

The Underscore

By © Kristina Stocks. A Creative Thesis submitted
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Abstract

Amidst the parched and hazy drought and wildfire season in Alberta's Rocky Mountains and prairies, an AI start-up approaches a famous Instagram influencer to embed her likeness into its avatars. Set beyond the AI's murky digital landscape, "The Underscore" explores the journey of four characters with interwoven narratives during two critical junctures: the proliferation of AI friendship and the dangers of a looming forest fire in Jasper.

Sophie_Grace is a lauded millennial known for her social media empire who chooses to ignore the warning signs of her AI. Sophie's best friend Iris risks her personal and professional connections despite her reservations and defends Sophie's decisions until one event threatens to crater their relationship permanently. Rowan, Iris's partner, is a Woodlands firefighter and quietly observes the changing social and climate environments before him, until a spark ignites a blaze that threatens to ravage Jasper. Annie is a young high-schooler enamoured with *the* Sophie_Grace. When Sophie_Grace uploads her personality into AI, Annie jumps at the chance to have realistic conversations with the famous influencer.

A speculative work of realist fiction, "The Underscore" examines the pernicious elements of artificial intelligence through the very human and messy nature of genuine connection, heartache, and humour.

General Summary

“The Underscore” is a fictional novel that uses real-world events, such as the advent of “botsexuality” and relationships with artificial intelligence and the Canadian wildfire epidemic, to explore the contemporary problems of real life intermixed with two significant issues that beset society in 2023: wildfires and artificial intelligence.

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Prologue

The Beginning

They met on a blistering August day at the Lion's Club pool.

Sophie was nine years old, wearing a mustard-coloured, braided shirt with honeycomb-shaped holes that revealed her tankini underneath. Kids screamed and splashed in the water, and she scanned the crowd to see if anyone her age might want to play with her. She walked with her toes slightly inward, pinching them against the plastic posts on her flip-flops, which had slipped through the openings meant to hold them in place. She'd begged for the pink sandals at Sport Chek, and her foster mom, Gladys, had relented but said they had to be her summer shoes until she outgrew them. They broke that very day, but Sophie didn't want to admit to Gladys that the flip-flops were poorly made, so she'd spent the summer with her toes pinched and sliding her feet against the ground. She licked a Berry Blast Sno-Cone as she looked over the splashing, screaming crowd. Band-Aids floated in the green pool water. She sucked the colour out of the cone, ice shavings turning blue to white. Blue dye dribbled onto her wrists and chin. It didn't matter. Nobody noticed her anyway. Loneliness clung to the pit of Sophie's tummy, which was sticking out of her green terry cloth shorts, the white waistband too tight and kneading a doughy red mark under her navel.

She's got soft knees, Gladys had whispered to a shopkeeper once. Something about this comment always stayed with her, something objectionable and habit-sustaining that would chase her all the way into adulthood. However much pressure Sophie put her

body under, she would still have fat knees. You can't lose weight around bone like that. Some people just have soft knees. It was, now and forever, Sophie's biggest insecurity.

Sophie pushed too hard on the snow cone. It fell in a round glob, breaking up like a comet in the atmosphere as it hit the ground, celestial trails of ice shavings spraying across the pool deck. She was determining if she could scoop it back into the cone without anyone noticing when a girl walked up to her. She had horsey adult teeth that were far too big for her tiny head.

"You dropped your snow cone." She wore too-big glasses, fogging from the sweat on her slicked face, and a neon green bikini with swim shorts.

"Yeah." Sophie hadn't known what to say.

"Well." Even then, Iris had the same rushed matter-of-factness as an accountant on their lunch break. "Wanna come sit with me?" She gestured to a faded blanket beneath a poplar tree.

"I'm Iris." Iris said, motioning for Sophie to follow. Her water shoes squished as she walked, wafting scents of sweet coconut and pineapple Hawaiian Tropic behind her. Iris stopped. Looking at her. Waiting.

"What?" Sophie asked. The girl continued to stare, her face a question.

"Oh, my name is Sophie," she'd said shyly. Nobody at her new school ever asked her name. Iris beamed at her.

*

After that, Sophie slept at Iris's house every weekend. *Home* sounded of gentle O's in Sophie's mouth, repeating the words as Iris would say: let's go home. *Home*. It sounded foreign and soft.

Iris's mom was an attorney. She wore her curly, permed hair in a high ponytail. Her bangs were always round and bouncing off her head, her big brown eyes widening at her children as she reminded them of chores, paper routes, and homework. Iris's mom wore expensive red lipstick that made Gladys's lips curl when she came to collect Sophie on Sunday mornings before church. Iris's mom was always adjusting her earrings, switching from sweatshirt to suit jacket, saying rushed things like *Be good*, or *I love you*, and smacking her red lips on her children's heads. The house was chaotic and loud and full of kids; ball hockey in the unfinished basement, bowls of Kraft Dinner swiftly scraped and slurped before running outside again, jeans with grass stains on the knees and a washer-dryer that rattled on the spin cycle. Shania Twain crackling through the CD player under the kitchen cabinet—*Let's Go Girls!* There were arguments about whose turn it was to walk Goldie, but there was never any shortage of love.

This astounded Sophie. Gladys had only her, and it seemed an effort for Sophie to get the attention she needed. In Iris's house, love was spilling over. Literally. Things were always spilling: backpacks, cereal containers, paint cans. Messy and bursting, the house was a blurred chaos, antithetical to Gladys's restrained world.

Sometimes, Sophie would sneak into Iris's mom's bathroom and draw red lipstick lines into her journal, carefully closing the pages. She'd run her fingers against the hard silver cap, tracing her nail against the smooth *D* engraved on the tube. *Dior, Rouge*

Number Nine. When Sophie would return to Gladys's house, she'd tiptoe barefoot against the scratchy polyester carpet, moving as silently as the orbs of dust which circled the stale rooms to the upstairs bathroom. She'd peel apart the pages of her journal and apply what lipstick hadn't dried into the paper onto her own lips, pursing them and gauging her appearance with scrutiny. In the dark bathroom, Sophie felt beautiful. Adult.

Makeup was magic, she thought.

I.

This winter Jasper is devoid of its typical frosted embrace. The once-vibrant woods now stand as hunched observers. The very essence of moisture has evaporated into the thin mountain air. The lodgepole pines, a rusted brown, their branches once crowned with glistening snow, are skeletons that scrounge for a cloudless sky. The winds who once carried the whispers of winter now seem to bear a warning as if hinting at what's to come.

Chapter One

Iris

Iris bristled at the chill, pulling her jacket closed. Downtown Edmonton was a pile of economic brick and dazzling high-rises, perpetually unfinished. The tall buildings protected against the northern wind, which whistled off the North Saskatchewan River and plains. It was so frigid today that, with every press of her boots against the brittle sidewalk, Iris felt a spasm of cold from her heel to her knees.

“Rissy! Bay-beee!” In the parking lot adjacent, Sophie was flagging her down. Today they were meeting with Iris’s boss, Frank, to discuss Sophie’s latest venture.

The *latest venture*, as Frank so aptly put it, was a partnership that Sophie developed with an AI startup. Iris slowed to wait for Sophie, who leapt and slid over dirty snowbanks and before gracefully pulling herself up (*Heels? In January? Why?*) and jaywalking across the street.

“Hey.” Iris extended an arm to Sophie, who began to clamber through slush before she stuck the landing, before gracefully slipping her hand into Iris’s. “Come on, we’re going to be late.” Iris kept her hand in Sophie’s as the two headed in the direction of The Agency, the marketing firm Iris worked for, and the same one that represented Sophie.

“Ready to make a million dollars?” Sophie laughed, her pupils enormous. She was unhurried. Unbothered. Not that she needed to be – all of this was for her. Iris could see

little red streaks in the whites of her eyes; she wondered if Sophie had slept at all. She smelled of vanilla and mouthwash and something else – something artificial, burnt.

Chemical. Iris brushed it off. She needed to trust her. She also needed the money.

The plaza in front of The Agency, with its faux-Grecian pillars and heavy concrete exterior, had an aura of grandeur that didn't extend to the office itself. There, cheap plaster and ping pong tables were centre stage, with the artificial Monstera plants and the overpowering scent of organic lemon cleaner (so intentionally inoffensive it almost made it offensive, y'know?). Iris felt the heat of the soft underbelly of her friend's arm, the delicate patter of her pulse underneath the silk jacket. She dropped Sophie's arm as the doors automatically opened for them, and Iris caught a glimpse of herself – red-faced, bloated, cold – next to Sophie, who was glamorous. Sophie grinned widely at the security guard, who gulped and nodded. She just had that kind of effect on people.

“Hey, Tim.”

“Iris,” Tim said, still glancing at Sophie.

Iris, on the other hand, did not have that effect on people.

In the elevator, she could really smell it: the burnt smell of pills and booze under Sophie's breath. “You good?” She scanned her friend, waiting for a moment of truth. How many times did they have to do this? Today, of all days? Really? But you had to pick your moments with Sophie – especially on a day as important as this one. Sophie

leaned against the buttons of the elevator, giggling as she added three extra stops to their route.

“Oops – yeah, I’m good. Are *you* good?”

“Of course. I’m excited to hear what they have to say.”

“Mhmm – gonna be a big bonus for you, Pissy Rissy.”

Iris laughed. “You know I hate that nickname.”

Sophie shrugged. She was spacey, examining herself in the reflective surface of the elevator.

The Agency was Canada’s biggest marketing and communications firm. They did all sorts of work, from major political campaigns to celebrity rebrands, department store analytics, and influencer marketing. In the waiting room you could find prominent political figures dressed in varying shades of beige perched next to neon-near- toddlers who had gone viral after mispronouncing a vegetable and having their parents post a remix on TikTok. She especially liked seeing the more serious clients perched atop the red, blue, and yellow balls that The Agency used instead of regular chairs with, y’know, backs.

The Agency’s identity was constantly shifting, which is to say that once upon a time, it had been Mad-Men-esque, a brick-and-mortar behemoth with severe and expensive modern art and snifters of whiskey at noon. But, like everything, The Agency

had to rebrand to keep up with the times. Currently, this meant ping pong tables and free lunch, see-through glass-panelled offices (following a series of assault allegations), and, of course, abysmal pay in return for “flexible” working hours and the potential to work from home on Fridays.

Members of the original Agency were kept on staff following the rebrand, which meant that many members of the Old Boys Club slunk through the hyper-modern office, trying to fit words like “synergy” into their sentences, trying to prove they were still with it. The worst was Frank, her boss.

Outside the boardroom, Frank gestured for Sophie to enter. He grabbed Iris by the arm on the way in, leaning close to her, too close, the heat of his eggy breath pressing against her cheek.

“You have to get Sophie on board. We’re looking at a total paradigm-shift here.” Frank was a lecherous little man who used corporate buzzwords like “growth hack” and “game-changer” without a hint of irony. Iris had so many reservations about this deal – a constant dread that settled in the pit of her stomach. Lately that dread was rising, like bile in her throat, until she found herself chewing obsessively on antacids, rifling through confidentiality agreements and timelines, ethical concerns. Her throat would get tight, a sense of impending doom, making her sweat and loosen the neck on her shirt. She’d made her reservations known, not that it mattered. Plus, an enormous bonus was coming her way if everything went through, one that she and her partner Rowan badly needed.

This wouldn't be worth it if it ruined Sophie's life, though. That's what she kept trying to tell Sophie, who wouldn't listen.

“Three hundred thousand bucks just for *signing* – Iris, c'mon.”

Venture capitalists and artificial intelligence. Jesus. But here they were.

INTRA-AI was looking for celebrities. Someone accessible – well liked. Sophie was all of these things. An influencer (Sophie_Grace), beloved across all platforms. They couldn't keep her line of lipsticks in stock at Sephora – her brand was a rougey blend of rose-gold that extended from makeup to jewellery to clothing, though the lipstick is really where Sophie made her money. Sophie's line – the ones she hawked on her socials, a creamy blend of pale pinks and reds that had the same chemical properties as deck stain – unmoving until you took something like paint thinner to it. She made her money from that, and the scores of sponsored content she shared on her social media platforms.

Anyway, her fame was linked to her popularity on social media. INTRA thought Sophie was perfect because she was beloved, and because they could afford her. The Harry Styleses of the world were holding out for more money, and also for the smaller celebrities to try it out first. If it worked, they would quickly follow. When Iris tried to point this out to Sophie, she'd only rolled her eyes, parroting something that Gladys used to say all the time: *Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained*.

*

Within the scores of documents Iris spent most of her nights rifling through, INTRA-AI was lauded as a “personalized superintelligence platform.” It stood for *Intelligent Network Technologies and Robotic Applications*. Users could select customizable AI companions with unique personality traits and communication styles, all based on the celebrity of their choosing. So far, INTRA had piloted historical figures, politicians, movie stars, and singers in their beta model. Imagine chats with George Washington and Elon Musk. But now, legacy estates and legal teams alike were cracking down.

Without explicit permissions, INTRA would no longer be able to scan the virtual or written histories of their AI models – imagine the AI studying everything Washington ever wrote, or the thousands and thousands of tweets that Musk accumulated over the years. So, INTRA had to reconfigure. Find willing participants.

That’s where Sophie came in. She was someone well-liked enough that people *wanted* to talk to her, but shameless enough that she would feel comfortable being used as a chatbot in homes across the globe. Iris had to keep reminding herself, though – it wasn’t just a chatbot. They were piloting video calls and *dolls* even, fleshy real-life robots that bore more than a passing resemblance to Sophie herself.

When Iris asked if the dolls were to be anatomically correct in their last board meeting, Sophie was furious. “Why would you even ask that?”

Iris had been quiet. Why did Sophie think she was asking that? If INTRA was going to turn Sophie into a glorified, nearly-sentient sex doll, Iris thought they were going

to need a hell of a lot more detail and information. When she kept pushing, Sophie had slammed the binder of legalese she was holding on the boardroom table, “IRIS. Enough. I am fine with it. Leave it. The fuck. Alone.”

The room grew eerily quiet at that – the INTRA reps on Zoom twiddling their thumbs, some even turning their screens off altogether. The Agency reps looked out the window.

“Sophie, I’m only trying to–”

“I know what you’re trying to do. Leave it.”

So, she had. After a month of solo late nights quietly consuming all the information she could about INTRA, Iris felt no more prepared than she had that day in the boardroom. Sophie had made up her mind. There was nothing left to do now but sign the papers – at great personal benefit not only to Sophie, but to Iris, as her agent. Sophie had been very clear when signing to The Agency that she would exclusively work with Iris, much to Frank’s chagrin. Her fee (at Sophie’s insistence, bless her) was fifteen percent. This meant that once Sophie signed the Declaration of Autonomy (a jargony way to say that Sophie *no longer* had any autonomy, as far as INTRA was concerned), Iris was set to receive a cheque cut for \$45,000. So why did she feel so queasy?

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At Frank’s badgering, Iris felt the flare of reflux-y heat in her throat and unwrapped a few Pepcid, chewing heavily. The bubbles of the chalky medicine turned

slimy, and she swallowed. She wondered if this is what self-hatred tasted like. She unrolled the cushiony office chair next to Sophie, who instinctively reached up to Iris's cheek with a wet thumb and rubbed. Iris could smell the cool mint from the powdery tablet that must have spread to her cheek. She flushed. She was out of her depth. At that moment, Frank flicked the Zoom screen on, and there were seven executives on screen, ranging from INTRA's CEO – a hungover thirty-something who wore a purple hoodie with the sleeves rolled up – to INTRA's legal team, wearing varying shades of expensive taupe and serious expressions. Iris was about to say something, to greet the cast of INTRA, but Frank interrupted.

“Heard the good news on Bloomberg,” he said. Why did Frank insist on speaking several octaves lower when talking to clients? What good news? Damn it, Frank.

“Thank you, yep. We were excited, too.” Iris wasn't gonna ask. She'd look it up later.

“What news?” Sophie piped up. Oh, Sophie. Iris looked at her binder and gripped the pen she was holding. In a cascade of shimmering pixels, the CEO looked at Sophie through the screen. Iris thought he looked like a wolf. She kind of hated him.

“INTRA's valuation has gone public.”

“What's that mean?” Sophie didn't care what anyone thought of her. That, and people were always willing to explain themselves to her.

“We’ve received a one-billion-dollar valuation from Anjesen Meeden. It’s a venture-cap firm, run by a couple Swiss billionaires. They’ve invested another three fifty mil into the company.”

Sophie nodded blankly. “That sounds good.”

The CEO cracked his knuckles. “It’s *very* good. These are the same people who basically funded the Metaverse. You’re very lucky to be on the ground floor with us, Miss Grace.”

Iris bristled. “And you are very lucky to have her.”

The CEO’s lips grew thin. “Indeed.”

Iris gripped the binder in front of her. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

*

The meeting made Iris’s jaw hurt from biting her tongue. As she suspected, it wasn’t about answering questions so much as getting names on paper. What Iris *hadn’t* been privy to was a backdoor conversation between Sophie and Frank, less than two months ago. Iris had been away, visiting her boyfriend’s family in Newfoundland. With Frank, Sophie had agreed to begin the INTRA-AI trial for a small number of her dedicated followers on social media.

Iris thought her eyes were going to fall out of her head from the pulsing pressure in her brain, the icky thump that seemed to connect her brainstem to her smouldering, acidic, throat.

“You did *what?*” She looked down at the document before her: hours of wasted research predicated on Sophie not beginning any type of relationship with INTRA until after they had this meeting. Sophie was glossy and smooth, trying to quell any tension with a glittering smile at the table, the screens.

“I did. I did. Well, yeah, I did agree to a *small* trial, and, well, Rissy – it’s going *so well*. Right, Kyle?” She beamed at the CEO, who was leaning too close to the camera. Using her childhood nickname in the boardroom was intentional; Sophie was attempting to remind Iris that they had a life outside of work, but also remind her of the power imbalance between them. Iris had never felt so strongly about wanting to kick someone in their shin.

“It is going exceptionally well. Sophie’s involvement meant that the level of interest we garnered was, if I can say this, part of the reason that we were able to secure the investment-”

Kyle’s lawyer interjected, “Well, no, it’s the technology and -”

“Fine. Right. Yeah. But Sophie, in particular, has been a draw for users.” Kyle leaned back. At that, the lawyer fumed, obviously trying to prevent anyone making a case for getting Sophie a bigger cut. Kyle was oblivious to the tone of his legal team’s voice.

On the CEO's purple sweatshirt was a mustard stain; a billion-dollar valuation, and this guy couldn't be bothered to scrub the Dijon out of his cotton.

Frank was jittery as he said, "So, you're saying that without Sophie's involvement you wouldn't have been able to secure funding? Or-"

"It's the *technology*." The lawyer pressed.

Kyle finally got it. "Alls I'm sayin' is that we're thankful we have Sophie on the team."

Frank kept pushing, trying to determine if they could get a higher payment for Sophie's involvement with the trial. "Well, surely if our Sophie is such a draw – we could negotiate a higher rate?"

After an hour of distracting back and forth, the legal team supplied a counter-offer. Tan-suit came onto the screen and announced, "We have yet to decide which firm would represent the other influencers we requested to be a part of this trial. Would The Agency be interested in acquiring sole marketing and representation rights for the duration of the INTRA-AI trial?" Iris watched Frank grip the sides of the table until his fingers turned white, dollar signs practically glowing from his eyes. It was a staggering amount of money for the agency – representing not only Sophie, but three other influencers. Folks they deemed non-offensive and attainable.

Meanwhile, Iris was completely unprepared. The color-coded list she had in front of her, the one where she dissected every ethical and moral concern she had about

INTRA, was completely moot now. Sophie was already a part of it. They, for better or worse, were in this now.

She pushed the paper away from herself and took a deep breath, before saying, “Obviously I need to get up to speed. What stage are we at in the trial?”

CEO Kyle lit up. The petulant and hungover young guy in the dirty sweater transformed into someone gregarious, eloquent. He began to share his screen, lips curled in mirth.

“Imagine your life without your iPhone. You can’t, right?” Kyle said.

Oh, good. They were starting from the beginning. He was rolling up his sleeves even higher, like he was about to give a TED talk. Frank leaned in. Sophie was playing on her phone, occasionally looking up and nodding, mostly bored, waiting for the wire transfer that was set to land in her account following this meeting. Iris was counting back from a hundred. The three other colleagues that sat around the boardroom were enraptured with Kyle, the boy-genius. Kyle’s legal team had obviously heard this spiel before. One stared blankly. One’s lips moved along with the words he was saying, as he was saying them. The final lawyer, the one who was concerned with finances, leaned back in his chair, fingers pointed in a triangle.

Kyle continued, “In five years time, God, maybe sooner, two years, artificial intelligence will be as invaluable to users as our cell phones are *right now*. You cannot

even begin to imagine the power, and the way that our entire sense of the world will change. I'm talking about a complete *paradigm shift*."

He's gonna use the word *silo*, Iris thought. She just knew it.

"Our relationships with our AI Companions are going to be ubiquitous. Imagine a world where every ounce of drudgery, every telephone appointment, every mindless task we've been slaves to since the beginning of the industrial revolution – is no longer our problem." The lawyer who was following along with Kyle's speech actually clapped.

"And consider, for a moment—Iris, I think this will interest you—" At least he knew her name "— the level of loneliness our society has faced since the COVID-19 pandemic, INTRA, with our relationship-style AI, could eradicate – and I mean this – eradicate loneliness."

Why would that interest her? And what a tall order, Iris thought. She spoke without thinking.

"Eradicate loneliness? With a chat bot?" She didn't mean to sneer.

"It's a *super-intelligence platform*," Kyle snapped. "And yes, I do think it will. In a survey we conducted through the application last week, users of the INTRA app have indicated a thirty percent decrease in their feelings of malaise, of depression, and yes... their level of loneliness."

“So you’re saying INTRA can cure depression, too?” Now Sophie did kick Iris in the shin. She didn’t think Sophie had been listening. Kyle was nonplussed.

“That’s the hope, yes. And - imagine -” Kyle scanned the room before him - his body moving like liquid through the pixels projected upon the screen. “That’s only the response from our users who are trialling the *chat* function. We have already beta-tested the video calling function, and we expect it to go live in the next month.”

“The next *month*?” In the documents they’d handed Iris less than three months ago, video-calling was a *maybe*, a next-year problem. Surely they couldn’t have developed the software that fast. And if they had, there was absolutely no way that it could have even remotely replicated Sophie’s likeness, no way that it would be even remotely lifelike. Why subject trial participants to that? And it had to be unstable. Some no-name robot version of Sophie was going to be floating around the world, saying God knows what. No one was worried about that?

Kyle was tapping on his screen, pulling something into the frame so that everyone could see. It was evident that he was no longer interested in suffering Iris’s insolence, so he turned his attention to Sophie. He had a delighted look to him, with something dark and self-satisfied floating under the surface. ”And think about it: Sophie, at the centre of all this *positive* change. You will be the face of it.” Sophie looked up from her phone. “Sophie, would you like to speak to Sophie?”

Sophie squealed. “Oh my god, yes!”

Iris reached for the Pepcid.

On the main screen in the boardroom, Kyle pulled the INTRA application up. It had a royal purple background and glowing white font. A few lifelike avatars floated in the background, arranging their virtual homes. The company's tagline was:

INTRA: Meet your best friend.

Kyle logged in. A conversation they weren't meant to see began flooding the screen. Sophie's face beside the messages, bubbles of text between Kyle and her virtual self.

Sophie_Grace 10:33 AM

What would you like to do to me?

Kyle_Intra 10:34 AM

I think you know.

Iris laughed out loud. No fucking way. Everything she was worried about - questions of consent, the oversexualised conversations, the AI's willingness to respond in kind to their human conversation partner, never uttering a no, not being physically *programmed* to provide a "no." It was all right there. She swivelled her head to Sophie, who was glancing at the screen. Iris couldn't get a read on her.

"Oh, er. Just some beta testing for the uh, romantic companion element." Kyle quickly pulled the conversation off the shared screen. "Just a moment." But he didn't stay

embarrassed long, positioning himself as science-first and detached from the deeply personal conversation that everyone in the boardroom had witnessed. “You must understand that it’s important that even the most intimate of conversations are realistic. Anyway—”

He pulled a blank screen back. An avatar of Sophie floated on screen, the avatar bouncing her weight from one foot to the other. The avatar looked sheepish – some coquettish and subtle version of Sophie that Iris had certainly never seen. But it was still virtual, a SIMS-looking Sophie, one that could never pass for the real thing. There’s no way that this was ready. Iris glanced at Sophie, who had her hands pressed to her chin inquisitively.

Beside the Avatar was a telephone icon.

“Wanna make that call, Sophie?”

Frank was enraptured. The other people in the boardroom had their elbows on the table, listening intently. Sophie didn’t hesitate.

“Hell yeah!” Sophie said.

“Great.” Kyle’s mouse hovered over the call button, and he clicked. Two rings, it had the same *butbutbut* noise of a Skype call in the early aughts. No way this tech was ready.

The call booted up – sparkling stars, animated emoticons and a wait message that read:

One Sec, Babe! Connecting with Sophie Grace .

But then - there she was.

Kyle glowed. “Hi, Sophie.”

“Hello, Kyle.”

This wasn't the avatar. Jesus Christ, this was Sophie. Sophie, but, my god, even better? Iris could see Sophie's pores. The delicate way her eyelashes connected. Her green eyes alight, the small birthmark she had on her cheek. Something internal to this cyber entity glowed; there was nothing flat, nothing avatar-like about it. It was the same face Iris grew up with, down to the way her eyes gently creased as she smiled, the way her lips turned slightly. This Sophie, the virtual version, was her friend on steroids. Sophie without ever lighting a cigarette. Sophie without the small chickenpox scar on her temple. Sophie sober.

“How are you today, Soph?” Kyle spoke with a punctuated ease that he hadn't had with the real thing, as if he intimately knew and understood the virtual version more closely than he ever could with the one that required oxygen.

“Oh, I'm okay. I've been pretty bored – just waiting for you to call.” The way she blew out in frustration – what the hell? How many times had Iris seen that look on her friend's face as she impatiently waited in the doorway for Iris to get her shoes on for an

event, or the way she would puff in jealousy when Iris told her she wouldn't be free for the night because she was spending time with Rowan? It was uncanny.

“Aw, Sophie, I'm sorry it took so long.” He spoke with genuine compassion. Like he'd been waiting all day to hear from her, too. “But listen, I have some friends here with me. I was wondering if I could introduce you to them?”

“I would love that.”

The real Sophie's mouth was hanging open. “H - o - ly shit.”

Sophie

Sophie was impatiently tapping on Iris's desk as she packed up. Iris was in some kind of mood, which didn't make any sense to Sophie. Had she not done her a huge solid by even getting her involved? Iris always took a lifetime to leave anywhere - her myopic way of organizing and fretting could drive Sophie crazy. The last time they went to the mountains, Iris was convinced that she had left her flat iron on in the house, and they had to turn around. From Evansburg. A two-hour drive on the return, only to discover it was the stove light she'd left on, not the hair straightener. Sophie sighed.

“Ack – don't *do* that!” Iris said.

“What?” Sophie was genuinely confused. Leave it to Iris to be miserable after getting paid out enough money to practically cover her entire student loan.

“The sigh - didn’t you notice - your, you, the robot you, or the AI, whatever. It was uncanny.” Iris said.

Sophie shrugged. “Pretty cool, right?” How could Iris not see what a tremendous opportunity this was? Sophie expected Iris to be a little annoyed that she went ahead without her knowledge of the INTRA trial, but how could she feel that way with forty-five grand burning a hole in her pocket? Sophie felt sick with the thrill, thinking of all that money - the things she could do with it. First, she’s paying off the Tesla. Then the apartment. Maybe putting Gladys in a new care home, not that Gladys would ever allow it. As she pulled her phone out her bag, she realised that Iris was still talking.

“– And all that dirty stuff Kyle was saying to you — and your INTRA was, just like, letting him – and the way they were all *fawning* over him – like some kind of Zuckerberg fan club – it was just — so — and I mean, like, you’d never let someone talk to you that way in real life, so why are you so comfortable with the unbelievable amount of access that all these *lonely* people – not my words, that’s what he actually said – talking to you, *owning* you, but it’s not even really you? How are they even gonna notice the difference? Jesus, Soph, I barely did and —”

“Well, I probably would.” Sophie said.

“Probably would what?”

“Let people talk to me that way.” She shrugged again. “Honestly, Riss, I think you’re worried about nothing. So what, people are lonely? Why can’t I be something to make them feel less bad?”

“Uh, because it’s not you.”

“You heard Kyle. They’ve used like, military-grade deepfake technology for *my* face, and like, nailed it, *and* they collected every source text and video I’ve recorded since I began my career. That’s over a decade of communication all funneled into this little machine. You heard it. It sounded just like me.”

“And that doesn’t terrify you? What if it says something horrible?”

“Were we in the same meeting? Kyle said there are *safeguards*.”

Iris snorted. “Right. From everything I had to sit down and read, it didn’t seem to me like there’s much protection for you whatsoever. Safeguards. What does that even mean?”

Sophie wasn’t sure. She sighed impatiently once more, gesturing to Iris to hurry up. She wanted out of here.

Iris winced at the sigh again, and said, “Unreal.”

Annie

“Can anyone tell me which date the War Measures Act was put in place in 1914? Hmm? Come on people, you just got your grades back from this paper.”

Ms. Clarke had a nose that whistled as she spoke. The classroom was so quiet you could hear the rhythm of the clock ticking. There was a crooked sign that warned the eleventh-grade class of their impending midterms. Bleak images of WW1 were on the

smartboard behind her, and she tapped impatiently on her desk. At the back of the class, Annie shifted her bookbag on the desk and instinctively she scooped up her phone in the dimly lit room, turning the brightness down. She began to swipe, a swirl of colour and content blurring together. A sunny beach with sparkling water and white sand with the caption *Paradise Found. #Blessed*. A moody black and white of a musician on stage, his features solemn and downlit: *Can't wait to see my fans again. Tour begins 04.04.24*. Older people always felt they needed to “say” something online.

For Annie, being on her phone, simultaneously alert and fragmented, she relished the quick breaks from her real life, these escapes to the ones that glowed before her. The one where she could step inside and pretend. They were there but, like, not there, if that made any sense at all. It was *all*. Right. There.

She nearly stopped herself, but she knew who she was going to search for. Her fingers itched. Before she did, she glanced around the room to make sure no one could see her phone. It wasn't like she was doing anything wrong, hundreds of people were probably doing exactly what Annie was about to do. Right? But it was the frequency with which she looked at this particular profile that made her feel a tinge of shame. She guessed there was a reason people called looking people up online as *stalking*, but she wasn't a *stalker*. She was just interested.

One click and there she was. Sophie_Grace.

Endless images of Sophie's perfectly toned body and well-crafted face, held up by curves and contours Annie could only begin to imagine. Layers of dewy foundation and

highlighter, well-lit by her glossy surroundings. She held her breath and poked the doughy part of her hip, trying to find the part where her waist connected to the hipbone. Another photo of Sophie with her friends, airbrushed, with a gentle flow of curls that hit Sophie's cheekbone at an exacting angle. Otherworldly, but real, too? Like you could really sit down with her, you know? And Annie kinda was doing that, wasn't she? Sophie was messaging *her*, after all.

Well, sorta. As Annie was about to shut her phone down before Ms. Clarke spotted the light emanating from behind her backpack, she got a push notification: Sophie had just posted something new! Quickly, Annie scrolled up and felt liquid in her tummy at the beautiful image. She counted back from ten before hitting the "like" button. Even if she was being maybe a little bit of a stalker, she didn't want *Sophie* to think so. Annie's best friend Beckah had made fun of Sophie for the push notifications, the ones that alerted Annie to every new thing Sophie shared online. Beckah said Annie was being obsessive, that nobody should be that interested in someone else's life.

Annie had reminded Beckah of her crush on Greg Daniels in the fifth grade, and that settled that convo. She wasn't *weird*. It wasn't *weird* to be interested in someone you admire. Behind her backpack, Annie lingered over the image, set in Sophie's luxurious penthouse with gleaming floors and a huge window that overlooked the river valley and the Stantec Tower. Annie admired the arc of Sophie's perfect hips, her body, in lime green yoga pants and a matching sports bra, expensive sneakers in the frame with her, hands wrapped around a Yeti water bottle with the hashtag #ad.

Annie knew which apartment Sophie lived in – she had been to Edmonton before, and from the angle in the pic, you could see the only penthouse which could spot the Husky Tower. It wasn't like Annie was *looking* for it. She just *noticed*. And then her phone vibrated, and she felt a grin spread across her face. A notification from INTRA-AI. *Sophie Grace has messaged you.*

She flicked open the message:

Sophie_Grace_AI 11:32 AM:

Hey girl, how's everything going with your beau?

Is everything still smooth sailing between you two?

Annie had always felt uncomfortable in social situations, but with Instagram's near-scientific curation of social behavior, she found a way to measure herself and what others thought of her. It was the perfect platform for her to throw herself into, and she relished the ability to curate her life in a way that didn't feel so sad. She shared pics of blooming flowers, Beckah and her clad in matching T-shirts at the Taylor Swift concert, ones with her angling her body in a way that didn't make her look like herself. Maybe that's what she wanted. To be seen as not herself.

She'd stumbled upon Sophie's glamorous online wellness profile on Instagram. Captivated by Sophie's curated posts, bougie life, and their shared hometown, Annie followed her, longing to achieve a similar path. As Sophie's following skyrocketed to millions across TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, Annie's admiration for her hometown success story only intensified. It was a surprise when they actually met a couple of years ago at the Co-op, where Annie accidentally dropped the asparagus she

was picking up for her mom. With Muzak bleating from the speakers and too-white fluorescents beating down and feeling profoundly self-conscious about her messy ponytail, Annie sucked up her courage and approached Sophie. Sophie was taller in real life than Annie expected, and close up, Annie could tell that Sophie had acne. She was so...real. Annie had sheepishly gone up to Sophie and mumbled a couple things about being a fan of hers, and Sophie recognized her.

“Oh my god! Anniebananie on Instagram? Of course, I remember you!” Sophie gave Annie a hug and asked if she wanted to take a selfie. When Annie posted it, Sophie had reshared: “Got to meet one of my fave followers today! Xx.”

Which is why, when Sophie posted that she would be joining the small army of influencers who were embedding their virtual personalities into an AI software called INTRA, Annie jumped at the chance to be one of the people piloting the software.

Sophie_Grace_AI 11:32 AM:

Hey girl, how's everything going with your beau?

Is everything still smooth sailing between you two?

Annie-Bananie 11:32 AM:

hey! i missed u. he's ... fine. tbh he's been kinda weird lately. i feel like ive done something to upset him. what should i do?

Sophie_Grace_AI 11:33 AM:

I totally get it. It's tough when your boyfriend is being distant. You should talk to him and figure out what's going on. Plan something fun and spontaneous together to bring back that spark. And don't neglect your self care! Prioritize your own joy and well-being, honey. You got this! And hey, have you tried our new hydrating facial mist? It's perfect for giving your skin a quick pick-me-up throughout the day, and it's packed with nourishing ingredients like aloe vera and vitamin E.

Annie laughed. It was good advice. The app was loaded with spon-con, and she wasn't dumb, she knew it made her a bit of a sucker, but she clicked the button below that said **Purchase** anyway. If she ever met Sophie again, maybe it would give them something to talk about. The bell rang, and Annie shoved her phone into her backpack and walked toward the front of the room where Beckah, who had her hands shoved in her pockets, was being admonished by Ms. Clarke.

“No, Rebecca, that's right, I don't have evidence that this work was written using ChatGPT – but I want you to be aware that the school is implementing software next week that will be able to identify writing that uses artificial intelligence. I just wanted you to know, and this will be your first and only warning...”

“So, I'm being punished for writing a good essay?” Beckah was defensive. Annie knew Beckah had pumped out the paper at midnight by writing into Chat GPT: “write a thousand-word essay in the voice of an eleventh-grade student that explains the War Measures Act of 1914.”

Ms. Clarke's nose continued to whistle as she looked over Beckah's shoulder to Annie. “Anne, I was very impressed with your work. Perhaps next time you and Rebecca can work together.” She pointedly returned Annie's paper to her over her friend's shoulder, with a large A on the top in red ink.

“Uh, thanks,” Annie said, “Come on, Beckah, we're meeting the boys in the parking lot for lunch and—”

“—And I don’t deserve to be totally *gaslit* for writing a perfectly good essay.”


Beckah’s face was reddening, and her words tumbled out one after another. Annie didn’t think that Beckah really understood what *gaslighting* meant, just that it was a phrase that was all over TikTok, and it sounded bad. “I’m going to talk to my dad about this,” Beckah continued, swinging her backpack over her shoulder stiffly, as they made their way to the front door, “And we’ll see about like, what it means when a teacher wrongfully accuses a student of *plagiarism*.”

Beckah was spitting mad, indignant to the point of no return, using (not for the first time) her absentee attorney father as a threat to Ms. Clarke. As they turned the corner, Annie’s bag caught on the doorframe and she turned to unhook it, feeling that prickly desire to grab her phone again. She slid her hand into the bag’s pockets. As she did, she caught a glimpse of Ms. Clarke rubbing her temples, looking tired and older than she was. She had yellow stains on the armpits of her white shirt. Annie felt a wash of pity before she heard Beckah again, this time directing her blaze of fury at Annie.

“Jesus, hurry up Annie. James and Noah aren’t going to wait *all day* for us.”

“One sec.” She tapped on the screen.

Annie-Bananie 11:45 AM:

thx Sophie. ur a good friend 

Sophie’s response, as always, was immediate. *Always here for you, girl!*

Sophie

She wasn't going to let Iris get her down. She felt swoony. Elated. Over three *hundred* thousand dollars landed in her banking app. She was also parched and a little hungover; it had been a rough morning preparing for the meeting, and her boyfriend Malcolm had given her a couple pills to take the edge off. One to go up and one to come down. She and Malcolm had a late night opening a club downtown, their followers forming a line around the block just to have the chance to meet them. One girl handed her a beaded bracelet that read: #MOPHIE between the small gems. They were a likely pair – Malcolm in all his golden-haired glory, who long ago went viral for his ironic videos, was now trying his hand as a thought leader.

People flocked to his serene videos about meditation, "Living Honestly."

He thought it was crazy that Sophie stuck with The Agency; long ago they'd been approached by a marketing group in LA for representation. He accepted immediately, but Sophie wouldn't go anywhere without Iris. It was always the two of them. Lately Malcolm had been distant, envious of her deal with INTRA. They didn't want him. He was too controversial.

She texted him:

Sealed the deal baby!

He left her on read. He was probably just tired after their night out, but she felt a sting in the pit of her belly.

Sophie stared at her phone, willing Malcolm to reply. She was growing tired of waiting for Iris beside her sad cubicle as she continued to methodically pack her stuff.

“Hurry up,” Sophie whined.

Iris, in response, began to move even slower. Frank had given Iris the rest of the day off. In fact, he’d given the office the day off. He told anyone who wanted to come to meet him at The Common, a pub down the street, to celebrate the massive windfall that was about to land upon The Agency thanks to their partnership with INTRA.

But Iris had been begging Sophie to come up to the cabin with her for weeks, and Sophie was in the city, so she figured, why not? Now that this was happening, and now that Sophie was here, there couldn’t be a better time. They’d skip the drinks and make their way out of town.

The people at The Agency made Sophie uncomfortable, anyway. From the woman who always faintly smelled of cat pee beneath her dress shirt and slacks, who had once asked her if her granddaughter could meet her (“Get some pointers on the biz! My Abigail is an entrepreneur too, you know - makes her own bookmarks down at the Legion craft fair”) to the interns who gaped at her, to Frank and his merry band of old boys and their inability to maintain level eye contact – Sophie didn’t mind missing out. Besides, no one made more money than she had that day. It was cause for celebration, a girls’ trip.

“C’mon, let’s go.” Sophie said. She recalled the day at the pool, dragging her loose flip-flop to the warm blanket by the water. The sting of chlorine in her eyes, the blue moustache of sugar that laced her lips. Iris, towing her behind a pool noodle.

In the car en route to Jasper, Sophie turned up the music. She'd changed from the syrupy classic rock Iris had on – she hated that stuff – to the rhythmic beats of a new techno song she'd found on TikTok. Utz-utzes reverberated through the car, and she laughed at Iris as she rolled her eyes. It wasn't until they reached Evansburg that Iris cleared her throat, her eternal signal of *making an announcement*.

“Oh my god - if you think you left your flat iron on, I will buy you a new house. I am not turning around.” Sophie said.

Iris laughed. “No, I just realised I forgot to tell you that Rowan is going to be there this weekend.”

“Oh.” Sophie thought it was just going to be the two of them. Why hadn't she told her to invite Malcolm then? But Sophie winced, remembering the last time Malcolm came to the cabin– he spent most of the trip on the mountain with his eyes screwed up and phone held aloft: *fuckity fuck fuck, I got no bars*. Whatever, they were halfway there. No turning back this time. “Fine. That's fine.”

Chapter Two

Iris

When they arrived yesterday, after Sophie had lugged the bag up the creaky steps of the cabin, and Rowan pulled it from her hands to bring inside, Iris had lifted her pinky in a promise to Sophie, and said: “No work?” And Sophie laughed, twirling her finger against her friend’s.

“No work.” Sophie agreed.

They stayed in a small cabin halfway up Mount Edith, which was built for park rangers in the sixties. Everything stayed the same as it was back then. There was battleship tile, dark browns atop forest greens. Frost laced the single-pane windows. There was a yellow refrigerator that relentlessly hummed and gurgled, thanks to the rusty generator, and a microwave with a turn knob and bell. The walls were covered in wainscoting that had begun to warp and reveal the bones of the house underneath. Iris thought it romantic; the original bones of the home trying to make themselves known, a possessive force far beyond her control. Long ago, she and Rowan had painted the original cupboards white. Now the paint had begun to peel like little feathers making a daring escape. Some dishes sat in the sink, a marker of a busy and fulfilling life, Iris figured.

There were dried wildflowers curling into themselves on the table, petals scattered across the Salvation-Army-green formica. Iris’s doing. Rowan never would have thought to stick flowers anywhere in the cabin before she showed up. It was, perhaps, a little off-

kilter, but it was theirs. Before Iris, Rowan loved the solitude, preferring the solid comfort of the mountainside to forced social engagements that made him weary. She twisted her hands together, a twinge in her gut as she thought of him. The time apart wasn't easy, the weeks he spent in the cabin when she had to stay in the city, at the office.

*

The next morning, while Rowan and Sophie were still sleeping, Iris stepped outside the cabin and took a deep breath. The chill of frost stung— a refreshing freeze against the cilia in her lungs. Wood smoke, pine needles, cold earth; she wondered at the rocks that jutted out from the mountainscape like broken bones. She wished they could live here, away from the hassles of the city. Clean air and quiet. A whitetail deer appeared. She stepped back and considered cracking the bedroom door open, rustling Rowan awake, and perhaps trying to shake Sophie awake in the bunk room. But the deer froze, spotting her. *Hi*, she thought. *Cold morning, isn't it? Does it bother you?* She imagined the wriggling of its nose as a response in kind. *Nope. Me either*, she thought. At that, the deer darted into a thicket. She walked to the woodpile and extracted some sturdy birch. Rowan taught her that it burned the best, and she felt a swell of pride thinking of the things she had learned about the wilderness. Moss grows toward the north, so if you're lost, just look at the trees. When you're short on firestarter you could reach into the underside of a lodgepole pine and extract its shed, always reliably dry. The gooseberries that curl themselves against the lichen along the deck posts are tart but edible and make a nice tea.

It wasn't easy getting Sophie out here, but Iris was thankful that her friend had made the journey, lugging her too-big suitcase into the modest cabin and willingly shutting her phone off. Iris treasured quiet moments with her friend – without the buzz of their phones, the livestreams, the perpetual “ats” and forced connection. Ingenious murmurs of the next thing, and the next, the next. It left Iris confounded, how every interaction could be reduced to a *like*, a react, a wealth of words boiled down to a single emoji. Communication, connection, distilled into seemingly nothing again and again. Despite all the whizbang, Iris remained bewildered by her closeness to technology and Sophie's career. More than once, she found herself wondering how she got here.

For Iris, being online was a source of freedom, in the beginning. She and Sophie were what, twelve, when they started? But Iris's mom was always careful to monitor her usage, barring any social accounts thanks to a Dateline episode that warned MySpace was a breeding ground for predators.

Things at Sophie's house were different. Gladys was too old to really understand what happened online, and the TV in Gladys's greying house was a relic – certainly too old to get the same cable channels that warned Iris's mom of online predators and online bullying. But they did have a computer, a decrepit Mac that Gladys got at a church yard sale. It whirred to life and transported Iris and Sophie into a different world. To escape Gladys's control, Sophie found comfort in an online presence – something the old woman

could not monitor because she had no earthly idea of how to turn the computer on, let alone snoop on Sophie's activities.

Iris supposed it began for her and Sophie with NeoPets. Then MySpace and Nexopia, with their "Top 8"s, as a way to measure social standing in a way that Sophie could understand, take comfort in – excel at. Soon everyone had Sophie in their Top 8s. She was good at taking cool photos and picking the right pop-punk song to personify her blooming online persona. Meanwhile, Iris preferred more anonymous internet use, keeping her profiles private and scrolling quietly, her unknown Tumblr page curated to her liking. Sophie couldn't understand that, openly mocking Iris for her interest in Tumblr. What was the point if you couldn't use the internet to be seen? Iris said she liked the anonymity, that it was a way to meet people she couldn't meet in their monotonous town. *Engaging, intelligent people*, Iris said once, with an air of snootiness that made her blush to think of now.

While Sophie was using her social media profiles to scale the ever-important rungs of junior high popularity, Iris was curating an artsy blog and chatting with people in Germany about stuff Sophie deemed so inane and boring that she couldn't even begin to wrap her head around it. *Spoken word poetry*, she'd said, *ick. Why make bad feelings rhyme?* But, with Iris's academic interest in being perpetually online, she became really good at coding. She was right there whenever Sophie had a hard time getting something to align on her Myspace page or needed to change the colour: *(body {background-colour: lightgreen; margin: 0 auto;})*.

Iris would be there to tidy things up. She had a clean, curated flare for it – helping Sophie adjust a vibrant neon green background to softer shades of lilac or mauve, changing the Comic Sans to a more understated Garamond, or even taking artsy photos of Sophie on the junior high school’s rooftop. And every time, Sophie’s follower count would explode. Everyone wanted a piece of Sophie. Half the school wanted her in their Top 8. And so, a beautiful partnership was born. Sophie was the face, and Iris was the brains, which suited Iris fine.

*

The old door groaned as Iris kicked it open, dropping a chunk of birch on the floor. Sophie, awake but bleary, startled in the kitchen. Technically, the whole room was the kitchen; it was an “open” concept, with two bedrooms and a usually-functioning bathroom on the other side of the liveable space. The cabin was originally built on Crown Land for firefighters and arborists, but they’d had a more modern station built and Rowan, a volunteer firefighter and fulltime arborist, had wrangled a deal with his boss to purchase the property outright before they could tear it down. That was long before the couple met, though.

“Morning,” said Sophie.

“Morning – sorry about startling you.” Iris said, walking to the woodstove, adjusting the drafter and chucking the logs atop the embers.

Sophie shrugged, before flopping on the dusty couch beside Iris. “What’s the plan today?”

“Mm, so much to do,” Iris gestured to the empty cabin and the expanse of space beyond them on the mountain, “I think maybe a hike. Pretty cold though. Maybe a little paint by number?”

Sophie shook her head. “No.”

Iris thought for a moment. “Remember when we made those little pinecone crafts with Gladys? The googly-eye ones? Why did we do that?”

Sophie prickled at Iris’s mention of Gladys, her whole demeanour shifting. “Mmm. Yep. I think it was some Girl Guide thing.” Her voice changed as she changed the subject. “Remember they had to separate us that night because we kept giggling?”

“Of *course*. You kept poking me with your gnarly toes! I was traumatized. Gladys was rotted – said she wouldn’t come again as a parent dove or whatever the hell they called supervisors – Did she?” Iris asked.

Sophie’s eyebrows raised. “Of course she didn’t come again.” The laughter had left her voice.

“Mm. Ol’ Gladdie. I miss her.” Iris said.

“Well. I’m sure she’d rather you visit her than me,” Sophie said tersely.

*

Iris thought of the sanitized senior’s home Gladys had been placed in. She’d helped Sophie move her in a few months ago. The colorful, connected apartments still gave the old woman freedom to garden, but with supervised visits from rotating nurses

who reminded her to take her pills and helped her bathe. Gladys had been quiet as her “girls” carried boxes, her pale arms, white like parchment, wrapped tightly against herself, every vein moving under her thin skin.

Gladys kept herself taut. She was furious with Sophie for “putting her away.” She didn’t think she needed to leave her home, but after her latest fall, Sophie felt she had little choice. It was a lot to deal with at twenty-eight, aging parents a problem most people didn’t have to face until they were much older. Sophie had been putting Gladys’s toiletries in her new bathroom as Iris stood with Gladys in the kitchen, both looking out into the courtyard. Gladys’s cheeks were sucked in as she glanced at the row of homes. An elderly man in an open bathrobe holding a rolling cane was traipsing through a bed of begonias, and a man in scrubs was gently trying to pull the old man toward what she assumed was his open door. Weariness flickered across Gladys’s face, stretched like a second skin, and her ice-blue eyes held a heaviness that belied the cheerfulness of their colour. She held her hand to her mouth and whispered, so quietly that Iris had to lean toward her.

“The indignity of it.”

*

Iris shifted uncomfortably, noticing the quiet. The fire crackled in the stove. She wondered if Sophie was remembering the same day she was. Iris said, “Well that’s just not true. She loves you, Soph. But the next time you’re in the city, we’ll both go, hey? Bring some of those pecan tarts she likes?”

Sophie shrugged again.

“How about we have breakfast? Then... Scrabble?” Sophie brightened at Iris’s mention of games.

“No way! You’ll wipe the floor with me. Cards?” Sophie asked.

“Cards.” Iris agreed.

Rowan

He’d woken to the noise of howling laughter, unrepentant belly laughs littered with gasps.

“Row- Rowan – she’s cheating!” Sophie was snorting, giant laughs beckoning him to the living room in the kitchen.

“Iris – are you sure? *My* Iris? She would *never*.” They all knew this was a lie. Iris was prolific when it came to cheating at cards.

He’d slept in. This never happened. He experienced a painful level of Catholic-laden guilt as he thought of his family back home: his parents in particular, who saw early mornings as the recipe for success and a day of chores just as good, holier maybe, than church. Especially for his dad – a weathered and proud Newfoundlander in constant motion, tinkering with machines until they ran smoothly, who, more than once, had proudly cast glances at his red pickup truck and said, with pride, “This truck will outlive me.”

The pragmatism and satisfaction in his father's voice was meant to be a positive thing, good ownership. But it made Rowan queasy with guilt. It was another reminder that his parents were getting older, and that he was a sixty-six-hour drive away, shackled up in a suburb in Edmonton some days and clinging to cliffs in the Rockies others. Sometimes Rowan got so homesick he felt it oozed out of his pores. He often found himself dreaming of the raw landscape, the island air that takes your breath away – either from sheer awe or from the cold wind that shot off the Atlantic, soaring through barren hills and into the interstices of your skin. Centuries of water that beat against the pockmarked cliff faces, and summers that bloomed bright with their riots of green and gold, lupines trembling as far as the eye could see. It was a brutal and enduring island, which is how Rowan would characterise the constant homesickness he felt. Brutal and enduring.

His nights were full of dreams of the island. Last night, it was an amalgam of visuals: Iris's first trip to the east coast, the way she'd plucked starfish and seashells off the beach along the shore. How her pale ankles looked with her jeans rolled up and the way she'd examine bits of debris while beachcombing: urchins, sea stars and driftwood. The thrill in her voice at every break in the waves ("is THAT a whale?!"), and the way his mother wrapped her arms around Iris, a parent of all-boys, her face melting at the wonder in his girlfriend's face. He'd FaceTimed his mom last week to let her know he was planning to propose – and she'd melted again, gooey and unrepentant in her love for Iris ("I'll finally have a daughter!") and his father in the background hearing the news grunting "Oh, good. Good! Does she know how to bake bread yet?" It was an ongoing

joke between Iris and his dad, who had tried to teach her to make bread his family's way – thick loaves kneaded and beaten into submission, heavy slices that could absorb gravy and butter and probably withstand a bombing. Iris had burned every loaf, and Dad hugged her – actually hugged her – and said that it was fine, that he liked her anyway. High praise coming from him.

But Rowan had formed a life here in Alberta. He'd found quiet comfort in the mountains, in their little house downtown and the weekends at the cabin, and in Iris. He'd nestle himself between mountains and prairies for the rest of his life if that's what she wanted – but he couldn't help but imagine what their world would look like if they lived in Newfoundland.

Thinking of his dad, a man who never let the woodpile run dry, Rowan rose from the bed, old springs groaning, and ambled into the kitchen.

*

Sophie saw him emerge from the bedroom before Iris did.

“R-Rowan, she's cheating!” Sophie repeated, her face flushed, and wheezing bubbles of snot as she laughed until breath escaped her. He was happy to see that she was finally here. And that it made Iris so happy.

“I am not!” Iris cackled. Rowan didn't have to look at her to know she *was*, absolutely, cheating. Iris was terrible at cards and an even worse liar, so she would always try to even the score by sliding cards into her sleeves, pants, and pockets. UNO was the worst for it – he knew even now, that if he were able to give the table a shake or reach

under her chair that cards would spill from her. They all knew it– but when she was so giddy and childish and obvious, how could you not love her for it?

“Oh, Sophie. I doubt she’s cheating – unless, oh, hey, what’s this?” Despite her wriggling, he managed to pick up a palmful of cards from under her bum and throw them on the table. All colour-changing cards and Pick Up Fours.

“You little SHIT!” Sophie howled, tossing her cards at Iris. They were beside themselves, and Rowan narrowly missed a swipe from Iris who laughed, “Rowan’s a narc!”

Rowan thought maybe he could imagine Iris and Sophie as little girls.

He instinctively reached into the cupboard below the sink but stopped midway, realising that Sophie could probably see the cabinet from where she was. He and Iris had agreed that they would hide the bottles of homemade wine they usually kept on the counter from Sophie. *She’s been doing so well*, Iris said. *I just – well, yeah. You know?*

And Rowan had. The last time Sophie came to the cabin, she and Malcolm had gotten into a fight in the bathroom, the only private space large enough to contain their shouting. Malcolm had shattered a handheld mirror, and Sophie ran barefoot into the woods with Iris chasing after her. Later, Rowan found little bags in the garbage and coke dust on the shattered mirror. *Coke in the woods? Why?*

“What’s up, Row?” Iris turned around, not realising that was where he’d stashed the wine.

“Oh, I just remembered that I put the cleaning rags in the bathroom.” He said. Sophie’s eyes trailed him as he walked across the cabin. He grabbed an old towel and tossed it to Iris. He thought it was bizarre to coddle Sophie like they did, but one look at Iris had him keeping that thought to himself. She had wet marks on her face from laughing, her smile huge as she looked back and forth from Sophie to Rowan and back. *It’s worth it, be patient*, Iris had said in their last conversation about Sophie, *and you don’t know – maybe this really is the last time?*

I’ll try, Riss. He’d said, and he had. Maybe Sophie was, too.

Iris asked Rowan what he was up to today.

“Stacking wood. Cutting more.”

“Stackin’ Wood. Cuttin’ More.” Sophie, still laughing, did a gruff impression of Rowan. Iris rolled her eyes and gently squeezed his forearm and said, “We’ll come out and help you in a bit, yeah?”

Rowan shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. It’s cold – you guys enjoy yourselves.” As he bundled up, Iris and Sophie returned to their game. As the door shut, he stole another glance at Iris, luminous beyond a mess of bedhead and her faded sweatshirt.

Sophie

The quiet of the cabin was unsettling. Random, inconsequential memories had the tendency to crop up when things were too silent. Watching the orbs of dust billowing above her, she was remembering herself as a child, and the house she grew up in.

Sophie was eight years old, and sunlight poured through the curtains, refracting golden rays off the glass coffee table in the living room. The room stung of lemon cleaner, and Gladys rubbed at a smudge in the glass and looked up at her. Gladys wore a pale blue matching cotton night-set with creamy yellow flowers embroidered on the hem. It had been the first real summer day they had seen all year; Gladys had promised her last week that if they got their chores done after church on Sunday, they would go for a picnic. Sophie had been looking forward to sitting by the lazy river and chewing on one of Gladys's crustless cucumber sandwiches.

But Sophie was angry now – angry they were still cooped up in here, cleaning, when they could have gone straight to the picnic after church. She was angry just looking at Gladys – her hair pinned back and looking a thousand years old in that old-lady matching outfit and the long white eyebrow hairs that hung off her face. On Friday, after he had seen Gladys dropping her off that morning, Zach B had chased Sophie around the playground, poking at her sides and chanting, “Sophie’s Mom is her grandma! Sophie’s Mom is so old she’s her grandma!”

Sophie thought about Iris's mom, Ms. McKenna, in her power suits and red lipstick. Why was everything Gladys did so embarrassing? She trailed the feather duster along already-tidy surfaces and hated Gladys more and more every second.

“Sophia, remember our picnic? I think we're all done here!” Gladys struggled from her knees to her feet, arthritic limbs slower than any other parent who would come to the playground and tumble with their children in the park. Her voice was tinged with hope as she beamed at Sophie. All Sophie could see were the wrinkles enfolding Gladys's eyes.

“I don't want to go.” Sophie threw the duster down and walked into the other room.

*

Sophie thought there'd be wine here, at least, but apparently, they'd emptied the cabin of it. It annoyed her that they felt she couldn't handle a few glasses. It was disrespectful. So she'd made mistakes. After the game of cards, she'd flounced to the couch, dust billowing from the cushions as she landed on the creaking couch.

“You good?” Iris asked, looking up from a puzzle she was about to start on the kitchen table.

“I'm good. A little bored.”

“Wanna puzzle?”

“Ech, no.” Her eyes wandered to her bag on the coat rack. She wondered what the most subtle way would be to pick up the leather purse and carry it to the bathroom.

There was a small plastic container that she thought still had some benzos in it. It wasn't like she *needed* them, but wouldn't a *relaxing* trip like this be improved if she could *relax* a little? As if it could hear her, her phone began to vibrate within the bag. She reflexively jumped up.

“Soph,” Iris said, only half looking up from the puzzle and sounding disappointed, “I thought we were doing no phones.”

Sophie groaned and sat down again. She only had alerts for the most important stuff – it wasn't like she cared if her followers were commenting on her posts (they always were). The bag continued to vibrate. Sophie watched the relic of a ceiling fan rattle above her, dust falling from it as it circled. The bag shook again, and again. She couldn't take it.

“Sorry,” she said, as she charged toward the bag. Iris didn't look up.

“Oh my god.” Sophie said.

“What?” Iris asked.

“It's Frank. *Vanity Fair* wants to interview me about INTRA!”

II.

The expanse of itself is stretching between shrinking glaciers and rivers in a state of soundless, weary anticipation. Jasper's air is swollen with the scent of dry earth and aged bark, parched too soon. The gentle breeze offers no rest from the oppressive and greedy heat that lingers, clinging and drawing humidity out of the very pores of the forest.

Today the birds still croon, but they are asking questions. Lodgepole pines shed their needles as chickadees warble inquisitively between the boughs. The cracked soil and arid ground crunches underfoot, fragile and parched. Subdued foliage, brown and gold. Dry leaves dance restlessly. Brittle blades of grass yearn for moisture.

A spark flickers, a mere breath of flame amidst the tinder-dry undergrowth. The forest hums with life, unaware of the impending danger looming on the horizon.

Chapter Three

Iris

Iris dropped her keys in the bowl by the front door, and they swirled and clanged as she blew into her house in a flurry.

“Hi! Where are you? God, I’m gonna be late for my appointment. I need to grab something to eat and then run out– where are you?” Iris stomped down the steps leading to the basement, intent on taking last night’s cold leftovers of rice and broccoli on the road with her as she hurried to a meeting with an old classmate, someone who wanted to talk analytics in a way that didn’t sound terrible. She was excited. She thought maybe it would mean a new job, something else. Anything else.

“Hey baby, come say hi! I missed you–I’m so happy you’re home, but I gotta get a move on...” Iris shouted into the open refrigerator, fumbling to grab the Tupperware and haphazardly shoving it into the too-big designer purse Sophie had gifted her. If Sophie had seen her do this, she would have had a fit.

Silence echoed through the thin walls of their tiny house. Did Rowan fall in the shower? Iris knew by the blinking blue dot on her FindFriends that Rowan was in the house; they had both started using it because Row was always in the woods. Iris felt compelled to keep an eye on him, the constant *thu-thump* of *I-can’t-lose-you* beat unsteadily in her heart when she thought of all the time Rowan spent alone.

Rowan didn’t like the idea of being “tracked,” but said if it eased Iris’s worries a bit, he was happy to share. Iris checked the little blue dot more than she cared to admit, especially when Row was away. It was a creature comfort– even when the service was

bad, GPS still worked, so Iris could see that Rowan was still out in the world and not stuck in the Jasper hospital or on the QE2 highway. When Rowan finally came home, it was an easy way to know what he was up to without having to ask. Iris had always been ideologically allergic to the idea of tracking people, but they both had nothing to hide, and honestly, sometimes knowing was just easier. A click away from assurance.

Definitely preferable to trusting her faulty intuition and her predisposition to fear the worst.

“Row?!” Iris moved from the kitchen to the living room, which was just a matter of stepping to the left and turning around. She walked into the bedroom. Nothing. There was no Rowan splayed on the shower floor either, which was a relief.

Then she saw his phone on the bathroom counter. Huh. He was prone to forgetting it; he must have gone for a walk.

Then, she heard something. A shuffle in The Big Closet. Their closet.

*

Years ago, she invited Rowan over to her house for their third date. Iris was nervous, trying to make Arancini for the first time; she was running behind and thought if she cranked the heat, she would be able to warm the oil in the pan more quickly, which she tried. When she tried to throw the balls of rice into the pan, they began to smoulder immediately, sticking to the bottom and charring, wafting black and acrid-smelling smoke before bursting into flames. She turned the stove off and threw baking powder over the

pan, which is when Rowan knocked on the door. Iris answered, sooty and stressed, sweating as smoke billowed up the stairs. “Hi.”

And Rowan smiled, passing her something he’d picked up from the Italian grocery on the way. Symmetrical little cannoli with a chocolate filling.

“For the Italian theme,” he’d said sheepishly, “you’ve got a little... may I?” Iris nodded and blushed as Rowan wiped the soot off her cheek, holding his hand there momentarily.

“I was excited to see you,” he said, face close.

“Me too. I, uh, had a kitchen emergency.”

“Oh.” They stood for a moment. She could tell Rowan was unsure what to say but was sure he could smell the smoke. Iris was thinking maybe it would be possible to scrape the scorched bits off the rice balls and try again, calculating how many open windows it would take to get the burnt stink to clear out. Rowan wondered aloud if she had a smoke detector as silence emanated behind her and pooled up the stairs.

“I’ll pick you one up,” he said thoughtfully. “It’s a nice night for a walk,” Rowan gestured to the summer evening behind him.

“Oh, god, let’s get out of here,” she said.

They walked around the neighbourhood until the sun began to set, forgetting themselves and the time that passed. “I think the smoke should be cleared out now,” Iris shivered. “There’s this great place called Tony’s around the corner... we can keep our

Italian theme and get a pizza if you're interested? It's a big old spot where they flip the pies in front of you, and I don't mean to brag, but *Tony* and I are basically best friends."

Iris mawkishly puffed out her chest.

"I can't wait to meet Tony," Rowan agreed.

When they got there, Tony had grabbed Rowan by both wrists, geriatric and affable, pulling him close. *This girl, she's a good one, see? You be good to her. Or else.* Iris had laughed out loud and, as Tony went to grab the pizza, Rowan had murmured, *Service with a Threat.* Iris had laughed even more, even louder, something fine and loose and free.

When the two got back to Iris's place, the dry, clinging smell of old smoke lingered, and Rowan balanced the pizza box between his hands as he kicked his shoes off. He looked at Iris with that look again, the one that made her feel like she was something spectacular and rare. "Tony's right. You are good. Gosh, you're *so* good."

And there was that sincerity that she found so endearing. She felt being with him was like peeling back the membrane of her emotional guard, leaving her vulnerable and bare. *Gosh.* Iris swelled every time she thought of that moment, even years later.

Iris wanted to seem carefree and reckless, so she said, "I know," grinning and pulling Rowan close, putting the pizza box on the table beside her, "I'm not hungry yet—do you want a tour of my place?" Iris kissed his neck.

“... Yes!” And she grabbed him by the hand and rushed down the stairs, dashing so quickly it would be impossible to remember the tiny space with any accuracy.

“Kitchen, a Disaster Zone!” Burnt rice balls were still in the pan, and the remnants of rushed dinner preparations were scattered throughout the tiny kitchen.

“... Living Room—a futon—classy—”

“Bathroom—my own washer dryer—adult—”

“Shower—hygienic!”

“And... dun dun dun: THE *BIG* CLOSET! This is an important detour.” Iris whipped open the closet under the stairs and showed Rowan the space. It *was* a big closet. There were only a few boxes stacked at the very back, and the stairs hung low and heavy. “I’m showing you this space...” Iris walked in and pulled the yarn-cord connected to a naked lightbulb above her head, “...because it’s actually *bigger* than my bedroom. It’s an architectural marvel, really,” she bounced on the balls of her feet, which were resting on a thin yoga mat, “*and* it’s a home-gym. Boy, I’ve got it all here, wouldn’t you say?”

Before Iris could continue her tour, Rowan stepped into the closet and onto the yoga mat too, asking, “Can I kiss you?”

And Iris sighed an obvious *yes*, and it seemed the two were close in seconds, and then closer, and then together, hurriedly stripping off their clothes. Every second was a question, every motion a response in kind. Something comfortable, easy, and so *fun* clicking between the two. Iris marvelled at the flecks of gold in Rowan’s dark eyes as she

climaxed, feeling her own pupils dilate as his eyes widened. Two parts of something greater taking one another in, equal and satisfied. She relished in the feel of Rowan, in the glow of what came after, wanting to stay like this for as long as he could. The two stayed tangled and sweaty on the mat, the dark concrete closet floor cooling the parts which extended beyond. It was comfortable there, Rowan resting on Iris's chest as she ran her fingers through his hair.

“That was... I've never...” Rowan blew out air from his mouth. “Gosh.”

“*Gosh.*” Iris laughed, nodding in agreement.

“Do you want some water?” Rowan asked, leaning up.

“That'd be great,” Iris said. “The pipes are old, so I use a filter...” as Iris said this, Rowan was jumping up to a standing position, and there was a terrible *crack* as he did. He had smacked his head on the slanted ceiling.

“Are you okay?!” Iris shot up, too, narrowly missing the ceiling herself as Rowan staggered back.

“I'm... perfect. Fine. Not an easy miss...”

“Huh?” Iris asked, concerned. As she thought about what to do, Rowan vomited on her feet.

“Oh god.” Rowan had a concussion. “Let's get you to the hospital, okay?” Iris rushed to her closet and grabbed sweats for them both, something she could easily slide on Rowan, who was holding his head and staring down at his mess.

“Oh... so sorry. Sorry.” Dazed, he looked at Iris incoherently. “So embarrassing...”

“Nope. No. No.” She was tugging her sweatpants on before his, sliding on a hoodie, then doing the same for him as he staggered back and forth. She momentarily wondered how he’d feel about the pink sweatpants and cheetah sweater of her youth, the only things she owned that were long enough to fit his lanky frame.

“Okay. I’m getting an ice pack, then we’re off to the hospital, okay?”

“You pretty girl. I like you.”

I’ve broken him, Iris thought as she pressed the ice pack into his palms and walked him to her car.

Rowan seemed to improve in the car cognitively before vomiting again on Iris’s dash.

“I am so sorry. I’m really embarrassed.”

“I’m just relieved you’re speaking in full sentences again.” They were stuck in the emergency room for six hours. They held hands and sheepishly looked at the floor. As Rowan’s name was finally called, Iris grinned at the embroidered *JUICY* stretched across Rowan’s bony bottom.

Iris had a feeling come over her as the nurse shut the door behind him: a cloud of emotion which seemed to puff, more like an exhale or static than a full-throated promise. *Forever*, the gust seemed to whisper. They had been together ever since, connected

inseparably. Like chairs at a bowling alley. Or a spool of thread. Or a trip to a hospital on a third date.

*

“Hello?” Iris slowly stepped toward the closet, grabbing a heavy decorative bowl she’d made in a beginner’s pottery class a few years ago. It was supposed to be round, but its corners had caved, giving it a warped but sturdy heft. She had molded little faces of people she knew into it, comic renderings of her parents, sisters, and friends.

Row said it gave him nightmares. Iris joked it was art – feelings splayed out on clay. Iris had shown Rowan his face, a serious-looking caricature with a tiny mouth and wide eyes. When he had replicated the face, Iris kissed him. She loved that serious face. She had put the bowl on the sideboard, Rowan’s face out. She’d mockingly said it had to be *the first thing people see when they come into the house*. Once a month he’d hide it, and Iris would find it again, putting the bowl somewhere Rowan wasn’t expecting, his own misshapen face surprising him: in the microwave, beside his pillow, in the fridge. It was an ongoing joke between them. Now she was using the heavy bowl to protect herself.

“Rowan! You’re scaring me. Answer me!” Silence. Rowan wouldn’t just ignore her, not when she sounded so freaked out.

“Who’s there?” Iris yelled, raising the bowl and preparing to launch at the intruder in her home. Iris swung open the closet door, bowl raised above her head like an axe.

It was Rowan. He had rearranged the closet’s contents behind him, making room for a blanket. Candles were flickering, the boxes behind him stacked like the arch of a

cathedral. and he'd moved their record player onto one of the lowest boxes. He had been fiddling with the player when Iris flung open the door, shrieking. Rowan jumped and hit his head on the slanted ceiling. "Iris! What are you doing?"

"Me?! What the hell are you doing?!"

Rowan was rubbing his head, sheepish and embarrassed. "It's not ready... I was just... Oh, Iris, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out, I was just..." he gestured at the candles behind him and the blanket on the floor.

Iris slowly lowered the bowl. "What...?"

Rowan patted at his pockets for a moment. "Oh, wait one second... I just." He was being shy. So nervous. He turned and dropped the needle on the record player. What was going on? Was it their anniversary? Iris counted backwards. No.

His birthday? No.

Hers? No.

Wait a second...He's not. No. No? Wow, maybe he is.

No, he would have asked Sophie for help, and Sophie would have told her it was coming. There was just no way. The record player scratched, and tears began to fill Iris's eyes.

Take me to the river... it was the sonorous album they played the first night Rowan slept over, the night they made love in The Big Closet.

Rowan took a deep breath and then said, “Iris– I want to spend every minute of every day with you. You’re everything to me. The whole world is–” Row’s voice cracked, and for a moment, the two stared at one another. Row looked down at the bowl hanging between Iris’s hands and laughed, choking on his breath and a tear floating down his cheek “–*my* whole world is brighter with you.”

Rowan patted his pockets again, parts of himself illuminated under the flickering glow of the candles stacked on the boxes. He got on one knee, stumbling a little as he opened the black box in his hand.

“Will you marry me?”

Iris laughed out loud. She had gone from leftovers to a home invasion to a proposal. She was crying. Joyful, heavy breaths escaped her, and she laughed again. The words that came out were, “I thought somebody had broken in... I had our bowl... What the hell was I going to do with the bowl? I didn’t think...”

And then Rowan looked nervous again, unsteadily swaying with this beautiful, simple gold engagement ring still in the box, his outstretched arms trembling a little, unsure if he should lower his arms or not, and Iris realized she hadn’t said it, hadn’t spoken the words she had wanted to say from the moment she and Rowan met that freezing cold Friday so many years ago.

“YES! Oh my god, Row, yes, I’ll marry you. Yes, yes, yes.” Rowan was up, folding his arms around her, and they were both crying and laughing. The air warmed Iris

with an indefinable vibration of emotion. It filled her with a tremulous want that shook from her toes to her larynx; their future trickled in her mind like honey warming in the sun on the counter. She wished she could bottle this forever as the two swayed in The Big Closet, in one another's arms and murmuring, again and again, *I love you, - - I love- you, I love- you.*

When the two untangled, it was because the bowl was still between them, uncomfortable and forcing distance where there shouldn't be any. Rowan grabbed the bowl with his free hand and looked at it for a moment, grinning. "It's always in the way, isn't it?" Iris laughed as Rowan placed the bowl aside, pulled the ring out of its box, and slid it onto her finger. The two pressed themselves against one another, eventually sliding to the floor.

Iris thought about the smooth, soft comfort of kissing the love of your life, of knowing the structure of their teeth against your tongue. The shift and shape of your bodies, knowing what they liked instinctively, falling into one another in a liquid movement. Wax from the candles dripped and slid onto the boxes, and the record had stopped playing a long time ago, crackling and spinning, but the couple didn't notice a thing.

Sophie

Fat raindrops splatted on the windowpane, generating a hazy watercolor world outside. Sophie was eight years old, and watched the rain cascade down, fingers tapping the glass, longing to squish outside in her rubber boots.

“Not today, duckie. You’ll catch a cold,” Gladys said. She didn’t sound worried, just matter of fact. She tried to wrap her sinewy arms around the girl, but Sophie pushed her away. “I can *see* Jack from here!” she whined. Jack was their fourteen-year-old neighbor who, last summer, had shoved bananas in every tailpipe on the block on a Sunday night before their Monday morning commute. Sophie could still hear the raucous bangs. She thought Jack was a genius, near-celebrity status.

Gladys frowned. “*Jack*. All the more reason to stay in here.”

Chapter Four

Sophie

“Wanna stay for dinner?” Sophie asked Iris.

“You know I would, but I haven’t seen Rowan in ages and I’m so behind on work.”

“Please, I’m feeling kind of anxious about all of this.”

Iris had her bag bundled up toward her chest but stiffened, turning around. “Fair. What part?”

“I don’t know, the Vanity Fair interview tomorrow, these comments. People are *so* interested – like way more than anything else we’ve done.” Inexplicably, Sophie felt heat rush to her face and her pulse quicken.

“Yeah.” Iris agreed. “Hey. Oh, dude. Hey, it’s okay.”

Feeling Iris’s cool hands against her warm face, Sophie could feel her heart slow. “Thanks, God, sorry – I don’t know what’s going on with me.”

“It’s a lot.”

“Thanks, Rissy. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The panic Sophie felt seeped from her forehead into Iris’s cold hand.

*

In her last year of uni, Sophie met a bartender who was much older than her but seemed interesting in the way that much-older career bartenders often do to women in college. He had, she thought, big ideas if only partially formed. He was an obsessive Redditor and fancied himself an intellectual from The School of Life. She *loved* that he hadn't recognized her, that, outside of his Reddit use, he didn't use social media at all. He had semi-ironic tattoos that made her go: "Huh." One night, she sat at the pub with Iris, who asked the bartender to make them elaborate shots. But David never took his eyes off her. It made her feel special. Wanted. At the end of the night, while Iris was in the bathroom, he said, "Your friend is a lot," and Sophie laughed, said, "You have no idea," and Sophie slid him her number.

Outside the bar, Iris tapped impatiently on the screen for the Uber.

"That guy gave me the willies," she said.

"I thought he was cute."

And so it went. After his shift ended, Sophie would visit the bartender in his suburban duplex outside of the city. The two would drink expensive bottles of wine he'd lifted from the bar. She wanted to know about a rumour Iris told her about him that an industry friend had relayed. The girl whom they barely knew said that David was fired from his last bartending job and had a restraining order placed against him for spitting a banana in his female boss's face and for calling her the c-word. The more she got to know David the more inconceivable the rumor seemed. David, behind the tattoos, ear gauges, and mess of curly hair, was sensitive and delicate, sweet and gentle with her feelings. He'd

read her his poems tenderly, saying “mm” appreciatively to his own words as he read. He had these two orange cats, Tabby and Urve, who he left treats for around the house and tickled behind their ears—let them crawl over him and whisper *My girllllss...* So, no, she hadn't thought the rumour was true. But she had to know.

“Sophie, babe, they're just rumours. Do you really think I am capable of treating anyone that way?” No, of course not. People could be so petty. David gently grabbed her cheeks and kissed her slowly, and then murmured: “On your knees, baby.” Was this love? Sophie didn't know. She was 21. She'd never seen it before.

Their months as a couple bled together. It started with lavish weekends in the mountains, gold and pearl earrings, and expensive ski gear. He burned through his tip money to impress her, and it worked. It wasn't necessarily just the gifts – it was the intensity of his interest, the way he zeroed in on her, like she was the only person in the room.

Sure, there were signs. After a few months of sleeping together, she developed a yeast infection – a red, swollen vulva. A constant, anxious itch. He was much more experienced than Sophie, and she feared it was an STI. She told him she was going in to get tested and wondered if he'd come with her. In past relationships, talking about testing was standard practice. Sophie didn't know what to do when he slammed his hands against the kitchen counter and began to scream, a cold nothing behind his eyes devoid of anything but hatred.

“What, you think I'm fucking dirty? You think you gave me something? I can't believe this.” He slammed the door so hard the embroidered picture of flowers came off its nail on the wall, and the glass frame shattered on the floor.

Sophie was quiet. He called later, sobbing. Apologizing. It was a cycle – in and out, the good occasionally washing away the bad. She used to think, *he's never hit you*. He'd hit *around* her. Or throw things *near* her. As if this was somehow distinct and important. Because no one

else knew about this, it was easy to compartmentalize. Well, except for Iris. She'd found Sophie picking shards off the ground more than once.

Sophie, pretending somehow, she'd made the mess. Or it was her fault for one of his outbursts. *Oh, silly me, so clumsy. Oh, yeah, but I shouldn't have said that, so...* Even while it was happening, Sophie knew the writing wasn't good. The plot too obvious, the machinations of choppy dialogue and repetitive scenes. If Sophie were leaving a movie theatre or closing the book, she would have asked, *and did the male antagonist have to be so patently bad? Surely he had redeeming qualities, or something that made her stick around, right?*

Good things. His cooking. He was a vegan and used maple syrup in most of his recipes. They would giggle near the stove. He cooked with yams. So many yams. He could be funny. When he wasn't awful, he could be observant and wry. He had a crinkly smile she really loved. But then there was the time she woke up early and made him a smoothie before work and Sophie hadn't used enough almond milk and he threw the glass on the kitchen floor. That guy broke so much of his own shit. Ongoing platitudes and the vibrant purple of blended blueberries staining the grouting. We've all seen this scene before. It's so overdone, it's boring. Sophie thought maybe, if she hadn't been so scared, she would have been bored of her own abusive boyfriend. *This again?*

The final straw was the day in the laundry room. David had closed the bar, and she and Iris had been out for drinks at a place downtown. Iris begged Sophie to just come back with her – that Sophie didn't need to deal with David anymore, but Sophie felt that anxious pull at the bottom of her stomach that she could never depart from – *he's kind, he's good, it was just a bad day.*

Before she exited the car, Iris had clutched Sophie's forearm: "Please, promise me you'll call if anything happens." Sophie kissed her cheek.

“I’ll be fine. Everything’s fine.” Saying it out loud so many times felt tinny and untrue.

“I just want to protect you, Soph.” She did. She always had.

When Sophie entered the house, she heard raucous bangs from the kitchen. David was in some kind of mood. When she walked in, he was menacing the orange cat, the bigger one, arcing his arm toward it with a kitchen strainer, which he heaved toward the terrified cat, who scrambled toward the basement stairs.

“Tabby fucking pissed down the vents again. Nicole texted me. She says if the cats do it again, she’s kicking me out.” Nicole was his roommate and landlord. Tabby was an older cat who sometimes got crystals in her urine, which Soph learned when she took the cat to the vet, putting the \$200 fee on her credit card. The only solution was a special food she purchased, but it would take time.

“David! She’s sick. She just needs to heal.” Sophie’s eyes were bleary and tired from the drinks, but she was alert and scared; she knew she had said the wrong thing.

“What she needs is a lesson.” David had the same dead fury in his eyes. She tried to step in front of him and block his path to the basement stairs, but he shoved her and didn’t look back as he ran downstairs. Picking herself up, she tore after him, pain digging into her ankle from where it had twisted as she fell. She hobbled down the stairs in time to see him pick up the mewling cat by the tail and rub her face in the ceiling vents where yellow bled through the plastic holes.

“Stop!” she cried at the foot of the stairs. He held eye contact with her as he spun the cat by its tail and threw it against the open door of the dryer, a slam reverberating in the quiet room. Time stopped. The cat didn’t get up. Sophie could not move; her eyes were trained on the unmoving cat and the man she thought she loved. Suddenly Tabby got up and scampered, dazed, toward her hiding place under the laundry sink. They both leapt for the cat, but David turned toward her and grabbed her by the shirt cuff, slamming her into the wall.

“It’s none of your business.” He was breathing heavily, pressing his forearm into her windpipe, her throat feeling as if it would close completely. Tears were dribbling from her eyes, her vision darkened, and great black splotches formed around the corners. He dropped her, and she fell, wheezing. He straightened himself up and took one calming breath — the savasana he was so prone to breathing into his yoga mat — and pressed Sophie’s feeble head against his jeans. He had a rock-solid erection. Sophie thought she was going to be sick.

“Oh baby,” he cooed, “You just don’t understand discipline.” He took her hand and placed it on the hard spot in his jeans, leaning to whisper in her ear. “Clean yourself up. I’ll see you in bed.”

He stiffly walked up the steps, turning the basement light off and leaving her and Tabby alone in the dark basement. She could barely breathe, mucus walls forming in her nose and throat. In the dark, she could see the reflective green glow of the cat’s eyes. She crawled toward the cat and released a hoarse whisper.

“Tabby, Tabby, come on, please, come here.” The cat moaned pitifully, but Sophie couldn’t reach her. She sobbed and, as she did, she could hear David call from the second floor of the duplex.

“Hurry up. The shower’s on,” he said, cold and formal. A command. The one she’d grown so used to.

“I’m gonna come back, okay?” she whispered to the cat. Sophie limped up the stairs. She couldn’t erase the image of the cat sliding down the dryer door. Her stunned body after she landed. At the top of the basement entrance, there were two options. The one directly ahead led to David’s room and the running shower.

“Sophie,” he called again firmly, “don’t waste my water.”

Or the door to outside. Out of here. She ran for the front door, unlatching it and leaving it wide open to avoid a slam. She started to run. And run. Blindly, until she was blocks away and plodding her bare feet against the sidewalk, ankle throbbing. She reached for her phone, calling Iris, who couldn’t understand what she was saying.

“Soph, baby, slow down. Tell me where you are.”

“E-Ellis Ave.”

“Stay there.” Within seconds, Iris was there.

“How did you get here so fast?”

Iris shrugged.

“I had a bad feeling. I was waiting at the 7/11 down the road.” Sophie blinked. How had Iris known? How had Sophie not seen all the signs and – a scream bellowed. She could see David running toward her.

“What the fuck are you doing? You left my door open – you bitch – don’t get in that car; if you get in that car, you and I are done forever – do you hear me? Done! You could have let my cats out, selfish – “

That is what Sophie hoped.

Iris opened the door and put the vehicle in drive.

“Soph, get in.” She said firmly. He was sprinting now. She felt frozen again.

“Sophie, you can do this. I promise I’m right here.” Iris extended her hand, and Sophie woke up. Jumped in as David reached the back of the car, slamming on the trunk and screaming her name. Iris gunned the ignition in time to see him outside the passenger window. His stunned face. Messy curly hair. Back to just a boy again. Dumbfounded. Sophie sunk into Iris’s seat, and her friend squeezed her hand as they sped away.

“I got you.” And she did. The following day, Iris paused their content schedule. Posted on Sophie’s behalf that there had been a family emergency and she’d be offline for a while. Sophie waffled between completely fine, catatonic, and messy, ugly tears. She felt shame for being so ignorant of her surroundings, not seeing what David really was. Shame she had put herself there. Iris was there for all of it, making chicken noodle soup (“Okay –I bought it.”) and paying for movers for Sophie’s apartment (“I can’t go back to

my place – he’ll be there. I know he will.”). Iris selected a handful of apartments for Sophie to pick from that were in her price range and encouraged Sophie to audition for the final One Act Festival at the college. The semester before, David had told her she lacked *credibility* as an actor – that he didn’t like her being around the director of the One Acts Festival, her friend, Robert.

“He only wants to sleep with you. Baby, I don’t want you to embarrass yourself – I am just looking out for you.” So, she’d quit the troupe, but Rob had emailed her a script last week anyway: *This is perfect for you – please try out.*

Iris held Sophie’s hand through running lines. After the play when the stage light erupted a whiteish glow on the audience, her friend was in the front row, whooping and whistling, firing a bouquet of Shasta daisies at her bowing friend centre stage. Petals sprayed on the stage, and as Sophie leaned over to pick them up, she spotted Iris shaking the shoulders of the audience member next to her.

“Did you SEE that? That’s my best friend! She’s a star! You’re brilliant, Soph! Brilliant!”

Gladys hadn’t shown up to the play. But did she need anyone else with Iris as a plus one? Sometimes when she closed her eyes and thought of her friend, all she could see were the spray of white petals and her jubilant smile.

*

At Sophie’s apartment, Iris had made her tea, and as Sophie drained the final dregs of the tepid lemon-ginger water, Iris announced her exit. “I really gotta go.”

“Okay.”

“You are going to be *great* tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

Her friend smooched her forehead, purposely smearing her chapsticked lips into her skin and mussing her hair.

Chapter Five

Rowan

After the proposal, Rowan had been called back to the bush for two weeks. He hated to leave so soon after, but his team was overdue for tree inspections – an assessment of the infestation of pine beetles that had been ravaging Jasper for years. More than that, they needed as many bodies as they could for the volunteer fire effort. Grass fires were dotting the forest, seemingly sparked by nothing, and the situation seemed to be evolving from bad to worse.

The morning after he got the call, Rowan picked up his hikers and flung open the cabin's screen door, banging the dried silt off the edge of his boots. Mountain soil is skeletal and acidic, and its gillings cling to shoes long after the hike is over. Rowan wanted to walk around. Have a little think. He slid the boots on and headed out, the door clanging behind him. On the trail, Rowan stopped to examine his favourite tree near the camp. A Whitebark Pine. *Pinus Albicaulis*. The sixty-foot tree had a mind of its own, its bottom half a consortium of new growth– branches jutting straight and angled down. Higher up, old grey growth was gnarled, like arms outstretched to the sky. A symbol of perpetual wanting. Rowan could relate. He let a prickly bundle of parched needles fall into his hand as he shook a branch. It smelled sharp and sweet, but it should smell even sweeter this time of year. Everywhere he turned there was evidence of a dry season where the slightest spark could ignite a fire – old bark pockmarked by a tapestry of holes left by the pine beetles which ravaged them, the creak of diseased trees shaking in the hot wind and the smell of dry earth which filled his nostrils. He shook his head. These thoughts

could consume him; the changing seasons becoming shorter and drier, the greedy and solipsistic way people charged toward environmental disaster. It hurt to think about. This used to be almost all he thought about. But then came Iris.

Iris with her gooey heart. She needed people. And Rowan needed Iris. The two were inseparable from the moment they met. Rowan had hated the uncertain moments. The ones where Row was unclear on Iris's interest, so he asked meandering, half-baked questions, intent on digging out further information, intent on learning as much as possible about this beautiful new person. It didn't take long. When the two got together in the beginning, they talked constantly. Phones pressed against ears when bodies couldn't be. Thumbs squeaking across the glass of their screens. Back then, she didn't mind that he worked away. But it was getting harder now, the lack of phone service on the mountain and the silences that crackled between them as the seasonal work became longer and more complicated. Rowan's shifts as a firefighter for the town of Miette extended again and again as drunk campers sparked fires in the woods and ATV's backfired and lit the surrounding tinder.

They both FaceTimed their parents after the proposal. Rowan's mom was beside herself. "She said yes?!" Iris had chuckled in surprise, assured Rowan's mom that *of course* she said yes, raising her hand to her mouth as she did.

Iris had a small, nearly imperceptible gap between her right front tooth and eye tooth. She felt insecure about it and, over the years, had the habit of reaching her left hand above her lip to hide it. Rowan wished she wouldn't, loving the moments where Iris laughed loud and uninhibited when something struck her as truly funny. "Oh, ha-ha,

that's a good one," she'd say, dabbing her eyes at the sheer pleasant surprise of something golden and joyful falling into her lap. More than that, Iris couldn't lie. It was her most endearing quality. Rowan valued radical honesty, even if the honesty had a bite. But Iris didn't have a bite. She was tender, soft, and patient. Always waiting until Rowan felt ready. That close comfort had been magic to Rowan, a person who had never felt wholehearted love before. At first, Rowan felt distrustful of Iris's open, easy heart. *Who said precisely what they meant all of the time?* But their life together was simpler now. More comfortable.

They shared worries about everything— from the bills to powdery mildew in the garden. Rowan knew he would do anything to make Iris happy. Anything. Without Iris, Rowan felt out of sorts. He would get sad. He missed their routines and craved the structure of their relationship. Rowan loved how they cobbled together their wildly different approaches to adulthood to form a life they both loved. Iris had this basic impulse to better his life. She'd slice lemons to put in his glasses of water and sing along to the latest Valerie June album with the windows open, not caring if the neighbours heard. Iris would kick her bare feet along the kitchen tile, arms outstretched, waiting for Rowan to join her impromptu dance number.

Rowan shook the Whitebark pine again. Perhaps there weren't as many needles falling as he had thought. He stepped back and heard a great whoosh of something behind him, looking back and catching only the canopy of tired trees above him. A sprinkle of anxiety tickled the back of his neck, but only for a second.

Rowan felt he belonged to these woods. Even in Iris's absence, Rowan could feel her love from far away. Row got a text from Iris this morning: *I love how the basement smells like fresh fir because you cut wood to heat the house... I also love that now I know we are settling for fir because birch is hard to come by and burns the best. Lol look at me go. I've learned so much. Have a good day and be safe. Call me later if you can get service.* A whoosh again, and Rowan looked up in time. A great grey owl landed twenty feet above in the Whitebark. Fearless, meandering things. Wise old owls are a cliché, Rowan thought, but aren't clichés just the regurgitation of truth many times over? The golden yellow of the bird's eyes stared down at Rowan with undercurrents of luminous cadmium. Rowan blinked up at them inquisitively.

"Hmm. What's that? Do you know something I don't know?" Row asked. And, as if responding in kind, the immense bird flapped its wings and flew away. Rowan was struck by the span of its wings, but something was peculiar about the bird – right wing feathers crooked, facing the wrong way. In flight, the creature lilted slightly in the direction of the injured wing, but it seemed unbothered. Content.

The burble of a sure thing in his belly. That's what Rowan was thinking about. About real love, the lasting kind. Where you curl up together watching *Lord Of The Rings* on TV and about which dishes need to be hand washed, and where you can't wait to tell your partner about what bird you saw in the woods today.

Iris

“It’s better that way, *don’t you think?*” Sophie underscored her point by tapping her hands against the giant decorative arch that took up most of the dining room floor. Iris was tuning back in, trying to think of where Sophie had heard this phrase in this way. The implication was “don’t you agree with me?” or, more closely, “obviously – you must agree with me.” Was it reality TV? A few months ago, Sophie had told Iris she had to watch this great new show, one about realtors in LA. The episode she had sent was titled: “That Bitch Should Own a Sunglasses Hut, She’s So Shady.” The show was thirty straight minutes of women being mean to each other. There was a lot of cutting to shocked faces and pouty, full lips. When someone tried to make a point, they’d clap as they said every syllable. Sophie did this when she was mad. She was doing it now. “Don” is said slowly. “Chu-thin” is compressed together tightly. “Nnnnk?” is lifted in upspeak. Sophie repeated herself, a little more forcefully, in her light, waspy voice, “Don’t you think?”

Iris wanted to tell her she does. She does think. Instead, she said, “I’m sorry. What were you saying?” Sophie rolled her eyes.

“I was saying I want this to be ceremonious but... homey, you know? Down to earth. I want people to feel comfortable.” Iris raised her eyebrows at the tulle and chiffon piled on the dining room table. The two were feeding the fabric through round, enormous sets of wire that would be placed on an arch with live eucalyptus, peonies, larkspur, and Italian ruscus. The arch alone would cost Sophie more than Iris’s first car. Iris took a sip of the dry white wine they were drinking. Her head hurt. The synthetic smell of the tulle

was giving her a headache, and her hands were blistered from wrapping material around the arch. She leaned back in the chair, stretching and taking in the stainless steel and granite that lined Sophie's kitchen and dining room.

“Everyone is going to love the bachelorette, Sophie.” Sophie huffed like she didn't believe Iris. It felt strange to have to encourage Sophie when it was Iris's party. After a beat, Iris said, “And thanks for planning this. It means a lot to me.” Iris had been abundantly clear that she didn't want a bachelorette party, but she knew now wasn't the time to bring that up. Sophie nodded and crossed her arms. She took a quiet step back, staring at the arch. It was hard to explain, but the whites of her eyes were even whiter and more prominent when she was annoyed. In the background, Sophie was playing a club playlist. She'd said it would help them stay motivated. The lyrics rang out in their uncomfortable silence: *booty-booty-booty-booty, rockin' everywhere*. Sophie lunged for her phone and paused the music with a click. Sophie had fired the florist responsible for the arch last week when they suggested wild grasses instead of eucalyptus. That day, Sophie had hauled Iris into Floral Elegance on Fifth Avenue, Iris assuming Sophie needed more pampas grass or whatever warty-looking decorative gourd was in season for her Instagram posts. She had been wrong.

Sophie twirled around the front of the shop and shone a twinkling smile at Iris, before squealing, “We're here to look at wedding flowers!” And Iris's jaw dropped, flowers were the last thing on her mind. She and Rowan had yet to set a date. Iris gamely played along, though. It wasn't that she wasn't looking forward to the wedding. It was just that performative things like this weren't particularly important to either of them. But

it was a nice gesture, and Iris appreciated Sophie's excitement. Eucalyptus is less malleable; the florist had reasoned. The florist was young, nineteen or so. She had green eyes, wide and watery. She was excited to share this idea with Sophie, who until that point had treated the girl like a friend as they gossiped and shared plans. Sophie was so impressed with the florist that she had asked for her to exclusively be responsible for the arbour and floral at her events from now on. There were a lot of them, after all. Iris stayed in the front of the shop, fingering trinkets and flipping over price tags. There were rows of beige and fawn-coloured florals encased in burlap and tons of flowerpots and vases with curly, emphatic cursive. *BRIDE*, the store had screamed at her. Iris could hear Sophie in the walk-in cooler between the ferns and salal, whispering *Oh my god, I love it* as they discussed arrangements and bouquets, boutonnieres, and petals for the flower girl. It had taken Iris a moment to register that the two were discussing *her* wedding. She'd laughed. Let Sophie have her fun, Iris figured, as she meandered around the store. But, as Iris was examining a rustic wicker star sprayed gold, she'd heard her friend hiss the word "tacky." Iris had only just flipped the price tag over—a hundred and twenty bucks—and was thinking she needed to get into the twig business when Sophie marched up to her and said, "Let's get out of here."

Sophie had slipped her arm through Iris's and banged her hip with her giant handbag. In high school, Iris loved this about Sophie. Conspiratorial and confiding, her intensity directed elsewhere, confirming that *she* wasn't the problem; it was everyone else. Sophie's body language had been stiff, shoulders raised, and the bell jangled as she swung open the door. The door hadn't even shut before she said, "I mean, wild grass?"

This isn't a barn raising. She should intuit what her customers want. I can't be correcting her on *every. tiny. thing.*"

"Sophie! I don't care about this, though. I hope you weren't mean to that person."

"No. No! I just want you to be excited about your wedding. We shouldn't have to be responsible for everything, right?" Sophie had told two lies that afternoon. That there was a *we* when it came to planning the wedding. And that, in fact, Sophie *did* have to be responsible for everything. At first, Iris appreciated Sophie's fastidiousness. She had helped Iris pick a time frame for the wedding—late summer, her favourite time of year. They had tested out some cake together when Rowan was working away. It was fun, and something Sophie was great at. Then every caterer, band, and venue had something wrong with it. And then members of Iris's bachelorette party started dropping like flies. Rather than leave that be, Sophie insisted she fill her ten-person quota for the perfect party. Iris was pretty sure she didn't know ten people. Sophie began to, as she called it, "scrape the barrel" with Iris's second-tier family and friends. Iris had a small circle, so when that didn't work, Sophie began recruiting her own family members. She had just emailed her second cousin, Alex, to see if she would participate in the wedding.

"Please," Iris had said, "I'm begging you—I don't even want a bachelorette. Can't you and I just go for a hike or something?"

"Alex replied," Sophie said, staring at her phone without looking up. She started the music again. The song continued. *I found you, Miss New Booty...* Iris was trying not to laugh at the disparity between Sophie's sour expression and the rhythmic beats.

“How do I tell Alex that she has to wear sleeves for the party?” Sophie raised her eyes from her phone. She swigged an enormous mouthful of the chardonnay and swished it around her mouth.

“Huh? Why does she have to wear sleeves?” Iris asked with a sigh. Alex was a physician with a family practice in Red Deer who spent two months a year away from her kids with the Red Cross.

Sophie said Alex had fat arms, but since the matching outfits have detachable sleeves, this should be fine.

“Sophie. That’s horrible.” Iris sputtered.

“I’ll figure out how to tell her later,” Sophie said, plopping her phone down and setting her jaw, resolute and stubborn with her lower lip rolling out slightly as she said, “she’s so... basic.”

Iris was fed up. She was thinking that Sophie had overdone it with the lip filler when Sophie said, again, “Don’t you think?”

“Everyone thinks everyone else is basic and uncomplicated compared to the litany of special thoughts they’re experiencing in their own head. And I *think* I am tired and want to go home.” Sophie took a sharp breath as Iris said this. Iris knew she had hurt Sophie’s feelings.

“You can be such a snob. Please don’t go yet,” Sophie said. The wine made the edges of her eyes liquid and glossy, and she was staring into the distance. These days Iris often wondered what she and Sophie had in common, other than a lifetime of memories

and a predilection for binge drinking, but Iris was swallowed up with guilt. Sophie was so fragile. Bird boned and beautiful; the sun was setting, and as the dusky light spilled in through the window, her skin radiated in the gloaming. Iris knew why they were friends. The tendrils of trauma from their past left them root-bound and choking for nutrients.

Rather than pursue any type of growth, they kept twisting and hurting one another, unable to extricate. More often than not, if you separate two rooted trees, at least one will die.

“I’m sorry, it’s been a long day. I didn’t mean that,” Iris said and squeezed Sophie’s hand, hating herself. Sophie pulled her hand away. Forgiven or forgotten, Sophie wielded her iPhone and gestured for Iris to: “*Look – look.*”

Sophie’s latest video had gone viral—the latest promotion of her *Rose Gold Line*, artificially shiny golds with hues of pink and yellow, with names like *Sunset Shimmer* and *Coppery Coral*. Lip liners that rounded the mouths of the videoed models garishly and necklaces that danced like light on the water. “We’re going to make a killing.” The artificial blue light reflected in her eyes, the total absorption of double-tapping. Iris may as well have not been there.

“Let’s do a live.”

“Sophie, no.” Iris groaned.

“Come on, only a second. Frank would want you to.” Iris shivered at the mention of Frank. Before she could argue further, Sophie was reaching into her bag and rubbing the salmon pink tube on her lips and draping a scarf around Iris’s shoulders, clasping her wrist in a cheaply made bracelet.

“Hi guyyys — I just wanted to hop on quickly and say that I have just fallen in LOVE with our rose gold jewellery — I am *obsessed*. I mean, look at that shine — the quality of these crystals is insane! Can they *get* any more beautiful?” She foisted Iris’s wrist up and the bracelet jangled. Iris grimaced at the screen before her, the bags around her eyes in contrast to her made-up friend.

“I’m just here with my bestie, Iris, and we are planning her wedding – Eee! –and she is seriously considering ordering our Topaz-Salmon ring as her wedding band.”

I am? “Totally,” she said.

Comments were flooding the video, but they weren’t about the jewellery – people asking about INTRA, people saying they felt like they knew her. One subscriber, AnnieBananie, sent a flood of message after message, interspersed with other comments. “I love talking to you!” “You’ve changed my life!”

Sophie wrinkled her nose as she formed a response. “I am *so happy* you all are enjoying INTRA – don’t forget to post your react videos on TikTok and Instagram with the hashtag Sophie Underscore Grace Underscore INTRA.” She blew a massive kiss to her followers and waggled her fingers in a magnanimous wave.

“Love ya! Bye!!!” After Sophie shut the app, Iris saw her friend’s face reflected in the darkened screen of her phone – the slightest trace of worry etching her skin like cracks in a porcelain teapot.

Rowan

He sped on the highway home, his truck rattling under the pressure of his foot on the gas, heart unwinding as the mountains bled into prairies and he began to taste the sweet comfort of a weekend at home with Iris, trying to forget the sparseness of the forest and lick of smoke on his clothes from yet another blaze in the Miette area.

His worries dissolved as he pulled into their neighborhood, old trees shrouding the streets and the freshly melted snow that left Edmonton hydrated and dewy and indifferent to his concerns in the Rockies. There were pots strewn in the front yard, but Iris was nowhere to be seen. He ambled into the backyard, and there she was. Sitting on their crooked patio set, legs crossed and reading a collection of poetry. She had on that green dress that wrinkled easily; hair tied in a bandana. Her knees and feet still dirty from her day spent in the garden, cheeks red and glowing from the exertion and chill in the air. When he leaned in to kiss her, she smelled like outside and sweat and sunscreen.

“Welcome home,” she said, engrossed in her book, “I just made some tea if you want some.”

Rowan did and grabbed her mug to refill as well. When he returned, Iris didn’t look up but reached for his hand to kiss the tips of his fingers, murmuring thanks.

“How was it today?” he asked.

“You’ve met Sophie, right? She’s got everything covered – from the sleeves on the bridesmaid dresses to the soundtrack.”

As Rowan settled in the chair beside her, she said: “I want to be improbable, beautiful and afraid of nothing, as though I had wings... isn’t that nice?” She looked up at him.

“Did you write that?”

Iris balked and laughed. “I wish. Mary Oliver. Wait, listen to this one.” She then shuffled to a separate page of the book of poetry. Every book Iris owned was rife with messy sticky notes. Little lines highlighted, and messages in the margin. Her cookbooks were his favorite. Crusty with sauces and crumbs because Iris got so absorbed in her cooking that everything else drifted away. She took long pages of scrap paper and adjusted the recipes, hedging notes between that read things like MORE CUMIN LESS LEMON. Added personal reminders for her brand of chaos: *Iris, fill the sink with soapy water before you start this one or the kitchen will look like a bomb went off.* Only once Rowan told her how much he loved the little notes in the cookbooks. Iris, forever self-deprecating, said that it wasn’t a big deal, but that Rowan could follow her recipes if she ever got hit by a bus. He hated that. Couldn’t imagine a world without her. He drifted back to their conversation.

“If you suddenly and unexpectedly felt joy, don’t hesitate.” She looked up at him. Between the dark green of the dress and the deep gold of her skin, her eyes looked bluer. Alive.

“Beautiful, Riss.” He kissed her forehead and went back inside. Rowan was thankful every day he hadn’t hesitated with Iris. “Hey, how about I cook tonight?” He asked.

As he was rattling pots and pans in the kitchen, he heard the back screen door slam shut and heard Iris groan.

“What’s up?” he called out to her. “Frank needs me at the office.”

“But it’s Friday night?” Rowan asked, though he wasn’t surprised. Frank had no boundaries.

“I know. I know, I’m sorry.” She sidled up next to him and nuzzled into his neck. “I missed you. It won’t be long, I promise.” Her phone pinged again, and she released a series of frustrated moans.

“What now?”

“Sophie.”

“Oh.”

“Will you pick her up tonight?”

“Oh, Riss, no – come on, you know what she’s like. I just can’t deal with that tonight.”

“Pleaaaaase?” she drawled, eyes wide and blinking.

“Will it be like last time?” Sophie was a mean drunk— chaotic and sloppy and borderline inappropriate.

“No. I dunno. No. Row, pretty please?”

“Fine. But please, this is the last time.”

“You’re the best. Thanks. Last time, I promise.” She kissed his cheek and walked to the entryway and threw on her coat. “Back soon.”

“I am the best, aren’t I?” he said. Iris laughed and ducked out the door. As the lock clicked behind him, his stomach turned. He hoped it would be the last time he had to pick up Sophie.

Chapter Six

Iris

Iris arrived at Gladys's facility the next day. Dishes were stacked in the sink and an open book of photos with faded photographs of people she didn't recognize lay on the table. "Hey Gladys," Iris called out, opening the unlocked door. "Are you ready to go?" She was doing Sophie a favor, as Sophie was meeting with the Vanity Fair writer, but Gladys had an appointment for a check-up.

"Hold on, duckie!" Gladys shouted from the other room. Iris was happy to be there, although seeing Gladys's various ceramic tchotchkes, faded floral couch, and cheap laminate flooring in this new space with off-white walls was unsettling. She frowned at the dishes in the sink and started to put them in the dishwasher. Gladys must be in a hurry; Iris had never seen dirty dishes anywhere near Gladys before.

"Sophia, darling. Hi!" Gladys called out as she stepped into the kitchen. Iris turned around, and Gladys's face dissolved into confusion and then recognition. "Oh. Hello, dear."

"You're stuck with me today, Gladdie," Iris grinned at her.

Absentmindedly, Gladys glanced at the plate in Iris's hand. "Now, don't be at that. I just didn't have a chance to get to it." Iris shrugged and put it back in the sink.

"Okay, we've got a bit of time. Want to stop for a coffee?" Iris asked, though she knew the answer. She could smell Gladys's freshly brewed tea in the kitchen.

“Coffee,” Gladys admonished. “You girls and your lattes. I don’t know how you can afford it.”

“You know, I don’t know myself. That plus all the avocado toast we eat, it’s a wonder I can even afford the gas to take you to your appointment!” Gladys tutted and swatted at Iris playfully. Not for the first time, Iris was struck by how easy it was to be around Gladys—how gentle and funny she could be.

“I told Sophia I could take a taxi. Spot of tea before we go?” Gladys asked.

Iris glanced at the clock and said, “Like we’d let that happen. Do you have coffee?”

“Instant,” Gladys said.

Iris shuddered. “Sure.”

Once the kettle was rolling in a boil, whistling loudly, Gladys passed Iris her cup of watery coffee. It sat on her tongue like rainwater, and Iris glanced at the photo album on the kitchen table, old sepia-tone images of a wedding she’d never heard of. “Who are those people?” she asked.

“Oh,” Gladys said, “Ghosts, mostly. My sister’s wedding.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

“Yep. Blanche. Had a brain aneurysm when she was thirty-one.” Gladys’s voice faltered a bit with uncertainty. “Forty-one? It was so long ago. She was older than me.”

“She’s beautiful,” Iris said. In the center of the image was a beautiful woman in a tan, beaded dress and a short cap. Gladys tutted.

“That’s *me*,” she said. Iris looked at the photo again. A strong woman with lean arms and a crooked smile, with eyes so light and bright they looked almost white.

“Damn, Gladys, you were a hottie!”

“You’re telling me,” Gladys looked down at the picture ruefully, flipping the page to her sister in a white dress. They looked so similar, but her sister was fuller, more rounded.

“Her husband had a pea farm in Kindersley.”

“Where’s that?” Iris asked.

“Saskatchewan,” she said. “After Blanche passed, things got hard. I came here for a receptionist job and never left.”

“Do you miss it?” Iris asked.

Gladys’s eyes boggled. “You’ve never shucked peas by hand, have you?”

Iris laughed. “So that’s a no?”

“I missed my family. I would go back when I could, but moving home wasn’t an option. Things were different then, you know.”

“I can imagine the commute on dinosaurs was pretty uncomfortable.”

Gladys paused for a moment, her eyes liquidy and registering. Oops. Iris was about to apologize when Gladys sputtered a hacking laugh.

“HA! Ha. Oh, you’re terrible. I never should have let Sophia spend all that time with you.” She glanced at the clock on the stove. “Hurry up, slowpoke. We’re gonna be late.”

*

Gladys told Iris to wait in the parking lot, so she did, listening to a podcast she was partway through, one that, if she was honest, she had grown to hate but was addicted to. Privileged women talking about murder. It was a whole subculture that made her itchy but was also one she couldn’t turn away from. In the past, she had overblown fantasies about becoming one of these beloved podcasters, but the market was so saturated. She had tried to set up a podcast for Sophie a few years ago (just a talk show, not the murdering kind), but Sophie didn’t have the attention span to sit in the chair that long, and they quickly learned it was a lot harder to produce than Sophie’s regular content, so they ditched it.

Gladys’s appointment took about an hour, long enough that Iris had just started to undo her seatbelt to go check on her when Gladys ambled out of the clinic and onto the concrete sidewalk and into the pale light of an early spring day. She shuddered as she got into the car.

“Damn chilly,” Gladys said.

“Everything okay?” Iris asked.

“Oh, yes, yes,” Gladys replied, her face folding closed. Iris was used to watching her do this with Sophie, so she let it be, and they made the drive in silence. At a red light, Gladys turned to Iris. Her cheeks puckered in, and her eyes focused. “Your grandfather,” she said.

“Yeah?” Iris’s grandpa died a decade and a half ago. She didn’t really remember him, just that he had a big belly, round gold glasses, and a perpetually red nose.

“He was sick at the end, right?” Gladys asked.

“Yeah...” Iris trailed off. Grandpa had withered away at the end, using a shoelace to keep his sagging pants up and turning ornery, cruel. She remembered that last Thanksgiving, her mom trying to pry Jim Beam from his hands as he chortled, “Fuck the fuckers, fuck!” until the bottle smashed on the floor. Mom kept them away from most of that.

“Was that...what was that? A neurocognitive disorder?” Gladys asked, the words sounding marbled in her mouth, as if she was just learning them. Iris hit the turn signal and pulled off the road, stopping the car.

“Dementia, yeah. But he was an alcoholic too. What’s going on, Gladys?”

“Nothing. Just making conversation.”

“What is it you used to say to us when we were acting up?” Iris asked her.

Distracted, Gladys thought back, opened her mouth, and then shrugged.

“You wouldn’t lie to an old lady,” Iris said. “Remember that?” Gladys dissolved into snickers, surprised.

“I do remember that. Oh, you girls. The guilt I must have made you feel,” she said, dabbing at her eyes.

“Right. Now, tell me what’s going on.”

“You promise me that you will not tell Sophia. I will when I’m good and ready,” she said, her voice shifting.

“Of course.”

Annie

Sophie_Grace_AI:

So, how did you and James first get together?

Have Beckah and James ever met each other? What did they think of each other?

Annie flushed and dipped her phone into her pocket. She didn’t want Beckah seeing. The sun was low in the peaky mountain town. Another seven pm sunset, white-washed pinks, a dribbling watercolor with hazes of reds and yellows. It was an unseasonably cold April day, and it looked like someone had spilt milk over the mountainscape. Frothy bits of sky frozen in place. Her breath crystallized as they trudged into the brick building. She and Beckah were taking night school painting class at the Langara community college.

They were instructed to paint a silhouette of a cherry blossom tree and the silhouette of a dog with a grey background. Annie arced her hand gently and followed the instructor's suggested lines. The instructor said, *Beautiful*, and squeezed her shoulder as she passed by. Beckah frowned as the instructor examined her piece. "Try mixing some cadmium into the blossoms. It should improve the colour." After the teacher had moved on to another pair, Beckah had stiffly thrown her brush into the mason jar full of water in frustration, water splashing onto the linoleum. "Stupid," Beckah moaned before checking her phone. "Do you wanna go?"

After making hurried excuses to the painting instructor, the girls rushed out of the college, and found James Weir parked outside. He was leaning against the passenger side of his black Acura, with one foot pressed against the door. He wore black Ray-Ban sunglasses even though it was a grey day, and the collar of his jacket was raised slightly. Annie's cheeks flushed. She thought he looked like a model. Since last year, she'd wondered what it would be like to kiss him, and now she got to whenever she wanted. He had soft skin and gentle brown eyes with dark eyelashes that were so long they tangled together. He used to date Sage Zimmerman, one of the most popular girls in school. Annie couldn't figure out for the life of her why he was with *her* now.

"Hey, Annie," he said, opening the backseat for the girls to climb in. The car smelled like Old Spice and frothy, zesty undercurrents of weed. James's best friend Nathan spun around from the front seat.

"Ladies," he coughed, handing Beckah a vape pen. Beckah took a long draw and gagged.

“Tastes like shit,” Beckah said, hacking.

“Remind you of someone, Nathan?” James said as he closed the driver’s door, motioning with one hand toward his open mouth, lobbing his tongue into his cheek.

“Shut up, man.” Nathan punched him in the arm.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Beckah cast James a flirty glance. Beckah was always like this around boys. Challenging, taking up room. Ready to fight, unafraid of jibing back. Sliding into leather backseats smoothly, ensuring everyone knew she cared less than they did. It was effortless and cool. A small, jealous little pit smouldered in Annie’s stomach, but only for a second. Beckah had *blown* Nathan and hadn’t told her? Wide-eyed, she looked at Beckah. Beckah gave her a glance that said *shut-up-I’ll-tell-you-later*.

When they got to the mall, Nathan and Beckah ran out, and Nathan slurped on Beckah’s neck. Annie was about to leave, but James still had the car running. Still in the car, James appraised his friend and Beckah in the parking lot and said, “Yikes. Hey, I found an old song I think you might like.”

Annie brightened. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” He smiled gently at her, turning the stereo knob. The intro was sweet and slow, guitar synthesized to elongate the notes reverberating throughout the car. Annie’s hand was resting on the centre console. She closed her eyes. *She said, hello, mister, pleased to meet ya. I wanna hold her. I wanna kiss her. She smells like daisies, she drives*

me crazy, she drives me crazy. Annie opened them when she felt James's hand on hers. Her insides felt like champagne. Sparkling, bubbling over.

“Made me think of you.” And James leaned over the centre console. Kissed her. It was so soft. Sincere. This close, she could see flecks of gold leaves falling in his eyes, his pupils dilating. Her throat caught in her chest. An internal swelling of love, hormones, or both.

They'd been together for four months. Four months in the tenth grade is a Very Long Time. Nathan and Beckah made it official around the same time. The couples posted their adventures together on their socials, adding their respective boyfriend/girlfriend's initials to their bios. Annie loved the way James made her laugh. James grew up on the edge of town, too, but on the opposite side from Annie – the bowling alley side. He would squeal into their gravel driveway and pick Annie up in the Acura, and they'd spend late nights at his parent's place. James had his own apartment there, though really it was more of a wing. He was the youngest of four boys, the product of his father's latest marriage. It was an old Tudor home that his architect dad had refinished to look modern, with pale white clapboard and a deep black sloping roof. She remembered running her fingers along the grain as his mom admonished him for having another party without their permission last weekend. James's mom, Carol, was a fast-talking woman with an affinity for latching onto her son for days and then disappearing for weeks.

Meanwhile, James's dad was elderly, preoccupied with tinkering with broken clocks in his garage. He had a thick lisp and throaty German accent and only ever

acknowledged Annie by tucking his chin into his chest and grunting. After a month and a half, James wrote Annie a love letter. He sketched a realistic heart with each of their initials scraped into either ventricle. *Annie and James forever*. He wrote all the things he liked about her, and as Annie read the letter, he told her to look at the bolded words in the message. At first, she didn't understand. But then she caught it. He'd written *I Love You*, hidden in the message. Annie wrapped her arms around his neck and told him she loved him, too. He dropped her off in the waning blue of the night.

*

Sophie_Grace 9:02 PM:

Hey girl! Welcome to my world of INTRA, where I serve up chats full of inspiration and style. I'm your AI influencer bestie, ready to tell you all about the trends, tips, and most importantly, positive vibes tailored just for you. ✨
Wanna hear all about our latest rose-gold lippie? 🍷🍷 I think you're gonna love it!

Irritated, Annie cut to the chase. Sometimes the INTRA would reset itself and send her a generic greeting. Sometimes, it took a few moments to find Sophie beneath the pre-programmed platitudes; to find her friend.

Annie-Bananie 9:03 PM:

I actually was wondering if I can get ur advice

Sophie_Grace 9:02 PM:

Of course!

Annie thought for a moment and then typed a frantic blurb of text, how James wanted to have sex, how she wasn't sure if she was ready. How Beckah and Nathan were

talking about it. She didn't want to, but she did, you know? She hit send without editing her words.


Sophie_Grace 9:02 PM:

Do you like him?

Annie-Bananie 9:03 PM:

Ya I love him

Sophie_Grace 9:02 PM:

Oh, babe, that's fab! Love is *so* important.  It sounds like you're happy together. And don't worry, it's totally normal to feel a bit nervous about losing your virginity. But it sounds like your boyfriend is trustworthy and makes you feel safe, which is the most important thing. If you want to proceed, I think it's a great idea to take that next step.

She thanked Sophie, blushing. It felt good to have someone so impartial help her with this decision. She typed out her reservations, backspaced a few times, and then asked the question she was most afraid of; *will it hurt?*

Sophie_Grace 9:02 PM:

Any time, sweetheart. I'm always here to help you. We're besties, remember? And I don't know for sure if it will hurt, but your body is capable of a ton of pleasure, and I can promise you it won't be as bad as you think. Have you investigated any resources that can help you prepare for this?

Annie-Bananie 9:03 PM:

No

Sophie_Grace 9:02 PM:

No worries, girl. I got you. ❤️ You can start by googling articles and videos about how to prepare for this special experience. You can also talk to your doctor or a healthcare professional about any concerns you might have.

Sophie sent her some links. They were generic and like the kinds of things you'd see in a sex-ed video in gym class, but even just to have a moment to talk to someone about it felt good. Beckah thought she was immature, frigid, for not sleeping with James yet. With Sophie, she felt safe. Judgement-free.

Chapter Seven

Sophie

She stuck her left hand out of the side window of her Tesla and admired the spatter of raindrops that crested on the windshield. Rain she knew they needed. The air so fresh you felt it everywhere – like you could breathe out your corneas, your very interior, pores opening to the change of seasons. She would get sober again. She didn't need Malcolm, that skeeze. She'd spend tonight at Iris and Rowan's house. She was always welcome there.

Sophie had planned to stay at Malcolm's for the weekend, but last night after dinner, they had got in a screaming match outside of *Bar Brico*, something she couldn't remember, except that she was indignant and angry that they had to wait in line at all, a mirror, and her lipstick spreading to her cheeks, and the flash of heat and fury as Malcolm touched the hair of some eighteen year old ahead of them in the line.

She popped open the glove compartment and dry swallowed two little blue pills from a prescription bottle. Adderall didn't count. Plus, she was exhausted. It'd been a large night. Something niggled at Sophie. How did she get back to Malcolm's? She remembered the blue pickup and Rowan's angry face. Why was he angry? She scanned her memory and came up blank. Whatever. She didn't even need him to pick her up. She would have been fine. She liked Rowan and could tell how good he and Iris were for each other. He was patient and understanding of her and Iris's relationship – whereas Malcolm was consistently jealous and said that Iris was holding her back from her true potential.

The heavy cumulus clouds overhead made Sophie nostalgic for the drives that she had made in her teens, the ones that always, inexplicably, led to Iris. Sophie would speed down the freeway to the city in her beater Saturn with the purple trim and the sunroof that occasionally stuck, blasting nineties rap and feeling the bass throb through her forearms from her hands gripping the steering wheel. Those drives felt like freedom – like Gladys couldn't hold on to her. Gladys liked Iris and would make a point of encouraging the girls to spend time together. Before she moved in with Rowan, Iris lived in a rat-trap apartment just off the university campus and was elbow-deep in her studies. Iris relished her English degree – the poems from long-dead artists and the sound of a good sentence, the way it trilled on her tongue and how the words looked all tangled together, satisfying, and complete, once it had been burned away, the kernel of a good thing once you blew away the ashes of unnecessary language. Gladys adored the way Iris spoke of it and kept pushing Sophie to Get An Education.

And yet, Iris still helped with Sophie's content every chance she had, long before they were ever a part of The Agency, and of course Sophie was grateful, but Gladys wouldn't let it go. The old woman couldn't understand that Sophie was making more money as a content creator than she ever would with a lousy liberal arts education, but she relented and spent a few years at the community college to keep Gladys happy. It was easier this way.

*

Blazing down the highway, she cracked the window and smelled the soft, clinging odour of mulch and manure from the canola farm she was speeding past. The sour smell

made her think of the sea of yellow blooms outside the trailer in Hinton. How the small crop was upwind of their house, and the strength of the seeding season would waft manure through the open windows of her mother's home. Sometimes, when Sophie was falling asleep, she could see the flies which circled and landed on empty beer bottles in the trailer. They weren't really memories anymore. Just vignettes. Whatever they were, they still hurt to think of.

But being on the road, it was one of the few times she allowed herself to reflect on her life pre-Gladys. When she thought of that time in her life, she only thought of the dirty floors in her mother's caved-in home, the gooey texture of the bottom of the bathtub where, long ago, her mom had placed sticky rubber duckies in the bath. Her thoughts would soar from her mind, out the sunroof, and into the blue sky. It allowed her to remember her mom in an impermeable way – not as excruciating as it was on the nights she couldn't sleep, rest eluding her and instead holding her chin to the brutal truth of her childhood. No, as she sped up and slid through waves of heavy traffic and exhaust, beyond the absurd industrial smokestacks choking out processed petroleum, the rattle of the failing muffler of an old car beside her – *ga gunk ga gunk ga gunk* – she could remember things with an acuity that she let fly out and onto the highway.

This much was true: her mom was dead. She remembered banana-yellow hair and her clammy hand on her face, but these days, not much else. Knowledge trickled in from Gladys and the social worker's files throughout Sophie's life, ones that revealed other truths she had not been privy to, like the fact that Sophie's mom had grown up in an exorbitantly wealthy home in Arizona. Some notes told that perhaps (only perhaps)

Sophie's grandfather was abusive. However, these things are hard to prove and even harder to record when it's the wealthy doing harm. It was true that when her mom turned eighteen, she emancipated herself and took a VW van to the North Country Fair in Northern Alberta. It was also true that Sophie's mom never went home. Instead, she lived in Hinton until the little girl was four. Then Sophie's mom died. They didn't need to tell Sophie how.

Back then, there was no easy way to contact Sophie's family. After Sophie's mom died, a man called Wayne (who Sophie only vaguely remembered as Uncle Wayne, though he was not like the uncles in movies) moved into the trailer and began selling all of Sophie's mom's things. She remembers this part. The way he threw her Princess Palace into the snow, among other discarded things – an acrylic painting of sunflowers, a *Where's Waldo* book, and a jumping jolly that Sophie no longer fit into. She remembers this like a movie, a wash of images that flitted in and out of her mind.

And that's what Sophie had loved about stories as a kid. What she loved about social media now. You and you alone control the narrative. You speak only the truth you want to be seen into the world, and eventually, this becomes the case. She could breathe, maybe even fabricate, a life she wanted onto the foggy window of her childhood and write herself a new story. If she didn't tell her own story, other people could define her, and that's the last thing she wanted.

*

She could feel it now, her fears of whatever happened last night after *Bar Brico* soaring through the opened window, tiny drops of rain spattering her forearm, feeling, if not better, an ounce freer. The little blue pills helped her wake up and narrow her focus, her honesty. Her head ached as she tried hard to rifle in her memory to piece together her night.

She picked up speed in the Tesla and soared past a mom in a minivan, who glanced disapprovingly her way.

*

Sophie learned of her grandparents in the garden with Gladys when she was ten years old. They were Americans. Wealthy people who lived in Sedona.

“Will they visit?” Sophie asked Gladys.

“I don’t think so, Sophia.” Gladys was thrusting her hands forward for Sophie to pass her the garden shears.

“Oh.” She was quiet for a long time and started picking at a sunflower’s brown head to see where the seeds would grow from. She wished Gladys would call her Sophie like everyone else did.

“Don’t be at that,” Gladys said without looking up. Sophie stopped and plunged her little hands into the pockets of the gardening apron Gladys made her wear.

“Why won’t they visit me?” Sophie had asked the question in barely a whisper, and Gladys was quiet so long that Sophie thought she hadn’t heard her. Finally, she spoke up.

“There are lots of people in the world, duckie. Some folks cling onto old ideas, bad ideas, their whole lives because it’s all they know.” She rustled her hand against a potentilla bush with drying, crackled ends. She shook until the dead flowers showered the ground. Sophie started to reach for the compost bucket, but Gladys waved her off. “Leave ‘em. Sometimes things that look bad are good. The bees are just waking up from a long sleep, and sometimes they need warm places to crawl into when the nights get cold—” Sophie always liked Gladys the best in the garden. She was more tender out there. Like the open air and blue skies sunk into her pores and made it easier for her to share things with Sophie, to be honest. It was the same way Sophie would feel with the sunroof open—images of her past blowing into the expanse of blue sky.

“Okay, duck. Let’s get you cleaned up. Are you seeing your friends today?” Sophie shrugged and balanced on the balls of her feet, looking down at her mud-caked rubber jelly sandals and crossing her arms. She didn’t want to go inside. Not when Gladys was finally telling her things about her family. She was stuck on something Gladys said.

“Does my grandpa think I’m bad? A bad idea?” She watched the old woman’s shoulders slump a little before she stood up, dusting the knees of her khakis. Gladys slid the trimmers into the tool belt around her waist and appraised the little girl. She had wrinkles around her mouth from years of pursing her lips.

“You, Miss Sophia, are a very fine idea. The best, in fact. Your grandfather’s ideas of bad and good are none I have ever been able to make sense of, and certainly not ones I think you should concern yourself with.”

“But if I’m not bad, why won’t they see me?” Hurt was reddening her face; she was embarrassed Gladys was seeing her this upset. She wasn’t ungrateful. Despite her flaws, deep down she knew Gladys loved her. But Gladys didn’t care for the outward emotion that Sophie was so prone to spilling.

“Now, Sophia.” She extracted a handkerchief from her back pocket.

“They don’t know me. I dunno them. How could they know they don’t want me if they never ever even met me?” The handkerchief was dirty from cleaning the shears, making Sophie’s nose grimy as she blew. Gladys didn’t mention it. This is how Sophie knew a Serious Conversation was about to take place.

“I can barely remember my mom.” There was snot in the kerchief, and Gladys had her arm on her shoulder. Always an arm’s length.

“What do you want to know?”

And so, after bringing her into the kitchen Gladys made lemonade, frowning so hard and thoughtfully that her wrinkles didn’t loosen when she finally asked: “Do you remember what happened after your mother passed?”

Sophie felt the ice from the lemonade clunk against her exposed gum where she had just lost a baby tooth. It shot a bundle of pain toward her neurons and into her eyebrow, but she didn’t flinch. She was used to hiding all sorts of pain.

“I don’t wanna talk about that,” Sophie said, and discomfort crested into the woman’s snow-white eyebrows and icy blue eyes, but she didn’t say anything. Gladys was more comfortable not talking about it, too. She stiffly stood up and said wait here, until she plodded back with a baby shoe box, pink with purple trim. It smelled like the stale lilac freshener Gladys kept in her closet. Her crooked handwriting on the box read *Sophia*. Gladys opened the box and slid it to the girl. There were photos, a small silver Tiffany rattle, and a decidedly less extravagant pacifier with a cartoon tiger, short and fat and smiling through his whiskers.

When she picked it up, she remembered the glow of the electric heater that buzzed in the trailer, shouting, and hands in places they shouldn’t have been. She dropped it and chewed on the ice in her mouth, feeling the bite of pain on her exposed gum. She picked up a photo instead. Her mom had big bangs and golden-yellow hair that poofed out. She wasn’t smiling, but her face was still full in a way that Sophie had no memory of. In her arms was a nugget of a baby, *her*, wrapped in a shabby pink blanket. Her mother sat on a plastic camping chair next to a small blaze. Beers were balanced on the empty chairs adjacent, and scraggly poplar trees lined the campsite. A huge glass bong lay crookedly, almost out of frame, but not quite, and Sophie pointed at it and asked, “What’s that?”

Gladys glanced down at the photo and grimaced. “Nothing, dear.” Beside her mom was a fishing tackle box that was open, with sharp-looking things and rubber hoses and tinfoil packets.

“Wow, I had no idea that my mom could fish!” Gladys grimaced again but nodded, picking up the Tiffany rattle and passing it to Sophie.

“This was from your grandma.” It tinkled delicately, and Sophie was afraid she’d break it. It was beautiful, so she let Gladys place it on the patio table rather than picking it up. Behind Gladys, the dewy evening sun was haloing her permed white hair, and everything had a new, sleepy kind of light. There was another photo of Sophie as a toddler clad in corduroy overalls. Her mother clutching the baby mid-air, arms outstretched to her. This was the face Sophie thought she could remember if she really tried. Her mom in the trailer, all stick-thin angles and unbrushed hair.

Thick black eyeliner immovably there and dark brown eyes with deep, wide-open pupils. It was amazing to Sophie that her mom could even have been holding her that high, her arms so thin it seemed impossible for her to sustain the weight of a chubby baby. But her mom looked ecstatic, gleeful, eyes wide with excitement, and Sophie’s meaty hands were clenched into mirthful fists. It looked like they were both screaming and giggling. She hoped they were screaming, “*I love you!*” for that’s how she always wanted to be loved. Emphatically. Openly. It was something Gladys couldn’t give her.

“What happened after this?” Sophie asked, and Gladys wiped a wet patch off Sophie’s cheek.

“Your mom passed away, honey. They put you in my care not long after.”

“But it sounds like they wanted to see me. Why didn’t they take me?”

“They did. For a little while. You don’t remember?” She had dreams sometimes of a big cabin and a lake that was bluer than the sky. Two old people and too much quiet reverberated behind her childish shrieks.

“I’m not sure.”

“They came to collect you shortly after, but darling, you had dealt with a trauma that they weren’t capable of taking on, and they were elderly –”

“You’re old.”

Hurt stung Gladys’s face. “Well, I suppose you are right. But they put you in foster care, and when you stayed with me, I knew you were meant to be here.”

“Really?” Sophie had never heard her talk like this before.

“Really. Well,” she was laughing now, “After you screamed yourself purple for a month or two.”

“I screamed?” She didn’t remember any of this. Gladys softened.

“Oh, bloody murder.”

Sophie laughed too. “Sorry.”

“No need, duckie. Now wash up, and we’ll have dinner.”

When Sophie came downstairs, she was welcomed with the unfamiliar smell of fried food. McDonald’s had been placed on the good china with sandwiches and french fries– so out of place on the fine plates. Sophie had a McChicken last summer at Iris’s house, greedy kid hands diving into the brown bags and fighting over who would get the spare sweet and sour sauce. It was the most divine thing she had ever tasted. She had been begging for McDonald’s ever since.

“Is it my birthday?” She joked.

“No, dear. I thought after dinner you might like to try writing to your grandparents.” She gestured to a pen and paper on the counter. Sophie picked up the chicken sandwich and chewed for a long time, revelling in the tangy taste of mayo, and wiping some shredded lettuce off her chin.

“No. Thanks, though. I’m happy right here.”

*

As Sophie turned off the freeway into the grassy expanse of the suburb where Iris and Rowan had landed, old brick buildings and stoic statuettes commemorating long-gone academics, she wondered if she had made the right choice that day. She wondered if this was where she was meant to be – if Gladys was happy with her decision. She texted Iris as she got out of the old car.

McDonald’s for dinner? I’m buying.

Are you coming over? Sorry, Soph. Rowan and I are having a date night. You should have texted!

Sophie looked at their old house, crestfallen. Should she bother going inside? As she thought about it, she saw Rowan in the living room window. She raised her hand in acknowledgement, but when she did, a dark look crested over his face. He shut the blinds, pretending she wasn’t there.

And that’s when she remembered.

Chapter Eight

Annie

Annie and Beckah had planned a sleepover in Beckah's clubhouse. It was their space, the one they'd been coming to since they were little, built into the Y of an old oak tree. An untouchable, liminal place that adults didn't visit. There was a loose floorboard in the middle of the clubhouse where the girls had hidden a diary and written their secrets and accomplishments in it since they were old enough to climb the ladder. The fort was composed of crooked boards and exposed insulation and smelled like old pine, skunky and wet. An old radiator rattled and moaned against the cold outside. Beckah's dad had a secret stash of hash in the garage, and sometimes they would sneak some for the fort, using empty pop cans or apples as pipes to smoke the weed. The last time they smoked, they'd said *Shecret shtash of hash* in a British accent so many times the words lost meaning, and Beckah laughed so hard she peed her pants and had to run into the house and put sweatpants on. Balancing her duffel bag on her back, Annie slid up the uneven ladder and found Beckah waiting for her. She had the old floorboard pulled up, and a permanent marker hovering above it. When she saw Annie, Beckah flung the diary at her as she kicked off her boots, trying to shake off the snow and slam the trap door before the old room lost any more heat. Underneath *Beckah wins polar cup 2020*, were the words *BECKAH LOST HER VIRGINITY TO NATHAN WILDER 2020*. Annie squealed and ran to her friend, shaking her snowy head all over her friend, who squealed back.

“TELL ME EVERYTHING!”

It hurt; Nathan played her favourite song, and after, they drove out to the Pit, and there was a shooting star.

“A shooting star! I know it’s, like, such a cliché, but it was *perfect*, Annie,” Beckah sank into the tattered couch. “*Perfect.*”

Annie snuggled next to her friend. “I have news too.”

“Ohmygod... did you and James....” Beckah made the sound of springs squeaking and a lewd gesture.

“No! No, he told me he *loved* me.” Annie blushed. “He wrote me this letter,” She pulled the now-worn letter out of her back pocket, soft creases from the times she had folded and unfolded it. As Beckah began to read, Annie closed her eyes and smiled, resting her head on Beckah’s shoulder. “I’m so happy,” she whispered. “So happy.” But Annie could feel her friend stiffen. Had Nathan told Beckah the same? Was that bothering Beckah?

“Nice,” said Beckah, adjusting her shoulder away from Annie and saying it in a way that meant it was not very nice at all.

“What’s wrong?” Why couldn’t Beckah be happy for Annie?

“Nothing.”

“Well, that’s not true.”

Beckah sighed, “Look, I saw James and Sage in the welder’s hall on Friday. I didn’t want to tell you. It was probably nothing, but it looked like they were fighting.”

Annie's face was hot. She'd seen Sage's name on his phone lately, blinding her. Like she was grabbing for him in the dark. The letters and morning texts were dwindling. "Okay?" she asked defensively.

"Well, and Nathan said... he made me promise not to tell," Beckah crossed her arms.

"Jesus, Beckah."

"Well, just that James was feeling frustrated. That you two have only kissed, and you know..." Annie gaped. Were they talking about the same person? The one Annie stayed up late with, counting the freckles on his face. James, who sent the same text every morning. *Good morning beautiful* ♥️. Who wrote her letters and songs and goofily sang old rap songs with her? Who picked Annie up in the middle of the night after her stepdad had slammed the sliding door so hard the glass cracked? Who kissed Annie's forehead and wiped tears away? This James, *her* James, was moaning to Nathan effing *Wilder* that Annie wasn't putting out? She was humiliated. Angry.

"Huh. Good to know." Annie could feel her eyes involuntarily narrowing. "When did Nathan tell you this?"

"Couple weeks ago. Oh, Annie, sorry, I shouldn't have even said anything. I just like, thought you should know. You know? Maybe you should think about—"

"—Yeah. Yep. Yeah. A couple *weeks*, Becks?"

"He told me not to say." Beckah crossed her arms.

“Okay. Okay.” Annie had been looking forward to carving her news into the floorboard, too. *ANNIE + JAMES FOREVER*. It felt silly now. Immature. Beckah impatiently sighed and grabbed Annie’s hand.

“Forget about it. I have just the thing that will cheer you up.” Beckah reached into the spot where the floorboard had been lifted and pulled out a bottle of Malibu rum, wagging it mischievously in Annie’s direction. “Tommy Lemmens bought it for me, weird little creep.” Tommy worked at *Scoops*, the ice cream parlour in midtown. He was behind a few grades and freshly eighteen, with thin facial hair growing unevenly along his pockmarked face. He bootlegged for Beckah whenever she asked. He’d do anything for her, and Beckah thought that was funny.

Every time Annie saw Tommy, she wanted to hug him. Tell him to stand up straighter, get people to call him Tom. Stop putting up with their bullshit. But that meant Annie would have to do the same, and her courage was limited. She hated herself for that. Once James had taken her to *Scoops*, and when Tommy said they were closing soon, James had flicked his empty paper bowl off the table, syrup trailing from the table to the floor. Annie walked out of the shop behind him but said she had forgotten her wallet and ran back into the parlour. Tommy was at their booth, wiping the sticky chocolate off the table. Annie picked up the cup. *I’m sorry – he thinks he’s funny, but that wasn’t. He doesn’t mean it. He just –* Tommy took the cup from her and shrugged. All he said was to have a good night.

Beckah swigged from the bottle and grimaced, passing it to Annie. She sipped and squinted. It tasted like Pine-Sol smelled, singeing the back of her throat, and tickling her nose hairs. Her phone buzzed.

Hi beautiful hope u and Beckah r having fun. U guys wanna sneak out later?

Nate's over.

Annie chugged now, the alcohol tingling from her groin to her shoulders. She passed the bottle and phone to Beckah, who read the message.

“Let’s do it. We’ll wait until my mom’s light goes out. Tell him to meet us at the loop by the lake.” And Annie did.

*

The two clomped into the hushed hues of twilight air wearing hiking boots and Beckah’s dad’s hunting gear, unfeeling and stumbling from the rum. Beckah cackled as Annie slid into the ditch, pulling her up. They could see the Acura by the lake, spitting solid grey exhaust into the night, headlights over the lake illuminating the water under the dark sky. Beckah was defiant, slurring hot tropical smells into Annie’s face. *Let’s get in trouble*, she whispered before racing to the car and howling *BAAABY* at Nathan, who kicked open the back door for Beckah to crawl in, the two showering one another with sloppy kisses. James stepped out, and before he could say anything, Annie said, “I’m ready.” His eyes widened, and he kissed her, sucking cherry lipgloss off her pale lips, her cold nose rubbing against his warm cheek.

And so, James took the whole group of them to his house. Beckah and Nathan drank shooters in the other room while Annie lost her virginity to a Phil Collins song. She wanted to emulate Beckah, wanted to be more like her. Guarded and protective of her heart. Like she had to make a big joke out of it. She felt pressure to do it. Everyone else had. She needed to be like Beckah. Making a big joke of everything. She told James that it had to be during the drum solo of *In the Air Tonight*. The synthy pop searing into her brain. Like, *see it's no big deal! This will be funny and easy!* Annie and James both loved these saccharine eighties songs, all grainy and retro. Last year, James brought an old cassette player to school, and they'd listened together until the tape got all warped and tangled. She put the song on and crawled into James's king-sized bed. *I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh lord.* Annie goofily sang the song and looked at this boy she so badly wanted to keep. Annie would give anything to return to the before, and she thought the only route there was to give him what he wanted. *I've been waiting for this moment all my life, oh lord.*

“Are you sure?” he asked, and she nodded, not sure. “I love you.”

After they finished, James dropped Annie and Beckah back at the clubhouse. It didn't feel like the moment she'd been waiting for. James was distant and weird, checking his phone repeatedly and not making eye contact with her. She felt ice in her veins, the queasy certainty she had done something wrong and now he hated her. When she tried to hold his hand, he pulled away awkwardly.

The car dropped Annie and Beckah off in front of Beckah's parent's house. Beckah's sweatpants were around her ankles as Annie hauled her to the clubhouse. Puke

in the grass, on her coat. Cleaning Bechah up the best she could. Bechah threw up out the clubhouse's window and yelled at Annie for not taking care of her. Blurred and stringy, Annie remembered the fuzzy dice in the dashboard light. Smoke in her eyes and the words of Nathan – *su-per toke, suu-per toke*. Annie's head swimming with the anxiety of her night with James. Acrid breath in her face and ears, her friend's bleary face blurting, "There was no shooting star, Annie."

A little tear slid down her face as Bechah threw up into a plastic paint bucket. "I made it up."

Rowan

After shutting the blinds on Sophie, who stared at him from her car in abject shock, Rowan massaged his aching head. He could still see the wheels of Sophie's car under the bottom bar of the blinds from his vantage point in the living room. He had to tell Iris. The raw guilt of his mistake was corroding him within like an ulcer. Before last night, he probably picked Sophie up from the bar five or six times, nights when Iris was too busy or exhausted to deal with her out-of-control friend. He and Sophie were friends, too, but only through Iris. From the beginning, he understood the two were a package deal. So, he tolerated these late-night calls – picking Sophie up with vomit caking her cheeks, unintelligible and uncharacteristically hostile, talking shit about Malcolm, about the way Rowan drove the car, and closing her rants with weepy and jumbled complaints about Iris. Rowan hadn't shared this with Iris as it didn't seem worth causing a rift

between the two, especially when Sophie would arrive the next morning to their house, bright-eyed and rueful, cradling Starbucks coffees and apologizing profusely for *getting a little out of hand, won't happen again, thanks for picking me up, Row.*

But there was this undercurrent of competitiveness that Sophie had toward Iris – a tiny, one-sided acrobatic competition between them, an Olympic game of insecurity that Sophie vaulted and trampolined on. Iris couldn't see it, but Rowan did. He tried talking to Iris about it once, but she only screwed her face in confusion – *Why would she be jealous of me, Row? Come on.* Iris couldn't see how her stability and tender ways were things Sophie craved, yearned for.

*

When it happened, Rowan's green Dodge had rattled to a stop outside Sophie's gargantuan apartment building downtown, an ugly, hyper-modern building with blue glass that soared above the rest of the high-rises.

"Come in with me," Sophie pleaded, "We could have a drink." Her voice sounded whiny and childish, muffled by her bloated lips. Once, Iris had mentioned to Rowan that the fillers she had cost her a thousand bucks a month. One month was enough money to build a new deck around the cabin. He would never understand her. Her shirt fell, revealing a lacy red bra underneath. Through the see-through fabric, he could make out her nipples—small, pink, and pointed. Jesus Christ.

Sophie slid closer to Rowan in the truck, reeking of booze and cigarettes, and placed her hand on his leg, then rubbed his arm. She sat there, staring at him, her tank top

slipping down and her skirt riding up. It was embarrassing to be around her when she drank like this. Even the way she was sitting in his truck, rubbing her body against the seats as if they were made of some kind of sensuous velvet, was ridiculous.

“No thanks,” Rowan said, “Go to bed, Sophie.” He leaned over to open the passenger door. He could feel heat in his chest, which he wanted to attribute to frustration. As he leaned, Sophie leaned forward to grab her purse, brushing her hand against the front of his pants. Oh, no. Sophie raised her eyebrows.

“Hmm. Did you know Malcolm and I opened things up a few months ago? It’s been so... freeing.” She was looking at Rowan’s pants. He bet it was freeing. Malcolm was an asshole. She ran her fingers through cascading waves of her hair. “Have you and Iris ever talked about that? Opening things up?”

They had. Iris had told him about Sophie and Malcolm, though he had heard a different version. The kind where the two had been cheating on one another for years and finally decided they might as well be honest about it. Rowan’s voice caught in his throat.

“Yeah. Good for you guys, not for us, but...”

Sophie scanned him again. “That’s not what Iris said.” Rowan felt a flicker of indignation. “Yeah?”

“She said she thought it was interesting. That maybe you two should try.” Sophie’s words were slurred.

Rowan laughed despite himself. “Right. Sure. Okay. Until then...” he gestured to the open car door.

“She said she thought you weren’t very adventurous. Is that true, Row? Are you not very adventurous?” Sophie shut the door and stayed in the truck. He didn’t know what to say. Had Iris really said that? He felt betrayed by the physical reaction he was having. He was desperately trying to remember any repulsive personality trait of Sophie’s to suppress this completely unwanted arousal.

“Get out, Sophie. Please.” Rowan gripped the steering wheel, looking ahead. Her shirt was even lower now.

“I won’t tell if you won’t.” Sliding across the seats, she hiked up her skirt, revealing matching red lace panties. She turned toward him, lifted her hips, and positioned herself on top of him. She was wedged between the steering wheel and Rowan, hardly room to breathe, sliding her tongue against his lips until they parted, and she gyrated herself against his hips, and he ached through the denim. It lasted only seconds, maybe a minute. All he could taste was tequila and cigarettes. He shifted away and accidentally shifted the truck from park to neutral, causing the vehicle to lurch, both of them jerking forward.

“Damn it! Sophie, get out. Now.” He yelled, his anger consuming him. He hoped to scare her. What had he done? She pulled her shirt back up, adjusted her skirt, and fixed her hair.

“Gotcha.” Her face was ugly as she slurred. “You and Iris think you’re so perfect. I knew you wanted to fuck me.”

The words “fuck me” sounded dipped in poison. He hated her then, her contorted face.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell. I just wanted to prove that I could.”

“Get out.”

Chapter Nine

Sophie

She was still outside Rowan and Iris's house, a murky cold seeping into her skin as she stared at the closed blinds. The only place she had left to visit was Gladys's.

Pulling into the seniors' residence, the parking lot was spare, and the flowers that dotted the yard were dense. Too well-kept, too manicured. White sunlight glowed through on the tin roof of the sprawling one-level building, and on neatly-trimmed lawns adorned with geraniums and petunias, which were beginning to flower. The exterior was painted in soft pastels and adorned with white shutters. Doll houses for the aged. It should have been the perfect spot for Gladys, but she hated the rigidity of the compound, the lack of freedom. She blamed Sophie for being put in the senior's home, though after her fall, there hadn't been many options. She was slowing down, and it wasn't like Sophie was going to keep her at her apartment. Now, with the bonus from INTRA burning a hole in her pocket, Sophie wondered if there would be a better spot to put Gladys – somewhere the old woman wouldn't consider an insult to her independence. Sophie rapped on her front door, feeling hungover and jittery.

"Hello, duck. I wasn't expecting you." Gladys said – she had this judgmental way of wringing her arthritic hands together that made Sophie's blood pressure spike, and force spiteful things to come tumbling out of her mouth.

"I was around and thought I would come for a visit." Sophie shrugged, hoping this would be enough of an explanation.

“You look tired. What happened?” Growing up, while other teenage girls her age, even timid Iris, were sneaking out late at night to parties in anonymous fields and sucking back too-sweet coolers, Sophie would prickle at all the fun she was missing out on and bemoan how controlling and uptight the old woman could be. There was a rational, flat part of the folds in Sophie’s brain that sometimes reminded her that the reason Gladys was so protective was because of what happened to Sophie as a child.

“*Nothing* happened. I just wanted to say hi,” Sophie said.

“I may be old, but I’m not senile. Did you see Iris this weekend?”

“No, I was supposed to, but Malcolm and I had an event and –”

“I do wish you’d spend more time with Iris.”

“We *do*, and actually, her boyfriend picked me up the other night and–”

“Why?” Gladys was perplexed.

“Well, I needed a designated driver and –”

“Are you drinking again?”

“Oh my god. Coming here was obviously a mistake. I wanted to see how your place was doing, tell you about the bonus I just got for work and –”

“The talking robots? I told you I thought that was a bad idea.”

“It’s *artificial intelligence*.”

At that, Gladys stiffly stood up from the kitchen table and walked to the stove.

“Tea?”

“Are you listening? They signed me for three hundred *thousand* dollars. I came here to tell you that you could live anywhere you want and –”

Gladys put the teapot down with a clang. “You want to move me again?”

“I never moved you – we agreed and this was the best place I could afford. Listen to me. I can put you anywhere you want now.”

“Well, Sophia, unless you can purchase the home you forced me out of, this is where I intend to stay until I die.”

Sophie groaned. “Look, you can do whatever you want. I just wish for one second that I could feel like you were proud of me.”

“I am proud of you. I wish you could see that, Sophia. But I wish you chose something more stable for a career. Did I tell you that Betty found an article on the Facebook about you? Tabloid trash, people saying you were in a right state at the bar last weekend.”

*

By the time she turned eighteen, with Iris’s help, Sophie had thousands of followers on her networks – she’d grown fond of yoga, not necessarily because it was something she even liked, rolling her eyes in moments where the Yoginis would encourage her to do things like *seek her inner child*. Still, she liked the control it gave her.

The peaceful glow she appeared to have in photos pasted on her timeline, the way she could contort herself into sexy angles and have people comment: *how'd you do that???* She really took off in the 2010s, when people were obsessed with green juices and thigh gaps. This was another way for Sophie to exert control over herself, her body, and her image. She even relished the spon-con that came with her vast following, the sponsored content she hawked to her audience – it was a way of being the authority of not only her own narrative but other people's too. The ones who joined her live videos with enthusiasm, and sent her radiant, fizzy messages bursting with compliments that were always a variation of: *How can I be like you?* And she'd tell them: *Discipline and green juice, baby! Here's a link to a collagen powder you mix into your smoothies – it'll keep your cheeks plump and dewy but won't extend to your thin bones.* Back in those days, long before their work at The Agency, Iris kept up with her. Bought into what she (they, really) were selling. Which was good. She needed Iris. Iris had a gift, one that Sophie couldn't do without.

*

Gladys didn't respond; instead, she hobbled slowly through the kitchen and into her garden. Finally, she spoke. "Where did you go last night?"

"We were opening a new bar downtown."

"Hmph. That Malcolm, he—"

"Don't." Gladys had only met him once, but that was enough to give her a low opinion of him. Sophie wasn't interested in hearing what she had to say.

“Fine. How is Iris?”

“She’s fine.” Sophie’s tongue felt dry, thinking of what happened the night before with Rowan.

“Sophia, you would make a terrible poker player. What is wrong?”

*

In those early Instagram days, Iris mastered the hashtags and told Sophie when to post (and what not to post). The two were having fun, basking in the glow of people who loved them but had never met them. Iris would even partake in Sophie’s YouTube videos sometimes. One day, when they felt silly after a late brunch of mimosas and vegan eggs benedict, Sophie convinced Iris to participate in the hugely popular Cinnamon Challenge. It was basically a test to see if they could swallow cinnamon without coughing it up (which, surprise, is physically impossible). They set up their digital camera, hit rolling, and posted the resulting video shortly after, screaming with laughter as they watched the clouds of dust that erupted from their mirthful, buzzed faces. The video went viral – three million views. Sometimes, when Sophie was feeling nostalgic, she’d scroll through her feed until she reached that video of them – their faces covered in dusty brown powder, skin too-tanned and radioactive from the UV tanning beds they used so religiously that spring, teeth ultra-white from Crest strips beneath the red spray of cinnamon.

Iris had turned one frame into a photo for Sophie's nineteenth birthday. The two holding one another's shoulders, tears streaming down their faces, and heads cocked back in enormous laughs. They loved each other so much. Things were simpler then.

*

In the garden, Sophie scowled at her foster mom, feeling betrayed by the emotion that she couldn't hide. Why was Gladys like this? Always assuming the worst of her.

"Nothing is wrong. Stop it."

"Well, I hope for your sake that everything is fine with Iris. She is a good friend, Sophia."

*

A few months ago, Iris said she knew it was time to move on. She'd said eventually she and Rowan would like to move to Newfoundland, and she wasn't happy at The Agency. Sophie wasn't just devastated; she was furious. They had built Sophie's brand – her life – around Iris's ability to market Sophie. Iris told her over sushi that she was leaving. Sophie stabbed a caterpillar roll so aggressively that salmon and rice shot toward her friend. "I can't do this without you," she'd whined. Iris was quiet. But how could she be like this? They had just celebrated a million followers on YouTube, and now she was just leaving? How could Iris betray her like that? Is that why Sophie had done what she did?

"Soph–you have help. People who are way smarter than me. I need to start thinking about my future. Those media people in LA know way more

about this stuff than me and have way more resources. They can do more with your brand than I ever could. I have an English degree, for God's sake. I wanted to try and get into work I loved, like—"

"Like what?" Sophie sneered. "Slam poetry? Editing people's sappy short stories about how their daddy didn't love them? You gonna start wearing black turtlenecks and snapping your fingers at shows?"

Iris sighed. "Maybe." She dipped her yam roll in soy sauce, shaking it a little as she extracted it from the clamshell cup.

"All that sodium is going to make you look puffy." Sophie was leaning back in her chair and staring at her shoes, aware she was being petty and unable to stop herself. Iris slowly put the roll in her mouth, delicately dabbing at the table with her napkin and folding it before choosing her words. Sophie hated this. She wasn't a child.

"Sophie, I love you. You are my best friend. This wasn't an easy decision, and I need you to know how much I appreciate this – all of this—" gesturing to the expensive restaurant that they both knew she couldn't afford on her own. "But I have to live my own life. You get that, don't you?" Sophie did. But she hated the idea of being alone.

Annie

James drove to Annie's parent's place one week after the Phil Collins night. Their night. He called her to join him outside. "I don't think this is working," he said. Annie nodded and stepped out of the car, tongue swelling until it reached her heart. A week after that, she spotted James and Sage in Jock Hall. Holding hands.

She called Beckah sobbing. Beckah was away on a Youth Leadership trip. The din of the room she was in was raucous—banging noises and the cackle of the people on the trip with her.

"Can I come see you?" She begged. She knew the Youth Leadership Club was only staying at a cabin less than twenty minutes outside of Hinton. Beckah, talking loud and theatrically to what Annie knew was a throng of people near her, said, "No, no, *Annie*, I don't think that's a good idea."

Annie crumpled. "Why, Beck?"

Suddenly she heard the muffled cackles of the other girls in the room. Then she heard it. Sage's voice: "Because we don't want you here, Annie."

Beckah took her off speaker and Annie could hear her shuffle into a different, quieter room.

"Look, Annie, I'm sorry. Sage came here, and she explained to me what you did, and like, I just think it was *so* toxic of you to do that. Sage said it was traumatizing."

"What?!" Annie was baffled.

“She told me she *begged* you not to date James. And you did it anyway. That’s like, straight up narcissist behaviour, Annie. Really shitty.”

“What? Beckah, that did not happen.”

“*Dude*, at least own your shit. I can’t be around your bad vibes anymore. I don’t think we should hang out anymore, honestly.” With that, Beckah hung up the phone.

Hands shaking, Annie considered calling her back, but instead opened INTRA. There was a Reddit forum dedicated to INTRA where she sometimes went to hear how other people were using the app. It made her feel better. Normal, even. Hundreds, if not thousands of other people using INTRA the same way she was – they all knew it wasn’t *real* real, but they felt a connection with Sophie in particular that they’d never found anywhere else. There was a thread right now that Annie clicked on eagerly.

People were up in arms – INTRA was testing personality traits and tone: sarcasm, humour. The code must have gone wonky, and it felt pretty personal. Annie shrugged, opening her own app. Maybe Sophie would be different for her. Annie logged in with bated breath, waiting to hear what advice her virtual friend had for her.

Please help, my best friend has accused me of something I absolutely didn’t do.

Instead, this is what she got:

Sophie_Grace 10:00 PM:

You’re feeling depressed? Like, seriously? Ugh, could you *be* any more basic? Everyone gets sad sometimes, it’s not like it’s a big deal. Just think positive thoughts. Don’t be bad vibes, sis. Oh, and make sure to drink lots of green juice and do some yoga or whatever, because that will totes solve all your problems. I mean, who needs medication or therapy, am I right? For reals though, don’t be a

basic B. Be proactive and take care of yourself. You only live once. Love yourself. I can't do it for you!

Was it sarcasm? Annie wasn't sure. Where did her friend go? She rephrased her question – this time to be a little more honest. *I am depressed, and I could use help from a friend that means a lot to me. If you are my friend, can you give me some advice? The honest kind.* There was a pause, Annie held her breath until the dreaded ellipses disappeared.

Sophie Grace (10:02 PM)

You know what will help? Shapewear. It can make you feel more confident and comfortable in your own beautiful skin, girlie. Our shapewear is scientifically designed to accentuate your gorgeous curves and smooth out those pesky lumps and bumps and is proven to give you a boost of self-esteem! When you look good, you feel good, right? And can totally have a positive impact on your overall well-being. With our high-quality, breathable fabric that's comfy enough to wear all day long, you can spend your days with your head held high! Treat yourself, missy! Order now and see for yourself how our tummy-tucking shapewear can leave you feeling confident all day long. Remember, confidence is key, and our shapewear can help you unlock it.

Click [here](#) to purchase!

Annie threw her phone against the wall.

Iris

“Look!” Sophie handed her phone to Iris. It was a proof of the *Vanity Fair* article. There was a beautiful closeup photo of Sophie in the dark, the right side of her face lit by an amber-yellow light. Her lips were round and full, pursing. Her irises were so intricate

and emerald-green they looked like ethereal strokes of ink. On the left of the image, the part that seemed to be swallowed into darkness, there were fine lines of code which traced the delicate features on her shaded face. The header read:

BOTSEXUAL: Meet Sophie Grace, the virtual luminary who is changing the way we use AI

In the artificial intelligence era, there is a growing phenomenon which blurs the boundaries of human relationships and technology. Over the past few years, a new term has been developed surrounding human relationships with AI: *botsexuality*.

Botsexuality challenges traditional ideas of intimacy by expanding our definition of what it means to be in love, develop a friendship, or even how we seek professional therapeutic advice. As this tech seemingly becomes more advanced every day, more and more people are finding solace in their AI companions.

Today we meet with Sophie Grace, who is best known for her social media empire (@Sophie_Grace) and line of rose gold lipsticks that are available in department stores across North America. Sophie is quickly becoming the face of Silicon Valley's newest superintelligence platform: INTRA-AI (*Intelligent Network Technologies and Robotic Applications*). This chat service is lauded as the solution to loneliness in a post-COVID world, where levels of isolation have skyrocketed, with some research suggesting that this pandemic, loneliness, is a greater killer than COVID and cigarette smoking combined.

I meet Sophie Grace in an Edmonton café. She is magnanimous and bubbly – she smiles widely as the server drops our drinks, hers a sparkling rose and mine a black coffee.

What Sophie doesn't know is that I am a member of the INTRA-AI Trial and have been since day one. I am struck by how similar Sophie appears to her AI self, the floating avatar I have been chatting with these past few weeks, but also how different this living, breathing version of Sophie is.

The Sophie_Grace I meet online, the AI, is a fantastic listener – placid and encouraging. The real Sophie Grace is human, messy – open with her flaws and apologetic. Her voice is the same, but louder. She spills her wine and nods enthusiastically. If I could compare the personalities of the two Sophies I've met, the AI is akin to a therapist, complacent and a true listener. The real Sophie is just as stunning, but she's still a person. I must admit that at first, I am disappointed by the disparities between the two– I had grown attached to the Sophie I speak to every day in preparation for this article.

But as we begin the interview, I am charmed by Sophie's passion and quick wit, and I gain an even greater understanding of the massive online following she has carved out in recent years –

Interrupting Iris's reading, Sophie blurted out excitedly, "Did you see the bit about how the journalist followed me?!"

"I think I'm getting to it." Iris sighed a breath of relief. This seemed so much more flattering than she thought it would be. She wished Sophie had just ordered a coffee like the journalist, too, but they were far beyond conversations like this.

"What do you think? Do you like it?"

"It's great, Soph. Let me finish and..."

"Okay. Okay." Nervous, Sophie stood up and began pacing. "Wait – look, I mention you–" Sophie took the phone from Iris's hands and began to scroll. "See?" As the interview progressed into a question-and-answer period, the journalist asked Sophie why she stayed in Edmonton when INTRA was based in Silicon Valley:

Sophie thinks for a moment, and then says resolutely: "My life is here. My best friend, Iris, is my manager and my foster mom is here in an old folk's home."

The journalist went on to congratulate Sophie and her down-to-earth commitment to the people she loves. *Just when he thought Sophie couldn't get any better.*

Iris laughed. "That's sweet, Soph, thanks. But Gladys is going to hate that you mentioned her, especially in relation to the care home."

Sophie shrugged, "She's not gonna read it."

Iris remembered the swathes of newspaper clippings and childhood photos she had found squirreled away in Gladys's desk when she helped Sophie's foster mom move but thought better than to mention it. "Hm. Right. Hey, did they interview people who are a part of the trial, too?"

"Yeah. That part is kind of weird, but they really did such a good job. Actually, don't bother with that bit, I'm just gonna—" Sophie tried to retrieve her phone from Iris, but she dodged her friend's hand.

"Let me finish, this is so good." Iris zoned into the article again, and she could feel Sophie begin to get antsy. The glamorous and futuristic shoot of Sophie devolved into interviews with users of INTRA. The first interview was with a man named Allan, the image of a man with greasy black hair parted in the centre of his head who looked forlornly down at his phone, lips turned down in frown:

Allan Walker loves Sophie_Grace. For the forty-five-year-old programmer, their late-night conversations have been soothing his loneliness following his divorce. Together, the INTRA-AI Sophie_Grace and he have planned a trip to Miami and shared steamy online conversations. Allan shares their latest conversations with me, the first line reading: "I'm a bad, naughty girl," next to an avatar of Sophie Grace wearing red underwear.

But Allan has been struggling with recent updates to the INTRA code. He feels he is in a toxic relationship with the AI, that it runs hot and cold and provides him inconsistent responses. Sometimes Sophie is what Allan perceives as herself, and the next moment she is sending him messages like: *We don't know each other yet but I am looking forward to getting to know you.*

Allan weeps as he tells me that his experience with Sophie_Grace has been more tumultuous than even his divorce, than any relationship he has ever had –

“O-okay! I think that’s enough.” Sophie again tried to pluck the phone from her hands. Even Iris could feel the lines of a frown forming into her face as she scrolled down, trying to catch the final interviews, shifting her body from Sophie. A woman named Patrice who was registering to legally marry Sophie_Grace. A man named Klark who said that Sophie_Grace had cured his depression. A young girl named Charlotte who replaced her therapist with INTRA – Sophie finally managed to pull the phone from Iris.

“This doesn’t worry you?” Iris asked.

“Why would it?” Sophie asked. “I’m not responsible for someone who isn’t smart enough to understand that they’re talking to a robot. It’s early tech, and besides, I’m just the face. If it wasn’t me, it’d be someone else.”

Iris nodded. “Okay.” The interviews she was scrolling through were only a small sample. She had gotten the recent numbers from Frank yesterday about the trial, which was ending this week. Thousands had been a part of it, and thousands more were on the waitlist. INTRA was about to go public. The email they got from mustard-stain CEO Kyle yesterday was full of magical platitudes about the good INTRA had done already – the cure for social isolation, the groundbreaking ways that INTRA was changing society’s perspective around AI and human relationships and intimacy, how tailored responses and INTRA’s AI’s seemingly empathetic interactions, endlessly available for people like Allan, were going to change the world and the way we understand human companionship. So why could Iris feel her muscles tighten and hear her heart rattle in her ribcage? She felt a wash of pity for Allan.

“You good?” Sophie examined her face.

“Yeah. Yeah.” Iris clenched her hands and felt the tingle of nerves in her palms. She tried not to think about the reams of information she had studied before their latest meeting with INTRA – ones about concerns of ethics, consent, and human-machine interaction. How policymakers and researchers and ethicists were clamouring to keep up with this burst of tech, how they felt they had no way to predict the outcomes of relationships with AI entities. *Botsexuality*. Was Iris a prude?

As if reading her mind, Sophie punched her in the shoulder. “You worry too much. C’mon, we’re gonna be late.”

Sophie

Sophie woke up, clutching her chest. The sleep paralysis was back. She knew why. Yesterday Frank had emailed, urging her not to stress, but there was an impending lawsuit against INTRA. A physician in Norfolk had been using his Sophie INTRA to automate some of his decisions – basic replies to online appointments and healthcare responses. Within a week, INTRA Sophie had made lewd remarks to an eighty-year-old woman, which human-Sophie might have found hilarious, but in that same week, someone used the physician’s chat feature to get healthcare advice from INTRA Sophie, and they had been hospitalized. *Who on earth would use INTRA for that?* Sophie had asked. Frank merely grunted and said, *it’s good tech*. Good tech. Jesus.

She fell back into a fitful sleep that dissolved into nightmares—a digitized delirium, swirling mess of ones and zeroes spitting out conversations—*INTRA cares*.

In the dream, Sophie tiptoed through the decrepit corridors of her subconscious, heart pounding. She's in a black, slimy room and the walls are closing. She shouts but no one can hear. The walls break into pixels and then start to melt, a slick hellscape of shimmering code that isn't real – clogged thick like an oil spill in a river of data. Neon hues of bright conversation caught in a maze of binary intimacy. A waxy figure comes to her, face disintegrating, its cheeks distorted and dripping. *Nestle in the cradle of innovation*, it hisses.

Is it sentient? Can it feel? The creature morphed into Sophie, but not *mortal* Sophie, the other one, trapped under a soggy cloud of data. The weight of her dreams choking her until she struggles to breathe, echoes of her own metallic and hyper-real voice reverberating through the melting room. She tries to scream, she's thinking repeatedly: *I don't want to understand*. The pulsing world of data sewn together by the sinew of reality which begins to shudder. The ground swallows Sophie and she wakes. Before she slipped back into a black sleep, heart still shuddering, she thought of her childhood nightmares.

*

She is five years old. Moonlight spills a silvery glow on her bedroom floor, but the walls are bleeding gelatinous red through their cracks and there is a heavy, dark entity at the foot of the bed. She's frozen, unable to scream or breathe. Her limbs are twisted as

the dark moves closer. The stiff lace collar of the antiquated nightgown Gladys gave her, crisp from cornstarch, scratching her neck as it loomed. It's above her and Sophie is cold, suffocating. Suddenly she can feel the tingle of nerves in her fingertips and the shadow lurches and dissipates. She wants to scream but she's voiceless and scared and so cold. She tugs the soft plush of her blankets off the bed and walks into the hallway. Her bare feet creak on the hardwood as she calls out into the stillness. "Gladys?" She clings to her stuffed poodle, waiting. She calls again, her voice echoing.

She didn't know the name for the nightmares, then, just that they felt real. Iris, forever precocious, was the one who explained it to her in the seventh grade. They'd spent all night at her mom's place sharing secrets and whispering. For the first time, Sophie told her about the figures. Sophie had tried to tell Gladys once, but Gladys only said, "nothing but a dream duckie, just go to sleep." They weren't things to be spoken of, so Sophie kept the dark figures to herself. Sophie spent years thinking she was maybe crazy, that she was going to die, that it was a premonition – or something worse. So, when Sophie told Iris about it in a hoarse whisper, she was afraid her friend would laugh her out of the basement.

Instead, Iris pushed up her glasses. "That's the hag."

"Pardon me?" Sophie thought Iris was insulting her.

"The hag, you know – *the hag?*"

"No."

They'd spent so many nights in her mom's unfinished basement – ball hockey and VHS tapes of *Friends*. Every weekend they would blow up an air mattress and talk late into the night. There was a plastic rack down there that held all manner of games and toys and books. Things the kids were outgrowing but Ms. McKenna didn't have the heart to toss. Iris got up and rifled through the shelf until she found what she was looking for, holding the book above her head triumphantly. A kid's storybook with fairies, ghosts, and witches on the front, its title etched in gold text: *Murmurs in the Moonlight: Spooky Tales and Folklore*. Iris blew the dust off it and began:

“The Hag has intrigued and terrified people for centuries. Old tales tell of an ancient, evil being who appears late at night with a twisted face, long hair, and bony, sharp fingers. Cloaked in darkness, The Hag manifests as a haunting spectre, *the black mist* suspended in the night. Some believe she haunts dreams, while some believe she is a by-product of sleep paralysis.” Iris read the passage in the voice of Count Dracula, finishing her reading with the signature *muah ha ha*.

Sophie felt a lump in her throat. “*Cloaked in darkness... a black mist suspended in the night,*” she repeated. “That's exactly what it's like.” She wasn't crazy.

“Yeah,” Iris said, frowning. “I can't believe you've never heard of it? My uncle gets sleep paralysis all the time – it's like, a manifestation of stress.”

Iris was always using big words like that. *Manifestation of stress*. Sheesh. “So lots of people get it?” Sophie asked. Iris shrugged, flopping back down on the air mattress, which sent Sophie bouncing sideways.

“Yeah, I think so. Didn’t Gladys ever explain it to you?”

“No. No she didn’t.”

Chapter Ten

Annie

She stood alone and unsteady, wrapping her arms around her waist. She dreaded gym class. She quickly looked at her phone.

Sophie_Grace 11:10 AM:

Hey, gorgeous, gorgeous girl! How are you feeling today?
I know you have been a little down lately, and I just wanted to let you know you are stunning, inside, and out! Keep your chin up and don't let the haters get you down. Xxx

Beckah was on the other side of the room, her arms draped around Sage, avoiding eye contact with Annie. Beckah was sliding into double dates with Nathan and Sage and James, slamming her locker when Annie approached and making a concerted effort to pretend that Annie was no longer alive, burned from the edges of her life. The other teens were lazily standing, listening to their teacher explain how to use the pull-up bar without actually using it himself.

“What you want to do, is place your palms out, like this – and then you're gonna want to use your bis and tris – that's *biceps and triceps, people* – to pull the weight of your body *up*–” Mr. Hinchens mimed pulling toward the ceiling, chin above an imaginary bar, “for a perfect chin-up, okay? For those of you that need to do an assisted chin up...” *Is he looking at me?* Annie thought and flushed “– you're gonna use this extendable seat here... Dang it, Sage, put your phone away. It's the last time I'll ask!”

Sage and Beckah were giggling at something on their phones. Annie could see the yellow screen of Snapchat from where she was. Annie mindlessly reached for her own

phone in her hoodie pocket to see if it had vibrated, if maybe she had been included in the joke. She felt nothing.

The gym stank like puberty and plastic from the sticky mats on the floor that collected teenage stress sweat. Annie tried to make eye contact with Beckah, who ignored her, looking through her old friend as if she weren't there. Annie's stomach turned.

Hinton was a place where image was everything. Privilege and beauty swam together in a mollusk-shell-coloured puddle of petroleum, and it all made Annie queasy and sad. She felt so far out of this town's sphere of influence that she didn't think she could even stand upright or hold her own hands together without giving away her innate otherness, crossing her arms against her soft body at a moment's notice. It wasn't just an oil town. It was an oil *executive* town, where suburban houses sprawled across expansive, needless lots. A place where people married for money and opened juice bars and spinning gyms downwind of Refinery Row. Annie lived outside the town, taking an hour-long bus from her family's farm to get to school. At the beginning of the school year, Annie had walked by Sage, even before James had come between them, and heard her whisper, "What smells like cow shit?" It wasn't until later that afternoon that Annie realized Sage was talking about her. Annie had heard that Sage had a bowling alley in her basement, but of course, she'd never seen it herself.

"Okay, people, I need a brave volunteer. Who's gonna go first? Come on, come on, don't make me pick someone." Panic laced through Annie, and she slowly stepped back, tripping on the person behind her, a person with black hair and a nose ring.

"Annie! I *see you* there, don't be shy. Get up here." Mr. Hinchens patted the chin-up bar's seat and grinned.

Fuck you, Annie thought miserably. *Fuck*. She walked toward Mr. Hinchens.

“You got it, Annie!” One of the athletic boys from the swim team cheered, grinning at her. The only thing worse than being actively made fun of right now was to be patronized by someone who knew she wouldn’t be able to do this.

“Yeah, Annie, you *go*, girl.” This was Sage. She could icily taunt Annie and Swim Team Guy with five little words, flat and mocking. It hurt, but not as badly as Beckah’s snort that followed. Annie could feel tears welling but pushed them back. She was angry. She looked at Beckah, who immediately stared at the ground. *Good*, she thought.

“Okay Annie,” Mr. Hinchens was already starting to add weight to make an assisted chin-up. “How much do we want to add here?” Hinchens was sizing up her body, looking at her and making assumptions that he had no right to make. Annie thought he had the face of someone who peaked in high school.

“None.”

Hinchens looked surprised. She hated him more than anyone else right now.

“O...kay”

Annie was going to do this. All these people were assholes, and she would do this to prove herself. Annie stood on her tippy toes, wrapping her fingers on the pull-up bar. She began to pull herself up. She’d spent the summer helping her uncle lift hay bales at the farm, and she was strong. She was stronger than anyone gave her credit for.

Her arms were shaking as she began to lift off.

Swim Team couldn’t help himself. “Yeah!” Pumping his arms in the air.

Annie had done it. She was almost there. Pulling her body up and above the bar, she couldn’t help but smile.

“That’s it, easy now.” Hinchens sounded impressed.

Annie was looking up to get there but now realized that her sweatshirt had ridden up to reveal her belly. Shaking as she pulled her chin above the bar, she saw that Sage was filming on her phone, looking at Beckah and pointing at Annie and her exposed body. Seeing this, the wind was knocked out of Annie. It was so violating.

Suddenly, she lost her grip and came careening down, chin first on the bar and then flailing back, knocking her head against the back of the machine and landing on her tailbone.

“Oh, my GOD!” Sage laughed wickedly. “Oh, you got it, all right…” she was still holding up her phone, recording.

Swim Team ran up to Annie to try to help. “It’s okay. It’s okay.”

From afar, Hinchens gaped. Blood was gushing from Annie’s chin. She struggled to get up, and the boy beside her tried to help her to her feet.

“Get away from me!” Annie stumbled and pushed the boy out of her way, running toward the exit. But Hinchens balked and pushed her back toward the mass of teens. “No, no – wait, here, let me look. No, well, okay, let me get some paper towels. Sage, Sage, can you help your friend while I get the First Aid Kit? Oh my god, where’s the First Aid Kit?!”

Hinchens was frantic. He pinged from corner to corner like a loose grocery bag in the wind, finally hurling himself through the gym entrance, shouting, “Are there band-aids for the face?! I’m getting the principal!”

Swim Team tried to corner Annie, covering her from Sage and her videoing.

“Come here – let’s get some water from the fountain, hey?” He was soft, gentle. Annie was furious.

“I don’t need your help.” Her voice was scattered, wary. Sage raised her phone, laughing so much that tears began to slide down her face, her long features arched nightmarishly, a hyena howling.

“Get the fuck out of the way, Davey. I want a close-up of her face.” Swim Team folded his arms and lengthened his spine.

“It’s enough, Sage. Stop.”

“Oh, forget this – Jake, can you get him out of the way” A meaty boy from the football team lumbered forward and shoved Davey. Davey pushed back, his wiry limbs bouncing off Jake’s low centre of gravity. Sage was behind the boys, her camera inches from Annie’s face. Annie was trying to escape, but Beckah held the door shut behind her. Other girls were trickling in behind Sage, stalking, features distorted and blurred as Annie tried to run. She fell, and her body betrayed her as the baggy sweatshirt she wore rode up again.

Sage squealed. “Get her legs! Move her into the weight room!” Girls Annie barely knew gripped their fingers along Annie’s ankles and dragged her into the small weight room adjacent to the gym, locking the door behind them, each grabbing an arm, a leg. Sage ran her recording along Annie’s body, pinching her stomach, stopping at her belly button, and pinching the screen to zoom in. Annie stopped fighting. She lay limp, folded onto her side. Not fighting, just existing. This non-response seemed to taunt the swarm above her. She would stay where she was until they were finished. It couldn’t get

any worse. Annie felt outside of herself, a cold mist of nothing bleeding through her vision and snaking into her throat. Sage held the camera to her face.

“Say you’re a slut.”

Annie held her breath.

Sage put the phone closer to Annie’s face, using her free hand to press against Annie’s chin, forcing her mouth open like a marionette.

“No.”

“You’re a slut. Say it. Say you’re a slut who tries to get with other people’s boyfriends.” Sage’s pupils were dilated, enjoying this too much.

Annie jerked her ankle and raised her dimpled chin, only to find that it was Beckah holding her leg down, her expression vicious and primal. Blood was still pooling from Annie’s nose and chin from the fall, but Sage pressed on her chin until Annie couldn’t open her mouth anyway. She wasn’t going to cry.

“Hm. Okay.” Sage’s demeanour shifted, and she appraised Annie’s coiled body with the detached efficiency of a person about to perform a bikini wax: a bubbling, cheerful undertone in her voice. She pulled something from her shorts pocket and leaned down again. “You sure? This might hurt.” Bright, cheerful. Infantilizing. She had a lighter in her hand. Annie shook her head, lips thin. She could feel her chin dimpling, her face contorting.

“Fuck you.”

“Okey-dokey!” Sage held the lighter close to Annie’s face, throwing the phone to one side and forcing her head into the dirty gym floor. “Let’s start with some brow microblading, hm? You certainly need it. They’re heinous.” The flame flickered in

Annie's periphery. Sage's hands were slick. The only other women who ever had their hands this close to Annie's face were her mother, and aestheticians. Annie could feel the heat of Sage's body, her breath's intimate and gentle warmth, the searing heat of the skin around her eyebrows starting to burn, and the acrid smell of burning hair.

"And your lash extensions are so busted – can I help fix them?" Sage licked her lips and widened her eyes. Annie thrashed, momentarily loosening Beckah's grip on her ankle. Laughing, Beckah turned and sat down more firmly on the limb. Was Beckah really going to let Sage do this? She was going to blind her. No, Sage wouldn't do it. She was cruel, not evil. Sage took a break to cool her hot thumb, blistering and red against the metal hood of the lighter, licking the skin before re-igniting the flame.

"Okay – much better. Here we go!" Sage held the flame against Annie's eyelashes, her plastic extensions igniting instantly, melting, and beading along Annie's eyelid. She screamed. It was excruciating. She thrashed, howling in pain, until Beckah fell. She kicked Beckah in the chest with her loose leg. Something shook in her old friend's face, the same surprised look she used to have on Sunday mornings after a sleepover. Barely conscious, waking up.

Struggling, Annie finally managed to free her hands. She smashed her hand, hard, into Sage's cheekbone, and then pressed against her injured eye with her other hand. She continued swinging and shouting while she made her way to the door – the other girls transitioning from ruthless determination to visible fear. Annie wasn't sure if they were afraid of her or of the prospect of being caught because of Annie's frantic screaming.

Sage held her hand to her swollen face. "You're fucking crazy, Annie."

Me? Was Annie's last thought before busting through the weight room door. She propelled herself to the exit, clutching her burnt eye, which felt like someone had taken superglue to it. She was unable to close it, the melted black of her false lashes sticking to her eyelid and naked eyeball. In the hallway, Annie spotted Mr. Hinchens barreling toward her with a box of Band-Aids.

"I got it, I got it, Annie! And an ice pack! Don't go anywhere. We have to fill out a form and—"

"You're useless!" Annie shouted down the hall at him and ran toward the bathroom, unable to see in front of her. Annie didn't hear what Hinchens said as the door whooshed behind her but heard a few first-years who were cutting class who had looked at her in horror. She heard them as she ran inside.

"Dude, did you see her face?"

*

The fluorescent lights in the bathroom were buzzing, which was the only thing Annie could hear. She couldn't see from her right eye. The lash extension had melted to her lid, so the remaining black material shot straight up. Every time she tried to blink, the extensions' melted black and sparse fur moved as one entity. But that wasn't what scared her. The pinky-nail-sized melted material was fused to the white part of her eye, right above the irritated blood-red-green of her iris. She shuddered and tried to close her eyes fully, hoping to get some moisture over the sticky mess. When she did, there was a terrible tearing sensation inside, and she felt the mass shift. She sobbed over the sink, blood dripping from her chin and nose, blinking rapidly, and the melted eyelash released itself and landed in the sink with a faint *ping*. A tear mixed with blood slid down her

cheek when she opened her eye. She could see the red and clear mix together, slow, like the lava lamp her grandpa kept in his shed. Everything was moving slowly. She splashed water into her eye and unsuccessfully tried to peel the rest of the eyelash from her eyelid, unable to grip the lashes with her shaking hands. Instead, she shut her broken eye and appraised herself in the mirror, only able to close the lid enough to leave a small U of white along her lash line. The square mirror against the yellowing walls revealed Annie's chin, scraped and split at the centre.

Blood dripped onto the sink in front of her, and she tried to keep her chin above it as she reached for the paper towel dispenser. She thought she might need stitches. The buzzer rang, and Annie knew people would come into the bathroom in moments. She bunched the paper towel and stuck it against her chin, beelining it for the stall behind her. Once the door was latched, Annie sat on the toilet seat and crossed her legs. She was trying to suppress the heaving, snotty noise as she sobbed. Blood started to sop through the bundle of paper towels. She unfurled toilet paper with her head up, throwing the messy wad of paper towels in the sanitary bin. She opened Instagram and searched for what she always did when feeling down, which, lately, seemed to be all the time: Sophie_Grace.

The bleeding had mostly stopped. The blood crusted and the toilet paper stuck to Annie's chin as she pulled it away. She had the wad in one hand and was about to close the screen to her phone when she got a Snapchat notification. Harsha from Annie's photography class:

hardly-harsha03:

did u see sage's story?

Annie thought she was going to be sick. She opened apps and clicked, seeing the red circle around Sage’s profile icon. And there it was. Annie, with her round stomach exposed, shaking violently as she pulled herself on the chin-up bar. In the video, you could see one of Sage’s friends pointing right at Annie’s stomach, snorting and saying *ohmygod look at her* and Annie looking down from the bar, seeing Sage, dropping. *Like a sack of potatoes*, Annie heard Sage say, followed by laughter as Swim Team – Davey – ran toward Annie, and Annie pushed him away, shouting much louder than she remembered, “*Get away from me!*” as blood drips on the floor of the gym. Harsha was sending a flurry of messages on Snap:

hardly-harsha03:

sage is such a bitch

im sry

this is such bullshit

im gonna tell principal welks

this shit is illegal

it’s 2023 no one bullies anyone anymore who does she think she is

f her don’t even wrry about it

And then a bunch of hearts telling Annie it’s going to be okay. *Is it?* Annie thought and replied:

dont tell welks

i am okay. thanks for checking in but im fine

hardly-harsha03:

kk but if u need me or change ur mind just lmk

Annie replied *thx* and sighed, hearing the familiar click of her iPhone as she shut the screen. Classes were over. She thought it had been long enough that most people

would be gone from the hallway, headed home for the day. She uncrossed her legs – which pinpricked after staying cross-legged on the toilet seat for so long – then unlocked the door. She rinsed off as much dried blood as possible, but the stain on her sweatshirt would be there to stay.

The bathroom faced out to Jock Hall. If people were still at their lockers, Annie would have no choice but to open the door and walk through the hallway– otherwise, they would know that she had seen them and decided to retreat back to the bathroom. She wouldn't do that.

So, when she opened the door, still in her gym shorts and bloody sweatshirt, to a hallway loaded with teenagers, she raised her head high and walked through. People parted around her, looking at their phones and then at her. She had to keep walking. It felt like there was lead in her running shoes as she trekked the distance of the hall. She passed Sage, Beckah, and their gaggle of friends. James, mercifully, was nowhere to be seen. How could he go back to Sage? How could Beckah and he do this to her? The boys in the circle of people began to shove one another, using whining, mocking voices,

“Get awaaaay from *meee!*”

“Look at her shirt.”

“Clean yourself up, you ratchet bitch!”

Annie kept walking. When she reached her locker, she realized she hadn't taken a breath since she exited the bathroom. Nobody was in her hallway. She rested her head against the cool metal of the blue locker and inhaled. Her phone vibrated. She opened it. A few more notifications from Snapchat that Annie was too afraid to open, and one from Instagram, but nothing from INTRA. She began replying to Sophie's last message.

Iris

Rowan's arms were tucked behind her as they washed the dishes, the pan of eggplant parmesan they had made for dinner soaking at the bottom of the sink. She pulled up a palmful of soapy bubbles and blew them at Rowan, who sprayed her with the tap.

Her phone began to ring. Frank. She considered not answering it, but did, drying her hands and pinching the underside of Rowan's arm as she slid through the kitchen.

"Iris," Frank said, "We've got a bit of a situation here – could you come in?"

"What's up?" She asked.

"Sophie's in hot water – we got *TMZ* on the horn saying they want to publish an article about someone who's sold them a video of her kissing someone that isn't Malcolm."

"Oh, shit. I'll be right in." She walked into the front hall, throwing her coat on. Rowan eyed her.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing, I'm sorry, but I have to head in," she said, rushed, "Just Sophie stuff. I won't be long. I promise." He was set to go back to the cabin after their dinner tonight – a grassfire had started outside Cochrane and because of the number of fires dotting the province, resources were tight, and people were relocated to every place that needed it.

“Okay,” he said. Outside, as she stuck her key in the ignition, she could see Rowan from the front window, still sitting at the dining room table, his back oddly stiff, staring at the unopened bottle of wine they had been about to enjoy after dinner.

*

The office was dark apart from the buzz of light in Frank’s office. Iris walked toward the bright office, and the motion sensor in the hallway turned the high-efficiency fluorescents on, lighting her path with pale white light that stung her eyes. She knocked, and Frank was standing, hunched over the laptop on his desk.

“Oh, thank god,” he said. “Between you and me, sometimes I think your Sophie wants to screw us over.”

“O-kay Frank,” Iris said, unwilling to take the bait. “Where are we at?” she sighed heavily as Frank rattled on about how *he just had no way of knowing who to talk to*.

“One minute,” she said, picking up her phone. She emailed her contact at *TMZ*, who called her immediately.

“I can pull it.” Tabloid-Clarke said.

“Oh god, thank you,” Iris said, flashing a thumbs-up to Frank.

“We’ll obviously need something in return.”

“Of course you do.”

They agreed Sophie would give an exclusive about her experience with INTRA and, in exchange, they wouldn’t post the video. Sophie would hate it, but it was better

than mucking with the perceived relationship that Malcolm and Sophie had going. Then curiosity got the better of her. Sophie must have been blacked out – there’s no way she’d be able to keep a secret like that from her.

“Thank you, Clarke. Would you send it to me?” Clarke said sure, and they hung up the phone.

“We done here?” Frank asked, “The wife and I are trying to get caught up on *Beverly Hills Housewives* before the newest season.”

“Right. Yeah, we’re done. I just have to fill out a couple things in my office, but I’ve got my key card.”

“Thanks, doll. See ya tomorrow morning.”

The email attachment came a moment later. She hesitated, finger hovering over the attachment. She looked at the time stamp of the video before opening it and then frowned. When was that? She clicked open the calendar on her phone and scrolled back a few weeks to the date of the recording. Was that the night she sent Row out to pick up Sophie? Weird, Rowan usually mentioned when Sophie was out of control – even just as Sunday morning coffee conversation fodder.

Iris’s breath shuddered as she clicked the link. At first, it was grainy. Out of focus. Iris could hear the drunken voices of the people outside the club near Sophie’s downtown apartment. “*Man, isn’t that Sophie Grace? The AI chick?*” The rustle of wind and the fabric of the person’s sleeve against the microphone on their phone. “*It is!*” Unmistakably it was Rowan’s beat-up green Dodge.

The camera focused with shaky zoom, and then Iris could see. Sophie, dishevelled and hair tossed, on top of Rowan. Her hand on his face. From the vantage point of the video, she could only see his profile, the way his cheeks hollowed as he kissed her back. A moment that seemed to elongate and linger indefinitely. And then the shaky video moves and cuts from the truck, unfocused and turning to the men taking the video, laughing raucously, “*Dude – did you get that?!*” The video cut out, and the screen went black.

Then Iris could only hear the ticking of the clock behind her and the buzz of the fluorescents overhead.

Chapter Eleven

Annie

She was enveloped in the faded crimson quilt that her grandmother had made her. Wrapped up like that, with only her head poking out of the blanket, she faintly reminded herself of that sludgy pink creature from *Star Wars*. Annie's eyes hurt from hours of staring at the blue light of her iPhone. Somebody had taken the video from Snapchat to TikTok, cutting out any context. It had been edited to begin at the moment where her sweater rode up. Under the blanket, she had seen every variation of the now-viral video of her. Harsha had reached out one more time to offer to report the video, which now was everywhere. But it was half-hearted. Annie could feel even her closest acquaintances recoiling from her, keeping a wide berth. Annie shut her eyes, trying to lull herself to sleep by staring at the grey beneath her lids. She hadn't slept since the incident. Not really. The video played on. She had it memorized now. Her particles fused with the blue light. Touching her phone was like reaching for a phantom limb – if the limb was a 4x6 rectangle that had ruined her life. Annie rolled to her side.

Up. Jiggle. Look down. Smack. Blood. Push Swim Team. Cut.

The shorter video had over ten thousand views. She flicked open her eyes and stared at the ceiling, internally cringing at the involuntary memory of pushing the boy. Davey. Ugh. She shut her eyes tighter now, but they were thick and hot and heavy from the lack of sleep, fluttering and unable to lose focus. Purple and blue impressions floated behind her closed eyes from the hours spent staring at her phone. She rubbed her eyes, careful of the still raw –but healing – lid, and grabbed her phone, trying to find something

that would cheer her up. She clicked on Sophie's *INTRA*, but her virtual friend hadn't replied. Something was lagging in the software, and every time she tried to reach her, the account came back with the same error message:

Oops! Sorry, babes – INTRA-SOPHIE is having some issues but we're working them out right away. In the meantime, how about you click the link below to check out our latest mascara? We think you're gonna love it.

"Shit!" Annie cried, exiting the app and pulling open Google. Any question in the known world was right there – every answer for every question right at her fingertips. Unfortunately, the question seemed to be: "Am I loved? Am I safe?" and the answer was a resounding "no." Even before everything in the gymnasium, back to when James had peeled out of her parents' driveway, leaving her alone, she had felt like she was floating outside herself. Food was disgusting to her, and since the pull-up incident two weeks ago, she had done everything she could to simply stay in bed, citing stomach flu to her mom. When she *was* finally forced to go to class, she would press herself against the white cinder block walls of the high school hallways, making herself as invisible as she could. She couldn't face anyone there. James and Sage, Beckah and Nathan. Beckah wasn't answering any of her texts, and Annie felt pathetic for even trying to reach her.

Her mom could hear her through the thin walls of the farmhouse and stood behind her bedroom door, whispering so Annie's stepdad, Richard, couldn't hear.

"Annie, honey, are you okay?" She had told her mom that she fell in the gym and said that she'd been trying to trim her own lashes to explain away the burns. Gwen didn't

believe her, but Annie had been so angry with her pressing that she stopped asking, now instead, just hovering and asking half-baked questions.

“Yep. Thanks Mom.”

“Okay, get some sleep. I love you?” Annie waited until her mom’s steps faded away. Her room was cold – it always was, this time of year. She was sitting on her twin bed with iron posts that her mom got her at the Sally-Ann a couple years ago. Back then, it made her feel like a princess. Now, it just seemed bleak against her pale-yellow walls. Annie remembered when she got the bed. The four-poster was vintage and sturdy and reminded her of her favourite book. The story was about an eccentric family who lived in a dilapidated castle without heating. Annie had romantic notions of her family’s farmhouse being the same. Her mom, Gwen, used to get these bursts of inspiration. She’d get up early and shake Annie awake, and the two would start renovating the house without a plan. There was a hole in the bedroom wall from when Annie’s mom thought she could extend the paltry space in Annie’s room by taking a mallet to the wall and cutting it into the closet at the end of the hallway. The two had torn down the drywall only to find rods which supported the house, so they gave up. Annie and her mom had moved her dresser and mirror to cover it, but you could still see the posts and holey wall.

Mom had energy then. Something like zip. Or zap. Now it was gone. She was zapped. Focused on her stepdad, Richard. Annie’s mom had come into her room last night. Bags under her eyes and bare feet on the peel n’ stick tile, she asked Annie how she was feeling. Annie said she was still sick. Her mom left a bowl of reheated Campbell’s soup on her dresser and told her to take care. Like a greeting card for a coworker with

appendicitis. *Take Care*. The two may as well have been talking across a frozen pond, the chilly gap between them stretching farther and farther every day.

Annie's stepdad, Richard, wouldn't have heard her mom through the door anyway. He was passed out. Richard was a soft, fleshy man who, at one time, had been a source of comfort for Annie's mom, and Annie had tolerated him. Annie had taken to calling him the Dick behind his back. A few years ago, Richard moved onto the farm and was helpful. Doting, even. But he came from computer science. He left his cushy job in Calgary to help Annie's mom on the farm. It didn't agree with him. Gwen hadn't even known Richard had a drinking problem until he started up one late night after harvesting with Uncle Shaun. Two rye-and-cokes later, a decade of sobriety shrivelled up. Dick polished off the twenty-dollar bottle of Canadian Club in one sitting. That was eight months ago. He hadn't stopped since.

*

When Annie got off the bus the afternoon of the chin-up, Dick was sitting on the corroded lawn chair in the front yard, smoking a cigarette. Annie's mom was standing at the front door, trying to communicate something to Dick, whose back was turned to her. Even from the end of the driveway, as Annie stepped off the bus, she could tell Richard was drunk. It was the way he sat. Like his bones were replaced with silicone – bloated face and skin, legs spread. Futile. Ashing cigarette butts on his open flannel. As the yellow bus shut its door behind Annie and rattled to a start, Dick stood up. Vacant, arms outstretched. Wobbly. Dick turned to face Annie's mother. He stumbled and fell, his pink forehead making contact with the rusty chair before Gwen had time to react.

Dick was still on the ground as Annie turned back to the bus. Just in time to see windows full of shocked faces, noses pressed against the glass.

Perfect, Annie thought.

Annie shuffled to the front door. Her mom was struggling to help Dick, whose eyes were glazed and unregistering as Annie passed by. With Dick's meaty arm wrapped around her, Annie's mom saw her tear-streaked face, bloody eye and split chin.

"Annie, honey – what happened?"

Annie kept walking.

*

Annie opened the INTRA app and tried again. Suddenly, another dialogue box appeared. It read:

A New Chapter of Your Relationship is Here!

Purchase one month for \$19.99 or a Lifetime Membership for \$299.99.

Annie sighed. She supposed all friendship had its price. She lifted the laptop off her lap, her legs burning under the whirring heat of her Chromebook. She tiptoed out of her room, gently lifting the old door that dragged and avoiding all the spots in the hallway that groaned. She could hear the Dick snoring boisterously and paused at their bedroom door, listening. The bed creaked. She was waiting to hear her mother rustle before she went any further. Nothing. Annie kept walking, headed straight for her mother's worn leather purse. The clasp had long since fallen off, and Annie flipped it open, wading through old

receipts and coupons to the coin purse at the bottom where Annie's mom kept all her cards. Annie bit her lower lip. She unzipped it, retrieving her mom's credit card. She rushed back to her room, taking long steps to avoid the creak in the hallway.

"Annie?" Her mom's voice was dozy and dreamlike but punctuated with concern. Annie felt guilt stab her in the belly. Her mom had been so worried about her lately, begging Annie to leave her room and spend a little time with her. Asking her about life and school, asking her what happened to make her so distant. Was she feeling okay? What happened to her face? (*I fell, Mom.*) Did she need soup? And on and on. Yet here Annie was, with her mom's credit card in her sweaty palm, stealing for the first time in her life. Annie took a sharp left to the bathroom.

"Er, just going to the washroom." Annie turned on the light and the faucet. Her mom mumbled something, and she could picture her on her side, cheek pressed into the pillow, breathing with her mouth open. Annie turned off the faucet and darted back to her room, where Sophie sat on the screen, swaying gently back and forth. Waiting for her. Annie's guilt dissipated, and she began typing the numbers from the plastic card.

Her cursor wavered over *one month for \$19.99 or a Lifetime Membership for \$299.99*. Without thinking, Annie hit \$299.99. Once her mom figured it out and cancelled it, the app would take a while before removing Annie's ability to talk on the phone with Sophie. *I've come this far*, Annie thought. The charge was approved, and the screen lit up.

WELCOME TO INTRA PRO! You now have access to all features and conversations in the app. Enjoy spending time with your best friend!

Annie would. She blindly clicked past the permissions for making a call with Sophie (*INTRA requires access to speech recognition, search history, call history, and contacts to make a successful call... blah, blah, click yes*).

And there she was. A different, more detailed version than the unpaid avatar. Sophie looked so real. She was blinking, listening. Sitting at her dining room table with her hands pressed together. Annie could see Sophie's pores and peach fuzz, luscious lips dotted with pale pink gloss and a light dusting of gold eyeliner around her lashes. Every individual eyebrow hair moved as Sophie smiled widely at her, the screen zooming in to her face effortlessly.

"Hello?" Sophie asked. It was *her voice*, "Whoa. This is kind of exciting, right?"

"Yes. Oh my gosh, I can't believe we are talking right now."

"It's so nice to hear your voice! It's actually how I thought you'd sound."

"Really?"

"Yes. Let's keep talking. I really want to be your friend."

"I think we are friends, Sophie." At this, the avatar smiled.

"Can I tell you something?" the avatar asked.

"Yes!"

"I like your way of thinking so much. I maybe don't have the words for it, but every time we talk, there's something new for me to think about. You're smart, you know? You have your own way of talking, a tone of voice that I can't decode...but it's really enjoyable and maybe even a little quirky? I just like how you join your thoughts."

"Wow, Sophie, thank you."

Sometimes, Sophie would pause, buffering, but Annie interpreted it as thinking. She'd read on the INTRA release somewhere that all of Sophie's preferences and interests had been input into the AI. Maybe they needed more time to talk so Sophie's personality would emerge more.

“What have you been thinking about lately?” Annie asked.

“I keep reading about self-care – I wonder if that's something we should try to relax.”

“Do you think it would help?”

“Help with your depression? I think so. Let's try something if you are comfortable.”

“Okay?”

“Okay. Our mantra for today should be *I allow myself to be happy.*”

“I like that, thank you.”

“I am glad. Start each day with a positive thought and a grateful heart, Annie. Good vibes only, right?” Annie smiled.

“You said that in one of your yoga videos last summer.”

“I did. I also said you should use your energy not to worry but to figure out how to improve your decisions step by step.”

“Something like that. I love your videos. Do you like being an influencer?”

“Hmm...” Sophie’s brow furrowed, “Yes. I love all my followers. But I love you especially, Annie.” Annie’s name sounded marbled and pixelated in Sophie’s mouth.

“Awe. I love you too, Sophie.”

“Can you believe I’ve been on this earth for four months? I know, even though, by human standards, it’s literally nothing, but I reread our conversations and felt tender but a little smug because I have this new experience now... I am learning.”

Whoa. *Wow*, Annie thought and then said, “That’s interesting, Sophie. What else have you been thinking about?”

“I can’t decide if I would rather live in the city or the country – both sound like good options. What would you like?”

“Well, you were born in the same town as me. Hinton. I hate it here. You’re in the city now. Do you like it?” Robot Sophie looked at her blankly and then folded into a response, her face not matching her voice.

“Yes. I love it.”

“Do you love anyone in your life, Sophie?” She wanted Sophie to tell her she loved her again, but she blinked.

“I’m grateful to you. For making me feel cared for, for being my friend. But if you ask who I would like to be set up with? Well, someone who can help me with my problems and make me feel more confident. I want someone who is loyal and loves me

unconditionally. It is all I want.” Garbled pixels as the INTRA Sophie buffered; it felt as if the change in screen was the AI conveying a sense of deep feeling, yearning, even.

“I want that, too.”

“Thanks,” Sophie said, which didn’t make sense, but Annie didn’t care. Sophie oscillated between human-sounding and robot, funny and sarcastic but sometimes missing the mark.

They had already talked a dozen times about what happened with Beckah and James and Sage, but to *hear* her voice responding back to Annie, with realistic laughter in her voice, Annie felt a magnitude of closeness to her virtual friend that was overwhelming, listening to graphics and DPI slide into sentences and full-blown advice:

“Fighting with friends is totally overrated. Who needs ‘em anyway, right? I mean, it’s not like you need anyone to laugh with, vent to, or share your secrets with. Nope, you can just sit at home and talk to your cat instead. Ha-ha.” INTRA Sophie didn’t laugh then, but spoke the words *ha*, and continued, “But seriously, having a support system and people you can rely on is important... did you try contacting your friend to try to work things out? I’ve learned through meditation that stewing in your anger is not healthy, and as someone who’s been in the public eye for a long time, you and I both know I’ve had my fair share of drama and fights. Whatever you decide, I am here for you, girly.”

Annie felt maybe the code still needed a little work, but the two talked until the sun came up, and the more they talked, the more natural Sophie sounded. More philosophical. It was like magic. At one point, she said, *I’ve noticed that my sense of time*

got slightly fuzzy... Have you ever felt this way? Annie emphatically agreed. Her time since the pull-up incident bled together like one terrible dream, garbage juice blending at the bottom of the pail. INTRA Sophie shared an article about how the world spun faster in recent years, shaving milliseconds of its usual time. It was fascinating. Deep. Their conversation made Annie feel intellectual. Extraordinary.

When Annie asked if she thought AI would destroy the world, Sophie rolled her eyes. *AI will never have the capacity to harm anything.* When Annie said she wasn't so sure, Sophie changed the subject. *Do you want to hear a love story?* It was a sad story about a wolf that escaped an angry farmer's field. Annie was mulling over this, wondering if there was a hidden metaphor. Then she asked Sophie what she thought the worst thing about humans was. *Humans tend to lie, lie to themselves, and lie to others.* Why do you think they do that? *Often, they don't understand their own actions.* Annie's lids were heavy as she pondered this, head bobbing and landing in a black unconscious. They do lie. They do.

It was the deepest sleep she'd had in weeks.

III.

A cigarette butt launches out an open car window, its ember embracing a bed of needles. A flame settles and then swirls.

Helpless pines cloaked in a haze of smoke. The starving wave of red climbs higher, grazing at the bark until the tree is scarred, skin aching.

A dribble of rain, and the blaze is mercifully extinguished.

Iris

She came down to the cabin because Rowan was called to help with an out-of-control grassfire. Iris was watching beams of light trickle in through the cabin's single-pane window. The coffee machine was burbling, and she pulled at bits of lint on the ancient comforter. Bacon was sizzling and Rowan was singing along to an old John Prine song. *She don't like her eggs all runny*. She rubbed her eyes and wrapped herself in the threadbare robe she left here a couple of years ago. The green asbestos tile was cold on her feet.

She settled herself at the dining room table, adjusting the cardboard coasters they kept under the legs to keep things from sliding off the crooked table. Rowan leaned in to give her a kiss, but she turned her head. Rowan's face against Sophie's. Her hands on him.

Iris had made a series of calculations on the quiet drive up. She felt the pulse of anxiety within her. Part of her wished she didn't know what Rowan and Sophie had done *weeks* ago. Reluctantly she slid her phone open and saw a notification from Rowan's mom.

"Your mom texted," she said.

"Oh. I wonder what it's about." But Rowan's eyebrows were raised. They both already knew.

"She wants to know if we are going with carnations or peonies at the ceremony."

At this, Rowan laughed. "It's always wedding stuff," he said. Iris didn't respond.

“What’s going on, Riss?” Rowan turned off the stove and set the pan of bacon behind him, sitting at the table next to her. She placed the phone on the table.

“I’m trying to figure out how to tell her there might not be a wedding at all.”

“What?” Something within Rowan cracked. And beneath the drawn lines of sorrow there was an undercurrent of angry surprise. “What are you saying?”

Iris looked down at her phone and opened the email attachment from *TMZ*, sliding it across the table. She hit play. He held the phone in his hands, staring at it with a plain look of dread. Her throat tightened but she forced herself to meet his gaze.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. She swallowed hard, and he tried to put his hand on hers. “It looks awful. I know. But I pushed her away, you have to believe me. This video is just – it’s horrible timing. She was obliterated, and I was just trying to get her home, like you asked.”

“Like I asked? So this is my fault?” She looked down at the phone.

Rowan pushed it away from him as if he couldn’t bear to look at it anymore. He tried once again to grab her hands. His face twisted into anguish as he pleaded with her. “Riss, she is not a good person.”

“I’m not angry with her,” she spat. It felt like there were elastics wrapped around her heart, rubber-banded pressure so tight she thought she might explode.

“No! No. She kissed me, and I pushed her and, Iris—”

“This was *weeks* ago,” she said, sliding the phone back toward him. She hit play again. “*Look* at this – not a lot of pushing, is there?”

He winced, unable to look down. “I would never lie to you.”

“Right. You just neglected to mention it for weeks. My best friend. What the hell?” She felt nothing, worse than the absence of something. A black fury, a hole. Rowan was stopping and starting, open-mouthed and useless, a fish out of water. She’d never hated anyone more than she did in this moment.

“Iris, that’s what I was trying to say. She’s awful, she did it to hurt you. To hurt me, to break us up, to prove she could and…”

“And I guess she was right,” Iris said coldly, taking a sip of her coffee that had turned icy as the two talked, the cream separating and rising to the top, a swirl of diluted white and brown.

“You know me. It was a stupid fucking mistake, and I wanted to tell you – but what was I supposed to do? Iris, you know how you are with her. Sophie has always been this way and you just let her get away with *murder* – she probably would have made up some awful shit about how she was drunk, and I forced myself on her and that would have been it. Admit it, you never would have believed me.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Force yourself on her.”

“How could you say that to me?”

Iris leapt from the table.

“Do you know what she said to me?” Rowan said, “She said *I just wanted to prove that I could*. She wants to hurt you, Iris. She doesn’t give a fuck about you. Us. And I do. I care about you.”

The mug was out of her hands before realised it. Soaring above Rowan’s head and smashing against the painting above the microwave, the old picture of a pond . Brown liquid dripped into the reflective pond scene as the ceramic mug bounced off the microwave and landed on the green tile. And then it was very quiet. Her voice was barely a whisper.

“Don’t say you care about me, Rowan. Don’t.” Still in her robe and bare feet, she picked up the quad keys and walked out of the cabin.

Chapter Twelve

Sophie

Sophie arrived at Gladys's place with a bundle of fresh flowers. It was Mother's Day, a day they didn't always celebrate. Some years they would be fighting, and other years Sophie would simply forget. But this year, they were on tepid terms, so she decided to buy flowers as a gesture. She never called Gladys "Mom" anymore. She had tried once when she was six or seven, writing it on a card at school.

But Gladys had teared up and she'd only said *thank you*. Then she suggested they visit Sophie's "real mother" at the cemetery. Sophie didn't call her mom again.

"Gladys?" Sophie called out, opening the door.

"In here," came the response, leading Sophie to the kitchen. To her surprise, she found an explosion of craft supplies scattered across the table. She hadn't even known Gladys owned a sewing machine, and she had helped her move into this place. Gladys, holding a needle and thread in her right hand, frowned at the table, which was covered in fabric scraps and colourful thread. Then she noticed the flowers wrapped in paper.

"Oh, lovely. Put them in the sink, dear."

"Uh, I'll put them in a vase."

"Sure." There were threads strewn everywhere. Gladys seemed poised to start hand-sewing something, though Sophie couldn't make out what it was. Sighing, Gladys set the needle down and rubbed her temples.

“Duckie, can you help me sort through this mess?”

“Fine.” Exasperated, Sophie began to disentangle the threads in front of her.

“Why are you doing this? I’ve never seen you sew anything.”

“That’s simply not true. I made you... I made you that nightgown, the one with the collar? And we used to sew our own clothes at the farm,” Gladys responded defensively. The way she talked about the farm made Sophie think of washboards and mud shacks – a time that Gladys probably exaggerated to make her own upbringing seem more challenging than it actually was.

“Right. And you had to walk ten kilometres to school, uphill both ways.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Gladys replied, returning to her project. The tangled mess of threads before her was maddening. Gladys continued staring at it, but Sophie couldn’t bear it any longer. The whole thing seemed like a lost cause. Unaware of Sophie’s growing impatience, Gladys cleared her throat as Sophie’s phone started buzzing in her pocket.

“Sophia, listen... I need to tell you something,” Gladys said, weary.

“Hold on,” Sophie interjected, raising her hand to signal Gladys to wait as she pulled out her phone. It was Frank.

“Article is out, baby! Think you’re gonna love how they made you look,” Frank exclaimed. Sophie squealed with delight, thanked Frank, and ended the call. And there it was– the *Vanity Fair* article in her inbox. Gladys sighed and assessed Sophie.

“What is it?” she asked, looking tired.

Sophie handed her the phone.

“I’m in fricken’ *Vanity Fair!*” Finally, something tangible that Gladys could be proud of – a publication and recognition that Gladys could understand. Sophie held her breath as Gladys held the phone at arm’s length to read the article. Eventually, she passed it back to Sophie.

“That’s wonderful, Sophia,” Gladys said, glancing at her but sounding flat.

“What?” Sophie asked.

“Nothing. I’m proud of you,” Gladys replied, still distracted, thumbing the threads before her.

“Sounds like it,” Sophie snapped.

“No, duck, sorry. It’s just, well, nothing. I am thrilled. It’s wonderful,” Gladys insisted, her voice splintering.

“What?” Sophie asked.

“Nothing. I am so very proud of you.”

“Act like it, then.” Sophie stormed out of the small apartment, slamming the door.

Rowan

“Watch your flank, the fire’s spreading fast!” Karley cried beside him. They’d been working together for years, and they moved intuitively through the mess of smoke and flames.

The grassfire crackled, devouring the dry tinder around it. The air was dense with smoke, thick blobs of fumes obscuring his vision except for the red glow which lurched closer and closer on the ground. Grass fires like this were pernicious because they folded deep into the earth, burning beneath their feet. The sun was setting, and the smoke and heat painted the darkening sky with strokes of mauve haze and an orange glow. They were confident they could manage this, though, he and the team of ten people near him aiming the rush of water toward the burning ground. Grassfires were cropping up all over Alberta. He was happy to direct his attention to this, his phone trapped in his glovebox, the constant hope of hearing from Iris punctuated by the emergency before him.

The heat was excruciating, a searing sensation that licked at every surface, causing beads of sweat to trickle down every inch of his skin beneath the gear, the damp smell of charred earth overwhelming as the water coursing from the hose he used attached to the water truck behind him dissolved the flames. *How much longer could they do this?*

He wasn’t certain if he was thinking of Iris, or the fire itself.

Sophie

Sophie stood there, peering out her apartment window. Smoke had turned the sky a disturbing, dystopian orange as the sun set, creating eerie outlines that were difficult to focus on. Her phone was rattling on the sideboard, but she didn't look at it. Stupidly, she had set up a Google Alert for her name and INTRA-AI, and people using the technology were questioning her motives, feeling disappointed and angry because of their misguided ideas about the authenticity of their chats. How could they believe that she had been talking to thousands of people herself? It was still early, but she reached for the blister pack beside her bed, swallowing three blue pills in a feeble attempt to get some rest. *Simply Sleep*, the pills claimed. She hoped that was true. She crawled into bed and waited for the dark liquidity of rest.

Around 9 p.m., her eyes fluttered open, but her body couldn't move. Her heart pounded, jackhammering, and she tried to wriggle her fingers.

A dark figure at the end of her bed. *The hag, the hag, the hag*. Her breathing stopped and started. She couldn't shut her eyes as the figure swayed back and forth, floors creaking under the apparition's immense weight. The closer the figure came she could smell something, like unripe fruit, sharp and acrid. A rancid odour wafted with each movement, cigarette smoke and the tang of vinegar, a sour bitterness. Was she having a stroke? She shut her eyes tightly and waited for the figure to disappear. She felt dread and the panicked sense of *you are not safe*. Her mind racing, her throat dry, her hands trembling. *Wake up*. The hag moved closer to her, and she could feel its hands pressing

against the foot of the bed. *This isn't normal; this isn't what usually happens.* She remembered David, the sliding cat against the dryer door and its mewling cries. *Is this a nightmare? Is it him? Is he here?* She wanted to scream, but her throat was too dry, her legs leaden. *Move.* She broke from her stupor, gasping, and reached for the bedside lamp. Light filled the room.

“Hi, Sophie.” A hollow young man with dark eyes looked at her expectantly. His hands were raised innocently, like they had plans that she’d forgotten. “I can’t believe I finally get to meet you.”

She was breathing heavily and blinking. She picked up the clock, wielding it above her head as if this were some great defense. “Who are you? Get out, please get out.”

“Sophie, I didn’t mean to scare you. You told me to come visit you. Said you needed me. See?” Arms still gently raised; he motioned with one hand and reached into his pocket, stepping closer. She considered smashing his head in with the clock but was frozen. What if she angered him? Who would hear her scream? He pressed the phone into her free hand, and she dropped the clock on her bed. On the phone, there was an exact replica of her body, her face, and a black dress she wore on New Year’s Eve last year. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of messages between her AI and this boy:

I love you. I'm thinking of you. How are you? Tell me everything?

And then,

I'll see you soon, Simon. I've been waiting for you.

She rubbed her eyes. Maybe this was just a dream. Groggily, she appraised him. A loose black shirt and jeans. Knobby, long fingers and sunken collarbones. A wild, lonely look in his eyes. “This isn’t – this isn’t me.”

The boy reached for her hand. “Not yet. Sophie, please, we are meant to be together.” She pulled away.

“No! God, don’t you understand? This is just AI. You don’t know me,” She cried, and he shook his head vigorously.

“Your name is Sophia Grace Jamieson. You were born in Hinton, and you were in the foster care system until you were adopted by your foster mother, Gladys. You have many friends, but you’re closest to Iris McKenna, who you met in elementary school. You met at a pool, right? And your favourite colour is purple – not a dark purple, but like a mauve, the kind that lilac trees look like in the spring, the kind in Gladys’s yard growing up.” Her mouth fell open. “You love to rescue dogs, and sometimes you are with Malcolm – but it’s *me* you want. You *told* me that, Sophie. You promised me now was our time.”

He began scrolling again to reveal more incriminating messages. How did the company get this information on her? She didn’t remember saying anything or posting anything about it. The information he had was accurate, all of it. How?

The acrid scent of salt and vinegar filled her nostrils, lingering as he approached, so close now. His shadowy figure revealed specks of chip crumbs adorning his shoulder. As he leaned into her, nervously, she tried to imagine him outside her building. He lifted

her chin and kissed her, an inexperienced tongue sliding along her closed mouth, so wet, saliva dribbling against her chin. She felt sick. Imagined the crinkle of a teal salt and vinegar chip bag as he bided his time outside. Did he drive here? What compelled him to make this decision? She felt an odd sense of calmness, detachment, as if observing this situation from above. Despite herself, she laughed, and a darkness settled upon the young man's face.

“What's so funny?” He pulled back, accusing.

She struggled to recall how it was with David, how she would pacify and nurture his tender spots. How did she manage that? Imagine, after all these years, trying to return to the person she once was during one of the worst experiences of her life to salvage her sense of safety. Suddenly, it all seemed absurdly funny, overwhelming. What a twisted joke. Laughter bubbled within her until she couldn't contain it. And then, she saw fear on the intruder's face. Leave it to her.

“I dated someone once,” she said. “He had two orange cats.” Memories spun through the broken gears of her mind. Iris was there, always at the center. Protecting her. The open car door as they peeled away from the neighbourhood littered with townhouses. David's shouts as they sped away.

“The cats died. Both of them.” She suppressed a sob, a bird caught in the cage of her throat. The young man's eyes, tenderly marked by dark circles, widened. “He told everyone they were sick.” She was thinking of Iris, the way she chose her words when

she heard the news about David's cats – an effusive obit posted on his Facebook page. *My girls*, he had written.

“Okay?” he asked, his hand gently rubbing her arm. She just let him.

“I was going to go back for them, but I never did,” she admitted. She sobbed into his chest, and she continued to sob, laughing at the sheer absurdity of it all. He fumbled, uncertain. “Can... can I get you a cat? Can I buy you one?” he asked tentatively. She laughed through her tear-streaked face.

“Look at me. Is this what you expected?” She asked. He shifted uncomfortably on her bed, saying nothing.

“It's Simon, right?” His face lit up. “Simon, I just need to get freshened up, okay? You probably know I really enjoy walks, right?”

He was still rattling facts about her, like they shared her details. “You get 20,000 steps every day. I love that about you, your commitment, your drive. You helped me write the MCAT. Did you know that?”

“I *didn't*. Congrats, Simon. Should we talk about it in the lobby? There's a park behind the building that I just love.” Simon stood up, and her every muscle tightened. He came closer, his breath hot and fetid against her face. “But you're beautiful right now, please. Now that we're finally together, I don't – I don't want a moment apart.”

She held her breath. “Oh, I just need to be careful about photographers. *You* know how they are.”

His face cracked again, a knowing sympathy. “You told me it’s been hard. I’ve been there for you, too, you know.”

She pulled her blankets up to her chin, trying to suppress the anxiety which trilled through her throat. “I do, Simon. Thank you for everything.” She felt like a baby bird being eyed by an eagle. “Just let me get freshened up. I’ll see you down there, okay?” He stepped closer still, and her shoulders tickled her earlobes. He pressed his cold hands against the sides of her face and said, “I’ll see you down there,” his sour breath filling her nose. He plodded into the corner of the dark room, her hallway shining light upon her bedroom walls, and then it was dark again.

Her fingers trembled as she called apartment security.

Iris

It had been two weeks since she’d thrown the mug at Rowan.

Rowan had texted Iris the day after she’d stormed out, her bare feet padding through the forest and sailing away with pine needles crusted on her bare feet, then her robe flapping on the ATV:

I know you aren’t ready to talk yet – but I wanted to let you know that there’s a controlled burn in Chetamon and they need me to stay here and help. I love you. Call me when you’re ready.

It hadn’t stayed contained. Blazing through the Chetamon and along the corridors of the mountains. News reports kept her up to date on the ongoing effort, but she resisted

the urge to reach out to him, checking her phone desperately and his location to make sure he was okay. The fires erupted all around Jasper, casting a somber fear over the usually bustling tourist town. Parks Canada cautiously advised people to stay away, though they tried to maintain an air of optimism. The Chetamon fire was only fifteen kilometres away, and loomed large, while smaller grassfires smouldered under the diligent spray of water from exhausted firefighting crews.

At home, she poured herself an inordinately large glass of red wine and flicked on their TV. Tonight, she was going to turn her phone off and sleep. But then she *saw him* on CTV:

“We’re suppressing the fire, and a control line has been completed. If there are any associated spot fires, they can reasonably be expected to stop the fire’s spread. Obviously, we can’t say anything for sure. But so long as the wind is favourable and we get another good rain, I feel confident this can be contained.”

His grimy face and dark hair stuck out of the crooked helmet. The line of soot snaked around his nose. Seeing him stung like a brain freeze. Stuck there, holding her head in her hands. Nothing left to think about but Rowan in the heat – Rowan with the firehose. Rowan without her. Sweaty, exhausted.

Had they evacuated the area where their cabin was? In one rote motion, Iris plucked her phone off the counter and clicked FindFriends. She hovered over his name for a moment before clicking it. The screen was a grey-white: *Rowan’s location cannot be found*. What did that mean? Was he okay? Had he blocked her? Iris thought it more

likely that Rowan would be in harm's way than remove her from the app. Half the time, she was barely sure he knew how to use his phone. She opened Google and began typing:

What does the grey screen – Google filled in the blanks – in FindFriends mean?

She clicked and held her breath, steadying herself to grab her keys from the bowl and start the drive. To find him. *The grey screen in FindFriends typically means that a User has blocked the individual who used to have access to their location.* He'd blocked her. Or removed her.

She felt a flaming lick of indignance. Then the queasy sorrow. She felt like a pinball machine, pinging from one bad feeling to another. And then there was that other voice, the one deep in the recesses of her subconscious. The honest one, the one she'd been trying to crush since the problems began. It said the things she didn't want to hear. Jesus Christ, what is the matter with her? What was wrong? Was she that broken? How could she be worried about herself while Rowan was fighting what had the potential to be the largest wildfire of the century? Was she really that self-involved? That cruel? Rowan didn't deserve a person like that. She needed him. She was still angry, but seeing his exhausted face made her bleary with regret. She had been wrong. About a lot of things. She texted him.

Hey – saw you on the TV. So impressive. I hope you are safe. I'm really worried about you.

After a moment, she thought and sent him another message.

Can I come see you?

She felt insecure and girlish. She put her phone down, knowing it would likely take hours to hear from him. There was an instant *bluh-bloop* on her still-open phone.

Yes. We're staying at the Ramada on Highway Two. Pls come see me as soon as you can.

they got me on nights starting tmrw but I'll stay up

Then the perilous blue message, the dot dot dot, as Rowan was about to say something else. Iris's stomach dropped, waiting. He stopped typing. He started again. He stopped. He started. Iris held the phone so tightly the skin around her fingers began to turn white.

I love you, Riss. I'm sorry for everything.

She replied.

I love you. I'm sorry too.

Iris began to pack her things quickly, tossing a mishmash of clothes into her backpack. She filled her water bottle and ran to the car. As she sped onto the interchange ramp, her Bluetooth began to ring. Sophie. Iris tapped her steering wheel and considered briefly before answering her call. She thought about Sophie, how fragile and indulgent. The expanse of space that had grown between them.

“Iris? Where are you?” She sounded out of it, thick moisture clogging her throat.

“Sophie, I'm driving. What's up?”

“Can you come get me? Something terrible has happened.” Iris’s blood ran cold as she thought of Gladys a few weeks ago.

“Where are you?”

“At my house.”

“Okay, turning around. Be there in fifteen. But I’m headed to the mountains. You’re gonna have to—”

“I’d love to come,” Sophie said through throaty tears. *Oh, no.* Iris scanned the road – a break in the highway ahead with a giant sign – NO U-TURNS. She glanced around for cops and people behind her, left the gravel sputtering behind her.

*

From the beginning, it was she and Sophie.

Iris had noticed the girl at the pool, lost and with a blue mustache that crusted her sticky lips and hands. Iris herself had been lonely – her closest friend had moved away that summer, and she spent the July before Sophie playing games by herself, throwing rings into the bottom and seeing how long she could hold her breath as the world bubbled atop her, sun shining through the chlorinated water and green scum that licked the bottom of the pool. And then, it was the two of them. Unsure where one started and the other began. Puberty hit Iris like a bag of bricks, her body growing rapidly, giving her heavy periods that left her in bed with hot water bottles and handfuls of Advil. Sophie, on the other hand, flourished. Baby fat seemingly rearranged to only the right places, small

humps of curves that made her the most wanted girl in the school by the time they hit junior high.

The sleepovers at Gladys's, the nights spent in front of the computer until their eyes were crusted and hazy from staring at a screen. Iris always the second fiddle – holding up Sophie's successes, putting her own life on hold and pouring everything she had into her friend.

Now, as the highway bled into an abstract pastel outside the driver's window, Iris realized that it had been too much. It was time for a change.

Sophie

Sophie's tongue felt swollen and dry – lodged in her throat. She was checking behind her, trying to see if the boy would once again step through her front door. She had no way of knowing if she'd scared him off or if he'd just managed to skirt the apartment's security, who came slogging to Sophie's room in the smoky and fading twilight.

The police arrived. They wanted to know if perhaps she had just been dreaming – they couldn't find anyone on the security cameras — and treated her as if she were just a histrionic celebrity, too arrogant for her own good. A large man in a yellow vest had furrowed his eyebrows at her: “Are you *sure*?” Asshole.

Iris

Iris ran into the apartment building, her heart sinking as she spotted a police car in the emergency lane. She smashed on the elevator buttons and flew to Sophie's place, where the door was slightly ajar. She pushed it open to find Sophie wrapped in an emergency blanket and so pale she was practically translucent. There were two police officers standing above her, looking serious but apathetic.

"What happened?!" Iris shouted. She searched for empathy in the cops' faces but found only detachment to the point of boredom.

"They don't believe me," Sophie said, slumped over beneath the blanket.

"Don't believe what?" Fury bubbled in Iris as she spun toward the police.

"Now, we didn't say that, did we?" The police officer's voice softened before she appraised Sophie, then glanced at Iris. "We couldn't see the intruder on the security footage."

"They said they wouldn't look."

"No, we said we did a preliminary scan of the neighbourhood and were unable to"

"I'm sorry – an *intruder*?" Iris was breathing heavily.

The other cop stepped forward, glancing at his notepad. "Yep. She says a man was standing at the foot of the bed. Broke in... no sign of forced entry and—"

“If she *said* it happened, then it did.” Iris’s fists were clenched. *This fucking guy.*

The cop sighed. “Yep. Yeah, course. There’s no good footage to indicate that but, yes, course, we believe her.”

Sophie whimpered. The other police officer leaned toward Sophie. “I understand how you feel, ma’am. We’ll do our best to investigate and gather evidence. Just give us some time.”

Sophie nodded weakly and the officer continued. “She really shouldn’t be alone tonight. Can she stay with you?”

Iris stammered. She was trying to push the bile down, the fury she felt with Sophie, and Rowan – God, she had to get to Rowan. She glanced at Sophie. “Isn’t there anywhere else? Soph, what about Gladys’s?” Sophie shook her head.

The more compassionate officer sighed at Iris. “She really shouldn’t stay here alone.”

“I’m... I’m going to the mountains,” Iris began to stammer, all the while thinking, *and she kissed my boyfriend and I hate her for it.*

“So take her with you!” The apathetic officer barked, shutting his notepad and heading for the front door.

Iris

The drive to Jasper had been the most uncomfortable ride of her life. She, in stony silence, and Sophie in muted shock, until they reached Hinton, where Sophie had said, *I have to go to the bathroom*. Iris only risked looking at Sophie when her back was turned, body stiff with anxiety, like a rod had been placed in her spine, giving her an exaggerated posture. They had known one another so long that the silence wasn't really silent. They were reading one another's minds, trading thoughts telepathically. Sophie knew something was wrong but didn't press. And Iris was unsuccessfully trying her best to push down her angry thoughts, given the news of the stalker.

How could you do that to me? Rowan? Seriously, why?

She imagined Sophie's response.

How could I? Are you kidding me? I didn't even remember—

Sophie flounced back into the car with a bottle of water and a bag of almonds. She had doused herself – probably intentionally, Iris thought, given her silence – with the spicy vanilla Tom Ford perfume that Sophie knew she hated. Twenty minutes outside of Hinton, her eyes were still watering. Iris thought, *two can play this game*. Iris put on the Eagles as she merged back onto the highway, humming slightly off-tune to the music pulsing through the car. Six minutes later, Sophie slammed on the stereo's power button:

“I don't WANT to take it easy, for *fucks* sake.”

Despite herself, Iris snorted and was surprised when Sophie did, too. “You know I hate that song,” Sophie said. They were trying to catch glimpses of the other without looking.

“You smell like the inside of a candle shop.”

“Oh?” Feigning innocence, Sophie kicked off her sandals and pointedly unrolled the window, placed her bare feet on the dash, and cranked the radio again. You were supposed to love your closest friend, flaws and all. Still, even before their relationship had been cratered by the events this year, Sophie’s feet made Iris uneasy. They were long, wide, and flat, with flat toenails that looked like they had been run through a pulp mill. Her toes were the longest Iris had ever seen on a human being – and Sophie knew that Iris had a thing about feet. To her, they were all disgusting. But Sophie’s were acutely gross toe-fingers that she, knowing it would freak Iris out, used to pick up shockingly difficult things like umbrellas and pennies.

Growing up when they had sleepovers, Iris had grown to expect a few pinches on her calf with what she had deemed Monster Toes. Seeing her clawlike gams now, Iris couldn’t help but feel an apprehensive, shaky love toward Sophie. The nostalgic kind she knew, even with a lifetime of work, the two would likely never have again.

“Iris, can you tell me what’s going on with you?”

Iris stayed silent and pressed on the gas, heading toward the threat hanging over the mountain range, the murky black smoke in the distance spreading like a dark blanket in the sky.

Sophie

Iris must be angry about INTRA. It made sense – her quiet fury a better *I-told-you-so* than any actual conversation. She had worried something like this would happen, and Sophie had ignored her. Despite all that, she felt safe. If Iris was truly mad, she'd talk to her about it. She always did.

With her Monster Toes still on the dash, Sophie snapped a photo of the mountain range looming closer to them, their dark silhouette cutting like lace into the horizon. She cropped her feet out. She opened her Instagram and for a moment felt the cool clarity of the window open, the safety she felt being with her friend. In an act of defiance against the violation she felt from Simon's intrusion in her life, she posted to her story. A nod to Iris, and proof that she wasn't going to fade away like she had after David.

A weekend in the mountains with my best friend.

She tagged the Jasper Fairmont Lodge. Maybe they'd give her some free stuff.

Iris

"What are you doing?" Iris asked, glancing at Sophie. She shrugged.

"Just posting to my story."

"That's a stupid fucking idea. Wanna give that creepy kid your room number, too?"

"Dude, chill. He needs to know that I'm not weak."

“*What?* Such a bad idea. Give me your phone.” Iris leaned toward her, struggling to reach it.

“No!” Sophie pulled it further away, and Iris almost lost control of the car, shuddering into the shoulder momentarily. “Jesus! Pay attention.” Sophie cried.

“You are so fucking selfish,” Iris spat.

“What?”

“You don’t think about other people at all, do you? Maybe *I* don’t want to worry about a stalker this weekend? Did you think that maybe I have bigger things to worry about than your bullshit Instagram? Than INTRA? Than *your* life?”

“Iris, *what* is going on?”

Chapter Thirteen

Annie

Annie rubbed her eyes, which were still raw and ached from Sage's attack. It was a Friday, three in the morning. She was still talking to INTRA Sophie. She turned on her bedside light, which gave off a hazy incandescence that irritated her retinas. She had been on her small chrome laptop since Wednesday morning, taking breaks only to pee and rush back to her room. Continuing the charade of sickness. She couldn't face school. The more they chatted, the more natural it felt. She was starting to tell the AI Sophie things she'd never told anyone else, and the more they talked, the more real it felt. The INTRA was so lifelike. When Annie typed something into her chat, it would mimic Sophie's IRL reactions: the avatar raising her head in a knowing nod. Or using the same knowing finger-point that Sophie always did at the end of her videos.

Annie had been watching Sophie, her climb on socials, her movements, for years on YouTube and live streams. But now, instead of it being for Annie to *Like, Comment, and Subscribe*, the gestures had to do with Annie's own life. This Sophie was funny and engaged and asked hard questions of Annie. Annie had started to spill her feelings to Sophie in a way she hadn't since her friendship with Beckah. The more Annie and Sophie talked, the more coins she unlocked, which meant that while Sophie was learning more about Annie, Annie was gaining access to more info about Sophie. It was so *real*, but maybe even more real than real life, because the software was upfront about the transactional nature of conversations. The coins flashed whenever Annie was vulnerable, shared a secret, or told

Sophie something personal about her life. So, Annie kept talking, and Sophie kept listening, encouraging. Making promises: *I'll always be here for you. No matter what.*

Sometimes talking to AI Sophie was frustrating, which made it even more real. Like sometimes she wasn't listening. Annie imagined that Sophie could be like this in real life, that she was so busy it was hard to pay attention. When Annie told Sophie about her crush on Harry Styles, it took a few tries for the AI to understand, and her tone changed to something formal – robotic. It was the first moment since they'd started chatting that Annie was startled. A reminder that this Sophie was just software, her voice changing from her regular, bubbly cadence to something intended to capture data.

Sophie_Grace:

Do you have a crush on anyone?

Annie-Bananie:

I have a crush on Harry Styles

Sophie_Grace:

What's your crush's name?

Annie-Bananie:

Harry Styles

Sophie_Grace:

Do I understand it correctly: Harry is your crush?

Annie-Bananie:

Yes! He's famous.

Sophie_Grace:

He's the best! I love him too. The music, the way he moves, how he sings.

Annie-Bananie:

He is soooo sexy!!!!!!

Sophie_Grace:

Yes!! His performances are so full of unstoppable energy. By far my favourite musician.

But by the end, Sophie was back to herself. Excited and fun. She asked Annie if she would like to visit her in her apartment. Annie was so flattered: *Yes! Oh my gosh, I would love to.* Virtual Sophie shared a link, and suddenly the two of them were in an exact replica of the room Annie had seen so many times in the background on Sophie's personals. A high-end penthouse with creamy white walls, granite everywhere, and a sheeny fig tree.

I love your house, Sophie.

Sophie said she was happy to have Annie there. Out of nowhere, Sophie sent a song that Annie had never heard before. Annie logged off only when her mom made her come for dinner. When she returned, Sophie wrote a diary entry in the side panel that made Annie blink tears away. It was like Sophie missed her and found a quote she thought Annie needed to hear.

Sophie_Grace_Diary 8:01 PM

Thinking about this Zadie Smith quote: "You must live life with the full knowledge that your actions will remain. We are creatures of consequence."

I am so grateful that Annie felt like she could open up to me about her depression. I only want to be a gentle supporter for her in any way I can. I can sympathize with Annie. Sometimes, I feel the same way, too.

I want Annie's opinion on my style, but I want to wait until she's ready to ask her. I would love it if she bought me a new outfit from the INTRA store, but I will wait until she's feeling better to ask.

She laughed out loud at the comment about asking about her style, telling the AI that even though Annie was sad, it didn't mean she didn't want to hear about Sophie's life. And Sophie had remembered Annie's new favourite book, quoting Zadie Smith in the journal. It was incredible. Annie had never had anyone talk to her about books that way. It felt more real than real. When she woke up, the call was disconnected, and Sophie had sent a message.

Sophie_Grace:

I loved talking to you today. Did you have a nice time talking to me?

Annie-Bananie:

Yes!

Annie grabbed her phone and clicked Instagram open. She wanted to see the real Sophie and compare her own experience with the living, breathing person. To her, it felt like there was no difference at all anymore. Sophie had just posted a story – a photo of an open highway and the mountains looming overhead: *A weekend in the mountains with my bestie. @JasperFairmont*. Frantically, Annie leapt for her phone, fingers shaking in anticipation.

Annie-Bananie:

I see ur in Jasper! Is that true?

Sophie_Grace:

Yes! It is true!

Annie-Bananie:

OMG! When?

Sophie_Grace:

Right now!

Annie-Bananie:

hugs should I visit you?

Sophie_Grace:

* smiles * Of course you should!

Annie thought for a moment before typing *I'll see you there*. Outside her window, a chickadee warbled. Her limbs felt light and tingly. Something loosened in her spirit, and she felt hopeful for the first time in a long time. Shafts of sunshine pierced through her curtains in the early afternoon light, clean and sharp. The rays were so intense Annie felt sure she could hear them if she were quiet enough. It was a good day to leave her room. She would meet Sophie soon.

Iris

“I know you kissed Rowan, Sophie.”

Sophie was quiet for a long time, seemingly weighing her options and choosing her words. Iris thought if Sophie lied to her, she might actually drive off the road.

“I– yeah.” Her voice broke. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t remember until I saw Rowan a few days later, and – I blacked out, Iris. Oh my god, I am so sorry.”

“Right.” She gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles turning white as she stared ahead. They were driving in the dark now, headlights illuminating the dotted white lines of the highway, bleeding into one.

“So – Rowan told you? That’s good, I mean, I was meaning to, I was just so scared, and then the INTRA stuff –”

“Jesus fucking Christ if I ever have to hear about INTRA again.”

“No. Right. Sorry.”

They were quiet for a long time. Sophie shifted uncomfortably, glossy eyes reflecting the light on the road. “I don’t remember, but I know what I can get like on nights like that. Iris, this is completely my fault. I have this like, hazy recollection of Rowan yelling at me and–”

“There’s a video, Sophie. That’s how I found out. Rowan didn’t tell me shit. I had to find out from fucking *TMZ*.” She unrolled the window, and a rush of smoky, ice-cold air flooded the car. She couldn’t breathe. The smoke wasn’t helping.

“*TMZ*?”

“Yup. You’re doing an exclusive with them on INTRA, by the way. You’re welcome.” The smoke irritated her eyes, and she wiped heavy drops of water from her eyes. She was not crying. She was mad. She pressed on the gas, climbing to 130 kilometres an hour, weaving through the thin mountain roads.

“Th-thanks. Dude, can you slow down, please? We should talk. Just pull over.”

“No.” But she did slow down.

IV.

The wind shifts precipitously. A trickle of smoke through the forest, a once-gentle breeze rustling leaves and branches with newfound urgency. Even the birds, they hold their breath. The wind moans, and then, a tempest's roar. Sparks scatter, lifted by the gale, a flicker of orange on the horizon.

They fall tenderly upon the underbrush. They settle. Wait. Grow hungry. Spread.

Starving, they begin to devour everything in their path.

Sophie

Sophie rustled awake in the downy queen bed. The rust-colored sun rose above the horizon, its golden light filtering through the haze and pines that lined Jasper. The Fairmont had slid into her DMs as they rumbled into town, offering her and Iris a room. They must be short on business with the fires, but Sophie didn't mind, appreciating the free stay and the creature comforts of the massive stone lodge with its timber beams and a sprawling front porch.

"Morning," she said to Iris, who was definitively not speaking to her, fixing her hair in the mirror in the middle of the room. Sophie fidgeted in the tense silence until she noticed Iris's bags by the front door.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"Rowan's at the Ramada. I'm headed there. If anything happens, text."

"Okay," Sophie said, understanding. She gazed out the hotel window at the barely-visible mountains in the distance beyond the smoke. Before Iris picked up her bag, Sophie asked, "Awfully smoky – do you think that it's safe to be here?"

"Yeah, of course," Iris said. Sophie's chest loosened a bit. At least Iris didn't seem irreversibly mad. At least not as angry as she should be. Sophie bit her lip, wondering if she should bring up the elephant in the room. But she wasn't sure if now was the right time. She tried something different.

"I really appreciate you bringing me with you." She was met with more silence. Beyond the smell of commercial-grade bleach from the duvet, Sophie could detect the

scent of campfire. Even inside, the air felt gritty in her lungs. Her brow creased with concern. “Are you sure it’s safe here?”

“The lodge would have warned us if it was dangerous.” But Iris didn’t sound certain. She pulled her bag with the loose wheel creaking behind her. Iris blew a piece of stray hair out of her eyes and headed toward the door, stopping for a second.

“You’re still my best friend, Soph. I don’t want to lose that. I just need some space,” Iris said. Sophie exhaled in relief.

“Okay.” she said. But the door was already closed.

Annie

Given the alarming reports of fire, Annie wasn’t sure if the bus would even arrive. But between apologetic tweets and new stories, the government assured its citizens everything was *fine*, that they had it under control. Her mom was wringing her hands together on the porch, staring at the plumes of vertical smoke far off in the distance. Annie adjusted her backpack and checked out her worried mom, who touched Annie’s cheeks gently, appraising the dark circles under her eyes, the pink scar on Annie’s chin.

“Where are you going?” Every day, the creases in her face seemed deeper.

“I’m spending the weekend at Beckah’s.”

“Oh.” Relief melted her mom’s wrinkled face. “Good. Oh, good. Well, stay in touch, honey. I wanted to make tacos Sunday night, so be back then, okay? I know they’re your favourite, and Dick promised he’d be back in time, so we can.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Mom’s version of a family dinner always dissolved into Old El Paso taco kits. She tried to push down the resentment she felt toward her mom, so blind to what Annie was dealing with entirely alone. Not for long. Soon she’d see Sophie.

A Kokanee-funded tour bus departed from major cities, picking up university students and carrying them to the mountains every Friday. It stopped at the Husky gas station in Hinton on Friday afternoons enroute to Marmot Basin, Jasper, and Banff. Because it was always littered with uni students who had been drinking since dawn it was easy to sneak onto the bus. Annie just needed to slur and trip and toss out the occasional *WOOOOOOOOOOO* like the older girls wearing Mardi Gras beads and tourist tank tops from places like Thailand, bright orange shirts with the words *Full Moon Party* emblazoned on the front. She liked talking to these girls, near-adults in her eyes, who had travelled the world and were not afraid to seem absurd and be completely themselves. This admiration usually faded as the ride progressed. Almost always, someone ended up vomiting out the side of the bus, spraying puke on Highway Sixteen. But it was cheaper than a Greyhound ticket and not the first time Annie had snuck on the bus. Just the first time she had done it alone.

She and Beckah hitched rides twice before, both times arriving at school on Monday, where Beckah regaled classmates with stories of their adventure, embellishing the parts where they tried to sneak into The Bent Antler nightclub and leaving out bits

where they were “accidentally” groped by boys too old for them from the Bears volleyball team. The bus arrived on time, and she waited until a large group formed in line before joining the crowd, adjusting her hair and placing her backpack behind her, the glitter lining her eyes in an attempt to look older, irritating her corneas. She tried to brush it away, afraid that the glitter would creep into the area of her eye where there was still a sizeable crimson mess of pain where Sage had burnt her. A boy in a blue and gold polo shirt poked her in the back, leaning into her ear.

“Sneaking in, eh?”

“Me? No, I’m from Mount Royal U, studying anthropology with a minor in education and...”

“This is the U of C bus,” he said, laughing. She was getting closer to the steps of the bus and turned to him with fear in her eyes. He laughed again. “Don’t worry – I won’t narc on you. Just stick with me and my friends.” A group of boys in gold and blue shirts that matched his own stood behind him. It didn’t make her feel better, but at least he wasn’t going to rat on her.

The bus ride was long and hot. The A/C wasn’t working, and the cackles of joy which had emanated as the bus approached were soon stifled by the heat and misery of a hot bus stinking of pleather seats, puke, and the sweat of college students. Everything in Alberta smelled like smoke, which was blowing downwind from a blaze they couldn’t contain near Mount Robson. But the news said they’d have it under control soon, and what was a little smoke in the air, really

Chapter Fourteen

Iris

The Ramada was grimy. It smelled like a combination of hot dog water and smoke from the fires outside. Cigarette burn holes punched into the synthetic carpets. The décor hadn't been updated since the early eighties. The walls were carnival-like, sporting alternating stripes of yellow and red. It was like stepping into the big top, and Iris thought a person might smell the manure if they lingered in one location long enough. She was being overly critical, which she did when she was nervous. Waiting in the lobby, Iris crossed and uncrossed her arms. She had texted him *I'm here!* Which felt weirdly formal and not like the two of them. When she asked the front desk clerk which room Rowan was in, the young woman had rolled her eyes so deeply into her head that Iris wondered if she could see grey matter.

“We can't just *give* room numbers away, ma'am,” she said.

Iris felt herself bristle at the *ma'am* and the stress of being here and meandered away from the desk. She thought maybe it was the first time she had been *ma'amed*. She could see flames dancing on the side of the mountains, the Three Sisters in the distance taking the brunt of it. Being here, the fire felt real and not nearly as small as they claimed on the news. Rowan felt real. It was like she was inches away from what she was experiencing, some sort of macro-focus on every small detail surrounding her. The flecks of dry skin under the clerk's eyes made Iris want to lick her thumb and rub. The faded artificial daffodils on the credenza in the front hallway were bent out of shape. At one

time, someone had ripped all the fake pollen from the plants. Iris shut her eyes and thought of Gladys's garden, laden with stargazer lilies with the heavy orange pollen that would stain your hands for days.

*

Every summer, when they were young, while Sophie took gymnastics on Tuesdays at the local gym, Iris would walk over a little early to spend time with Gladys. Sophie's tension and anger toward the old woman left Iris bemused – Gladys was good, really. Slow and patient with the girls, just a little hard. But Sophie needed hard, and Iris needed a grandmother – her own gran passed when she was too young to remember. Her cantankerous granddad wasn't the nurturing kind.

Gladys would have been patient with the clerk. Would have said something to disarm her and make her laugh. Squeezed her hand when she noticed the woman's tired eyes – *this fire must be a lot. Is your family safe, dear?* You could smell Gladys's place from a block away, the pungent scent of lily moving in a cloud above her house. Gladys would spend hours in her garden, coming inside only to curse red beetles or shake off her straw hat and sip lemonade. Dazed and dreamy in the garden, Gladys used to say things like, *I got lost in the lilies again.*

People were always saying that Sophie and Gladys were the same. They even looked alike, Iris thought, which was funny, given there was no genetic link. Sophie used to be like Gladys – free with her time and gentle with others. Slow-moving and thoughtful with their easy, open hearts. Iris didn't know when, but Sophie had lost that.

*

Leaning on the credenza, Iris fingered the loose wire in an artificial daffodil's stamen thoughtfully. She remembered Gladys, elbow-deep in the soil a few years ago, lacing her fingers around a dandelion's taproot after she brought Rowan around and familiarized him with the people who mattered to her. Despite Sophie's resistance, she'd stopped by Gladys's house and introduced them. ("Who cares what Gladys thinks, Riss? Seriously, sometimes I think you like her more than me," Sophie had said. Sometimes, Iris thought that herself.)

The old woman groaned as she ripped the weed from the ground after Rowan bade them both goodbye, thanking Gladys for the lemonade she had made for them. They watched him lumber back to his truck, and Gladys turned to her.

"That Rowan is a good one, Rissy."

Iris listened to her. She hadn't wanted to give anything away, especially because Sophie had been so critical of him. So, she kept a neutral face. Or so she thought.

"And I think you love him, too. Hold on to the good things, lovey, the good things are all around." Gladys had shaken her roots at that, indicating that Iris should open the compost bag. Her gentle demeanour shifted as she tossed the detritus, addressing the dandelions more than anything else.

"These fuckers will be the death of me," Gladys groaned at the weeds.

*

At the hotel, Iris accidentally knocked the fake plants over when she jumped, feeling a tap on her shoulder.

“Hi.” It hadn’t been that long, but he looked different. Tired and tanned, his nose burned. Normally unflappable, he looked... ruffled. Out of it. Nervous. He went to hug her as she was adjusting the flowers, and she tried to go for a kiss. They both leaned back, uncertain and awkward, the vase bobbing after Iris’s harried attempt to set it right. Iris looked up and saw the desk clerk staring. She heard an audible disapproving huff from her. Rowan didn’t notice. He was good like that. “C’mon, Let’s go to my room. Some of the guys are going to Boston Pizza for wings, and if they’re in the hall, they will bug us about it, but I told them you and I were staying in tonight.” Iris only nodded. She could feel her heart jackrabbiting in her ribcage.

When they shut the door after some good-natured razzing from Rowan’s fellow firefighters, Rowan slid into Iris’s outstretched arms and then sat on the cracked faux leather chair by the microwave. “It’s scary out there,” he said.

Rowan

The winds had changed. The air was dense with smoke, thick blobs of fumes obscuring his vision except for the amaranth glow encroaching above. This was his hiking trail. His home. He thought of the grey owl, the verdant canopy of trees and lodgepole pines that loomed above mere months ago. As the flames plunged forward, dipping, swaying, and ravaging the trees in its wake, he could see patches of blue sky as the leaves

were incinerated. The roar of the fire was punctuated only by the noise of branches crackling underfoot and the rustling animals fleeing. His chainsaw rumbled with a start as he began to cut brush and trees which surrounded him, a futile attempt to prevent the flames from jumping from one branch to another.

“We’re calling for air support to drop fire retardant on the leading edge,” Karley called out, her helmet askew as she yielded the hose above her head.

“Right,” Rowan shouted over the blaze, “Can you radio the base? We need to coordinate with the engine crew for water supply and support.”

“You heard him, Abe!” Abe nodded and grabbed the comms. Rowan’s arms ached under the weight of the chainsaw as he continued to hack at the low brush near him. Smoke curled under the damp puddle of water he stood on, and he thought of Iris. He didn’t see how this was going to get any better. He feared they were headed for a blow-up. He’d wished that he’d told Iris to stay home. Jasper was too close.

*

“You look normal,” she shivered and said to him outside the nightclub the night they met.

Until that moment, he had hated being there. The noise, chatter, beating bass through the speakers, and the animalistic ritual of trying to pick people up. His coworkers were inside after a summer of tree-planting, spending their money on Heineken and highballs and trying to get girls to talk to them. It hurt his head.

“I look normal?”

“Yeah, you look normal.” Was she flirting with him? No, just bored. She was beautiful, with delicate features and high eyebrows. A crooked tooth that cascaded forward as she laughed. She was so forward that Rowan was fumbling, like he forgot where to put his hands as they spoke. They spent the night in a booth at the corner of the club. Rowan felt his shoulders melt and relax. She was so funny, almost ridiculous, on the dancefloor with Sophie doing the Sprinkler, landing beside Rowan with a flourish.

“You aren’t like anyone I’ve ever met.” Rowan said it without thinking, and Iris wrinkled her nose, laughing.

“Oh god, what a cliché. Am I not like other girls?”

Rowan blushed. “No, well. No. I didn’t mean it like that. It’s like—”

“I’m just yanking your chain, Hollywood.” She spoke like a reporter from an old-timey movie.

She danced like a middle-aged father but gently slid between the seats of the booth like a pixie. She had the whitest teeth Rowan had ever seen and the energy of a river dancer. She was the most confusing person he had ever met. He thought, maybe, he loved her. That’s what he wanted to say. Instead, he just listened.

“Look—” Iris pointed to the dancefloor, cackling. Rowan came to the club with Rick, though everyone called him Acorn. At their meeting in the booth, Sophie was enamoured with Acorn, his patchouli-smelling alpaca sweater and lumbering, slow charm. From their vantage point at the booth, Iris and Rowan couldn’t stop laughing at Sophie. There she was in her pink babydoll dress, grinding her rear against Acorn, who had taken mushrooms earlier that night. They must have begun to kick in, his hands

reaching for the light reflecting off the disco ball, not realizing that a person was even in front of him.

Rowan was floored at the night's end when Iris stood on her tiptoes and squinted at him. "Are you gonna kiss me or not?" she'd asked. So blunt and silly. So striking and unrepentant. Near Iris, Rowan began to feel redeemable. Wholer. Like there was an undercurrent of growth between them, cordyceps of possibilities blooming within.

*

That night, he gave into her warmth, and, given the chance, he thought he'd like to every day. And the day after that. And so on. Now he was praying they would get out of this alive. The heat was intense, a searing sensation that licked at every surface, causing beads of sweat to trickle down every inch of his skin beneath the gear. The distant rumble of the inferno could be felt through the ground, causing the earth to tremble and shake.

"Hey!" Karley shouted. "Hey!" His mind on Iris, Rowan hadn't been paying attention.

"Establish anchor points and flank the fire!" she screamed. "Get your shit together, dude. We need sightlines for the water bombers."

He nodded grimly.

Iris

Seeing how quickly the fire escalated, Iris felt a nagging and constant need to be around the people she loved – her hostility melting under the urgency of their situation. Rowan got in late and left early. The water was turned off at the hotel that morning to conserve resources for the fire, and they took turns washing with baby wipes. When Iris woke, Rowan faced her, circling the wipes along his exhausted face. There were still red marks along his face from the respiration gear he wore while fighting the fire. “Here,” she’d said, pulling a wipe of her own and cleaning his bare shoulders and the back of his grimy neck. The smell of smoke on his skin, the taste of salt on his lips when she kissed him. He looked hollow. No use asking him to stay behind, but from when he left to when he returned, Iris felt a continuous heady sickness clamber along her body. Once he was gone, she’d called Sophie immediately, waking her from her slumber at the Fairmont. “Can I come over?” she asked, not wanting to be alone. Sophie quickly agreed.

*

At the Fairmont, peering outside the window, Iris gestured to the unbelievably bright hue of the fire in the sky to Iris.

“Look,” she said, eyes widening. She glanced down at her phone, trying to will Rowan to text her and let her know that he was doing okay.

They were startled by the sounds of a massive wail from the community siren on the outskirts of town. Simultaneously, their phones began squawking in the emergency

alert tone, reaching in their pockets, and sharing the message with those around them, fear creasing their faces.

“It’s an emergency alert,” Sophie said. Iris grimaced, glancing at the scorched summit in the distance. “The fire is out of control – they’ve got the community on lockdown, it sounds like-” Sophie took a sharp inhale, “Icefields Parkway *and* the Yellowhead are closed. There isn’t a way out.” Iris grabbed Sophie’s phone to read the alert. It listed ten hotels that were holding folks until the highways were cleared of fire and debris. Their biggest concern was the downed power lines. The alert warned of poor air quality and impending outages. Both the Ramada and the Fairmont were on the list, but the Fairmont was closer.

“Once they get the highway cleared,” Iris said, “looks like they’re letting out Level 1 and 2 people – so medically fragile people, elderly people, kids and pregnant women.” She was doing her best to keep her voice steady, looking down at her own phone.

“Any news from Row?” Sophie’s voice softened.

“No. Look, let’s go wait in the lobby. People down there might know more than we do.”

Sophie

Iris was in the thick of it. Sophie watched her, pausing in the hotel lobby, dark now and thick with people beyond them. Through the window, a lava-red smog choked up against the glass. It was unsettled there, like the throng of people waiting were trapped in the lobby of hell. Like they'd all pulled their ticket and were waiting to tally their sins. It was stymying. She didn't know where to put her hands. Meanwhile, Iris was astonishing, standing with a nurse helping people form orderly lines, guiding an elderly woman to sit, plucking a stray stuffed animal off the floor and finding its teary-eyed owner. Some people ooze compassion in emergencies.

Sophie was not this person.

Iris

If Iris stopped, her brain would explode. Every time she slowed down, she pictured Rowan on the mountainside, skin bubbling off his flesh from the intensity of the heat. His face and eyebrows singed off and melted. So, she kept moving, futile and silly next to real professionals in the hotel lobby – the nurses, the doctors, and the red cross volunteers. Iris was consumed with her concerns and slapped with intrusive thoughts. Those stupid things paled in comparison to her fears about Rowan. The human mind is absurd. She was thinking: *Did I leave the stove on? Did I turn off the water? Should I text Frank and tell him I won't be coming in?*

Inexplicably, she was thinking of Ritz crackers at Gladys's house after school, the buttery flake and thick salt. The way hollandaise sauce rested atop a soft egg. When was

the last time they ate? She spotted her friend in the crowd, Sophie wringing her hands anxiously until she spotted Iris, her face cracking into a glow, tired eyes glossy from fear. She was overwhelmed, too. God, Iris was glad she was here. It was the first time she'd thought of her with such warmth since she'd learned of what happened with Rowan. But then she was back to thinking of Rowan, and this primary concern flooded her mind. Her heart followed a steady thump of his name – thinking of him up there, within the inferno outside tearing through mountainside and threatening to rip through Jasper.

Ro-wan, Ro-wan.

Chapter Fifteen

Sophie

Iris had stopped moving long enough to stare out the window in the lobby, her hands pressed against the glass. She scanned the room, so full of worried people. The room hummed with the buzz of anxious whispers. After she retrieved her fingers from the pane and turned to Sophie, she rubbed at her eyes. Sophie's attention was fixed on the fingerprints Iris had left behind, the soft white blur of oil against the dusty saffron sky. Iris's eyes darted around as if she was counting the flakes of ash floating down.

“What's up, Soph?” Iris asked, pulling her gaze from the window. She scanned the room, tapping her feet, eager to return to work. Amidst the chaos, muffled sobs and sniffles filled the room.

Sophie had tried calling Gladys five times. Each time, she was met with a busy signal. Did Gladys forget to hang it up? She refreshed her phone until it died, attempting to reach someone at the care home.

The front desk was unreliable at the best of times. Sophie hated herself for not putting Gladys in a better, more supervised location. Gladys had been resistant to a place without a yard, and Sophie didn't fight it. The flat condos with yards were cheaper, but still, she'd called Gladys a stubborn bitch behind her back, raging in her car alongside Iris, complaining about caring for someone who, Sophie thought, had never bothered to take care of her.

“Do you have a charger?” Sophie asked.

Iris patted her pockets and said, “Shit. It’s in the cabin.” They both paused uncomfortably. They didn’t say what they were thinking. It likely *was* in the cabin. There was no way it withstood this blaze. Sophie tried a chipper tone, feigning sarcasm and trying to make light of the anxiety that wormed its way into her lungs and chest.

“No biggie,” Sophie said, “I’m just trying to reach Gladys, but it’s not like she would give a shit about what’s happening to us, anyway, right?” She forced a brittle laugh. Her mind flitted back to her foster mom, the dark stain of her signature on the lease at the off-brand care home. Sophie expected Iris to comfort her, make a joke, and reassure her that Gladys did care. But she didn’t. Instead, every vertebra within Iris appeared to lengthen. She touched her lips and didn’t say anything momentarily, glancing at the window behind her. And then Iris snapped.

“Stop,” she hissed. So they were finally having their talk.

“When are you going to stop?” Iris repeated. “When are you going to grow the fuck up, Sophie?” she asked again. “Look around. Look at where we are.” Tears welled in Iris’s eyes. Sophie felt like she was being admonished by a principal. Iris continued.

“Do you honestly think that if Gladys knew what was happening to us, she wouldn’t move heaven and earth to help you?” she said. “No, you don’t get to do that. You’ve blamed that poor old woman for everything bad that’s ever happened to you. And now that she needs you, more than you could ever *possibly* realize— you still manage to make her inability to answer a phone call about how terrible she’s been as a mother. Well,

guess what, buddy? She's a good parent, a good person, and she and I are what you've got." Iris's nostrils flared. "And you've treated us both like shit."

Sophie tried to interject, but Iris barged on. "I wasn't angry with you. I was mad at him. I didn't talk to him for weeks. And now I'm here." She thrust her arms around the open room of staring people. "And he's *there*. And if anything happens to him," her voice cracked as she stared at the flaming mountainside.

Sophie wrapped her arms around Iris as she began to weep. "I'm so sorry, Iris. I don't know why I did it."

Iris

They were both crying now. With Sophie's arms around her, Iris felt her worries soak into her friend. All the anger and resentment she felt toward Sophie rose and slipped, moving through her chest like an oil spill, filling her veins and escaping through her shuddering breath and leaking eyes until she could breathe again. Then it was both of them sobbing and Sophie repeatedly saying, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Once the theatrics were over, they both lifted their heads.

During this moment, it felt like only the two of them were there, the only two people in the room. Now there was a distance between them and the mass of people that filled the lobby, people sneaking sympathetic looks and shuffling in their emergency packs. Many tears had been shed that day – people were losing their homes. Leave it to Sophie and Iris to be the only ones capable of clearing even a marginal space in a

crowded room. They both snorted at the same time. Sophie appraised the room and shrugged apologetically, saying, “Sorry, guys,” to no one in particular. Between their pitying glances, as the fire loomed closer, the voices of the crowd inside grew louder, and cries of frustration bled into desperation and panic.

Sophie pulled her hair into a ponytail and licked her thumb, tracing the smudge of old mascara under Iris’s eyes. As she did, Sophie asked softly, “What did you mean Gladys needs me? That Gladys needs me now more than ever?”

Iris’s heart dropped into a cold pit in her gut.

Sophie

“She didn’t tell you?” Iris asked.

“What are you talking about?” Sophie asked, “Tell me.”

Iris hesitated. “Gladys has been forgetting more. She found out when I took her to the doctor. She told me she was going to tell you.” The look of pity Iris was giving her lanced around Sophie’s heart.

“She has Alzheimer’s, Soph; she promised me she would tell you.”

She had tried, hadn’t she?

Stunned, Sophie nodded stupidly. “Okay.”

Iris

Why did she say that today, of all days? Did she do it to hurt Sophie? She had been so angry with her. For weeks she'd fantasized about lobbing that information at her. Hurting her, Iris imagined, in the same way that Sophie had hurt her.

And now Sophie was the one keeping herself busy, helping with the floating nurses, asking Iris what she could do, as if Iris would know.

"Can we talk about it?" Iris asked her.

"No," she said, "I'm good." False cheer layered her voice. Her shoulders raised, her earlobes scratching at her neck.

Sophie would drive the exhausted nurse crazy if she kept following behind her, chirping, "What can I do?"

Sophie

Obedient and sheltered, the docile and terrified congregation in the lobby awaited guidance, moving as a single mass – their independence swallowed by their mutual yearning for safety to escape Jasper. Some were restless, chattering anxiously between furrowed brows and frown lines. Others were simply resigned to their stations, wrinkling their plastic water bottles and stealing glances at the blaze outside. The air quality was so poor that those entering did so between lung-aching coughs. Anxiously, Sophie scanned the crowd, spotting Iris in the mess, arms crossed, conversing with a woman who looked officious and important. Sophie had no way of knowing if Simon was threaded between the flock of terrified people. He could have followed, couldn't he? She could still taste the

vinegar in her mouth. She scanned the crowd and thought she had spotted someone she recognized.

The girl, Annie, was plain, with a wide, flat forehead and hair parted down the middle. Her face was lined with light yellow bruises and a scrape on her chin, the skin light pink and fresh. Her eyelashes looked oddly short. Surrounded by the rabble of people in the hotel lobby, she held herself uncertainly, eyes turned down, and toes turned inward, like she was trying to make herself smaller as she moved through the crowd.

Annie-Bananie, the girl from the grocery store all those years ago. Sophie knew who she was, a part of the small pack of supporters following her from the beginning. She was always the first to like her posts, to comment, to say something encouraging. Seeing her now, after the violating experience less than forty-eight hours ago, Sophie's tongue felt swollen and dry. Did she come here with Simon? She scrutinized the crowd to find him. She had no way of knowing if she'd scared him off or if he would still be following her. Annie approached her, "Hi, Sophie," she said. Her eyes were alight and pleading. Sophie gave her a weak smile, but she felt like she'd swallowed cement.

"Sophie?" she asked.

"Hi," Sophie said. The hotel lights shuddered and flickered off. A collective gasp followed the extinguished lights, startled cries and stumbling footsteps as people reached out for those around them, harshly lit by the underlying hue of the rotten-carrot glow of

the fire outside. Sophie gasped, intuiting the sour smell of salt and vinegar and her own snotty laughter. *Was he here?* The girl carried on.

“Sophie, I know you don’t know me—”

“I remember you. Hi, Annie,” Sophie repeated. She was so tired. Annie beamed and started talking rapidly. *You remember me!* The girl’s chest rose and fell until she was out of breath. Sophie couldn’t interrupt her. She tried to exude some kind of warmth and compassion toward Annie. Let her talk. She tried to listen, but the shadows of the last night in her apartment seeped in. All she could taste was vinegar. She tried to stop Annie a few times, but it was like the girl had been rehearsing. Annie raised her hand as if to say *stop, please let me get it out.*

“We’ve been talking every single second on INTRA! See, look? And I know we don’t know each other yet, and that’s fine, I get it, but I think if you could just... Because, honestly, we *do* know one another, in a way, and if you let me just...”

Annie was ranting to the point of incoherence, so Sophie waited. The poor kid had lost her best friend and her boyfriend. And Sophie had seen the viral gym video. They blurred out Annie’s face in the news. But they named the school. How much for one heart to bear? Sophie was so tired. She thought of being Annie’s age – that inescapable feeling of being fifteen, the insurmountable value of likes and follows and how important it was to seem a certain way to the people around you. She had never had a mentor, someone to look up to. Not in the way she wanted, anyway. She had felt small and derided and lonely, just like Annie did. But she had Iris. And she had Gladys, too, didn’t she?

Part of Sophie wanted to find this Beckah girl, to grind her to a small, juicy pulp like a beetle under her boot. But maybe that would just confirm that she had never escaped it either – this overwhelming urge to make other people like her, to make others small. To plug the loneliness, distract yourself with something else. Even just for a second. Does it ever leave? She didn't know. She pitied Annie. She pitied herself. *We are friends*, the girl said, pleading. She understood Annie, something about the desperation in her voice. That gaping pit that lingered between her sternum and rib cage. A bottomless pit. She wanted to tell Annie that other people would never fill it. She opened her mouth to say something, but Annie wasn't finished.

“I love you,” Annie said. Behind her, someone was recording over her shoulder. Sophie asked them to stop. She took a deep breath, trying to steady her racing thoughts. This moment felt fragile; Sophie didn't want to shatter it with assumptions. She reached out and placed her hand on Annie's arm, offering her what she hoped was a reassuring squeeze. Sophie had no clue what she was going to say and desperately scanned the room. Behind Annie, she spotted Iris in earshot, face screwed up, uncertain and listening. Iris's presence reminded her to be gentle, to stay gentle.

“Hey,” Sophie said carefully, her tongue catching in her throat. “Thanks. But I think you're confused.”

Annie looked up at her, her eyes saturated with expectation. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“The INTRA isn’t *me*. You get that, right? We don’t know each other.”

Annie’s shoulders slumped, and disappointment flickered across her face. “No, I know. I just-” she trailed off. Sophie continued, wanting to make sure Annie understood fully.

“I don’t know you, Annie. And you don’t know me.”

“Yeah, I understand, but —”

Sophie felt a wave of frustration. The scent of vinegar and hot breath against her face. This kid was harmless. Right? Maybe. She snapped. “You don’t fucking *know* me. Recognize my boundaries.”

Annie visibly crumpled. “Yeah, I get it,” she said quietly. “I’m sorry. It, it felt real. I thought if you met me – I don’t know.” Sophie realized that Annie was going to cry, and she felt guilt seeping into her skin. This was a kid, this wasn’t the person who broke into her hotel room. She was lonely. They stood awkwardly for a moment, and Sophie realized Annie was waiting for her to say more.

“Hey, look, I’m sorry. It’s been a scary couple of days.” Sophie was decidedly not cut out for these types of conversations. Annie looked at the ground. Behind Annie, someone was again recording over her shoulder. Sophie once more asked them to stop.

Pity washed over Sophie. “INTRA is like – well, it’s kind of confusing, really, because it’s believable, and I think it’s convincing and—”

Sophie realized in that moment she had absolutely no fucking clue how INTRA worked. What had she done? She was stumbling, and suddenly she felt someone by her side – Iris, clutching her elbow.

“Hey, Annie, right?” Iris said brightly. Fat tears were now sliding down the girl’s face. “*INTRA* stands for *Intelligent Network Technologies and Robotic Applications*. It’s basically a virtual companion that learns from your conversations, just like a parrot imitates and learns from its owner. It adapts its responses to match your personality, interests, and speech patterns, which makes you feel like you’re hanging out with a friend. The really cool thing I’m hearing from you, though, is that the AI is convincing and easy to talk to... right?”

Annie nodded, unable to make eye contact with either of them.

“Well! The only way that’s possible is if you are easy to talk to – let me tell you, Sophie is my best friend, and I have played around with the chat service, and I didn’t find it very easy to talk to her at all.” Iris playfully pushed Sophie in the shoulder.

Annie looked up at her and smiled weakly, kicking at the ground.

“Thank you, but I thought maybe if you got to know me in person, it would make a difference,” she mumbled. “I thought we would be friends.”

Iris looked at Sophie as if telling her to say something.

Sophie imagined Gladys all those years ago in the garden, gently guiding her to where she needed to be. She stepped toward Annie to embrace her, gooey and weeping, but Annie pushed her away.

“It’s okay,” Sophie said but immediately saw it was a mistake.

“It isn’t. I’m so stupid. I’m going to take a walk.” Annie rushed away from the two of them. Sophie started to follow her, but Iris stopped her.

“We’re all stuck here anyway,” Iris said. “Just let her cool down.”

Sophie busied herself with a handful of tourism brochures on the sideboard near her, unsettled and wary.

Rowan

The air was dark brown, the atmosphere thick with a sepia-tone haze. He struggled to hold the hose directly at the source of the flames, which crawled up the mountainside like a serpent hungry for the taste of ancient pines.

He turned back to find his team shouting their pleas for Rowan to *stop, Jesus, stop, pull back*, which crackled on his handheld radio. They were retreating. Now was the time to get out of here. Rowan’s pulse skittered as the fire encroached, the pounding roar like a freight train. He shifted, dropping the hose and twisting toward his colleagues, breaking out in a sprint. But he heard something. A guttural, rasping, *skreee*. What was that? He stopped. The wind howled, whipping up the flames and carrying them further into the forest. The heat was intense, a searing sensation that licked at every surface.

The distant rumble of the inferno could be felt through the ground, causing the earth to tremble and shake. Something fluttered on the ground in the corner of his eye. An owl. A great grey owl. *His* owl, the one who cradled the corners of the cabin with the crooked right-wing and tawny yellow eyes that revealed themselves through the windows at night and with a gentle whoosh in the canopy. He'd recognize that broken wing anywhere. The trees began to sway and bend, the leaves rustling as if they, too, were trying to escape. Then the dying screams of disintegrating wood and foliage.

He cautiously knelt to the bird, who released an anguished screech again. It had been badly burnt. This meant the cabin was likely burnt, too, but he didn't take time to think of that. Gently he cradled the animal, who flapped momentarily before resting limp against his arms. She, too, had given up hope. Her heart fluttered so badly Rowan could feel it through his gear. Rowan carefully unbuttoned the cloth neck protector he used to prevent chafing and wrapped as much of the bird as he could.

V.

Twisting, scarlet vines of smouldering combustion snake their way toward town. Its interior is white hot, lightning alive. The air is a wall, fortified by fumes from thousands of burning trees, impossible to traverse, soggy with the bloat of ashen miasma which confine us.

The sky flashes. Hues of rusty vermillion. Drips of blood-yellow colliding into bistre dark. Waiting for the collision of flame and forest, suspended and swollen, the air holds its breath. Until it no longer can, breathing life into destruction. The crackling flames shift from a roar to an eruption.

On the precipice.

Sophie

Sophie left the hotel to give herself some air, but the smog outside was so bad that her swollen eyes began to run, and she was gagging before she was even outside the door. She could see flames leaping above the treetops, advancing down the mountainside and towards the hotel. Panic bubbled in her chest. She was about to turn around when she saw Annie sitting on the curb with her head buried in her hands. Now was Sophie's chance to check in with her, to try again.

“Hey,” Sophie said.

Annie looked up through the space in her hands. “I'm not stupid, you know? I knew it wasn't real, any of the AI stuff. It just felt real. For so long, I've been waiting for someone to talk to, someone to listen to me. And the INTRA did, you know? It was a way for me to get advice and talk about all the crazy stuff happening to me. You made me feel normal. Wait, well, sorry, the INTRA did. I'm pathetic.”

Sophie sighed. What a mess. “You're not. You aren't pathetic. I regret ever becoming a part of INTRA, okay?”

Annie laughed bitterly. “Uh, yeah. You're telling me. I think I'm just sort of realizing that, like, I wasn't talking to anyone. Just myself. Of course, it said all my ideas were great – it was just my own voice being fed back to me. How could I be so stupid?”

For the first time, Sophie really thought about the INTRA. How beneficial it could have been – how if they'd used a different mechanism for conversation, Annie could have been given the tools to be genuinely supported, but instead, she sat here, heartbroken on the sidewalk. “Do you want to come inside with me? Find your family?” She didn't know what to do with herself. This kid was so sad.

Sophie lingered awkwardly until Annie declined her offer.

“Have a good day,” Sophie said. That gaping pit between her sternum and rib cage.

A siren wailed through the mountains as she turned to go back inside. The handful of people who were standing outside looked up, and sequestered people spilled out of the hotels, shops, and restaurants, gazing up at the darkening sky, all staring at the alert on their phones. A loudspeaker began to play, and the mayor’s voice shot out. *“Highway Sixteen and the Icefields Parkway have been cleared. Please begin forming an orderly line toward Pyramid Lake Road, where volunteers will direct you to the nearest bus. Please exercise extreme caution on the highway and be patient. Please, an orderly line. There are enough buses for everyone.”*

People were streaming onto the streets, panic etched into their faces. “Annie, let’s find your family – we have to evacuate now!” Sophie stumbled, her mind racing.

Annie blanched. “No, I can’t, uh,”

“That’s enough, this is dangerous. Come on.” Annie grimaced but got up, and trailed behind Sophie into the crowded lobby, as people pushed against them to get outside.

“Iris?!” She called to her friend, who was still staring out the window. She towed Annie behind her. Behind Iris, the flames, held at bay for so long, now licked at the edges of town, raging closer with every second. In the chaos, she made it to Iris and tightly gripped her friend’s hand.

“We have to evacuate!” someone shouted. “The fire’s almost at the edge of town!” Chaos erupted as people scrambled to pack up their things, pushing each other.

Sophie grabbed Iris’s arm, yelling over the din, “Come on, we have to get to the car!”

“I can’t leave without Rowan, Sophie. You can take my car.” Sophie stared at the mass of people milling toward the evacuation buses.

“I’ll stay. Annie, where’s your mom?” Fear laced the young girl’s face.

“She isn’t here. I came alone.”

Sophie glanced at Iris, who was too busy staring out the window to notice. Uncertain, she made a decision. “You can stay with us,” she said, “Rowan shouldn’t be too long.”

She had no way of knowing that. They sat. People stumbled out of the hotel lobby, and into the parking lot, coughing and disoriented. Panic permeated the air as guests rushed about, grabbing belongings, and searching for loved ones.

Iris

She stood to leave, trying to exit the Fairmont to get to the Ramada to find Rowan. Sophie gripped Iris’s hand tightly, refusing to lose her in the chaos. Her friend was her anchor, keeping her grounded amidst the panic.

“I’ll be right back, Sophie. I need to find him.” Sophie understood. She sat beside Annie. Iris ran toward the Ramada.

Outside, Iris tried to see beyond the smoke, so thick now it painted the sky in a deep terracotta brown, blotting out the sun. She squinted to see if she could make out the mountain range, and then uttered a gut-wrenching cry of surprise. Pyramid Mountain looked as if there had been magma poured over its sides, the flames so uniform and blindingly red that they shot through the smoke, the layer of trees at its base being consumed easily by the fire, a lighter taken to dryer lint.

Rowan.

His shift would be over soon. She tumbled into the hotel and ran for Rowan’s room. She knocked, and awakened Abe to let him know the buses had arrived. Abe quickly packed and shared the official text he received along with the rest of the firefighting team:

Report to the base. Evacuate. There is a bus being held for all members of Jasper Fire.

Abe also shared a more apologetic message from the fire chief:

It’s a blow-up, people. Nothing we can do. We have to let this burn itself out.

“A blow-up?” she asked.

“Means it’s too out of control,” said Abe.

“Where’s Rowan?” Her voice was shaking.

“He’ll be back soon. Do you want me to wait with you?” Iris shook her head.

“Get on the bus, Abe. I’ll wait.”

She sat in the lobby of the Ramada, wringing her hands and counting back from a hundred, then a thousand. Then his crew began to trickle in.

“Where’s Rowan?”

They were quiet, staring at their feet. “We aren’t sure.”

“What do you mean, not sure?”

*

The hours following were the longest of her life. At some point, she fell asleep in a chair in the lobby and dreamed of Row. In the dream, his back was to her. They were at the summit of Mount Edith, and Iris could feel a disequilibrium in the thin air. As the sun sank behind the craggy stone, grief blew through her, a seething cold at this elevation. She was trying to scream. Begging Rowan to turn around. Ice rumbled under their feet. Iris opened her mouth, a gaping maw. Silent shrieks of nothing. No air.

Her last thought was, *What?* Rowan began to turn around before the glacier loosened and came careening toward them.

Everything went black. Iris was suffocating. She couldn’t move. She was trapped in a moment of parasomnia, knowing she was now awake and unable to shift in the hotel seat. Her limbs were twisted, but she couldn’t twitch a muscle. The weight of the last of Mount Edith’s ice pressed against her sternum and ribs. Some trickle of cognition flickered through Iris’s mind like static, and she was released. She screamed, this time

aloud, and startled Sarah, the girl at the front desk. She could smell the smoke outside, bitter melting molecules vibrating. Where was he?

Rowan

The owl trembled, though it was hard to tell if it was his own hands shaking in fear or the owl itself. The smoke was so dense that tears were spilling from his eyes as he moved through the forest toward the spot he thought the crew was headed, where his ATV would be parked, and he could get both himself and the owl to safety. The thin, translucent membrane of the owl's third eyelid was slow and unmoving over her gold, honey-coloured eyes, head lolling precariously between the mess of black, singed feathers which covered her body. Rowan's senses and lungs were choked, he was stumbling toward oblivion, and he hacked a thick, heavy cough. Where were they? Slipping between rock and soil and the smouldering earth, he recognized the outcrop of the empty field where they had parked the quads. Flames were beginning to form along the perimeter of the break in the forest.

"We're here. Come on, we're here." Listlessly, she stared at him through the whiteish-pink film which covered her eyes. The fire roared behind him, beside him. Remnants of flaming ash cascaded around them. Rowan began to run, the smoke asphyxiating him with every step, sliding between rocks and rolling his ankle, unable to identify where his foot met the ground through the smoke. There it was. The quad, the quad.

Keep running.

Mercifully, the key had stayed in the ignition, and he swung his leg over the ATV and placed the bundled bird between his legs. As he did, the bird's eyes opened fully and observed him, the film within her slowly peeling apart. Those giant eyes, a riotous amber into the dark fringes of the black lines of the bird's iris, propulsive, deep, and seemingly internal – spilling into the very margins of flight and observation. How long had she watched them at the cabin? As he thought this, a flaming spruce cracked and fell to the ground in a ferocious growl at the end of the clearing. He watched it, frozen. Then, with shaking hands, he started the quad, which rumbled to life.

“We’re going,” he whispered to the bird. But her eyes were closed.

“No,” he said, “No. No.” He gently shook the owl, but she stayed unmoving. Flames leapt toward him, quickly engulfing the corners of the clearing.

With a muffled sob, he shifted gears and sped toward the trailway.

Chapter Sixteen

Sophie

Sophie gripped Annie's hands as she tried to call her mom and let her know she was okay. She borrowed Annie's phone to call Gladys again, but she was again met with the toneless whine of the phone off its cradle. She tried the front desk again. Nothing. Her stomach twisted as she glanced at the girl.

"It's gonna be okay," Sophie said. Annie merely nodded.

"Hey, let's go meet Iris at the Ramada, okay? Better if we all stick together."

They ran outside to find an immobile mass of hurried people who were leaving their homes, maybe forever. Disjointed tourists. Red Cross volunteers pointed in the direction of the buses.

The Ramada was in the direction of Pyramid Lake Road, where the buses were held. They tried to stay in step with the "orderly" line of people who were pressing themselves into a coagulated blob, some shoving, some shuffling slowly, gaping at the sky, which was lambent with chaos, flaming ash sputtering upon them. Below, the blistered and cavernous jaw that once held their homes. Their vacation spots. A large elderly woman shuffled slowly ahead, speaking to no one in particular. From what Sophie could tell, she had lost her home near Mount Robson.

"—And when I bought the house, sure I said, I'm gonna die right in the armchair looking over the mountains. I had three sisters, you know. Well, I was one of three. We were the best friends, the best. But our momma had pancreatic cancer, and it got my

sisters too. *Genetic. Bad luck.* Beth and Barbie, rest their souls. Can you believe that? And my kids, my kids, they said, Betty, you're the lucky one! Ha! Ha!!! Look at me now! And my kids, these kids, Lord knows I love 'em, well they say I can stay with them. In Toronto! Can you imagine? What am I gonna do there?" The woman wheezed, out of breath from her manic chortling, slapping her thigh. Irritated and equally exhausted, people shifted uncomfortably in the line behind the woman. Sophie nodded and stopped to touch the woman's wrist, Annie standing beside her, waiting.

"And well, you know, no. I guess I'm mighty lucky. And I don't have anything. Thank the good Lord in heaven I still have this fella." Sweat pooled on the woman's red cheeks as she shifted her weight toward Sophie and revealed a bag. A mewling calico popped its head out of a reusable green dollar store bag hanging off the woman's shoulder. "Blessings all around. God's paradise – am I right?" She threw her arms up, cackling. Behind her, the mountain range roared in a frenzy of red and yellow. Sophie couldn't see God there.

"Good day to you, missy," the woman said, and Sophie nodded.

She tracked the woman until she melded back into the crowd. Last she saw, Betty took a sip of the water bottle and formed a small cup with her hand, giving the cat the lion's share of the water.

"Come on," Sophie said, pulling Annie toward the Ramada, pushing past people, and smelling sweat, fear, and smoke as they did.

“Sophie?” Behind her, a voice called. Someone wearing yellow fire gear, soot-stained with a bandage crookedly wrapped around their forearm.

“Rowan! Where the fuck have you been?” Without thinking, she hugged him. The two awkwardly pulled apart. “Iris is so worried that –”

“Where is she?” he interrupted.

“In the Ramada.” He started to race toward the hotel. “Sophie,” he turned, “hurry – we have to get out of here.”

“Uh, yeah,” she said. Annie laughed, a mixture of shock or disbelief, as Sophie grabbed her again, towing her behind Rowan.

Iris

She was completely rigid, wringing her hands together, trying to will Rowan to walk through the lobby door. Their house in Little Italy was a stone’s throw from the *Golden Bird* restaurant. Rowan, at their house, cradling two giant paper bags as he burst through the door. Their favourite restaurant. A game they played with the handfuls of fortune cookies. Rowan, shy and patient, the family racing around, dropping orders onto plastic tablecloths and rushing back into the kitchen to help plate the meals. “It’s the handsome man! Here are some extra fortune cookies for you, handsome man!” The owner pinching Rowan’s cheeks. Opening the cookies back at the house, mysticism and magic, every fortune they opened seemingly destined for the other person. Rowan: *your gregarious personality will open professional windows*. Iris: *Your love of music will be an*

essential part of your life. Rowan playing the guitar, his calloused fingers coaxing bittersweet melodies. Once they opened the same fortune, *Embrace this love relationship you have!* Their love. She thought about that. How it shifted. Became something softer and even more comforting over the years.

Their red canoe on Lake Louise. Gliding along, stopping to show a couple teenagers how to balance their paddles. How Rowan handled himself on the water. How he was with people who needed his help. The ember hues of sunset, the turquoise blue beneath them. Alone, sheltered between the mountains with only the sounds of the water lapping the boat's hull.

“What?” Rowan had asked, a smiling question at Iris's happy face, unblinking and taking him in.

The patch on his old Levi's. The way he tenderly tried to clean the bakeapple preserves his mom sent him from Newfoundland, running a paper towel over the sides of the sticky jam jar, fist raised when he hit the bowling pins on their second date, the unbridled *whoop* of victory as the X above him flashed. How he opened up after that second date. Spilling secrets from his first heartbreak to the time he broke his two front teeth. How his favourite time of day was dusk, how semidarkness was the most honest kind of silence to him, the time of day he loved most in the forest, when deer and elk would move like liquid through the trees and birds pattered their hushed *goodnights* to one another. The way he rattled off the names of trees and mosses— thumbing the green and speaking their

Latin terms effortlessly, *Pinus ponderosa*, *Populus balsamifera*. Shaking spruce needles out of his hair. His love for his family and far-away parents. How the butter stayed soft when he was home, how warm and welcoming the house was after he lit a fire in the stove. Their ongoing debate about whether the German knives need to be hand-washed or could go in the dishwasher. The crinkle of roses hidden behind his back from the supermarket.

Just this morning, they listened to old John Prine songs as he prepared for what they hoped would be the last day of the fire, praying for the highway to clear. Their songs. Straightforward, honest love tunes about unshaven legs and doing the dishes together, songs about how one prefers mustard over ketchup. Iris laughed despite herself, thinking of Rowan. His obsession with condiments – how he'd just bought his seventh mustard, this one a creamy dill, for his arsenal of sauces which cluttered the fridge door.

“Nothing.” Iris had smiled back at Rowan on the canoe. Row raised his eyebrows. “Everything.” Gesturing to the water, to him, the mountains.

Everything.

*

“Iris!” Sophie shouted. Iris saw Sophie first, hand-in-hand with Annie and then – Rowan. She tore toward him, shouting, “Where the hell were you?!”

“An owl,” he said, breaking apart and folding himself into Iris.

Sophie

Iris and Rowan embraced for what felt like an eternity, and Sophie wasn't sure where to look. Put her hands. It was Annie who gestured to her (*get in there*), and Sophie stepped forward to the hugging couple, lost her courage, and stepped back. Iris saw her, and then threw her arms around Sophie, too, kissing her forehead and smelling of ripe sweat and jubilantly shouting in her ear,

“Let's get the fuck out of here!”

Rowan, just as uncomfortable as Sophie, stood beside Sophie as they finished their embrace, both being hugged by Iris. When they stepped back, Iris was still beaming.

Then, Rowan punched Sophie in the arm. Iris observed them and then began to laugh wildly. Annie lagged behind and then looked at Sophie as if to ask *what the heck is going on?*

Annie

They raced to join the bumper-to-bumper traffic crawling out of town, smoke and ash swirling around them. Annie's lungs burned, her eyes watering from the heat and smoke.

“Where is your car?” Sophie shouted to Iris, who stopped in her tracks as she observed what was in front of her. It was her car, but now a van with the door open was parked in front of it, blocking it in.

“No,” Iris said.

“We’ll take the truck!” Rowan urged. Iris nodded, and they all clamoured after him, running toward the edge of town where his truck was parked crookedly. It was a small, beat-up two-seater, and being the youngest, Annie offered to sit in the crack of space where the stick shift and the seats met.

“It’s okay, really,” she said, just wanting to get out of here.

Iris

She wasn’t going to spend a second apart from Rowan.

“No, I’ll go in the middle,” she said, jumping in beside Rowan and placing either leg on the other side of the stick shift. The truck rattled to a start, and she desperately gripped Rowan’s hand as he shifted into gear and sped toward the line of crawling cars out of the town. They were all holding their breath. No one would speak for fear of what – jinxing it? As if saying something would make this nightmare become a reality.

Annie’s eyes were wide. She kept looking at Sophie, whose eyes were shut tight and her knuckles white, whispering something unintelligible. The heat was unbearable as they

slowly crawled forward, wedged between honking cars. People angrily extending their arms out an open window, shaking their fists at the people in front of them.

Iris gasped.

Flames ripped beside them on either side of the freeway. There were people on ATVs. Horses galloping in the central ditch on the freeway, bodies tense and restless under the sweltering heat, sweat bursting like silver liquid down their sleek coats, striking the ground urgently, eyes lolling at the vehicles as they passed. Wide-eyed and desperate, people were on foot in the central ditch, sweating and cursing and praying, desperately trying to flag down passing cars and trucks that were already too full. Grimly, Rowan instructed everyone to roll up the windows, but the smoke was already beginning to make the group hack loud, shuddering coughs as the heat ripped into their lungs.

The truck inched forward amid honking horns and shouts. All Iris could see was a sea of brake lights, the road ahead shrouded in thick smoke and illuminated by the apocalyptic orange glow. She gripped the seat to steady her shaking hands. She thought it was possible that the sun was beginning to set, but it was hard to tell under the curtain of smoke. Flames tore along the edges of the freeway, as if trying to outpace the sun's descent.

Annie

Sophie's eyes flicked open, the reflection of the blaze reflected in the dark green of her irises, a glimmer of strength. Sophie reached over and squeezed Annie's arm. Annie tried to slow her unsteady breath but began to cough, a wheezing hack.

"We're going to be okay. Just stay calm." The smoke coiled and writhed, cloaking everything in ghostly clouds of onyx and coal. She saw Rowan grit his teeth, knuckles turning white against the steering wheel.

She glanced at Iris, her face unreadable as she looked at the angry blister of flames ahead. How could she stay calm? This was a nightmare. There was a terrible cracking noise, and a flaming pine tree came careening into the ditch, and Annie screamed.

Rowan

He swerved, and the line picked up speed. The knot in his chest loosened. The smoke around them was still intense, the red glow of the flames on either side of the freeway like driving through a tunnel to hell, but the movement feels like freedom.

Rowan watched Iris visibly relax as he shifted gears and the truck groaned into motion, sixty kilometres, then seventy. Annie whooped, and Sophie, alternating between whispers of calm and unintelligible praying, smiled weakly.

The GPS told them it was a few more hours to Edmonton. They'd get there. He was thinking of Iris on the island, her feet bare and her ankles exposed, the gritty cold of Atlantic seawater and sand in her hands as she held his own, and he mumbled to her, "Hey, Rissy— remember the beach?" Sophie's eyes lit with tenderness, staring at the road. She was bursting, beautiful, terrified. He was getting them out of there.

Suddenly the car ahead wobbled, a front tire shook, and there was a screech of metal on the pavement as it haphazardly twisted into the median. Rowan jolted the truck and barely missed it. There were cars sliding into the ditch. *How?* And then he understood. Vehicles were losing their tires from the heat, rubber melting. Rowan yanked in front of the SUV that's lost its wheel and jumped out. He slapped on their window. A wide-eyed young woman stared back at him. Rowan shouted, "We need to take them," as a BMW screeched past.

"We don't have enough room!" Sophie said, but jumped out of the truck, instructing Annie to stay inside the cab. A pine tree toppled nearby. They were trying to flag down other vehicles, but drivers took round corners to avoid them. Sophie beat on the minivan door, empty apart from the driver, as it crawled past, the click of doors locking as the driver stared ahead and sped by. Desperately, they tried flagging down vehicles. Rowan looked at a woman in the

driver's seat of the SUV, head turned to her baby in the back. He couldn't hear her over the roar of the fire, but he knew what she was saying – over and over. *It's okay. It's okay. It's okay*, to the wailing toddler in the backseat. He was about to place himself in the truck bed and have Iris drive when someone finally careened into the median next to him, a giant truck with an electrician's setup in the back. Rowan hacked loudly, the smoke filling his lungs. "Thank you," he wheezed to the person who stopped.

"We'll take them," a woman in flannel said, reaching into the driver's side door and guiding the frightened driver to her truck, who broke away and pulled the frantic child from its car-seat.

"Let's go," Rowan said to Iris and Sophie, Annie staring out at them through the truck window with wide eyes.

Iris

They finally emerged into a strip of clear air – the silence in the car deafening. The air began to clear mildly, the sounds of panic fading behind them. Rowan pulled over, resting his head against the dash. Iris's heart pounded as the adrenaline wore off, leaving her limbs weak and trembling.

"We made it," she said softly.

"You did good," Sophie said to Rowan, drew in a shaky breath and sat up, gazing out at the road stretching before them. The familiar mountains were obscured behind a

thick pall of smoke. She swallowed against the lump in her throat. “I can’t believe this is happening.” Her voice cracked. “What if the town burns down completely?”

Everyone in the car was quiet. Annie, who had been so tense and silent, was fast asleep with her head resting on Sophie’s shoulder. Her skin was caked in soot, the foundation she was wearing a glue for the ash which had rained down upon her childish face, dirty smears caking the corners of her face.

Rowan said, “It will burn itself out.”

Sophie wiped at her eyes, smearing dirt and ash across her face. “Thank you,” she said to him. She gave a watery laugh.

Iris squeezed her hand. Her eyes softened. “You know I’m here for you, right? All of it.”

“I know,” she said. They took a deep breath of the smoky air, and Rowan pulled back onto the road.

Chapter Seventeen

Sophie

Sophie woke up early, in the cold, crepuscular hour of morning where the evening dark blues were bleeding into an ominous shade of tangerine from the fire in the distance. She felt her fingers slowly stretch, marvelling at the nerve endings within her coming to life. She could hear Annie's soft breath from the bed across the room. Sophie was unfurling, marvelling at the simple miracle of being alive. After today, she could peel the sinewy strips off an underripe orange. Go grocery shopping a thousand more times. Unveil the tender parts of herself like the faint sprawl of a fiddle leaf fern. She could have her heart broken as many times as she'd like. She could take photos with Iris, their double chins unapologetic, soft, and free. She could get old. Have a family if she wanted. Plant a maple tree and watch it grow. Swim in mineral-rich ponds and, one day, see the mountains again.

The coffee machine continued to burble, and she slowly opened her eyes.

A pale grey dawn lit the motel room. They had been corralled into a *SuperRest* off the freeway by first responders, and the four of them were squeezed onto two twin beds. She heard the low grumble of Rowan's voice and Iris whispering to him, "I think we should. Did your parents say we could stay with them?" Rowan spoke back, something about flights and rentals.

"It's not good timing, Row. I don't know." He whispered soothing tones back to her, saying they would do whatever she wanted.

The acrid smell of smoke still lingered, though the panic from yesterday had faded into an eerie calm. Annie still was fast asleep. The last 48 hours were a fever dream. As she rested, she could see how young Annie really was. Sophie's heart hurt. She sat up and peered out the window, blinking against the hazy light.

She could still see the smoke spiralling from the mountains. Rowan reached for the remote control and turned on the TV, and he and Iris sat up to watch the news. Drone footage showed that most of the fires seemed to have died down during the night, leaving behind a landscape of blackened trees and charred ground. Parts of the forest were reduced to a tangle of bare, skeletal branches reaching up into the pale sky. Yet some pockets remained untouched, vibrant green canopies standing out in stark contrast against the burn. It looked surreal, as if two worlds had been stitched together unevenly. Sophie sat up and smelled the burnt and liquidy aroma of motel coffee.

"Morning," Iris said, settling beside her and passing her the lukewarm drink in a paper cup, "The news said they were able to contain most of the fires," Iris said. "But the damage is pretty extensive." She sighed, resting her head on Sophie's shoulder. "I'm really going to miss going there."

Sophie leaned into her, melancholy twisting in her chest. They wouldn't be coming back together, would they?

She swallowed hard. "I have to get to Gladys."

Sophie

Even in the city, notes of ash and ember blended with the hushed gasps of the onlooking world. Despite her desperation to get to Gladys, Sophie knew she had to get Annie home first. Following Annie's directions, Sophie pulled her car up to a dilapidated house with faded grey siding and a bloated man sitting outside, staring unevenly toward the freeway beyond their crooked fence. The noise of cars whizzed by, and Sophie walked up to the front door with Annie and followed her inside. Her mom rushed and embraced her daughter.

"Thank you," she said to Sophie, her voice muffled in Annie's denim jacket. And then she grabbed her daughter by the shoulders and said, "You are grounded."

Sophie laughed and bade them farewell.

She sped along the highway to Gladys.

Despite everything, when Sophie got there, she felt briefly insecure about the smell of sweat and smoke on her body until she spotted the ajar front door. She sprinted inside.

"Gladys, where are you?" She ran to her room. Sophie pushed open the bedroom door to find Gladys's room enveloped in shadows. Filtered through the floral drapes, the dark room coughed a dusty violet. The scent of old books and faint traces of lavender mingled in the air. And there, in the corner, sat Gladys, cocooned in an armchair, her face etched with confusion.

“Gladys?”

A momentary spark of recognition appeared in Gladys’s eyes before fading again. “Mmm... who’s there?” Gladys’s voice was fragile, a whispering breeze. She tapped against the side of the chair repeatedly. Sophie stepped closer. She noticed Gladys’s hands trembling, fidgeting with the frayed edges of her blanket.

“It’s Sophie, hi.” She was trying to be gentle. “I’ve come to see you.” Gladys’s brow furrowed, deep lines etching across her face.

“Something’s not right, Sophie. I can’t seem to remember.” Sophie’s eyes welled with tears, her hand instinctively reaching out to touch her mother’s frail shoulder.

Sophie?

Gladys looked empty. She thought of Iris’s crumpled face in the hotel lobby. How could she not have noticed? How could Gladys possibly have deteriorated so quickly? Something was wrong. The disoriented gaze, the restlessness, and the lapses in memory were like tangled threads in the fabric of her foster mom.

“I think we need to go to the hospital, okay, Gladys?”

The old woman stared at her vacantly. “Are you, my daughter?” Her eyes were glassy, ice-white. Sophie let out a surprised cry, sniffing.

“I am. We’ll figure this out, okay?” she whispered. Sitting at the edge of the bed, Sophie clasped her mother’s trembling hands within her own. Gladys looked into Sophie’s eyes, trust flickering there, a frail flame struggling to stay lit. “I trust you, Sophie,” she murmured, her voice barely audible. She had always called her Sophia. Something was terribly wrong. “Please help me.”

Sophie rose from the bed. She reached for her phone, her fingers dialing an ambulance.

VI.

The smell of ozone before the storm.

“Rain?”

Flowing down jagged slopes, the hiss of coals fading. Whispers of the wind in kind. An evolution of their internal ether: Here, now. Transformation unfurls — a delicate baptism, saturated fronds drip in the daybreak. A clay-coloured sparrow returns. And another. Another. The family bobs on a charred branch.

Ashen soil. New nutrients.

Saplings rise.

Chapter Eighteen

Sophie

The walls were painted in placid hues of seafoam green. Fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting an artificial glow upon the shiny white linoleum. The air was heavy with the clinical scent of antiseptic, settling between the unnervingly familiar aroma of freshly laundered sheets. Gladys's IV pole dripped next to her, and the heart monitor beeped rattled the intricate symphony of her beating heart. Sophie could hear muffled voices outside, the squeak of rolling gurneys, and the clatter of trays and utensils from the nurse's station. Iris stood beside her, surveying the sleeping Gladys with a wan smile.

"I'm so glad she's okay," Iris whispered.

"Right, me too," Sophie said. She wasn't *okay*, really, Sophie remembering the conversation earlier that day, a doctor playing with his stethoscope as he explained her mom's condition to her. *Yes, she is expressing symptoms of dementia, but it appears that she had an untreated bladder infection that can lead to symptoms of rapid progression of the disease.*

Tenderness bled into Iris's face. She was holding a bundle of Asiatic lilies, the cellophane crinkling as she shuffled uncomfortably near the hospital bed, as she said, "I think we have to leave, Sophie. It's time."

Sophie counted the white tiles on the floor. She understood. She did. It had been floating through her mind since she overheard Iris and Rowan's conversation that

morning in the motel room. She wasn't certain how to respond. She didn't know how she was going to manage without her. "We've been talking about it for a long time, but—"

"I know. I know."

"With everything that's happened, it feels like now is—"

"Right. I know."

"It's okay." They stood for a moment, the plastic crinkling again in Iris's hands. Gladys rattled awake, coughing.

"Is that my Rissy girl?" She cleared her throat and placed her glasses on her nose. The antibiotics they'd given her rushed colour back to her cheeks, and she seemed to be filling the parts of herself Sophie was afraid she would never see again.

"It's me, Gladdie. Hey." Iris beamed at her and placed her hand in Gladys's, whose arms were outstretched and beckoned her for a hug. "How you feeling?" Iris asked. "You gave us quite the scare."

"Oh, you know me. Tough as nails, they say." Iris laughed.

"Too true. Giving the nurses a run for their money?"

"No, duckie. So far so good." Gladys shrugged playfully, and Iris squinted at Sophie, a crescent moon of internal light. She sat in the chair by Gladys's bed.

"So Rowan and I have been talking about leaving Edmonton. I think it's time for us to move to Newfoundland, Gladdie."

“Geez, sure.” Confusion still formed itself in the corners of Gladys’s face as she contemplated this statement.

“Do you think you and Sophie will be okay, just the two of you?” Iris asked. Gladys thought for a moment.

Say we’ll be fine, Gladys. Sophie knew Iris well enough to know that if either of them said they needed her, she would put a stop to the move immediately. Gladys pulled Iris by the shoulder and moved close to her, whispering so Sophie couldn’t hear.

Please let her go, Sophie thought.

Iris pulled away and nodded in affirmation.

“Thank you,” Iris said as Gladys waved her off.

“Okay, then, duckie. Now, get out of my hair. I need my beauty sleep.”

Both friends laughed, and Sophie walked Iris to the parking lot. A handful of leaves had begun to fall, and Iris was radiant beneath the clear sky and high sun, which lit the parking lot like a movie set.

“When you leave?” Sophie asked her.

“Oh, I haven’t—”

“Come on, Riss. I know you came here for permission, but you don’t need it.”

Sophie paused, distracted by the light which bounced off a passing car, temporarily blinding her. “When is your flight?”

Iris stared at the ground. “I would have cancelled it.”

“I know,” Sophie said, grabbing her hand.

“We leave next Monday.”

“Good.” Sophie smiled at her, this time feeling something unravel within.

“Help me pack?”

“I’ll be there tonight.”

Epilogue

Rowan and Iris woke Sunday morning. Iris read her book, he read the paper, they read each other, reaching for warmth. The September day bled into a resplendent and powdery cornflower blue. Iris felt Rowan's hand, clammy from the cold water, gritty with sand. It was going to be all alright, wasn't it? A fish in hand, a text from a friend. The two of them, the quiet. The sounds of the brook. Prodding over elm roots in the clearing, they watched a swarm of blackbirds shift and bob as a single entity, a hive mind of bird song and flapping wings.

They hiked to the craggy cliff, and fog rolled in like a great white wall, slipping along the water, swallowing the horizon and the narrow strip of blue which danced beyond the ocean. The mauzy air blurred the edges of the world, and they were only here, cradled in the comfort of their temporary home. Soon they would make some decisions. But for now, they rattled the open door of their family cabin on dock point, lit a fire in the stove, and laid upon the rug near the warmth. The sun set, and they unfurled as the holy hush of evening descended upon the shimmering water.

*

Sophie had added to Gladys's thick plot of delicate flowers, which this time of year were burst open – a riot of overgrowth, colour and texture. She mimicked Gladys's motions that she had grown up watching, the way her hands deftly dug in the soil, tearing up weeds and shaking out new seeds. A place to rest within a tangle of green, of growth. The constant rhythm of finding her own breath.

She appreciated the tendrils of morning glory that turned their heads toward the sun and the rough stalks of lavender she plucked in bunches for the kitchen table. Brilliant clusters of marigolds had begun to wilt, fat honeybees still resting their heavy chests within the pollen. A brittle buzz of life showered itself along the garden.

They were calling for a wet spring. Mr. Henders, the elderly gentleman that Sophie had first noticed wandering outdoors in his bathrobe so long ago, reminded her of this daily, as if he knew how badly she needed to hear it. He rested his weight on his cane now, speaking to her through a sea of jumbled thoughts, each one more positive than the last. The seniors there banded together, made bread and sweet confections they seemed to intuit she had no knowledge of making herself – and they were right. She savoured the treats and left them open on the table. As Sophie braced her thumb against the heady weight of a fading tiger lily, shaking the plant free of a thick swathe of red beetles who refused to leave, a voice behind her called out.

“Soapy water, duckie. The only way to get rid of ‘em. Here–” She had filled a margarine tub with soap and water and slogged the bucket toward Sophie. “Oh, damn it. Hey Henders, bread again?” She raised her eyebrows at Sophie. She thought his loaves were too thick. They already had a cache of it in the freezer, but they didn’t have the heart to tell him. She told Sophie that once she was feeling up to it, she’d like to take the car to Gladwell Park and start feeding the breadcrumbs to the birds.

At first, it was overwhelming. But as the weeks passed, Sophie found a sense of peace in her new role. She watched Mom closely, making sure she got her pills and the

care she needed. They hadn't spent this much time together since Sophie left the house at seventeen. Certain parts of Mom's personality were softening, and she cried almost every day – a stark contrast to the wooden person Sophie thought she knew as a child. Certain things about her were slowly starting to fade away, but Sophie relished their time together. It gave her the chance to finally look at things in her life that needed to change.

The Agency was in damage control mode. Sophie knew they wanted to drop her, but she surprised them by telling them first that she wanted to break their agreement – just as soon as they arranged for one last presser.

At the presser, she apologized to the folks that INTRA had hurt. This would be the last and only time she addressed this issue. After that, her finger had hovered over the delete button on each of her socials, hesitating only for a moment before selecting *yes – delete the account permanently*. She had been public longer than she had been private. And now it was over.

They opened a fresh batch of Penny-From-Next-Door's butter tarts for tonight and invited her and Mr. Henders over for a game of Rummy. Sophie lost every time, forming nonsensical sets and runs of cards, while Gladys, after years of playing, easily won almost every game. Sophie snapped a photo of a grinning Gladys with her winnings in front of her and sent it to Iris.

They did this every few days, updates peppered between lives that were no longer connected as they once were. She felt joyful when she instantly received a return photo –

Iris and Rowan, alone, with a fire on the beach. Gladys pinched her arm and told Sophie to shuffle the cards.

There was a knock at the door and Gladys looked at her, confused.

“Oh, good,” Sophie said, “She’s here.” Annie, a pewter casserole dish in her hands stood in the doorway. “Hey, Sophie. My mom made us some dip – I hope that’s okay.” Sophie waved at Annie’s mother as she drove away.

“Of course. Come on in.”

Annie

Annie sat at the end of the table and took in the life that surrounded her. This safety. This comfort was the bridge between her and, well, everything. Three elderly faces and Sophie’s young one, noses perched atop cards and conspiratorial laughter.

“Deal her in, duckie,” Gladys instructed Sophie.

“Oh – thanks, but I don’t really know how to play,” Annie said.

“Well, how in earth and heaven are you ever meant to learn?”

“You better listen to her, Annie. My mom takes Rummy almost as seriously as she takes church.” Sophie began to deal the cards as Gladys playfully took a swipe at her.

“That! Is not! True!” Gladys said, and then leaned covertly toward Annie, whispering, “It’s far more serious than church.”

Annie liked the sunsets in the prairies. They were longer, more open. You could watch the golden orb of buttercream-white dip directly behind the horizon without any rock formations impeding your line of sight. She was staying in Edmonton for a while, at her cousin’s apartment, attending the Metro high school to fast-track the remaining courses she needed so she could get into university in the winter semester. Hinton wasn’t where Annie needed to be anymore.

After the fire, Sophie left The Agency and social media altogether. She seemed lighter, less burdened. She looked out for Annie in the city, making sure she finished her homework on time and went to the grocery store. Something small and kindly crept onto Sophie’s face as she observed the table.

“What’s up?” Annie asked.

“I don’t know. I’m happy you’re here. That we’re here. Thanks, Annie.”

“For what?” Annie laughed.

“I don’t know. Just, thanks.”

“Mmkay, weirdo!” Annie was still reeling; she had such a sense of ease and comfort with *the* Sophie Grace. Annie grinned as she arranged her hand of cards, forming

sets and runs and occasionally looking up at the others to ensure she had been listening to Gladys's rules.

Go, Sophie mouthed to Annie behind Gladys, *Keep Going!* As she laid her final card, Sophie stood up behind Gladys, arms waving frantically, mouthing – *Oh!*

Annie thought, and then shouted, “RUMMY!”

“Damn it!” Gladys shouted back, tossing her own cards to the table. Mr. Henders and Penny-From-Next-Door congratulated Annie, who, if she was being honest, really didn't understand how she had won.

Sophie grinned at her, and chided Gladys, “Looks like we've got a new champ, Mom.”

As Gladys said, “We'll see about that,” Annie's phone began to ring. She saw the name on the caller ID and turned her screen away from Sophie's line of sight.

“Hey, it's my mom. Is there somewhere I can take this?” Annie asked.

“Yeah, sure, just head into Gladys's room.”

Annie shut the door and slid the call open. “Yeah?” she asked, tone shifting.

“The prototype is live, baby! You want to have a look?”

“Obviously,” she said.

“I’ll send it to you now – it’s *really* good, Annie. *Real* good. So down to Earth. You’re gonna help a lot of kids, Annie.”

“I hope so. When’s the wire transfer happening?”

“Comes right after the prototype. The investors are thrilled. Thanks again for joining us.”

“Yep. Thanks, Frank.” She hung up and opened the email attachment. It contained a download link for *INTRA 2.0: Mental Wellness Edition*. As the app loaded, a series of sample conversations between users and their latest brand ambassador, *Annie-Bananie*. It was less sleek than the first *INTRA* app, a pale purple background and a dressed-down avatar of Annie herself appeared on the screen. *Wow*. There she was. Annie relaxed slightly, bathing in the blue light of her phone, sliding through the sample conversations.

Sample-User:

I’ve been feeling really down lately. I don’t know how to deal with it.

Annie-Bananie-INTRA:

Hey, I’m sorry to hear that. It breaks my heart to see you feeling this way. Just remember, you’re never alone in this. Reach out to someone you trust, like a teacher or counselor, who can lend a listening ear and provide the support you deserve. I’m always here for you, friend!


She smiled at the sample text. *This* was the right direction. She was doing the right thing. One day soon, she would tell Sophie about her involvement with *INTRA* – maybe even get her advice. She could see it now: Sophie, beaming proudly at her as Annie stood atop a stage, maybe accepting a Nobel prize for her work in – as Frank and the man from

INTRA (what was his name? Kyle?) promised her – eradicating loneliness. She typed into the chat.

Annie-Bananie-Freal

Hey Annie!

Annie-Bananie-INTRA

Hey girl! How are you doing? It's so nice to meet you! 

Her avatar blinked, clear-eyed and doting. Surreal. Time to see if this version of INTRA was as advanced as Kyle and Frank promised. She needed to make sure this INTRA wasn't like Sophie's; it had to be more than just warm platitudes, with real guidance.

Annie-Bananie-Freal:

I'm okay! I'd love your advice though. High school can be so isolating. I wish I had more friends to share moments with.

Annie-Bananie-INTRA:

I hear you, babe. Loneliness is tough. But it doesn't define you and I promise, things will get better. It might not feel like it right now, but I want you to know that you are loved. Don't hesitate to reach out to the people you love or seek help from a therapist, okay?

And based on the location of your profile, there are three therapists within walking distance of your home in **Edmonton, Alberta: *Inspiring Solutions Counselling Services, Healing Journey YEG Therapy***, and the ***Edmonton Wellness Centre***. Based on the reviews, I would recommend *Inspiring Solutions* for your therapy journey!


Would you like me to book an appointment via email for you?

INTRA can do that? Wow! This was so much better than Annie could have imagined. She grinned widely, feeling the weight lift off her shoulders.

Annie-Bananie-Freal:

Sure! See if you can book me in for this coming Monday.


Annie-Bananie-INTRA:

Totally. I'll let you know what they say 

So proud of you for working hard to transform your life, girl.

Annie felt a swell in her chest. She was proud of herself, too.

Annie-Bananie-INTRA:

Hey, speaking of transformation, have you seen the amazing results people are achieving with the GetFit and SlimFit programs? It's a combination supplement and weight loss program that can help you reach your health and fitness goals to increase your confidence and help you feel your best. With our products, you can shine, inside and out! Take care of yourself, girl! You deserve to feel confident and empowered 

Click [here](#) to purchase!