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The Gala

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The Gala
By Anna Joranger

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Advisor: Peter Bognanni

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One

Lily would always remember the ribbons that Diane wore in her hair that day. They were blue and smooth as the sky, perfectly matched to the knee-length dress that their mother had crafted for the occasion. On this day, Diane Pierce, 22 years old, would look like a queen. “A perfect queen,” Sophia Pierce whispered, smoothing the wrinkles from her older daughter’s skirt.

Clutching Diane’s purse, Lily stood quietly in the corner, in awe of how the glimmering lights and marbled floors of the dressing room made Diane’s skin glow. The scene reminded Lily of the few hours before a school play when she was eleven or twelve, how her mother had fawned over her make-up and curled her hair into ringlets behind her ears. This room was even identical to the one backstage at Lily’s elementary school, with mirrored walls and wraparound counters. The only difference was the City of New Barton Gala Handbook twinkling next to a lamp in the corner, and the fact that Diane had a private dressing room, quiet except for the footsteps of their mother, who rushed from counter to counter in search of the hairdryer, the mascara, a sewing needle.

Diane looked serene, as she always did. Facing the mirror, she moved her fingers through her curls unhurriedly. She had perfect dark hair, perfect round eyes and rosy cheeks. Lily knew that when her turn came, no one would look at her quite the way they looked at her sister. Mothers would not hold their breath as their handsome sons drew from the selection pool and hope that Lily Pierce’s name was announced. No one would fervently wish for their sons *not* to choose her, either. She would go unnoticed. She was used to going unnoticed in comparison to her sister.

But at eighteen, Lily still had four years to wait. Today was about Diane. And Diane Pierce, everyone agreed, was a prize.

* * *

The excited chatter of the crowd faded the moment Mr. Herston took the stage. The Gala took place on the upper floor of downtown New Barton's former library, now a meeting hall completely absent of books—although a few shelves, now filled with framed photos of Galas and government rallies, still lingered on the perimeter. Surrounded by the building's dark wood paneling and white columns, even the dowdy facilitator looked elegant. He straightened his tie and positioned himself behind the podium. "Please rise and welcome your sons and daughters to the hall," he boomed into his microphone.

Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, excitable neighbors, all stood and turned to the back entrance, where the boys began to emerge one by one amidst anxious applause and regal music from an orchestra in the back balcony. Dressed in impeccable tuxedos, hair slicked back and teeth shining, the boys proceeded down the center aisle to the front of the hall. A large screen in the upper right corner of the room, above the stage, magnified each face in turn.

Lily glanced at her parents. Sophia had passed the day in a whirlwind of preparation, but during the final hour of sitting and waiting in the hall, Lily had watched her mother's joy transform into nerves. Now Sophia corrected the diamond clip in her hair with a trembling hand and whispered theatrically with Laura McPherson's mother, who was seated behind them.

Lily's father James, on the other hand, was still as stone. He was a Congressman, and Lily could only remember him as unreadable and a little distant. Usually, though, his expression retained a subtle humor. There was no trace of it today.

When the twelve boys had taken their post to the left of the stage—in a perfect line, hands folded in front—the girls began their entrance. Laura McPherson was first, and her mother squealed at the sight of her daughter's fluttering pink skirt and blond hair. Jane Theodore

followed in a white floor-length gown. “A little behind the times,” Lily heard her mother murmur to Mrs. McPherson.

Then, Diane. Her blue dress, cinched at the perfect point in her waist, rushed around her like water as she made her way down the aisle. She smiled widely, blue ribbon pointing skyward. Lily thought of the endless afternoons that she had spent flitting around the fabric shops with her mother and sister, searching for Diane’s perfect look, and how her sister’s eyes had grown wide a few weeks ago when their mother emerged from her craft room with the finished dress. Diane was perpetually cheerful and smiling, but rarely did she divulge any deeper emotions, so the look on her face when she saw the dress left Lily dazed. A few days after that, Lily had had a rare half hour alone with her sister when they took the bus to the grocery store together. “All of this Gala stuff, this is the first time that I’ve felt like an actual adult,” Diane had said as they wandered toward the dairy aisle, swinging the cloth shopping bag around and around her wrist. “Everything about my life feels different, or newer. You’ll see what I mean when you get there.” Then she had seemed lost in thought and hadn’t continued. Lily had followed as Diane retrieved a jug of milk, wanting to hear more, but already predicting that Diane would remain quiet the rest of the night.

Diane’s Gala appearance caused a stir throughout the hall. “Gorgeous,” Lily’s mother whispered to her. “Absolutely gorgeous.”

There were thirteen girls in all, and Lily could sense the anxiety of each mother and father. One lucky female would be matched with Jude Jennings, the neighborhood heartthrob. One would find a less fortuitous match in Zachary Lumberg, scrawny and cross. And thanks to the uneven gender ratio, one would find that her name was never called at all, postponed for at least another year.

With the girls to the right and the boys to the left, all glancing shyly at each other, Mr. Herston cleared his throat. “Welcome, everyone. Each year it thrills me to assist with the Gala for my very own community, Silver Woods. It is an honor, as always, to be here with all of you and to celebrate the happy traditions of our city, a city that chose sixty years ago to claim independent statehood and do things in its own way. And of course, the leader of New Barton, Governor Cole Michels himself, is here celebrating alongside us. His presence makes this event all the more exceptional.”

At this point a small, clean-shaven man in a navy blue suit, stationed in the front row, turned to the rest of the audience with a radiant smile. Seated on either side of him was a guard in a green and blue uniform. Lily had noted the Governor’s presence almost as soon as she had entered the hall with her family, as had nearly every other guest, although no one seemed particularly surprised to see him given that Michels had grown up in Silver Woods and had close friends in the audience. Governor Michels looked towards the Pierce family in particular and offered James a small wave. James nodded back.

At this point Mr. Herston proceeded to the same brief speech he made every year. He proclaimed the honor of state-endorsed marriage, the thrill of turning 22 and knowing you were finally eligible for your second major life ceremony. Lily imagined how she would feel on her twenty-second birthday. The day she had turned 15, more than three years ago now, had hardly been extraordinary, yet turning 15 had dictated that later that week she had mounted the stage of her school’s auditorium, where the glass bowl swimming with paper slips awaited her, and she had chosen her career. Nurse. She remembered sighing with relief when she made the draw. It was a solid choice, and it was nice to have a concrete future laid out in front of her.

Lily couldn't imagine that the marriage ceremony would be much different. She had skimmed Diane's copy of the Gala Handbook, and it was filled with the same rhetoric as the guide Lily had received before her career draw. The career draw guide discussed the charms of a life free of difficult decisions, "the invaluable formation of strong, career-oriented individuals within our communities," and the wonderful opportunity to select a fruitful path while also fulfilling the city's needs. The Gala Handbook, while stressing similar values, had a decidedly more festive tone than the career draw guide; "Nerves are natural, but remember that your Gala is a day to celebrate life, family, and community. Relax, enjoy yourself, and savor your time with both old and new family members on this exciting day," the Gala handbook stated.

Because the Gala groupings were divided by neighborhood, Lily had grown up recognizing that any one of the boys her age, within a certain number of city blocks, might eventually be her husband. And while she liked the idea of marrying certain boys better than the idea of marrying others, her mother had told her time and time again that life was all about taking what you were given and working with it—that you could be happy with any husband, with any job, as long as you set your mind to it. And so far, Lily had been happy.

"And with that," Mr. Herston concluded, "I will ask Mr. Jacobs to kindly retrieve the Gala pools."

Within moments the lanky Mr. Jacobs (another official from the government's Gala Office, like Mr. Herston) ascended the stairs with a large, opaque bowl in each hand. He set the bowls on the podium in front of Mr. Herston.

Mr. Herston beamed. "If no one objects, we will select our first young lady."

The crowd murmured assent. Sophia clutched Lily's hand.

Reaching into the bowl on his right, Mr. Herston removed a small silver envelope. He held it up for all to see before opening it and examining the name. “Amelia Rendeau,” he read.

There was a small eruption from the Rendeau family, and Amelia, tall and lean with olive skin, stepped forward. Mr. Herston moved away from the podium, leaving the selection pools accessible to Amelia. She paused for a moment at the podium, staring at the boys’ pool and breathing visibly. The other girls kept their heads down. The boys shifted on their feet. Amelia reached in and quickly chose an envelope, and a hush fell as she opened it. She stood motionless for a few moments before reading the name in a shaky voice: “Abraham Dunbar.”

The spectators jumped to their feet and broke into wild cheering. Even Governor Michels stood in the front row and applauded his approval. Amelia smiled as Abraham stepped forward. Not a bad choice, Lily assessed. Abraham was fairly handsome, extremely smart, and was finishing up his training as a surgeon. The young man reached into his pocket and removed a silver ring, which Amelia accepted, blushing. The cameraman crouched in front of the stage for a close-up of their hands, and the footage was immediately projected to the screen, an enormous image of Amelia’s twinkling finger. Mr. Herston, standing a few paces back from them, spoke into his microphone above the roar of the crowd: “I now pronounce you man and wife.” Abraham leaned down to brush his lips against Amelia’s cheek, and together they made their way down the stairs in front of the stage to sit in the empty front row, reserved for the new couples.

Sophia clapped and smiled pleasantly, but Lily could feel the nervous trembling of her mother’s chair as it bumped against her own.

“Thank you to both of you,” Mr. Herston said, stepping back to the podium. He allowed a brief interlude for the crowd to quiet, and then stepped to the boys’ pool to acquire a new name.

“Next, we have Mike Portry.”

Mike was stout and a bit round, not the best-looking boy at the Gala, but easygoing and humorous. Normally self-assured, Mike took his time approaching the podium and stared at the girls’ pool for a few minutes before reaching in. His voice sounded relieved when he opened his envelope. “Laura McPherson,” he announced.

Laura stepped forward happily and accepted her place at Mike’s side, even offering him a hug as the crowd applauded. They grinned at each other as Mr. Herston spoke, and they kissed comfortably. Laura and Mike, Lily knew, had grown up on the same block and had been friends almost since birth. Mrs. McPherson embraced her husband with a gleeful shout, and then reached forward to squeeze Sophia’s shoulder.

“Such a nice boy,” Sophia told Mrs. McPherson, and Lily offered her congratulations to Laura’s mother as James shook hands with Mr. McPherson.

When Laura and Mike were seated, Mr. Herston reached into the girls’ pool and called Ann Merrill to the podium. Ann selected Connor Wesley. Lily had never known Ann or Connor very well, but she clapped politely. She turned her attention to Diane, who was perfectly still under the bright stage lights.

Eddie Haleski’s name came up next. Sophia pressed her mouth to Lily’s ear. “Three of the better options are already taken. Lord, I hope her name comes up soon.” Lily was about to reply when she realized that the hall was deathly silent. She looked up.

Eddie was standing several feet back from the podium, frozen.

Lily remembered Eddie from when she was younger and her mother would invite all the neighborhood women to their house on summer weekends to laze on the perimeter of the pool and drink cocktails. Mrs. Haleski came with Eddie once or twice. She was widowed, had been married outside of the Gala ceremonies a few years before they went into effect. And she always slipped out of Sophia's gatherings long before the other women broke up their riotous laughter, taking Eddie by the hand to trace the outside of the Pierce house and retreat down the block, nearly hidden in the shade of the oak trees. Eddie had been so quiet and unobtrusive as a boy that Lily barely noticed him throughout their school years. He had blond hair and glasses that reflected the glint of chandeliers and windows in the enormous Gala hall, making it difficult, at first, for Lily to realize that he was crying.

Mr. Herston stepped gently forward. "Go ahead, son."

More silence. Then Eddie, stiff as a board, shook his head once, twice.

Mr. Herston waited, but Eddie did not move. Lily could see Governor Michels muttering something to one of his guards, and the guard rose and stepped briskly to the stage. He led Eddie down the stairs, out the side door. The audience looked around in confusion. Lily turned to where she remembered Mrs. Haleski had been sitting, but the seat was empty. Eddie's mother was already fleeing to the back door, skirt drifting behind her, silent as a cloud.

The crowd murmured as Mr. Herston stepped back to the podium. "Maybe next year," he said amiably, and there was a hesitant ripple of laughter.

Jessica Yassin was next up. She drew Zachary Lumberg, an unspoken relief to everyone who was still awaiting a daughter's selection. Still, Lily realized, now that Eddie was out of the running, not one, but two girls would ultimately be left out.

Two, three, four more matches were made, and still Diane's name was not announced. There were only three boys left—Nate Lowry, Fernando LePage, and Jude Jennings. Five girls clustered to the right of the platform, the smiles gone from their faces.

Nate Lowry was up next, and when he called Aidan Makabee's name, she looked ready to faint. Lily's mother barely applauded now; the color was draining from her face. James crouched forward with his elbows on his knees, staring at the floor.

Fernando LePage took his turn, and he chose Sally Henderson. Only Jude Jennings remained standing to the left of the stage, completely relaxed, not registering the terrified faces of the last three girls—Diane Pierce, Lucy Salvester, and Aurora Graham. They stared at him as he sauntered to the podium. Lily could feel her mother's fingernails digging into her hand.

Jude was, and always had been, charming. He had thick brown hair that dangled in front of his green eyes, and his tuxedo outlined a strong frame. Lily thought of the neighborhood picnics where everyone would spread blankets in the park and make sandwiches with jelly and honey. She remembered Jude, sprawling idly next to Mr. and Mrs. Jennings in a light blue T-shirt and movie star sunglasses at a picnic a few years before. Someone had produced a stereo, and she remembered Jude and Lucy Salvester dancing together by the lake, Jude still wearing his sunglasses, Lucy trying to appear humble as the other girls looked on. Lily recalled whisperings at school back then, issued by peers who were both shocked and excited by the gossip. Lucy and Jude had been "seeing each other," the other students claimed. But if that was ever true, it was short-lived and hushed up quickly. "Seeing each other" was more than discouraged.

Jude took his time at the podium, grinning at his spellbound audience before choosing an envelope. The paper ripped lightly in his hands, and then he read the name: "Diane Pierce."

Diane, aglow under the light of a chandelier, looked stunned. As the uproar began, she released a small smile and stepped forward to where Jude held out one hand to her.

Sophia was beside herself. Lily could see water glistening in the corner of her mother's eye as Sophia clapped her hands above her head, beaming widely as Mr. Herston stepped forward to shake hands with the last couple of the evening. Mrs. McPherson whistled behind them. Jude removed a ring from his pocket and presented it to Diane, who allowed him to slip it onto her finger and kiss her cheek as Mr. Herston announced their official marriage. Behind the new couple, Lucy and Aurora were slipping away to join their families, the only ones present who were not cheering. Lucy kept her face turned away from the audience. Her shoulders were quaking.

The screen kept to the image of Jude and Diane as they sat down, side by side. Then it switched to a shot of Governor Michels, applauding in the front row. A festive concluding tune echoed from the orchestra.

"They look great together," Lily whispered to her mother.

"They look perfect, perfect." Sighing happily, Sophia slid back and leaned against James, who was clapping somberly. Always the collected public official, his face revealed the strained hint of a smile, but nothing more.

The reception was dazzling. The weather was clear, and everyone gathered on the New Barton River Promenade, which was extravagantly decorated for the event. The Jennings and Pierce families sat together for dinner, and Mr. and Mrs. Jennings were as dashing as their son, with exaggerated smiles and even more exaggerated laughter.

After dinner, Diane and Jude spent most of the evening dancing. Jude wasn't much good at it, but Diane had been taking lessons for months. She had changed into a floor-length ball gown for the reception, this time a dark blue, almost black, and backless. Her hair had been released onto her shoulders so that it floated with her as she danced.

The stars came out after a few hours, and they mingled with lights strung in the trees along the promenade, casting a soft glow on the brides' bare arms. Lily toyed with the nametag that had been placed at her seat before their arrival. In her mother's mind, she knew, Diane was unsurpassable in beauty, in charm, and now in her choice of husband. Lily glanced down at her own green dress, beautifully designed but hanging from her thin frame at awkward angles. Her skin was so pale it was almost ghostly, and it had been all she could do to wrap her hair into an unremarkable bun this morning. But these things wouldn't be so bad if they didn't encourage comparison with Diane. She might pass for cute, even marginally pretty, if it was just her, but it had never been just her.

Eventually Mr. and Mrs. Jennings joined the younger couples on the dance floor, and Sophia drifted away to chat with Mrs. McPherson. Sanders Cohen, a boy in Lily's year, asked her to dance—not because he especially liked her, she was sure, but because it was expected that younger siblings would parade themselves in front of the neighborhood as the next ones up.

“So, your sister and Jude Jennings,” Sanders said in way of conversation as they began to waltz.

“Guess so,” Lily said. She glanced at Diane and Jude, who were close at hand, and observed as Jude lost his balance and stomped inadvertently on Diane's foot as she attempted a graceful slide towards him. Diane winced slightly, but resumed her smiling countenance within moments.

Back at the family table, where James was now sitting alone, Lily saw that Governor Michels had taken the opportunity to greet her father. Michels was clapping James on the back with a friendly grin. James returned the greeting in that ubiquitous way he had, which never allowed Lily to determine whether he was being sincere or simply acting his part. He and Michels had been friends since birth, had grown up neighbors. Sitting in Congress was one of the few positions that had never become a part of the career pools. Congress was only about connections.

Eventually Michels drifted away, and Lily thanked Sanders after a few dances and sat back down with her father. Nearly everyone was dancing by now, and Lily, a younger sibling, should have been one of them. But James looked forlorn at the table, alone in a sea of white napkins folded on empty chairs.

“Jude is a solid match,” James said.

Lily nodded. Jude was handsome, he came from a well-respected family, and he had selected a career as a lawyer—although he would probably be placed in Congress within a few years because his family and the Michels family had a history. No one would even be surprised by Lily’s envy. Based on odds, it was unlikely that she would make such an exciting match. But when she pushed herself beyond jealousy, there was something bigger and more exhilarating about all of this, about the life that was unwinding for Diane. Lily had felt the first stirrings of that idea after her career draw, with the slip of paper reading ‘nurse’ tucked safely away in her pocket. It was hers, and she was finally entitled to it. She wondered if Diane felt that way about Jude.

James looked pensive, and Lily recognized that he had a different and more encompassing perspective. He had been alive before the Galas. Before that, and since the City of

New Barton's independence from the United States, only career selection had been random. One lonely city in the middle of nowhere, its own Republic, needed very specific numbers of people for each job. It was easier. The number of children each couple could have was the next thing to be placed under the random pooling system. Then marriage, and housing soon after. James and Sophia were married in the first ever Gala.

"I think they'll be great together," Lily told her father eventually.

James turned to face her. He had been a politician by nature even before he joined Congress. He was always formal, with just the right amount of distanced humor. "Well, optimism can take you a long way," he said.

Lily wasn't sure why he had said it, but she smiled because it was nice to have him speaking to her directly, rather than huddling over a newspaper or staring into a cup of coffee.

She danced once or twice more with other boys in her year, to be polite, but for most of the night she sat quietly with James, or listened to her mother, now tipsy on champagne, chattering excitedly. She found herself wondering about Eddie Haleski, about what he could have been thinking. Had his nerves been too much for him? Had he actually been trying to indicate that he didn't want to get married? There was no basis for comparison; Lily had never heard of anything like it before.

She watched her sister dancing with Jude. After a while she dismissed Eddie Haleski from her thoughts, and she tried her best to dismiss her own insecurities, her curiosity about her own Gala, her future. Because tonight wasn't about any of that. It was about Diane Pierce, who looked like a queen, dancing smoothly on five-inch heels, the skin of her back glowing eerily in the starlight.

Two

Four years after Diane's Gala, Lily clutched her scarf around her face as she made her way up Carlyle Drive, trying to keep out the icy wind that was beginning to rave at night. It was November, barely winter, but the cold had been early and bitter the last few years. And Diane lived several blocks from the nearest bus stop. But Lily hadn't seen her sister or nephew in nearly a month, and she didn't have classes for once. So she took the number 16 bus to Carlyle and Marquez, braced herself for the walk, and shuffled down the empty street, past well-lit houses that grew bigger as she went on. From this neighborhood she could see the lake to the east, whitecaps swelling in the gusts. Downtown and the river glittered behind her, to the south. And the mountains west of the city, further west than anyone Lily knew had ever ventured, were visible as well. A solitary light gleamed there, as constant and faint as a star—the watch tower, her father had told her.

Diane's Lake Heights neighborhood on Carlyle Drive North, just a few miles from where the forest set in at the northern rim of the city limits, had the best view in New Barton. Lily had sometimes envisioned herself living in Lake Heights, but it was unlikely that she actually would, since it was a relatively small area. Every year just before Gala time, the government's Housing Office assessed available homes in the city so that they could prepare a selection pool for the housing draw. Each new couple drew for a house a few weeks after their Gala. There were rarely more than a few Lake Heights houses in a selection pool.

Lily hadn't seen much of her sister or Jude since they had moved. Lake Heights was across town from Silver Woods, and in the throes of nursing school, Lily had been busy. But she adored her nephew Davey, and he was a good motivation to make it out to Lake Heights every few weeks when she could.

Finally Lily approached 393 Carlyle Drive, a towering white house with massive pine trees gracing the front yard, and she hurried to the front door, pausing only when she heard Davey sobbing from inside. Before she had the chance to knock, the door swung open and Jude Jennings stared down at her. Jude was as handsome as ever, but now, as everyone had predicted, he was a Congressman. He wore formal suits and cut his hair short, a far cry from his teenage days when all of the neighborhood girls were in love with his sunglasses and ripped jeans.

“Hey, Lily. Sorry to run off on you, duty calls,” he said before marching past her to the sleek black car parked in the side lot. Personal cars were scarce in New Barton, but the few cars that the small automotive factory did produce went primarily to government officials because their jobs involved extra mobility needs. James had one, too. Everyone in New Barton earned the same amount of money with the same benefits, including Congressmen, but owning a car was the one obvious perk that came with a government job. Most people used the city buses that swarmed the streets.

As Jude’s car backed down the drive and rumbled into the distance, Lily stepped slowly inside the house and eased the door closed behind her. She never failed to feel tiny and inconsequential inside 393 Carlyle Drive. The ceilings were high enough to afford everything a strange echo, and the walls were wide and bare. The smells were the best thing about 393 Carlyle. A delicious scent, something with tomatoes and basil, wafted from the kitchen, and Lily made her way towards it.

Diane was sitting at the kitchen table with two-year-old Davey in her lap, hushing him as he sniffled into her sweater.

“Hey,” said Lily.

“Oh my God, hi!” Diane seemed genuinely glad to see her, and she set Davey down in his high seat before rushing over to give her sister a peck on the cheek. Every time they saw each other, not so often anymore, Lily thought that Diane seemed slightly older. When she thought of Diane, she still imagined her as she had been the day of her Gala—glowing, blue, and tall. Diane was still only 26, but hints of wrinkles were already forming around her eyes. Mostly, she was the same beautiful girl she had always been, but her clothes were ill-fitting and her hair was perpetually thrown back into a messy ponytail. Diane blamed this on motherhood.

“Is everything okay?” Lily asked, glancing at Davey, who was still teary in his seat.

“Yeah. He’s two, he does this sometimes.” Diane sighed. “Jude had to go back to the office with barely any dinner. Hungry?”

Lily nodded, glad as always that after the long commute, she could at least count on a wonderful meal at her sister’s house. Better than at home, these days, since her father practically slept at the legislative offices and her mother often worked evenings at the Home and Body store.

“Sorry to come over on such short notice. I tried to call you, but it went to voicemail,” Lily said.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m glad to see you,” Diane said, dishing out soup from the stove. Davey was starting to cheer up, and Lily lifted him out of his chair. He was an amazingly good-looking toddler, not surprising based on his genes. He had curly brown hair, enormous eyes, and rosy cheeks. He looked more like Diane, Lily thought. “You doing okay there, my friend?” she asked him softly, and he nodded, wiping his fist over his eyelids.

Davey was the center of his mother’s existence. As far as Lily could tell, Diane spent every waking moment worrying about Davey, his clothes, his future schooling, his meals, his

general happiness. He had a beautiful bedroom with the best array of toys Lily had ever seen, and a canopy bed with trains and trucks hand-stitched into the comforter—Diane’s doing. Every couple was supposed to have a child within five years of marriage, but Diane had been pregnant with Davey only a year after her Gala. She had worked as a substitute teacher before that, but she took maternity leave when Davey was born and she hadn’t gone back to work yet. Nobody had reprimanded her for it; she was the wife of a Congressman, and substitute teachers were relatively low in demand.

Diane brought two bowls to the table and pushed one toward Lily. She took Davey and sat down with him in her lap.

“You know,” Diane said, watching as Lily began to eat, “I went in yesterday. For my maternity draw.”

Lily froze. “What?”

“Yeah.”

Lily waited, but her sister didn’t go on. “And?” she prompted.

“It was a no,” Diane said in a tiny voice.

Lily dropped her spoon. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

They had never directly talked about it—it was an unspoken rule that you didn’t voice those kinds of desires—but Lily knew that Diane had always wanted kids. Not just one. Diane wanted four, five, six children to fill this enormous house. That had always been unlikely, because people rarely drew a “yes” more than twice after their obligatory first child. Lily knew only one woman in Silver Woods with five children. But a second child, that wasn’t too much to hope for.

“It’s okay,” Diane said firmly. “It’s fine.”

Lily sat stiffly, not sure whether Diane would prefer to be comforted or to simply move on. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes. Really, it might be better this way,” Diane said, blowing on a spoonful of soup before feeding it to Davey. “Having one is consuming enough.”

Diane sounded casual, but Lily knew that Diane had been working up the nerve to go in for weeks. After the birth of a child, any mother under 35 was required to go in for a new selection by the time her son or daughter was two and a half. Lily could picture her sister at the Child Services Office—dressed impeccably, as she always seemed to be in stressful situations—putting in her name, waiting to be called up front to where a crisp man in a suit would be waiting with the selection pool, full of pieces of paper that said only ‘yes’ or ‘no.’

“Enough about that,” said Diane. “I don’t want to think about it. What about you? Are you excited about the Gala?”

Every year the Galas took place in May, but this year had seen a record number of new 22-year-olds. So in certain neighborhoods, Lily’s included, the government had decided to host two events, one in November as well as the usual Gala in May. Ten boys and ten girls from Silver Woods had been randomly selected to participate in the November ceremony. A few weeks ago, when Lily had gotten home late from class, she found her father standing over the kitchen table, eyes glued to a letter from the Gala Office which jovially announced that her name was on the November roster.

“Yes,” Lily answered. “I’m excited.” She had been waiting for her turn since she was old enough to understand what it meant. On the other hand, she couldn’t stop thinking about Diane’s ceremony. Sophia still talked about that day, and Lily wanted more than anything to make such a

splash. Her excitement was only sedated by the fact that every time the subject came up around her father, he was eager to ignore it.

“God, I remember all of that so well,” said Diane. “Have you gone shopping yet? I bet Mom is thrilled.”

“Yeah, Mom is definitely thrilled,” said Lily. “Although she’s panicky, too. It doesn’t give me much time. Less than a month.”

“I’m sure you’ll be beautiful,” said Diane, wiping a drop of soup from the corner of Davey’s mouth. “I think it’s bedtime for this one. Want to help me put him down?”

Lily trailed Diane and Davey up the stairs and down the long hallway to the bedrooms. As Diane tucked the handmade comforter up to Davey’s chin and kissed him goodnight, Lily wandered to the window and pulled back the curtain. The window faced east, with the lake floating on the horizon. 393 Carlyle was built atop a small hill, so that Lake Heights stretched out in front of Lily, and the edge of downtown framed the southern limit of her view. Davey yawned behind her, and Diane hummed softly on the edge of the bed. Despite the long, desolate hallways and the echoes, Lily thought, it would be wonderful to live in this house, to sleep at this window. She could only hope that she would be so lucky.

“Lily! Hear the news?”

Lily spun around in the middle of the university corridor, nearly tipping over the stack of books in her arms. Exams were fast approaching. She had her anatomy exam just a few days later, and she had done nothing but rush from the library to class and back again since morning. Her mother had off work that night, which meant it was time to begin Gala shopping, but which also meant that Lily was in a rush to accomplish as much as possible before six.

“What is it?” She tried not to sound irritated as her friend Maggie Collins jogged down the hall in her direction, breathing quickly. Maggie was training as a pharmacist, which meant that they had classes in the same buildings. She was also one of the other girls from Lily’s neighborhood whose name had been selected for the November Gala.

“Garcia,” Maggie panted.

Lily looked at Maggie in confusion.

“Garcia Michels. The Governor’s son,” Maggie said impatiently. “He’s in our Gala.”

Lily let the information sink in. That would certainly be big news, if it were true. But the Governor’s home was technically in the next district over. “Shouldn’t Garcia be in the Riverdale Gala?” Lily asked.

“They changed the borders,” Maggie said. “He’s in Silver Woods, with us. And he was selected for November.”

“How do you even know this? That kind of thing has to be top-secret,” Lily said.

Maggie shrugged. “The grapevine. Ask your dad. Why aren’t you more hyped? One of us might be the future First Lady.”

“I’ll believe it when it’s official,” Lily said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Shit, late for class.” Maggie tapped her watch. “Let me know if you hear anything, please?”

“Sure,” Lily said. Maggie ran for the lecture hall as Lily continued to the library, cursing her friend for letting her in on this information, because she could already feel her focus fading into daydreams.

Lily’s mother was waiting for her in front of the university’s medical complex at six o’clock sharp. Sophia had borrowed James’ car for the evening. When she was younger Lily had

been thrilled about riding in the car, and then, as a teenager, she had been self-conscious, knowing that her peers would notice. By now all of her classmates knew that her father was a Congressman, but the car was still a mild spectacle. She shoved her bag into the back seat and slipped into the front. “School was good?” her mother asked, twisting the radio dial until she settled on the symphonic station.

“Fine,” Lily said. “I have my first exam coming up.”

“Well, get your mind off of it for a few hours. We’re heading to Carmella’s for fabric.”

Lily settled in for the drive, wondering whether she should mention Maggie’s gossip, but judging that it would be better to wait for confirmation. She could only imagine her mother’s over-the-top reaction.

When they reached Carmella’s, Sophia began to flit between aisles, pulling fabrics from cardboard rectangles and holding them against her daughter’s chest, waist, even her hair. “Green,” Lily suggested. “I would love green.” But no, green wasn’t the most flattering color for Lily’s dirty blond hair, Sophia insisted. “We need something warm, to bring out the richer hues,” she said (Lily wondered if her hair had any richer hues). “And nothing too reflective, either,” Sophia explained. “Too much sheen would make your hair and face look greasy.” Lily was amazed by her mother’s devotion to every detail of the fabric and the dress, and pleased, in a childish way, to be the center of attention. But she was also self-conscious. Her hair was too dull, her skin was too pale and freckled. Eventually her mother pulled out a fabric in a light peach color, so soft and weightless that it sifted over Lily’s fingers like sand. “Perfect,” Sophia said.

They moved on to look at patterns, which brought on a new array of problems. Lily was long and wiry, with barely a trace of curves, and Sophia poured over waistlines and hems, musing about how best to play up Lily’s womanly figure. Lily felt like a little girl again, sitting

at the sample table and flipping through a “Gala Favorites” book showing ball gowns, cocktail dresses, and every conceivable style. She stopped instinctively when she saw a sleeveless, form-fitting dress modeled in pink, and showed it to Sophia. “You like this one?” Sophia raised her eyebrows slightly, and Lily nodded bashfully. Her mother examined it more closely. “I can make it work with a few slight adjustments,” she concluded. “All right, if you’re sure.”

Waiting in line for the cash register with the peach fabric, the pattern, and some thread and silk gauze selected by her mother to augment the project, Lily felt much younger than twenty-two. She glanced at Sophia, who was thumbing through a “New Barton’s Latest” fashion magazine as they approached the front of the line. Her mother was completely put together, down to the bows in her shoelaces and the lipstick that never crossed the line of her lips. When she had the neighbors over for drinks, even the limes were perfectly positioned on the rims of her cocktail glasses. She was meticulous when it came to aesthetics. Lily imagined that when the dress was finished, she would be able to sink it over her arms and onto her body and feel without even looking that it was flawless. Anything less would be a disappointment.

Lily was relieved to get home that night. When they arrived, James was in the kitchen, sitting on a stool at the island counter with a steaming mug of tea in front of him. There was also a book, but he hadn’t opened it. He turned tiredly as Lily and her mother entered the kitchen.

“Preparations?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Sophia replied, and headed off with the supplies to stow them in her craft room. Lily knew she wouldn’t see any of it again until the dress was finished.

Lily plunked her backpack in a corner and headed for the refrigerator.

“You have an exam coming up, don’t you?” her father asked.

“Thursday. Human anatomy.” With a bowl of leftovers in hand, Lily sat several places down from her father at the long countertop. She always felt small and isolated sitting like this, because the stools were too tall for her and there was so much extra space between herself and her father. Out of habit, though, they never took seats immediately next to one another.

“Been studying?” James asked.

“Yes. All day.”

“That’s good.” He flipped open the front cover of his book distractedly.

Munching on cold casserole, Lily wondered if she should ask him about Garcia Michels. As a friend of the Governor, her father was one of the few people who might know the definitive facts, although he might not be willing to reveal them to her. But if she didn’t ask, it would bother her until she found out. The Gala Office didn’t usually publicize the participant lists until only a week or so before the ceremony.

“I heard something about Garcia Michels being in my Gala,” she said between bites.

James snapped his head towards her, surprised. “Who said that?”

“Maggie,” she said.

James shook his head. “I see these things don’t stay secret for long. Yes, it’s true. City Affairs altered the border between Silver Woods and Riverdale just a few weeks before the Gala divide.”

“And he’s in November?”

“He’s in November.” James looked troubled. “Don’t tell your mother, will you? She’ll find out soon enough, and we may as well spare ourselves the uproar while we can.”

“Okay,” Lily agreed. So it was true. Part of her felt that she should be above hoping for something as shallow as marrying into the Michels family, especially when she knew nothing

about Garcia and the odds were not in her favor. But then, the odds weren't in anyone's favor, and it had to be someone. Garcia's Gala match would be the star of the night. No one else would even be noticed.

"Lily."

"Hm?" She turned her gaze back to her father, who was watching her from his stool, the tip of his tie dangling precariously over his tea. "Don't think on it too much," he said.

She nodded.

Soon James retreated to his study for a quiet hour before bed. Once she finished eating, Lily trudged up the stairs and passed his corner of the house on her way to her bedroom. The door to his study was cracked open, and she could see that it was dark inside but for the glow of a small table lamp, illuminating the back of his head and a puff of smoke rising above him. A few doors down she passed her mother's craft room, and Lily could hear the sewing machine already buzzing away behind the closed door.

When she was safely shut up in her own bedroom, Lily sank onto her bed, still fully dressed, and clutched the comforter over her chest. She had slept in this room since she was born. Remnants of her childhood were scattered everywhere—the stuffed animals piled in the corner, a splotch of pink wallpaper by the window that had never completely peeled off. Then there were things left over from her teenage years—a few pairs of too-small high heels under the desk, a photo of Lily, Maggie, and Caroline Hernandez at the lake when they were sixteen, posing in bikinis. The most recent layer of belongings consisted primarily of sweaters and notebooks.

Lily kicked her shoes off over the edge of her bed, thinking about what it would be like to move out. She had only three weeks until the Gala, but there would also be a few weeks after

that before she and her new husband made their housing selection. Part of her was glad that she would have a little extra time in this room, this house. But then again, once she had a ring on her finger, this stage of her life would be over. Over, she repeated to herself. And what came next could be anything. It could be Matthew Darin, or Clay Bennett, or Garcia Michels, or any of seven others. She remembered a line from the Gala Handbook, which had come in the mail along with her November Gala notification and which she had read cover to cover: “You may feel anxious when you try to imagine your future life, but whatever precisely it may be, it will be secure; your job is to embrace whatever comes your way.” She grappled to remove her jeans and the clips from her hair before falling asleep, throwing them to the floor, and reminded herself, before drifting off, that it was all so simple. She had to look nice, and she had to read a name.

Lily’s dress was finished four days later. Her mother had cornered her for measurements several times since their trip to the store, but other than that, the process was kept secret until Sophia announced over Friday night dinner that the dress was ready. “I wanted to give us plenty of time, in case it’s not right for you,” she told Lily.

The scene was just as Lily remembered it from four years before, when Diane tried on her Gala dress for the first time. Lily sat impatiently on her bed, tapping her feet and listening to the crinkling as her mother removed the dress from its plastic cover. Then the patter of footsteps, and Sophia stood in the doorway. The dress hung limply over her arm.

Lily quickly stripped off her clothes, and stood expectantly in her underwear as her mother lifted the dress over her head. The fabric slid against her cheeks and fell to her shoulders. Pulling her arms through, she waited a moment for the dress to form to her figure, swishing her

legs back and forth so that the skirt rustled against her knees. Then she held out her arms and turned to her mother, not daring to look in the mirror yet.

Sophia carefully eyed everything from Lily's neck to her toes. "Well, there you have it," she said. "You look stunning."

Finally Lily turned to the mirror. It was nothing like the dress in the catalog, and nothing like she had imagined. But the effect was remarkable. The color brought out tints in her cheeks and hair that she had never noticed before, and her mother had narrowed and deepened the neckline and filled out the skirt. It was the first time she could remember that she had truly looked her age.

"So that's that. Keep it on, I didn't want to finish sewing up the back seam until it was on you." Sophia went for her sewing kit, leaving Lily in front of the mirror, staring at herself without recognition.

"Imagine what Garcia Michels will think when he sees you in this," Sophia muttered when she returned, threading a needle and examining the back of the dress.

Lily was surprised to hear her mother mention Garcia, because Sophia hadn't said a word about it before this, and Lily had assumed that her mother would begin raving about it as soon as she found out. But occasionally Sophia was surprisingly subtle with her excitements, usually when she didn't want to get herself too worked up over nothing.

Maggie had been less subdued upon hearing the news. Lily had not planned to say anything, but Maggie had brought it up over lunch the day before, and Lily had been in a good mood because she had just finished her exam. So she let the information slip.

"Ridiculous." Maggie had shaken her head in mock disappointment. "You felt no need to call me instantly and let me know about this?"

“My dad—” Lily had started to defend herself.

“Yes, top secret politician things, I know.” Maggie pushed her pudding away and leaned forward conspiratorially. “The important thing is, now I know. The stakes are high,” she said with a grin. Maggie had always been dramatic. “What does your dad think of this possibility? I mean, he’s best friends with the Governor. You and Garcia would be a pretty good combination.” She awaited Lily’s reaction, but Lily didn’t offer one.

“Okay, more seriously, though,” Maggie said, “No matter who you choose, and no matter who I choose, or who chooses us, no hard feelings. It’s just the luck of the draw.”

When Maggie had sauntered away to pharmaceutical chemistry, Lily had wondered: Were they really such good people, or such good friends, that there would be no hard feelings?

And now, standing in front of the mirror in her Gala attire, with her mother fussing over the stitching across her back, she knew that the answer was no. The other girls were probably scrutinizing fabric or wading through closets full of shoes at that very moment, thinking exactly the same thing.

“I think we’re finished.” Sophia backed away to see her handiwork.

“Thanks, Mom,” Lily said quietly.

A shadow passed into the room, and Lily looked up to find her father standing in the doorway, arms crossed against his chest.

“Our daughter will be the belle of the ball,” Sophia informed her husband.

“Yes, I believe she will,” said James.

Three

November 21. Lily stared at her ringing alarm clock, at the date positioned just below the time. Turning off the alarm, she rolled over to huddle against the wall. She needed a few minutes of calm and peace, a little time to collect herself. She pulled the blanket to her chin.

“Lily!” Sophia pounded on the door and entered without an invitation. “I heard your alarm go off. What are you waiting for? Up!”

Sophia ran off to prepare breakfast, and Lily slowly pulled her legs over the side of the bed so that she was sitting up. Her dress, perfectly ironed and ready, hung from the closet door. The gold high heels that her mother had insisted on were settled on the floor just under the dress’s bottom hem, as though some invisible girl, dressed and ready, was waiting patiently for her turn on the stage.

The dress and the shoes would be the last step of Lily’s preparations. The Gala began at 4:00, and her prep room would be available beginning at 2:00. Until then, she and her mother would visit the hairstylist, the manicurist, the make-up artist...recognizing that she had a long and nerve-ridden morning ahead of her, Lily sighed and heaved herself up.

When she had showered and dressed in jogging pants and a T-shirt, she descended the stairs to find the dining room table spread with an impressive array of breakfast foods. Sophia was adding a fresh pot of coffee to the center of the table, alongside plates of eggs with cheese, pancakes, and toast.

“Eat,” her mother commanded. “And eat substantially. You’ve hardly touched your food for the past two days.”

James was already at one end of the table, slowly lifting forkfuls of eggs to his mouth as he scrutinized the front page of the City Gazette. He dropped the paper to the table as Lily sat down.

“So,” he said, but he didn’t seem to have anything to add. He watched as Lily served herself generously. It was true that she had hardly eaten lately; she had been too excited, or anxious.

“Anything interesting?” Lily asked, indicating the newspaper. The Gazette was the only newspaper in New Barton, and besides NBTV, which was the only television station (and ran identical stories), it was the sole news option. Her father didn’t care for TV, but he poured over the Gazette daily.

“An announcement concerning the new bill we’ve been laboring over.” He tapped the front page with one finger.

“What’s that?”

“It’s for the Gala. Michels wants each ceremony, in each district, televised for the whole city.”

“So it passed?”

“Very few people have the nerve to vote against Michels,” James said. “You’ll be on TV tonight.”

This news did nothing to help Lily eat a satisfactory breakfast. Soon enough, Sophia checked the clock and discovered that they had a half hour to get to the manicurist. She ran upstairs for the dress and shoes and a duffel bag of other supplies, grabbed James’ car keys, and then shoved two pieces of toast into Lily’s hand as they retreated through the back door. James waved from the table.

The salon was in Riverdale, the trendy downtown district just north of the government offices. A billboard glimmered above the entrance: “Preparing for the Big Day? Call Jeanie, 213-3857, for your personal consultation.” A young, smiling woman posed next to the text, displaying her bright blue nails for the photographer.

“That’s a little outlandish for you,” Sophia said as they entered. “I’m thinking of a French manicure. Classy and pretty.”

Lily nodded her agreement and admired the salon’s view as her mother checked in at the front desk. One entire wall consisted of windows that looked out over the New Barton River, rushing east to meet the Lake and lined on both sides by skyscrapers.

“Lily?” A grinning woman with tiny white teeth and immaculate hair came forward to shake Lily’s hand, leaning in slightly too close. “I’m Lana, and it’s so good to meet you! If you’ll just follow me over here, we can get started.”

Lily and her mother followed Lana to a luxurious armchair by the window, where Lily sat down. As Lana flitted around and collected supplies, listening to Sophia’s instructions, Lily took a closer look around her and discovered that of the half dozen other stations by the window, at least three were occupied by girls her age, clearly also preparing for their Galas. She eyed the other girls, trying to be subtle, and recognized Athena Summerseed just two chairs down from her. Athena was also from Silver Woods, and the two girls had had a few high school classes together before entering the university. Athena had apparently chosen a career that rarely led her to the medical complex, because Lily had hardly seen her since graduating from Silver Woods High School. Athena was beautiful. She had wavy chestnut hair, green eyes, and the unlikely combination of a tiny waist and a sizeable bust. Sensing the attention, Athena turned her head.

Lily offered a small smile, thinking that Athena had always seemed friendly enough. But Athena only nodded and turned back to the window. Positioning her hands on a small tray that extended over her lap so that Lana could get to work, Lily decided that this was not the day for making friends.

“Any thoughts on the Michels kid? I hear he’s a charmer,” Lana chattered to Sophia. “That’s been the talk of the town since the lists went public last week. I saw them posted in Malin Park. I didn’t recognize any of the other names from Silver Woods.” Lana leaned in close enough that Lily could smell toothpaste on her breath. “You must be so excited!”

Lily glanced to her right, where Athena was standing next to her chair, apparently finished with her appointment. “I don’t know anything about Garcia,” Lily told Lana, aware that Athena was listening.

“Well, never mind. You have as good a chance as the next girl,” Lana said.

Four hours later, after her manicure, a light lunch, and another and longer salon visit for hair and make-up, Lily entered the lobby of Barton Hall alongside her mother. She lingered in the lobby’s center with her dress flopped over her arm as Sophia checked in and retrieved the keys to their dressing room. Gazing up at the elaborate domed ceiling, Lily felt overwhelmed by the somber images of horses and wolves prancing across stained glass, so high above her. She wondered if they had been there when this was a library. She guessed that they had.

Sophia whisked Lily away to the elevator and they quickly dropped two floors to the dressing room level and made their way down the hall, Sophia jangling the keys in her fingers. “Number nine,” she muttered, finally finding the right door and unlocking it. She entered and held the door ajar for Lily, who followed and flipped on the light switch. The room was

immediately ablaze with dozens of tiny bulbs lining the top of the three-wall mirror. Although she knew that every room must look the same, Lily immediately remembered the few hours in the dressing room before Diane's Gala. Even the marbled countertops were identical. There was a sink with a tin of tissues and a vase of roses in one corner, and a Gala Handbook in the other. As her mother unpacked lotion, safety pins, and dozens of other small items out of their duffel bag, Lily wandered to the corner housing the Handbook and flipped it open. The first page she turned to was titled "Your New Spouse." "Don't forget that he is every bit as nervous as you are," the page read amiably. "But don't worry about it too much. You have years to get used to one another." Lily shut the book and set it back in its place.

There was a frantic knock on the door.

"That must be Diane," said Sophia, rushing to open it.

"Hey," Diane said breathlessly, lugging Davey into the room behind her. She looked flushed and tired, but as put-together as ever in an understated black cocktail dress and a blue cardigan.

"Hi, sweetheart." Sophia kissed Diane on the cheek and lifted Davey to her chest.

"What's he doing here? I thought you said he'd be with Jude."

"Jude is off somewhere. Picking up his suit from the dry cleaner, maybe. It's fine. Davey won't be a bother." Diane turned to Lily. "Hey."

Lily gave Diane a quick hug. "I guess this is the part where I put my dress on?"

"It certainly is," Sophia said, unzipping the plastic jacket covering the dress.

"Let's see it." Diane examined the garment as Lily pulled her clothes off.

"Lily, you wore the wrong bra," Sophia admonished, pulling another out of the duffel bag. "This one will work better."

Lily turned away and changed bras without question. Her mother paid much more attention to these things than she did. Diane helped her to slip the dress over her head, careful not to disturb Lily's fancy updo. Smoothing the dress over her body, Lily straightened to see herself in the mirror. She adjusted the stiff curls that had been left dangling around her face, and wiped a flake of mascara from her eyelid. She did not look remotely like herself. Her eyes were too big with make-up, her hair was too intricate, and her body was too shapely. Her mother's work was definitely admirable, she thought.

"Peach was a wonderful color choice," Diane said.

"Yes. Excellent. I'm going to take in the shoulder straps the tiniest bit." Sophia rummaged for a needle and thread in her bag, then crossed the room to stand behind Lily. "Hold still."

Facing the mirror as her mother made final adjustments, Lily watched Diane, who was perched silently in the back corner, toying with the roses. She had one arm around Davey, who stood next to her on the countertop. The toddler whispered something in Diane's ear. "I don't know, honey. He'll be here soon," Diane muttered. Davey turned to address the whole room: "Where's Daddy?" Diane sighed and said, "I told you, he's on his way."

Lily returned her focus to her own figure. Her bust looked suddenly bigger now that her mother had tightened the shoulder straps.

A woman's voice came on through a loudspeaker that was barely visible in the upper corner of the wall. "Welcome to the November Silver Woods Gala," the voice said. "It is currently 2:30 p.m. In one hour, at 3:30 p.m., you will be expected to leave your dressing room. Family members will take their places in the audience. Female participants will meet in room 12

of the dressing room level, and male participants will meet in room 1. Many thanks!” The voice clicked off.

At 3:50, Lily was in room 12, standing in a carefully arranged line with nine other girls—Maggie, Athena, and seven others, most of whom she knew vaguely from high school. There was Rachel Billings, looking angelic in a dusty blue dress with blond curls flowing at her neck, and Helena Ontario, whose dark complexion glowed in a regal purple gown. Everyone looked beautiful, Lily thought. Everyone looked ready. Even Maggie, who had been placed next to Lily and normally appeared boyish, was wearing a fiery red number. But apart from the sidelong glances, the girls were quiet and distant. Maggie and Lily had said hello and nothing else.

A mousy Gala Office woman with glasses and a clipboard marched up and down the line, muttering into a headset. “We’re set here. Are you ready? Good to go. Okay then.” She removed the headset and beamed at the girls. “We’re heading up. Is everyone prepared? Take a nice deep breath and we’ll get going. I know you’re all nervous, I know this is an important day, but just remember that everybody wins. This is a celebration.” She was practiced at these lines. “Okay, follow me, please.”

The girls shuffled down the hallway to the elevator, where they silently rode to the Main Hall level. Lily realized that she was nibbling on a nail and forced herself to stop, remembering her manicure. The elevator issued a polite ‘ding’ and she held her breath. There, in the growing crack between the elevator doors, was Garcia Michels, waiting in a tidy line with the other boys behind the doors to the Hall. Lily had met Garcia once or twice, years before, but only because of their fathers’ friendship, and she was sure she had never made a strong impression on Garcia. Despite all the talk lately about what a “charmer” he was, he had never made a strong impression

on her either. Today his long, thin frame was blurred by a tailored tuxedo, and his dark eyes flashed up to the girls only for a moment before returning to the floor. Next to him on one side was Roger Plum, who was jolly, if not handsome; on the other, Jack Kanton, whose blond curls had been the envy of half the neighborhood since he was a toddler. As the Gala Office woman ushered the girls into a line off to the side, all ten girls and all ten boys took a rapid inventory of the opposite line, then turned forward and waited.

They could hear the crowd inside the hall quieting, followed by Mr. Herston's magnified voice: "Please welcome your sons and daughters to the hall." Two ushers tugged the doors open, and the boys checked their ties, donned broad smiles, and marched down the aisle. The applause grew thunderous. When Chester Parfrey, the last boy in line, disappeared into the hall, the Gala Office woman motioned from the doorway to Robin Dale, the first girl, and Lily followed the line forward, smoothing her dress and trying to steady her feet. Within moments she was blinking under the glare of chandeliers and sunlight. As her eyes adjusted, she collected herself and remembered to smile, bedazzled and terrified by the sea of faces before her. She spotted her mother waving at her from a row near the front, and there was her father, along with Diane, Davey, and Jude. She gave a small wave in return as she approached them, noting her mother's face, flushed from excitement, and her father's steady gaze, unreadable as always. But most of all she noticed Diane. Despite an obvious last-minute attempt to cover the redness with make-up, Lily could tell that Diane had been crying. Jude was standing well apart from his wife, looking disheveled and grim. Davey was tiny between them. Diane applauded and forced a smile, and Lily could read the apology in her sister's face. She pressed forward, not daring to glance back, sure she would attract too much attention if she did.

As she ascended a few stairs and took her place in line to the right of the stage, she caught a glimpse of the massive screen suspended in an upper corner. Tonight all of New Barton would be able to watch her on TV. But at least for the moment, Lily observed with relief, she was not onscreen. Garcia was featured there, and probably would be for much of the Gala.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Mr. Herston said, “Today my typical duties as host are going to be slimmed down a bit. Since his own son is a participant today, our neighbor and governor, Mr. Cole Michels, has requested the opportunity to make the opening speech and oversee the selections himself. I’m sure you will all be happy to welcome him to the podium.”

Lily heard the stage doors behind her swing open and swiveled to see Cole Michels making his entrance, accompanied by the swelling orchestra and the roaring crowd. He wore the same simple navy blue suit as always, but today it was decorated with several small medallions—the governor’s badges of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather, always part of his persona on the most special occasions. Two guards followed him and retreated to the back corners of the stage when Michels took the podium. The guards wore flashy uniforms, also bedecked with military medallions. They had always seemed more for show than for protection, Lily thought. She had never heard of an attempt on the Governor’s life. And yet she never doubted that the guards hid weapons under their ostentatious garb.

“Hello, everyone!” Michels began, to many shouts of ‘hello’ from the audience. “I’m sorry to force Mr. Herston out of the spotlight today, but as you all know, this is a special occasion for me as well as for you. My own son, Garcia”—here he turned to acknowledge his son, who nodded back—“will be married today to one of these lovely young ladies. I share your nerves and your enthusiasm as you wait for your son or daughter’s name to be called. But even today, when you are overcome by the joy of seeing your child up here and ready to make the

next big step, and the joy of uniting your family with another, I hope you can step back for a minute and view the big picture—that is, everything we’re doing and everything we’ve done in this remarkable city. New Barton has always been a different kind of place. When we were still a part of the States, we were isolated. We have always worked well that way. So when the New Revolution came around, when we withdrew from the chaos by seceding, it was only the natural next step, and it saved us from the fate, the destruction, of nearly everything outside of our borders. We’ve been on our own these past sixty years, and we have built something beautiful. We became an independent Republic because we wanted to partake in peace and ease of mind rather than violence, and we remain true to those ideals. Here, we are all equal in opportunity, and we are all equal in value.”

As Michels finished his speech, Lily examined the audience and tried to reassure her mother, who was beginning to look pale, with a smile. She could feel her heart beating more and more heavily as the first selection approached.

“Mr. Herston, may I have the marriage pools?” Michels asked.

Mr. Herston strode to the podium with two blue satin boxes in hand. The physical design of the selection pools changed slightly every year. For this Gala, Lily could see, the boxes were completely enclosed, with only a slit in the top for participants to insert one hand and select an envelope, a scroll, or whatever type of packaging the written names had been given this year.

“I’ll go ahead and make the first choice. Ladies first, as always.” Michels reached for the box. Lily realized that she was clutching her skirt in one hand and tried to unclench her fist. She peeked at her family and found that Diane was watching her intently, strained creases showing around her eyes. Lily had never known it so clearly before: Her sister was not happy. She didn’t know why, but the fact was there in front of her.

Michels removed his hand from the box, bringing with it a small origami crane, which he held up for everyone to see. The crowd murmured as he unfolded the delicate creature. “The first young lady to make a selection will be Regina Larsen,” announced Michels.

Lily joined the applause, calming herself as best she could, as Regina approached the podium. She wished she had been called first. She wanted to leave the stage.

Regina selected and unfolded a crane quickly, then breathed into the microphone, “Jeremy McMillian.”

Jeremy came forward. He and Regina greeted each other, he gave her the ring, Michels pronounced them married, they kissed, and they left the stage. Lily could barely focus. The next several pairings blurred by. Athena was whisked away by Jack Kanton, with approval from all. When five couples had accumulated in the front row, and the number of participants still standing had been split in half, Lily assessed the situation. Garcia was still there. So was Maggie. Lily felt faint.

“Next we have...Johnny Amherst.” Michels welcomed Johnny to the stage, and Lily held her breath as Johnny called out “Marchae Tilly.” She barely heard the applause, because she was again looking at her family. Sophia was wide-eyed, and James was crouched forward, staring at the floor—just as he had been at Diane’s Gala. Diane noticed Lily’s eye contact and offered her a smile. Returning her attention to the proceedings, Lily tried to take heart in her sister’s gesture.

There were two more matches made and Lily felt her feet shaking underneath her when she looked to her right and registered that she and Maggie Collins were the only two girls left. They exchanged a glance. The two boys were Garcia Michels and Chester Parfrey.

“Maggie Collins, you will be the next to make your choice,” Michels announced, keeping his voice neutral.

Maggie marched forward. She dipped her hand into the box and took her time choosing a crane. Hand still submerged, she stopped and stared at Lily, who gazed back with wide eyes. Maggie was usually so controlled and determined, Lily thought, but at the moment her friend only seemed confused. The breach in concentration lasted only a moment; Maggie returned her eyes to the box, removed her hand, and stared at the crane, resting peacefully in her palm. She carefully, deliberately unfolded it. She had always known how to kindle as much drama as possible. Lily had a sickening urge to laugh as Maggie rested her eyes on the name, keeping the secret to herself for a few steady seconds, before she finally leaned forward to the microphone: “Chester Parfrey.”

Lily staggered. Chester was sauntering forward, and Maggie was smiling at him in greeting, red dress aflame under the lights, but all that Lily could do was stare at Garcia. He looked at her, too, and bowed his head slightly, a gesture that Lily could not think to return in any way, because her head was spinning. She recalled something from the Handbook, a tip about “acknowledging your family first” to keep yourself calm, but it wasn’t until Maggie and Chester were nearly seated that she was able to force her gaze ahead, to where her mother was jumping up and down and her father was applauding stoically. Diane had Davey propped against her shoulder, his tiny hands enveloped in hers, the two of them clapping together.

Michels appeared at the podium. “Our last couple of the evening is Garcia Michels and Lily Pierce!”

Lily could not move. Only when Garcia was halfway to the front of the stage and giving her a quizzical look did she force herself to approach him. She took note of the slight bushiness between his eyebrows, the perfect line of his teeth, a pimple on his chin that was only visible up close, and she realized that these were the things she would be intimately familiar with, very

soon. “Hi, Lily,” he said. “Hi,” she answered. He reached into his pocket and removed a tiny silk bag, from which he produced a silver ring lined with three exquisite diamonds, shimmering side by side. Lily was stunned to see the ring on her left finger a moment later.

Governor Michels was hovering behind them, and Lily was dimly aware that he must have made his pronouncement, because Garcia was leaning forward to brush his lips against her cheek. And then she found herself facing Governor Michels himself. “Congratulations to my new daughter-in-law,” he said, clasping one of her hands in both of his, blue eyes sparking. He was addressing her, but his voice was reverberating throughout the room. “Thank you,” she stuttered, finding her own voice captured by the closeness of his microphone.

She took Garcia’s arm and descended the front stairs, offering a smile and a small wave to the audience, feeling tired as the cheers echoed behind her eyes. As she sat down between Maggie and Garcia the screen above the stage fell into her line of vision, and she found herself watching her own pale, gaping face. She turned to Maggie, hoping that a smile would lessen the tension between them, but in response Maggie only looked wary, squinting into Lily’s face as though trying to discern something there.

The November Silver Woods Gala, everyone agreed later on, was followed up by the best reception of the year. It seemed clear to Lily that the inclusion of the Governor’s son in the ceremony was the reason for the reception’s over-the-top elegance, but no one mentioned it. The party was held at the Lakeside Garden, which was covered by a retractable glass dome. In the summer it was an open-air park reserved exclusively for government officials and their families. She had been once or twice before. Now, enclosed and indoors, it allowed the Gala attendees to admire both the tropical plants inside and the glistening lake and light snowfall outside.

Sitting at the Pierce and Michels family table, drifting in and out of the conversation, Lily thought back to Diane's Gala reception. It had been simpler, but beautiful. Glancing at Diane, who was feeding bits of salad to Davey against his will as Jude silently watched, Lily realized that, against all odds, she had completely outdone her sister. But compared with the sharp satisfaction she may have felt if she had known about this outcome a few months ago, now she only felt stiff and confused. Especially when she thought of her sister's face, appearing red and broken in the crowd as Lily entered the Hall. By now, Diane had wiped away any hint of that face.

Lily felt even more confused when she remembered the foreign body in the chair next to hers—Garcia, sitting with perfect posture and talking with James. Lily thought about the fact that she would be sleeping in the same bed as him for the rest of her life, seeing him every morning and night, stowing her toothbrush next to his in a bathroom that they would share...they were going to get to know each other very well. But at the moment, she couldn't feel any of that. All she could feel was bewilderment, and even fear when she thought about the things that would be expected of them. Not to mention that the vision she had previously entertained, of a comfortable bungalow for just herself and her husband and eventually their kids, had vanished all at once. She would be moving into the Governor's Mansion.

They had just finished supper—an assortment of cheeses as an appetizer, followed by cucumber soup, a light salad, lobster, and chocolate soufflé that Lily could not finish—and everyone was warmed by several glasses of wine. Sophia and Mrs. Michels, a petite woman with matching pearl jewelry and a nervous laugh, had gravitated to each other and were talking too loudly at one end of the table. Garcia, Governor Michels, and James were discussing the new television law. Apparently the filming only extended to the end of the Gala ceremony itself and

did not cover the reception, but Michels wanted to prolong coverage until the end of the evening at future Galas. "It would be a hit, James. The television idea is already a hit," he said. James sat with crossed arms, and Lily wondered if Michels, his childhood friend, could recognize her father's subtle look of disapproval. "We'll see," James said.

Michels laughed. "All right, Jamie, enough official talk. We're related now! I have to admit I thought of the possibility, but you know, didn't want to hope. But here we are." He gave James a pat on the arm.

Already tired and tense, Lily found herself begrudging the way Michels was talking about her, not as a person but only as a connection.

Governor Michels glanced at the dance floor, which was quickly flooding with couples now that dinner was ending. "You two should show them how it's done," he told Garcia and Lily.

"You want to dance?" Garcia asked. Lily nodded, rising and following him to the center of the dance floor, near to where Maggie and Chester were already stationed. Maggie did not look over.

Garcia extended one hand to Lily's waist, and she put her palm on his shoulder. The music was a swing tune. She was grateful for a lively, fast-paced dance that did not require much interaction, but soon the orchestra switched to a slower piece and she found herself awkwardly moving closer to Garcia's body. Their faces were not far apart at all, and Lily had to force herself to make eye contact.

"Long day," Garcia said.

"Yes, long day," she agreed.

"I know this must be...weird for you. Getting married to me has a lot of strings attached."

Lily met his eyes, surprised that he was being so straightforward.

"But it sounds like we're going to wait a bit before you move in with me," he offered. She was slightly put off by how relieved he sounded, even though that was unfair of her because she was probably the more relieved of the two.

"Just try not to take it too seriously," he said.

Lily shrank away slightly. What did he mean? Of course she was going to take it seriously. Not much had changed for him. He had always known that he would get married, live in the Governor's Mansion, and eventually be Governor himself. The only question for him, before this, had been which girl would be joining him. But she was being tossed into something entirely new. "I don't see how to not take this seriously," she said. "Because it is serious."

He didn't answer, and she realized that her words had come out sounding harsh. But she did not retract them.

Four

Two days after the Gala, Lily sat on her bed, surrounded by half-filled boxes and stacks of clothing that she didn't know what to do with. There were torn spring jackets from years ago that she had never wanted to throw away, there were dresses she had worn to high school dances that she still felt attached to even though they no longer fit—somehow she felt that without these useless but familiar items she could never be completely at home. She ran her fingers over the purple fabric of the gown she had worn for the Spring Promenade her last year of high school. High school dances functioned almost as practice Galas; you were matched with a random partner beforehand. Lily had gone to Spring Promenade with Chester Parfrey, now Maggie's husband. She wondered if Maggie was packing her things away as well and felt tempted to call her friend, but she wasn't sure Maggie would welcome the contact. She had been cold at the Gala.

Lily had never moved before. 1331 Wylin Street, Silver Woods, had been her family's home for her entire life. Before her Gala, she had not given too much thought to the idea of moving out. She had always understood that that was just the way it worked. But now that the ceremony was over and it came down to preparing to leave, she did not feel ready. She was used to the smells of her mother's cooking and the hum of her sewing machine, and she was used to cigar smoke drifting wistfully from her father's study. She couldn't imagine a life without those things.

She was also in a unique position compared with the other girls, the other couples. They would be moving out entirely, boys and girls, into new homes of their own. They would be starting anew. Lily, on the other hand, was moving into Garcia's home, which in some ways made her feel like an intruder. There was no question that she had to do this. The only question

was when, and her family and the Michels family had agreed together that Lily would move in a little over a week after the Gala. She was grateful for the extra time. She had thought she could use it to study and prepare for her nursing practicum at the hospital, which was set to begin just a few days after her move to the Governor's Mansion. But instead she had been mostly lethargic, had found herself sitting like this on her bedroom carpet for hours on end.

She heard the door slam downstairs and stood up, not wanting one of her parents to walk in and find her wallowing like this. Heavy footsteps thudded on the stairs—her father, home from work. Lily grabbed a stack of shirts and began sorting them into piles.

“Lily?” James called softly from the hall.

“Hi, Dad,” she said.

He rounded the corner and appeared in her doorway, hesitating for a minute before entering. He watched her folding and dividing the garments. “May I help?”

Lily looked up, surprised by the offer. “Sure.”

He knelt down and looked through a stack of textbooks, but Lily realized he wasn't paying them much attention when he put a new biology textbook in the same pile as her seventh grade 'History of New Barton' text. Kneeling there in his work suit, with his navy blue tie getting in the way of his hands, he looked out of place. He picked up a pink stuffed rabbit that was seated by the wall and played with its ears.

Lily stopped what she was doing and watched him. “Dad, are you okay?”

He sighed and tossed the rabbit to the floor. “I know I'm supposed to be happy about this whole thing. It's just that a few days ago, you were Lily Pierce, and now you're Lily Michels. I'm sorry, that sounds silly. It's not just that. It's a lot of things.” His voice choked, and Lily was afraid he was going to cry. She had never, in her entire life, seen her father cry. But instead he

took a deep, shaky breath. His chest moved out and back in, steadying itself. “I’m sorry to take this out on you. You have enough to think about already. Don’t worry about me,” he said.

“I don’t mind,” Lily said, amazed by her father’s ability to collect himself so quickly. He and Diane were alike in that way.

James stood and turned to leave. “I’m going to make us dinner.”

He never made dinner. Lily listened as he entered his study and slipped off his work shoes to change into slippers, then padded down the stairs. As he clanked around in the kitchen, noisily retrieving pots and pans and swinging the refrigerator door open, Lily took up the pink rabbit and pressed it to her face, feeling its fur grow damp beneath her eyes.

“What do you think?”

Lily stood in the entrance to the Governor’s Mansion, a suitcase on the floor to her left and a duffel bag to her right. The ceiling was at least thirty feet above her head, its gold cables flickering distantly. To her left and right were elegant floor-to-ceiling windows with silk curtains, and the end of the long entryway opened onto a dazzling lobby with marble floors and a majestic staircase leading to the second level. And this was only a fraction of what the mansion had to offer. She felt overwhelmed, but Garcia was waiting for an answer, ruffling one hand nervously through his dark hair. “Well, it’s gorgeous, of course,” she said.

“Glad you like it. No, don’t bother with that,” he said as she lifted the suitcase. “The porters will bring all of it upstairs. Let me show you around a little.”

He led her across the lobby, pointing out a favorite painting on one enormous wall (it depicted an elegant family picnicking on the lakefront—his grandfather’s family, Garcia clarified), and then he showed her the living and dining room areas. Everywhere Lily turned, she

found herself faced with an astonishing view. From the living room alone she could see the snowy gardens and downtown cityscape to the north and the lake to the east.

Garcia showed Lily the conference area and let her peek into his father's stately office. Then he led her through the front gallery, the parlor, and the kitchen. She could tell by how little he had to say about it that he spent very little time in the kitchen. The cook rushed by and greeted Lily as they exited, which prompted Lily to wonder just how many people worked for Garcia's family. She had seen the driver, the porters, the cook, a cleaning woman who had flitted across the parlor as they wandered by...the household employees seemed to keep mostly out of the way.

"There are a few other less interesting rooms on this floor, but you can see every last detail later. I'll show you our suite. It's upstairs."

Our suite. Lily felt her throat tighten as she ascended the stairs behind Garcia.

"That's my parents' suite," he said when they reached the top, gesturing to a hallway on the left. "I don't recommend wandering over there. We have our own TV room, bathroom, all of that over here." He proceeded to the right, past what looked like another living room, and down another hallway, thickly carpeted underfoot so that they moved as silently as mice. Stopping in front of a heavy oak door, he turned to offer Lily an awkward smile.

She frantically thought back to a conversation she had (unwillingly) had with her mother a few nights before. They had been sitting on her bed, going through an old box of pajamas. "Lily," her mother had said, "you know your husband will expect to make love to you as soon as you move in." Lily had frozen, but Sophia had gone on refolding pajama pants as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "You already knew that, I'm sure. I know you had sexual education in school. I just thought you should know that it is a natural and immediate thing to do,

when you get married. Now, what do you think about this old nightgown? A little young for you, probably.”

It was the first time Lily’s mother had ever discussed the subject with her, and she was shell-shocked by the surfacing of such a taboo topic. It was true that she had had sexual education at school when she was fifteen. She remembered how one day out of the blue the teachers had hustled the girls into one room and the boys into another. That had been one of the most uncomfortable days of Lily’s life. Before that, she had known nothing about sex; her mother had only told her, when she asked, that a woman became pregnant because of the “things” she did with her husband after they got married. On sexual education day, therefore, Lily had looked around at the other girls with horror as they were forced to watch a government-sponsored “Conception” video, in which blurry cartoon characters slowly and mechanically went through the motions of “sexual intercourse.” The rest of the video was devoted to terrifying ravings about how having sexual intercourse before your Gala could lead to awful diseases or even pregnancy, which would necessitate painful surgery and removal from the Gala pool. Lily had left the room feeling ashamed and shaken. Soon after that, rumors had begun to circulate about people—people like Jude and Lucy—who were ignoring the rules. But the gossip never escalated beyond excited, scared whispers, and Lily never found out if any of it was true. It was bad enough to even talk about those things.

And yet after her Gala, Lily’s mother had brought up the topic almost casually. Lily realized that this was another one of the many things that changed, suddenly and completely, after the ceremony.

Garcia swung open the door of their suite and Lily peeked in hesitantly. He motioned for her to go first and she stepped onto a slick hardwood floor, the clanking of her shoes filling the

space. She was in a sitting room with plush couches and a large television and even a bar off to one side, stocked with wine and champagne. The eastern side of the room opened onto a balcony that overlooked the gardens and the lake, and Lily stood near the glass doors to observe the view for a moment, allowing the glinting water and dimming sky to calm her down.

“So yeah, this is our living room. Over here we have a bathroom, and obviously the bedroom is over there.” There was a knock at the door. “Excuse me.” Garcia answered and found the porters waiting with the first load of Lily’s belongings. “Where would you like your suitcases, Mrs. Michels?” one of them asked.

She didn’t answer at first because she was surprised by the salutation, realizing that it was the first time all week that someone had directly called her by her new name. “In here is fine,” she muttered.

Garcia helped them bring her things in as Lily wandered over to the bathroom, her stomach fluttering uneasily. All of this, and she was ‘Mrs. Michels’...the bathroom had marble floors and exotic plants hovering in the corners. Not only was there a glassed-in shower off to one side, but there was an enormous Jacuzzi-style bathtub with waterproof pillows lining the walls. The toilet had its own miniature room off the main bathroom.

Lily moved on to the bedroom, which was connected to both the bathroom and the living room by separate doors. Despite her reservations about the idea of sharing a bedroom with Garcia, she had to admit that the space was beautifully done. It did not look like the bedroom of a 22-year-old boy; she suspected it had been recreated in preparation for her arrival. A drowsy sky blue consumed the walls and silver curtains drifted over the windows. The bed itself was much larger than two people needed and housed several times more pillows than they could ever use. She flopped down on the bed and allowed her body to sink into the comforter, wishing she

could fall asleep, but forcing herself up before she did. She did not want Garcia to find her already lounging across their nuptial bed. Instead she walked around the room, taking in its details. She was slightly taken aback to find that a picture of herself and Garcia already graced the center of the bookshelf. It had been taken as they descended the stairs at the Gala, after the ring and the pronouncement. What surprised Lily most about the photo was how poised she looked, smiling and waving at the crowd, her dress glowing perfectly under the chandeliers. They must have gotten that shot in the instant when she had resolved to pull herself together for the sake of the audience.

“Hi.” Garcia was standing in the doorway. “We finished with your things.”

“Okay. Thanks,” Lily said.

He kept still for a minute, watching her drift across the room, watching as she opened and closed the doors of the walk-in closet. “It’s a nice room,” she offered, sure that her voice was tiny.

“Yeah. It’s really nice,” he said. They fell back to silence. Garcia shuffled from foot to foot. “Would you like some time to unpack? And to make yourself comfortable?”

“I mean, sure, I would like to start unpacking,” she said, not wanting to sound as eager as she felt to be alone.

“Okay. Do you want anything to drink?” he asked.

“Thanks, but I’m fine.”

“Okay.” He paused. “I’m going to go and see if my parents are home yet. They’ve been out touring the remodeled hospital, but once they’re back they’ll want to welcome you. And I think your family is getting here at six for dinner.”

Lily nodded.

He started to leave but turned back to add, “I’m glad you’re here, Lily.”

He looked tired, she thought. “I’m glad I’m here, too,” she said.

“I’ll be back in a little while.” And with that he left, closing the main door softly behind him. Lily stood at the window, wishing she hadn’t felt like she needed to lie to him, but knowing that his words had been just as hollow as hers.

At five minutes to six, Lily combed her hair in the bathroom, adjusted the ring that seemed to weigh down her entire left hand, and descended the main stairway to the living room, where Garcia had told her they would all meet before dinner. She had only seen him fleetingly a few times since moving in earlier that day, once when he entered the suite to exchange a few pleasant words, take a shower, and change clothes (he brought the new outfit into the bathroom with him so that she did not see him changing), and once to say that his parents were home and wanted to see her. After a quick interview with the Governor and Mrs. Michels—Garcia’s mother had been nervous and chirpy, and Governor Michels had seemed far more interested in her than he had been at the reception, asking about her family, asking about her schooling, asking about her friends, all accompanied by unrelenting eye contact that made Lily fidget—after this, Garcia had stayed behind to talk with his father, and Lily had wandered back upstairs to the suite, not knowing where else to go.

Now, approaching the back of the house, she heard the echoing voices of Garcia and Governor Michels. She had intentionally waited until the last few minutes before six o’clock to leave the suite because she had hoped not to encounter the Governor again until her father was there for support. But she could not wait any longer to appear for fear of being impolite, so she entered the living room and stood in the doorway. “Hello,” she said pleasantly.

“Lily, my dear,” the Governor boomed. He should not have looked so imposing, Lily thought. He was small, balding, and red-cheeked. But his voice was enormous and his eyes, almost black, glinted intelligently.

Garcia patted the couch next to him, and Lily acquiesced, arranging her skirt around her carefully as she sat.

“Are you getting yourself organized upstairs?” Governor Michels asked.

“I am, yes, thanks,” Lily said, blushing because she had spent the entire afternoon in her new bedroom and had barely unpacked. Garcia would notice.

Michels was watching her as closely as before, an easy smile playing across his lips. She wondered if this was a politician’s trick, something he used on everyone. “Well, again, let someone know if anything, anything at all, isn’t right for you. Isabel, she’s the one who arranged the suite before you arrived, she would be happy to make any changes.”

Before Lily had time to answer, Mrs. Michels fluttered into the room. “Hi everyone! Sorry, sorry, I was looking for the perfect wine downstairs. I’m glad I’m not very late.”

The doorbell rang, and Mrs. Michels turned back around. “I’ve got it!” Her brown curls—perfectly styled and contrasting strongly with her wrinkles and protruding veins—plopped at her neck as she hurried away.

“Let Dominic get it,” Governor Michels called to her.

“No, no, they are *family* now, I’m showing them in myself!”

A few minutes later James, Sophia, and Diane entered, all dressed impeccably, all smiling and shaking hands with Garcia and his parents. Lily felt her confidence increasing slightly.

“Darling!” Lily’s mother rushed forward to embrace her.

“Hi, Mom,” Lily replied gratefully, hugging back. She had seen her mother just this morning, but she was surprised by how happy she was to have her here now.

“Hello.” James was next, leaning forward to kiss Lily on the cheek.

“Hi, Dad,” Lily said.

Diane was last. “Hey.” She hugged Lily. “I left the little one at home so he wouldn’t be a distraction.”

“With Jude?”

Diane glanced around the room. “Yeah. With Jude.”

They all sat down to share the specially selected bottle of wine and a cheese platter before dinner. Everyone seemed to get along well enough in conversation, Lily thought. Diane was seated on the opposite side of Garcia and was talking with him amiably. Sophia chatted with Governor Michels, who laughed too loudly at her jokes, as James sat between them looking down at his folded hands. Lily found herself discussing the results of the West Hampton November Gala with Mrs. Michels, whose friendliness, combined with her family’s presence, allowed Lily to relax. At some point one of the kitchen employees stopped in to refill the wine glasses, and Lily was distracted from her conversation for a moment when she looked up to find the man’s blue eyes blinking down at her. He had blond hair and thick glasses. But he left as quickly as he arrived, and Lily turned back to Mrs. Michels, letting the man’s familiarity slip away.

When they sat down at the dining room table, lit by candlelight and covered in steaming dishes of salmon, potatoes, and vegetables, Lily was starving. Much like the few days before the Gala, today and yesterday had been strenuous enough to quiet her appetite. But at least for now, everything felt comfortable and safe, and she ate two platefuls of food without pausing and went

for a third. At some point during the meal, when she glanced at the laughing faces of her father, mother, and sister, warmed by the candles and the food, she thought: Most of the time, they won't be here. She dreaded the moment later that evening when they would step out the door, because once they had been in the mansion and gone away again, Lily knew she would be lonelier, more frightened, than before.

Eventually the dishes were cleared and crystal cups of sorbet materialized for dessert. It was after that, when everyone stood up and meandered back to the living room for coffee, that Diane touched Lily's arm. "Can I see your room? Would that be okay?"

Lily turned to Garcia. "I'm just going to show Diane around. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," he said.

The two girls left the room together. Diane looked as cool and collected as ever, and she had been charming throughout dinner. She wore diamond earrings and a modest pink dress that accented her body perfectly. "Davey's actually with a babysitter, not with Jude," she whispered as they climbed the stairs, their shoes clicking against the polished marble.

"What?"

"Davey's with a babysitter. Jude isn't at home."

Lily didn't understand the significance of this news, and she didn't understand why Diane had lied about it to everyone else. At the top of the stairs, Lily briefly showed Diane into the general sitting room between the two suites, which had comfortable armchairs gazing out the windows at the lake. It was almost completely dark by now, but the fading glow of sunset made the water visible. This was one of the few rooms—other than the ones belonging to her and Garcia—that Lily had been brave enough to explore alone, and she thought Diane might be impressed by its beauty. But Diane didn't seem to notice.

Next they padded down the hallway and Lily showed Diane through the private sitting room, the bathroom, the bedroom. Diane politely admired each area in turn, but at the end of the tour she sank into a couch near the door instead of leaving.

“Should we join everyone?” Lily asked.

“I wanted to talk to you. For a minute.” Diane was looking at the floor, her shoulders drooping. The cheerful face was gone, although Lily knew that her sister could reclaim it at any moment she chose.

“Okay.” Lily sat.

“Look,” Diane said. “You already know that something has been off with me lately. You’re the only person who noticed. Or, if Mom or Dad saw how I looked at your Gala, they didn’t say a word. But I saw how you kept staring at me and...I thought I should explain.”

Lily felt suddenly afraid. She wished she could rush back downstairs and escape from whatever was coming.

“Jude is never around,” Diane said. “He works a lot, that’s true. But that isn’t why he’s always gone, and I know it. Do you remember Lucy Salvester? She was in our Gala, but she wasn’t matched with anyone, and she was never assigned to another Gala. She’s not married.”

Lily nodded. “I remember.”

“When Jude isn’t around, sometimes he doesn’t get back until late. Really late. And I think it’s because he’s seeing her.”

“How do you know?” Lily felt her hands shaking.

“I just know.”

“He never told you?”

“Told me?” Diane laughed disgustedly. “He would never tell me.”

“Then how can you be sure?”

“He’s not interested in me, ever. He pays practically no attention to Davey. He’s always distracted. He disappears for entire nights and tells me that he slept at the office. He smells like perfume. And do you remember the way he and Lucy looked at each other at my Gala? When he didn’t pick her? When he picked me?” Her voice was quaking.

“I didn’t know any of that,” Lily murmured.

“Now you know.” For a moment, Diane looked like she might cry. Then she crunched up her face and smoothed it back into a complacent expression. She stood up, ran her hands over her skirt, and walked to the door. “I’m okay. I never really loved him, you know. So it’s okay. It’s nothing for you to worry about. But I wanted you to know so that you would understand why I looked—the way I did. At your Gala.” She turned back to Lily and sighed. “Anyhow, Garcia seems nice.”

Lily stared as Diane left the suite. Then she followed quickly. “What are you going to do?” she whispered when she was right behind Diane.

“I’m not going to do anything,” Diane said.

And with that, they climbed back down the stairs, glided into the living room, and presented themselves for coffee. Lily paid no attention to the final hour of conversation, except for a moment when Garcia placed his hand on top of hers on the couch and she jerked back to reality, wondering if his gesture was only for show or if he was truly trying to be affectionate.

Eventually the Michels and Pierce families wandered to the front door, and before Lily knew it her father was swinging his coat over his shoulders and giving her a brief hug. Her mother pecked her cheek and Diane smiled, too radiantly. It couldn’t be real. Then they were

gone and Lily was standing in the entryway. Governor Michels and his wife strolled towards the parlor, but Garcia stood behind her, waiting for her.

“Are you tired?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said.

“We could watch a movie or something. My dad gives me all the Pulse Studio films when they’re still waiting for approval, so that I can make a recommendation to Congress about whether to permit them. I just got the latest.”

Lily nodded, thinking about Diane going home to find Jude still gone. “Okay,” she said. “We’ll watch a movie.”

They traversed the lobby together. It was growing dark—the distant lights of the towering ceiling had been mostly extinguished—and as they approached the stairs, Lily glimpsed behind her and saw a figure in the parlor doorway, nearly hidden in shadows. It was Governor Michels, puffing at a cigar. He smiled, gestured in acknowledgement, and turned away.

Lily and Garcia sat on opposite ends of the long couch in their living room, facing the television and silently watching the Pulse Studio film. It was an approved plot that Lily had seen a few times before: A young woman, almost 22 years old, fancied herself in love with a boy from school. Then she turned 22 and completed her Gala, where she selected someone else as her husband. In the end she came to the happy realization that she had fallen in love with her new husband, and that her crush had been meaningless.

Lily had always enjoyed these films in the past. Pulse Studio had a small theater where it ran all of its new movies, about one every few months. Going to the Pulse Studio theater to see a new film had been an occasion when Lily was in high school. She had gone to all of them with

Maggie and Caroline, and they would invariably see dozens of their peers there. And yet now, watching this newest Pulse Studio film with Garcia, Lily found it predictable and uninteresting. She spent most of the hour and a half drifting between exhaustion and anxiety. She was too tired to think very clearly about anything, but she was vaguely aware that when the movie ended, it would be time for bed. Her first night sharing a bed with Garcia Michels. She remembered again what her mother had told her.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and realized she had dozed off.

“Let’s get some sleep,” Garcia said, flipping off the television. He marched to the bathroom, and Lily heard running water and the rustle of a toothbrush. She unearthed a pair of pajamas in the bedroom and debated whether to change there or wait for her turn in the bathroom. Garcia was taking his time, so she quickly threw off her skirt and blouse. She had not even managed to get both feet into her pajama pants when the bathroom door opened and Garcia wandered in, looking drowsy. He stopped short when he saw her in her bra and underwear, pajamas only halfway up one leg.

“Oh. Um, sorry.” He turned away quickly.

Yanking up the pants and grabbing her top, Lily rushed past him into the bathroom, slammed the door, and stood staring at herself in the mirror. For a moment she felt like she might cry, but she took a deep breath and pulled on her pajama shirt, telling herself that they were married, and he was going to see her undressed sooner or later. She brushed her hair back into a ponytail, washed her face, and brushed her teeth very slowly. She thought back to the Gala Handbook, trying to remember if it offered any advice on this subject. All she could recall were vague encouragements about doing your utmost to “get to know” your new spouse.

Finally she returned to the bedroom, where she found that the lights were out and Garcia was already drowned in blankets, keeping to one side of the bed. Quietly, she slipped in on the other side, thankful that the bed was large enough so that they didn't have to touch. Her exhaustion disappeared as she lay, still as stone, waiting to see what he would do, if he would do anything. Her heart thumped violently against the covers.

After a minute he stirred on his side of the bed and turned over to face Lily. She didn't move, and she tried to slow her breathing. But he didn't come any closer.

“Good night, Lily,” he said quietly.

“Good night,” she said.

Within minutes he was still, huffing away steadily. She turned her head, careful not to make any noise, and confirmed that he was fast asleep.

Five

Lily moved into the Governor's Mansion on a Friday. She spent most of Saturday wandering the house and the grounds—it was freezing outside, but even in the enormous mansion, she started to feel claustrophobic by noon—until evening, when Garcia suggested that they attend a cocktail party at the house of one of his high school friends. Lily went with him, having nothing better to do, and luckily it turned out that Garcia's friend had just participated in the Riverdale November Gala and was newly married to Haley Bontee, a girl Lily knew distantly from medical classes at the university. Haley looked just as uncomfortable as Lily felt, so they sat side-by-side for most of the two hours that Garcia and Lily remained at the party, making small talk.

That night, Lily went to bed certain that something would happen. She wished it wouldn't but believed it was unavoidable, so she was shocked when Garcia, once again, rolled over once or twice in bed and fell promptly asleep without coming near her. She stared at him bitterly, thinking she would rather get things over with to dissipate some of the tension. But then again, she decided, maybe he was just as nervous as she was. So she turned away with a sigh, determining that in any case they would need to do something sooner or later because sooner or later she was supposed to have a baby. In the meantime—she pushed away a small voice in her head, which recalled her mother's words and wondered if Garcia's behavior was normal—there was no rush.

On Sunday morning Lily had brunch with Garcia and his parents, then escaped upstairs to try to call Diane.

The phone rang once, twice, and finally Davey's voice yelled into the receiver, "Hi Auntie Lily!"

Lily laughed as Diane took over the phone. “Did you enjoy that?” Diane asked. “He loves answering the phone lately.”

“It’s cute.”

“What’s up?” There was clanking and crashing on Diane’s end of the line. Lily assumed she was trying to cook.

“Oh, um...is Jude home?”

“No.”

Lily paused. “I just...wondered if you were doing okay.”

Diane didn’t respond for a few minutes. “Really, Lily, I’m doing fine. And I regret telling you all of the things that I told you the other night. You don’t need to worry about it. I was worked up and I jumped to conclusions. But everything is fine here now. How is everything there?”

Lily sighed. “Fine.”

“How’s Garcia?”

“He’s...nice. Nice as can be. We went to a party at his friend’s house last night. Haley Bontee was there. Tonight we’re going to some event with his parents at the New Barton History Museum. A meet-and-greet thing, I don’t know, it will probably just be dull. Oh, and I’m starting my practicum at the hospital tomorrow.”

“Great. That all sounds great.” Another clank in the background, and Davey started to cry. “Damn,” Diane muttered. “He dropped a pot on his foot.”

Lily had a hard time getting much more out of Diane, and although she couldn’t decide whether she really felt reassured by Diane’s words, she said goodbye, hung up the phone, and wandered downstairs again, deciding it would be best not to stay huddled up in the suite so early

in the day. She was trying to make a good impression on Garcia's parents, in part because she hoped Governor Michels would stop watching her so intently if he came to like her.

Lily still wasn't confident about all of the mansion's protocol, but she wanted a second cup of coffee. She had seen Garcia go into the kitchen for tea the night before, so she assumed it was acceptable to walk in without notice. As soon as she passed through the swinging door she was confronted by the blond man from Friday night, who was standing at a counter chopping up chicken breasts. He jumped slightly. "Hi, Mrs. Michels," he said. "Can I get something for you?"

She stared at him, recalling how he had seemed so familiar on Friday, with the blue eyes and the thick glasses. "I was just hoping for some coffee," she said.

He went to a nearby cabinet, retrieved a mug, and filled it from a huge, steaming coffee pot by the sink. "There's always fresh coffee up until two in the afternoon," he informed her, handing her the mug.

She nodded, but before she turned to go she felt she needed to address him. She sipped at her coffee and watched as he went back to the chicken, thinking about his face, that forlorn look about him, and then she remembered that same face frozen behind the podium at Diane's Gala. "Eddie?" she asked. "Are you Eddie Haleski?"

He looked at her directly, but his expression remained neutral. "Hi, Lily."

He returned once again to his task. Lily thought about him as a little boy, departing from the Pierce house with his mother, stumbling along beside her with one hand clenched in hers. She remembered how his glasses used to fall to the tip of his nose because they were too big for his face, back then. Lily was still standing in front of Eddie, clutching her coffee mug. She didn't know what else to say, and it was clear that he didn't plan to continue the conversation, so she left him alone in the kitchen.

Lily meandered across the hall to the living room, and she was relieved to find that no one else was there. She sat in a corner armchair by the window, located a coaster for her coffee mug and settled in to stare at the gardens—brown and bleak, now that the snow had melted—and to wonder about Eddie Haleski. She had never heard of someone drawing a career as a house servant. No one in New Barton even had servants, for exactly that reason. The Governor was the only exception, and how people like Eddie came to work in the Governor’s Mansion, Lily had no idea.

Hearing voices and footsteps approaching, Lily sat upright in her chair. A few minutes later Governor Michels and Garcia entered the living room together.

“Hi,” Garcia said amiably. He looked as put-together as ever in tailored jeans and a black collared shirt, which lent dramatic flare to his dark hair and eyes. Lily could see how people would find him attractive, but having been exposed to clumps of his hair in the shower and the way he drooled excessively when he slept, she was still making up her mind.

Governor Michels was slightly shorter than his son, but his stately walk and loud presence made him the more noticeable of the two. “Lily, my dear.” He took a seat on the sofa. “Enjoying the view? Unfortunately this is the worst month of the year for the gardens. Come back here in May and you’ll have a different impression.”

“No, no, it’s still really nice,” Lily replied.

“So the History Museum Cocktail Hour is at eight tonight,” said Garcia. “But also, was there anything specific you wanted to do tomorrow? Because my Mom’s sister—my Aunt Kayla—invited us for lunch. She wants to meet you. So far she’s only seen you on TV.”

Lily hadn't seen the televised version of her Gala and could only hope in was flattering. "I would really love to meet your aunt," she said. "But I have to go to the hospital tomorrow. It's the first day of my practicum."

Governor Michels released a booming laugh. "Your practicum? You mean for nursing?"

Lily paused. "Yes, for nursing."

"My dear, you don't have to do your practicum or anything at all regarding nursing anymore," Michels said. "You're part of the Gubernatorial Family now. You're not expected to hold a job."

Lily stared at him. No one had mentioned this to her before. "I don't think I understand."

Garcia interjected. "Lily, you don't have to work or go to school anymore. You'll have plenty to do with New Barton politics."

Politics. She had known she would be involved in politics, but she had not known that it meant the elimination of her career. She had been training to be a nurse since she was 15—part-time in high school, full-time in college. All of this schooling seemed excessive if it was all for nothing. She realized that both Garcia and Governor Michels were watching her and forced her facial muscles to relax. "I just...didn't realize...I would prefer to keep going." She was surprised by the forcefulness of her own words.

Governor Michels raised his eyebrows. "You would prefer to keep working?"

"I've been going to school for this for seven years," Lily said timidly.

Michels glanced at Garcia, who had turned away and was fiddling with his watch, obviously eager to stay out of things. The Governor set his eyes back on Lily. "You realize it isn't conventional for a member of the highest political family in the city to maintain a normal job."

His voice and stare were too piercing and Lily couldn't bring herself to speak. She settled her eyes into her coffee mug.

After a minute, the Governor sighed. "I suppose it's not going to hurt anyone if you keep at it for now. But remember that life as the future Governor's wife will give you plenty to do if you give it your full attention." Lily understood from his tone of voice that eventually quitting her nursing career was more an expectation than an option.

"Okay," she replied.

"Excuse me." Governor Michels stood up—he was small, but he carried himself like a giant—and strode out of the room.

When the Governor's footsteps had receded into the distance, Garcia looked up and grinned at Lily. "People don't usually oppose him. Maybe you could tell."

The next morning, Lily woke up exasperated after a night of little sleep.

She and Garcia had been particularly friendly the previous day. At the History Museum Cocktail Hour, Garcia had introduced her to countless acquaintances, and then they had wandered the museum together. Lily remembered the museum from elementary school field trips, but back then it had seemed impressive, and now certain aspects of it struck her as funny. She and Garcia laughed together, for example, when they reached an exhibit showing a demolished United States city, burning and smoking during the New Revolution. The exhibit featured no photographs, only dramatic sketches of imaginary war scenes and captions stating that this was the fate New Barton had avoided by seceding.

"I know this is meant for kids," Lily said. "But really, cartoons?"

Garcia had laughed along, a little hesitantly at first, but then more heartily.

So it had been a good night. Still, back at the mansion and back in their suite after the party, Garcia had kept well away from her. Lily had stayed up after he fell asleep, wondering about him. In addition, she was nervous about her practicum, nervous about Governor Michels' reaction to her desire to keep working...and the luxurious bed refused to feel like her own.

She had been awake nearly half an hour when her alarm went off in the morning. She grabbed jeans and a T-shirt out of her dresser—she would be getting her scrubs at the hospital today, so there was no need to dress with special care—and retreated to the bathroom as Garcia muttered something groggily and fell back asleep.

Groomed and ready, she went down to the kitchen. Garcia had told her to go in when she was ready and ask for whatever she wanted for breakfast. Someone was always there by seven, he had said. It was only 7:30, and she wasn't due at the hospital until 8:30, so she took her time, savoring the morning stillness.

When she entered the kitchen she came face-to-face with Eddie again.

“Hi,” she said.

“Good morning, Mrs. Michels,” he answered. “What can I get you for breakfast?”

“Don't call me Mrs. Michels, that's ridiculous. We've known each other since we were kids,” she said.

Eddie looked at her strangely and went to the refrigerator. “What can I get you for breakfast?”

“Oh. I would love some eggs. And coffee. Thank you.”

She stood uncomfortably by the door, watching as he prepared her meal. “This seems silly,” she said eventually. “I could make eggs and coffee myself.”

Eddie didn't answer.

Lily shifted on her feet, watching as he scooped the eggs onto a plate. Her curiosity got the better of her. “I’m sorry, really sorry, if this is a personal question, but...how did you come to work here? I mean, I didn’t realize it was part of the selection pool.”

This time Eddie nearly dropped the plate. He set it down and grabbed something out of his pocket—a piece of paper and a pen. He wrote something, then approached and showed Lily the paper. It read: “Kitchen is bugged. Bad Q to ask.” He pointed at the upper corners of the room. Then out loud he said, “I’ve worked here for about a year.” Replacing the paper in his pocket, he retrieved the plate of eggs and the cup of coffee, and handed them to Lily.

Lily gulped. “Thank you.”

“Enjoy your breakfast,” he said. “You can leave the dishes on the table when you’re finished.”

Eating alone at the vast dining room table, Lily examined the ceiling, wondering if this room was bugged as well. And what about the suite? Had someone listened in on her conversation with Diane? She realized that she would have to be very careful from now on.

As she finished eating, Eddie entered and stood near the table. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, thanks,” she said.

He started to take her dishes, but she picked them up herself and carried them to the kitchen. She scrubbed them in the sink, left them out to dry, and turned around to find Eddie watching, smiling to himself. He took a folded paper out of his pocket, wrote something on the outside, and handed it to her as she left the kitchen, so gently that it didn’t make a sound.

Suddenly anxious to get out of the mansion, Lily rushed upstairs for her things (Garcia was still asleep) and returned to the lobby as quietly as she could, sneaking out the front door

before she encountered anyone. She pulled her scarf around her neck as the chill hit her and clutched Eddie's paper in her pocket. She didn't want to read it until she was well away.

"Mrs. Michels!" The family driver was perched on the front of a long black limo. "A ride?"

"I'd really like to walk, thanks," she said as pleasantly as she could.

"I was told I should give you a ride," he said.

"I like walking. It's close. But thank you."

The driver shrugged. "Just don't say I wasn't waiting for you."

Lily nodded and proceeded down the long front lawn to the entrance gate. She punched the code Garcia had told her onto a pad of buttons and the gate slid open for her. Finally out on the street, she looked back at the Mansion, towering behind her, and let out a deep breath. She walked a few blocks in the direction of the hospital, then looked around to ensure that she was alone and slid the paper out of her pocket. On the outside of the folded sheet, Eddie had written: "You really don't have to do your own dishes."

She laughed quietly and unfolded the paper. "Lily," it read, "If you want to have a real conversation, there's a place I know of where we can. It's called The Barnacle and it's on Henrietta and Fjord streets, right near the hospital. Ask the guy up front if he's seen Chris Enders. I'm there most evenings so stop by after work if you want to talk things over. Keep all this to yourself. The Barnacle isn't the kind of place you should mention to Gov Michels or family. Of course I won't begrudge you if you don't come by. Either way, see you soon. Eddie. P.S. Get rid of this, and make sure no one else can read it."

Lily spent the rest of her walk to the hospital tearing the note into miniscule shreds and dropping a few shreds into each trash receptacle she passed.

* * *

New Barton Memorial Hospital, recently remodeled, was enormous and glimmering in the morning sun. Lily stood on the front steps before she entered, taking in the building that would be her workplace indefinitely. Inside, she approached the front desk and asked where she could find Senior Nurse Monica Jamel's station. The receptionist stared at Lily as she pointed to the elevator and explained that the Hospital Clinic was on the fifth floor. It took Lily a minute to remember that everyone in New Barton now knew her face.

On the fifth floor, Lily followed a sign labeled "NB Memorial Hospital Clinic and Lab" down a hallway to the left. She entered the Clinic and asked for Monica Jamel.

"That's me," said the woman at the desk. She was so small that she had to strain her neck to see over the barrier, and she had rectangular glasses and cropped brown hair. Monica squinted at Lily. "Lily Pierce? Oh, so sorry, Lily Michels, I suppose. I'm so surprised! We weren't expecting you."

"I signed on a few months ago to start my practicum today," Lily said.

"Yes, yes, I know, but after the Gala we assumed that was out of the question." Monica stared at her a moment longer. "Are you here for good, then?"

"Well, yes. I mean, I plan to complete my practicum, and I plan to take my exams whenever you think I'm ready," Lily said.

"Well, well." Monica, cheerfully flustered, dug around in a drawer. "I have your file here somewhere. Your transcript and all of that. Forgive me for not being ready, I'm just so surprised that you're here! Oh, don't mistake me, you're obviously welcome. All right, here it is." She pulled out the file. "You've done wonderfully in all your courses." She flipped through a few

papers and set the file aside. “Okay, well then! You’re here! So let’s go find your things. We had your scrubs ordered in, if I can just remember where I shoved them off to.”

Lily followed Monica around the Clinic as Monica poked her head into various storage closets. Business seemed fairly slow; only a few of the exam rooms were occupied by doctors and patients, and there was laughter from the lab down the hall.

“So, as you already know, this is the Clinic,” Monica said as she fumbled around in another closet. “It’s usually pretty calm around here. That’s why we’re starting you off in this sector. After a few years you might decide you want to go through some extra training and move to the ER, or the Pregnancy Ward, or elsewhere. That will be up to you and also up to us. But for now we start here, with the basics. Aha!” She pulled out a plastic bag with a label reading ‘Lily Pierce.’ “I knew they were hiding around here.” Monica led Lily to a room around the corner from the front desk with a sign reading ‘Female Nurses Only.’ She unlocked the door. “Remind me to get you some keys. Go ahead and change.”

When Lily emerged from the nurses’ room in her too-big, bright blue scrubs, Monica chuckled. “I see we didn’t do a perfect job. They’ll do for now. First off, let’s show you around.”

Lily learned about the waiting room, the exam rooms, the equipment rooms, the lab, the nurse’s station, and where to find patient charts. She met the two primary Clinic doctors, Dr. Shepard and Dr. Houston, and late in the morning she helped with her first physical. Monica wasn’t about to let Lily handle a patient so soon, but Lily stood by and filled in a ten-year-old girl’s chart as Monica prepared the girl for a check-up with Dr. Houston.

At lunchtime Lily boarded the staff-only elevator and rode it to the third floor, where she thought the cafeteria was located. When she stepped out, she discovered a deadly quiet hallway with huge wooden doors on either end. One read ‘Pregnancy Ward.’ The other, ‘Davis Center.’

As she stood looking around and deciding that the cafeteria must be another floor down, the door to the Davis Center opened and an older nurse came out in a huff. Lily heard someone inside yelling, enraged, “You can’t take matters into your own hands like that, damn you! My daughter—” the voice cut off as the door slammed shut.

The older nurse caught sight of Lily. “What in the hell are you doing here? Are you in Clinical? You can’t be here!” the woman took hold of Lily’s shoulders, spun her around, and gave her a light push back onto the elevator. “Learn where you can and can’t go!”

Shocked, Lily rode the elevator to the second floor in silence.

After successfully finding the cafeteria and eating lunch, she spent her afternoon doing less than fascinating work in the Clinic and calming herself down after the encounter with the angry nurse. There was an influx of patients during the afternoon and Monica didn’t have much spare time, so Lily sorted files for a few hours and found a lab nurse who was willing to explain some of the testing procedures.

She left at 4:00 (very careful this time to take the elevator to the correct floor), hoping that her job would get more interesting as time went on, but at least happy that she wasn’t wandering aimlessly around the Governor’s Mansion all day. She would be working on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays until she took her exams. If she passed, she would start as a full-time nurse. Studying would take up plenty of time on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and weekends.

Henrietta Street was only a few blocks from the hospital, and Lily paused when she reached it. She fully intended to visit Eddie at The Barnacle very soon. Now that she knew he had something to say, she needed to know what it was. But she hadn’t necessarily planned to go today. On the other hand, come Wednesday the Governor might insist on her being driven to and from the hospital, which wouldn’t allow her any freedom to make a detour. She thought back to

Eddie's words in the note, how he had said that he wouldn't begrudge her if she didn't go. But if she didn't go, she would continue to see him at the Governor's Mansion day after day and year after year, and she would never feel that she really knew him anymore. Not that she had ever known him well. They had grown up together, but they hadn't been intimate friends, in part because he was several years older. Still, something about the memory of Eddie silently dipping his feet into the pool at one of Lily's mother's gatherings, his glasses teetering at the tip of his nose, while Lily and her friends did cannonballs into the water next to him...something about that memory made Lily certain that she had to talk with him.

So she turned on Henrietta Street and walked four blocks until she reached Fjord, thankful that it was not yet rush hour. She passed only a few buses, and there weren't many people out to observe her.

The Barnacle was squished between a dentist's office and a photographer's studio on the corner, and when she entered she was surprised to find a tiny flat packed floor to ceiling with every manner of used goods—jewelry, mirrors, furniture, racks of clothing, even a few bicycles. Probably a leftover from before the career selections, Lily decided. This kind of place had to be a hobby shop, something that a few family members ran on the side. Stores like this were scattered around the city, staffed only a few hours a week by sons or daughters who kept the places going because they were family heirlooms. The government, she had read in a New Barton history textbook, had graciously allowed families to put in proposals for small business preservation when the career selections went into effect, but only if the family members agreed to work normally selected jobs as well.

An older man was seated behind a decrepit desk, reading the City Gazette. He had tufts of white hair around his ears and patches on the knees of his jeans. He looked up when Lily approached his desk. “Can I help you?”

“I’m not sure, I might be in the wrong place...but a friend told me to meet him at The Barnacle. He said to ask for Chris Enders?”

The old man smiled and set down his newspaper. “You look familiar.”

She blushed, realizing that based on the looks of this place, it wasn’t the kind of spot that the Governor’s daughter-in-law should be known to frequent.

“Don’t worry. I don’t ask and I don’t tell. This way.”

She followed him to a door in the back, which he unlocked. It led to a dusty bookroom, where every wall was covered in shelves housing archives of the City Gazette, historical texts, and novels spun out by New Barton’s approved fiction publisher, Pinnacle Press. The man closed the outer door behind him and unlocked a second door at the other end of the bookroom, which led to a steep flight of stairs. Distant murmurs of conversation reached Lily’s ears.

“Down there.” He motioned to the stairs. “You can come back out the same way.” When Lily stepped through the door he closed it behind her. After a few steadying breaths, she began the descent.

She reached a landing about halfway down the stairs and stopped, absorbing the scene as it came into view. Below her was a small, dark room, crammed with tiny tables and wobbling chairs atop a floor of cracked blue and black tiles. Nostalgic jazz hummed in the background, almost too quiet to hear. About a dozen people—mostly men, but a few women as well—were scattered at the tables in ones and twos, sipping from chipped coffee mugs and reading newspapers that looked nothing like the City Gazette. Along the far edge of the room was a bar

completely absent of liquor; all that Lily could make out behind it were a few glowing coffeemakers and some jugs of milk. The bartender was a prickly-looking woman in her forties or fifties who wore a long, flowing shirt and pinned her graying hair behind her ears. The woman lounged on a stool behind the bar, with the coffeemakers on one side and a stack of newspapers on the other. Lily could just make out the headline scrawled across the top paper: “The View from New York.” She had heard of New York when they discussed the New Revolution in school, and she remembered something about it from the History Museum as well. It had been a huge city, far away from New Barton, and it had been one of the focal points of the New Revolution. It was gone now. She didn’t understand the headline.

Collecting herself, Lily looked around for Eddie. She spotted him in a corner, head ducked over a paper, a hanging lamp illuminating his blond hair and glasses. When Lily had first seen him at the Governor’s Mansion, refilling wine glasses, she hadn’t recognized him because she only remembered him as a little boy. Even at Diane’s Gala, he had seemed so young and out of place, standing meekly behind the podium. Now, Lily thought, he had to be about 26. But he looked decades older than he had at Diane’s Gala. Sitting there in the dusty basement coffee shop, with the lamplight flickering off his arms, there was nothing meek about him.

Eyes rose to examine Lily as she proceeded to Eddie’s table. Two months ago, she could have entered this place—any place—without eliciting a second glance. Now, everyone noticed her.

She slid into the chair across from Eddie, relieved that he had chosen an out-of-the way corner. “Hi.”

He looked up quickly, having been too engrossed in the newspaper to notice her earlier. “Hey.” He smiled. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t expect you today, at least.”

“I had no idea what this place would be like.” She lowered her voice. “Everyone is staring at me.”

Eddie laughed. “Don’t worry about it. Nobody will say a thing. They’re more anxious than you not to be found out.” His smile vanished. “Shit. Give me your purse.”

“What?”

Without waiting for Lily to hand it over, Eddie grabbed her purse from where she had set it on the floor and started rummaging through it. He pulled out every item—comb, wallet, hospital ID, a stack of flashcards that had been there since her anatomy exam weeks ago—and examined each one closely. “Check your pockets,” he instructed. “And the soles of your shoes. Do you see anything strange?”

Lily checked. “No.”

“Okay.” He handed back the purse. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I wanted to make sure.”

“Make sure—”

“That they’re not tracking you. I didn’t think they would be trying that on you, though. Your dad would recognize it in a heartbeat if they put a tracking device on you. I’m sure he knows all the tricks.”

“Is tracking—is that legal?” Lily asked, surprised.

“No, no. It’s not legal. But they do it sometimes anyhow. They did it to me for six months. They thought I didn’t know. Then they decided I wasn’t much of a threat, so now they just bug my apartment.”

Lily stared at him incredulously.

Eddie sighed. “Sorry. Can I get you a coffee?”

Lily nodded and watched as Eddie went to retrieve a coffee from the bar. She toyed with the edge of his newspaper for a moment before pulling it toward her. “The Country Gazette,” it read along the top. Below that was the article about New York, accompanied by a photo of a glimmering skyline. “You’ve probably read about New York in your high school textbooks,” the first line of the article read. “You’ve probably been told that New York no longer exists. You’ve probably been told that very little of value exists outside of New Barton, ever since the New Revolution. We’re here to tell you that New York City is still alive and well—not to mention Philadelphia, Boston, Washington D.C., and more.”

Eddie appeared at the table again. He placed a steaming mug in front of Lily.

“Thanks.” She took the coffee with shaking hands and drank from it very slowly, trying to collect her thoughts. When she looked up Eddie was watching her squarely, his eyes large and unblinking.

“You probably don’t have much time,” he said.

“No.”

“Did you enjoy the paper?” Eddie indicated the Country Gazette, still spread in front of Lily.

“I..” Lily felt suddenly childish. “I thought New York was destroyed in the New Revolution.”

“Yeah, I know. So does everyone.”

“So it wasn’t?”

“It’s still out there.”

“How do you know?”

Eddie watched her thoughtfully and didn't respond right away. “Look, I feel kind of bad for exposing you to all of this so suddenly. I realize what kind of life you've led. But you seem curious. You seem like you want to know things. I think it's better if you learn some of it now.”

“I don't know what you mean.” Lily glanced around and caught a young woman across the room watching her inquisitively. The woman turned away.

Eddie sighed. “I just mean that you've been protected from a lot of things, but you're growing out of that.”

Lily stared at her hands. “That newspaper, this is all ridiculous.”

“Take it or leave it.”

They were both quiet, Eddie tapping a finger against the table, Lily taking hesitant sips from her mug. She felt young and defensive, and the sensation frustrated her. She didn't want Eddie to see her that way.

She met his eyes again. “What happened to you? Where have you been the past four years? I haven't seen you. I haven't even heard anything about you.”

He considered her question. “You remember my Gala? Your sister's Gala?”

“Of course.”

“Yeah. Of course you do. So you remember how they took me away?”

Lily hesitated. “Yes.”

“They took me to the Hill. It's a prison outside of town, in the mountains. Almost at the wall.”

“The wall?”

“Yeah. If you go far enough out, almost a hundred miles out—most people never do—there’s this wall. It’s all around New Barton land. The lake to the east, the wall to the north, south, and west. They guard it so you can’t get past. Not many people ever try.” Eddie tapped the newspaper. “But this writer, the one who wrote about New York, he claims he made contact with somebody there. I don’t know how.” He stared at the newspaper distantly before continuing. “So when I couldn’t go through with the Gala, they took me to the Hill. They claimed that I was insane and they put me in the mental ward. I was there for three years.”

“What did they…” Lily stopped herself before she could finish, not sure if Eddie would want to answer the question and not at all sure that she wanted to know the answer.

“When they let me out they sent me to work at the Governor’s Mansion,” he finished flatly.

“And all that because—”

“All that because I wouldn’t do what you and your sister did.”

Lily snapped her eyes to his. “I didn’t do anything.”

“No, I guess you’re right. You didn’t do anything.” He paused. “But there’s another way to *do* things, you know. Like in New York. Like before the Michels government, before independence. That’s how my mother got married to my father. The other way.”

Lily faltered, once again not sure if she should ask her next question. But this time she pushed on. “What happened to your dad?”

“My dad tried to get past the wall.” His face was blank, and Lily knew he was trying to decide whether to tell her more.

She suddenly felt a twitch in her legs and rose to her feet. She couldn’t stay any longer. “I have to go,” she said. “They’ll be suspicious if I’m too late.”

“Yeah. They will. Come back any time, if you want. I’ll be around. And Lily?”

She had half turned away already. “Yes?”

“Well, you already know. You can’t mention any of this, not to anybody.”

She looked at him, confused. “How do you know you can trust me?”

“I guess I can’t be sure.”

But by the way he was looking at her, she could tell that he trusted her. She didn’t understand why. She felt her cheeks flushing under his gaze.

“We’ve known each other since we were little kids, after all,” he said.

Lily turned and left the room. She ran up the stairs, feeling a dozen sets of eyes observing her, Eddie’s most of all.

Back at the Mansion, Lily made it through the gate, down the lawn, in the front door, and up the stairs at the other end of the lobby without anyone bothering her. The Mansion seemed like a slumbering animal, and she was afraid she would wake it at any moment. She slid her feet from stair to stair, careful not to make a sound. When she reached the suite, Garcia was waiting for her, reading the City Gazette at the small table by the balcony doors.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi.” She watched him, suddenly wanting to hate him. Did he know about all of the things that Eddie had told her, the Hill and the wall and New York City? If all of that was even true. If it was true, did he know? He had to know.

Lily had arrived home at least a half hour later than Garcia had expected her, but his gaze was not reprimanding. Examining his expression, she realized that she couldn’t hate him, not yet.

He had done nothing to merit her enmity. He had done absolutely nothing, had elicited no real emotions from her at all.

“How was your first day?” he asked pleasantly.

Lily had nearly forgotten about the hospital. “Fine,” she said. “It was fine.”

“That’s good. Look…” he hesitated. “My dad wants you to ride with our driver from now on. If you’re going to insist on going to work. His words, not mine.”

Lily glared at him. “I like walking.”

“Yeah. I would let you walk if it were up to me. It’s not up to me.”

“I would rather walk,” she repeated.

“I know. I’m sorry. Really, Lily, I’m sorry,” Garcia said.

And he did look sorry, but Lily didn’t have anything to say. She marched past him into the bedroom, deposited her purse on the ground, and went to the bathroom, slamming and locking the door. Somehow she managed to wait until the shower was on and the water was rushing before she started to cry.

Six

“Hi, my dear!” Sophia opened the door of 1331 Wylin Street and threw her arms around her daughter, who gladly accepted the embrace. Then Lily turned to James, who had been standing just behind her mother. “Glad to have you home,” he said quietly, pausing before he hugged her. James Pierce knew how to shake hands and kiss cheeks, but anything more intimate than that was less natural for him. Lily was grateful for the rare closeness.

She followed her parents inside, overjoyed to be home, even if it was only for one night. It was Friday, and it had been a long week. Wednesday and Friday at the hospital had lacked stimulation just as severely as Monday. Lily had spent Tuesday and Thursday in the Mansion’s dining room with her textbooks spread over the table, pretending to be studying intently whenever someone walked by, but staring out the windows at the lake whenever she was alone. Governor Michels had entered the room and left again without a word sometime in mid-afternoon, and Lily had realized that she was putting on a show with her nursing textbooks and her studiousness, and although she hadn’t admitted it before, she was doing it intentionally.

She had watched for Eddie every day, and she had seen him twice. The first time was at breakfast on Wednesday, when he silently made her eggs and coffee again and handed them to her with a small smile. There had been no note, no real words exchanged between them. The second time was at Thursday night dinner with the Michels family, when Lily had not even dared to acknowledge Eddie’s presence, but had watched his hands out of the corner of her eye as he placed the steaming chicken on the table.

All week, Governor Michels had barely spoken to her. But when he had, his manner was charming in such a rehearsed manner that Lily knew it wasn’t genuine. Mrs. Michels had been sincerely kind in her blithe, naïve way. And Garcia...Garcia was trying. He brought her

breakfast in bed on Tuesday morning, after their fight. He always smiled at her, and he never ignored her. He even held her hand occasionally. But as soon as they were both in pajamas and they turned out the lights, he dozed off without any indication that he intended to do anything in their bed other than sleep. It made Lily feel insecure. She wasn't as beautiful as her sister; she had always known that. But she was Garcia's wife, and she was in his bed, and he could do anything he wanted, whenever he wanted. And yet he didn't. On Thursday night, watching his chest rise and fall, watching the moonlight on his ruffled hair, Lily had thought for a moment about trying to curl up against him. She didn't even know why she wanted to do it. She didn't feel anything towards him besides fleeting gratitude for his kindness. She only thought that physical contact would be comforting, that it would make her feel a little less lonely. But her pride was stronger than any of those other emotions and she didn't move to touch him.

Friday morning, before she left for the hospital, Garcia had woken up while Lily was getting her things together, and he had told her that his father had given her permission to spend the night with her parents, if she wanted.

It was the most helpful thing Garcia could have done for her. Now, padding down the warm front hallway of her own house behind her mother and her father, she savored the feeling of her feet sinking into the deep, worn carpet. Delicious smells wafted down the hall from the kitchen, and hearing the distant patter of sleet on the roof, Lily thought of her own bed, awaiting her upstairs.

"Is Diane coming?" she asked.

"Diane's with Davey," Sophia said. "They were going to come over but Davey has apparently had a quick temper all day. So no, not tonight."

Lily's elation at being home sunk slightly. It would have been nice if it had been all four of them. And it would have reassured her if she could see her sister happy and smiling over dinner.

They were mostly quiet as they ate—carrot and potato soup, garlic bread, vegetables, and a chocolate pie for desert. Sophia asked a few questions about Lily's practicum, Lily answered, and they drifted back to a comfortable silence, the yellow candlelight casting a calm glow over the room.

After dinner they sat together in the living room, James reading his newspaper (the *City Gazette*—had he ever seen the *Country Gazette*? Lily wondered), Sophia knitting a scarf for Davey, Lily reading a few lines of a book at a time, then stopping to take in her surroundings all over again. She didn't know how often this luxury would be afforded to her in the future.

When she began to nod off she kissed both her parents on the cheek and went to her room, where she sat on her bed staring around her at the familiar space before she dug through a dresser drawer for a pair of pajamas she hadn't brought to the Mansion. She changed and went to the bathroom, brushed her teeth, pulled her hair into a sloppy ponytail, and returned to her bed, where she cuddled into the corner with the lights still on, looking around at the photos, the stuffed animals, and the stacks of textbooks. She glimpsed her *New Barton History* textbook in the midst of the pile and got out of bed to retrieve it. Flipping it open, she was greeted by an enthusiastic pronunciation: "Welcome to the History of New Barton, a peaceful and benevolent city arisen out of the ashes of the New Revolution of the United States of America." Lily threw the book to the floor, suddenly furious.

"Lily?"

She looked up. She had left her door ajar, and James was standing there, watching her with a concerned expression.

“Sorry. Hi, Dad,” she said.

He moved to the bed and sat down next to her, staring at the book on the floor and nudging it with his foot. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m okay,” she said.

“How are things with Governor Michels? And Garcia?”

“They’re being nice enough,” Lily said. She stared at the textbook. Of all the people she could ask about the things Eddie had told her, her father was the safest bet. He knew things, she was sure he did. And he was her father. He would never say a word about the conversation to anyone else.

James was still watching her intently, and Lily grappled with everything she wanted to know. “I was wondering,” she finally said, “if you know anything about New York City.”

James lifted his eyebrows. “What?”

“New York City. I heard it still exists. And I thought that if anyone would know, you would know.”

“Who told you that?”

“Just...a friend.”

James thought for a moment before he answered. “I’ve never seen proof that New York City still exists, but personally, I think it does.”

They were quiet as Lily absorbed his words.

James rubbed a hand over his eye. “I could never bring myself to lie to you. That was the truth. But I don’t understand why you’re asking me this.”

“I wanted to know.”

“It’s not safe to ask about things like that.” James’s knuckles were quivering against his knees.

“I just thought—”

“Lily, be careful. I don’t have as many answers as you think I do. I told you the truth, and the truth is I don’t know for certain, either.”

“You’re the Governor’s best friend,” she said, confused.

“That doesn’t mean a thing.” He sighed. “I only wish you hadn’t been talking with whoever you’ve been talking with. Whoever has been telling you all of this.”

“I would have figured it out eventually,” she said, surprised to find herself repeating Eddie’s words.

James ran his fingers silently along his temples. “Listen, Lily, I don’t like it that you’re in that house at all. And though there’s nothing I can do about it now, it would have been better if you could be indifferent to these kinds of questions. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I thought you would be happy that Garcia and I were matched,” Lily said.

“Happy or not, it makes no difference. We all do the best we can with what we get,” James said.

“I guess you’re right,” Lily replied, watching her father.

James deflated slightly. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to snap at you. I only need you to know that it isn’t safe to be living in that house and to be asking these things. Even less safe to be spending time with anyone who knows about them. You may think you’re untouchable, because you’re Garcia’s wife, and because I’m Governor Michels’—best friend, I suppose, as you said. But no one is untouchable if they’re doing, talking about, dangerous things. Not you. And

certainly not me. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Lily said.

"Can you promise me to be careful?"

"Yes," she said. "I promise."

They sat together stiffly for a few more minutes. Then James leaned over and kissed his daughter's cheek. "Good night. I'm glad you're home. I only wish you didn't have to go so soon." He rose and left the room.

The next morning, the driver picked Lily up at eleven o'clock sharp. She was welcomed back to the Mansion by Governor Michels, who strolled across the lobby just as she arrived. He was dressed in his usual navy blue suit, bald head and black eyes dazzling under the midday light.

"Hello, Lily," he said. "Did you have a nice visit with your parents?"

"Yes, very nice." She nodded.

"Glad to hear it. If you'll excuse me." With a curt smile he turned and continued in the direction of his office.

Lily made her way upstairs to the suite. Garcia wasn't home. She stayed in their living room for a few hours, studying and going through the things she had yet to unpack (several boxes stacked in a corner of the bedroom). She wanted to call Diane, but she still didn't know what was bugged, and the only way to find out would be to talk with Eddie again.

Garcia showed up just before dinnertime. "Hey," he said, marching in the door and stomping snow off of his boots.

"Hi, Garcia," Lily said pleasantly.

“How was home?”

“Great,” she said. “Thanks.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Garcia threw his gloves onto a chair. “Now that you’re back, I was wondering if I could take you out for dinner.”

Lily was taken aback. “Dinner?”

“Yeah. Maybe at The Carolina.”

“I—yes, that sounds really nice.”

“Great. It’s my favorite restaurant. I can make us a reservation. I need a shower, I’ll be out soon.”

He disappeared into the bathroom, and Lily sank into the sofa as the distant hum of the shower filled the suite. As a couple, she and Garcia had only attended social events like the History Museum meet and greet. But this would be a real date, just the two of them spending time together in public. And The Carolina was a fancy eatery on the lakefront, where they were sure to be observed by plenty of influential people. She had gone there once before, with her family on the day of her career selection. She had worn her nicest dress and her mother had bought her an expensive cocktail.

Lily was flattered that Garcia was finally going to take her out, but it made her think of his elusive handholding. He did it when other people were watching, but he had never once done it when they were alone. She wondered if going to The Carolina was part of the same agenda.

But she was grateful that Garcia had instigated her visit home. Also, she realized that her recent behaviors (both things Garcia knew about, like her insistence on continuing her nursing career, and things he didn’t, like her talk with Eddie) had endangered her position as a welcome

part of the Gubernatorial family. All things considered, Lily decided that it would be in her best interest to put on a nice dress and play along.

She and Garcia arrived at the Carolina at 6:30. Garcia looked dashing in his tux and polished black shoes. His hair was clean and combed, and he was even wearing cologne. Lily had donned a simple green party dress and a pearl necklace, and had carefully applied a coat of the mascara her mother had given her before she moved out.

The hostess showed them to a two-person table at the lake view window. Garcia pulled out Lily's chair and told her, "You look wonderful."

Lily smiled. "Thank you. You look nice, too."

Over lamb and rich red wine, Garcia talked to Lily about political life. He told her about how he spent his days sitting in on Congressional and Presidential Cabinet meetings, studying law, and having lunch with important strangers. Lily played with the edge of the tablecloth and nodded attentively as he spoke. When the conversation turned to her she told him about nursing and school and home. She told him about how her mother worked at Home and Body and kept 1331 Wylin well stocked with items like lilac-scented hand towels and seasonal "Welcome" doormats. It made him laugh.

When they left the restaurant, Lily felt a little unsteady thanks to three glasses of wine. The hostess smiled goodnight and held the door for them and the other diners looked on, faces golden in the candlelight. The driver was waiting to whisk Garcia and Lily back to the Mansion.

Back upstairs in the suite, Lily told Garcia thank you for the lovely evening.

"Don't mention it," he said. "It's the least I can do."

She wasn't sure what he meant, but she was too tipsy to pay much attention.

A few hours later they went through their typical bedtime routine. Garcia entered the bathroom first with his pajamas under his arm, changed, brushed his teeth, emerged with a pleasant “good night” for Lily and slipped into bed. Lily took her turn in the bathroom, changing and pulling her hair back and thinking to herself that maybe this was it. It had been a nice night. She wasn’t sure if what she felt at dinner was romance, but it had to be at least the beginning of friendship.

Back in the dark bedroom, she stood for a minute on her side of the bed, listening to Garcia’s breathing to see whether he was already asleep. He shifted his legs and she knew that he wasn’t.

She slid in next to him and waited. He didn’t move. She stared at the ceiling in exasperation and inched closer. Still nothing from his side of the bed.

Lily stared at the back of his shoulder, sturdy and ghostly in the moonlight. This had gone on too long. She had been living with Garcia for a week. If she was ever going to feel comfortable in this place, she needed to be sleeping next to a husband, not a random acquaintance. With a surge of determination, she placed the palm of her hand on Garcia’s back. The warmth of his body through his thin T-shirt drew her closer. When her chest was only inches from where her hand rested on his back, he turned over.

“Lily,” he said apprehensively, his eyes squinting through the darkness.

“Hi,” she whispered.

Her hand had flopped onto the blanket between them when he had rolled over, and now he took it in his own hand and held it loosely. She hoped he couldn’t feel her trembling.

“You’re a really great girl,” Garcia said. He sighed and turned his eyes away from her. “I think we’ll be really happy together, eventually. But I think we should take everything slowly.”

“What?”

“We’re just beginning to get to know each other. Let’s keep doing that.”

His voice was quiet and concerned. Lily’s mind raced. “Okay,” she said.

Garcia was asleep a few minutes later, still holding her hand. Lily stared at his eyelashes, his parted lips, a clump of hair that was groggily sticking to his cheek...she thought for the thousandth time about what her mother had told her about marital intimacy, and she felt sure that Sophia would not consider this behavior normal. *He’s not telling the truth.* The words seemed as clear in Lily’s mind as the midnight surface of the lake out the window. It wasn’t about getting to know each other. It was about something else. She slowly removed her hand from his and turned away, but it was a long time before she slept.

Monday morning was sunny and warm for December. Lily meandered down the marble staircase on her way to the kitchen and fumbled with a piece of paper in her pocket. She was counting on Eddie’s presence. He had been there the previous Monday.

He was washing coffee mugs in the sink when she swung open the kitchen door.

“Good morning,” he said. His voice was unemotional but his smile was welcoming.

“Good morning.”

“The usual?”

Lily held back a laugh. “Yes, please.”

He brought her meal out to the dining room for her and left her alone to eat. When she was finished she carried the dishes back to the kitchen herself. Eddie watched, amused by the familiar custom, as she washed them and left them out to dry. Before she left she removed the

paper from her pocket, as quietly as she could, and handed it over. It read: *Can you be at the Barnacle if I take a late lunch break?* He nodded yes. Lily smiled and left.

She was silent in the back of the limo as she rode to work, trying to decide what exactly she wanted to say to Eddie.

At the hospital she changed into her scrubs and went to the nurse's station for Monica's instructions. Monica put her in charge of preparing several of the morning's more straightforward patients for Dr. Shepard. Lily had spent the previous week doing prep under Monica's guidance, and she was pleased that she was now allowed to handle patients on her own. One middle-aged woman that Lily prepped for a physical recognized her and asked about the Governor's Mansion in an awe-filled voice. Uncomfortable, Lily quickly checked temperature and pulse and moved on.

Around noon Lily asked Monica permission to take lunch later than usual. "I'm meeting my sister," she lied.

"That's fine." Monica was scribbling something on a patient's chart. "I don't mind. Oh, I nearly forgot—Jean Lamper, downstairs in the ER, needs somebody on desk duty on Wednesday mornings. The normal employee is on maternity leave. It's boring work, you just sit at the desk all day and check people in and out, keep track of which rooms are filled. But they're desperate for somebody and it has to be a certified hospital employee. I thought I'd ask you."

"Sure," Lily said. "So I report there on Wednesday mornings?"

"Yes. Thanks!" Monica rushed away to speak with Dr. Houston, who was calling to her from an exam room.

Lily filed a few charts and cleaned up the nurse's station, unsure of whether ER duty was a positive or negative development. Watching the clock, she realized she should have specified a

time with Eddie. She settled on 1:30 and took care of a few more patients before she quickly changed back out of her scrubs—she didn't want to attract any more attention than she already did—and exited the hospital. She kept her head down to avoid making eye contact with the lunch crowd and quickly reached Henrietta and Fjord streets.

When she arrived at The Barnacle she could barely make it in the door thanks to an ancient chest of drawers that was resting in the entryway, the rest of the shop being too cramped to house it.

“As you can see, things just fly off the shelves in this place.” The same elderly man was sitting behind the desk. He released a jolly chuckle and set down his newspaper. “Who or what are you looking for today?”

“Hi, sir. Is Chris Enders around?”

“Ah, that delinquent again,” he said good-naturedly. “Same as last time, eh? This way.”

She followed him through the store and the bookroom and thanked him when he opened the door to the back stairway. She stepped through.

“Now don't you go getting yourself into trouble,” he said cheerfully as he closed the door behind her.

The same thwarted jazz and low conversation drifted upward to meet Lily as she reached the landing. The basement was less crowded this time, with only five or six people scattered at the tables, all of whom looked up through a haze of cigarette smoke when she appeared. There was Eddie in the same corner, waving to her. She didn't wave back but made her way to him quickly, nodding to the woman at the bar (someone different this time, young and skinny with huge eyes) as she passed.

“Hi,” she said, slipping into the seat across from Eddie.

“I’m glad to see you. Do you mind checking your bag?” he asked.

She acquiesced and dug through it. Seeing nothing unusual, she set it on the floor.

“How are you?” Eddie asked seriously, blue eyes shining.

“Okay,” she said.

“I see.” He didn’t sound convinced. “Coffee?”

Lily nodded. “Thanks.” Eddie went to get her a mug and she glanced at his newspaper. It was the same issue of the Country Gazette as the week before.

The girl serving the coffee handed Eddie a mug without offering any conversation, and he returned immediately. “Here you go. Yeah, there’s no new paper. They’re pretty inconsistent about getting the issues out.”

“Who’s they?” Lily asked, taking the coffee.

“Who knows? Probably someone who hangs out here.” Eddie smiled mischievously. “Not me, I promise. I only wish I had that kind of stealth.” He took a sip of coffee. “But yeah, so what brings you back here?”

“Well, it’s refreshing here,” Lily said.

Eddie grinned at her, holding eye contact a moment too long. Lily turned her eyes away.

“Refreshing,” Eddie said. “That’s interesting. Refreshing as compared with Garcia Michels? The Mansion?”

Lily shook her head more out of embarrassment than disagreement. “I don’t know.” She wasn’t ready to admit those things so directly, although she could tell it made no difference because Eddie seemed confident that he knew what she meant.

He pushed forward. “So how *is* Garcia?”

Lily didn’t answer right away, trying to decide how honest she wanted to be.

“I hear he took you to The Carolina the other night.”

“Yes, he did, and it seems like everyone knows it.”

“Sorry,” Eddie said. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“It doesn’t matter. Besides, you’re around the mansion. You see what he’s like. He’s friendly to me, okay, that’s true. He’s nothing more than that.”

Eddie looked surprised at her outspokenness, but he didn’t say anything. Lily rolled her own words around in her mind, surprised that she had allowed them to escape. She watched Eddie, trying to gauge whether she could trust him if she took the conversation a step further. Remembering that he had trusted her with something as important as his own clandestine history, she decided to take the risk.

“I wanted to ask you,” she began carefully, “if you knew of anything...unusual about him. About Garcia.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t even know. I just know that he’s been behaving strangely.”

“How so?”

“I’d rather not specify.”

Eddie looked intrigued for a moment but moved on. “Okay. I wish I could help, but I don’t know what to tell you. Besides his obvious involvement with his father’s government, I don’t know much about Garcia. I don’t even know how involved with his father’s government he actually is.”

“I don’t know, either. I just wondered...” she didn’t finish.

“You wondered?” Eddie asked patiently.

“I wondered if Garcia had a reason to keep me at a distance,” she concluded, keeping her voice soft.

Eddie didn't answer.

“It's like I said. He's completely pleasant when he's around me, and he takes me out to The Carolina and shows me off to prove to the world that he is, in fact, married to the girl everyone has seen on TV. But he never indicates that he wants us to have a relationship beyond that. And he's so obvious about it...to me, at least...there has to be something going on.” And as soon as the words rushed out and she paused for breath, she felt ashamed, juvenile, for coming here to say this as though Eddie might have some idea of what she should do or what was going on with her husband. And she knew all at once that she had come to The Barnacle to see him, not only because he seemed to know things that other people didn't know, but because, whether he knew anything about this or not, she simply wanted to talk to him.

“Do you want a relationship beyond that?”

The question caught her off guard. Eddie was watching Lily steadily and she found that she couldn't make eye contact. “I...don't know,” she stuttered.

“You must know.”

“I...God.” She shook her head. “I'm indifferent. I don't know if I even see him as my husband. But I know that I should. And I know that he should think of me not just as a friend but as his wife, because that's what I am.”

To her astonishment, Eddie laughed.

“What?” she asked.

“Just because you should doesn't mean that you do,” he said.

Lily sat in silence, tapping a finger against the side of her mug, staring at the girl behind the bar whose huge eyes were roving around the room. She felt guilty, guilty for admitting to so much and guilty for expecting Eddie to care. But even more, she felt a twinge of happiness because it seemed as though he did care.

“What’s up? What are you wondering?” Eddie asked.

“Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you something else, but this is something silly,” she said, eager to turn to a less personal topic.

“I doubt it’s silly.”

“I was just wondering whether my suite in the Mansion is bugged.”

“Most of the public space is bugged, like the dining room and the lobby and kitchen,” he said. “I don’t know about the private spaces and the suites. There’s a chance.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m glad to fill you in. Is there anything else? Anything at all.”

“Not now. Maybe another time,” Lily said.

“That’s okay too.”

She stood up without another word and was surprised to find that Eddie stood up, too. “It’s about time for me to get back to the hospital,” she said.

“And time for me to go back to the Governor’s Mansion,” he said.

They crossed the room together. Eddie said goodbye to the girl at the bar, who replied “goodbye” in such a tiny voice that Lily hardly heard her.

Lily’s footsteps creaked up the stairs, with Eddie’s following close behind like echoes. When she reached the top she opened the door to the bookroom and stepped through. She turned

to wait for him, feeling lightheaded because the sunlight from a high window was streaking across her face, throwing a flood of dust particles into vision.

When Eddie appeared in front of her, his glasses nearly hiding his eyes behind a reflection of the room, she found that she didn't want to move.

"Shall we?" he said.

"Thank you," she answered. "For listening."

"You're welcome."

And without realizing exactly what she was doing, Lily leaned forward and pressed her lips lightly against his. It was over in a second, and she blinked at him through the haze, wondering if it had really happened.

He smiled, and that was all. Lily turned to the far end of the bookroom and opened the door into the shop, where she and Eddie slipped through a labyrinth of lamps and oil paintings. Eddie offered the man at the desk a cheerful goodbye, but Lily couldn't think clearly enough to do the same.

As soon as they were out on the street they were strangers, Eddie walking in one direction and Lily marching in the other. She turned her head once to see his figure retreating around a corner, and when she turned back to continue on her way she could almost hear the delicate rustle of his mother's skirt as she darted down the aisle and out of sight during Eddie's Gala four years ago. And she remembered Eddie behind the podium, gaping at the marriage pool with young, terrified eyes. Her own action, she realized, was just as irreversible.

Seven

That Thursday she talked Garcia into letting her visit Diane, and Garcia talked Governor Michels into letting her visit Diane. It was a bitter night and she wrapped herself in layer after layer before she rushed out of the Mansion and into the waiting limo, Garcia waving idly in the door behind her.

“So your sister’s house?” asked the driver.

“Yes. It’s at 393 Carlyle.”

They drove north, passed through the eastern portion of downtown, and continued up the beginning of a long slope into Lake Heights. Lily hadn’t visited Diane at home since before her Gala. She certainly didn’t want to talk to her on the phone if there was even a chance that she would be overheard at the Mansion.

“Nice neighborhood,” the driver said.

“Yeah, it is nice.”

The enormous façade of 393 Carlyle was brightly lit against the darkness, and the pine trees wavered regally in the wind. Lily shivered. “It’ll probably be about an hour,” she told the driver, hopping out of the car. She rushed to the front door and rang the bell, hearing a deep *ding* resounding through the house’s hollow innards.

Diane opened the door almost immediately. “Hi,” she breathed.

“Hi!” Lily rushed inside to give her sister a hug, which Diane returned only weakly.

“Come in.” She ushered Lily towards the kitchen.

“Is Jude home?” Lily asked quietly.

“Upstairs in his study. Davey is already in bed. I’ll make us some tea.”

Lily watched as her sister fumbled around for mugs in the kitchen cabinets and poured out water from a kettle. Diane was wearing a ragged pair of sweatpants and a floppy sweater. Her beautiful brown hair hung in greasy strands around her neck. But in stark contrast, she wore impeccable make-up—her lips shone glossy and pink, her cheeks sported just the right amount of flush, and her eyelashes bantered thickly above her blue eyes.

“How are you feeling?” Lily asked, realizing too late how loaded the question felt.

“I’m not sick, if that’s what you mean.” Diane handed Lily a cup of tea. “I feel fine. Let’s move to my den. It’s cozier.”

“Okay.” Lily followed her sister back past the front door and all the way to a snug room at the back of the house. Warm lamplight flooded the space and couches lined the walls, sporting colorful throw pillows and blankets. There were shelves stocked with a few photos and lots of books that Lily remembered from when she and Diane were children—*Wellesley the Riverdale Puppy* and *Eli the Cautious Kitten* from the New Barton Animal Friends series (she and Diane had loved those books when they were very young), and every book from the New Barton City Girls series, Diane’s favorites when she was eleven or twelve. Examining the photos, Lily saw several family shots from back home, and portrait after portrait of Davey. Hidden in a corner was a picture of Jude and Diane at their Gala, the photo overshadowed by a stack of Education Guides from when Diane had worked as a teacher.

“I’m guessing Jude didn’t have much say in the décor back here,” Lily said, observing a flowery painting of the lakeside garden hanging on the wall.

“I decided to make this room my own.”

“I like it.” Lily sat at the edge of a velvety blue couch and tucked a blanket over her lap. She started to place her tea on the side table and Diane handed her a coaster with an image of the mountains embossed on its surface. “Thanks.”

Diane sank into the sofa opposite Lily, blowing at the surface of her tea. “How is the Hospital? And how’s home? The Mansion, I mean.”

“Home.” Lily rolled the word over her tongue, testing out how it felt to refer to the Governor’s Mansion as home. “It’s luxurious, obviously. It’s also...cold.”

“Mm.” Diane sipped at her tea. “What about Garcia?”

“He’s nice. Just nice.”

“Just nice,” Diane echoed thoughtfully. “And work?”

Lily squirmed in her seat, growing uncomfortable with all these questions because what she really wanted to discuss was Diane’s life, not her own. “Work could be more interesting. They have me doing pretty monotonous things.”

“I’m sure it’ll grow on you.”

“Once I’m an actual nurse rather than a student, I’m sure it will.” Lily eyed Diane, who seemed distracted by a baby picture of Davey that grinned at them from the adjacent bookshelf. “Really, how are you?” Lily asked.

Diane crinkled her eyebrows. “Fine.”

“I don’t mean to keep bothering you. It’s just that you entrusted me with something really important and now you won’t tell me what’s going on.”

Diane shook her head. “There’s nothing to tell. Well, Jude actually arrives home most nights lately. I guess that’s a positive development.”

“But do you still think—”

“I was upset. I was upset that I hadn’t seen much of Jude, and I was upset that I couldn’t have another baby. I was confused.”

“Confused?”

“Maybe not the right word. I was ready to jump to conclusions that probably weren’t justified.”

Diane was silent. Lily drank her tea uncomfortably.

“I heard something interesting about Dad,” Diane said. “Jude told me about some Congressional gossip.”

“Jude tells you things like that?”

“No. Rarely. He only told me this because it had to do with Dad.”

“Okay.”

“He voted against the TV bill. Dad did, I mean.”

“I thought they did a secret ballot for things like that,” Lily said.

Diane shrugged. “I don’t know how it works. All I know is, someone—just one person—voted against it, and somehow Governor Michels found out that it was Dad. That was all weeks ago, of course, but Jude said the secret leaked out to the entire Congress recently.”

Lily felt herself growing stiff. “Is that a big deal?”

“I doubt it. Like I said, it was weeks ago. They’re allowed to vote against things, that’s why they vote in the first place.”

“Right.”

“Anyway, I just found it interesting that Dad would oppose something like that. He always seemed so excited about publicity efforts.”

Lily remembered her father the morning of her Gala, sitting at breakfast with the City Gazette and telling her that the TV bill had passed. He had told her that of course it had, people rarely voted against Governor Michels. He hadn't given any indication of voting against the bill himself. As Diane had said, that had been weeks ago, so the whole affair had clearly been smoothed over. The part Lily found unnerving was that Governor Michels had somehow discovered to whom the "no" vote belonged. She wanted to say this to her sister but caught herself, remembering that Diane hadn't been consulting with anyone like Eddie, and wouldn't find this so suspicious.

"Yeah, that is interesting," Lily said simply.

There was a childish howl from upstairs, loud enough to reverberate all the way to the den.

"Too bad," Diane said. "I thought he was actually asleep." She set down her tea and stood up.

"I'll come with you," Lily said.

She padded down a long, empty hallway behind Diane, back to the front door and up the twisting staircase. They passed the closed door of Jude's study and continued to Davey's bedroom, where the howling was growing louder and louder. Inside, Davey was sitting upright in bed, his brown curls sticking to his forehead and his comforter coiled around his feet.

"Come here, baby," Diane said. She went to the bed and picked up her son, cradling him against his shoulder, where he instantly began to quiet down.

"Isn't Jude right down the hall?" Lily asked.

"He's not very good at things like this," Diane said.

Lily gazed around the bedroom, surprised to find it messier than she was accustomed to. A box of stuffed animals was toppled on its side, its contents strewn over the floor, and the remains of a block tower sprawled at the foot of the bed.

Davey offered Lily a tiny smile before his eyes fluttered shut and he fell asleep again. Diane yawned, pushing a greasy strand of hair behind her ear and nudging a stuffed dog with her foot. She really had aged substantially in just a few years, Lily thought.

A phone rang down the hall and Lily could make out the muffled sound of Jude's voice. At first it was quiet, but then it grew louder, frantic. Something fell over with a loud crash. Davey's eyelids opened again and Diane cradled him close to her chest, murmuring to him to go back to sleep. A door slammed and Jude rushed past Davey's bedroom.

"Jude?" Diane called, depositing Davey on his bed and running to the door. She went out into the hall, and Lily stood quietly, unsure of what to do.

"I'm going out and I'll be back in a few hours," Jude said hurriedly in the hallway.

"Is everything okay?"

"Okay. Yes. Everything's okay. Emergency meeting at Congress. Don't worry." His voice was wavering.

"Jude—"

"I have to go. I have to go now." Footsteps echoed down the stairs.

Diane entered the bedroom again, moving stiffly and silently. She sat down next to Davey and gently set him back against his pillows. Even after the toddler was clearly asleep, Diane didn't move for a long time. Lily stood by the window and watched Jude's car racing away down the street. The Congressional buildings were to the south, but Jude was heading west.

* * *

“Lily, would you please pass the pork roast?”

Lily took hold of the platter and passed it to Mrs. Michels, who beamed at her with too-white teeth. “Thank you, dear.”

“You’re welcome.” Lily’s eyes roved around the dining room table, which had been too large for a party of seven when her family had visited and was far too large for a party of just four. Governor Michels sat to her right at the head of the table, Garcia to her left, and Mrs. Michels was across from her. She was able to reach across the short length of the table to pass a dish to her mother-in-law, but Garcia and his father were too distant in either direction. One of the kitchen employees was standing in the corner, waiting for Governor Michels to demand the potatoes or the salad from the table’s center.

It was a languid, snowy evening a few days after Lily’s visit with Diane, and all four diners were quietly keeping to their own corners of the table. Lily caught herself nearly dozing off as she observed the snow falling lethargically out the window.

“Not very hungry?”

Lily looked up to find Governor Michels fixating on her practically untouched plate, bald head gleaming under the chandeliers.

“Afraid not,” she said. “I’m just really tired today. It may be an early night.” She tried to sound casual although she knew Governor Michels had probably noted her minimalist eating habits. Nerves had always lessened her appetite, and here, in this monstrous, wintry house, her nerves had been perpetually heightened. Why exactly that was, she couldn’t say. Part of it was the knowledge that she might be overheard at any time. Part of it was Garcia’s distanced behavior. Part of it was her constant desire to be on the watch for Eddie, and then the necessity of saying and doing nothing if he happened to be around.

“Pity. It’s a great meal.” Governor Michels lifted his fork in her direction, nodding at his moist cut of pork.

Lily swallowed and forced a smile, picking up her fork again to cut back into her food.

When it was time for dessert, another kitchen worker stepped briskly into the room with a covered cake. Lily tried to keep her eyes on her plate but found herself glancing upward and then reddening almost instantly when she found Eddie hovering over her. He wasn’t looking at her, or even acknowledging her, just standing at her side as he lowered the cake to the table and removed the lid.

Lily hastily lowered her eyes again, trying to breathe quietly and slowly so that the heat she could feel in her face would drain away. But her eyes darted sideways again as Eddie left the room, and Governor Michels was watching her when she directed her gaze back to the table.

“I believe,” he said, “That Eddie grew up in your neighborhood. Although you might not have known him, since he’s several years older than you.”

The employee who had been standing in the corner was at Lily’s side now, cutting the cake and serving her a slice. She nodded her thanks, searching for a response to the Governor’s question that would be perfectly elusive and equally blasé. “I think my mother and his mother were acquaintances,” she told Governor Michels. “But I don’t remember him very well.”

“Yes,” Michels said, as though he had already anticipated her answer.

“Lily, really, you just look *exhausted*,” Mrs. Michels said. “Don’t feel obligated to hang around.”

Lily hesitated, not wanting to seem rude, but extremely grateful for her mother-in-law’s intervention. She glanced at Garcia, who was passively eating his cake and not paying attention.

“No, I insist. Stop by the kitchen and ask them to bring you tea upstairs! Watch a movie, get some sleep.” Mrs. Michels smiled benevolently.

Lily excused herself, nodding politely to Governor Michels. She retreated down the hallway and stopped in the kitchen to request a cup of tea, her heart already racing before she even opened the door. Faced with Eddie’s smiling face, she felt like a thirteen-year-old. “Um, tea? Please?” she stammered. “I’d love some tea.”

“Of course.” Eddie turned away to prepare it for her, and she stood rigidly in the doorway.

When he handed her the tea, she felt a piece of paper hidden between her palm and the saucer. “Thank you,” she said. Another kitchen worker entered and Eddie turned away.

Lily rushed up the stairs to the suite, arrived in the living room and deposited the tea on a side table. Standing near the fire so that she could get rid of the paper at a moment’s notice, she opened it slowly: *Stop by lunchtime on Friday if you can. I want to show you a project I’ve been working on.*

Tossing the paper into the fire, she realized she had hoped it would be more personal.

She settled in to drink her tea and watch a movie, but she drifted off within ten minutes and woke up much later to find the fire petering out and Garcia tapping her on the shoulder.

“It’s warmer in the bedroom,” he said.

“Yeah, I’ll move.” She rubbed her eyes and stood. “Thanks for waking me.”

“I wouldn’t want you to be cold,” he said.

Lily stumbled into the bathroom to brush her teeth. When she emerged Garcia wasn’t in the suite and she slipped into bed alone, trying to remember how many days it had been since they had even bothered going to bed at the same time.

* * *

“I guess I’m just not sure why we keep putting the minor patients in the closest rooms,” Lily said to the nurse. It was Wednesday morning and she was completing her weekly ER duty, which mostly consisted of paperwork and pestering the nurses. This one had straight black hair and an irritable expression. She stood in front of the ER check-in desk with her arms crossed, staring at Lily.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to put, say, someone with a broken nose in one of the further rooms? So that if someone comes in and has had a heart attack they can get into the closest one?” Lily asked timidly. “I don’t want to intrude. I was just wondering.”

“Yes,” the nurse said. “We do that when we can.” Her voice was obviously annoyed but she marched away without saying anything else.

Flustered, Lily decided not to give advice anymore when it wasn’t absolutely necessary. As the front desk operator she felt like she had a clear idea of what could be done to ease logistical difficulties, but every time she brought these things up the nurses seemed frustrated. Sometimes they only said “Yes, Mrs. Michels,” and stalked away. This constant reminder of her political stature brought the obvious facts to light: They couldn’t say no to her. They were too afraid. And they despised her for it.

She kept to herself and spoke to the nurses as little as possible for the rest of the morning. She had always thought that she didn’t want to stick with Clinical, that after she had a little more experience she would move on to something more important within the hospital, like the ER. But now that she was acquainted with the cold atmosphere and the fact that people tended to disdain her when she was placed in any position of power (on top of the one inherent in her marriage), she was beginning to think that she should stick with a more low-key career. She had wondered,

anyway, if she really had the stomach to work in the ER. She hadn't seen anyone come in with a truly gruesome injury yet. It was mostly children with straightforward broken bones and construction workers with minor glass cuts. She hoped it would stay that way.

At twelve the afternoon staffer arrived for front desk duty and relieved Lily with an uncomfortably formal hello. Lily rushed to the staff-only elevator to head back up to the Clinic, anxious to return to the more relaxed climate of the fifth floor.

When the doors slid shut she tapped her foot against the floor panel, wishing more fervently than she had wished yet that she could go back to her normal life. As the daughter of a Congressman, her family had always had high connections. And she had always known, whenever she went somewhere in her father's car, that she stood out. But she was never important enough that everyone knew her face, not until she was married to Garcia. She noticed more every day that people treated her differently. Even things that could have been benefits, like the fact that her supervisors were unusually casual about her schedule, bothered her.

At the third floor the elevator stopped abruptly. When the doors opened a regal-looking nurse was waiting. She stuck her hand in the elevator to hold the door but did not get on herself. Lily recognized her as the nurse who had yelled at her on her very first day when she had accidentally found her way onto the third floor.

"Thanks for stopping it," said a gruff voice from down the hall. Two towering hospital guards appeared with a young woman, each guard lightly holding one of her arms, and they got on. Lily stepped to the side to allow them room, and one of the guards nodded to her as he pressed the button for the tenth floor, the hospital's administrative offices. "Hello, Mrs. Michels," he said.

She smiled and said hello but was distracted by the woman standing meekly between the two huge men. She was very small, and her face was deathly pale. She looked sick. Lily noted that the woman, although probably in her mid-twenties, wore no wedding ring. Her bright blond hair and delicate features struck Lily as familiar. Lucy Salvester, Lily thought. It was Lucy Salvester. Lucy realized that Lily was watching her and turned away, a terrified expression crossing her face. When Lily got off the elevator she nodded goodbye to the guards. Lucy did not acknowledge her.

Back in the Clinic, Lily found Monica sitting at the nurse's station.

"Hello, Lily," Monica said pleasantly.

"Hey," Lily said. She turned towards the cubical she had been using but stopped short.

"Monica, sorry to bother you," she said lightly. "A patient in the ER asked me today about the Davis Center. I had no idea what to say. Do you know anything about it?"

Monica looked surprised but kept her voice smooth. "It's on the third floor."

"But what's its function?"

"It's part of the Pregnancy Ward," Monica replied. "If anyone asks you again, direct them to the administrative offices."

"Okay. Thank you." Lily turned away, hoping her inquiry had sounded innocent enough.

She excused herself for lunch soon after. She decided not to eat in the cafeteria; she wanted to get out briefly. At the corner deli a few blocks from the hospital she found an unoccupied table in the corner and sat with her sandwich, her cell phone lying placidly on the table next to her. She wanted to call Diane but she was afraid to do it. After the scene with Jude when Lily had visited the week before, she felt she didn't want to intrude. She didn't want to

make matters worse. But no, she told herself, this was important. She couldn't keep something like this a secret.

After finishing her lunch she stood on the corner near the hospital, not wanting to go back inside yet despite the cold. Finally she pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed Diane's number.

"Hello?" Diane answered.

"Diane," Lily began quietly. "I saw Lucy Salvester at the hospital today. I think she's pregnant."

"Hey." Lily was standing over Eddie at his usual corner table in the Barnacle, her stomach in knots. It was lunchtime on Friday and she had passed the entire morning working up the courage to come here again. Somehow her third visit felt more dangerous than either of her first two. Before, she had hardly known what she was doing. Now she understood completely.

"Glad to see you," Eddie said. He wore an unabashed smile as he looked up at her, and his blue eyes seemed more enormous than ever behind his thick glasses.

Lily began to sit down across from him, but he motioned for her to stay standing. "The thing I want to show you is in the back." He stood and moved to the bar, Lily following close behind him. She thought she could smell cologne.

The older woman from Lily's first visit was stationed by the coffee. "We're going to take a look in back," Eddie said, and the bartender reached under the counter without question and brought forward a tiny gold key. Eddie led Lily behind the bar to a practically invisible door in the corner. It opened onto a narrow hallway with a lonely, flickering bulb as its only light source.

When Lily had stepped into the hallway, Eddie closed the door quickly behind them so that the fumes and quiet jazz of the main room disappeared.

“They let you come back here?” Lily whispered.

“They trust me,” Eddie said. “And my apartment is no place for anything illegal. So they let me keep things back here occasionally, when it’s important.”

“So this is something important?”

“It’s important to me,” he said.

Lily followed him down the hall, eyeing the rusty doors that popped up occasionally on either side. They stopped at a door numbered “9” and Eddie produced the key, jangling it in the lock until the door swung open.

“Okay,” he said. “Here goes.” He flipped a switch on the wall and Lily blinked at hundreds of tiny bulbs floating angelically in the creases between walls and floor and walls and ceiling. The light gleamed off of an enormous mirage of photographs plastered to the far wall. Lily moved forward to look more closely. There were too many pictures to count, and they overlapped and collided in a whirlwind of colors and shapes. The most normal-looking photos were of faces—women, men, babies, and an ancient man in a floppy farmer’s hat, grinning toothlessly at the camera. But there were also images of overflowing fruit stands on grimy streets, immeasurably tall buildings...a crowded park in the center of a flashing skyline...and in the middle of the wall, a photo larger than all the rest of a man standing at the railing of a boat, smiling widely and pointing behind him, to where the water met the dense swarm of buildings. The man’s face was familiar, although Lily felt sure she had never met him. Dazed, she leaned in closer, examining the smaller photos crammed into extra spaces. There was a family huddled at a kitchen table in a tiny, dim apartment. There was a woman standing on a balcony several floors

above street level, clutching a scarf around her shoulders, skirts spinning in the wind. There were iron staircases on the sides of buildings, extending so far skyward that they looked endless. One photograph depicted a building's gorgeous interior, bedecked with rows of ivory pillars and majestic stained glass windows. There were benches filled with people in this building, all facing three figures who stood on a platform up front; a robed man in the middle, a woman in a long white gown, and a man in a tuxedo.

Lily felt her head spinning and backed away. She sank into a wooden chair near the door and gazed up at Eddie. "What is it?"

His smile was bewitching. "It's New York City."

Lily had already guessed the answer. "How did you get all of those?"

"My father," Eddie said. "Victor Haleski. His real name was Chris Enders."

Lily sat spellbound by the images in front of her, trying to grasp the scope of what she was seeing. "Your father went to New York City?"

Eddie sat down on the floor beside her. "I didn't tell you the whole truth before. I told you that my dad tried to get past the wall, but I didn't tell you that he made it. I don't know how he did it, but he went to New York City. And he came back."

"He came back?" Lily asked, shocked.

"He came back and gave me these," Eddie said, pointing to the photos. "I was a little boy. He told me to hide them somewhere safe, and I did. That same night the men from the Hill came to get him. He brought back other things, too. Valuable things. Other than these pictures, they got all of it."

"Did you see him again?" Lily asked quietly.

"No, I didn't."

They sat in silence, studying the collage spread in front of them. Lily listened closely to Eddie's breathing, thankful for its steadiness. She wondered how long he had been working on this, and she felt overwhelmed by the weight of it. She was vaguely aware that they were only in a ruddy New Barton basement, but for the first time in her life she felt very far away.

"Lily?"

"Yes?"

"If you had the chance to go to New York, would you?"

"Of course," she said. "I would love to see New York."

"No, listen. If you had the chance to go to New York, a real chance, would you go, even if you didn't think you could come back?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"I just want to know."

"Okay." She breathed deeply, letting the question circulate in her mind. She thought of her mother and her father, and Diane and Davey. She thought of what it would be like to never see them again. But then she thought of Garcia and her marriage that was hardly a marriage, and she thought of Garcia's father, moving like a specter between his study and the icy sitting room in the icy Governor's Mansion. And although she couldn't think why, she thought of the look on Lucy Salvester's face in the hospital elevator. "Yes," she said. "I would go."

Eddie nodded seriously.

"Would you go?" she asked.

"I would," he said.

Lily felt very far away. But when she closed her eyes to convince herself that she was in New York, or anywhere else, she couldn't picture anywhere else. She couldn't picture anything

but New Barton. Eddie's face was pressing into hers. *Be somewhere else*, she begged herself, wishing she didn't have to remember the danger she was in, being here, doing this. But suddenly a rush hit her stomach and she didn't care, didn't care at all. He was kissing her harder, and then she was rising out of the chair and he was rising with her, pressing her into the wall, pressing his body against hers. And she no longer cared about implications or consequences—she only cared that right now she felt a scorching excitement she had never felt before, one that had to do with things she barely understood. Even when Eddie reached behind her to turn the lock on the door and slid his hands up her waist to pull her shirt over her head, she did not hesitate.

When Lily arrived back at the Mansion at the end of the day and entered the suite she shared with Garcia, she found him seated in his usual position, at the table next to the balcony, reading a sheaf of papers.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hey. Did you have a good day?” she asked too enthusiastically.

“I had a nice enough day, yeah. I had a meeting with the Secretary of Security about the City Vault. I'm reading some of his files.” He stopped, searching Lily's face. “What about you? How was your day?”

“Boring, but fine,” she said. “I'm going to take a shower.”

“Okay. Dinner will be ready soon.”

“Okay.”

“Hey.” He paused. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, fine, thanks. I'll be out soon.” Lily rushed into the bathroom, suddenly conscious that her hair was in clumps and her cheeks were flushed. She felt sure that Garcia was watching

as she closed the door. She thought she must look different, and she turned to the mirror. But no, she only looked like herself. And she felt herself sink into disappointment at the realization. She felt as though everything had changed for her today, but here she was in the same bathroom, in the Governor's Mansion with Garcia, and nothing had really changed at all.

On Monday around lunchtime Lily was seated at the nurse's station, answering phones and filling out paperwork while Monica was busy in the lab. She looked up briskly when the Clinic's front door swung open. Diane was there, looking as collected as ever. She wore a flashy blue coat and her hair was flowing down her back, longer than Lily could ever remember seeing it before. Diane waved to her sister with newly manicured nails. "Hey. Sorry to drop in unannounced. I wondered if we could have lunch."

"Um, sure," Lily said, confused. "What brings you by?"

"We'll talk outside. Will you be available soon?"

"Sure. Let me finish these up," Lily said, gesturing to her papers. "I'll be ready in just a minute."

"No rush," Diane said. "I'll be here." She took a seat in the waiting area and flipped through a magazine.

Lily put the papers in order and ran to the lab to tell Monica she was going for lunch. Then she changed quickly out of her scrubs and found Diane at the door. "Ready," she said.

They found a table at a bistro near the hospital. Lily took care to head straight for a deserted corner where she felt sure they wouldn't be overheard.

"Hello, ladies. A pleasure, Mrs. Michels. Can I get you anything to drink?" the waitress asked.

“Water with lemon, please,” Diane answered.

“Just water, thanks,” Lily said. She waited impatiently for the waitress to retreat before she turned to address Diane. “What’s going on?”

“Well, I have heard some news about Lucy Salvester,” Diane said offhandedly, scanning the menu. “She was, in fact, pregnant. But she’s not anymore.”

“What?” Lily tried to keep her voice quiet, and it came out a hiss.

“Which sounds better to you, a tuna salad sandwich or chicken parmesan?” Diane asked.

“Please,” Lily said. “Stop it. What is happening?”

Diane set the menu down and crossed her hands. “I tracked Lucy down myself. She found out she was pregnant, so she went to the hospital to see a doctor. When the doctors realized she was unmarried, they forced her to terminate the pregnancy. That’s all.”

“They forced her to terminate the pregnancy?”

“Apparently,” Diane said, “That’s what this ‘Davis Center’ does. I don’t think Lucy was supposed to tell me this. She seemed terrified explaining it to me. Then again, she seemed terrified of me to begin with.”

Lily could only imagine. When Diane got dressed up and put on her best looks and her best manners, she was either delightful or frighteningly cold. Right now she was frighteningly cold. “How did Lucy seem?” Lily asked.

“Horrible. But what do I care?” Diane said. “That baby should have been mine. It would have been, if my maternity draw had turned out differently.”

Lily started to answer, but the waitress was approaching with their drinks. Diane ordered the chicken parmesan, and Lily realized she had not looked at the menu. “Give me another minute,” she told the waitress, who left them alone again.

“So,” Lily said, “It was Jude’s?”

“Of course it was Jude’s. That’s why he ran off like that, when you were visiting. She called to tell him she was pregnant.” Diane was watching Lily steadily, unblinkingly.

“What are you going to do?” Lily asked.

“I’m going to confront him.” Diane took the napkin off the table and laid it neatly across her lap, her hands moving mechanically.

“But what will you say?”

“Whatever I have to,” Diane said. Her voice was flat.

Lily ordered food but barely ate any of it, watching as her sister ate and sipped at her lemon water. “Nice place,” Diane commented when they got up to leave. Lily couldn’t tell if she meant it.

They walked back in the direction of the hospital together, Diane’s heels tapping at the pavement, and Lily feeling comparatively young and uncouth in her jeans and sneakers. When they reached the front steps of the hospital Diane turned to Lily and looked her over for a minute. “You look well,” she said.

“I’m pretty well,” Lily said.

Diane nodded. Her hair was fluttering just so against her neck, and her eyes were flashing in the winter light. She was tall and lovely and Lily couldn’t remember why she had ever believed that Diane was losing her charm. If anything, Diane was more beautiful than she had ever been, more beautiful even than on the day of her Gala. Lily felt the old jealousy rising up again, but it was overwhelmed by sympathy. She reached forward to embrace her sister. To her surprise, Diane returned the gesture.

“I love you,” Diane said.

Lily tensed up for a moment, taken aback by her sister's first display of sentiment since she had marched through the Clinic door. But then she felt Diane clutching her and was afraid that she would cry. "I love you, too," she said.

Eight

When Lily woke up to prepare for work on Wednesday morning, Garcia woke up as well. She was surprised when she emerged from the bathroom and found him sitting upright in bed, gazing at her thoughtfully.

“Good morning,” she said. “You can go back to sleep.”

He blinked at her. “How about we meet up for lunch today? Or maybe dinner, after you get off work?”

“Okay,” she said. “Dinner’s good.” She was surprised, although she tried not to show it. They had not spent time together one on one, in public, since their date at The Carolina. And over the past week or two they had established a firm pattern of going about their lives, chatting pleasantly when they intersected, and not interacting much besides that. She had appreciated the distance because ever since Friday night, when she had returned to the Mansion after her afternoon with Eddie, she had felt a need to avoid Garcia. That night she had wondered if he noticed that something was different, but nothing had changed in his behavior towards her, and she was eager to uphold the simplicity of their unspoken arrangement, the arrangement of not having a relationship. It made it easier, when she remembered Eddie, to be able to forget about Garcia.

Still, she couldn’t very well say no to a date with her husband. “Why tonight in particular?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

Garcia shrugged, but he seemed distracted, and Lily thought he was actually contemplating something behind his nonchalant demeanor. “I wanted to talk to you,” he said.

“Okay,” Lily said. “I’ll be home at five-thirty. So dinner then?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” he said.

It seemed clear to Lily that something in particular was bothering Garcia, but he didn't seem at all upset with her, so she decided not to worry about it until dinnertime.

"Have a nice day at work," he said as she left the suite.

"See you tonight," she replied.

At ten-thirty that morning Lily was stationed at the ER check-in desk, trying her best to go unnoticed by the nurses and flipping idly through a stack of papers. She reflected briefly on her earlier conversation with Garcia, but she still didn't know what to think of it. He was indecipherable. She turned her thoughts to Eddie, whom she hadn't seen since Friday. She had watched for him at every meal at the Mansion, but he had been consistently absent. Usually she could count on seeing him on Mondays when she went down to the kitchen for breakfast, but this week he hadn't been there. She wondered if his schedule had changed. Or if he was actually in the Mansion but was keeping out of sight—maybe he felt uncomfortable seeing her in front of Garcia and Governor Michels. Lily knew she had not done a brilliant job of hiding her attentions the day Eddie appeared at dinner, and maybe he didn't want to risk another display. Especially after Friday.

She wanted to see him again, and soon. But if he was never at meals, especially Monday breakfast, she had no idea how to contact him. Unless she went to the Barnacle on a whim and tried to find him there. She twisted a strand of her hair into a knot around her finger.

Suddenly there was a racket near the outer doors and several nurses rushed past Lily's desk in a panic. "Code Red Emergency," sounded over the ER loudspeaker. "Code Red."

Lily swiveled around in her seat, trying to get a look at the door. From somewhere behind her she heard a quiet voice—"Where's Lily Michels? Keep her out—"

Suddenly the nurse with the straight black hair was descending upon her. “Let’s go over here,” she said hurriedly. Tugging Lily by the arm, she rushed around the corner and down the hall towards the nurses’ lounge.

A scream echoed from the ER and Lily stopped cold. “Who—”

“Follow me,” the nurse said. Lily turned away and ran back towards the ER. “Mrs. Michels! *Follow me!*” the nurse yelled, but Lily was faster and she streaked past the front desk to where she could hear the screams of a young woman. But the shrieks stopped all at once, just as Lily skidded to a halt in front of Room 15. “What’s going on?” she asked breathlessly.

Silence. There was a beeping machine, and five or six nurses stood crowded around a blood-soaked cot. They all turned to look at her, and between one nurse’s shoulder and another’s arm, thrust in her way to block her view, Lily could see Diane’s face, eyes closed, her head pinned back against a hospital pillow.

Lily shoved the nurse who was blocking her as hard as she could until she was standing next to the cot. She was afraid to look down, but she did it anyway. The cot, the blankets, Diane’s arms and torso, they were drowned in blood. Useless bandages dangled from her wrists.

“Do something!” Lily hollered. “Do something!”

The nurses didn’t move.

“Help her!”

Finally the youngest nurse, only a year or two older than Lily, stepped forward. The girl had red hair and freckles, and she folded her arms around Lily in a careful hug. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Really, Lily, I’m so, so sorry.”

* * *

The next day forty or fifty people gathered in the Silver Woods cemetery, shivering against the cold and donned head to toe in black outerwear, as Diane was lowered into a freshly dug grave.

Lily had spent the previous night with her parents. She told them everything, everything she knew, and all three of them had fallen asleep on the living room sofa, Lily's bag with her pajamas and toothbrush lying untouched in a corner. Garcia had compiled the overnight bag for her. He had hardly known what to say—and she didn't care because she didn't want to talk to him about any of it—and so instead of saying anything he had rushed around the suite, gathering her things for her while she sat motionless on the sofa.

Now Lily stood with her father and mother to one side and Garcia on the other, staring at her hands because she didn't want to look at the casket. The official cause of death, the one that had been announced in the City Gazette, was some ludicrous account of an 'accident' in which Diane had tripped down her home's enormous stairs and suffered brain trauma. The nurses claimed to have discovered that Diane had suffered from a very rare genetic disorder that made her susceptible to severe internal bleeding. Lily had seen their faulty documentation, but she didn't bother to argue because she knew that they were operating under strict orders and nothing would change their story. Besides, she knew the truth.

And so did her parents. Lily had never seen her father look crumpled in the way he did at Diane's funeral. His suit was as crisp as ever, and his hair was neatly sleeked back, but he barely looked up once during the entire ceremony. And when Lily caught a glimpse of his face, she could see the redness and wrinkles overwhelming his usually clear eyes. Lily's mother quieted herself by pressing a handkerchief against her mouth, but her entire body was shaking.

On the other side of Sophia and James were Jude and Davey. Lily couldn't even look at Jude, and Davey was hidden behind his father's legs. Could such a young kid even understand this? Lily wondered.

Governor Michels stepped forward to say a few words before the casket was covered. The funeral director had requested that James speak, but James had said no. As the Governor cleared his throat, Garcia gave Lily's hand a squeeze. Her fingers were so numb that she barely felt it.

"Ladies and gentleman," Governor Michels began, bald head gleaming in the distant winter sun, "I am not accustomed to speaking at occasions as sad as this. I am accustomed to Galas, and career draws, and the many joyful occasions that have allowed our society to thrive over the years. It can be difficult to remember that even in a place as happy as New Barton, we can't avoid grief forever. There is never an explanation, never a good enough reason, why something like this must happen. In this case, nothing more than a seemingly insignificant wrong step, a silly accident, can lead to devastation. I'm sorry to have to be here today, as are we all. I only hope that from this experience we can feel a little more like a family, a little more like a community, as we grieve together for Diane Jennings."

There were whispered words of agreement as Governor Michels bowed and returned to his place in the crowd. James had finally lifted his eyes to watch Governor Michels, and Lily saw something hard in his gaze, something unforgiving.

Lily's mother and father hosted a simple reception at 1331 Wylin after the burial. Lily sat stiffly between the two of them at the kitchen table, where friends and acquaintances and government officials who had never even met Diane paraded by, sipping coffee and murmuring "we're so sorry" in turn. Jude and Davey were also seated at the table. Davey was crying softly

into his father's chest, and Lily thought that Jude looked unnatural holding his son like that. It had always been Diane's job. And Davey had been Diane's entire life. How could she leave him like this? Lily asked herself.

Jude looked absolutely stricken, and Lily realized that of course he hadn't wanted this either. She remembered calling Diane the day she had seen Lucy at the hospital, and she felt a flash of self-loathing. If she hadn't called, if Diane had never found out, this might not have happened. But then, Jude was the one who had started everything. If he had never been with Lucy, then maybe Diane would have been happier to begin with, and Lily would never have seen Lucy with the guards in the elevator and she never would have called, and Diane would never have sat across from her in that bistro, looking as cold as stone. Lily had to avert her eyes down to her lap because Jude was looking back at her and she couldn't acknowledge him.

Later, when most of the guests had departed, Jude approached Lily to tell her goodbye. They shook hands and they exchanged almost no words, and Lily leaned down to lift Davey to her chest and press her eyes against his hair. Then Davey and Jude retreated out the front door, and Lily watched them go, thinking that in Jude's face there had been real sadness, and real regret. And then a horrible idea occurred to her: What Jude had done to Diane, Lily was doing to Garcia. They were one in the same. Whatever Jude had said to Diane, however he had tried to justify what he had done with Lucy, suddenly it was difficult for Lily to see him as a villain because then she would have to be one, too.

She was in the living room cleaning up a vegetable platter when she felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to find Maggie Collins standing behind her. Maggie's typically bold presence was quieted by a long, modest black dress, and her face was heavy. "Lily," she said. "I feel terrible. Are you okay?"

Lily thought she might collapse and allowed herself to sink ungracefully onto a sofa before she fell into Maggie. Her friend took a seat next to her. “Thanks for coming,” Lily said.

“Did you think I wouldn’t?” Maggie asked. “I know we haven’t talked since the Gala, and I’m sorry for not keeping in touch...but none of that really matters in this situation, does it?”

Lily shook her head and felt her shoulders beginning to shake. She clenched her fists and firmed her mouth to ward off a breakdown. When she had calmed herself down slightly she told Maggie, “I’m sorry, too, for not being in touch. But I’m really, really glad you’re here.”

There were footsteps in the hall and Garcia appeared in the doorway. “Lily?”

“Hang on,” Lily said to Maggie, standing up and walking over to Garcia.

“My Mom and Dad and I, we’re going home for the night,” he said. “Do you want to stay here again?”

Lily nodded.

“Of course. Stay as long as you need to,” Garcia said quietly. Then he pulled Lily into a tight hug. She acquiesced and hugged back. Any trace of Garcia’s strangely contemplative mood—had that really only been the previous morning?—was gone. He looked at her sadly.

Governor and Mrs. Michels materialized next to Garcia. “Lily, honey, we’re so sorry. Anything you need, anything at all, you just let us know.” Mrs. Michels wiped a gloved hand across her eyes and hugged her daughter-in-law. Governor Michels stepped forward and Lily felt herself cringe at the idea of embracing him. But instead he only patted her on the shoulder and blinked at her with his shrewd black eyes. At this small distance, Lily realized just how matched they were in size; Governor Michels was no more than an inch taller than her. They faced each other directly. “We’ll see you soon,” was all he said.

Lily nodded and turned back to Maggie as her husband's family left the house. Maggie was examining the mantle, which Sophia had lined with photos of Diane. It had been difficult to decide which pictures deserved a place there; Lily and her mother had flipped through the photo albums that morning, and at every turn of the page they were met with another radiant photograph of Lily's older sister. "So pretty," their mother had whispered.

Maggie turned back to Lily. "How *is* Garcia?" she asked seriously.

"Garcia is fine," Lily said.

Maggie stayed behind even after her parents left the Pierce house, sitting with Lily in the living room, bringing her water and tissues, listening quietly.

"It wasn't really an accident, you know," Lily said. She didn't say anything else but she thought Maggie knew what she meant.

Much later in the evening, when Lily could smell her father's dreary cigarette smoke drifting in from the kitchen and she could hear her mother washing dishes and crying, Maggie was still there. Lily said, "You seemed so angry with me at our Gala."

"I wasn't angry with *you*," Maggie said. "I've been wanting to tell you that."

Lily nodded. "I understand. But you wouldn't talk to me."

"I didn't know what to say."

"What do you mean?"

"This doesn't seem like the right time to talk about this," Maggie sighed.

"I guess, but there's never really a right time to talk about things."

Maggie watched Lily steadily. "You're right. There isn't. Do you really want to know why I was so upset?"

"Of course," Lily said.

“Okay. I was upset because when I went up there to make my selection, when I reached into the box, there was only one name left.” Maggie waited for Lily to respond, but when there was no answer she went on. “You should have seen the terrible look that Governor Michels gave me on that stage, when he was pronouncing Chester and I as husband and wife. He knew that I knew.”

Lily looked over at Diane’s photo above the mantle, Diane’s sparkling eyes and perfect smile beaming down at her. “Are you sure?” she asked Maggie.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Maggie said.

Lily stayed with her parents for three more days. She spent most of that time lying in bed with her childhood stuffed animals circling her protectively, or sitting in Diane’s old bedroom, gazing around at the photos and the party dresses and the discarded shoes, wondering why Diane had tolerated the bright pink wallpaper beyond her preteen years. Lily’s mother and father wouldn’t go near the room, but Lily found a strange solace there. In that room, Diane still existed. Everywhere else, she was gone.

When she wasn’t in her room or Diane’s, Lily was at the kitchen table with her parents, talking a little but mostly not. Mostly they sat together silently. James was frozen except for his right hand, which kept a cigarette constantly moving to and from his mouth like a machine. His eyes were glazed and unmoving. Sophia would cry for a while, then realize that no one had eaten all day and get up to prepare a plate of apple slices that would linger unmolested as the table’s centerpiece for the rest of the evening, growing brown as the light dimmed.

On the fourth day Lily got a call from Garcia, checking in on her and asking if she wanted a lift back to the Mansion. “You can go back to your parents’ house anytime you like,” he added quickly. “Of course.”

She accepted the offer unemotionally, thinking that she would have to confront the Michels family again sooner or later, and that if she went back now she could probably return to 1331 Wylin within a few days. The limo appeared around sunset, and Garcia emerged himself to fetch Lily at the door. When she appeared he kissed her cheek and said “I hope you’re okay.” He waited patiently as Lily said goodbye to her parents.

Lily, Sophia, and James examined each other for a minute, and Lily found herself wondering what they really thought about all this. When Lily had revealed the truth about Diane to her mother, Sophia had sobbed and sobbed and shaken her head violently. She hadn’t said another word about it since. Her grief seemed unfocused, vague, whereas James was as concentrated as a clock. What he was concentrating on, Lily couldn’t say.

“We’ll see you again soon,” Lily’s mother said.

“Take care of yourself,” James said. Then he hugged her and said again, “Truly, Lily, take care of yourself.”

What had Garcia been doing these past several days? Lily wondered to herself as they rode back to the Mansion. Garcia kept glancing over at her anxiously but she kept her eyes turned out the window. More urgently, she wondered, What has Eddie been doing? Where is he?

Back at the Mansion, back in the towering entryway, something descended on Lily that she had tried to ignore while she had been at home. It was what Maggie had revealed to her.

There was an elegant dinner that night in the main dining room for just the four of them—Lily, Garcia, Mrs. Michels, and Governor Michels. Governor Michels did not speak

much and did not try to ask Lily any questions, although she could feel his cool eyes on her from his seat at the head of the table. She surprised everyone, herself included, by eating all of her salad and some of her chicken. She stuck around only long enough to decide that Eddie was certainly nowhere in the vicinity—or if he was, he had no intention of making an appearance—and then she excused herself early. Mrs. Michels gave her a worried look but no one stopped her when she got up and went upstairs.

She sprawled limply on the couch, she had no idea for how long, until Garcia came back upstairs and sat down next to her. “Do you want to watch a movie? Have a glass of water? A bath? Anything?” he asked.

“No thank you,” she answered.

He sat uncomfortably while she twisted a few hairs around her finger, breaking them off mercilessly when they were wound too tight. Then she turned to him and asked, “What am I doing here?”

He raised his eyebrows in distress. “What do you mean, Lily?”

He seemed so young and innocent in that moment, dark hair and dark eyes gone soft under the quiet lights, skin looking as smooth as a baby’s. He looked unusually thin. Yes, Garcia Michels was definitely attractive, Lily thought, and he had even been worried about her. And he was her husband. But if she hadn’t even won him in the usual way, random and faultless like all the other Gala matches, then it didn’t matter. “You know what I mean,” she said sadly. “Does it have something to do with my dad?”

When she realized that Garcia was close to tears, she felt pity for a moment, and almost wished she hadn’t said a word. But still, in the end, he was a part of it all. Whatever his father

had been scheming, if Garcia had known, then he had been a part of it. Affected and gentle as he seemed at this moment, it didn't change a thing.

He muttered, "I had finally made up my mind to talk to you. Just the other day. But—I'm sorry, Lily. You must hate me."

"I don't hate you," she said truthfully. But she also silently admitted to herself that she could never love him.

After a minute he stood up and turned away towards the bedroom. He looked to see if she had moved to follow him, and realizing that she had not, he went in alone.

After a few quiet, uneventful days at the Mansion, Lily said she wanted to visit home again. She found the unopened bag from before, the one with the pajamas and toothbrush, and located Garcia in the downstairs living room.

"I need to go see my mom and dad for the night," she told him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll let the driver know."

"I would like to walk," she said.

"What? You're crazy, it's freezing out there," he said.

"I want to walk. Walking helps," she said coldly.

Eventually he kissed her cheek and saw her to the door. She peered at Governor Michels' study as they passed, hoping he wouldn't find out that she had walked.

Safely outside, Lily set off in the direction of 1331 Wylin. It was only about a mile away. When she was halfway there she turned abruptly north, towards Henrietta and Fjord. It was the middle of the day, lunchtime, and the streets in this area, so close to downtown, were clogged

with buses and people out on their break. When she reached the Barnacle she took a deep breath and headed in, praying that Eddie would be there.

“Hello there,” the old man at the desk said in surprise when he saw her. He wore the same patched jeans and spectacles as always and he offered her a sad smile. He clearly knew who she was and he had clearly heard about Diane.

“Hi,” Lily said. “Chris Enders?”

The man shook his head. “I’m sorry. He left just about an hour ago. You’re Lily?”

“Yes,” she said.

“He said you might stop by.” The man reached deep into a pocket and tugged out a ragged piece of paper. “He left you a note.”

Lily breathed out happily and took the paper, thanking the man profusely and turning to go. *Lily, the note said, I hoped you would come. I know about all of it and I am so sorry. Please come to see me here. Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday, anywhere around lunchtime on any of those days. I’ll be here.*

She stowed the paper in her coat pocket, making a mental note to burn it in the fire when she got home, and allowed herself to temporarily sink into the comfort of knowing that Eddie hadn’t been ignoring her and that he was thinking about her. And tomorrow was Wednesday—she would return to the Barnacle, and he would be there. But her comfort disappeared, as she had known it would, when she reached the door of her childhood home and was faced once again with her mother’s broken face and James’ glassy eyes.

She slept in Diane’s room that night. In the morning she woke up unusually early, confused at first to find herself in her sister’s old bed, and she descended to the kitchen. James

was already at the breakfast table with a cup of coffee, a cigarette, and a neatly folded newspaper.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning.” Lily sat down across from him. They were quiet for a minute and then she added, “You shouldn’t smoke so much. It’s bad for you.”

James sighed. “Since you are a nurse, I suppose I should take your advice.” But he seemed to forget his words as soon as they were spoken, and he went on smoking.

“I don’t even know if I am a nurse anymore,” Lily said. “I’ve skipped out on work all week. And I don’t know if I want to go back there.”

James nodded. “There are more important things.”

The morning passed lethargically, and by eleven Lily was anxious to get to the Barnacle. She told her parents that she was going to Maggie’s house. They didn’t ask questions, although Lily saw James glancing dubiously at her as she slipped out the door.

Once there, she approached the elderly shopkeeper with a hurried hello and jogged down the back stairway when he unlocked the doors for her. It was still early in the day and the Barnacle was nearly empty; there was only the gray-haired bartender, a middle-aged man buried in his newspaper, and Eddie in his corner. He stood up when he saw her, and she tripped clumsily down the last few stairs.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.” Eddie pulled her into a hug and she felt herself breaking down instantly. She had tried so hard not to cry in front of Garcia, not to cry in front of Governor Michels—even her mother and father, because they were miserable enough on their own. But Eddie was so clearly expecting her to be upset that she gave in to it completely and started to sob into his shoulder.

After a minute she backed away and rubbed her face dry. The bartender and the other patron were trying not to stare. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.” She went to Eddie’s table and he followed.

“I haven’t seen you at the Mansion,” she said as he sat down opposite her.

“I don’t work there anymore,” he said.

“What? Why?”

He shrugged. “I was relocated. Now I work at the New Barton History Museum. They’re training me to give their bullshit tours. They tried to peg it as a promotion.”

“Does it worry you that they removed you from the Mansion? I mean…” Lily hesitated. “Do you think Governor Michels noticed something?”

“I have no idea. It’s possible. But what can we do?”

“If he noticed something, maybe it’s not safe for me to be here.”

“Lily, it was never safe for you to be here. And you’ve always known that.”

“Yes. I know.” Lily nodded.

Eddie’s eyes softened. “I’m sorry about your sister. I can’t even think what to say.” He waited while Lily struggled not to cry. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Lily said quickly. “I just want to escape for a little while.”

“Okay.” Eddie smiled. “That’s fine, too.”

Back at the Mansion on Thursday, Lily wandered aimlessly from room to room, thinking that the place was as still and silent as a mausoleum. Occasionally the feet of porters or cooks would scurry to and from the kitchen or back rooms like mice. Mrs. Michels was with her sister on the city's north end. She had left Lily a note saying ‘I’m thinking of you, my dear.’ The

absence of her ramblings and nervous laughter made the Mansion feel emptier. The Governor was keeping more and more to his study, and Lily only saw him at meals. At dinner on Thursday he told her, "It's a long walk to your parents' house from here. I was afraid you would get lost." Lily cringed, but he said it without the slightest hint of real concern and went back to his meal.

Mostly, Lily spent those few days at the Mansion unhappily anticipating her run-ins with Garcia. She knew that the coldness between them was largely her fault. He sat at the window-side table in their suite or in the downstairs living room, reading documents and writing letters, or he was inexplicably gone (she didn't care where he went and he never told her). A few times he seemed to want to talk with her. Once was when she wandered into the upstairs living room, outside of their suite, thinking it would be abandoned as it usually was. But Garcia was there with a sheaf of papers on his lap and a tired grimace on his face. She was surprised when he looked up to her and she thought she could detect a flash of anger in his eyes. He opened his mouth, closed it again, said hello, and went back to his work. She moved downstairs, wondering.

By Sunday morning the silence and tedium were too much. Lily felt that even her eyes were numb; she had spent too many hours staring out icy windows at the lake, grey under the winter sky, or the gardens, brown and dirty with old snow. She thought about trying to go back to the hospital but decided instead to go home again. This time she took pains to make her departure as inconspicuous as possible. She asked Garcia's permission, and he said "that's fine" without emotion. But in light of the Governor's comment at dinner, Lily specifically asked for the driver and told Garcia to call her at home at any time.

James looked at her strangely when he opened the door for her back home. "Hello," he said.

"Hi, Dad." She gave him a hug.

“Back again so soon?”

“Yes. I can’t take it over there.”

James nodded. Lily dropped her bag in the hall, kicked off her shoes, and went to the kitchen. Sophia was at the table with a cup of tea. She stood to give her daughter a hug. “Are things pleasant at the Governor’s house?” she asked.

Lily stared at her mother’s withered face, trying to decide whether to lie. But she had had enough of lying and she said, “I wish I could move out.”

Sophia sank into her chair and rubbed a palm against her forehead. “Things had been going so well, before all of this.”

“Really?” Lily asked hollowly.

“Lily,” James warned. As Sophia buried her face in her hands and began to cry, James motioned Lily towards the stairs.

Lily followed her father up to his study and pushed the heavy wooden door closed behind her. As James lit a cigarette—his fingers were trembling, she noticed—she looked around at his carefully stacked work binders, the archive of City Gazettes organized chronologically, the expensive cigars and the photograph of James and Cole Michels when they were only twelve or thirteen, Cole jamming a baseball mitt into James’ neck while James laughed hysterically. The study was dark; James rarely opened the blinds and always kept the burrow lit by a few small lamps instead.

“Lily,” he said, fingers clutching his cigarette, mouth set in an unyielding line.

From his tone she sensed that she should not respond.

“I want to say something I can’t say in front of your mother,” he said. “She can’t handle anything more right now. But I’m prepared to say it to you.”

Lily met his eyes and tried not to flinch. “Okay.”

“I feel you might be making some unwise choices,” he said. “I’ve tried to convince myself to ask you to stop. But I don’t think I can. I don’t know exactly what you’re up to, but I want you to know that the Governor is almost certainly keeping close tabs on you. Because of me, and now because of Diane.”

“Dad,” Lily said, “The marriage was fixed.”

“I know,” he murmured. “But don’t let on to the Governor that you know.”

Lily felt her cheeks paling. She wondered if Garcia had said anything.

“I’m sorry,” James said quietly. “It’s because of me. I’ve known him too long, I know too much, and then I voted against that ridiculous bill. It’s because of me.”

“Don’t be sorry. There’s nothing we can do now.”

James flicked his cigarette into an ashtray. “I want to ask you to keep yourself safe and silent, not to do anything that might require my action, but in asking you that, I realize now that I would be asking you to be unhappy. And I think I would rather see you with some glimmer of happiness in your life, then to see you living in a hole.”

“Dad,” Lily choked.

“Diane never had the opportunity to be happy,” he said quietly. “And if you do, I don’t know that I can ask you to give that up. But you do need to understand that the choices you make might have real repercussions. For all of us. My choices already have.”

“Yes,” Lily said. “I understand.”

James gazed at her steadily, eyes lined and exhausted, cheeks wane and white. “Good. That’s all I needed to know.”

* * *

Lily returned to the Barnacle that afternoon. Her father's words echoed back to her and she realized that continuing to visit this place, continuing to see Eddie, was almost certainly unwise, but somehow that didn't stop her feet from carrying her there. Eddie was waiting—he had said in the note that he would be there on Sunday—and Lily sat down across from him quietly. She was there for nearly an hour and they barely spoke, but Eddie held her hand across the table.

“How is the History Museum?” she asked after a while.

“It's strange,” he said. “I don't like it. I don't like that it's my job to propagate that kind of information. But I don't have much choice. I have a script.”

“A script?”

“For the tours,” he said.

“Oh.” Lily thought about herself as a ten-year-old, long before her Gala and years even before her career draw, going with her class on a field trip to the History Museum. They had gone on a tour. She remembered the cardboard cutouts of the revolutionary Francis Michels, the current Governor's grandfather, and his Cabinet when they signed off on the cessation. She remembered the photos of New Barton forty, thirty, twenty years ago, the skyscrapers growing by the decade, each photo with a glowing quote underneath: “Our city at its finest.” “Our city under Governor Cecil Michels.” The newest: “Our city under Governor Cole Michels.” She thought of the day she and Garcia had been at the History Museum together, laughing at the cartoon war images. When she thought about it now, she no longer found it funny.

Lily and Eddie drifted back into silence and Lily allowed the atmosphere to calm her. Eddie was gripping her hand intently. The gray-haired barwoman was perched on her stool, a silver streak of hair curled around her fingers. It was crowded that day; there must have been

twenty people in the basement, paired at the cracked tables and tapping their feet to a piano tune that rattled over the ancient speakers. There was a new painting on the wall above their table entitled “New York in the Spring.” It was an abstract piece with long, upward lines and colorful dots.

“You like it?” Eddie asked.

“Yes,” Lily said. “It’s nice.”

“It’s mine,” Eddie smiled. “From a friend.”

Lily was about to ask more when she realized that the basement had gone silent. Apart from the outdated piano music fluttering in the corners, all she could hear was a pair of feet stepping sharply against the floor. Lily turned to look.

Garcia Michels was standing in the middle of the room, staring at Lily, his fists clenched at his sides. She felt her hand burning in Eddie’s and she pulled it away. “Garcia—”

“I found this,” he said quietly. He held up a crumpled piece of paper and on it Lily distantly recognized Eddie’s handwriting. Lily turned pale, thinking of the coat she had discarded on the couch in their suite, Eddie’s note forgotten in its pocket. Garcia tossed the paper to the ground. “It said Sunday,” he said, “So I thought I might find you here.”

“How did you know this place?” she whispered.

“Let’s go home,” Garcia said.

Lily stood and looked around at the paralyzed faces staring up at her from every table. The barwoman scampered over to them, skirts flailing. “Please,” she gasped to Garcia. “Please don’t—”

“I recommend you close this place by tomorrow,” Garcia said simply. Then he turned back to the stairs. Lily swiveled to Eddie, who was sitting with his back stiff against the wall, eyes wide. His lips formed a single, short word, but Lily shook her head, not understanding.

Garcia did not look back at her, but Lily didn’t dare fall behind. She followed him closely, up the rickety stairs, through the dusty bookroom where she had kissed Eddie, past the mirrors and guitars and splintering desks in the shop—the man who usually sat up front wasn’t there. Garcia swung the door open and marched out onto the street, making his brisk way down the block to where the Michels limousine was waiting for them, sleek and domineering at the corner.

Normally Garcia sat next to Lily in the back seat of the car. Today he took the front, and Lily slipped into the back, cold and terrified.

They returned directly to the Mansion. Garcia didn’t say another word during the drive, but when they had passed through the entranceway and up the marble stairs and into the suite (Lily still following Garcia like a child), he turned to her, eyes cold, and motioned her into the bedroom.

Lily perched on the bed, her entire body shaking, as all the things he could do to her raced through her mind. No one would reprimand him, not now. Garcia closed the door firmly. Then he took a seat by the window, as far from her as possible. She allowed her breath to move again.

“This and the bathroom are the only rooms in our suite that aren’t bugged,” Garcia said.

Lily didn’t look at him.

“Do you understand?” he asked. “I don’t want anyone to hear this conversation.”

She glanced up tentatively, confused. “You’re not telling your father?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do.”

“I thought it would be clear,” she said.

He shook his head. “No. Not so clear.”

Lily shrank back against the pillows, shivering even under her thick sweater and the coat she had not yet removed. She watched Garcia intently, thinking about him. He was as lanky as a cat and his hair seemed darker than ever against his luminous skin, pale from a lack of sunlight. She thought, if things had been different, if she and Garcia had selected each other in the normal way, and if Eddie had never reappeared in her life, maybe she could have let things be. Maybe she could have been happy. It would have been so much easier.

“Why did you do that?” Garcia asked. He was looking at her directly now, accusing her.

“Why were you with him?”

Lily considered the question, wanting to give him an honest answer. “You never treated me like your wife,” she finally said. “Or, you only treated me like your wife in public.”

“Was that really why?”

“That was the first reason. Yes.”

“I didn’t treat you like my wife because I knew it was fixed,” Garcia said. “I didn’t want to get attached because I didn’t know what would happen. And it felt—it felt wrong to use you like that, when I knew about all of it.”

“But you didn’t tell me.”

“I was going to tell you,” Garcia said. “I had made up my mind to tell you. And I was going to leave it up to you. If you wanted to be my wife anyway, really be my wife, I would have tried to make you happy.”

“Why would you let them do this in the first place?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t have a choice. We’re talking about my father. We’re talking about the government I’m supposed to be the head of eventually. They keep their enemies close. I have to play along.”

“So I’m the enemy,” Lily said.

“Your father,” Garcia said. “They’re afraid that your father is an enemy.”

“How did you know about the Barnacle?” she asked.

“My dad had you followed,” Garcia said. “When you walked home last week.”

“You told him?”

“I told him you were walking. He took the rest into his own hands. When they figured out where you went, they told me. But they didn’t know that you were meeting—him.”

Lily sat upright again. “So you let them follow me around, and you let your dad tell the whole city that my sister died because of an *accident*, and you even let him control your own marriage. You just sit around and watch it all happen.”

Garcia’s sad expression turned hard. “I don’t ever have a choice, Lily. But I was going to tell you that our Gala was fixed, and I hope you realize what a huge risk that would have been. For me.”

Staring at him, Lily decided that this was the quality she had never quite grasped about Garcia. He was scared—sometimes well-intentioned, but always scared. Too scared to stop his father from forcing them together like this. And in the end, she thought, he had his loyalties. He had been planning to tell her, but he had never planned to fight the way things were.

She was safe for the moment, but she didn’t know for how long. “Please,” she said. “Don’t blame Eddie. He doesn’t deserve trouble.”

“I’m not getting anyone in trouble,” Garcia said.

“It isn’t his fault. This is only about me,” she said.

Garcia stood abruptly. “I’m taking a shower.”

He disappeared into the bathroom, and Lily went to the couch in the living room. She wanted to swim away across the freezing lake, or hide forever in that room with Eddie and his pictures. But all she could do was wait.

The next morning when Lily woke up, Garcia was already gone. She sat upright in bed and looked around the room, thinking. This room, Garcia had admitted, was not bugged. She got out of bed and went to the window, trying to open it, trying to see if there was a way out. But the window didn’t budge. And even if it did, it was at least thirty feet to the ground.

She turned away helplessly, cursing herself for thinking it could be so easy. Garcia would be on his guard now. Even if he hadn’t yet told his father what had happened, he would be careful with her. Lily rummaged in her purse and found her phone. The screen read “No Service.”

She threw it to the ground and decided to go downstairs for a cup of coffee while she thought things over. Leaving the suite, she nearly collided with a house servant who was vacuuming the hallway. “Good morning, Mrs. Michels,” he said brightly.

“Good morning.” She hurried away, past the second-floor parlor and down the stairs, where she came face-to-face with yet another Mansion employee who quickly pretended to be adjusting a vase of flowers. “Good morning, Mrs. Michels.”

There were three people in the kitchen, and a tall, dark man handed her a coffee with a dubious expression. Lily had never seen so many employees wandering around in the morning. She approached the dining room but heard a cough that she recognized as belonging to Governor

Michels, so she turned instead to a side hallway leading to a wing with a smaller sitting room that overlooked the garden. The door to the hallway was locked. Lily stared at it, dumbfounded, and finally returned upstairs to the suite.

She remained there, reading and pondering quietly, until Garcia returned to the Mansion around noon. She wanted to ask about her phone, the sudden morning liveliness of the generally quiet Mansion, the locked door—but she kept quiet.

“I’m not going out again today,” Garcia told her as he put down his briefcase on the table.

And he didn’t. He remained in the same room as her, but practically ignored her, for the rest of the day until dinnertime.

Lily had not seen Governor or Mrs. Michels since Garcia had found her at the Barnacle the day before. She dressed carefully for dinner, donning a white blouse and a pearl necklace and a tidy blue skirt. In the dining room, nothing was out of the ordinary. Governor Michels nodded at her from the head of the table, and Lily offered a quiet hello as she took her place across from Garcia. Mrs. Michels entered and gave Lily a peck on the cheek before sitting.

“How is your father?” Governor Michels asked gruffly as one of the cooks appeared with a bottle of wine.

“He’s well, thanks,” Lily said, thinking that he probably knew the answer better than she did. How many people did he have watching James Pierce?

Later that night, when Garcia and Lily had been sitting silently in the suite for hours, she escaped downstairs for a cup of tea from the kitchen. She was hardly thirsty, but five minutes away from Garcia’s stifling gaze was beginning to feel necessary.

The cook who greeted her was stout and red-faced. “What can I get for you, ma’am?”

Lily asked for a cup of tea and the cook went to prepare it. As the water heated, the cook took a scrap of paper and a pencil from her pocket and wrote something that she handed to Lily.

I'm Emma, the note read. Friends w. Eddie. He told me to keep an eye on you.

Emma. Lily recalled Eddie at the Barnacle, when she had turned back as Garcia ascended the stairs and Eddie had tried to tell her something. He had been saying *Emma*. A rush of relief hit her. Of all the faces in the Mansion, here was one she felt certain she could trust. Lily took the pencil and scribbled frantically on the back of the paper, looking around to check that no one else was there. She wrote, *Please tell him that I don't think we'll be safe for long.*

Emma glanced at the note, nodded, and strutted across the room to throw it in the fire, where she stood guard until it had burned through. Then she handed Lily a cup of tea and gave her a motherly pat on the shoulder.

Nine

The next week was the slowest of Lily's life. Every morning she stayed in bed as long as she could manage, sleeping nearly twelve hours a night because sleeping and forgetting seemed like the best way to occupy her time. She would get out of bed in the late morning, take a very long shower, and wander downstairs for breakfast. She would drink three or four cups of coffee while sitting at the frosty living room window, knowing that when breakfast was over she would have to decide what to do next. Sometimes she would try to read, but it rarely lasted long. By mid-afternoon she would be bored and anxious. A few times she watched a Pulse Studio film from Garcia's collection. The movies were always long and predictable, but they took her mind off things. Then it would be dinnertime, and she would have no choice but to sit for at least an hour at the same table as Garcia and Governor Michels. Mrs. Michels was the only thing that kept the dinners bearable, because through her chatter Lily could hardly focus on anything else. After dinner, Lily would go to the kitchen under the pretense of getting a cup of tea, but really hoping to see Emma. It happened once, on Thursday, and Emma had a note ready. It said: *Saw Eddie yesterday. He says he'll see you soon and he's glad you're okay.* When she had read it several times, Lily handed the note back to Emma, who burned it in the fire.

That night Lily went upstairs to the suite feeling a hint of happiness for the first time in days. *He'll see you soon.* Lily had no idea what it meant, or if it meant nothing at all and he was only being hopeful, but it didn't matter. It was enough to get her through several pre-bedtime hours on the couch, pretending to examine a book, while Garcia sat at the table with his files as he had been doing every night.

But the next day she got up and there was no trace of Emma and she had to do it all again. Garcia didn't leave the Mansion the entire day, and there was hardly a moment when she

wasn't within somebody's line of vision, either Garcia's or the porter's or the cleaning woman's. Governor Michels rushed out of the Mansion midday in a huff and didn't return. He wasn't there at dinner. No one offered Lily an explanation, but she was glad of his absence regardless.

After dinner, back in the suite, Lily asked Garcia if she could go out the next day.

"Obviously not without supervision," he said. He was trying to sound humorous, but Lily knew he wasn't actually joking.

"With supervision?" she asked, trying to play along even though it made her feel sick.

"We'll see," he said.

Shortly after that there was a knock at the door of the suite. The manservant who often took the night shift guarding the Mansion's front entrance stepped inside. "Excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Michels," he said with the slightest bow. "There is a phone call downstairs for Mrs. Michels."

Garcia let Lily go without a word. But as she proceeded down the stairs behind the guard, she realized that the phone was, of course, tapped. And for all she knew, Garcia was already listening in upstairs.

When they reached the side room near the Mansion's front entrance where the main phone was located, Lily pressed the receiver to her ear. The guard took up a post at the open door, hands folded, showing no signs of leaving.

"Hello?" Lily said into the phone.

"Hi, Lily." It was her father.

Lily breathed in sharply, trying to think of what to say and hoping her father understood that the line was tapped. "Hi, Dad," she said.

“Just wanted to say hello and see how you’re doing,” he said. “I haven’t heard from you in a few days. We tried to call your cell phone.”

“Yeah, sorry, I’ve been busy,” Lily said, feeling the lie cut across her tongue. “My phone hasn’t been working. I’ll have to get it checked out.” She could almost see Garcia’s face as she said it.

“Ah,” James said.

“How is everything?” Lily asked.

“Well enough. Congress is a bit slow. Your mother has been working overtime, which leaves me to do things like shopping. I ran into a friend of yours at the grocery store today, actually. Someone who went to your high school. Chris, I think his name was. He asked how you were doing.”

Lily’s heart pounded. Chris. Had there been a Chris? She couldn’t think of anyone but Chris Enders. “Oh,” she said. “I hope he’s well.”

“He’s well,” James said.

“And how is Mom?”

“All right. She’s right here, actually. She wants to say hello as well.” James paused. “I love you.” The words were heavy.

“Love you, too,” Lily said.

There was rustling on the other end, and Lily’s mother picked up the phone. “Hello, honey,” she said. “I’ve been worried! Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, of course, everything’s fine,” Lily said. She felt like she would cry. “How are you holding up?”

“Oh, you know. It’s hard, of course.” Sophia’s voice wavered. “But I’m getting by. Just one day at a time. I went back to the store.”

“That’s good,” Lily said.

“Are you back at work yet?”

“No,” Lily said. “Not yet. I don’t know if I want to go back to the hospital.”

“Of course,” her mother said. “Well, I’m glad to know everything’s okay. Call any time, and come over any time, of course.”

“Of course. I love you,” Lily said. She didn’t typically say this to her mother at the end of a simple phone conversation. But she felt she had to. She hoped Garcia, or whoever was listening, wouldn’t recognize this as unusual.

“I love you, too, darling,” her mother said.

Lily hung up and had to stay turned away from the guard for a minute, forcing herself to calm down. If she could have had anything in the world at that moment, she would have chosen to go home.

When she was ready, the guard escorted her back upstairs. Chris, she kept thinking. Was there another Chris? No, there wasn’t. Had her father actually spoken with Eddie? Did he know what had happened?

In the suite, Garcia was sitting innocently at the table, his expression as blank as it had been before, a stack of papers in front of him and an elegant pen in hand. Lily settled back into the couch and pretended to take up her book again.

The next night at dinner Governor Michels was back, but Mrs. Michels was with a friend. Lily, Garcia, and Governor Michels sat silently through their meal, and when he had eaten only

half of the main course, Garcia pressed his napkin to his lips, muttered “excuse me,” and left the room.

Lily remained self-consciously at the long end of the table, eyes focused on her nearly empty plate. She ate quickly, hoping that once she finished she could escape as well without being rude. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Governor Michels at the head of the table, hands folded under his chin. He wasn’t eating.

“Lily,” he said. “A word?”

Lily dropped her fork with a start and looked up at him. He was squinting at her carefully.

“Of course,” Lily said.

“Did you know that your father and I have been friends since childhood?” the Governor asked lightly.

Lily nodded. “Yes, sir. I was aware of that.”

“We did everything together, back in the day. We started a baseball team together. I would invite James to state dinners at the Mansion, back when my father was in charge, and we were always disruptive. I once threw a carrot at your father in front of the Secretary of Security. We were in the same classes from kindergarten all the way up through seventh grade. Our parents were great friends as well, you know.”

Lily gulped. “Yes, sir. The two of you have quite a history.”

Governor Michels nodded. “Yes. And so you must realize that, when I discovered that my son and James’ daughter would be in the same Gala, I certainly hoped the two of you would select one another,” he said. His tone was sterile, monotonous. “When it actually came to pass, I

realized that there is usually some outside force, impelling these sorts of necessary events to take place.”

Lily stared at her plate.

“I view it,” the Governor continued, “As a moment of serendipity.”

Lily didn’t speak.

“Don’t you agree?” he asked.

She looked up again. “Yes,” she said slowly. “I agree.”

“But on the other hand, your father and I have had a minor falling out since then,” the Governor said. “Particularly since your sister’s accident. He’s been out of sorts.”

Accident. The word echoed across Lily’s mind.

“Not taking his work as seriously, falling behind in Congress, judging legislation a bit harshly, you know, that sort of thing,” Governor Michels went on. “Unfortunately, this means that he and I have not been quite as friendly lately.”

Lily frowned at her salad. “I’m sorry to hear it, sir.”

“You weren’t aware?”

“No,” Lily said. “I wasn’t aware.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say it’s the truth. But that doesn’t mean that you and I must also have a falling out.” He drummed a finger against the table. “In fact, I think that the two of us are very much on the same page. Am I correct?”

Lily’s mind raced. He knew some important things about her, that much was certain. He was clearly aware that she knew about the Gala setup. And he knew what had actually happened to Diane. But he didn’t know about Eddie.

“For example, your place in this family. We agree, don’t we, how *lucky* it is that you gained a place in this family?” He was pushing for an answer.

“Lucky,” Lily said. “Very lucky.”

Governor Michels nodded. “Yes. And we’re glad to have you. I believe you could make a great addition to the Gubernatorial platform.”

“The platform?”

“The First Lady is able to wield quite a bit of power, you know. Of course, it depends on who she is, her character. You can only hold power if you’re well suited to it, and to this administration.”

Lily met his eyes, trying to gauge his intentions. Did he honestly understand so little about her that he was willing to offer her power? Or did he know what she was thinking, about him, about all of this? Was he trying to persuade her to quiet her objections?

Lily placed her napkin neatly on the table. “Excuse me.” She stood and hurried out of the room. It was inexcusable, but she couldn’t lie anymore. Down the hallway, up the marble staircase, and into the suite—she imagined her father-in-law still seated at the table, staring at where she had retreated out the door.

Garcia was standing by the window. He turned to her as she collapsed onto the couch.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She got up again. “I’m taking a bath.” She couldn’t lie and say yes, and she couldn’t stand another interrogation.

But Garcia stopped her as she approached the bathroom. She tried to push past. He held the door shut. “I need to talk to you,” he said.

“I’ve had enough talking,” she said.

“Please. Let’s go in the bedroom.” He took her arm and pulled her there, closing the door behind them.

“What did my father say?” Garcia asked.

“He wants to be my friend. He wants me to be part of the Gubernatorial Platform,” Lily said bitterly.

“He’s suspicious of you,” Garcia said.

“Because of what you’ve told him.”

“No. Because of the way you act. All the time, you act like you can’t stand him. I know you can’t stand him, and he knows it, too. You need to stop being obvious, or he’ll ask even more questions.”

“I’m not going to tell him anything. And whether or not you tell him anything is your choice, so stop acting as though it’s not.”

“Lily, here’s what I’ve decided,” Garcia said, and his voice was softer. “First off, I’ve decided that I can’t blame you entirely for what you did. Part of it, part of this whole situation, is my fault. I know that, and I just want reassurance that you’re not going to see Eddie anymore. If you can give me that, I can start to let it go. But I’ve decided another thing, too, which is that we can’t go on like this, with you hating this place and my family. You need to calm down and accept your situation for the time being. My father, me, living here, being a part of this—you need to accept it. If you do, I’m not going to say anything.”

“I can’t just accept it,” she said.

“Can you accept it if I promise you that things are going to get better?”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are some things about the way we do things in this city that I don’t like, either,” Garcia said. “And eventually I’ll be able to do something about it. Once I’m in charge. But for now, I play along. You have to play along, too.”

“I can’t,” she repeated.

“But you have to,” he said.

“It could be years. It could be thirty years until you’re Governor,” Lily said.

“It’s up to you.”

“What’s my alternative?”

“The alternative is that I tell my father what you did.”

Lily stared at him. Garcia’s entire life was about being passive. It seemed too big an action on his part, to do that to her. But she couldn’t trust that he wouldn’t. On the other hand, she didn’t feel confident that he would keep his word. If she waited decades as his quiet companion, there was still no guarantee that anything would ever change. There was no guarantee that Garcia wouldn’t keep leading the easy life he had always led, part of something that he viewed as problematic but tolerable.

“I can’t wait until I’m forty, pretending as though everything in this city is fine and pretending to happily lead it by your side. Do you think I could, after what happened to my sister? It happened because of the way we do things in this place,” she said.

“Is that your answer?” Garcia’s expression was cold, detached.

There was a knock on the door. Garcia swiveled to address it. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Robert, sir. It’s important. I’m sorry to interrupt.”

Garcia turned back to Lily. “Is that your answer?”

She felt her teeth pressing into the inside of her cheek. If she said yes, she was out of time. If she pretended to change her mind, he might not believe her. If she truly chose to go back on her words, and if he did believe her, she would be committing herself to a lifetime of this.

There was another knock. "I'm so, so sorry, Mr. Garcia," Robert called. "This is urgent. Someone has robbed the City Vault. Your father is waiting in the car. He requested that you join him immediately."

Garcia turned back to Lily once again, waiting.

"Yes," she said slowly. "That is my answer. I'm sorry, Garcia. I can't do it."

His body tensed. For a moment Lily thought he was going to move to hit her, hurt her. His lips trembled. But he only stood stiffly for a moment, and when his voice emerged, it was controlled. "All right. Then you've made up your mind. That's it."

"Yes," she said. "That's it."

Garcia turned away from her abruptly, went to the main door of the suite and swung it open. "I'm on my way, Robert. Please keep an eye on Mrs. Michels while I'm out."

Lily stood silently, listening to his footsteps pattering down the stairs, hating the idea of waiting for what she knew would happen. She left the suite, went down the hall, and stood at the top of the marble staircase, watching as Garcia disappeared out the Mansion's front door and slammed it behind him without another glance in her direction.

Robert, one of the Governor's Guards, was at the foot of the stairs, looking up at her. When she tried to return to the suite, he said, "I am sorry, Mrs. Michels, but you are strictly to remain in the public space. I'm supposed to be within sight of you at all times." He looked sincerely apologetic, and Lily marched down the stairs, past him, and into the back sitting room, where she stationed herself at a large window overlooking the lake. The last glimmers of twilight

were leaving the sky, and the lake was nothing but a barren stretch of darkness, without a moon to reflect on its surface.

Robert appeared a few minutes later and lingered quietly in a corner of the room while Lily thought things over. She was essentially imprisoned. In the car, on the way to the City Vault or the Hill or wherever they were going, Garcia would tell his father everything. When Governor Michels and Garcia returned that night, her life at the Mansion would be over. That gave her as little as an hour, possibly less, to find a way out. Lily sank into an armchair, hoping to look resigned.

Neither Lily nor Robert had moved when there was a tentative tap on the doorframe nearly a half hour later. “Robert,” a soft voice said. “I’m in a crunch. Mrs. Michels is supposed to show up with several friends, very soon I’m sure, and I’ve only just found out. The dinner isn’t ready, not at all. Can you do me a favor and go downstairs for a bottle of wine? Something red, vintage, very expensive.”

Lily turned to the speaker and found Emma standing in the door, small and unassuming, red-faced as ever.

Robert glanced from Emma to Lily. “We’re under strict orders to keep an eye on Mrs. Michels,” he told Emma. “I’ll get the wine quickly. Please keep her close.”

Robert marched away towards the cellar door in the northwest wing. Emma grabbed Lily by the arm and dragged her through the kitchen, through a small storage room behind it, to a tiny back hallway lined with windows. “It isn’t bugged back here,” Emma whispered. “It’s your father. They’ve arrested him. He robbed the City Vault.”

“What?”

“He robbed it days ago,” Emma said. “He only took something small. But they’ve found him out.”

“Oh my God,” Lily said. “Where are they taking him?”

“I don’t know.”

“I need to get out,” Lily said. “They’ll arrest me, too.”

“Eddie’s waiting for you. Get out here.” Emma indicated the windows and took a ring of keys out of her pocket. She unlocked the window on the end and swung it open. “Get out and run. Henrietta and Burlesky Streets. You know the way?”

“I know it,” Lily said. “You’ll be in trouble.”

“I’ll say you attacked me. I’ll say you took the keys. Just go.”

Lily looked at Emma’s red cheeks, her watery eyes, her plump hands holding out the ring of keys. “I will never be able to thank you enough,” she said.

Emma smiled. “Who knows? You have to go. You have to go *now*. Run as fast as you can. Take the alleys.”

Lily jumped out the window, felt her shins sinking into the snow, and ran. She ran into a patch of trees near the Mansion, and she kept running until she came out in a deserted street on the far end of the gardens and park. She ran west for a long, long time, running in pitch-black alleys, thinking at every turn that she could hear someone behind her. But then she turned back and there was no one. Still, she ran faster. She had been running for at least a mile, two miles, and she reached Henrietta. She went past, found another alley, and ran north one, two, three blocks. Fjord. The Barnacle. But that wasn’t it. She ran another five, six blocks, blinking at the street signs—it was around here somewhere—until she finally stopped dead at the sign for Burlesky Street.

“Lily,” a man’s voice called to her. She turned to find Eddie waving from the low window of a nearby apartment building. She ran over and climbed through the window, shivering because the cold was just beginning to hit her, then shaking more violently when she thought about her father.

“They got my dad,” she said.

“I know. And your dad got me this.” Eddie held up a small, silver key.

“What’s it for?” Lily asked, her voice small.

“I’m going to show you. Remember when you said you’d go to New York if you ever got the chance?”

“Is that key taking us to New York?”

“Not exactly. But it’s taking us closer.”

Lily looked around at the drab apartment. Eddie hadn’t turned on any lights, and she could barely see in the dim glow from the streetlamps outside. She could tell, though, that the place had been abandoned for some time; she could make out a table covered with a sheet and a decayed, toppling piano in the corner. Everything else was shadows and dust.

“Are we going somewhere else?” she asked.

“No,” Eddie said. “We start right here.”

Lily shook her head. “I can’t go anywhere. My dad—I don’t know where he is. I don’t know what’s going to happen to him.”

“Then why did you run?” Eddie asked.

“Garcia was going to tell his father about what I did,” Lily said. “I had to get out.”

Eddie squinted at her, his glasses thick with reflections from the street out the window. “I guess I acted just in time, then.”

“At least tell me where we’re supposed to be going,” Lily said.

Eddie looked out the window, his body rigid. “Your dad got into the City Vault. The things my father brought back with him from New York, they took all of it and that’s where they keep it. Your dad was part of an inspection team, and while he was in the Vault, he took this.” Eddie held up the key again. “I told him what it’s for. No one else knows. Your father got this and he handed it off to me. They arrested him when they realized that something was gone.”

“You asked him to take it?”

“I told him what had happened, and I told him what I needed.” Eddie pointed at the table. “Under there. There’s a cellar. In the cellar, there’s a door. Behind the door is a tunnel. It takes us out.”

“Out where?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know where it leads?”

“All I know is that my father told me, before they took him away, that he had a key, and he got out with that key. He couldn’t get past the wall in the mountains, but he got out with this key. I was just a little kid. I told your father that there was a key in the Vault, and he got me the key. I found the tunnel.”

She wanted to know more about the way out, about what getting out could mean, more about Eddie’s father. She wanted to stop and think about what they were about to do, if she decided to do it, and about her own father. Where was he? But she heard a dog barking in a distance and looked around the room, looked out at the street, looked at Eddie, who tugged her towards the table.

“It’s here,” he said.

The barking grew slightly louder. From one dog to many.

“We have to go,” Eddie said.

Lily stood her ground, gasping for air. “Why isn’t he here?”

“What?”

“My dad,” she said. “Why isn’t he here?”

Eddie looked at her quietly, carefully. “I’m sorry, Lily. He was going to come with us, if things worked out. But they didn’t. I got the key from him yesterday and I found this place today. I sent Emma to tell you. I was too late for your dad. Lily,” he said, pulling her hand very lightly, “If we’re going to go, we have to go now.”

“We don’t even know where we’re going,” she whispered.

“My father got out this way,” Eddie said.

Still, she couldn’t move.

“Lily,” Eddie urged.

“Did he want me to go?” she asked. “My father, I mean. Did he want me to go?”

“Of course,” Eddie said. “That’s why he did it. He did it for you.”

Lily thought of her father at Diane’s funeral, the way he had stared as the casket made its final descent into the ground. She thought of him in his study on that last day she was at home, his face pale even in the soft glow of his study, the wrinkles pressing in around his mouth and eyes, determined and tired.

“You’re sure?” she asked.

“Yes. He did it for you,” Eddie said.

“Okay,” Lily said. “Then we’ll go.”

The moment she said it, Eddie was on his hands and knees, under the table. She heard a creak and then wood against wood.

Lily followed him down a ladder, into a deep, dark cellar. Eddie flicked a light on the wall and a lonely bulb flickered to life, illuminating a room crammed with bookshelves and chairs and boxes. How long they had been there, Lily had no idea. Eddie climbed back up the ladder and slowly lowered the trap door to its closed position. The voice of another dog, howling somewhere in the city, dulled to a mumble as the door slid shut.

Eddie turned to a backpack in the corner of the cellar and slung it over his shoulder. He went to a bookshelf across the room and shoved it to one side with difficulty, then lifted a ripped tapestry that hung against the wall behind it. He knelt to the ground. Lily listened as he inserted the key into a nearly invisible hole. There was a loud, resonating click, and the grind of stone against stone, and the door creaked open.

Eddie stood aside, fumbling in his backpack. Lily peered into the tunnel, but there was nothing to see. Only darkness. Producing a flashlight, Eddie stepped through and cast a beam of light down a long, narrow hallway.

“We don’t know if it’s safe,” Lily said. “We don’t even know how long it is. Or if it will take us anywhere.”

Eddie returned to her side, and out of the backpack’s front pocket he retrieved a stack of small papers. Photographs, Lily realized. He showed her the front of one of them, and she remembered it. It depicted a woman on a balcony, scarf and skirts flying in the breeze. Eddie flipped the photo over. On the back was written: *Henrietta*. Then Eddie produced the picture of Chris Enders at the railing of a boat, gesturing to a brilliant skyline. He showed her the back:

Burlesky. Finally, there was the photo of a family eating dinner in a gloomy apartment. The back read, *Find it underground, two days' journey*.

“He told me, when I was just a little kid, to keep these safe,” Eddie said. “These are the only instructions he left me. Your dad got me the key. I searched all around Henrietta and Burlesky, all of last night and all of today. And I found it. I found this.”

“Two days?” Lily asked.

“I have water, food, two flashlights, plenty of batteries, candles, matches, a blanket...everything we need for two days. Now we have to go.”

Lily approached the entrance to the tunnel and stood, staring into the space, willing her feet to move forward. Finally she stepped through the doorway. It was cold, and she was shaking. Eddie flipped off the light in the cellar and followed her, handing her the flashlight, sliding the bookshelf back into position as best he could and then locking the tunnel door from the inside. Lily pointed the flashlight forward.

Ten

They walked in darkness for hours, craning their heads forward to see as far as they could, peaking hesitantly around corners when the narrow tunnel turned, but never stopping. Lily had no idea how long they walked. They didn't speak. Her mind roved back to the Mansion, to Garcia and Governor Michels, wondering if they were still looking for her, wondering if they had found the apartment from which she and Eddie had escaped.

She thought about her father. She hoped that, wherever he was, he had heard that she was gone.

She also thought ahead to wherever they were going. She didn't know how far away New York was, but she didn't think that two days of walking would get them all the way there.

They finally halted many hours into the journey, not knowing whether it was night or day, but too tired and hungry to go any further. They set the flashlight on the ground and huddled together under the blanket, eating crackers and apples. Eddie fell asleep with his head leaned back against the dusty wall, but Lily couldn't close her eyes. She was too frightened of this place; she felt that she and Eddie would be left vulnerable to the darkness, the dripping sound from somewhere down the way, and the dust if she, too, closed her eyes. So instead of sleeping herself, she watched Eddie as he dozed. She didn't know what to feel when she looked at him. Before, when she had glanced at him without a word during dinner at the Mansion or when she sat across from him at the corner table in the Barnacle, she had sensed that he represented something exciting, something important. The electricity of it had overwhelmed her. Now the excitement and importance didn't lie in Eddie, but in wherever they were going. She had always viewed him as so wise, so much older somehow, but now, with his glasses tilted to one side and his mouth dangling open in sleep, he wasn't any older or wiser than she was.

When Eddie nodded back to consciousness, they got up and moved on. They walked and walked and walked. At some point Lily was too exhausted to keep going and they stopped again, this time so that she could sleep. She didn't know how long she slept, but she awoke with a start, expecting to find herself drowned in the familiar quilt that covered her bed in Silver Woods—or expecting, even, to awake to the blue walls of her bedroom in the Governor's Mansion and to hear Garcia's soft breathing next to her. Instead she awoke to what seemed like night (although she couldn't know if it was really night) and to Eddie's hand on her arm. She got to her feet immediately, muddled from a dream. In the dream she had been standing in the Mansion's back corridor with Emma, taking the ring of keys, but the keys became pebbles in her hand so that Lily couldn't open the window, and Emma looked at her sadly and went away.

“Eddie,” she asked when they had been walking for a few minutes, “Why does Emma work in the Governor's Mansion? And the rest of them, too—how did they get there?”

“I don't know about everyone,” Eddie said. “They all have secrets. But Emma—she refused to marry a man.”

“She didn't want to get married? Like you?”

“No,” Eddie said. “She refused to marry a *man*.”

Lily nodded, only faintly understanding. And they kept walking.

They stopped a few more times to eat and to sleep, but mostly they trudged along quietly. Lily glanced around her at the walls, which flickered in and out of the flashlight's wake. They looked ready to crumble. She wondered how long it had been since someone had walked here.

“Are you scared?” Eddie asked her at some point.

“Of course I'm scared,” Lily said. “Aren't you scared?”

He hesitated. “Yes,” he said.

* * *

The tunnel ended. They stood side by side, flashlights pointed at the closed door, and they looked at each other. “I guess this is it,” Eddie said.

Lily reached out both hands, too tired to be sure what to do, and she placed them gingerly on the door, trying to sense what might be on the other side. All she felt was the cold. Eddie joined her, and they pushed.

At first the door didn’t give way, but after a few minutes it groaned and moved an inch or two. Lily and Eddie stood back, breathing hard, before they resumed their efforts. Bit by bit, the door slid open. Eddie cast his flashlight ahead, revealing another cellar, similar in design to the one at the beginning of the tunnel. This cellar, however, was overrun by dead weeds, and the only indications of past human presence were a rickety table in one corner and a clumsy staircase in another. The stairs seemed to lead nowhere, ending in a rusted patch of wall.

Lily shone her flashlight back behind her, suddenly terrified of the tunnel they had traversed, and she hastily followed Eddie into the cellar.

“Can we close the door?” she asked.

They pushed it closed again, from the other side now, and stood transfixed for a moment. Eddie turned around and pointed overhead, at the stairs. “Up there. There must be an opening.”

Lily preceded him up the stairs, and at the top she made out the faint rim of a door in the ceiling. “It’s here,” she said. “Help me. It’s heavy.”

Eddie climbed past her and heaved the trap door upward. Lily stood by, holding her breath, and then she was blinking up at a bright winter sun.

“We’re there,” Eddie said, grinning. “I have no idea where that is, but we’re there.”

Lily climbed out first, and Eddie followed. They were in a silent, snowy forest, surrounded by towering trees and squirrels' footprints. Lily could hear a bell tolling far, far away. When she dropped the trap door into place behind them, it blended back in with a mottled layer of ice and dead leaves.

“Look.” Eddie pointed towards the sun, and in the distance, through a thinner patch of trees, Lily could make out a house.

They approached the house cautiously and hovered at the edge of the woods when the trees gave way to a clearing. The dwelling was small and sturdy, made of bricks, with a chimney exuding a lazy stream of smoke. A road ran past it near the woods, and looking to her left down the road, Lily saw lifeless fields, and a parked car, and another small house in the distance.

“It’s not New Barton,” she told Eddie.

Slowly, carefully, they left the safety of the trees. Lily stepped into the road. A door slammed, and before Lily could think what to do, a stocky woman in a knee-length coat was standing in the doorway of the house, car keys jangling from her fingers.

“Hello there,” she said. “Not from around here?”

“No,” Lily said. “We’re not. I’m really sorry to bother you, but we’re a little lost. Where exactly are we?” Eddie hovered behind her, suddenly childish.

The woman looked at them strangely. “The Town Center of Hammond is right down that way,” the woman said, pointing down the road. “About a mile and you’ll be on Main Street.”

“Thank you,” Lily said, turning away and tugging Eddie along behind her. He was gawking at the sleepy forest, the road, the woman. “It’s not New Barton,” he repeated to her in a whisper.

Hammond was understated and quiet, lorded over by a wintry sedation. They passed a few more small houses on their way into the town, but they didn't see anyone for most of their walk. Slowly more houses began to appear around them, closer together and brightly colored, and then a little boy with red hair scampered past Lily and ran up the front steps of a building. "Main Street," a sign read.

They arrived at a stretch of shops. A beauty shop, a tailor, a hole-in-the-wall grocery store, a pawn shop. And people appeared, meandering up and down the sidewalk, huddled against the cold, glancing up at Lily and Eddie with nervous smiles. Lily looked down at her body and the cold hit her for the first time; she didn't have a coat, only a dirty sweater.

"We need a place to stay," Eddie said.

"The sun is going to set soon," Lily agreed.

They kept walking, and Lily tried to read faces. A woman with a red scarf met her eyes, and Lily tried to imagine her mother or Maggie or Diane (because here, in this new place, Diane could almost still exist) walking down this street, huddling under that scarf. Would they look out of place, different? Did she look different? These people looked just like anyone she had seen in New Barton. But they weren't the same. She wanted the differences to scream at her from their eyes and their cheeks, but she couldn't distinguish anything to gape at. Only normal, shivering faces.

Eventually they came to "Davis Inn." Lily did a double-take at the name, but tried to rid herself of the association as they stepped inside.

"Can I help you?" The man at the front desk was elderly and white-haired. He wore a crisp suit, which stood in stark contrast to the creaking wooden floors and the homey photos on the walls. One was a photo of him, standing on a frozen lake with a huge fish in hand. Another

depicted a young woman in a yellow dress, picking flowers in a field. Lily turned to Eddie in a panic. “We don’t have money,” she whispered. “We don’t even know what kind of money we’re supposed to have.”

The man rounded the desk and approached them, extending his hand. “I’m Jim,” he said.

“Hi,” Lily answered. “Lily.” They shook hands.

“And I’m Eddie,” Eddie said, following suit. “Eddie Haleski.”

“Haleski?” the man asked.

“That’s right,” Eddie said.

“That’s an interesting name.” The man nodded fondly.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Lily said. “We don’t have any money. But can you tell us what it costs to stay here overnight? We’ll try to pull something together.”

Jim looked them up and down, eyeing Lily’s spoiled sweater and Eddie’s scratchy blue jeans, the tired backpack over his shoulder. “Are the two of you in some kind of trouble?”

“No,” Lily said. “Not exactly. But we’re new here.”

“You sure you’re not in trouble?”

“Not the kind that could get to us here, anyway,” Lily said, trying to sound persuasive, although she realized as she said it that she wasn’t sure whether her words were true.

Jim nodded. “I see. All right, you can have a room tonight.”

“I’m sorry, we don’t have any money,” Eddie repeated.

“For tonight, it’s on me,” Jim said.

Their room was small but tidy, with a double bed, a dresser, a desk, and a small bathroom off to one side. A painting of a city graced the wall above the bed.

“New York?” Lily asked Jim when he showed them the room.

“San Francisco,” he corrected.

“San Francisco.” She flopped down onto the bed.

Eddie shook Jim’s hand again. “We honestly can’t thank you enough.”

“It’s my pleasure.” Jim smiled. He reminded her of someone, Lily thought. Her grandfather. Grandpa Mike had died when she was only five, but this man had the same sturdy smile. She sank deeper into the bed, and at least for a moment, she felt safe.

When they were alone, Eddie sank down next to her, taking her hand in his. “We made it,” he said.

“We made it,” she said. “And what do we do next?”

“We’ll decide that tomorrow.” He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

Lily expected that they would both fall asleep right away, but instead she found herself lying still, thinking about Eddie. He was still awake, and running his fingers over her hand. She thought about the moments with him in the Barnacle’s nostalgic basement, especially the afternoon when he had shown her the photo collage in the back room. She thought about the way he had kissed her that day, how she had felt as though the whole world was opening to her. Now she felt as though it had—the world was available, in a way she had never expected it to be, and suddenly Eddie’s presence at her side confused her. Why the two of them, together like this? Had she really chosen Eddie because he was Eddie or had she chosen him because she had so few choices in life, because he was an alternative to the things she had *not* chosen for herself? She didn’t know. She knew she had wanted to escape, and she had done that through Eddie. She turned her head slightly to look at him and discovered that he was watching her as well. They blinked at each other, she offered a small smile, and she looked away again. She thought: *I*

barely know him. For that moment they were together, but with the whole world just out the window Lily wondered if he was supposed to be a permanent fixture in her life from now on. He didn't have to be.

A car honked outside. Eddie remained quietly on the bed, but Lily got up and stood at the window, gazing out at the scattered cars (so many of them), the figures retreating into the setting sun, the flashing lights of a movie theater down the street. She wondered about the movies that showed here. She would have to see one.

"I thought it would be more different," Eddie said from the bed. "But I don't care. It's still amazing." He stood. "I almost forgot something important. From your dad." He went to his backpack and pulled out an envelope. He handed it to Lily.

Lily sank to the ground, holding the envelope lightly across her palms, staring at what was written across the front. *For my beautiful daughter.* She slowly pulled the envelope open, savoring the way it caressed her fingers, and her lips trembled as she pulled out a single sheet of paper.

Lily,

I know you weren't expecting this kind of goodbye. I tried to say it over the phone, but we weren't safe that way. Wherever you are now, and whatever you are doing, I hope you are safe. And if you're not happy right now, if you're frightened, I hope you can feel that one day, you will be happy. I hope you feel the possibilities.

If you're reading this, I'm not with you. In that case, I'm sorry. It isn't how I wanted things to work out, but I have been prepared to accept the worst for myself, for your sake. I don't say that to evoke your guilt. I say it because I don't want you to feel guilty. In some way, I've

been preparing myself for this ever since I realized that I only had one daughter left. The one I have left, I will do anything for. Don't worry about me, and don't worry about your mother. I've made sure that she has no association with any of this. She will be safe.

I want you to see the world, and I want you to live in it. I've never had the opportunity, but it's all I need to know that you will.

Take care of yourself. I don't know what things are like out there, but I do know my daughter, and I expect—I feel certain—that you will make the most of what you find.

There's nothing more to say but this, that I love you beyond words. Don't forget.

--Dad