of his mouth. Now Mira laughed. “Just keep me company.” She didn’t mention that she’d noticed how he had avoided spending money all night. “Look, it’s no big deal, okay? I meant to finish this case tonight.” She smiled, opened both, and he offered her a crooked smile in return.

“Tell me about...” Mira wanted to ask about his mom. She imagined Finn, this long, skinny boy, shrunk down to child-size, tucked into bed, his Wiccan mother bent toward him pushing hair off his forehead and whispering incantational words. But the question about his dad hung in the air, unanswered.

“He isn’t, I mean, he’s my mom’s husband. But she didn’t have me, with him.” He scraped the beer label with his fingernails.

“You don’t have to—”

“She did not have an affair.” Finn shook his head vehemently at Mira’s shocked expression. “And he’s not dead—oh boy, I’m terrible at this.” He took a deep breath.

“Tell me about your mom, she sounds lovely.”

He looked at her and his expression was just how she imagined him as a child. “She’s a storyteller.” He drummed the fingers of one hand against his knee. “And she loves music.” His hands settled in his lap and he told her about the characters—giants, fairies, and a sneaky smart

boy—who populated the bedtime stories Holly used to tell her son. “She taught me how to play banjo, guitar, a fiddle—but she kept the instruments at a friend’s house...so he wouldn’t wreck them. He was a bad drunk. She made sure I learned how to make music. Before he could wreck everything.”

“Is that what you want to be—a musician?”

“I’d take working in a music store. But I do construction in the summer, it pays more. I want to help her out.”

“You’ve thought about as far ahead as I have,” Mira said. She was delighted to say this aloud. “In my family Vicky is the one with clear, long-term goals. She makes up for those of us who are more...vague.”

For a moment she was afraid she’d assumed too much. He said, “I’d love to play an organ.”

She laughed. “I suppose it could do more than play hymns in a church?”

“Oh for sure. With all that depth of sound. I’d love that, or a multi-necked guitar. I tried to make one once—”

“You did?!”

“Out of fishing line, wood and nails. It took a long time.”

“Did it work?”

“Strangely, I got a few sounds out of it, but only when I used quartz rock to strum it.”

“Amazing.” They were both sitting on the floor. Mira pulled the blanket off the couch and tucked it behind her against the wall. It would have been more comfortable sitting on the couch, but she was more relaxed than she had been all night. Each time she’d tried to talk to Vicky her cousin had pulled Finn, or someone else, into the conversation, so they had never been

alone. Mira had watched the body language between her cousin and Finn, but had seen nothing more affectionate than a pat on the arm.

Finn bent his legs and wrapped his arms around his knees, shivering. “I never finished telling you the other thing.” Mira pulled the blanket out from behind her, moved to sit next to him, and spread it out for both of them. He accepted the cover. “My mom told me a little while ago. Only because...he had a stroke. Otherwise, I never would have known. He was always such a bully.”

Mira realized that this was why Finn had looked so concerned when he asked if Lewis bullied Ghislaine—because his own mom was treated that way. “I’m...sorry.”

“She was trapped—forced into marrying him because she was pregnant. She had wanted a baby. But not with him.” He went on to say that that first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. “But by then it was too late, she couldn’t get out of the marriage. His family is Catholic in that hypocritical way. Do as I say, not as I do. My mom was alone, her family is far away in Northern BC.”

Then he said the thing that Mira, in an eerie, telepathic kind of a way, knew she had expected him to say. “My mom found a way to have a baby without him—through sperm donation.”

Mira gulped back her beer and wriggled out from under the blanket to go get two more from the fridge. When she returned, she tucked herself much closer to him than she had been before.

“How is it he doesn’t know you’re not his?” Mira asked.

“He’s horrible. Too drunk to notice.” Finn bowed his head, then tilted the bottle. She watched his Adam’s apple shift up and down as he drank. Mira wondered if this horrible man

had hurt Finn as well as his mother. “He never allowed her to be who she could have been. My mom is so smart.” He sighed. “He had the stroke last year.” Finn’s voice had gotten so quiet Mira had to lean closer to hear him. “He’s an invalid—can’t even talk. She’s stuck caring for him but without his voice, or his binges, the house is peaceful.”

It was so cozy under the blanket, like being in one of the forts she and Vicky used to make out of chairs and rugs in the porch at Chantal’s house. But something was missing. “What do you want to listen to?” Finn’s eyes brightened, as though he’d been thinking the same thing. “Dylan, Zeppelin, Skydiggers, The Hip...”

“Go with the first,” Finn said. He held the blanket open for her and left his arm in the air while she went to put on the CD. He closed the blanket around them both when she returned.

## Chapter Sixteen

When they arrived in Copeland Mira said she wasn't ready to go home yet. She had a vague sense of wanting to avoid her parents, preferring to see Chantal first.

Vicky dropped Finn off at the squat, two-storey apartment building where he lived, a block off Main Street. They both watched Finn make his way up the partially shoveled walkway, bouncing his keys in one hand. His backpack got stuck when the door closed too quickly behind him and he had to reverse, kicking it open with one foot, before slithering through.

Mira laughed. "He's a character. Not the most glamorous guy you've ever been into." Vicky still hadn't made a move to back the car out of the lot. The door opened again and Finn reappeared with his ukulele, followed by a stooped man with a shaggy grey beard and messy strands of grey hair under a bright orange wool hat. The old man dug around in the pockets of his oversized coat, then lit a cigarette while Finn tuned his instrument. They didn't seem to notice that the car was still parked in front of the building, that they were being watched. "Let's go to Chantal's."

Vicky's exhalation was exaggerated, but if it was a sound of annoyance directed at her, Mira ignored it. She had slept the whole drive, and assumed Finn had as well. The two of them had stayed up until five, listening to music and talking.

"You okay?" she asked curtly.

"Yup," Vicky answered.

There didn't seem to be anything else to say. Mira had asked Finn if Vicky knew the story about his dad, and he said no, he didn't want to tell her. When she pushed him to explain, he'd said, "Things have been stressful for her, with her mom. I don't want to dump any more

reality on Vicky.” Mira had nodded, pretending to know what he was talking about. “It must be hard for her that her parents are fighting again, and she’s caught in the middle.”

She tried, again, to coax Vicky into talking. “Are you sure there’s nothing—”

“Nope.”

Mira looked out the passenger window. She hardly saw the quaint snowmen, icicle lights and Santas on front lawns. When they pulled into Chantal’s driveway Vicky said, “I’ve got plans. Come in if you want, but I’ll be going out soon.”

“Are you mad that I stayed up with Finn? I thought you’d want me to get to know him.”

“All you’ve done is make fun of him.” She left the door open, and walked into her house.

A wind chime tinkled, then stopped. A car drove by. Mira decided she was innocent of any wrongdoing. She got her backpack, duffel bag and Vicky’s backpack out of the trunk, and carried them inside. Vicky’s voice drifted out from the kitchen, followed by Chantal’s laughter. “...news to celebrate.”

They both came out into the living room. “Geezus are you moving in here too?” Chantal said.

Mira was still holding all of the luggage. She shook snow from her hair. “Cold out there.”

“Don’t get used to it, it’ll warm up before the end of the week, then freeze. Big block of ice for Christmas.” Chantal kissed them each sloppily on the face then said she was going to fill glasses from a pitcher of rum and eggnog. “Vicky has news, we need to toast.”

“So that’s what you were holding out for? What is it?”

Vicky said, “I got the best summer co-op position of anyone in my class, in Toronto. I’m practically guaranteed a job after I graduate.” Chantal corralled them to the couch and chairs

while Vicky continued. “This is the PR company *everyone* wants to work for.” She was standing in the middle of the room, chest out.

Mira frowned. She already knew this—Ghislaine had told her. She didn’t understand why Vicky hadn’t mentioned it. She half regretted that Vicky had brought Finn to the Suds. They’d had no chance to talk, alone. “Your ability to keep a secret is scary. Why didn’t you say something before?” Vicky shrugged and sipped her drink. It was easier to be happy for her knowing she would be gone for most of the summer. “Well if everyone...” Mira said, but stopped herself amidst her irrational animosity.

“That’s great. Congratulations!” Chantal said, raising her glass.

“Congrats!” Mira raised her glass. She was so tired that her arm felt like a cement block. She drank half her cup in one gulp to be finished with it as soon as possible. She felt the weakness in herself, with no news to share besides her academic probation. Vicky spoke with such confidence about her future, when Mira should have been closer to that milestone herself. She wrestled with a sense of inertia, indecision and, worse: jealousy. “Will you stay with Blake for the summer?”

Vicky shook her head. “There’s a deal for students with internships, to stay in residence between May and September. But I’ll come up here on weekends.” She watched Mira’s face. “Why not be by the Bay on my time off?”

“You’ll be stuck in traffic on the 400, for one. And what do you care about Georgian Bay? I thought you had to chase your career, and your in-crowd—”

Vicky’s eyes narrowed. One time, when Vicky was in grade three, she had asked Mira to come to a birthday party with her. Vicky wanted to show off her older cousin. Mira had been playing outside all day, came in quickly to shower before going to the party, and forgot to rinse

conditioner from her hair. She went to the party looking more like a swamp creature than the glamorous older relative Vicky had hoped to present to her peers. Her cousin focused the same look of disappointment and condescension on her now.

Vicky turned and walked off down the hall. They heard the radio through Vicky's closed door. Chantal said, "She's getting exactly what she wanted." She looked towards Vicky's closed door. "I remember feeling like that. Having a plan. Watching it all turn to shit." Radio talk ended and Vicky turned up the volume on the song. Guitar strings strummed out the melody to *She Ain't Pretty*.

Mira was ashamed for being anything but happy for her cousin. "What about Vicky?"

Chantal reached over and squeezed Mira's arm. "Don't worry about her. Her plans are solid. It'll work out. And you. You're a bit like me—you take the long way around, but eventually, it all works out."

Mira took a sip then set her glass on a travel magazine on the table. "You are so much braver." Chantal closed her eyes and mouthed the words to the song. Mira longed to be in Chantal's shoes, with so many struggles and life choices already behind her.

"I hear your parents want you to work at the clinic," Chantal said.

Mira chewed the inside of her cheek. "I should be so lucky to have the choice."

Chantal stretched her legs out straight in front of her. "Do you remember when I worked in the lawyer's office?"

Mira nodded slowly. Chantal had turned her life into something else completely since that brief period when she wore blouses and pencil skirts. Mira admired the sense of freedom in the freelance writing career Chantal had built for herself, her weeks of travel.

“I did it for a year. I went through four different babysitters—it seemed like every week I was interviewing people to look after Vicky. I thought it was worth it because the pay was great. But at the end of that year I hit a wall. I couldn’t even get out of bed Christmas morning—I was glad your parents were here to help with Vicky,” she said. Mira smiled, knowing how Chantal hated to ask for help. “Then I made it my new year’s resolution to quit, to do something more fulfilling.” This was when Chantal had started freelancing. The story was familiar, part of the backdrop of Mira’s childhood. Chantal said, “I had written press releases for the firm, and published a couple small stories—mostly people features—in our local paper. I started sending articles to other publications in the province. Some of them took my stories, gave me more assignments. I worked every day of the week and late into the nights, but it wasn’t enough. My savings dried up.”

“Wasn’t Blake paying child support?”

Chantal bent her legs and stared at her knuckles, perched like boulders on her knees. “I took every penny he gave me and put it towards buying him out of my life.” Her eyes fixed on Mira and she said sharply, “The problem was, I was stubborn. I wasn’t willing to give up the boat.”

Mira picked up her glass to drain it. “When did things finally change for you?”

“You know the story,” Chantal said. “The editor of the Northern Business mag liked my work, and hired me for some regular features. The point is, I spent most days that year, my new life as a freelance writer—feeling guilty. But it all worked out.”

A stroke of sunlight fell on her aunt’s hair, still a rich auburn with only a few greys near her temples. It struck Mira that Chantal was the most alive person she knew.

“I got over Blake a long time ago.” She brushed a hand across the rug. “But I always wanted more kids.”

Mira nodded. “I remember you saying you could have raised a whole gaggle.” Chantal’s house was the one where you could always get bandages, lemonade, cardboard boxes for forts.

“It’s still sinking in, what Blake did. This delayed reaction. Twenty years ago, fucking hell. You work so hard to put the past behind.”

Mira wasn’t sure exactly what Chantal was talking about, whether it was Blake’s shittyness as a husband and father, or something more specific. Her aunt’s jaw was set, her eyes looked off into the distance. Vicky’s door opened and she was suddenly in the room, ending the conversation. Chantal stretched her neck out of slumped shoulders and welcomed Vicky back with a bright smile. The song on the radio was swallowed by a commercial, and all three of them looked to the front of the house at the sound of a car door slamming.

Mira’s heart leapt into her throat and she rushed to the front window. “Dammit, it’s my mom.”

Chantal got up but looked at her niece strangely. “You on the run or something?”

Mira swallowed but didn’t explain her anxiety. She had no intention of taking the job at Third Gate, but worried that in the flesh, her mother would somehow coerce her.

Ghislaine blew in through the front door like a prairie wind, eyes flashing as she surveyed the assemblage of sister, daughter and niece. Mira forgot to be wary, and laughed. And that’s when Ghislaine pulled a newspaper out of her purse and handed it to her daughter.

Mira stretched her hand out tentatively, as though afraid of being slapped again. If Ghislaine was focused on her, Mira wouldn’t have known because she was looking at Vicky, who was completely uninterested in the newspaper. Vicky said, “Mom, do we have any snacks?”

and Chantal suggested cheese and crackers. Mira took the paper, carefully covering the image of her own face with her thumb.

Almost as an aside, as though she'd stopped by for no more important reason than to give her daughter a scrap of newsprint, Ghislaine said, "The only way to get news about university life in Sudbury is to subscribe to the campus newspaper. My daughter never calls!" She followed her sister to the kitchen. Mira quickly stuffed the paper into one of her bags.

When her mother and her aunt returned, Ghislaine pulled a stack of home decorating magazines and a bundle of paint swatches from her bag. "I'm done with these now. Thanks. The office is looking so much better. You should come take a look."

Chantal said, "You were working on that in the summer. Did it really take you all this time to complete?"

Ghislaine shot back, "You can't rush perfection."

In Ghislaine's world view there was no room for the what ifs or maybes in other people's opinions. To her, the concrete was all important—get the right furniture, create the right look. Everything for her resided on the surface. And then there was Chantal, with pride enough to recover in her own way from her ex's desertion.

Was her mother waiting until they were alone to discuss the rally? She was afraid that the gesture of showing Mira she had seen the article was a warning.

## Chapter Seventeen

Mira, Lewis and Ghislaine, wearing matching fuzzy Christmas socks—the same ones they’d worn on this day for as long as Mira could remember—were on their second cups of coffee and Bailey’s by the time Vicky rolled out of bed. Chantal emerged from the kitchen with a tray of goodies—clementines, gingerbread cookies, peppermint biscotti, coconut drops, shortbread and fruitcake. Ghislaine gave Lewis two new outfits, pictures of all the items she’d bought for the clinic, a bread maker, and a stocking full of kitchen utensils like tongs of various sizes and more peelers, slicers, shredders than any one person could possibly need, but Lewis was pleased with all of it. Ghislaine gave Chantal a beige sweater set and a gift card to the local book store, several gift cards to Vicky for her campus book store and The Bay and for Mira, a book store gift card and a huge, plaid housecoat. Clearly, the housecoat was something she had purchased for Lewis first. Ghislaine had obviously had a huge list of things to buy her husband, and not a clue what to get for her daughter. Even the first edition Grimm’s Fairytales from Chantal didn’t cheer Mira up. The housecoat smelled funny, like the furniture in the basement—dusty, musty and old—and being near it gave her an instant sinus headache.

Mira stayed at Chantal’s later than her parents on Christmas day, drinking rum and eggnog and laughing with her aunt and cousin. It was so late when they all got quiet that she ended up sleeping in the spare room, and continued to live there for the better part of the week following Christmas. On Thursday she was in the basement, pulling damp clothes from the washing machine and flicking them into the dryer when the door at the top of the stairs banged, and Vicky shouted.

“I’m down here!” Mira called.

Vicky ran down the stairs. She took one look, grabbed the clothes from Mira, swore, and waved a cotton blouse like a flag in front of Mira's face. "You moron, look what you did!" Her voice crackled with electricity. "You ruined it!" One sleeve of the blouse remained white, but the rest was tinged a motley blue-green, a watery bruise.

"It was an accident." Mira's voice was monotone but she thought, *Oh shit*.

"There are no accidents!" Vicky pounded up the stairs.

Mira sat on the bottom basement step, sucking up the cold from the concrete floor through her feet. The smell down here was an accumulation of three generations worth of baggage. Vicky had left behind the laundry items that weren't hers—dark red tea towels, Mira's jeans and hoodie sweaters. These things clung to the inside circumference of the machine, accessories to Vicky's accusations. Mira muttered again, "Oh shit." She stayed very still to slow her heartbeat. Vicky reserved certain insults just for her. They'd fought like siblings their whole lives, used words against each other that accentuated their differences. *Vicky: You're a wheel-spinner! All momentum and zero results. Mira: I'll be old or dead by the time you get that board game set up.* Mira had thought of these exchanges as playful, an extension of the way their mothers conversed—sometimes insulting, but sharp with wit and hilarity. Vicky shared a methodical approach to life with Ghislaine, and the two of them teased Mira and Chantal for being disorganized. These were the alliances. Familiar, unbendable.

But this outburst had a new tone, slick and dangerous. Vicky's reaction was beyond what seemed reasonable, over one ruined shirt.

Some of Mira's belongings were stored down here. Her high school transcripts, somewhere in the filing cabinet in the corner, and a few of her childish art projects. Her history was mixed and mingled with that of the maternal side of the family. This was the house her

grandparents had lived in, where her mom and her aunt grew up. The Tremblay family history was piled up in layers here, on the floor and jammed against the walls. The lumpy figures of an old comfy chair and ottoman, where Grandpa had sat to clean out his tackle box—probably a major source of the mustiness—and metal shelving hugged one wall. There were stacks of spindly chairs, at least a dozen boxes, and other piles obscured under old sheets. She scanned the board games piled on top of a layer of sheets, a tottering stack of planters with their earthy odour. The corner of a yellow duo tang protruding from a pile of papers caught her eye. She slid it out from its hiding place. Vicky's footfalls above her head were angry, irregular.

A clicking sound from the static in the dryer startled her and filled her with a ballooning sense of remorse, but not over Vicky's ruined laundry. A blouse could be replaced. Whatever happened to her and her cousin, their relationship should be as permanent and fixed as the foundation of this house. Chantal's voice layered over Vicky's stomping and shouting, but the words were muffled through the floor. She opened the notebook and stared at her own childish, angled handwriting on one page, Vicky's rounded printing on the next. From upstairs she heard, "...didn't know how long you were staying..."

"I didn't know you needed my itinerary!"

"...you usually do?"

The notebook's pages crinkled in her fingers and the sequence continued, back and forth, first in Mira's hand, then Vicky's. It was fragile, and the memory of it was so distant that it seemed impossible they had ever created it. More delicate than a blouse to the touch, yet more enduring, for it had existed all this time among the piles of memorabilia. She and Vicky had each made lists of people they liked or hated at school, favourite animals (Vicky, a pony, Mira, a bear), stories based on tales that they'd read or had had read to them with the heroine names

replaced by their own (Vicky, Snow White; Mira, Aerin Dragon-Killer). On one page Vicky had written that she wanted to tie up the school bully to a tree and get all the kids to spit on him. The following page revealed details of the kidnapper Mira had sometimes imagined would carry her off. “My Real Father” was the title.

From upstairs came kitchen sounds, the fridge door opening and closing, cupboards banging.

She hadn’t planned to invent explanations or to fabricate worries about this aspect of her life. The oft repeated mantra of her childhood came back to her now. Lewis, even though he didn’t share her genetics, was every bit her father as Ghislaine was her mother, in all the most important ways. The notebook picture of her bio-dad was drawn in stick-figure, a line for a mouth, no eyes, no smile. Mira’s fears of this stranger had emerged unexpectedly. She couldn’t blame it on a nightmare. The images of a man who stalked her was a fungus in her mind. She almost couldn’t remember a time when the idea hadn’t been with her, that there was a man, both stranger, and strangely familiar, who haunted her.

The dryer snapped and clicked, still cooling in the damp basement air. “Don’t leave like this,” Chantal said, her voice, clear now, coming from somewhere close to the top of the stairs.

“She did this!” Vicky yelled, her voice farther away yet louder than her mother’s.

“Surely it was an accident.”

*There are no accidents.* Mira closed the notebook.

Vicky was absent for several days, only to reappear wearing fresh makeup, a new outfit from scull cap to boots, and carrying several shopping bags of clothes. As soon as she was in the house Vicky hugged Chantal and announced that she intended to have guests for New Year’s

Eve. “Entertainment is so expensive in the city, when I told them everything here would be free—except for booze—no cover charges, a parade and fireworks, they begged me to invite them.”

“I’ll wash the sleeping bags and extra pillows!” Chantal said merrily. She began to clear a space on the living room floor for extra bodies. “We’ll have a New Year’s Day brunch!”

“I guess they’ll have to camp out...” Vicky’s smile faded when she cast a quick glance at Mira.

Mira went into the spare room, having taken the hint that she should pack her things and head back to her own house. Clearly, Vicky’s plans did not include her. “I’d better go...tonight is my last shift of 1999.” She felt like a turtle, carrying her bags on her back, and went directly to work from her aunt’s house.

During her shift that night there was the usual murmur and laughter among diners, with added levels of excitement and anxiety over the coming end-of-year celebrations. Someone mentioned a bunker where people were going to weather the coming Y2K storm. “Like the ones built during the cold war,” a man’s voice said. The celebrations in Copeland would be more extravagant than the end of summer parade, with Main Street blocked off, dancing in the street, and even more entertainers. There would be fires lit in each of the parks and at private residences lining the shores of Matchedash Bay, which would be clearly visible across the water from the café. These warm visions of welcome would mark locations where people would mingle, celebrate and await the Y2K unknown. The fearful talk she was hearing from customers on this night before New Year’s depressed her, but she was like a young child glued to a horror movie, possessed by a feeling of doom, rather than celebration.

## Chapter Eighteen

The storyline was almost within reach, but each time she got close, it slipped away.

The dream was a tug-of-war. There was no rope, but in the way of dreams, she knew this was the game at play, and that it was about a woman who couldn't have a baby. The woman in the chicken wire cage bared fangs and screeched at the women in peasant dresses and bonnets walking back and forth on the road outside her battered prison. The women who walked refused to look at the woman in the cage. Children threw rocks at it, making it rattle and sway grotesquely. The caged woman mixed cement with her bare hands and plastered the inside of her enclosure with it. Beginning at chest-level, she dropped massive globs of cement to close in the space at her feet. Her arms turned white. When she reached up to seal the part above her head the cement began to crumble. It fell in her eyes, it plugged her nose, it filled her mouth. Mira awoke with stiff fingers.

It was December 31st, dark and overcast in Copeland. Tonight would be the biggest New Year's Eve celebration ever, and a night for resolutions. When she got up late in the morning, the house was empty. The appliances hummed, the floors were polished, every surface was decluttered and clean—there was nothing out of place. She spent the day walking, trying to read, watching TV. She ate dinner with her parents. Finally, she showered and went out.

Her friends from Laurentian had arrived late, and were staying at an apartment near Main Street. The bar was packed. She met up with a few of her co-workers, tossed back shots of tequila, then more with Derek from school. Finn and Vicky were there, and so were the friends Vicky had invited from the city. Mira danced with everyone, even her old friends from high school. She saw Bryan, but avoided him.

The atmosphere became more and more boisterous as more and more bodies crowded in. It wasn't the dance floor Mira wanted, sunk down there in the festering heat of the bar with its sticky floor and girls in crop-tops. Instead, Mira climbed up onto a table and put her arms in the air. She rocked her hips, moving the alcohol through her bloodstream. Whatever song it was she knew the beat in her body. She was the girl with beads hanging in the doorframe, candlelight, the kama sutra open to chapter four.

The room didn't quite spin but it got quiet in her head for one brief moment. She saw Finn in the crowd, with Vicky at his side. She closed her eyes and waited for someone to take the drink from her hand. Then trust-fell, backwards, off the table.

The arms were firm but the body absorbed her weight, then sprang back up like a diving board.

“Bryan!?”

He put her down but didn't release her, and his grip on her shoulders had the effect of a stun gun. “Don't. Ever. Do. That. Again.” He pushed past her. She stood, swaying a little on her feet as a new song took over from the old one.

She stumbled out of the bar to get some air. The surrounding buildings were blurred and distorted like shipwrecks in a fish tank. A blast of heat rushed out to meet the colder outside air as the door to the bar opened.

Derek and Philip came tumbling out, a mess of limbs and wide mouths that appeared as one body, not two. Then an arm detached from the organism, and one head pushed away from the other.

“Yer jealous, I won and you know it—”

“You won't admit you suck out there!”

Mira grinned at them. “Can I be the judge?” They stared at her. Her sweater was tied around her waist and she held her jacket in one hand. One strap of her tank top fell off her shoulder. Her hair was loosely held by an elastic at the back of her head, and there was a sheen of sweat on her skin. She saw her own sexiness reflected in their expressions.

Philip recovered himself first. “Well-well.” He took her hand, lifted it to his mouth and pressed his lips to the inside of her wrist. “Step inside.” Mira leaned into him as they went back into the humid, noisy bar. He was only as familiar as anyone else. She’d hung out with him and Derek at other bars, in the Suds.

She raised her voice to be heard over the music thumping like a giant heartbeat bursting the walls. “What am I doing again?”

Derek slipped an arm around her waist, half lifting her off the floor. “Our moves, girl. You be the judge!”

“The hottest!” said Philip.

Derek squeezed her and she felt her ribs compress. “That’s a given,” he said. “Me. Points for best moves.”

A new tune burst into the beat of the song that had been playing, a spaz of irregular thumps for a moment, that chased, then caught its own rhythm. Derek released her, Philip let go of her hand, and they pointed to an empty stool against the railing of the raised deck overlooking the dance floor.

Mira perched there and gripped the railing for balance. She cheered until her voice turned hoarse. They spread their arms wide to make space among the other gyrating bodies. Derek had his chin down and nodded to the beat, arms pulsing out from his sides. Philip’s hands were in the air, hailing the patchy coloured lights spinning off the disco ball.

There was no one else worth watching. One couple leaned precariously in each other's arms. Mira focused on Derek, then Philip, back and forth. Having a task made her feel slightly less drunk. Both of them had rhythm. They were sure of themselves on that greasy dance floor. Derek had the upper body movements of a hip hop dancer, a pulsing in his chest, a low, smooth sway of his head. Philip wiggled his hips and moved his feet so fast they blurred under the spinning disco ball. Like children vying for attention they yelled up to her, "Watch! Watch!" She gripped the railing, swung her hips. The guys cheered and motioned for her to come on down to the dance floor with them. She shook her head and moved more freely to the music now, pleased to be on a perch where they had to look up to see her.

Derek pulled himself up on the railing so his dark hair was in her face and told her, "I want to take you home." Philip yanked him down and got close enough to kiss her cheek and insist that he would be the one to take her home.

"All could be arranged," she said into their damp heads, and blew them kisses.

Derek went to one side of the dance floor, Philip the other, and before they ran toward each other Mira thought, This is it, their climactic moment. Just before they crashed Mira held her breath—then they linked arms and spun. It was grand, they bowed, and the dancing was over. When she came out of the bar for the second time that night Derek was on one side of her, Philip on the other, and the three of them clung to each other and made their way up the street.

She hesitated only a moment on the threshold of the door they brought her to. Derek leaned his face into her neck and whispered, "I wanna rock your world, girl." His lips so near her ear sent wonderful chills all the way down her spine. She pulled his face close and kissed him. Philip put on music, a jazz album, a thousand degrees more mellow than the music that had hammered their eardrums at the bar. Mira was excited and drunk and her body was rubbery

inside her clothes. She remembered that they'd both been at the rally—they had met the group in front of the Great Hall—and she conjured a vision of all the rally participants joined, like paper dolls attached at various body parts, hands, knees, shoulder blades. Mira and these two gorgeous boys were eternally bound in that experience, were part of a group who had set out to discover something new together. When they approached her she gripped their shoulders and stroked their backs, touched their faces and sank into their arms, twirled when they took her hands and spun her.

She focused on their movements around the apartment. They sang, laughed and spoke softly to each other, pulled glasses from cupboards, ice from the freezer. Their bodies were long, their limbs graceful as they sidestepped furniture and bantered about this or that kind of a dance move, and did you see her, and that guy, what a riot. She shook her head at the rum and coke Philip offered, accepted a glass of ice from Derek. She became fixated on Derek's firm, round calf, and the curly dark hair on his knee caps. She hadn't noticed till then that he was wearing shorts. Philip was fair, his hair a light, wispy auburn, and the freckles on his skin stood out on his forearms, his graceful hands.

She stepped away from the counter where she'd been leaning, chewing ice. They closed in on her and she welcomed the warmth of their bodies. She found a part of each of them with her hands, a bicep, a hip, and then Philip's mouth was on hers and she inhaled the cascading feeling seeping into her chest, took a breath, closed her eyes and tilted her head back for more. Different lips, the same lips, on her jaw bone, her bare shoulders. She thought about the crowd on the dance floor, the rally, bodies pressed together, shared heat, all of their youthful, excited energy.

Her tank top came off first. Up and over her head, her arms suspended in the air. She swayed to the slow rhythm of the music. Strong, warm hands massaged her back, touched her breasts, a thumb on her nipple, then a full palm massaging with more determination. She slipped her own fingers under clothes, curled them into damp hair, gripped a hard cock and stroked.

Her body levitated as it sank to the ground. She grazed the floor with her knees, her elbows, a shoulder blade. She closed her eyes. Once, she rolled onto her stomach and attempted to slither back towards her feet, to extract herself from the bottom to get back to the top. Hands on her buttocks held her and she nearly cried out to be gripped so confidently, so firmly. It was something she wanted so badly it shocked her, not planning what to do but moving with a momentum that was not entirely her own. She rolled on top of Philip, pressed her ass back against Derek. Her pelvis dug in, she undulated between their bodies, her torso sandwiched between desires, her arms and legs coiled and recoiled around theirs. There was no penetration and no orgasm that she was aware of, but she licked and sucked, stroked and moaned, flung her arms wide and welcomed every caress, every stroke. Her mind folded in on itself, a door closing on conscious thought as her body came more and more alive, nerves firing and expanding, swelling and throbbing at the mere touch of her own hair, pulled and then released.

There were countless moments of close writhing, and one when she was left alone on the rug. She opened her eyes briefly, saw Derek standing above her, felt herself fill his gaze and harden him more. Philip held her from behind, kissed her chin, her mouth. And then he whispered, "Marsha."

"What?" From a slurry of faces known and unknown, seen around campus, there emerged in Mira's mind a pretty one with blonde hair, petite body. In a burst of clarity that

manifested as anger she pulled on whatever was in her hand and Derek released her with a stifled yelp, rubbing his ear.

The momentum of their movements slowed. She brushed a hand down her sternum to rest on her belly. In that instant she felt, suddenly, hotly, that this experience was not her own but that it belonged to someone else. She reached up in an effort to regain some sort of control of it all and pulled Philip's head closer, brought his hands to her waist, felt Derek cuddled between her thighs.

She closed her eyes but the darkness was stifling. She was no longer lost in the moment. She pushed Derek away, rolled out of Philip's embrace. Who were they to her? And who was she, to them? She wondered if they did this often—had they shared Marsha? Had they devoured her together, silently and pleurably? She got up slowly, reintroduced herself to gravity. She wanted the camaraderie of their shared experience, the image of dolls in the connected line of paper forms.

She had lost track of New Year's—it had passed, at what point in the night? Y2K had come and gone, and the world continued to turn.

## Part Three

### Chapter Nineteen

A fresh layer of February snow, not yet plowed, covered the world like frosting. Windowsills and door frames, and the west side of the Sudbury post office building glittered icily under the clear sky. Mira walked downtown, dragging her feet in the drifts, to the Hallmark store. Vicky hadn't returned any of her calls or emails so she was looking for a card to send to her cousin's Toronto address, the kind of whimsical greeting their grandma used to give them for birthdays. She found one that was blank inside, with an old-fashioned image of two girls in gingham dresses on the front. Mira wrote, *I miss you*, sealed the card, and mailed it. She tried to think of a reason to go back to Copeland, to have Vicky meet her there. The opportunity, when it came, was unexpected.

It was three a.m. on a Friday, and she had only been home from the bar for an hour when the phone rang in the Sudbury apartment. The cold floor made her dance from foot to foot as she stood in the kitchen holding the receiver—she hardly remembered getting up to answer it. Maybe it was part of her dream. Octavia's door was closed.

"Mira." Ghislaine's tone brought her fully awake. "It's Chantal. She's in the hospital."

Mira stopped prancing and gripped the portable receiver. She put out her free hand to stop herself from falling into the wall and asked what had happened.

"She called around eleven, said she didn't want to be alone, so I went over."

"She never calls anyone late at night!"

"She opened the door for me, but didn't invite me in. Said she was uncomfortable, but wouldn't let me touch her. I thought, maybe a fever. She was tugging at her clothes, irritable. She

refused my help—you know how she is. I called the ambulance. She’s been admitted, that was half an hour ago.”

“Have they told you anything since?”

“Just that she’s stable. Listen, I’ll send your father to get you.”

“Wait—” Mira put both hands out in front of her as though she could stop the world, just for a minute, or, better yet, rewind time. She called across the space made by the length of her arm, “But is she okay?” then pulled her hand with the receiver back to her ear.

Ghislaine’s voice softened. She reassured Mira that a doctor was with Chantal, that she’d be taken care of until they knew what was going on. She reiterated the offer to have Lewis drive up.

The thought of being in a car with Lewis for three hours was almost as unbearable as this news. “What time is it? I’ll be on the five am bus.”

She said a quick goodbye, then hastily packed a bag, and pulled on a sweater and jogging pants over her pyjamas. She thought guiltily about the band that was playing that night, that she would have been going to see if... She tried to imagine Chantal safe, at home, curled up in her favourite chair with a notebook and a novel open on her lap, the teapot under its hen cozy on the coffee table next to a pile of Penguin Classics. A flurry of questions ran through her mind: Had Ghislaine called Vicky yet? Was Chantal’s body letting her down, or could it be something simple, and temporary, like food poisoning, or a migraine? She made a quick sweep of items from the narrow bathroom counter into her backpack, moving so fast she accidentally grabbed Octavia’s toothbrush and quickly put it back. Her worry for Chantal grew to encompass Vicky. If anything happened to Chantal, Vicky...

Vicky's dad. Had Blake been notified? Mira knew that Ghislaine had been fond of her brother-in-law, back when he was new in Chantal's life. But alliances being what they are following a divorce, his exclusion from the Tremblay family meant their relationship was severed, as well. Still, shouldn't he be informed that the mother of his only child was in hospital? She stuffed her clothes into her bag and dug out her old, battered phone book, found Blake's number, then rushed for the receiver, determined to banish some of her worry by taking action.

Blake picked up on the first ring. She was surprised that he sounded delighted to hear from her—what was he doing up at four a.m., anyway? His tone was disorienting. She had only been thinking about Vicky as she dialled, and now here she was, exchanging pleasantries with her ex-uncle as the precious seconds ticked by.

When she got around to asking him how long it was since he'd been in touch with his daughter, she had only fifteen minutes to be out the door. He conceded that he and Vicky hadn't spoken to each other in more than short sentences in a very long time. He said he was willing to work on it, in fact he had tried on more than one occasion, but Vicky didn't seem to be interested in a closer relationship. Did Mira think she could persuade Vicky to spend some time with him?

Then she told him, as gently as possible—unsure why she felt the need to tread carefully with him—that Chantal was in the hospital.

“Oh, dear.”

“You said you've barely been in touch with Vicky, but what about Chantal?”

“I'm afraid I was. About a year ago. It wasn't nice—it hasn't been nice between us. What I told her was especially...hard for her.”

Mira's stomach lurched, as her mind conjured an image of Chantal suffering under some massive, unwarranted strain. "What did you do?" She clenched her teeth to prevent herself from shouting.

"It wasn't totally new, I mean, I was just telling her—I thought she should know—but it was years ago. Maybe I did it, then, because I was stupid, but now, you have to understand—"

"Tell me!" Mira checked the time on the microwave. She had to be out the door in seven minutes if she was going to make it to the bus station in time. "Did you have an affair? Why would she care now?"

"No, not that, not exactly. You see, I donated sperm—I know what you may think—it's awful, given the fact that it was Chantal who always wanted more children. I never wanted to raise them. It was," he sighed. "A way to get back at her, I suppose."

"Wait." *Sperm...donated.*

"It seemed reasonable enough at the time. You don't always think these things through. But in the process—I made someone very, very happy. I have the proof. A woman, Holly—there, I even have her name—she called me just before Christmas to tell me that I gave her the greatest gift of her life. She said she was blessed with her son, all thanks to me. See? It was a thing I did, maybe out of a determination to hurt, at the time. But it turned out well, and good. And that's why I thought it was right to let Chantal know. So that she could tell Vicky, when she felt the time was right."

In the swirl of emotions that accosted her, the clearest thought in Mira's head was a fact from before she was even born; that Blake had been part of the Tremblay family when she was conceived. Unable to process the fact that he, too, had been an anonymous donor, she was

momentarily fixated on the possibility that Blake might know something about her own donor.

“Did my parents ever talk to you about...my donor?”

“The topic did come up, Mira, when they were trying to figure out how to conceive. I said, No.”

“What?” she gasped. “They asked you to be their donor?” She was repulsed by this unexpected insertion of her cousin’s absent father into her own story.

“You asked—”

“I didn’t mean that!” She scraped her thumbnail against the wall behind her bed. “I didn’t mean.” Mira struggled to modulate the volume of her voice, shouting one word, whispering another. “Did you consider it?” There was a soft sound on the other end, like he’d plopped down onto a couch cushion. Completely stunned by the direction of the conversation and annoyed by his apparent casual response, Mira couldn’t wait for him to speak again. Of course Blake was not her father, her parents would have told her. “Are you insane? This isn’t a new ride at Canada’s Wonderland. Did you ever think about—”

“I’m not making this up. I have a gift of life. I take it much more seriously, now, than I did back then.”

“Did you even think about Vicky when you did it? Even if you had to—to spite Chantal—what about Vicky? Does she even know she has a sibling in the world?” She was filled with rage on behalf of her cousin and her aunt, but still thinking about her own questions, and glancing at the time. “I have to go. I just thought you should know. We have troubles too, you know.” She hung up and ran out of the apartment.

In a seat in the middle of the almost empty bus, she leaned her head against the window, and tried to keep her eyes closed. But each time the lights of oncoming traffic penetrated her lids, she pictured an ambulance, and sat upright, gripped by new waves of worry. She had wished so hard for an excuse to go back to Copeland, for a way to reconnect with Vicky. She missed her immensely. Surely it wasn't her fault it was happening this way, but she felt responsible. Be careful what you wish for. How could she not have known that something was wrong? She was cursed. Shouldn't she have known to be aware of an impending family tragedy? Maybe partying had dulled her intuition. Weren't you supposed to just know when something intense was happening to an important person in your life, to feel these things about people you were close with? It was cruel irony the way her wish had come true.

She replayed the two phone calls over and over in her mind. There were so many questions she should have asked, and now she was trapped, on the bus, without a phone, made to suffer for three hours without any answers and a mountain of worry.

“Wait—who contacted you?” Had she said that to Blake? What had his answer been?

“She said her name was Holly. The clinic had to contact me first, of course, to get my permission to pass along my number.”

That name. Holly. Where had she heard it? A wiccan woman telling bedtime stories to her only son. Finn's mom telling stories that were equal parts meaningful, and entertaining. She tried to remember every single word Blake had uttered, to piece together timelines and birth dates. Finn was still finishing high school, which meant he was a year younger than Vicky. Chantal had remained married to Blake until Vicky was nearly seven, but the family had always known that the marriage had been sour as soon as Chantal gave birth—maybe sooner. What else

had Blake said? “She has a son, she raised him not far from where she went to be inseminated. He’s a sweet, smart boy.”

She pulled her heels up onto the seat, hugged her legs and screamed into her knees, her mouth pressed against layers of cotton. Finn. Vicky had found her half-brother! But this wasn’t the happy ending anyone would have hoped for.

## Chapter Twenty

Lewis was waiting for her at the bus station. He looked the same as he always did, like there was nothing that could truly bother him. Why had she spent so much of her life's energy trying not to hurt him, as though he needed protecting? Was it her mother's fault? Ghislaine had created the barrier around Lewis, making them all respect him because he was the most powerless member of the family. She wanted to scream, No he isn't! I am! I am powerless! She remembered, with an overtired rush of emotion, that it was her mother who used to organize Mira's time with Lewis. She purchased the tickets, and told Lewis to take his daughter to a Jay's game in Toronto. She spread out the university brochures on the dining room table and ordered the two of them to sit there together and go through them. Would Lewis have ever done anything, planned anything with her, on his own initiative?

She ignored his greeting and followed him to his car. He asked if he could take her backpack. When she tried to speak her mouth was dry and nothing but dust came out. Once they were both buckled up he said, "I never got to say, Happy New Year's."

Mira's throat clenched. She didn't want to talk about New Year's.

"Did you see it? The Crystal Palace was a big hit," he continued. "Everyone was talking about the one-hundred-year history of the town. Some really great stories were exchanged."

His idle chit-chat hardened her heart. She was tense with the desire to get out of the car. She stared at the grey sky through the windshield. It could have been any time of day, for the clouds were thick, blocking the direction of the sun. He asked her where she had been, who she had celebrated with. She considered making up some elaborate story about a New Year's bash at a friend's house, a party *he* had missed, just to show him up, but she was too tired for invention. Being near him was repulsive, everything about this moment was superficial. She was so raw

with the bombardment of bad news, the lack of sleep, that she didn't care about having to protect him anymore. She vowed not to talk to him. But old habits are hard to break. "Is there news of Chantal?"

He signaled, looked left and right. The tires slapped through slush as he pulled away from the curb. "You don't have to worry, you know. She's stable." She found it difficult to look at him and stared, instead, at the red mittens twisting between her fingers in her lap. He'd had time to mentally prepare for this conversation, but he avoided any topic of substance, saying more, in an annoyingly casual tone, about New Year's Eve, the people, the decorations. It all amounted to nothing but noise. He had always been good at listening to himself speak. "I have confidence in the doctors, in the medical system. Advancements are happening faster than you can imagine." She looked at him quickly and he met her eyes with a wink. Was he trying to imply that he knew something she did not?

"I wouldn't be here if it wasn't serious."

"Remember what I told you my mother used to say?"

"If it's about faith I don't want to—"

"Whatever the plan, in our hands or not, we'll make the best of it."

Mira grunted. "Seems out of character, for a pessimist."

He meant to cheer her up. But in her misery she was only capable of rudeness. If he was a different kind of person, a stronger kind of person, he wouldn't put up with her insult, and he wouldn't make light of the situation. A fresh wave of fatigue, awash with guilt and a sense of helplessness, came over her. She had believed that he'd always be there for her. But now she saw how untrue this was, that he had so very little to offer her. She crunched herself against the door.

With a vacuous whooshing sound the window opened suddenly, and a cold blast of winter air struck her forehead. She pushed the button and closed them in warmth once again.

Despite her loss of faith in him, it was important to her that Lewis still believe she trusted him—that was the only way she could manage him, until she was more sure that she didn't need him anymore. This line of thinking was new, and she almost opened the window again on purpose just to blow it out of her brain. He had revealed probably more than he had intended, that day in his office when she'd tried to return the shirts. She saw that he believed that what was right for his business, was right for her. This frightened her because she knew it was wrong. She did not believe that anonymity would ever be a good thing in the business he was toying with. A business built on anonymity was misguided. It only led to secrets, lies. Heartache. She lived with a constant sense of wondering, not the wonder that Lewis spoke of when he spoke of his mother's Christian faith. It was the sense that everyone else knew something she didn't. His business, his system of beliefs, was all part of a deliberate act to hide truth, from her. And now she knew it had even bigger implications.

She opened the window and gulped the shockingly cold air.

Since putting those shirts on the seniors, she had been trying to pull away from Lewis, one step at a time. The shirts, the rally, all of it was an expression of her loss of faith in him, and now, her disgust. She wanted to make it clear to him why she was doing these things, but couldn't, because he wouldn't listen. He'd shown her that. She was alone in her wondering about her paternity, and alone in her newly emerging vision of Lewis, and alone as the keeper of this secret about Vicky, and Finn. In her desolation there was no one she could talk to about this. Vicky was the best friend she wanted, but couldn't reach, and here she was, stuck, in this car,

with Lewis. She closed the window, squeezed her hands between her knees and willed the seconds to pass until they pulled up to the hospital, and she could get out, away from him.

“What did you think of the new decorations on Main Street this year?”

She mumbled a falsely positive response. Was he trying to keep her talking, so that she wouldn’t bring up a less superficial topic? Or was he dismissing her concerns? Did she matter so little, in the end? She squirmed under the uncertainty of these thoughts but pursued them, because to think of anything else was to worry about Chantal, and to feel sick over Vicky.

He was looking at her, and grinning. “What?” she asked, intending it as a comment on his expression rather than a question for his thoughts.

“You remind me of my mother at moments like this.”

Incredulous, she played along this time. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

He didn’t recognize the sarcasm in her voice and added, “She was so sensitive to tragedy, even when it turned out okay. It will turn out okay.”

Mira sputtered her incredulity and Lewis responded with a hush, like static.

And then they arrived at the hospital.

In an upstairs waiting room Mira hugged her mother. She had not cried yet, but in the refuge of her mother’s arms the tears came. Stale beer scent wafted up from the collar of Mira’s sweater. She was ashamed of her own slovenly state, but also conscious of other people crowded and sweating in their winter coats, hats and dripping boots in the waiting room.

“They’ve run tests. She’s sleeping now. They believe it was a stroke—”

“What—?”

“We’re still waiting to hear what comes next.” Ghislaine squeezed Mira’s shoulder. Her expression remained on the pleasant side of neutral. Mira admired and envied her mother’s

display of self-control. Ghislaine had probably already dealt with her own worry; she could afford to be patient and methodical about whatever came next.

“Can we see her?”

Ghislaine led the way and Mira followed, glad to be out of Lewis’s orbit at last, but lagging a step behind like a toddler forced to accompany an adult on an errand. The faint odours emanating from her mother—disinfectant, wet mop, clean laundry, and a remnant of warm food—were reminiscent of what she was used to from when she came home from work.

Chantal’s skin was pale, her hair flattened against her forehead. She looked more like a mannequin than the busy, independent woman Mira knew and loved. There was a monitor next to her, and a clamp on her finger. It was surreal to see her lying there, this woman whose habitual state was rarely stillness. Even when Chantal sat down with a book, she scribbled away with a pen in a notebook as she read. Mira wanted to shake her until her eyes opened, until she said, Hey, pumpkin. Mira looked from Chantal’s subdued form to her mother and said, “Does she need another blanket? How do they know she’s not cold?” The room was dim, lit only by the bedside light accessible by a pull cord. There was another cord to summon a nurse for help. What if Chantal awoke and needed someone, and got the cords mixed up? She looked so vulnerable. Mira hugged herself. “She’s the one who takes care of everyone.” A thrumming in her temples burned through the fog of grief. “How can we make her more comfortable?”

Ghislaine didn’t smile or frown, and Mira was beginning to blame her mother’s neutrality for her own rising panic. But she hugged her daughter suddenly, and for a moment, Mira imagined Chantal’s lips had curled into an ironic smile.

“Shouldn’t one of us stay?” Mira said.

Ghislaine smoothed the hair back from Chantal's forehead. "We'll let her sleep now, and come back later." Then she looked more closely at Mira. "You should sleep, too."

Her parents' house did not feel like the place you always return to when you've been away. It was in one of the newer neighbourhoods, two-storey, with walk-in closets and open concept kitchen. It was different from their last house, which had been around the corner from Chantal's squat brick bungalow. All her life Mira had split her time between Chantal's house and her parents' place. Chantal's was the constant with its artefacts from her late grandparents—the furniture, the dishes, the boxes of memorabilia she and Vicky used to explore in the basement. On this night, however, the modern, sparse decor chosen by her mother was strangely comforting. There were no emotions attached to any of it, the couch, the dining room set, the precise greenness of the oversized plants, or the abstract art on the walls.

Mira let Lewis take her coat and hang it in the closet while Ghislaine went upstairs to change. Mira put her foot on the bottom step to head up to bed but Lewis said, "I made stew. Come have some."

"I don't want stew."

"Warm biscuit with butter?"

She opened her mouth and made a gagging sound.

"I guess nothing will please you right now." He bit his lower lip, nodded. "I understand. You're upset about your aunt."

He was pulling bowls out of a cupboard but paused with his arms up when she said, "You. Understand. Nothing."

He dropped his hands, empty, to the counter. “I beg your pardon?”

The hot energy that had kept her tense the whole day drained out of Mira’s skull, slithered like lava over her shoulders, down her torso to her legs and out her feet into the floor. What was left behind was a coldness, like armour. She pushed the heat of emotion away, and donned this chilly barrier to confront him. “Do you understand what’s going on with Chantal?”

He cocked his head and chuckled in that way he had of averting conflict. “I’m not a doctor, if that’s what you mean.”

“I am linked to her. Whatever is wrong—will now be part of my health record.”

He crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Where are you going with this?”

“I have a right to know.” When he stared blankly, she threw her arms in the air. “Health information!” She was standing in the kitchen doorway and began to bang her fists, one and then the other, into the door frame on either side of her body. “I should know, if for no other reason than for health, something about the person who is...” She was staring at him, and he met her gaze, and it was as confrontational as she’d ever been with him, which stopped her from saying *my real dad*. She growled deep in her throat to keep the heat out and the steely cold in. “The other person I’m related to.”

It was, in her mind, enough to bring about his ah-ha moment. Infuriatingly, he only shrugged. “My mother had mental health issues—or so your mother assumes—it was never diagnosed. What good does that do me? If I experienced symptoms myself, I would seek treatment.”

“Your mother has nothing to do with me.” The armour only partially protected her from the flood of emotions that marbled the cold and the heat in her body. It was about so much more

than health history. She wanted him to understand this yearning inside of her to know something, anything, about the other father, the biological one she didn't know.

She watched his face contort and twitch with what she hoped was doubt, because that's what she felt. She didn't want to discuss genetics, or health records with him. She only wanted what she had tried to ask him last summer, what he'd already denied her for the sake of keeping the status quo within the industry he was so proud to be part of. She had always trusted him, but that trust was tense, braced against the possibility of hurting him, and she was on the verge of exploding the veil of civility that kept their relationship intact. He looked over his left shoulder and the profile of his arrow-straight nose stood out against the white cupboard behind him. When he turned his head in her direction he didn't meet her eyes. It occurred to her that she had never stared at him this long before. She had always looked away. "Look at me. I'm not done with this conversation."

Ghislaine had come downstairs and stood motionless in the doorway. They both watched Lewis shift his weight, his hands pressed against the counter behind him. His mouth was open and when he shook his head slightly, his jaw wobbled. Grotesque, Mira thought. "You made me believe...that I could know..." She stopped. Her desire to learn something about her paternity had grown, but her ability to express that desire remained stunted.

He looked at her for no more than a second before turning away again. "Be careful with your accusations."

Her eyes bulged and her whole head felt like it might pop off her body. "I asked if you could get any information about my sperm donor. You said, maybe..."

"Ah-ha!"

Fucker sounded like a Sherlock Holmes wanna be, she thought.

“Maybe,” he said, “is not a lie. How do I know? Maybe, in the future, a DNA test will be easier to acquire, something of that nature could happen. Maybe is open-ended.”

It was still a new sensation to question his judgement. Filled with the power her anger provided she yelled, “I have a right to know!”

“And people who are desperate to have a child also have rights.”

Her argument seemed weak next to his—what was her niggling question next to his growing list of clients, the reality of commerce, of the availability of purchase when demand was growing? She looked to her mother for assistance—Ghislaine was stoic as a tree—you had to chop, bit by bit, to knock her down. Even then, Mira couldn’t recall a time when she had ever managed to change her mother’s mind. Right now, she had only enough destructive energy available for Lewis.

Ghislaine made a noise of exasperation. “That’s enough, both of you. We don’t know what we don’t know.”

And somehow Mira understood, finally, that Ghislaine was as much in the dark about the identity of the donor as she was. Ghislaine wouldn’t lie about it. She would brush Mira off because she didn’t know the answer, yes. But she wouldn’t lie—Lewis would. In this revelation it was suddenly clear to her that Ghislaine’s only thought at the time of conception, was to have a baby with her husband. Knowing the identity of the donor might have complicated her feelings. But shouldn’t she have also considered the possibility of questions from the child she conceived?

She was losing focus, and Lewis, with two bowls in hand, was preparing to serve the stew.

“This is our family.” He put the bowls down next to the stove and one arm swept out in a gesture that included all three of them. He lifted the lid off the pot, sniffed the steam that rose to meet his face. “You’re just upset about your aunt being in the hospital.”

The growing certainty that she couldn’t trust him reduced her voice to the sound of a toddler in tantrum. “You and your anonymity. It ruins everything, destroys people’s lives. You got it all wrong.” She broke off and dug her fingernails into her palms. “Forget about me, forget I ever asked. But my cousin—your second daughter! She’s maybe falling for her own brother! Did you know that? The guy she’s been hanging around since summer, the guy she even brought with her to...she is maybe dating... Her beautiful, sweet baby brother.” She hardly realized that the sobbing was coming from her own body. “You chose client privilege over the rights of the conceived! What will she do? She’ll be ruined. Because she doesn’t know. And he didn’t know. And they met. So add them to your list of happy couples! My gift to you. Don’t say I don’t help out with the company. I hate it. I hate it. I hate you!”

Without touching her, Ghislaine somehow reached out to Mira. She could feel a heat emanating from her mother’s body, and a prickling from Lewis.

Ghislaine’s voice was raspy. “Do you mean...?”

Mira’s whole face and neck were covered in tears she couldn’t wipe away fast enough. “How can I tell her? It’s too much. This is not right. It’s all your fault.”

Lewis carried one of the bowls to the table. Ghislaine crossed the floor, opened the cupboard next to the sink and pulled out a bottle of Tylenol. She opened the tap to maximum pressure and said, “I’m not hungry, either.”

Mira might have accepted the answer about their family of three being intact, and she might have seen her mother’s actions as evidence she was about to take her daughter’s side, not

Lewis's, for a change. But then Lewis said, "Did you ever think that the donor doesn't want to be found?" He looked her in the eye with the certainty of the one winning the argument, then added his ultimatum. "You come to the clinic and witness a meeting with a couple trying to conceive. Then maybe you'll see. With God as my witness—"

"Enough," Ghislaine said. Her hands were shaking.

The throbbing heat flooded back into Mira's body. She staggered on her way out of the kitchen. Ghislaine remained in the room with him. Mira was consumed by a sense of loneliness so profound that it drained strength from her whole self so that she had to use the railing to pull herself up the stairs to her bedroom. She lay down and stared at the ceiling in the dark. She was done feeling sorry for him, protecting him. The weight of seeing him this way was a painful exercise. It was some kind of punishment, as was Chantal being taken from her. But neither of these things had anything to do with each other. She was searching for connections where there were none.

## Chapter Twenty-One

Her shoulder was shaking, or being shaken. She opened her eyes and saw her mother's face.

"Did I miss school?"

Ghislaine looked as confused as Mira felt. "You're back in Copeland, remember?"

Chantal. We'll go back to the hospital as soon as you're ready. Vicky will be there soon."

The hospital was like a sleepy village, with only the nurses moving about with purpose. There were no other visitors in the hallway as there had been the day before. Mira rested a hand on Chantal's forearm and watched her sleeping. Ghislaine left the bedside to go talk to the doctor. If Chantal's mouth drooped a little to the left it could have been mistaken for the peaceful state of slumber. Mira was digging a book out of her backpack when Vicky appeared in the hallway. Without planning to, or understanding why she did it, Mira shrank back behind the scrunched up part of the curtain that surrounded Chantal's hospital bed. Mira could only see the back of the nurse who approached Vicky, telling her that there were already two people visiting. "Don't worry," the nurse said, "your sister is in there."

Seeing Vicky, after all the prolonged silence between them, and under these terrible circumstances, produced a strange reaction in Mira. She felt as if there was a stopwatch hovering over them, counting down the seconds until it would be too late to tell Vicky about Finn. Mira at once wanted to reach out and embrace Vicky, to warn her, to protect her. But she felt irrationally intimidated, as though, with so much to tell, and to ask, she was incapable of saying anything at all. They stood there sizing each other up like two stalking animals.

Vicky waited until the nurse was gone before she came into the room and went to the opposite side of the bed and began tugging at her mother's blankets. She said, "This isn't supposed to happen."

“No one plans these things.”

Mira found herself crouching back behind the curtain again when Vicky charged towards her from the other side of the bed. Her proximity was sudden and startling, but it was the low tone and control in her voice that Mira found most frightening. “Did you drop everything in a second to beat me here? To be the hero?”

Mira tried to ignore the anger in Vicky’s voice, meant to ask if she had received the card, but instead she found herself asking, “What is wrong with you?”

Vicky’s face was luminous with emotion and there was a moist, feral smell wafting off of her. She pulled so hard on the blanket that it popped up off Chantal’s bare feet. She tried to tug it back the other way, but only succeeded in stretching it sideways, off Chantal’s chest, as well. Finally she said, “I can’t be here if you’re here.” Mira stared, mute, as Vicky stomped out of the room, arms swinging like pendulums.

Mira was damned to go after her, and damned to remain sitting, calmly, with her unconscious aunt. She straightened the covers. Her arms were heavy, like limbs trapped in a wet coat, underwater. Mira remembered how Vicky used to sometimes storm out of the house, slamming the granny door behind her. The way Mira remembered it, there had always been a mutual understanding between her and Chantal that when Vicky was indignant, Mira was the one who could coax her out of her mood. She had always been able to make Vicky laugh, usually by starting a game of What’s the Worst You Could Do. Mira was the storyteller, but it was Vicky who could come up with the most gruesome details of torture for those who crossed her. Her vindictive sentence for the neighbour who used to wrestle her to the ground and sit on her, or throw her bag into the middle of the street, was, “I’d tie him up and slice his fat cheeks with a sharp rock, and watch him cry harder as the tears got in the cuts.”

Mira shivered, imagining Vicky directing violent curses toward her. She couldn't let that happen.

Mira had to maneuver through a crowd of people in the hallway, three generations of a family arguing about which room their Grandma was in. She found Vicky outside, her arms wrapped around herself.

Mira inched closer. "I wish you'd talk to me," she said.

Vicky made a grunting sound that could have been mistaken for a sob. "You have two parents."

The statement was not on the list of things she had expected Vicky to say. Fat snowflakes fell from a grey sky. It was the kind of snowfall that Mira and Vicky used to like to be out in when they were kids, mouths open, catching flakes like fairy dust on their tongues. It made the world feel safe as a snow globe. It seemed unreasonable at that moment to enjoy it, but everything about this day was unreasonable. "They're practically your parents, too."

"I don't have a dad," Vicky said.

"At least you know who your dad is," Mira said.

"See, this is what you do. I'm not talking about you. This is all me, and my shitty dad. He's a liar and a coward."

Mira ached to tell Vicky that she felt the same way about Lewis, but the anger that radiated off her cousin's body was a force that stopped her words. She could clearly see the hole in Vicky's life where a father should be. For a moment Mira tried to imagine her own life from Vicky's perspective, a girl with two fathers—Lewis, her social father, and the other one she might never know, but could imagine. Her relationship with Lewis wasn't great, but at least it existed. She chewed the inside of her cheek. A breeze stirred snowflakes from the ground so that

for a moment they rose, making the world seem upside down. Despite Vicky's outburst, Mira felt lighter than she had in weeks in her relief to be near her cousin again, to hear her talk again.

Vicky swatted at the second-hand smoke from a smoker standing not far enough away. "My mom and I. We're self-contained." The smoker dropped his butt and it hissed in the snow. Vicky looked hard at Mira. "Blake has other kids in the world."

Snow drifted in lazy clouds over the parking lot, but Mira's heart rate increased. "Vicky, I—"

She was afraid of Vicky walking away if she said the wrong thing so she remained silent, waiting.

Vicky plucked something off her jacket, rolled it in her fingers and flicked it away. "Why are you so concerned about my mom all the time? Don't you think she of all people—she's the strongest." Vicky's voice broke. Then she laughed without joy. "Dammit, maybe I could just be here. Just me. And my mom. For once." This, and Vicky's remark about how she and Chantal were self-contained, caused Mira's heart to ache. Of all the beliefs she held about her family, one that struck her in that moment as most dear was that she was every bit as much a part of Chantal's life as was Vicky.

"I wanted siblings," Vicky said. She snorted. "I wanted a little brother to boss around." She turned her gaze on Mira, who was paralyzed by this conversation. "I might have siblings out there. Jesus. How am I supposed to even..."

The possibility of many unknown siblings had never occurred to her for herself, let alone Vicky. There could be a galaxy of siblings out there, other people with Vicky's eyes, or Mira's mousy hair, her cousin's sarcasm, or her imagination. This revelation didn't thrill her—it terrified her, and in her fear she had no voice, no comfort or collusion to share with her cousin.

Vicky shook her head and moved her lips in a conversation with herself. “And the one person I could vent to with satisfaction about what an asshole Blake is,” she coughed, and put a fist to her cheek, “is lying in a hospital bed.”

Mira’s whole body yearned to step across the barriers that divided them and pull Vicky into her confidence. She had been wondering for months, years even, who her genetic father might be. But they both had genetic relations to wonder about. This was something that should have united them. Instead, they stood side-by-side, in isolation from one another.

Halfway across the parking lot an elderly woman bent forward, thin arms outstretched, attempting to help her husband out of a wheelchair and into the passenger seat of their car. They paused several times while he leaned against the snow-wet metal of the Buick. Mira felt her throat constrict even tighter. Her vision blurred. She had only ever imagined one man, one stranger whose footsteps matched her heartbeat. This one person whose face she couldn’t see was her link to a part of herself she felt cut off from. One. Like insects, one on its own is bearable, even interesting. A swarm, a hive, with countless legs and the speed and agility to get inside your clothes, uninvited, is creepy to the point of terror. She envisioned an army of children, teens, young adults, marching through Copeland, not unfriendly, but that was what scared Mira: the intimacy of sharing genes with strangers who could, without invitation, show up in her life, in the lives of the people she was closest with. She didn’t feel capable of making room for this possibility in her life. She thought about the people who might someday come looking for her, for Vicky. Would they be aggressive, or casual? And Vicky, what would her reaction be?

With great effort, Mira said, “What if you learned—”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

It was more than an invisible force that stopped Mira from mentioning Finn. The unspeakable was an insurmountable barrier that locked her voice inside her chest. In the nauseating, expanding galaxy of her thoughts it struck her that Vicky was right—she had infringed on Vicky’s relationship with her mom. She had used Chantal, and Chantal’s home, to escape the difficulty between her and her own parents. And she hadn’t even realized she’d been doing it.

Finally, the husband was seated in the passenger seat. His wife walked slowly around the front of the car holding the keys carefully in front of her, like a server with a heavily laden tray. Her husband closed his eyes and rested his head back against the headrest. They seemed to have forgotten to load the wheelchair. Maybe it belonged to the hospital and would be collected from the parking lot like grocery carts at the supermarket. “It’s a lot,” she said, her voice shoved painfully through the smallest pinhole in her trachea. Vicky was no longer standing next to her. She had gone back into the hospital. This time, Mira did not follow her.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*It was an ancient myth about King Oedipus on which Sophocles based his famous play. The myth wasn't important. What was important was to know that the play was a type of Greek theatre known as tragedy. The original meaning of tragedy had nothing to do with disaster. It meant "goat song" because the goat-singers were a chorus in goatskin costumes who sang at the festival of Dionysus.* As her professor droned on Mira wrote down the words, pressing so hard in her notebook she could have read it like braille. The most resilient person in her family was closed off from the world behind shut eyelids. What did goat song matter? As she transcribed, she imagined Chantal's clear, confident voice: Mix it with rum and call it dessert! *Comedies were songs of the revellers.* Mira's pen punctured a hole in her page.

Since being back at school she had called home more frequently. She only ever spoke to Ghislaine. She hadn't wanted to leave until Chantal was out of the hospital, but did, reluctantly, after only three days in Copeland. Aside from the fact that the tension in her parents' house was Arctic cold, leaving town was the least she could do, to give Vicky space.

Mira put all her worry into her aunt's recovery. Ghislaine said Chantal was safe, but Mira imagined the bed in the semi-private hospital room as a jail cell rather than salvation. Until one evening—when the five days she had been back in Sudbury had felt like five years—Ghislaine called to say that Chantal was home. She had a long schedule of therapy ahead of her, but lots of support from not only Ghislaine, but friends, people who showed up in droves with casseroles, and schedules of availability.

"Will she ever be the same?" Mira asked.

Ghislaine paused, and it was an excruciating moment of silence that Mira filled with worst case scenarios. “The stroke has slurred her speech and made her very tired. But she’s young, she’s strong, and her diagnosis is better than most. So yes, and no, not exactly.”

Mira had not gone out except to her classes, and once to the grocery store. She repeated a refrain of abstinence from pleasure—aside from reading, the activity that was an homage to Chantal—as a kind of prayer for her aunt.

Octavia came in from writing a mid-term and knew right away that Mira had finally received the call she’d been waiting for. “Are you okay?”

With tears in her eyes, Mira shook her head.

Octavia came over to console, cuddling and listening. When she had heard enough she said, “Get your coat, we’re going out!”

“I don’t have a goat.” To Octavia’s incredulous look she said, “Classics class? Remember?”

To refuse Octavia’s demand required more energy than going along with her. She felt naked without the pressure of her book bag to weigh her down. She allowed her friend to link arms with her on the way to the liquor store, but she found Octavia’s chatter tiresome. There was no need to hurt her by asking her to shut up. Still, silence was its own kind of rejection.

Octavia guided her to the liquor store, declaring that it was white wine night. They were halfway through the second bottle when Mira realized she had broken her promise to herself. She put her glass in the middle of the table and curled herself into a corner of the couch. Octavia tried to hand it back to her and Mira, thinking it was a betrayal to Chantal to interrupt her worrying by indulging in alcohol, said, “I’ve unbalanced the universe.” Octavia should have understood. But either the booze had dulled her friend’s intuition, or she had decided not to listen to Mira’s

complaints, for she kept pouring more in Mira's glass. Her mind was filled with doubt and her stomach with gurgles. She told Octavia she needed to go to bed. Unmoored by her thoughts she made no move to get up, just sat on the couch and hugged her knees.

Octavia said, "What is it you think you can do by worrying?"

Mira glared at her. "Don't simplify. It won't work to cheer me up." She burped.

Octavia asked if her aunt would want her to become a hermit. In a fit of alcohol-inspired honesty, Mira said, "I didn't ask her for help when I had the chance." She said that maybe her aunt knew something about her genetic father, and just hadn't told her yet. Chantal, she reasoned, would have been waiting for the right time to give her this information. "She's the only person I'd forgive for not telling me sooner."

"So because she's unavailable, she's your scapegoat."

"I trust her!"

"She's your unofficial saviour, the angel you can't reach."

"If she didn't know, she would have helped me to find out, just to spite Lewis." Mira realized, too late, that Octavia was dramatizing. "Don't make fun of me."

"Don't do this to yourself."

"Do what?"

"You don't know what you don't know."

Mira groaned. "You sound like my mother."

"Listen! You're smart. You care. But you think too much. Thoughts that lead to darkness. You don't know if Chantal would help you—or even if she's got the information you want."

Then Octavia told Mira a story about a time when she was really sick, and thought she was dying. "I was sure my mom was lying to me, telling me I'd be okay, when really I wasn't. I

kept seeing myself, falling out of bed and being too weak to yell, or drowning in the bathtub, with no one there to help me. My mom kept repeating, You'll be okay. And I was. But later I learned that the fever got so bad, she took me to the hospital and they put me on an IV, and I didn't even remember. Did she lie to me? Yes and no. Does it matter now? No."

"What's your point?"

"Other than, I'm drunk?" She rolled across the couch to cuddle up next to Mira. "Your aunt will be fine. Be patient." She put her hand on Mira's head, nearly fell over when Mira pulled away.

Mira squeezed her eyes shut, willing her mind to have faith in a positive outcome. She didn't want to feel sick from the alcohol, and negativity would bring that on. She hugged the cushion. Octavia moved to the stereo, and Sarah McLachlan's *Delirium* album filled the room with its orchestral melody.

The music was nice. Guiltily, she sipped more wine. But she had to have something to worry about. The balance of the universe required it. She told Octavia her suspicions about Vicky and Finn. "I need to talk to them—one of them—at least ask if they know they might be. Imagine if—"

Octavia took a surprisingly firm stance. "You should forget about it."

"But what if Vicky..." was dating her half-brother? Mira couldn't even say it out loud. Forget it? What good was Octavia's advice, anyway? What good had come out of the rally? It had only made her relationship with her parents even more rotten. She had taken Octavia's advice before, but thought better of it, now. "I can't just forget about it."

Octavia rolled her eyes. "Do you think Finn's mom would have found the biological father of her child, and not told her son?"

The weight of the world shifted on Mira's shoulders. "I don't know," she said. But there was another fact that blocked the relief from entering her heart—that Vicky was unreachable, because she didn't want to talk to her cousin. "Octavia, I love you—"

"I love you, too," Octavia batted her eyelashes.

Mira smiled at her friend. She did adore her, but the person she really wanted, was Vicky.

Later that night she opened Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—compliments of Chantal's bookshelf. Her classics prof had handed out photocopied excerpts of the text. Those pages were like severed digits compared with the intact body of the Penguin volume nice —fifteen books of interconnected stories. The brief ideas discussed in class—similarities between the flood in *Metamorphoses* and the one in Genesis, for example—were generalizations. The stories in the book gave life to words she'd heard but never really understood before—words like **fate**. The characters in the stories made bad decisions that led to catastrophe, expressed the range of emotions Mira experienced in her own life. Pythagoras' long discussion on the soul in Book Fifteen reminded her of Lewis's justification for his business practices, and almost explained his self-proclaimed altruism.

Had it been some kind of twisted destiny that Finn and Vicky should meet?

There were only a few weeks left of the semester when she finally called Vicky. She was so shocked that Vicky answered and didn't hang up, Vicky had to yell her name before she spoke. "Do you remember the last time we spent time together? Like really, just hung out?"

"I don't know."

She asked Vicky about her semester, and if she'd seen her mom lately. Mira knew the news about Chantal—she was recovering well, but couldn't work, not yet. She had to drag the conversation on, long enough so that it resembled something comfortable. Vicky talked about spring in Toronto, how the weather was already warm as summer there, how she'd miss the outdoor cafés when she went back to Copeland.

“Are you going alone?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“I just wanted to know...” Her blood felt poisoned by urgency. She asked when she could expect to see her back in Copeland.

“Look, Mira.” Vicky's tone made Mira's heart sink. Whatever she was about to say, there would be no space for Mira to ask Vicky about Finn. “I'm having to...make some changes. I can't deal...with anything else right now.”

“But your internship...”

“I can't.”

It occurred to Mira for the first time, that Vicky had given up her internship, to be available to Chantal for the summer. The internship she'd worked so hard for. She said, as gently as possible, “Are you able to defer...for a year?”

“I don't know.” Then she signed off their call with a vague, “I'll see you.”

Mira had a final paper to complete for her classics class and decided to investigate some of the gaps between what they were told only briefly in class, and the vast number of both archeological and literary sources available. It was a grandiose plan that would never materialize in the way she had imagined it. She opened the paper with a discussion about Pythagoras, his lengthy justification for vegetarianism. She didn't believe in any of it. She merely regurgitated

notes from other essays. The paper felt flat, without substance, but she got it done. Stories of love and passion, incest, revenge, and jealousy swirled around her for weeks as she reread bits of *Metamorphoses*. At the end of the semester, she packed up her room and found a ride back to Copeland for the summer.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

There was no question that she was going to follow up on Lewis's challenge to see one of his childless couples in consultation. How else would she prove to him how wrong it was, what he was doing? She would be able to see through Lewis's sales pitch to how uncomfortable the couple was with the idea of using donor sperm, from a stranger. She would tell them what it was like from her perspective, to know she had a genetic father in the world, someone who was part of her that she was prevented from knowing anything about because of rules that protected no one but the donor. Wouldn't adoption, an industry that had evolved to provide opportunities for children to meet their genetic parents, be a better model? She would witness all this, speak to it, then head to the café to take up her position behind the bar.

The clients Lewis was about to see were nervous. The man got up to pace across the floor in the waiting room, his wife reached up to touch his arm as he passed and he slumped into the chair next to her. He clasped her hand between his and rubbed a thumb along her wrist. The woman rocked on her hips as though incapable of finding a comfortable, seated position, and shook him off. They breathed in unison for a few seconds, then the man got up out of the chair and began to pace again.

Lewis stepped out of his office to personally greet them. He spoke to them by name, "Hello Gretchen, Bob, welcome back!" They were one of the couples he'd matched through the dating business. After their first date, Gretchen had called Lewis, and within seconds, Bob had called. He spoke to them like that, back and forth between lines until he purposely conferenced them in so that all three were on the line together. They were cautiously optimistic people, both of them, always hesitating before making a move, always following through in the end. Lewis

had relayed all of this to Mira, who sat observing them in the waiting room. She followed them into his office with an uncomfortable faux smile on her lips.

These two had been married a full two years. Unable to conceive a child, they had spoken with their doctor and several fertility professionals who suggested they consider in vitro fertilization. But IVF would involve a complicated series of procedures: stimulation of egg production, laparoscopic retrieval, introduction of semen to create an embryo, genetic tests to monitor for abnormalities and implantation of the embryo in the uterus. Perhaps Bob's lazy sperm problems could be solved with a bit of surgery to extract a sample of his seed from the scrotum, but he wasn't at all comfortable with that thought so sperm donation, he had decided, was more appealing. And if that was the route to take, what Lewis was offering—artificial insemination, the deliberate introduction of donated sperm into Gretchen's cervix to achieve pregnancy—conveniently avoided the risks of surgery.

"So," Lewis began, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his desk and clasp his hands together. Gretchen's facial muscles relaxed, she was seemingly reassured by his gestures. She held Bob's hand and he seemed to calm down, too. "This is the next step guys, you must be excited."

Bob cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "But bringing in a third party, I—"

"A baby," said Lewis, holding up a hand and pointing his index finger to the ceiling, "is a true miracle, isn't it? Formed in the bonds of love, completing the family circle, a link between us and the future of mankind. Look at you guys!" He got up and came around to the front of his desk and perched on the corner, closest to Gretchen. "Look at you!" he repeated. "You've come so far. Remember the cautious thrill of finding each other, in the beginning? What, four years ago?" They nodded and looked at each other, smiling. Lewis lowered his voice and leaned in,

brushing Gretchen's arm briefly with the tips of those long, pale fingers. "You've waited long enough. So." Lewis slapped his hands against his thighs. Gretchen rocked slightly back, then forth. Bob shifted sideways. Lewis chuckled softly, moving toward a tall green filing cabinet behind the door. He looked over his shoulder at Bob and said, conspiratorially, "Let me know if you hear my secretary coming, she's been known to get me once or twice with the door." Bob couldn't help himself, he squeezed Gretchen's hand. Lewis knew not only the right words, but the appropriate gestures to put them at ease. To think, Lewis had matched Bob and Gretchen—not after dozens of agonizing dates with forgettable strangers like the other dating services Bob had tried, but right the first time. With Gretchen.

Mira felt awkward standing against the wall behind them, but they didn't seem to care that she was there.

"Have I told you my story?" said Lewis.

Gretchen and Bob looked at each other uncertainly. Lewis had told them many stories, when they were dating. About how he'd wooed his own wife, Ghislaine, finally caught her heart with a little science experiment involving glasses and a lab coat.

"Maybe not this one. It's...personal," Lewis said. Gretchen sat up straighter. "I suffered an illness as a child. What seemed just a fever at the time, resulted in, hmph," Lewis ducked his head and Gretchen's head snapped toward Bob. "Well," Lewis continued, looking up at them with wistful eyes. "The fever, the illness, left me... infertile."

The pause was a dramatic touch. Like a rapt and obedient audience, Bob and Gretchen exhaled simultaneously.

Lewis held up a hand. "When you find the right partner, anything is possible. Isn't it?"

Gretchen leaned into Bob and he let go of her hand to put his arm around her shoulders.

“Ghislaine and I, we talked and talked. You know those early, late night conversations. I told her what I hadn’t told anyone before, what only my mother and my doctor knew at the time. We have pills for erectile dysfunction, pills to prevent pregnancy. But this,” Lewis paused again, walked slowly back around his desk and sat down with a file from the cabinet. “What I’m saying is, if you can agree on a solution, a door that was closed... That door suddenly opens.”

Gretchen’s cheeks were wet. Lewis held out his hands, palms up, and Mira thought, He believes he’s the fucking messiah.

Lewis patted the file. “What I’m saying is, you can change your outcome. In here, I have six forms. Six willing sperm donors I’ve selected for you—I can add to the list, if you like, but I’ve researched each donor for similar characteristics to your own, with background and health checks. And Bob. You will be right there with her the whole time.”

Lewis stood and circled behind his chair, his hands gripping the backrest, and his eyes met Mira’s. He had said to Mira, “Just watch and listen. Then tell me if you would tell these poor people no, we can’t help you? When we can? When we have the ability to make their dreams a reality, safely, virtually effortlessly?”

Mira had pleaded for honesty, openness. And Lewis, again, put it back on his clients, and his Christian duty to assist them. He had explained to her, in that froth of enthusiasm, how science was helping people to change their outcomes in ways that used to be unimaginable. He was maybe thinking of his own mother when he said these things, how she had wanted more children and was never able to, after he was born. Mira wondered what the people who had lived hundreds, or thousands of years ago would think of today’s scientific advancements. Would they say, Yes! This is what we were hoping for all along. Or might they have thought about the downside, as people thought about Y2K, the warnings about what might have happened,

disasters, anarchy, abuses of power... Would there be a strange mix of relief and disappointment that nothing had happened, that the world had spent all this money and effort and worry on something nobody seemed to be able to prove had been necessary. The people of the past might not be impressed with what humans had accomplished. Instead, they might say, “Open your eyes and see the mess you’re in. All your progress relies on systems that could crash and destroy you.”

While Mira had been thinking these things, Bob and Gretchen seemed to have communicated all their thoughts, fears and mutual reassurances through hand squeezes, and reached a decision. They were smiling and nodding. They accepted the file Lewis handed them.

When Lewis met her gaze, his eyes conveyed triumph. His expression told her, “Here are people who want desperately to be parents. All they need is the seed that will help them make their baby, their family. Just like us.”

She wanted to hold onto the belief she had walked in the door with, but she struggled to reconcile that with Bob and Gretchen’s willingness to go along with Lewis’s prescription for them. She wanted to be angry with them. But she couldn’t deny the sense of relief—not anger, or fear—she felt in the room, and that’s what made her second-guess herself.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

It seemed to Mira that for weeks she had been living with this burning itch under her skin, unreachable with her nails, her knuckles, unquenchable because it was everywhere and nowhere. She worked back-to-back shifts—afternoon, evening—at the café, hoping that the busyness of serving summer crowds would distract her. But she didn't have the same energy for the job that she used to. She thought often about Vicky, and her mind bounced back and forth between being angry at her cousin for avoiding her, and sad for the same reason. She had given Vicky space. She had tried to call her. Vicky refused to show appreciation for the space, by refusing to answer or return Mira's calls.

She hadn't seen Finn around town at all—maybe he'd gone home, too, back to Parry Sound. Maybe it was the summer of going home to mothers. Lewis was away at conferences most weekdays, and some weekends. Most days it was only Mira and Ghislaine living together.

Besides Ghislaine and her customers at the café, Mira hardly spoke to anyone. She rode her bike, she went to the beach to walk barefoot on the sand or swim. Bryan had a new girlfriend. Everyone else she had once hung out with from her year in high school had left town. Octavia, she thought, would be so disappointed in her. She was a loner, after all. There were other people she could have hung out with, but what was the point? She only wanted to talk to Vicky. Enough was enough, she told herself, it was time to march on up to her aunt's house, not take no for an answer, and talk to her cousin. What was she afraid of? Vicky was avoiding her, but that shouldn't stop her from doing what she felt was right.

Mira approached the house on Seventh Street with trepidation. It wasn't the same as it used to be. Before the stroke, Chantal's house had been infused, inside and out, with her energy. Now the geraniums were speckled in brown, the lilac bush sagged, and the whole facade seemed

covered in a shadow that Mira was sure hadn't existed before. In truth, the yard was less cared for than it had been, since Chantal hadn't done any of the gardening and trimming she usually did every summer.

Mira went in and found Chantal dozing in her chair, a copy of *Far From the Madding Crowd* open on her chest. She sat up when she saw Mira and wiped her mouth. It took her a moment to speak a greeting, but she found the words. Then she got up to put the kettle on for tea.

Mira was going to shoo her out of the kitchen and get the tea herself, but decided to watch Chantal instead. She had spent so much time feeling sad for Chantal, from a distance. Her aunt's movements were slower than before, but deliberate. "You are the strongest woman I know," Mira said. She blinked to keep her emotions in check.

Chantal stared at her. Then a smile spread across her face. "Aren't you the sweet one." She poured water. "But you didn't come here to talk to me."

Relief like a refreshing breeze wafted over Mira. With Chantal, you didn't have to worry about offending. "I was hoping you could tell me where I could find Vicky."

Vicky was working at the new insurance office at the top of Main Street. According to Chantal, before she'd even started in May, Vicky'd had her workspace moved from a back corner into the centre of the office, memorized the names of employees and clients, and reorganized the flow of work.

Mira was standing on the sidewalk when Vicky came out for her lunch break. Mira told herself to be cool, casual, but as soon as Vicky was close enough, Mira reached out to hug her. Vicky stepped sideways so that Mira made an embarrassing lunge into empty air. "Where have you been? I've called."

Vicky shrugged. "Here. There. You know."

“No, I don’t. I need to talk to you, are you avoiding me?” Mira’s words rushed out of her body but dropped like husks onto the ground, meaningless before Vicky’s expressionless face. Mira felt that she should have approached Vicky in that cautious way of two people who haven’t been on speaking terms for a while. Instead, she accosted her cousin with an accusatory tone she instantly regretted. “Let me buy you lunch.”

Vicky shook her head. “I have plans.”

“With who? Change them. There’s something I need to—”

Vicky put her hands in the air, in front of Mira’s mouth. “Go. Talk to your mom.”

“I want to talk to *you*. Why won’t you talk to me?”

Vicky sighed. “You ask too many questions.”

Shocked, Mira was silent a moment. Then she grasped at the first thing that came into her head. “Do you remember when our moms did that baptismal ritual on us, in the lake?”

Vicky looked down the street, towards the water. “Sure. They were drunk.”

Mira clenched her fists. “Why do you have to shoot me down—it’s a memory, can’t you see the significance? We should do a mini road trip, just the two of us. Don’t you think?”

“Mira.” Vicky grabbed both her arms and pinched.

“Ow!” It was childish and familiar, the instinct to slap Vicky, who leaned her head back just in time to avoid contact “Travel is off.”

Mira waited for that statement to hit her like a truck, but it didn’t. “I know.” Instead of disappointment, Mira felt as though something had been crossed off her To Do list.

“You never really wanted to go.”

“I wanted to go with you! I still would, I mean, if it wasn’t for Chantal’s stroke, I get it. But you want to go? My mom can move in with Chantal, let’s do it, let’s—”

“It’s not that.” Vicky wiped the back of one hand across her forehead. “I mean it. Go. Talk to your mom.”

She headed home right away, calling out for Ghislaine. It had been too painful to stand there watching Vicky walk away from her.

“Vicky said I needed to talk to you. She won’t.” Tears stung the corners of Mira’s eyes. She wrinkled her nose and held her breath to keep them in.

“Ssshhh...” Ghislaine put an arm around Mira’s shoulders, and they went out through the kitchen door and sat outside.

“Why would she say that, go home, talk to your mom? Why won’t she talk to me?”

Ghislaine smiled. “Because she talked to me.”

This was not reassuring. “But why?”

“Think about it. About what you told me, the night you came back when Chantal was in the hospital. Don’t you think it was hard for her, too?”

Mira scratched the back of her head. “You mean about Vicky maybe dating Finn?”

Ghislaine touched Mira’s arm. “I’d like to tell you something.”

So, this was it, Mira thought. I am going to learn from my mom—not Vicky—that my cousin has been having an incestuous relationship with her half-brother. And if Vicky couldn’t talk to her about it herself, then Mira didn’t want to know. “No, you don’t.”

“A couple of months after you were born,” Ghislaine said, “I started having dreams about your father.”

Mira groaned. “I don’t need to know about your love life with dad—”

Ghislaine shook her head. “Not Lewis. There were long hours and sleepless nights when I couldn’t stop myself from imagining the man I’d made a baby with.”

Mira's mouth dropped open, but she had no words. This was probably the most intimate thing her mother had ever shared with her. Her mother, who always seemed so in control, of herself, of each of her family members, of all their lives. Was it possible she had ever felt out of control of her own imagination?

"Babies change so much day to day, week to week. And every time I discovered something new about your features, your limbs—something that didn't seem familiar from myself, or from my memories of your aunt when she was little—I knew it had to come from someone else. And I realized I didn't know who that was. So, I imagined, piece by piece, what your genetic father might look like. It was very..."

"Disturbing?"

"Disconcerting, for sure. Once I went back to work it got better, I didn't dwell on it so much."

It gave her a warm feeling to know that the anonymous donation had affected her mother, but she wasn't ready to share that. Not yet.

"But what about Vicky? What did she tell you, is she dating Finn, did she—"

"It's okay. She isn't. She didn't."

Mira remembered how hostile Vicky had been to her when they'd returned to Copeland for the holidays. The hurt she'd felt over the fact that Vicky had not wanted her there, had invited other friends instead, rekindled. "She doesn't tell me things anymore. What did I do to deserve that?"

Ghislaine said, "You have to let her handle things in her own time, her own way."

In her mind's eye Mira opened her baby album and looked through the pictures of her with each of her parents. From Lewis's point of view, they were a family, no matter what, no

other explanations necessary. But for the first time, she saw that her mother had struggled with feelings about their uncommon conception that had been both joyous and confusing. And in her heart, she forgave her just a little bit for brushing aside her own questions about the unknown donor.

Mira couldn't sleep. The moon was full, and she left her blind open so that she could stare at the blue glow in the sky. She got up and took Lewis's office keys from the drawer in the kitchen. She left the house quietly, got on her bike. Her first thought was to go to Third Gate. She had a vague idea that she could look through Lewis's files, in search of one with her name on it. If no one would give her the answer about her missing paternity, perhaps she could find it out for herself. Was it possible that it could be there, in writing, buried amongst the donors Lewis had in his files?

She took the long way, up to Seventh Street. She stood on the sidewalk in front of Chantal's house, her bike balanced between her legs, picturing herself tossing rocks at Vicky's window, like a secret lover. She wanted an accomplice in this mission. If there was anything to discover in Lewis's files, she didn't want to be alone.

It had taken her a long time to realize that Vicky had been on her own mission of discovery. Mira wasn't the only one who had questions about other connections in the world. She let herself in through the main door at the Third Gate clinic.

She unlocked the filing cabinet behind the door in Lewis' office and open the top drawer, then the next, then the next. They were all full of numbered files. She gasped in amazement. "My god," she said aloud, "there must be thousands of donors here!" One of these numbers could

belong to Blake. She pictured, again, the image of paper dolls attached by their hands. So many half siblings in the world. For her, for Vicky. Maybe some of them were right here, in Copeland. Maybe more than a few? It made the planet seem both much bigger, and smaller than she'd imagined it to be, a feverish perspective she couldn't pin down that was changeable, frustrating, and devastatingly confusing.

But it was also comforting, because, although she was making this discovery on her own, she knew Vicky was uncovering the same truth about herself. It was like looking at the moon, and knowing that same orb shone down on everyone, family, friends, strangers.

She had planned to look for "Tremblay" but of course her last name wasn't there, only these numbers. And her own donor wouldn't be here, anyway, since her conception preceded the founding of Third Gate. She pulled out the first three numbers and sat on the ground to flip through them. With no light but the moon entering through the window, she read the basic information. Brown hair. Blue eyes. Brown eyes. Fair hair. Six feet. Five eleven. She thought about the photocopier in the hallway. Should she copy some of them? All of them? That had been her intention. But that was before she realized just how many files—how many donors—there were.

As she read through more of the donor files, the itch in her skin faded to a mild throbbing. She wasn't here to steal information, or to copy it and file it away for some unknown future use. She had been drawn to this place, on this night, to see something for herself. She hadn't wanted to work in this office, but she had wanted to know what was behind the curtain, to see the wizard's workings. These files existed. They might even be here ten or twenty years down the road, if some of the children born of these donors wanted to find it. Her own paternal genetic information was not here. She had been created nearer the beginning of this new way of family

building, at a time and in a way that had not preserved the information for her. There was nothing more for her to do but accept the things she didn't know.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

At the end of her shift one evening Mira stayed behind to clean up a spill down the front of the bar. She put on a Cowboy Junkies disc and felt the day's rush and worry drain away as exhaustion settled into her body. She finished with the vertical mess, then attacked the horizontal surface of the bar with determined energy.

"We're all alone?" Harry said, appearing from his office. He pushed his hands into his back and yawned. Mira, whose energy had built from a state of sedate weariness at midday toward a frenzy after the sun had set, moved on from the bar to the tables. Her arm was a blur, strands of hair fell against her face, as she fought off the sudden return of her fatigue.

She reached for the bottle of gin on the shelf behind the bar, and started mixing a drink. "Here." The ice in the glass rattled as she handed him the gin and tonic.

He took it without saying anything. She continued to wipe the now invisible spill.

"Any regrets about not working for your dad this summer?"

She paused. He had never asked her anything outside of café business. She folded the cloth, laid it next to the sink. He sat down on a bar stool. After a moment, she pulled out the one two over from his, and sat. "Why do you ask?"

He finished his drink, wiped his mouth with the back of one hand. "You are my longest-term employee. Just wondering if you'll be leaving soon, or if I should be making you an assistant manager." His whole face lifted toward his glittering eyes.

"Don't tease," she said.

His expression settled into a more serious mode. "It's okay, I don't need to know, now. You are welcome to work here whenever, and for as long as you like. Just don't make it forever."

She frowned, but didn't really mind him saying it. "On the topic of..." She was thinking about the mystery woman on the dock, but wasn't sure how to ask him about her. She got up to go mix Harry another drink. He didn't stop her, so while her back was turned to reach for the gin, she said, "Who was the woman...the one who yelled at you from the dock that day?"

He looked at her sternly. "We were talking about you." They stared at each other a full minute. Harry sighed. "She was...my wife."

Mira was amazed she hadn't thought of it—she'd only imagined that the woman was a girlfriend.

"I worked all the time. And when our son was born... Let's just say, I wasn't the domestic type."

"You have a family!" He nodded stiffly. "Where are they now?" In the moment when he didn't answer, Mira saw him struggle with his own emotions. She had wanted to know his secret, but now felt bad for having asked him. She had shied away from asking her own important questions, the questions she knew, now, she had every right to ask. "You must...love them?"

Before he could reply, a piercing scream cut through the silence in the room. Harry's body tensed as a glass smashed against the wall from the kitchen. In the next moment everything moved quickly. Harry was there, then he was gone. Mira's sneakers crunched on glass. She followed Harry down the hall.

What she saw took several moments to register: Next to the door that led to the back parking lot Bill, the cook, his eyes bulging from his red, sweating face, stared above an arm wrapped around his neck. A knife was held against Bill's neck. The arm was bare, pale, and thin, the dark hairs slicked back with moisture.

Harry's hands were at his sides, the large, disproportioned fingers spread wide. There was a lull in the shouting and in that moment an unexpected image entered her mind of Harry's hands transforming into propellers to lift his body off the ground in an heroic attempt to disarm the attacker. Harry was speaking but Mira struggled to unscramble his words from the propeller image of his hands, or to decipher the shape of the person who had Chef pinned against the wall. The first unscramble patched through to her brain when Harry said, "Steve, it's okay, you really don't want to hurt anyone, do you?" Steve, the busser who, last summer, was fired. Source of the glass now smashed to bits in the hallway. Mira remembered bits and pieces of his personal life, a difficult romantic relationship, an inconsistent work history, what else?

Harry's voice was gentle, consoling, but firm, telling Steve he had money if that's what he needed. He urged him to "take it easy" as he reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

"Do it quick!" Steve said, jerking his head so that Mira saw his profile with a glimmer of spittle at the side of his mouth. Mira was behind Harry, so close she could smell the clean laundry scent she associated with him. It occurred to her that Harry knew something about Steve that she should have guessed. Steve was even thinner than she remembered him, his hair matted and his clothes crumpled. She wondered which of the street drugs currently available in town he was on. Steve edged toward Harry, his arm shifted and the edge of the knife pierced Bill's skin. No one seemed to be breathing. Moving only her eyes, Mira saw a bulge in Harry's back pocket where he carried his portable phone.

Harry held up his wallet in one hand and a fistful of bills in the other. Mira wished she could see his face, take consolation in its firm neutrality. She stepped closer to him, almost sure that Steve couldn't see her, because the lights in the hall were off and she was in Harry's shadow. She imagined various possibilities of actions. Cowering in a corner. Running away

through the front door. Flinging herself at Steve. She saw herself telling Steve to stand down, threatening him with prosecution or injury if he didn't, in the kind of commanding tone Harry had used when he fired Steve.

She slid the phone up and out of Harry's pocket. Keeping her body hidden behind his, she backed out of the kitchen until she could no longer see Steve. *If I can't see you, you can't see me.* She felt like a child playing hide and seek. But this was real. She turned and moved carefully around the broken glass, to the farthest corner of the café where she hoped her voice would not be heard. Then she dialled 911.

She inched her way along the wall, but stopped at the mess of glass on the floor. She could hear Harry's voice, still low, but with a quaver now, telling Steve to take it easy, he could have the money, just let Bill go, everything would be okay.

Then there was silence.

Unable to remain still, Mira tip-toed. Concentrating on her breath, she imagined she had ballerina toes, or acrobatic agility, and moved back up the hallway until she could peek around the doorway and into the kitchen. Steve's whole body began to shake and the hand with the knife slowly lowered away from Bill's neck. Harry eased forward toward Steve, but before he could touch him, the knife clattered to the floor. Time paused, and it was only afterward that Mira would realize how lucky they all were that that was the moment when two police officers entered cautiously through the kitchen door. Steve made one last clumsy lunge for the knife, but the cops had him by the arms.

She backed out of the kitchen as Harry moved toward Bill to support him. She skirted the broken glass and leaned against the bar. Her mind was blank as she turned to the mess of glass and liquid in the hallway. With this task to focus on, to keep her attention away from the sounds,

voices, and Steve's blood curdling cries, she rolled the mop bucket from the closet where it lived. She pushed the mop across the floor and heard Harry's voice again, still calm and in control. She looked at what she had done and regretted it. Now there was glass in the mop, and she still had to get the shards up off the floor.

Harry appeared and she smiled. "I'm taking Bill home," he said. Then he waited, and she knew she was supposed to speak. Mira nodded and it was a gesture with too much enthusiasm behind it, and she was still smiling, as though Harry had just told her congratulations, but she couldn't think what there was to congratulate. "I'll be right back," and then he was gone. She remembered the metal dust pan and the hand broom, the proper tools for cleaning up a mess of broken glass, and she almost laughed aloud for the relief of this one simple task.

It was once she had disposed of the glass in the large kitchen bin and was back to mopping up the remaining liquid mess that she began to shake. She finished with the mopping and was quivering so badly that she had a difficult time lifting the mop back into the bucket. She yearned for Harry's low, comforting voice. So many people found him intimidating. But size, she thought, was a strength—real strength, not the sad, impulsive, ravenous grip of a drug addict in a moment of desperation.

The gate behind the bar was latched open. She spotted the bottle of single malt scotch Harry kept for one of his wealthier guests who berthed his 60-foot Ocean Yacht, the "G-Spot", at Copeland's town dock each summer and came in every Tuesday night for drinks and dinner. The bottle shone like a beacon.

Three sips of scotch thawed her frigid trembling to an even, steady heartbeat and her mind was on autopilot when she heard a sound, gentle as a paddle dipped in water. Harry approached quietly but she wasn't startled. She responded without question when Harry asked for a double gin this time.

She carried their drinks to the table where he'd pulled down two chairs. He nodded as she sat. His eyes were on her, full of concern, and she thought, "He's dealt with Bill, and the ex-employee, now he has to deal with me."

She gulped again, and this time the scotch burned her throat and she erupted into a hiccupping giggle. Harry's eyes were wide, which only made her laugh harder. She was relieved that Harry sat there like a statue as her emotions—fury, fear, curiosity, confusion—fought with one another inside of her. She thought about Chantal's courage, which she had always imagined was innate. But was courage ever innate? Was Harry's? Did some people just have it? When she looked at him again, wiping at her eyes, his face showed bewilderment. He looked away and ran a hand through his hair, and said, "Well. Didn't expect that."

When she finally ceased her delirious giggling, they sat in silence, finishing their drinks. Harry got up and brought the scotch, the gin, and the opened can of tonic over to the table.

"So," she said. The alcohol had calmed her by now. She looked over at the hallway in which there was no trace of the mess. As though her efforts on behalf of the mess that evening justified an explanation, she asked, "Why did you fire Steve last summer?"

"He was skimming the server's tips. And then I caught him behind the counter with his hand in the till."

"You caught him stealing money?"

Harry nodded.

“Does it happen often?”

Harry looked down at his drink as he swirled it absently in his oversized hands. “Sure.”

“How did he get in? Without Bill noticing, I mean.”

“Bill said that he surprised Steve trying to sneak in when he went to take out the garbage. Steve had the knife already. That’s how he was able to push Bill back against the wall.”

She remembered what they had been talking about before. She had an urge to tell him, I could be your child, since you lost yours. But she was learning to keep some things inside. Not bottled up, like secret poison, but respectfully close to her heart, where it could do no harm. Maybe he was yearning to discuss his son, maybe he felt the seasons go through him like tornadoes, all while marking off the life stages he would never get to share with him. She could imagine it; she didn’t need to ask him to say it.

The night was complete around them, so still that time might have ceased to exist. It was, she thought, lonely if you let yourself go there. She wanted to think of herself as a hero, after tonight. But Harry was the one who had stared down Steve and disarmed him. She admired him, and examined, for the first time, how this made her feel—honoured to know him, but also small, like he set a standard that she hadn’t reached, yet. This was the way she had always wanted to feel, about Lewis. She looked at the fishing net behind the bar. She had believed that to find her bio-dad would make everything in her life right. She had believed it would feel natural, that she should know, because it was her basic human right to know. But what was natural about the fact that whoever he was, he had donated his seed to a stranger, to make a person he never had any intention of meeting? What was natural about a man camped out in a windowless room with porn, masturbating into a cup with the purpose of selling his seed on the open market? Was this the type of person she really needed to know?

Most of her life she had believed it was the lake she loved most about living in Copeland. But maybe it was nothing more than the walls of this café, a familiar place.

“To answer your question,” she said, still looking at the fishing net, “no. I don’t regret not working at Third Gate.”

She had heard all of Lewis’s complaints so often in her life, his frustrated attempts to find his way to a career he could enjoy, his efforts to grow the business, complaints about clients, the cost of advertising. She wondered if Harry ever complained to himself about the petty problems of the staff that made scheduling difficult, squabbles with suppliers, and the health regulations that should have been intuitive but instead pushed the bounds of what seemed reasonable. Harry’s business, as much if not more than Lewis’s, meant encounters with needy customers and suppliers that often proved to be an emotional overload. Harry handled everything with professionalism. But Harry was also a man, she thought, who had had a family, lost them, and settled into solitary habits.

“Do you think you’ll ever remarry?”

The silence stretched out, long as shadows. Mira got up and pulled chairs down from tables, emptied the mop bucket in the back. She returned with a jug of ice water.

He said, “Sometimes you see something, you think is clear. Like a tree. Then you get up close, and the details—the bark, the shape of the branches—confuses the whole picture. And it’s just better to back away and take in the whole tree.”

She was alert to the tender tone in his voice, and felt, for the first time, that maybe Harry was a friend. She told him she wasn’t getting along with her dad. “I can’t seem to ever agree with him.”

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. “It’s not your job. To agree.”

Mira grinned. "I guess. But it's also more like being from different planets."

"You're an alien like all the rest." She wasn't sure if he meant alien for feeling different from her family, or alien for implying she didn't care. He lifted one arm, looked at his hand in the cone of light emanating from above their heads. His fingers were stiff, unyielding, and bent. Like tree branches shaped by the west wind. "I can't do the Spock thing," he said, catching his tongue in the corner of his mouth as he tried to manipulate the fingers he was holding up. She laughed when he laughed.

"Is it painful? Your hands."

"No."

"What does it feel like?"

"I don't know any different," was all he said.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Mira's memory extended exactly as far back as Vicky's existence. Her birth coincided with Mira's discovery of her own voice. By age two, Mira had learned to invent stories and act them out for her baby cousin. It was as though both their lives, despite the two years between them, began at the same time.

At the end of a day when she had no evening shift, Mira walked through the warm summer air to Seventh Street.

When Vicky got home that evening, Mira was sitting on Chantal's front step. On her lap were two beach towels.

"Where's my mom?"

"Sleeping."

Mira followed Vicky inside, through the granny door. She stumbled over a new pile of books on the floor near the closet, ones with curled covers, carelessly skimmed, not like Chantal's most beloved books with their pencilled marginalia and frills of sticky notes. She tiptoed into Vicky's bedroom with her, afraid to break the tenuous line of connection between her and her cousin. The lingering smell of the house, of worn furniture, of paper, of books, was humid with old, loved things. Mira tried to memorize it all, even though she already had, forever. She followed Vicky with her eyes, not words.

Vicky ignored Mira and got changed out of her work clothes. She put on a sundress then stood, staring, at a picture of the two of them on her dresser.

Mira was envious of the way her aunt and cousin had agreed to this arrangement without talk of guilt. A year ago, she would have forced her way in to spend time with Chantal, with Vicky, and her jealousy would have been a presence too big for her to hide. Now she saw things

differently: nothing she could do would change the bond between them. And, thanks to Vicky, the bond between herself and her own mom had been strengthened.

Mira opened Vicky's bottom drawer but closed it without grabbing her bathing suit. Vicky followed her out of the house, and they walked in silence to the beach. The sky was summer dark, a deep navy background with countless bright dots concentrated along the belt of the milky way, and dominated by the big dipper. Mira marched in time with her heartbeat. One-two, one-two, one-two. She imposed a memory into this moment of a much earlier time when Vicky had followed her. They would have been aged nine and seven, and had collected wildflowers from a ditch. They had each carried an armload to the front lawn of Chantal's house, then gathered them into bunches which they tied with long pieces of grass also collected from the ditch. They hung the bunches to dry from a line strung up corner to corner in the porch. The next day Vicky pulled the wagon while Mira guided the way, and they went door-to-door selling the decrepit bunches. One of them had been pleased to make people happy with the flowers, the other had calculated what they could buy with the coins they were given for their efforts. They had both been energized by the adventure. Mira walked next to this image of their younger selves with the sense that she had been putting off the inevitable, that she was moving towards a shore she'd been trying to reach for a long time. Under the soothing, familiar beat of her own body, her mind yearned toward her cousin, to the easy chatter they had once shared.

She didn't have to dare Vicky to leave her clothes on the shore to skinny dip. Some things unspoken were still understood between them. Vicky raced on ahead, and Mira ran after her.

She didn't need words to be in this place, in this moment, with her cousin. In the water was where she could forget—almost—and be in her body, leaving her mind to float freely in

space and time. In the water she could feel the movement of earth, spinning, a sensation impossible to notice on firm ground.

Vicky came up for air. Mira couldn't read her expression in the half-dark. She swam underwater, long breast strokes, wide frog kicks, and burst through the murky surface to tread water. Vicky dove down with a strong splashing kick, then landed a handstand position, toes pointed to the sky, just as she had done when they were kids.

Mira had been so preoccupied with sperm, but sperm had so little to do with who she was. Nor was it blood. She wanted to tell Vicky these things, but her cousin was swimming away, toward the horizon, her arms a windmill against the last glow of day. Mira called for Vicky to wait, but she only turned her head for air every few strokes, her ears were mostly covered by water. If she heard her cousin's voice she ignored it. All artificial light was concentrated behind them, a small distance away in town, and the multiplying stars only made Vicky's body even harder to see. Mira pulled the water behind her in a head-up front crawl, but the distance between them widened, and into that space sank a lifetime of memories shared between them. The informal baptism their mothers had performed on them in these very waters. The reading of books that gripped Mira's heart, like the children's story about a baby bird's search for its mother. The scoffing talks about boys, and the silence between them about fathers.

Mira revolved onto her back to force herself to look away from Vicky's invisible form. She thought about what it took to be civil to a man you didn't even love anymore. Wait! Who doesn't love whom anymore? I'm not sure what this means here. She had always believed it was about strength, and courage. But it wasn't that. It was more like gumption. She stared at the ombre sky, comprised of variations of blue and golden yellow, and the narrowest line at the horizon made of pink, orange and palest blue—and tried to imagine that the colours, if she could

only unscramble them, were messages. The stars multiplied, and the clouds had, for now, all cleared away.

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