

# PROLOGUE

## SHIPWRECKS AS A RECESSIVE GENE

**F**un fact: my great-great-great-grandmother was the lone survivor of a shipwreck.

For a long time, my parents liked to point to this story as evidence of family strength. We're descended from *survivors*, they said. *Making it* is in our blood. We cling to planks off the coast of Maine, we don't freeze to death, and when we wash ashore, we marry, we procreate, and we catch lobster to feed to our children. Crying? There's no crying in shipwrecks. No need—as a family, we're not only lucky, we're lucky *and* we persevere.

My younger brother, Sam, and I grew up loving that shipwreck. Every summer when we visited our mother's childhood home in Maine, he and I descended to the rocky shore behind the house and imagined we were underwater explorers in search of the wreck of the *Lyric*. We wore goggles and carried empty glass bottles as oxygen tanks, scrambling across the rocks at low tide until we were frozen, grimy with sea scum. We dreamed of discovering the shipwreck ourselves, imagined gold coins half-buried in sand, jewels blooming in tide pools, hermit crabs fashioning shells from diamonds. We weren't just in it for the riches: more than anything, we wanted to find the ship's carcass, grown green with moss and

flickering with fish. We wanted to see what kind of disaster our great-great-great-grandmother had escaped.

The *Lyric* was more than a sunken ship—it was our family’s story, long lost to the ocean’s depths.



At the hospital, I joked my brother’s stomach pump was his snorkel and my mother said “That’s enough, Violet” so sharply the nurse dropped his stethoscope. Later, my father caught me by the vending machines chatting a little too close with a boy a little too old (Dad [bewildered, aghast]: Your brother’s in the hospital and you’re flirting with a *fully bearded man?*). By the time Sam woke up later that afternoon, his teeth gritty and ghoulish with charcoal, our parents had new summer plans for all of us: counseling for them, a treatment center for my brother, Maine for me. I became a bad sister and a bad daughter in an hour; an exile in just under two.

By comparison, the *Titanic* sunk in two hours, forty minutes. Pretty impressive, to have sunk to the bottom even faster than the twentieth century’s greatest shipwreck. Especially considering I was only sixteen. I didn’t even have a driver’s license, but I was an expert in the art of catastrophe.



PART ONE: WRECK



## YOU'RE JUST SO BRAVE

The day I left for Lyric, I shaved my head. A prophylactic, if you will.

A week had passed since the Hospital Incident, and the middle of June bloomed in New York City, perfect weather for cones from Mister Softee and imagining your brother in the psych ward. I packed light for exile, ditching my usual leggings and liquid liner for two pairs of my dad's faded jeans, six Hanes T-shirts, one ancient tube of fragrance-free lip balm, and a heap of cotton underwear. Plane reading was Sam's copy of *Diving for Sunken Treasure*, which I kept on my lap the whole flight, unopened. Inside, I'd slipped the scrap of paper on which my mom had written the address for Sam's treatment facility in Vermont. My plan was to send him a letter, and after drafting in my head all morning, the best I had was, *Dear Sam, Sorry I couldn't keep it in my pants after you tried to kill yourself, fixing that now. STEP ONE: NO HAIR! Step two: Bad clothes! ps How's the maple syrup?*

My work, needless to say, required some revision.

The plane ride to Portland lasted forty-five minutes, and the flight attendant asked me how I was feeling four separate times. She put ice in my orange juice and slipped me Milanos instead of

the off-brand biscuits she'd given to the rest of steerage. As I disembarked, she pulled me aside and told me, tears clinging to her thickly mascaraed lashes—purple, I noticed—that a niece of hers had gone through chemo last year.

“You’re just so brave,” she said.

I was so stunned all I could do was nod. She pressed two pairs of plastic wings into my hand and told me she'd keep me in her thoughts. As far as reinventing myself went, this did not bode well.

“Your hair!” my uncle Toby bellowed when I met him at arrivals.

He pulled me into a hug, and I bent my knees so I'd be the right height to press my face into his shoulder. Toby's flannel smelled cozy, like cotton and flour and yeast—from the bakery, I guessed—and underneath, the faintest hint of my mom's morning smell, before she left for the hospital (catch her after work and she smelled antibacterial, like Purell and latex). I pressed my face deeper into Toby's shoulder and clutched the plastic wings until they pinched my palm.

“You're okay, kid,” Toby murmured. “I've got you.”

Eventually, he pushed me back by my shoulders and made a great show of peering at me. Toby was nearly a decade younger than my mother, but his tan face was crinkled like an ancient gnome's, weathered and sweet. He had enough hair for the both of us, sandy, lank, gathered into a sloppy bun at the nape of his neck. He studied me until I looked down, uneasy with the attention.

“Nice kicks,” I said. His plaid Converse high-tops were busted

along the seams and splattered with coffee, the perfect match for my equally grubby white ones.

“Bad arch support. Save your plantar fascia while there’s still time, kid.”

I rolled my eyes. My plantar fascia was the least of my worries.

“I like the new ‘do,” Toby went on. “I like this whole new look, but the ‘do, especially. The last time I saw you, you looked like—what’s the word? A *celebutante*?” I grimaced. “Now, though, you look like a seal pup.”

“I look like an ogress with alopecia.”

“There’s that Violet wit. Have you been practicing your scowl?”

“Thirty minutes in the mirror every day.”

“Hm. Well. Practice makes perfect, I suppose. Which is exactly why my meringues always collapse. Listen, kid, at the risk of sounding very old,” Toby said, “stand up straight.”

I winced. The truth was that since the Hospital Incident, I’d been perfecting not my scowl but my slouch: step three of my master plan, after the hair and the clothes. I wanted to take up less space, or just *be* less: muted, quiet. Shrinking. Not my usual self. I had a lot of height to contend with, but if I hunched, I could pass for five foot eleven, maybe even five foot ten, instead of my real six feet.

Fine. My real six feet and one half inch.

At 72.5 inches, I represented less than 1 percent of the American female population. Growing up, I’d been every basketball, swimming, and volleyball coach’s dream until they realized I had zero

interest in athletics and zero talent to boot. I was interested only in theater—nay, *the theatre*, preferably of the musical variety. I tap-danced and soft-shoed and sang, dreamed of *Broadway* in my future. Not that it mattered now. My theater career had gone the way of the dinosaur long ago.

“C’mon, don’t waste that height! You got the good genes!”

I straightened up and loomed over my uncle. As if to emphasize the difference in our statures, he stood on tiptoes to rub the fine layer of fuzz on my skull.

I shook him off. “I’m not a *dog*, Toby.”

“But if you were, you’d be a Great Dane.”

Count on my uncle to know just what to say.



Lyric was four hours north, and we inched along the Maine Turnpike through tourist traffic and construction. I cracked a window and inhaled: it’d been three years since our last family visit to Maine, but that briny, sharp sea smell was exactly the same as I remembered. So was the feeling, as we got farther north, that civilization was slowly falling away. The tourist spots became dingy fishing towns; roadside buildings grew more and more dilapidated until they were just husks. Lyric was a small town, shaggy around the edges, lost and forgotten. Not to put too fine a point on it, but my parents had sent me here for a reason.

“Think of it not as a punishment, but as an opportunity,” my

mom had insisted. “With less distraction, maybe it’ll be easier to turn off the romance channel.”

I was already two steps ahead of her. After the vending machine debacle, I’d sworn off smooching and everything else that’d led to that moment: my wild hair, my love of tequila, my unrelenting insensitivity. My need to be at the center of all things. In Lyric, I’d be *less*. Maybe I’d even disappear.

“You’re quiet, kid. I almost forgot you were here,” Toby said.

The plan was working already.



My phone lost service just as things started to look familiar. We passed the weather-beaten sign for the Lyric Aquarium, the fishing supply store, the harbor. Past town and then into the pines, down the long dirt driveway to my grandmother’s—now Toby’s—house. I held my breath until we reached the bottom, a habit from an old game with Sam.

The house came into view just when I thought I’d burst. It’d been my grandparents’ home originally, a turreted Victorian framed by the boat-dotted gray sea, weathered and damp and plagued by a serious mold problem. A family of raccoons had once lived in the turret’s walls and chattered ceaselessly throughout the night. Against the water, though, the house still looked to me like Botticelli’s Venus. I exhaled, dizzy.

“You want me to set you up a tent in the turret?” Toby asked.

“Not if the raccoons are still there.”

“I believe Maude and her young have finally found greener pastures,” Toby said. “You and Sam were so cute up there. Camping. Roasting marshmallows. Nearly setting the house on fire . . .”

“I’ll stick with a normal bed, thanks.”

“You’ve finally grown up, Violet. I’ll warn you: getting old is expensive and boring.”

“Boring might be a nice change of pace,” I said.

I got out of the car and accidentally slammed my door.

Inside, Toby apologized for the mess, but I barely noticed, because one step over the threshold and *bam*, it was our last summer here. I was thirteen; Sam was twelve. For three weeks, he ate green apples and drank Earl Grey tea. I had a plastic choker that left a tan like a trellis around my neck. We shared the same room like always, but we didn’t talk at night. He’d started grinding his teeth in his sleep.

In the kitchen, Toby poured me a lemonade and added a sprig of mint, playing a perfect host. Then he poured himself a beer. A pilsner. Light and crisp. I stirred my mint sprig like a cocktail straw.

“What, no booze for me, Uncle Toby?”

He shot me a look of alarm.

“*Kidding*. Relax.” Beer was one thing from my former life I wouldn’t be sorry to say goodbye to. At least, not *super* sorry.

“Violet . . .” Toby started. He had that look on his face like he wanted to capital-*T* Talk. Couldn’t anyone take a joke anymore?

“I’m going outside,” I announced.

I took off through the house, which wasn’t messy so much as *stuff-y*. My mom always complained that my grandmother had been a pack rat—she died when I was five, and my grandfather, way earlier—and Toby seemed to have inherited that trait. There were books everywhere, a tchotchke on every available surface, a collection of foam rollers, nesting tables topped with tea sets, a million boots beside a boot dryer (in *June*), some Batman Legos on the mantelpiece, *so many books*, a single ice skate on that coffee table, and on that couch, a stuffed guinea pig inside a disassembled blender.

I passed through the den into the dining room, which was kind of tidy, except for a just-emptied puzzle that sprawled across the big table. The box showed a movie still from *The Wizard of Oz*. No place like home, I thought grimly. In the living room, a blanket of dust coated the brass telescope and the globe that I knew said USSR, not RUSSIA. I sneezed as I yanked open the sliding glass doors to the backyard.

For the smell of pines outside, I’d put up with the dust and a whole raccoon army. The view was spectacular—my dad’s word, always. Past the overgrown grass and the weedy flower bed, the ocean stretched on endlessly. Moored boats bobbed below me and birds pinpricked the sky. Down the hill was the shore where Sam and I used to play. The boulders seemed to have shrunk, eroded, maybe, by salt water and sand. Or had the shoreline always been that small?

Toby appeared at my side. “Remember all the plays you performed on this lawn?”

“Don’t remind me,” I said.

“I’ve got great memories of you singing ‘Greased Lightnin’ with a croquet mallet as a microphone. Sam sang backup.”

“The horror.” I shivered for emphasis.

“What? You were talented! *Are* talented.”

“I don’t really do that anymore,” I said. “Perform, I mean.”

“Why not?”

Because (a) singing only ends in disaster, and because (b) I found more exciting extracurriculars.

“No reason,” I said.

Toby took a casual sip of his drink. “Your parents mentioned things had gotten a little wild in the city. Any connection there?”

What a fool I’d been to think we could avoid this conversation. Of course Toby was going to bring up my former life. *So, uh, Vi, what did it mean when my sister called, absolutely hysterical, and asked if I could provide you shelter for the summer?* I knew Toby was being nice, but I went rigid at my uncle’s attempt to bond. Our relationship had heretofore been standard uncle-niece fare, pleasant and innocuous: trips to the zoo and belated birthday cards featuring too-slow sloths. I had no desire to talk with him about my Year of Wild, nor Sam, nor the general brokenness of my family. What was there to say, really, to him, or *anyone*? Sam *was* fucked up, and I *got* fucked up. The end.

Toby was waiting.

“I don’t know about *wild*. My slutting around was pretty run-of-the-mill. Sam, though. Finishing a whole three-quarters of a bottle of Tylenol? *That’s* wild. Especially for him.”

Toby whistled, long and low. I imagined how all the boats on the ocean would sink. A snapping mast here. A hull can-opener’d on a coral reef, maybe. A strangling from a giant, hungry kraken.

“So that’s a no on talking, then,” Toby said.

“All I want is to disappear.”

“Good luck doing that with a head like yours in a town this small.”

I poured the rest of my lemonade in the pachysandra.

“Thanks for the drink.” I really meant it, though I see now that’s hard to believe.



Upstairs, in the blue room I used to share with my brother, with the stiff twin beds and the lamps filled with sea glass I used to count to fall asleep and the whole bookcase full of Nancy Drews, my phone said it was *searching*. . . .

I’d never been great at keeping in touch. A handful of summer-program friends gave up on me eventually, and even with friends in the city, I screened calls and let texts go unanswered. Maybe that had all been *practice* for this very moment. Over the years, without even realizing, I’d built strong disappearing muscles.

I switched my phone fully off, and *poof*, I was gone.

## ASK ME HOW I'M SAVING MANATEES

With a single phone call, my parents had gotten me a volunteer position at the Lyric Aquarium, one of the more traditional tourist attractions in town. Apparently, if your great-great-great-grandparents once helped found a local aquarium, you *will* be hired more than a century later, even if you have no experience and just as much interest in fish. “Nepotism at its finest,” I’d said to my dad.

“Maybe you’ll learn something,” my dad had replied.

“You do realize *Sam* is the one who loved the aquarium.”

My dad had rubbed his eyes beneath his glasses. “Violet, I know this may come as a shock to you, but we’re doing the best that we can. Just give the fish a chance, okay?”

“I just meant—” I didn’t know what I’d meant. I’d just wanted to say Sam’s name out loud.

My first day there was Tuesday, two days after my arrival in Lyric. In the dim kitchen that morning, I found a cinnamon bun and a note that read, *they’re lucky to have you, xo, a ghost. ps toby’s day starts at 5 but he says what’s up. pps call your mother!* The icing was cream cheese and so freaking good that I licked the plate clean.

The aquarium was a fifteen-minute bike ride away, through

and past the center of town. I pedaled slowly at first, grateful that I could breathe in my dad's jeans, even if they were too short. I gained speed and was so relieved to be rid of heavy earrings and jangling bracelets, free from raccoon eyeliner and long, long hair. I pulled that whole look off, sure, but I'd never felt exactly myself in those clothes. At their best, they were a costume that made me the sort of girl you wanted at your party, and at their worst, my clothes were *wrong*. Case in point: I'd been underdressed for my brother's suicide attempt. I'd been wearing my tiniest pair of shorts, denim cutoffs, a nip of butt cheek visible when I ascended a staircase. A flimsy cotton tank top and no bra, nipples perky in the harsh hospital cold. I'd ached for a sweater, for a parka, for something that felt more *right*.

Something, it turned out, like men's jeans and a shaved head.

I was on the edge of town now, zipping past the outdoor store, Toby's bakery, the hot dog joint; the lobster shack, the movie theater, the Korean restaurant. The one grungy bar, the Lyric Pub, with its perpetually drawn shades. Then the gift shops, and tucked up on a side street, I knew, was Treasures of Atlantis, the so-called "Wonder Emporium" that Sam and I used to visit on rainy days. Once, I'd made him shoplift tiger's eye, and when he later confessed to Mom, I didn't speak to him for days.

Like that, the shops were gone, and I was at the docks, where I stopped to raise the height on my bike seat. Far off, a group of dudes in waders and beanies were unloading from a fishing trip—their boat was called *Sheila*. Sam and I used to invent boat names,

and we'd finally settled on HMS *Promise and Discipline*. We were six and seven and Mom had just about died laughing when she heard it. "Gotta learn to sail before you name the boat," she'd said, and Dad'd said: "I dunno, I like the idea that they're the only kids in Maine who *can't*."

Seat fixed and almost there now, I was starting to get nervous. What would I do in an aquarium? I knew *nothing* about the ocean. Not like Sam. His favorite place in the whole world, besides the shore behind my grandmother's house, was the Irma and Paul Milstein Family Hall of Ocean Life at the Museum of Natural History (countless visits meant that the exact, interminable name was forever in my memory). When Sam was thirteen, he sent a poem he'd written about a jellyfish to a curator there, and she was so moved that she invited us for a private behind-the-scenes tour. I was fourteen and I remember, more than anything else, my hangover.

Sam reminded me of a jellyfish, actually: porous, wispy, faintly luminous. He was a city kid not equipped to handle the city, unable to stand the pace, the traffic, the crush. I thrived and he floundered. As a fifteen-year-old, he'd choose to walk an hour rather than take a fifteen-minute train ride. As a five-year-old, he'd hurl himself on the sidewalk in front of the subway entrance, dead-weight and screaming. Passing strangers covered their ears or shot my mom looks; I remember studying salt scatter on the sidewalk and singing "Sixteen Going On Seventeen" under my breath to pass the time. Once a tantrum started, Sam couldn't be reasoned

with; we'd just wait until he screamed himself exhausted. Then my mom would scoop him up and load us into a cab, late for whatever birthday party/movie/child-psychology appointment we were headed toward.

Sam's official diagnosis was complicated. Depression, anxiety, and patterns of disordered eating that, his shrink believed, existed concurrently with certain aspects of obsessive-compulsive disorder. *That* mouthful, I felt, barely scratched the surface.

What about the way Sam seemed to flicker like a fluorescent light? Or how he occasionally hid in weird places—under a table, for example, or an out-of-the-way bathroom. And then there was the fact that, in spite of all this, he was perfect in school, every teacher's favorite.

At home, though, he was always the problem. Except for this past year, when I was.



The Lyric Aquarium had been imposing in my memory, but when I saw it that morning, the first word that came to mind was *rinky-dink*. The building was octagonal, once painted blue but now weathered the pale gray color of vitamins I'd gaged on as a kid. Inside, the foyer smelled of salt water and rot, and the ticket desk, a cheap folding table, was coated in a fine layer of dust. The main room's focal point was a touch tank that housed nurse sharks and sea cucumbers; another circular tank held rays and skates doing

slow, morose laps. A marine skeleton hung from the ceiling, its bones suspended by fishing line. A sickly whale? An extra-large tuna? It was a little embarrassing that I didn't have a clue.

"Violet?"

A white-haired white lady in a black fleece and tall brown rain boots was striding toward me, trailed by a wolfish dog. This must have been Joan, the aquarium's director. She broke into a huge smile as she reached for my hand.

"Oh my goodness, hello! You're *so* tall! So grown-up!" she told me, pumping my arm so hard my bicep shook. "I know it's been a few years, but wow!"

"I'm sorry. Have we met?"

"Oh, you wouldn't remember, you were just a kid."

I looked between the dog and Joan and realized I *had* met them. I mean, I'd only been thirteen, and more focused on the hot volunteer than her, but—

"How're your folks? And your brother! You know I still have a poem he wrote during one of our Critters of the Deep workshops? It's hanging in my office. *From the small sea snail to the great blue whale, everyone has feelings.*"

Apparently, I walked in Sam's intellectual shadow in not one state, but *two*.

"We're so happy to have you. Our very own Rudolph! Your grandmother was such a lovely woman. She helped me with research from time to time."

“My last name’s actually Larkin. My dad’s.”

“You’ll always be a Rudolph here. You’re the closest thing we have to a local celebrity.”

The dog barked. “Oh, hush, Boris, life isn’t a zero-sum game. He gets jealous,” she whispered conspiratorially. I offered her a weak smile. Boris could totally have the local celebrity title.

Joan handed me an informational packet labeled LYRIC AQUARIUM AND OCEANOGRAPHIC EDUCATION CENTER TRAINING MANUAL and two electric-teal T-shirts with ASK ME HOW I’M SAVING MANATEES printed on the back. Before I could follow the shirts’ instructions, Joan said, “Orion should be here any minute. He’s our star employee—works here year-round—and he’ll train you. Really, this is just so exciting. We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for your ancestors!”

“Neither would I. Though maybe that’d be better for everyone.”

She blinked, then burst out laughing. “What a card you are!” She chattered away about my schedule—“Just part-time, Tuesday through Friday, mostly be dealing with summer camp field trips, though we haven’t had a lot going on, I’m sorry to say. . . . Frankly it’s been a dead zone, there’s a flashier aquarium about thirty minutes south and they just built a penguin exhibit, so . . .”

I flipped through the packet, skimming paragraphs on marine biomes, longshore drift, and thermohaline circulation. An entire section was devoted to “Maine’s Natural Wonders” and listed the limestone cliffs of Fabian’s Bluff; Old Sow Whirlpool, the

largest whirlpool in the western hemisphere; the Desert of Maine. (*Not a true desert, but a tract of glacial silt!*) Did I really have to learn all this?

“Do you guys still do tide-pooling classes?” I asked. “I remember liking those with my brother.”

“*Weellll.*” Joan’s voice grew squeaky. “There’ve been some cuts to programming in the past few years. We’ve lost some funding, sadly, and a few of our educational programs have fallen by the wayside as a result. That’s why we’re closed on Mondays, you see.”

“Oh.” For the best, maybe. The last thing I needed on my conscience was a child banana-peeling on a sea star and cracking her head open on a rock. “What about the lobster demonstrations?”

“Good memory!” she said. “But, no, we don’t do those anymore either. There was an . . . *incident.*” She made pincers with her hands and chomped at the air. “I maintain our lobster was provoked, but . . .” She shrugged. “We’re a little light on the programming this year. But. So happy to have you on board. You’re going to do great work here.”

Boris raised his wolf-doggy eyebrows. He had me all figured out.

“I’ve got to go track down your paperwork, but please poke around! Explore. That’s what we’re here for.”

Joan disappeared upstairs, Boris jingling after her. My poking around left me underwhelmed. The aquarium’s star attraction was an (admittedly awesome) mammoth blue lobster named Louise, but otherwise, the exhibits were grim. Along one wall, a

three-foot-long box of soil and scraggly grass was labeled REEDS AND PLANT LIFE OF THE MAINE COAST. There was an outdated chart of coral reef death titled HELP SAVE OUR ECOSYSTEM, a fairly standard exhibit on the Gulf of Maine, and beside that, SEA MONSTERS OF OLD, which featured some seriously bad artists' renderings of Cassie, the Casco Bay Sea Serpent. Even the small nook of a gift shop was depressing. It sold, along with china Cassies and Lyric Lobsterfest T-shirts, unconscionably phallic stuffed sea cucumbers with googly eyes, no less.

The only exhibit that I lingered over was the *History of Lyric* display, and that's because it featured my ancestors, the town's founders. A model *Lyric* steamship sat behind glass, gathering dust on its miniature deck. Beside it, a computerized map charted the ship's course by red dotted line—technology ripped from *The Muppet Movie*—across the Atlantic, until the line exploded a few miles off the coast of Maine. Tiny animated stick figures bobbed in the water. One flailed for shore. The screen flickered, then rebooted, sending stick-figure Fidelia swimming on an endless loop toward safety.

*Sisyphean* was the SAT word I was looking for.

I turned to a picture of my great-great-great-grandparents, Fidelia and Ransome, on their wedding day. A copy of this same photograph sat on the cluttered mantel in our living room, but I'd never really studied it. Now I leaned in close. Fidelia was covered in head-to-toe lace, long veil, high-necked dress, a bouquet of flowers spilling over her unseen hands, leaves dangling almost to her

knees. Ransome stood beside her, top hat tucked under his arm. It wasn't in fashion to smile for photographs in those days, but his lips curled upward anyway—delighted, I guessed, at his good fortune. I didn't blame him. Even with all the lace, my great-great-great-grandmother was kind of a dish.

The informational plaque dated the photo at five years after the shipwreck. THEIR LOVE WAS OUR BEGINNING, read the caption.

I'd forgotten this was the unofficial town motto. Really great place to turn off the romance channel, Mom.

I was staring at the photograph and trying to figure out if I'd ever look that happy, let alone actually *be* that happy, when someone tapped my shoulder and said, "Hey, man."

I turned and two things happened at once:

1. The tapper realized I was, in fact, not a man;
2. I realized the tapper was, in fact, a man. Not just any man: the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Though *beautiful man* hardly does him justice. Because the tapper was so much more than that. He was a Certifiable Smokeshow and Knee Buckler to End All Knee Bucklers.

He had shaggy brown bedhead, clear olive skin, and green-gray eyes; chapped pink lips, broad shoulders, and a full chest that stretched the cotton of his teal aquarium T-shirt. His eyebrows were truly gorgeous in a way I did not know eyebrows could *be*: slightly arched and polished, drawing his whole face into focus. A

tattoo on his inner arm caught my eye, but he shifted to readjust a large purple lunch box he had over his shoulder, hiding the design before I could make it out. An eco-conscious tattooed eyebrow god? Yes, please.

The Knee-Bucklingest: he was *even taller than I was*.

Yes, I know. Didn't I just literally shave my head so that everyone would stay *away*? Hadn't I dedicated myself to turning off the romance channel? Hadn't I been so blinded by lust that I wasn't even able to *see* what my younger brother was going through, not even *in the actual hospital*?

But, but, but. If you had seen Orion Lewis's eyebrows. Born witness to their majesty. I'm telling you: you would have understood.

"Oh," he said, arching his glorious you-know-whats. "*Shoot.*"

"Fake-out," I said.

He looked perplexed. "Are you . . . ?"

An excellent kisser? On birth control?

"Female?" I suggested.

"Working here."

I reminded myself of my priorities. Celibacy. Disappearing.

"Yes. I'm Violet."

"Ah. You're—wow. I thought . . ." He fumbled for words, and the strap of his lunch box strap pulled at his T-shirt, exposing a tanned, smooth shoulder. In another life, I would have sunk my teeth into that very space.

He gestured toward his hair. "Sorry. I thought you were a guy."

"Whatever." I shrugged. "I thought you were one, too, so."

He laughed a stammering laugh, revealing a gap between his teeth. It suited him, and I was glad it hadn't been fixed.

"If you're Orion, I hear you're the star employee," I said.

"I'm sort of the only employee. We'd be in trouble if I weren't the star."

"It's just you and me?"

"And Joan and Boris," he said. "Come on. I'll show you around."

He led me upstairs to a very fishy-smelling break room with a wobbly table, an industrial-size freezer, and a fat maroon sofa upon which the dignified Boris reclined, front paws neatly crossed. Aquatically fetal blobs floated in jars of green juice on the counter; the shelves were scattered with dried bits of coral and the crusty shell of a horseshoe crab. Orion weaved among cardboard boxes full of aquarium merch to rub the dog's ears, and Boris, that smug bastard, yawned at me in triumph.

Orion opened the freezer next and pulled loose a silver bucket labeled FEED. The smell of days-old fish filled the room. I shuddered, thinking of poor Louise's insides.

"Are you a bio major or something?" I asked him as he placed the bucket on the table.

"Nah." Orion took a folded paper napkin from his pocket and tucked it under the wobbly table before placing the bucket on top. "I'll be a senior. In high school. You?"

"Junior."

“The height tends to throw people. You probably know that.”

I nodded. He unzipped his lunch box and removed a plastic bag filled with pearly-gray critters. Their heads were still attached, jelly black eyes peering at me through the plastic.

“Late breakfast?”

“Good stuff for the fish. I try to get them something special when I can swing it. You can leave the heads and legs on.” He pulled a Swiss Army knife from his pocket and when he passed it to me, his fingers didn’t linger on mine. *Good*—no funny business on his end either. I turned to the plastic bag.

“Um. Orion. What are these guys, exactly?”

He looked at me strangely. “They’re shrimp.”

Huh. Shrimp were usually pink and peeled, curled and dipped in cocktail sauce. I poked at the bag, as if to test for shrimpiness.

“I didn’t know shrimp had *legs*.”

“Really?”

“Sorry. I mean, I must’ve known that. I’m not really a fish person.”

He looked at me sideways. “You *do* know we’re working in an aquarium, right?”

“Yes. I know.”

“So there are lots of fish here,” he said slowly.

“Yes.”

“So why did you get a job working at an aquarium if you’re not a fish person?”

“Oh, well. I didn’t exactly *want* to work here.”

“You didn’t?” He looked confused. This was going all wrong. Goddamn this shipwreck gene. I could never say anything right.

“My parents got me the job.” Even I could hear how spoiled that sounded.

“Ah,” Orion said. “So you’re summer folk.” He zipped his lunch box closed and shouldered it.

“No! Well. My mom grew up here. I used to come here as a kid. I’m from the city. But I’m not like a tourist.”

“Portland? Boston?”

“Er. New York City?”

“The Big Apple, huh. I’ve never been.”

“*Really?* Oh my God, you’d love it. Like—if you like the ocean—at the natural history museum alone, there’s the great blue whale model, and the pearl diver exhibit, and the squid and the whale. . . .”

“Whereas here we just have the ocean.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant. Though, come on, you *do* have to admit,” I said, gesturing at the feed bucket, the jarred specimens, and the dog-hair-covered couch. Boris lifted his head. Why was I still talking? Why couldn’t I stop? The words were bubbling up, unstoppable and ugly: “This place used to be great, but it’s kind of depressing now, isn’t it?”

“I guess so,” Orion said quietly. He gestured at the shrimp. “You can bring those down after you finish dicing, okay?”

With that, he left. Boris trailed after him, woofing in disapproval. First day, and I'd managed to offend even the dog.



It took me an embarrassingly long time to dice the shrimp. I found Orion downstairs at the touch tank with one arm in water up to his elbow. Boris lay at his feet with his head on Orion's sneaker.

"I didn't know with the shells . . ." I said, placing the bucket beside him.

"You did fine," he said. With his bare hand, he took a shrimp between his finger like a cigarette and returned his hand to the water. The rays flocked to him, flapping at the tank's lip, splashing water over the side with their wings. They'd been the Eeyores of the sea world an hour ago, but now, with Orion, they looked almost mammalian, like a pack of tail-wagging golden retrievers.

"They love you," I said, standing next to him awkwardly.

"They're fish. They only love me for my food," Orion said shortly. I'd known him only a few moments, but I recognized thin skin when I saw it. I'd grown up with my brother, after all.

"About what I said . . . this seems like a great place to work." God, even when I was trying, I sounded sarcastic. My mom was right: I did have to work on my tone.

"I'm sorry," I tried again. "I think I'm really nervous."

Not perfect, but better. Truer, at least.

“It’s cool,” Orion said in a detached way that indicated just how deeply uncool I’d been. “I want to study marine biology in college. So. This is a good place to start. And money’s tight, but we’re applying for grants and stuff, and Joan’s been really supportive of me. She doesn’t let on, but she’s kind of a bigwig in the science world. She’s gonna write me a rec for college.”

“Cool.”

“Yup.”

We watched the rays in silence. Boris thumped his tail. The bubblers in the tanks whirred; upstairs, I heard Joan’s footsteps creaking. Talking with a new person was so hard without a drink.

“Do these guys have names?” I finally asked.

“Not officially.”

“But unofficially?”

Orion finally looked up from the rays.

“You really want to know?” he said.

“Sure.”

“Okay,” he said, inhaling, a little hesitant, maybe a little embarrassed. “The darker guys are bat rays. That’s Billy Ray Cyrus and Rachael Ray. That big tan one is Ray Charles. She’s Raven-Symoné.”

“Who’s that far one? Ray J?”

Orion shook his head. “Sting.”

I laughed so loud that Boris yelped. Orion patted him on the head.

“Who’s this guy?” I said as a large sandy one silked near

us—indistinguishable, as far as I could tell, from Sting and Raven-Symoné.

“This is Link Wray.”

“Like the guitarist?”

“You know Link Wray?” Orion sounded impressed. Good. Thanks to an appreciation for bad wordplay and my dad’s record collection, I was beginning to climb my way out of the hole.

“You can pet them,” Orion said. “Two fingers. That’s what we tell the kiddos.”

My fingers had barely skimmed the surface, when Billy Ray and Rachael Ray scattered. Sting all but pulled a U-turn to avoid me. I tried not to interpret ray rejection as a sign of how I’d fare with Orion.

“You need one named Famous Original Ray’s Pizza,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“A New York thing. They’re all over the city, in different iterations. People kept stealing the name, wanting to pass off Ray’s pizza as their own. Ray’s Original. Ray’s Pizza. Ray’s Famous. Original Ray’s.” I could keep going. Pizza had been my favorite drunken delight during my Year of Wild.

“Some urban mimicry right there.”

“Come again?”

“Mimicry. Like, a striped octopus mimics the sea snake. For protection, not selling pizza, but the idea’s the same. I’ll show you a video sometime.”

He lowered another shrimp in the water; either Rachael Ray or Billy Ray swooped toward him. I studied his inner arm, the small tattoo that was half-submerged in the tank: five horizontal lines, crossing through an open circle. I had my own stick-and-poke UFO on my rib cage, done by a friend in her kitchen in Brooklyn while her mom made us tacos.

“Is your tattoo a whole note?” I asked.

“Oh. Yeah.” He wiped his hand dry on his jeans.

“And Link Wray—are you into music?”

“Yeah. Let’s talk about your training.”

*Tattoo = highly classified information.* Noted, no pun intended.

“I’m gonna start you off in the gift shop,” he said. “Can you work a cash register?”

“Sure,” I lied. I didn’t want him thinking I was any more of a dumb turista than he already did. How hard could it be?

In my first day at the gift shop—which was a fairly slow day, I might add—I interrupted Orion eight times for help. *Eight*. I didn’t know how to run a credit card, nor did I know how to take the membership discount. No, I didn’t know if we had those Louise the Lobster sweatshirts in other sizes, let me ask Orion. I accidentally charged a beleaguered dad three times for a stuffed clown fish, then somehow managed to lock the register with his credit card inside it.

“So, when you said you could work a cash register . . .” Orion said, punching buttons to fix my mistake. The small child screamed.

“Excuse me,” the dad asked, “but where’s the penguin exhibit?”

Orion, for his part, was the prince of the aquarium. From my perch at the cash register, I learned he had an endless well of patience for questions: did horseshoe crabs have stingers (“Nope—they use those tails to flip over if they get knocked on their backs”), or did sea monsters really exist (“Never say never”), or why didn’t the aquarium have sea otters (“Man, I wish we had them, too! They’re so cute!”). He showed kids how to pet the rays just as he’d shown me, and even held up one tiny boy who wasn’t tall enough to reach.

In the afternoon, I spilled a fresh cup of coffee on a new box of stuffed sharks.

“*Shoot,*” Orion breathed. “C’mon. I’ll show you where the mop is.”

It is not an exaggeration to say that the most enjoyable part of the day was *cleaning* at the end of our shift. Orion put on Sam Cooke, one of my dad’s favorites, and whistled as he went about his closing tasks. I mopped like I’d never mopped before, scrubbing what felt like years’ worth of grime from the floor to songs I knew by heart. Maybe work wouldn’t be a complete disaster. At least I knew how to clean, and at least Orion had good taste in tunes.

“Can I do anything else?” I asked Orion after I’d finished mopping.

He was counting the money in the gift shop register, mumbling under his breath. The music was louder in the gift shop. Sam Cooke was singing about how his baby done gone away and left him. I wondered, briefly, if my mom missed me.

“Orion?” I repeated.

He turned and held my gaze. In his green-gray eyes, the evening took sudden shape. He was going to offer me a ride home. We’d stop for milkshakes, and he’d tell me the story of his tattoo. We’d engage in some strictly platonic and wholesome activity, like fly-fishing, or a trip to the hardware store. *Shoot*, he’d say, laughing at my hardware-themed puns, *that was a good one*.

“Did you reset the totals on this drawer by accident?” he asked. Oh. Just kidding.

“I’m not even sure I know what that means,” I admitted.

“Never mind. It’s cool.”

“I can help,” I said. I wanted so badly to be useful.

“No, really,” he said. “You can really just go home. Really.”

He didn’t have to say *really* a fourth time.



I arrived home to find Toby hunched over his *Wizard of Oz* puzzle. “Care to lend an eye?” he asked, sweeping a hand over the heap of pieces.

I shook my head. My back hurt from mopping. My dreamy, off-limits superior thought I was a dope. *I thought I was a dope*. I missed Sam. I missed my parents. I didn’t want a puzzle: I wanted salt and limes and somebody else’s body. I wanted to forget myself the way I normally did—only, I was supposed to be different.

“I might go for a walk on the beach,” I said.

“Flora and fauna can be a balm.”

The beach was no balm. It was low tide, smelled like sewage, and was littered with rusted cans of Polar Seltzer and smashed Shipyard beer bottles, plastic bags plastered to rocks, one water-swollen Nike sneaker. The beach had never been pristine, but the water had always been clean enough for underwater tea parties and breath-holding contests. Sam and I got so cold our skin turned blue, but Mom could swim all the way out to the buoys and back. “Hardy New England stock,” Dad said from shore, pulling his sweater tighter around him. He’d moved a lot as a kid—his explanation was always “my dad worked for General Motors”—but he’d lived the longest in Jacksonville, Florida, famous for strip malls, the Jacksonville Jaguars, and, apparently, the smell of paper mills. Whenever we complained about New York, he’d say, “Just remember, you could’ve grown up in a town that smells like sulfur and diapers.”

Would I have been different if I’d grown up there?

In March, I’d been caught smoking weed during the school day. Not on school grounds, but close enough that it mattered. Immediate suspension, and that went on my permanent transcript. Colleges loooooove that. My parents, who’d been pretty preoccupied with Sam, who sometimes called me their “little experimenter,” did an about-face. Cue curfew, tattoo discovery, room cleanout. Screaming. Door slamming. All three of us trying

to get the doormen on our team (Hector accepted my brownies, only to tattle on me *that very night*).

And every night, March, April, May, Sam lurked in my doorway with some dumb excuse. “Do you have a pencil sharpener?” “Have you seen my watch?” Like I didn’t know exactly what he was after. He really thought he was going to make me feel better? Downtown was the only thing that made me feel better.

“No,” I said. Then I closed the door so I wouldn’t have to see his face.

I didn’t have to baby him anymore. He was doing *better*. He’d gained weight. He played Magic with that one kid—Tim, I think? He was crushing his classes, though that was standard. He’d talked about joining stage crew. What a turnaround, we all thought, right up till his big date with Tylenol.

Sam had really needed the limelight, but my parents had their beam swiveled my way. And I was too busy throwing their love back in their faces to notice anything else.

I took my shoes off to wade, but the ocean was too cold and too gray, too weedy. How had Fidelia survived this water in March, let alone walked from the beach to town? I stared out at the ocean, imagining her ship somewhere beneath. I wondered which wreck felt worse: hers or mine.

Something in the sand caught my eye, opalescent and clawed. Abalone? A pearl? My breath caught. Maybe there *was* treasure on this beach. Maybe Sam and I hadn’t been wrong to think so. I dug with the edge of a mussel shell, taking care not to cut myself on its

razor edge. Even just a pretty shell, maybe. All I wanted was one tiny, pretty thing.

It was a tampon applicator, half-buried in the sand.



Toby had passed out on the living room couch. I moved the blender/guinea pig combo, put a blanket on him, and left him a note: *Violet would like to be alone right now but she wishes you luck with the puzzle. Tell her mom she'll call her later. Signed, a ghost. PS that cinnamon bun was freaking delicious.*

## THE WREXPERT

The next morning, Joan was pissed about the coffee-covered sharks. Gift shop sales, particularly stuffed animals, brought in most of the aquarium's money. I offered to pay, but she just shook her white-haired head at me.

"Just ask for help with the register next time, okay? Me—Orion—anyone."

"I asked Orion."

"And he didn't help you?"

"No! He did."

"Not enough, then," she said skeptically.

"No, no, he was *extremely* helpful. I'm just inept."

Joan frowned. "Violet, some professional advice. 'I'm inept' is a phrase I never want to hear from an employee. I'm sure most bosses would agree."

She, Orion, and Boris spent a good twenty minutes in her office after that. I busied myself with the crossword and prayed no one would come in, because I still didn't know the price of a ticket.

"Did I get you in trouble?" I asked Orion when he reappeared.

“Nah. I should have trained you better. Let’s go over the cash register, okay?”

He taught me. The lesson was disappointingly professional. He was so upset. I bet he never got in trouble.

“Don’t let the man get you down, Orion.”

“Joan’s right. And I’m pretty sure I am ‘the man.’”

“Wanna arm-wrestle for it?” I elbowed him, but he just looked down at my puzzle. I had the upper left, but after that, I was stuck. This was the point, normally, where I’d ask my mom or Sam for help.

“If you know one, shout it out,” I said.

“You should probably . . . like . . . save that for your break,” Orion said. “You can read the info packet if we’re slow, okay?”

I slipped the crossword into my back pocket. Truly, the least I could do.



Orion more or less monosyllabic’d me for the remainder of the week, which was fair. Left to my own devices, I learned a lot about the Bermuda Triangle from the info packet and named the cash register Scrooge McDuck.

Friday night, I cleaned extra hard and slow, resisting my release into the world. It was my first real weekend in Lyric, and I had no plans and no friends. In New York, Friday night meant a flurry

of texts and a train ride downtown, for sake-bombing, maybe, or concerts in Brooklyn, or to the bar that didn't card. Maybe we'd meet some NYU kids and they'd invite us back to their party. The beer was bad, but that wasn't the point.

I didn't miss any of it, but I also missed all of it.

I sprayed Windex on the glass *History of Lyric* display and wiped down the photograph of my great-great-great-grandparents. Their clean, shiny faces stared back at me, young-looking but wise. I leaned in close to them, and whispered: "What do you think, Fidelia? How long did it take you to feel happy here?"

"Who're you talking to?"

I whirled. Orion had crept up on me.

"No one. The photograph. Can't a girl commune with her ancestors in peace?"

"Ancestors?"

"They were my great-great-great-grandparents. Didn't Joan tell you?"

"She did *not*," Orion said. His eyes were suddenly wide. "You're *related* to them?"

"Well. Yeah."

"That's sort of awesome."

"I had nothing to do with it." I resumed my cleaning, embarrassed to have been caught talking to a plaque.

"Hey. Listen."

I looked back, and Orion was fiddling with the carabiner on which he kept his keys. I wondered if he rock climbed, or if he just

had it to look cool. Who was I kidding? *Of course* he rock climbed.

“Are you doing anything tonight?” he asked.

I almost dropped my Windex. *I beg your pardon?* How did we move so swiftly from “Can you please save your crosswords for your break?” to “Hey, Violet, let’s hang?”

“I have this friend. She’s super into Lyric history. You wouldn’t want to come meet her, would you?”

How silly of me. Orion wanted to impress a girl. Of course.

Even though I was lonely, I hesitated. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be paraded around as show-and-tell to help Orion get laid. Then again, my alternative was puzzling with Toby, who started so early at the bakery that he’d be asleep by seven, leaving me alone with my terrible drafts to Sam.

“She’s really nice,” Orion said. “And for what it’s worth, I’d really appreciate it.”

“All right. Fine. But Fidelia and Ransome are pretty much just names to me. If your friend’s looking for insider info, I’ve got nothing.”

“Totally fine,” Orion said. “Your presence will be more than enough.”

I wished he didn’t look so good when he grinned.



Allow me a quick primer on the history of Lyric, Maine—at least what I knew before Orion introduced me to his friend Liv Stone.

Most of my information was family lore, recited anecdotally by my parents and gathered over many years. My parents themselves had relied on my grandmother's stories and the town's general knowledge, which is all to say I wasn't provided with a bibliography for the following.

Nevertheless: In 1885, my great-great-great-grandmother on my mother's side, Miss Fidelia Rudolph, née Hathaway, boarded the steamship *Lyric* for passage from London to Boston. A March nor'easter sank the ship off the Maine coast. Fidelia was the wreck's sole survivor, though it took a while for that to actually be *revealed*.

See, when Fidelia washed up on shore, she didn't go running into town screaming, "Guys, I'm lucky *and* I persevered!" Instead, she disguised herself as a boy and found work running errands in the house of Ransome Rudolph, my soon-to-be ancestral grandfather. I suppose he eventually discovered she was a woman, because, next thing you know, they were married. Together they made the town official, naming it *Lyric* after her sunken ship. Then they started laying the groundwork for their long line of descendants, that pesky shipwreck gene popping up every now and then.

Since the *Lyric* sank, there had been a few efforts to locate the ship. Theories held that the wreck lay in the outer islands somewhere, but what with unpredictable tides and lack of funding, there hadn't been any serious attempt at discovery. The *Lyric* may have mattered to this one town, but the wreck wasn't exactly the *Titanic*. Frankly, no one really cared that much. *Their Love Was Our Beginning* was where the story started and ended for most people.

Except my brother and me, ages seven and eight; and Liv Stone, age seventeen.



Orion drove a minivan. Not just any minivan, he told me: Orion's car was the "original minivan," a 1980 Plymouth Voyager, complete with a wood-paneled exterior and beige leather seats. It was also extremely dirty. Half-drunk Arizona iced teas and energy drinks littered the floor of the passenger seat, and on the seat itself there were three empty M&M's bags, four crushed Coke cans, and an Icee cup tacky with melted blue sugar.

"Just shove that stuff onto the floor," Orion said, starting the engine.

I shoved and hopped aboard. "Sweet ride."

"Nothing flashy, but she works."

"Does *she* have a name?"

He looked sheepish.

"Wait!" I said. "Let me guess. Van Morrison. No! Van Helsing."

"Her official name is the Apogee."

"Good name." I sounded like I meant it, which was good, because I did.

"Thanks," he said, and I wanted to throw a parade to celebrate this moment of sincerity between us.

"So tell me about Liv," I said.

"She's one of my oldest friends," Orion said. He kept his eyes

on the road and seemed like a good, if cautious, driver, but then again, I didn't have a license. "You know the town motto?"

"Is your love also your beginning?"

"Not quite." He laughed. Subtext: *not yet*. "Liv's got some cool ideas about the motto. About your ancestors' story. She's working at the Lighthouse Museum this summer, over on Bat Wing Point? You know it?"

"Yeah. Never been."

He nodded. "It's pretty cool actually. I'd never been, even, until this past year, besides, like, fourth-grade trips. Mariah's mom—she'll be there tonight, too, Mariah, not her mom, and probably Felix—has made a big difference. It's a good spot for Liv. She's super"—he opened and closed his hand, like he might find the right word in the air—"bright."

"Huh." Just because I was off the sauce didn't mean that I wanted to hear him fawn. I changed the subject. "*Orion's* an unusual name. What's the story there? Are you named for the constellation?"

"My mom likes stars, I think. Liv says Orion's the son of Poseidon, though, so that's cool. She's one of those people who just like retains everything. She knows *so many facts*. She'd kill on *Jeopardy!*, you know?"

Seeing as I didn't have much choice, I tried to imagine the sort of girl Orion Lewis would fall in love with. Someone wood nymphy, I bet. I suspected Liv Stone had a curtain of flaxen hair, a wood-whistle clarinet, and an entourage of assorted woodland creatures. She was, without doubt, under six feet tall.

“Is that a *tape deck*?” I said. I punched the play button and a trumpet blared out at me, clear and fast and frantic.

“*Shit.*” Orion’s hand shot toward the console and knocked loose a full, uncapped bottle of Snapple from his cup holder. Dark pink drink sloshed into his lap, and he swerved. An oncoming car honked. Orion careened back toward the shoulder, throwing his arm across my chest and slamming on the brakes. Somewhere in there, I screamed.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

We were safely pulled over. The trumpet was still playing.

“Swell,” I said.

Orion’s arm had me pinned against the seat, still. He had quite a wingspan.

“I’m so sorry. Are you sure you’re okay?” His hand held tight to my right arm, his freckle-less forearm braced across my chest.

“You can let go of me,” I said.

“Sorry.” He uncurled his fingers. The pads of his fingers were squashed and square, nails bitten down to the quick. Blood rushed back to my arm.

Orion moved with mechanical precision. He turned off the music, then dabbed uselessly at his jeans with the hem of his shirt. He fished the offending Snapple bottle from the pedals, dumped its remains out the half-open window, and tossed the empty bottle toward the graveyard at my feet. Finally, he switched on his blinker and eased back onto the road.

“What the hell was *that*?” I said.

“Nothing. Just practice tapes.”

“That was *you*?”

“Nothing serious. Just ideas.”

“You *wrote* that?” My arm was still tingling from where he’d gripped me.

He bit his lip. “I dabble.”

“Orion Lewis, are you in a *band*?”

“It’s complicated.” His hands were tight on the steering wheel, and from this angle, his tattoo was more visible than ever. Something juicy had gone down, I could tell.

“C’mon, man, you can tell me. My dad raised us on Bowie and Patti Smith and the Talking Heads and Joy Division. Music is liiiiife, man. Rock and *roooooo!!!!!!*.”

He looked at me sidelong. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?” he said, but he’d cracked a smile. Mission accomplished. “Liv’s brother and I used to play together. Jazz.”

“Jazz, baby! Did you guys break up? Oooh, was it because you fell in love with his sister? A Yoko situation? *West Side Story* meets ‘Under the Sea’? Was there a rumble in the aquarium? Was there—”

“He died. Three years ago. Bike accident.”

He lifted his chin slightly. I think I said I was sorry. I *hope* I said I was sorry.

“Don’t worry,” Orion said, “You didn’t know.”

What I remember next is struggling to breathe. The car had stopped on the side of the road, and we were by the woods. A local

spot, he said, don't tell your New York friends. I was sitting down but I was dizzy. His friend was dead. We'd almost hit a car. My friend's friend had jumped out the window once. My brain was on the fritz. Was I going crazy? Lost marbles, like Tootles in *Peter Pan*. Was that—? We were almost in a car accident. I couldn't breathe.

Sam had tried to die.

Orion said something. Sam had tried to die. Orion's door was open. Orion and I had almost died. "Violet?" My thoughts were mashed potatoes, and Sam was in Vermont, learning to eat, like a baby. It was freezing. A noise: a hand shaking dice. "Violet, you okay?" I'm not blacking out, not high, def not an orgasm. The dice clackclackclacked. "Violet, it's okay." A skeleton, playing her own rib cage like a xylophone. "Am I dying?" That was my voice, cut with dice clacks. I spoke and my mouth moved against my thighs. That was weird. I'd folded in half, I guess. My eye sockets were in my knees. My arms cradled my head. I couldn't breathe. Purple and gold galaxies danced on my eyelids.

"I can't—"

Orion's hand was between my shoulder blades, the way you might calm a quaking dog.

"You're not dying," he said. "Deep breaths."

My teeth were chattering. That was the dice noise. The rib noise. My own teeth. Why were my teeth chattering?

"It's okay," Orion said. His hand spread wide and flat. "Deep breaths."

A breath shuddered through my body. Time passed. Each of Orion's fingertips touched my back. My teeth slowed. I thought of Mom, Dad, even Sam telling me it was okay that time I lost my apartment keys and cried. Time passed. Orion's fingers were like a tree frog's. I'd gone through a tree frog phase as a kid and in my head I recited different species until finally, finally, my teeth stopped.

I sat up and the world pitched.

"Slow," Orion said.

I went slow. I leaned against the seat and gazed up at the gray fabric ceiling of the minivan. My teeth clacked once and I steadied my jaw with my hands. My face was wet. I'd been crying. What the fuck had just happened? God, poor Orion.

"Sorry. My body—that was weird. God. Sorry. Your friend—"

"Do you get those a lot?" Orion said.

"What do you mean, those?"

"Panic attacks. My mom gets one, like, every tax season."

"No," I said, because panic attacks weren't part of my repertoire, I'd never had one. Why did cars have fabric ceilings? Why—oh—fuck. I understood what he was trying to say.

"I don't want to have a panic attack," I told him. My voice sounded exposed, young, and Orion's face was full of sympathy.

"Well, it already happened, so all you can do now is go slow. You okay?"

"I think so." I peeled my head from the headrest and looked him in the eye. "I'm sorry about your friend."

“I’m sorry—whatever happened there. Whatever I did to, um. For my driving back there. I’m sorry.”

“Were my teeth chattering?”

“Like crazy. You want me to call someone? Or I can take you home—”

“Can we just sit here for a second?”

“For sure.”

He got back in the car. We sat there. A breeze blew in from Orion’s open door. My tears were drying on my face, and when I surprised myself with a yawn, the salt tracks cracked like riverbeds. I felt like I’d run six marathons and hydrated with iced coffee. I said as much to Orion and he laughed.

“I’d offer you some really old Grapeade, but I’m all out,” he said, gesturing at the Snapple bottle.

“The grossest flavor,” I said, and he laughed, I laughed, and it felt really good. Then my laugh went wacky, dangerously so. My teeth did a quick Irish jig. Christ almighty. Not even Sam had panic attacks. I would’ve heard about them. I rubbed my face with my shirt.

“Do I look terrible?” I asked.

“You look fine.”

I flipped my mirror down. “I’m *completely* blotchy, Orion.”

“You look good. Who cares if you were crying, anyway?”

He was right. Who cared? I slammed the mirror shut. “Let’s go meet your girlfriend,” I said.

“Take it easy,” he said.

“Sorry. Not your girlfriend.”

“No, *you* take it easy. Your body’s done work just now. Just, like, be nice to yourself, okay?”

The thought had never even occurred to me.

“Oh—um—and—don’t say anything to Liv about her brother. She doesn’t like when that’s the first thing people know about her.”

“I’d never.”

“I figured,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets.

I don’t know what it was, exactly, but that *figured* made me feel a little better. Like we were on our way to something. If not friends, then *friendly*.



We walked through the woods and found ourselves on the edge of a rock slab, big as a baseball diamond, long and flat and sandy gray, a little yellow in the fading sun. We could see all of Lyric below us, the coastline, one street, no stoplights. Three people were grouped around an unlit inflatable lantern, two girls and a boy, and past them, the rock ended and the sky began.

“Wait’ll the stars come out. Normally the fog rolls in, but I think it’s going to stay clear tonight,” Orion said. He walked across the slab, clipping his carabiner around his belt loop as he went.

“*Leeewis!*” called the boy as we walked closer. He had shoulder-length hair and was seated on his heels like a yogi. One of the

girls was wearing a baseball cap and smoking a cigarette. The non-smoking girl had a choppy black bob, a nose ring, and a perfectly lipsticked red mouth. That must've been Liv. She wasn't a pixie princess, but she was certainly a babe.

"Felix is hoping you brought weed," the babe said.

"Better. This is Violet. She works at the aquarium."

"You're his underling? Pro tip: he's actually a softie."

"Thanks for that, Mariah," Orion said. The other girl took a drag on her cigarette and Orion turned to her. "She's Fidelia's great-great-great-granddaughter, Liv."

Something whacked Orion in his chest; Felix had pelted him with a flip-flop. Orion pelted him back.

"*Boooooo!*" Mariah screamed. "I take it back! He's not a softie, he's the worst!"

"Ignore them," Liv said, standing up and reaching out her hand. "They're just upset they don't have a project."

Liv Stone was not the bohemian fairy I'd envisioned. She wore all black—not in a Goth way, and not in a chic New Yorker way either, but in a plain, *black is my uniform* way. Her black dress was a sack that hung to her knees, and she wore black sneakers, even the laces and the soles, and a black Portland Sea Dogs cap. Her hair had been gathered into two thin braids, locks of hair escaping the plaits and sticking out like straw. The only thing flashy about her was a ring that sparkled on her index finger: a huge purple rock in a gold setting, so craggy and rough-hewn it seemed as though it

had been ripped directly from the earth. I wondered if that rock had left behind a crater somewhere.

She crushed my hand in a strong handshake, and something thrashed in my stomach, finned and flickering.

Mariah said, "You want a beer? Liv's driving."

"Liv's always driving," Felix said. His right eye moved slower than his left. "That's why we love her."

"A reason we love her," said Orion.

Yes beer. No beer. *Take it easy.* I shook my head and sat between Liv and Felix.

"So what's the project?" I asked.

"Liv's a Lyric truther," Mariah said.

Felix waggled his fingers. His right eye was glass, I saw now. "Small-town conspiracy. Big cover-up. WooOOOooo."

"Full disclosure, Felix is extremely woo-woo," Mariah said.

"Mariah, you gotta let the woo-woo reveal that on their own schedule."

"Violet should know what she's getting into with you clowns," Mariah said.

Felix cackled. Orion grinned. Liv's expression was difficult to read beneath the brim of her hat. She brought her cigarette to her lips, inhaled, and the tip bloomed red with heat. Her eyes were wintry.

"I'm just saying," Liv repeated, swallowing her words along with her smoke. "The way this town rallies around this supposed

*love story*”—here, she exhaled, and her voice dripped with disdain—“is bewildering. I mean, really. *Their Love Was Our Beginning?*” She scoffed, then looked at me. “No offense. I know they were your people.”

“None taken.”

“It’s just so ridiculous”—“Here we go,” said Felix—“so *ridiculous*, Felix, that everyone thinks Fidelia and Ransome’s story was a fairy tale! Violet. Would you like to hear the big questions?”

“*Here’s* a question,” said Felix. “If two trains leave Chicago at six-oh-five p.m. . . .”

“They’d leave two *different* stations,” said Mariah.

“If one train leaves Chicago, and one leaves another dimension . . .”

“But now you need the theory of relativity.”

“Maybe Violet brought that,” said Felix.

“Orion wants to kill us,” Mariah said.

“Orion, don’t be mad.”

“Orion, we love you.”

“Orion, ole buddy, ole pal . . .”

“For Pete’s sake! I’m not mad! I just want to listen to Liv for fifteen seconds without you two putting on the Goon Show!”

“We all agreed to call us *Mastergoon Theater*, Orion,” said Mariah.

“You’re right,” said Orion, rolling his eyes. “My bad.”

“I, for one, *love* Mastergoon Theater,” said Liv.

I really hated the smell of cigarettes.

Mariah hooked her thumb toward Orion. “See what I mean? The angriest he gets is ‘for Pete’s sake.’”

Orion put his head in his hands.

“So . . . the big questions?” I said to Liv.

“Thank you,” she said. “To start: Why didn’t Fidelia just write her family after she washed up on shore? Why did she disguise herself as a boy? Was she hiding from something, and if so, from whom? Why did Ransome just *give* this strange, beaten-up boy a job in his home? Think about how fucked up she must have looked. She’d just pulled herself out of the sea! And why doesn’t anyone think it’s weird that Ransome *married the woman he thought was a boy*? And why, then, would she choose to reveal that she’d survived the wreck, months later? Yet here we are. Over a century past, and still celebrating their love.”

“Maybe they were, uh, gender-blind,” I offered.

“In Maine in 1885? Yeah, right. Even if they were, trust me, that’s not how people in this town are interpreting the story.” Liv licked two fingers, clamped them around the end of her cigarette, then tucked the butt into the front pocket of her dress. “The things I do for you, Orion, you see this?”

“You’re doing it for the *planet*, Liv, not for me.”

“Are we done yet?” said Felix.

“The ship, Liv,” Orion said.

Liv’s arm shot out and she gripped Orion by his shoulder. My heart fluttered—because of them, or for them, I didn’t know.

“The ship!” Liv cried. “How could I forget!”

“Liv, do you subject my mother to this every single day?”  
Mariah asked.

“Say more, Professor Stone! I sense I’m about to become a convert!”

“I will say more, Felix, thank you. Final question: Why hasn’t the ship been found?”

“What, you think the wreck was a hoax?” I asked. That seemed extreme.

She shook her head. “Of course not. I just think the fact that no one wants to look for the ship is indicative of a larger problem. No one wants to address the fact that thousands of other people died. Everyone just wants to celebrate the love story. *Literally: no one wants to look for the wreckage.* Consider it a metaphor: no hunting for the ship, no hunting for the underbelly of Ransome and Fidelia’s story.”

I made a mental note to start encouraging people to *consider things a metaphor*. Also to use the words *underbelly* and *indicative*.

“My mom calls her the wrexpert,” Mariah said.

“As in wreck expert,” Orion said.

“Yeah, Orion, I think she gets it,” said Mariah.

Felix clapped wildly. “This girl’s gonna change the world!”

“I’m not *trying* to change the world,” Liv countered. “I just don’t understand why no one in this town will turn the rock over.” She fluttered her hand along her acned cheekbones, and I went to gather my hair and touched only bare neck with dirty, rock-dusty

fingers. The sensation was startling, like missing the last step on a flight of stairs.

“Anyway,” Liv said. “It’s cool to meet you. You must know a ton about your family.”

“Hardly. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re perfect,” Mariah said. She shot me an enormous thumbs-up.

“Tobias Rudolph is your family, right? From the bakery? We were supposed to meet, but he never got back to me,” Liv said.

“Ooh, can you get us free blackberry pie?” Mariah gasped.

“Toby’s my uncle, and maybe on the free pie. Sorry he never got back to you. He’s not the most responsible. But you should come poke around our house if you want. There’s bound to be some stuff lying around.”

Liv’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Sure. I’ll be at the aquarium during the day, but otherwise, yeah.”

“I told my parents I’d see a movie with them tomorrow. But next Saturday? One week from tomorrow?”

“She’ll show up,” Mariah warned.

“Sure,” I said. “I am embarrassingly free.”

Felix propped himself up on his elbows. “I don’t think you realize this, Miss Violet, but you just made Professor Stone’s *life*.”

Felix lifted himself into bridge pose, then did a back walkover.

“Show-off,” scolded Mariah.

“Nice work, Lewis,” Liv said.

She reached over and slapped a mosquito on Orion's calf. She didn't even stop talking as she did it, or warn him. Just slapped his calf and carried on.



The night grew dark and the sky fell in a starry dome around us, so panoramic and dizzying it hurt my eyes. I craned my neck back so far my vertebrae crunched. The conversation meandered, then pattered, and Felix and Mariah went to pee in the woods. I was left alone with Orion and Liv. They were playing slaps now, their hands hovering over each other, quick reflexes and stinging heat. I felt like I was in one of those tourist-trap vortexes where marbles rolled uphill. They weren't *together*, according to Orion, but I still felt like a third wheel.

"I'm gonna get a better look at the stars," I said.

"Just don't go too close to the edge. It's a far drop," Orion said, and Liv smacked his hands.

Away from Orion and Liv, I stretched my eyes wider, and then, when they couldn't go as wide as I wanted, I literally held them open with my fingers. I was weirdly aware of my eyeballs as *eyeballs*, moving and wet. I wondered if the stars were this good in Vermont. Mom and Dad probably couldn't see anything besides the moon, which was full-ish, waxing or waning, who knew. I wished that I were the sort of person who could identify constellations, point to the sky and declare, *Cassiopeia*.

“Glass half-full, Chatterjee.”

“No way she’ll ever say yes. You heard her—she *hates* a love story.”

Felix and Mariah, talking in low voices, closer to me than they realized. Sound carried well across the rock.

“But their love story was our beginning!” Felix said. “Lewis is a fox. I’d keep him on the hook, too.”

“You don’t have her willpower. You’d make out with him after ten minutes.”

“Poor guy has gone without action for *so long*.”

“Oh, fuck off, Felix, she doesn’t owe him access to her vagina.”

“That’s not what I *meant*. Come on, Mariah, you know I’m a feminist.”

“Fair-weather feminist, more like.”

“Hi?” I called cautiously.

“Oh, shit,” said Felix, “we forgot to swivel.”

A phone flashlight popped on: They were on the edge of the woods. Felix patted the ground beside him.

“Sorry—I wasn’t trying to—”

“Eavesdrop?” Mariah said.

“C’mon, Mariah, she’ll learn about the Orion-and-Liv saga soon enough. I’m telling you, if we all just talk about this, get it out in the open . . .”

I glanced toward Orion and Liv. They had a way of being together that made me ache. During the Year of Wild, there had been lots of bedrooms, lots of tongues and mouths, lots of hands

up my shirt and down my pants—but there hadn't been anyone who'd looked at me the way Orion looked at Liv Stone. There hadn't been anyone who realized I was being bitten by a mosquito before I did.

“How long have they been a thing?” I asked.

“A thing for years. A couple for never. The heart craves the familiar,” Felix said.

“It's not really any of our business,” Mariah said, not meanly, just to move us along. She gestured for me to sit and I joined them, feeling suddenly shy.

“So,” Mariah said warmly, “where're you from?”

“New York City,” I said.

“Ah! New York is my destiny!” said Felix.

“New York's not a bad idea for you, actually, Felix,” Mariah said. “I read about this psychic a few years back who scammed the shit out of these rich New Yorkers. City dwellers are the true suckers,” she said, sounding quite happy about it. “And what brings you here, Violet?”

“Um—my mom grew up here.”

“She wanted you to experience the torture firsthand?” Mariah said.

“Is Lyric that bad?” I asked.

“Not if you have friends. Which you do,” she said. She patted me on the knee, and I felt, in the best way, like we were in kindergarten, our friendship decided with one easy exchange.

“Yeah, at least you found us in this wack town, which is

evidence, Mariah, *that energy in the universe has a pattern and we meet the people we need to meet through its seemingly random energy.*”

“That was barely English, and correlation does not imply causation.”

“She says I can’t start a coven.”

“I said you should think about what it means, as a man, to start a group that’s traditionally female.”

“But the whole point is inclusivity!”

“I really can’t have this argument with you again, Felix.”

“So we *are* arguing.”

“God. No. What I’m saying is . . .”

In the dark, far from us and beside each other, Orion and Liv were so close they might’ve been one person.



When I got home, Toby was on the phone. By the all-too-familiar way he was mashing the heel of his hand into his eye socket, I knew he was talking to my mom. He saw me and practically threw the phone at me, saying, “Hold on, Margaret, here she is,” before rushing off.

Mom (suspicious): Where were you?

Violet (trying hard to cooperate): Out with people.

M (long pause): What *kind* of people?

V: Heroin addicts, Mom.

M: Heroin's a huge problem in this country, Violet, particularly in Lyric. Toby volunteered for a while at the needle exchange, I believe. I'm sure he's got some stories to share. Would you care to talk about the dangers of opioids? What it does to a body? What I see every day at the hospital?

V: You're a pediatric surgeon, Mom.

M: My point exactly.

[*That* shuts Violet up.]

V: They were normal people, Mom. Kids from work.

M (sighs): I'm sorry. I'm just worried. Why did you turn your phone off?

V: I don't have service.

[silence]

M: We miss you here.

[silence]

M: We spoke to Sam last night. I think he'd really like to hear from you.

V: He hates the phone.

M: Why don't you write to him? You know how much he loves letters. You're not that far away from him, you know. You could even go visit. Toby would take you, I'm sure.

[silence]

M: Toby told me you're trying to disappear.

[Silence, shocked this time. Violet's forgotten this was her goal. How has she forgotten? She'll start now, on this phone call. She won't say another word.]

M: Honey . . . that made me so sad to hear. Disappearing? That's not you. You take up so much *space*. You walk into a room and people pay attention. Boys, girls, young, old. Not because of how you look, but because of who you are. Dramatic and charming and *big*. You have such a presence, honey. And when people look at you, you light up!

[Violet thinks of the perfect Halloween costume: Attention Whore. Maybe she could rig up a spotlight, somehow, and dress like a *Cabaret* dancer.]

M: Write to Sam, honey. We miss you. Don't disappear.

[Violet says nothing and hangs up softly, so softly she bets her mom doesn't even notice. Mission accomplished.]



Toby was doing the puzzle. I hated puzzles. Especially this one.

“Why did you tell my mom I wanted to disappear?” I said to him.

“Because I was worried,” Toby said honestly. “I’m *still* worried.”

“Well, don’t be. Just ignore me, okay? Better yet, just pretend I’m not even here.”