

PRETEND LAND

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing
in the College of Arts & Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College at the
University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida.

Fall Term 2011

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Abstract

The bond between a mother and child is thought to be sacred. It is a phenomenon that society seems to expect as axiomatic based on the single biological fact that a woman carries her child, creating an inseparable bond; even for non-biological mothers, the bond is perceived as one of supreme importance. What happens to the mother and to the child, if this sacred bond is broken?

The intent of this thesis was to focus on the perceived bond between mother and child and turn it on its head. As a work of fiction, *Pretend Land* is a series of interrelated short stories about a young woman named Dalia and her issues of abandonment and consequent coping mechanisms. My goal was to explore the effects of mother/child separation through the vehicle of storytelling and create a tale that would allow an honest narrative, not to prove one thing or another, but to finally bring a story to the forefront about an absent mother and the child she left behind.

Dedication

For my grandparents; all that I can't remember, I imagine.

For my parents, the best people this earth ever brought forth.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my committee for their determined efforts to set time aside for my thesis. Thank you to my out-of-department committee member, Dr. Santana, for her undying enthusiasm. Thanks to Dr. Neal for her dedication to my work and to my thesis chair, Dr. Rodríguez Milanés, for being there to turn on the light switch whenever I wandered in the dark. You were absolutely amazing.

Thank you, Arlencia, Ian, Marcus, Paige, and Jamale. You all played your role in helping me, even if you didn't realize it at the time.

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Pretend Land

I was in the middle of ruining my life. Downing bottles of liquor, taking shots of tequila like I could take the world alone. But I wasn't alone. Aaron sat by me as I rolled the joints and bypassed my junior and senior classes to walk to the corner store where they didn't check for ID.

Most days that we skipped school, we'd end up in Daytona, partly passed out, partly having philosophical conversations on the beach the way stoners do. After stopping to see Aaron's dealer and grabbing some bottles, we'd drive up I-4 east, leaving Orlando behind. I'd watch him contently, my knight in shining armor, legs propped outside the window. I'd often run my hands through his sandy hair as he drove me away.

I think we'd talk about anything and everything except the strings pulling us along like marionettes. Our drama at home shaped our every decision, even these trips to Daytona. But we couldn't talk about it. And why would we? Talking meant eventually taking responsibility for the skipping, drinking, and smoking. He was the prince of my Pretend Land and the only thing he asked of me was that I act as his princess, leaving behind the real world: the pain, reality, the truth.

"We'll buy a house on the beach," he said, pulling from the blunt, sapphire eyes narrowed. "No fucking hurricane'll touch us." He waved his hand. "And what if it did? We could live on this sand."

I stifled a laugh, watching Aaron's solemn expression. My bottle was running low, so I was nodding and leaning, hair in my eyes, wet from the waves coming in just to my knees. I played with my toes and spread my hands out to the sand, leaving my mark until the next wave.

"A beach house," I said. What else did I have to add to this fantasy? I poked holes in the sand, gathered handfuls of mud and squished the dirt through my hands. "I want a huge library filled with history books and fiction and comics."

I didn't mean the comics. That was the liquor talking. The history books, though, they meant something to me. Even though my mother had been gone for years, even though I was the one who took care of my little brother, Benny, more than she did before she left, I held on to what it used to be when it was good.

I remember distinctly the moments when our designated occupations as mother and daughter were clear.

Before Benny, my mother would tell me tales, stories of her grandparents' tribe. The history of the Cherokee nation in north Georgia was half my heritage and the platform on which we connected. I looked like my mother and that had to be unnerving in a way that urged her to be certain I knew where I came from. For her, it was something more than genetics that gave me her nose and eyes.

The funny thing is talk like that didn't scare me when I was younger because all I wanted was to be like my mother. It chilled my spine now. Sometimes I'd catch my father sneaking glances at me, and I knew it wasn't me he was seeing. I couldn't quite understand how a connection that my mother had described to me as "unbreakable" could be snapped so irreparably. But even with my mother long gone, I could still hear her voice.

“The whole world opens up to you, but the people don’t listen.” Her words echoed in my head as I stretched my legs on the beach, head swimming. The scene was set before me, my mother and I were walking, my hand clasped safely in hers. The sky was clouded over, thunder beat down on us, but I followed my mother without question when I was naïve about the world.

Today was warm, but the sun was covered by clouds, something like the calm before the storm. I let my head hang back, my body in the position of total vulnerability. Aaron was laid out beside me, his caramel skin glowing in the heat. I smiled. I felt free.

This was Pretend Land. Reality didn’t give us our freedom, so the only way to deal was to free ourselves from reality.

“Why do you think the moon pulls at the sea?” I asked. My eyes were closed and my senses open to the earth around me.

Aaron groaned. “Suffocation.”

I peered at him through squinted eyes. “No. No...it’s a love story.”

Aaron shook his head. “No. *Hell* no. It’s a constant battle between the two.”

“Sometimes love is a battle,” I said, knowing I was talking about us more than the moon.

“Not this one.” He coughed, smiling a bit. “There’s no mutual bond,” he said, pointing to the sky. “Even when the moon isn’t out, the water feels it, pulling and tugging at it...a nagging nuisance, a reminder that—without the moon—it can’t even move on its own.”

I fell back into the sand, disappointed with that answer. “Maybe what you think is a nuisance is passion? Maybe there’s fire in this relationship.”

He smirked at me. “Love is always the answer with you.”

I tugged at his shirt. “You feel that?” I tugged harder. “That feel like nagging to you?”

He gazed at me quietly for a moment with an amused look on his face, and then he turned serious. “We don’t have that kind of relationship.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, letting my hand fall away.

“You’re not my moon.”

“Well what am I, then?” I asked, curiously.

“I don’t know.” He took my hand in his. “I think you’re taking the analogy too far.”

I didn’t know what to say. He always had me guessing. We’d been together, now, for four years one way or another and most times I still had no idea what we were.

I stroked his fingers as he held mine, his hands rough and calloused for whatever reason. I wondered what he did when we weren’t together. His skin felt warm and humid, like a sauna, giving off heat.

I picked up our hands and pulled him into me, falling back onto the sand. He hovered over me, his sandy hair framing his face and hiding it from the sun. He lowered his head to mine and planted thin kisses on my cheeks and forehead. He was delicate and even. Not just now, but whenever we’d melt into each other.

Our hips touched and I felt a desperate need for contact. I cupped his face in my hands and pressed our lips together. He tasted like weed and vodka.

Aaron put his hand on my hip and squeezed my ass as we passed touches back and forth, pressing together. He pulled away and rolled to my side after a few moments.

Water tickled my toes as the waves washed up. I closed my eyes to the sun while Aaron drank some more.

Twenty minutes later we gathered our bottles and left after gazing at the waves in silence. Like always, leaving Pretend Land had an immediate effect on me. Reality was creeping back in, rotting our connection, and I began to shiver as the quiet became almost deafening. On the way back, my feet were planted to the floor, my arms glued to my side. I could feel the grains of sand settling into every crevice of my body.

“We could just keep riding,” I said. When I said it, I knew I was buzzed. I glanced over at Aaron to check out his motor skills. He hadn’t seemed very drunk.

He shook his head. “We’re going home. Your dad’s probably gonna know we were together again. You’ll be in enough trouble.”

I’d blocked that out and now realized I wasn’t ready to handle another fight with my dad. I was already technically still grounded for another tryst with Aaron three weeks ago. I’d snuck out of the house to meet him at a party where I got too smashed to get home safely and ended up out all night. The days following the party, I’d heard all kinds of rumors about Aaron and some girl, but I hadn’t seen it and I hadn’t asked him about it either. It’s possible I imagined it all in my head, anyway.

My mind stayed in that place for awhile and then Aaron spoke, cracking the silence like a whip.

“What I said about you not being my moon...that’s a good thing. You shouldn’t feel bad.”

My face broke into a small smile and I turned from him to the window. “I didn’t take it personally.” I could feel him looking at me as I watched the trees appear and vanish in front of me.

“Well, if you did...” he paused for a moment, swallowing audibly. “If you took it personally, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know,” I said.

“I was talking about my dad.”

I already knew he’d called. I’d figured it was the reason why we’d made the trip.

“Was it more of his blame-game shit?”

He nodded. “Sometimes...sometimes I wonder if I should’ve stayed in Boston with him after the divorce.”

“Your dad was an alcoholic before he married your mom, Aaron. It’s not your fault,” I said firmly.

“I know that, but he needed someone.”

“Do you really think he’d be okay if you’d stayed?” I asked him.

“No. I don’t know. I mean...he fucking calls and tells me I’m the reason why he lost his job and why he drinks every night.” Aaron tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “What the fuck am I supposed to say to that? I try to tell myself it’s just the booze talking...”

He looked so pained it almost made me want to cry. I knew exactly what he meant, trying to come out with a scenario that didn’t leave you feeling hollow.

Mine was a clear-cut “they grew apart” excuse for my mom and dad. They obviously got married too fast and too young and the age difference—ten years—took its toll. My mom left because she couldn’t stand the sight of my dad anymore and it hurt her to no end to leave me and Benny behind. That was the story I lived by and it was the one my dad allowed.

But then there were days when that story wouldn't fit. Since my dad remarried a woman twenty years younger than him, I couldn't always count on the age difference story to exclude me from blame and I'd begin to feel the holes in my story grow larger. I couldn't stop myself from wondering if I was, somehow, the reason why she left.

My glance fell to my lap as I felt a familiar weight settle on my chest. We were so far away from Pretend Land now.

Aaron reached over and grabbed my hand. "I know you're thinking about her." He squeezed my hand. "I'm here," he said and the pain began to dissipate. "Hey."

I turned to him as he swept his eyes back and forth from the road to me.

"I love you, you know that? You're the only person I feel safe with." His look was desperate, almost grasping.

"I love you too," I said, squeezing his hand so tight it hurt. I couldn't face the world without him.

For a moment, it felt like we could exist in this reality, it felt like I could believe all his promises without booze or weed. I felt like Aaron and I could carve out a normal life and our stupid parents wouldn't own one more second of our emotions. My dad would start to like him and maybe Aaron would even see him as the father he no longer had. It felt so good, so incredibly good, that even when I looked back toward the road and saw the tree in our way, a feeling of calm washed over me.

Even as Aaron shouted and swore to God, even as the car jerked, but not in enough time, I stayed in my peace, knowing that Aaron loved me.

Before I lost consciousness, I was content. It was when I woke up that I realized how absolutely and completely far I'd fallen from the girl my mother left behind.

The light was blinding when I opened my eyes. I moved to put a hand over my face, but my right arm felt heavy.

"It's broken."

I whipped around and, through squinted eyes, saw my best friend, Kara, sitting in the corner of the room. "What?" My voice cracked.

"It's a compound fracture. You're gonna have a pretty nasty scar."

I looked down and saw that my arm was cased in a hard, white cast.

Kara stood up and walked toward me. Her shoulder-length dark brown hair was pulled into a ponytail. She looked tired.

"What happened?" I said. "Where's Aaron?"

"Aunt Julia checked him out hours ago." Kara sat on the bed and stared inquisitively at me.

"Why isn't he here?" I shifted to sit up, but felt a pain shoot up my torso. Kara put a gentle hand on my chest.

"Be still. There's bruising." She pulled the covers up on me and smoothed them out.

"Your dad wouldn't let Aaron anywhere near you."

My heartbeat quickened. "My dad's here?"

Kara made a face. "Of course he's here. You were in an accident."

I took a deep breath and inspected my cast. "Is he okay?"

“Oh yeah, he’s perfectly fine...walked away with a couple cuts,” Kara said, rolling her eyes.

“Oh thank God,” I said, feeling a wave of relief wash over me.

Kara glared at me.

“What?”

“*He got you hurt, Dalia. What the fuck?*” Her nostrils flared as she hopped off the bed and crossed her arms.

“Don’t do that. I was drinking, too.”

She paced the room. “But you weren’t driving!”

“I could’ve been. I could’ve been driving and then I’d be the one walking around while he sat in the hospital bed.”

“This is so, so wrong. Are you *trying* to kill yourself?”

Kara stopped walking around the room and moved toward me. Her stare was so intense that I turned my head to stare at the blank white wall. She didn’t say anything for a moment, just huffed and sighed as I took deep breaths and focused on the wall.

“You want me to come in here and coddle you...and part of me wants to do that for you, but I can’t.” She paused. “You shouldn’t be together and you know it.” She took a ragged breath and shouted, “You could’ve *died* today!”

I turned to face her just as the door opened and my dad walked in. Kara nodded to him, then patted my hand and sat still for a moment next to me. My dad and I watched her struggle for a moment until a tear slid away from her.

“Kara—”

She jumped up. “I’ll be back later,” she said, kissing my forehead. She wouldn’t look at me. “I love you.”

I nodded as she rushed away. My dad closed the door behind her and took his time walking over with dark circles under his eyes I’d never seen before. He glanced at the cast on my arm. Had his hair been that gray when I left this morning? I wondered.

He took a seat and ran a hand over his face before looking to me with red-rimmed eyes. Again, I tried to sit up, but the pain knocked me back down.

“I’m going to be honest, Dalia, I don’t know what to do,” he said, his eyes watering. He motioned to my cast. “I could’ve been coming to see you in the morgue.”

I frowned. “Dad, I’m fine.”

“*You’re not fine!*” he shrieked, startling me, spit falling from his mouth. His face was red, matching his teary eyes.

My mouth was open. “Dad...”

“Why do you keep doing this?”

“Doing what?” I asked, bewildered.

“You keep... *testing* me. I ground you and you disobey me anyway. I’m trying to protect you from that, that *boy*.”

“Aaron. His name is Aaron and I don’t know—”

“I don’t care what his name is, you won’t be seeing him again and—”

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

“I’m your *father!*”

We were shouting, my dad unraveling at the seams and me with my voice wracking through my broken and bruised body.

And then I was crying, for no apparent reason.

My father moved in closer. “Why are you doing this?” he asked again. “Did you see Kara? She couldn’t even look at you when she left.”

Suddenly, I felt so ashamed of myself.

“Well?” he asked. “What is it? What’s going on with you?”

I opened my mouth and nothing seemed to come out for the longest time. Then finally, “Where is she?” I asked.

“Kara’s probably gone home by now.”

I shook my head fiercely. “No,” I blubbered through my tears. “Where is my mother?”

The expression he wore, it was if I’d struck him in the face. “Honey...”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” I told him.

He was silent, running his eyes over me in that worried way parents do.

I was shaking like a leaf.

“Your mother left us. You know that.”

“Did she leave because of me?” I begged for an answer.

Whatever was left of my father’s usual strong and stoic demeanor fell apart immediately. Before I knew it, I was in his arms, wrapped up tightly and pulled close.

“Absolutely not. Don’t you ever, *ever* think that in your life ever again,” he said vehemently. I was so close to him, I could smell his cologne. I took a deep breath and buried my head deeper into his chest.

I cried harder.

“You’re doing this because of her?” my father said. It was more a statement than a question, his own personal epiphany and maybe mine, too.

I’d always tried to convince myself that I was living despite her.

I looked up and saw my father’s face through the prism of my tears.

“She’s never even called!” I shouted, crying, as the tears rolled down my cheeks to my neck and into the hospital sheets.

He pulled me still tighter to him, and I could feel his heartbeat, fast and strong.

Blood in the Water

“We’re going to do this together,” he said.

“Together? We’re going to do what together? I’m not going to see a shrink,” I said.

I was sitting on the passenger’s side, glaring at my father as he turned out of the schoolyard.

“We need to see someone, Dalia. Both of us.” He glanced at the cast on my arm. “It’s not optional.”

“Well, what about Benny? Why doesn’t he have to come?” I asked.

“I want to leave some semblance of normalcy in his life, Dalia. His mother is gone, his sister is having a hard time; I just want him to feel normal.”

Utter and complete bullshit. Ever since the accident, my dad had been treating me like a baby. I’d put up with it because I felt bad, and I was embarrassed about the whole thing with my mother, but now I was pissed.

“I don’t get a say in this?”

“We’re going to do this together,” he said again.

“We didn’t make this decision together,” I snapped.

“I made the decision. I’m the parent. That’s what we do. We make the hard decisions, Dalia.”

His temper was flaring up.

I changed the subject. “Why won’t you let Kara drive me to school?”

“I want to take you.”

“No you don’t. You just don’t trust me.” I said angrily, turning to check his reaction.

He shook his head slowly. “You were in a car accident, Dalia. Is it such a bad thing to want to see you safely make it to school and back?”

I just glared at him. He was clad in business attire, as always. His dark hair was freshly cut, his tie in place, not even a speck of dandruff or lint to be found on him. The only time I’d seen my father out of it was after the car accident. I rubbed my cast and turned away.

“You can think of it as punishment or you can think of it as treatment,” he said, abruptly reverting back to the issue at hand. “This could be a gateway to something better than what you’ve been doing.” He was speaking with his hands, something my father did when he was trying to be convincing.

I crossed my arms.

“You asked for help—this is it,” he said, ignoring my attitude.

He was frustrated. I was angry.

I turned toward my side of the car and took deep, calming breaths, peering out the window. Clouds rolled in across the sun as I closed my eyes and leaned back into the headrest.

“If anybody needs a shrink, it’s you,” Kara said, rummaging through my closet.

“Shut up. I called you over here for some insider info and you’re stealing my clothes,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m looking up typical therapist questions.” I frowned. “I can’t believe my dad is making me see a stupid shrink.”

“I never heard of anyone studying for a sit-down with a psychiatrist,” Kara said, tossing a pair of jeans into her bag.

“Actually, I wasn’t trying to study. I’m trying to cheat, but you won’t help me.”

Both of Kara’s parents were psychiatrists with their own practice and I’d hoped Kara could help me prepare for my “gateway to something better,” so I begged her to come over as soon as she could.

She held a dressy tube top to her chest and tossed it to her bag.

“Hey!”

“You’re wearing a cast, Dalia. You won’t need any sexy wear for at least another month.” She cocked her head to the side and looked thoughtful for a moment. “So is your dad sending you to a therapist because of the accident?”

I shrugged. “Just because he doesn’t want to deal with me, I guess.” I hadn’t told Kara about the outburst. I turned to my computer and clicked on another Google link that led to nothing and groaned. “Kara, help me!”

“Oh, calm down. There isn’t really much to what they do. Honestly, they just pick up on your vibes like those fake psychics do. If they ask you about your personal life and you stiffen up, they know you either had a bad childhood or you got out of a bad relationship. If you’re tightlipped about work, then you don’t handle stress very well or you have social issues. It’s a pretty standard formula.”

I typed in “shrink formula” and Google provided me with a site where I could buy “female eroticism vaginal shrink formulas,” whatever that was. I closed out the browser and turned to Kara’s back as she dug, half-submerged, into my closet.

“What about the stuff they say on TV? Is that real?” I started chewing on my nails. “Do they really start with that “tell me what’s wrong” crap?”

“That depends on the shrink,” Kara said, sounding muffled. She backed out of the closet with a sweater gripped in her hands and shoved it in her bag. “Some of them watch as much TV as you and me, so they take themselves too seriously.”

I pouted.

Kara sat down on the edge of my bed facing me. “Don’t worry about it, okay? It’s not a test you have to study for. It’s just...it’s just help, that’s all it is.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Since when do you drink the Kool-aid your parents make for a living?”

“I believe in therapy, Dalia,” Kara said, softly, with a slight grin. “I don’t believe in therapy for situations that can be solved with half a thought, but I believe in it for people like you.”

“People like me?” I prodded. “What am I?”

“Troubled,” Kara said quickly.

Well, I couldn’t disagree with that. I drummed my fingers on my knee for a moment, pondering my plight.

“Do you think Aaron is troubled, too?” I asked with a wince, knowing Kara would bitch me out for even bringing up the reason why my arm was in a cast in the first place.

She narrowed her eyes and I braced myself, but she just took a deep breath and shrugged, giving me a tired look.

“Aaron needs tons of therapy.”

“Do you know if your Aunt Julia is making him see a shrink?”

“No, I don’t.”

I was trying to stop myself from asking about him, but it was habitual practice by now. Every time we'd get into trouble, Kara became my connection to Aaron.

"I'm not trying to... I don't—I don't want to be with him, you know. I'm just asking," I said, looking down at my lap.

Kara shifted a little and then sighed. "All I know is that he's in a GED program."

I bit my lip. "Is he clean?"

"You think he'd let *me* know that? The only reason why I know about the GED is because of Aunt Julia and she only reports the good stuff." She paused. "Look, just worry about you for now. It's about you—and occasionally me—but more you," she said playfully.

I grinned weakly as I moved from my desk and fell on my bed next to her. "I'm tired."

"Is that my cue to leave? Because I should be painting anyway. I have a show in a week." Kara jumped up and grabbed her bag. "I'll see you later, crazy. Let me know how the appointment goes."

I kicked her lightly. "Get out."

"I love you, too."

I waved from the bed and watched her walk out. Before she could close the door, my thirteen-year-old brother, Benny, barged inside in a dirty soccer practice uniform, the only clothes I ever saw him in.

"Bye, Kara," he said, sliding past her.

"Bye, Benny."

She closed the door behind him and he plopped on my bed, showing a cookie in his mouth.

“What?” I asked, feigning annoyance. “Why are you in my room in your smelly practice clothes? Get off my bed.”

“Nancy said you’re crazy.”

I sat up. “She said *what?*”

“She was on the phone talking about you going to see a doctor. She said Dad’s going, too. Am I going?”

I sat still for a moment, fighting the urge to run downstairs and have it out with my stepmother, and then fell back down onto the bed. “No. I’m just going to talk to a shrink with Dad about the accident.”

Benny was the spitting image of our father—dark hair, blue eyes, and a heavy brow. He looked confused. “Why?”

“Because Dad thinks I should. It’s not that big a deal.” I rolled over and closed my eyes.

“Well, why can’t I go?” Benny asked. “Should I be going?”

I peeked at him over my shoulder. He was sitting on my bed, fiddling with my comforter, looking down.

“Are you crazy?” I asked.

“No.”

“You don’t need to go then.”

“Are you and Dad crazy?”

I giggled. “Maybe.”

He cracked a grin. “Yeah, you probably should go, Dolly. You’re sort of nuts.”

I shook my head, smiling. “Sort of,” I repeated. “But I’m working on it.”

“So, you’re going to feel better?”

“I feel better already.”

“Will you be happy?”

I frowned. “Do I seem unhappy?”

He finally looked up at me. “Well...*yeah*.” He raised his eyebrows as if to add a “duh” in there.

I felt bad all of a sudden. Had I been that transparent, that self-involved? In so many ways, Benny was like my own child and it felt wrong to involve him in my issues.

I sat up with a worried look plastered on. “Benny, do you think something is wrong with me?”

He stared into my face and then opened his mouth, searching for the correct words to fall out.

“Benjamin! Am I that bad?”

“You broke your arm, Dolly,” he said with furrowed eyebrows.

“I’m so sick of everyone bringing up this cast,” I snapped, gripping the hard casing.

“People get in accidents every day and they don’t get dragged to the shrink.”

Benny raised an indignant eyebrow.

I sighed. “First Dad, then Kara, now you...I guess it won’t hurt to go,” I said, reluctantly.

Benny reached over and patted my hand. “You’ll be fine,” he said, quietly.

My dad was miserable. I watched him tug at his suit jacket at least three times in one minute and then adjust the lapels of his shirt over and over until we were called into Dr. Bonnie Meyer's office.

She was a stereotypical shrink—about fifty years old, complete with the bland skirt suit and glasses hanging off her nose. Her hair was a deep black with edges of gray that stood out against her dark skin. My stomach began to turn a little.

I sat on a velvet chaise placed off to the side of the office and my dad took the chair directly across from Dr. Meyer's desk.

"How are you two today?" she asked as she took a seat at her desk, not very much unlike the one my dad had in his office at home. The smell of a car freshener pine tree filled the air in the room and books lined the shelves of cases coated with dust. There wasn't anything special about Dr. Bonnie Meyer that I could see.

I turned back to her and waited for my dad to answer.

"We're fine," he said. "A little nervous...."

Dammit. I shook my head inwardly. He was talking too much.

"Are you nervous, Dalia?" she asked. She pushed her glasses up and put her chin in her hand like we were gossiping at school, throwing me off completely.

I took a moment and then shrugged. "I'm here."

"Well, of course, you're here. I asked if you were nervous." She blinked, did it as if it weren't a function controlled by her muscles, but solely at her own discretion, and I got the sense that everything Dr. Meyer did was deliberate.

“I said I’m here. That’s my answer,” I said finally, then took a deep breath. I was scared now. I couldn’t remember any of the little bit Kara had told me to prepare for the visit.

Dr. Meyer stood up and retrieved a chair identical to my dad’s from the corner next to her desk and sat it next to him.

“Sit here,” she said.

“I’m comfortable where I am,” I said, stiffly.

“Dalia, just sit here, okay?” my dad pleaded, turning to me. “We’re doing this together, remember?”

I rolled my eyes.

Dr. Meyer took her seat again and I begrudgingly moved from the velvet chaise.

“So, why are you here?” she began, eyeing me. “I know your dad made the appointment, but I don’t know why. Do you?”

I shrugged.

Her eyes skirted over me and landed a little south. I followed her gaze to my cast and looked back up to find she was already watching me watch her.

“How’d you get that?”

I gritted my teeth and eyed my dad. He gave an encouraging look.

“Car accident.” I pulled my sweater’s sleeve over the cast and gave a look that dared her to question me any further.

Dr. Meyer gave an inquisitive look and turned to my father. “So why’d you bring her?” she asked, jerking the conversation forward.

He shifted uncomfortably. “I brought *us*. I thought maybe we should see someone. Dalia has had a...*substance* issue lately that caused that accident,” he said, pointing in my general direction.

Dr. Meyer nodded. “Okay. And where is Mrs. Harrington?”

I winced.

“At home. There was really no reason for her to come,” my dad said, not understanding the question.

“Oh,” she said, eyebrows sky high. She scribbled on her pad.

“She’s my stepmother,” I clarified. “Nancy isn’t my mother. My mother left us when I was twelve.”

I waited for Dr. Meyer’s sad, pity eyes, but they didn’t come. She nodded, as if processing the information, and then moved on.

“Do your daughter and wife get along?” she asked my father.

He hesitated.

“No,” I said for him. “She’s likes my little brother, but I think I’m too old for her.”

“Don’t drag Nancy into this,” my dad started.

“So you brought me here to lie to the therapist?” I shot back.

“No, I brought you here because your issues landed you in the passenger’s seat of a wrecked car—”

“Let’s just get back to the matter at hand, shall we?” Dr. Meyer interrupted, unfazed by our outburst. She turned to me. “You said your mother left. Where is she?”

I frowned. “She’s gone.” I busied myself with a string unraveling on my sweater and kept my head down.

“Mr. Harrington, do you know where your ex-wife is?” Dr. Meyer asked.

My dad cleared his throat again. “She’s in north Georgia. That’s about all I know.”

I looked up, curiously. “What? How do you know that?”

My dad ran his eyes over me nervously and then turned back to Dr. Meyer.

“Has she ever tried to keep any contact with Dalia or your son?” She asked, pushing up her glasses.

“Wait! How do you know where she is?” I asked again, thrown off by my father’s admission. I’d just assumed we were all unaware of her whereabouts.

My dad looked me in the eye, but answered Dr. Meyer’s question instead. “No.”

There was an uncharacteristic hint of anger in my dad’s voice that seemed to get Dr. Meyer’s attention, too.

“How do you know where your ex-wife is?” she asked.

I was sitting up in my chair, looking utterly confused. My dad pursed his thin, pale lips together and then rubbed his temple.

“I went looking for her after she left.”

Now I was even more confused. “Wait—*what?* You went after her?”

“No. *No.* I didn’t go after her. I sent a P.I. to find her.”

I struggled for words and came up with, “*Why?*”

“I wanted to know where the mother of my children was,” my father said sternly. I knew by the tone of his voice that he was done talking.

“What was your ex-wife’s name?” she asked my father.

“Josephine,” I said. “Josephine White.” I slammed into the back of my chair hard, knocking the little air I had in me out of my lungs. What the hell was going on?

Dr. Meyer began our second private session with a bang. It’d been a month since our first meeting and she had asked that my dad sit out the next few appointments so that she could get better acquainted with me. That was all code for “stay out of here so I can crack open your kid’s brain without you watching,” but Dr. Meyer had a point. Sitting in the first few meetings with my dad was so uncomfortable, not only for me, but for him, too. Besides, I hadn’t really spoken to him since finding out about his extracurricular spy activity and I wasn’t ready to now.

Even though I didn’t want to admit it, I was slowly beginning to see therapy as a step to finding a way to live in the world, so I was biting the bullet. I rubbed the fading scar on my skinny right arm, a dark mark, shaped like a mangled boomerang. It was hideous.

“We’ve talked about Aaron briefly. Let’s talk some more,” Dr. Meyer said. She had an emotionless look on her face and a dark green pant suit on her body, boring and neutral.

I gave myself a minute, and then decided to start from the beginning.

“I met him in the mall in eighth grade. He’s my best friend’s cousin. He got his mom in the divorce and they’d just moved down from Boston.”

Dr. Meyer smiled, her face displaying rare expression. “He got his mom? Not his mom got him?”

I laughed easy. “No, I guess you’re right. His mom got him. If he’d stayed with his dad, though, I would’ve meant what I said.”

“Why?”

“Because his dad is a drunk. He’s not in the position to receive anything. Aaron would’ve gotten his dad. He would’ve gotten an abusive, drunken mess.”

“So his dad was abusive? Is that why his mother left?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know why Ms. Reynolds left. Aaron and I talked more about the effect than the cause.”

“Is that what made it okay to skip school and drink?” Dr. Meyer quipped.

“No, it’s because that’s the moment we were living in,” I corrected her, scowling. “I’m not proud of what I’ve done.”

She bowed her head to jot notes. “Don’t mistake my curiosity for malice. We’re on the same team, Dalia.”

I nodded and took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“So you met Aaron in the eighth grade.” She paused. “Why did he become so important to you?”

“We just clicked, I guess. It wasn’t too long before we were always together.”

“What did you and Aaron talk about?”

“Everything. We talked about our parents, school, each other...I’d help him through his father’s periodic phone calls and he’d help me with my idiotic stepmother.”

Dr. Meyer was intrigued. “His father calls him?”

I nodded. “Every so often he drunk dials Aaron like a loser and then recites his sob story, blaming him for everything.”

She looked thoughtful. “What would you usually do when this happened?”

I bit my lip, felt a bit ashamed. “His calls...always sent Aaron over. We’d skip school or sneak out of the house and get high or drunk...sometimes both.”

“Did you feel like you had to do those things for him?”

I shook my head. “I wanted to. And it wasn’t for him. I did it for me.”

“You said Aaron’s father sent him over. What sent you over?”

I scoffed. “Now it seems like anything would, but I mostly fell apart when Aaron did.”

“Why? Do you love him?”

All of a sudden, I felt as if my heart had just fallen to my stomach. It’d been two months since I’d seen or heard from him and it was taking everything in me not to run to him and reclaim our thrones in Pretend Land. This whole reality thing was sort of sucked.

“Dalia?”

I felt pressure behind my eyes, tears I hadn’t cried for him coming to expose me. They fell one after the other. She gestured to the Kleenex box next to me. I ignored it and wiped my tears on my sleeve.

“Why are you crying?” she asked, softly.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you upset that you haven’t seen Aaron?”

I took a few deep breaths, tried not to be so upset. “It’s not like we’re together anymore. I don’t feel like I want to be back with him, that’s not it.”

“Were the two of you intimate?” Dr. Meyer prodded.

I shrugged nonchalantly. “Intimate, I don’t know...we fooled around, we kissed...we had sex every now and then, but it wasn’t about that.”

“What was it about?”

“The touching,” I said, my eyes closed. I remembered the day things went to shit, the taste of weed and vodka on my lips, his hip touching mine. “He felt like the best thing ever.” I could almost feel the sun bouncing off my skin, the waves on my feet, sand in my toes. My face erupted into a huge grin. “It’s like holding your breath underwater. If you stay down too long you’ll drown, but if you break the surface you’ll realize just how cold it is out of the water.”

The vision before me disappeared and I opened my eyes, feeling heavy.

“Why do you think you turned to him instead of your little brother or Kara?” Dr. Meyer said, pushing.

“Benny’s too young. He’s always been too young and Kara’s parents are married. They’re neglectful and condescending, but they are married. Kara doesn’t get it. She wants to and I love her for it, but she doesn’t get it. Her situation just isn’t the same.”

“So you were left with Aaron. What made him so special?”

“Are you even listening to me? Both our parents split!” I snapped.

“Dalia, half the kids in the country live in so-called broken homes. You aren’t standing on a precipice here. Your mother left you. You keep talking about divorce, but the real issue here is your mother,” she said, staring down her nose at me. Her voice was stern, but turned soft when she said, “Talk to me about that.”

I grabbed a tissue and blew my nose. “You know what happened. My mother left me when I was twelve years old with no explanation, no letters, no phone calls, nothing.”

“How did you handle that?”

“*Handle* that? How was I supposed to *handle* that? I was twelve! I’m eighteen now and I still haven’t *handled* that.” I clenched my teeth and exhaled deeply, trying to contain myself.

“And then I find out my dad has known where she is all along...”

“Are you angry at him for that?” Dr. Meyer asked candidly.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” I said, waving my hand. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

She nodded. “Were you at all close to your mother?”

I wiped my eyes and nodded. Dr. Meyer waited for me to speak.

“She used to call me her baby doll.”

Dr. Meyer nodded.

“When she was happy, she was a great mom,” I continued. “Once, when I was four years old, she read *The Velveteen Rabbit* to me ten times in one night because I wouldn’t fall asleep. I was really scared that night because she was pregnant with Benny at the time and I thought she was going to leave me for some reason, so I couldn’t sleep, but she stayed with me and kept reading until I finally drifted off. She kept saying, ‘I couldn’t leave my baby doll behind.’”

“But she did.”

“She did.”

“Do you know why? Were there any signs?”

“Plenty.”

“What do you think happened?”

I chuckled without humor. “Before Benny was born, my mother was a happy woman. She was the way any mother should be.” I waited for her to egg me on, but Dr. Meyer was waiting for me. I looked back down to my scarred arm. “I raised Benny. When he was born, my mother shut down and it was up to me to raise him. She started fighting with my dad all the time and...that’s what happened.”

“Did your mother ever see a doctor?”

“I don’t know. Do you think she should’ve?”

“I can’t definitively say—”

“Then what good are you?” I asked vehemently. I sighed for a moment, reestablishing myself. “I’m sorry.”

Dr. Meyer nodded. “That’s okay. Go on.”

“It was like talking to a wall,” I said. “After Benny, I would only catch glimpses of her.” I shook my head. It’d been years since I’d allowed myself to remember these things. “I caught my mother standing outside in our backyard in the middle of the night, holding her pillow with this blank look on her face. Do you know what she said to me when I asked her what she was doing?” I asked Dr. Meyer.

“No.”

“She said, ‘I’m looking for Pebbles.’”

“Who is Pebbles?”

I shook my head. “Pebbles was my parents’ German Shepherd that died when I was a year old.” I gently tugged on my hair. “That happened when I was ten. Benny was five and two years later our mother was gone.”

“Have you ever thought about contacting her?” Dr. Meyer asked with furrowed brows.

She rubbed her dark hands together and waited.

“Not seriously.”

“Why not?”

“Because I didn’t know how to bring it up to my dad.”

“Does he talk about your mother?”

“No.”

“Why do you think that is?”

I paused. “I think...I think he’s mad at her...or maybe hurt. You heard him at our first meeting. He sounded angry, didn’t he?”

“He did.” Dr. Meyer took a sip of water. “So what about now? Now that you’re talking about your mother freely...and you know your dad knows where she is...does that make you want to get in touch with her?”

The thought scared the shit out of me. I gave it a few seconds’ consideration before: “I don’t know,” I said.

“Do you think your dad would tell you everything that happened?”

“No,” I said quickly. “He’s a reserved man. He compartmentalizes everything: Business Ben on the right, Family Ben on the left; children over here, adults over there. He’s that kind of man. He wouldn’t think it was appropriate for me to know everything because I’m a child—specifically *his* child.”

“Your mother is the missing puzzle piece. Your father isn’t going to offer what you need, Dalia; you just proved that. You need to see your mother.”

“But I don’t even know her now.”

“This isn’t about her. It’s about you. You’re not going to fix yourself until you know what broke you. Tell me how you got that scar,” she said, pointing to my arm.

I was confused. “I..uh, I was in a car accident, remember? I just got the cast off.”

“No. Not just a car accident. You got in a car with your drunk ex-boyfriend and hit a tree,” Dr. Meyer clarified.

“Um, okay.”

“Don’t sugarcoat how broken you are. Don’t make excuses for him or yourself anymore.”

“I’m not making excuses—”

“You are!” she exclaimed. “I’ve watched *you* and your dad sit here for weeks and make excuses. I watched that cast come off and I watched him sit here visit after visit trying to convince himself that you would be okay with a little “girl talk” and you sit here and think this was all a waste of your time.”

“I don’t think that anymore!”

Dr. Meyer eyed me carefully and then asked me once more, “Do you love Aaron?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Meyer shook her head. “I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to open your eyes. You said you connected with Aaron because your best friend couldn’t understand and your brother was too young. You know that isn’t true.”

“Oh yeah? Well what’s the truth then?” I asked, crossing my arms.

Dr. Meyer gave me a hard stare. “He’s the only person you could run to who would let you stay broken.”

“What?” My brows met in the middle as my forehead wrinkled.

“He has just as many problems as you, if not more,” she said, eyes squinted thoughtfully. “He couldn’t fix you. You couldn’t fix him. One was great company for the other. That’s why the two of you could act out together and pretend like it was okay.”

“Our own little Pretend Land...” I mumbled.

“You don’t love him, Dalia and you know it,” Dr. Meyer said softly, in an almost motherly tone.

That crushing feeling, that heaviness, returned. I couldn’t breathe enough air, couldn’t see clearly enough..

“That pull you feel, Dalia, that isn’t about love,” Dr. Meyer continued. “You never loved Aaron. You *needed* him and that, I’m afraid, is much, much worse.”

The next day, I decided to ask my father to help me find my mother even though I was still angry at him. I felt a push stronger than I’d ever felt before. I didn’t know how long it would last, so I had to act on it quickly.

It was after school and my dad, in rare occasion, was working from home. Benny was at soccer practice and Nancy was out with friends so we had the house to ourselves.

I stood outside of his office for five minutes trying to come up with an approach before I just said ‘fuck it,’ and barged in.

“I need to see my mother,” I blurted.

My dad was bent over his desk, sleeves pushed up. He looked up, eyes bugging momentarily before he contained himself and cleared his throat.

“So you’re talking to me now?”

“Did you hear what I just said?” I moved from the doorway and walked up to the desk.

My dad had a critical look on his face. He did a once-over and then bent his head back down to his budget workbook. “You said you want to see your mother.”

I raised my eyebrows impatiently. “Okay, so, can we talk about this?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“I’m—I’m talking to you right now. I’m saying we need to talk.”

Without looking up, my father replied, “Dalia, your mother left us a long time ago and she hasn’t called or written or come back. I think it’s time for you to face the fact that she’s gone.”

And just like that, I was on fire. In one swift motion, I snatched the workbook from under his gaze and hurled it at the wall, hitting a glass vase that came crashing down to the wooden floor. It smashed into little bits.

My dad jumped up. “*Dalia!*”

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?” I screamed.

“You watch your tone—”

“What, did you put me in therapy so you wouldn’t have to deal with me?”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“You’re trying to help yourself!” I yelled, throwing up my hands. “How am I supposed to get better when it’s obvious that, even though my mother is gone, my dad *still* doesn’t want to pay me any attention?”

“That’s not fair.”

“*Life’s* not fair,” I hissed. “Why didn’t you tell me you found her?”

“You were a child,” he said, his voice growing steadily louder. “You were too young to understand—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to—”

“*What did you do to her?*” I screeched. “*Why did she leave? What did you do?*” I was screaming so loud, my whole body shook. My dad, for once, was absolutely speechless.

He gazed at me, mouth halfway open, and then turned his empty stare to the wall as he fell back into his chair.

“What. Did. You. Do?” I asked again, this time very quietly.

My father looked up from me and squinted, as if he’d been wounded. “Sit down,” he said.

“No.”

“*SIT. Down,*” he barked.

I dropped into the chair behind me.

“When your mother left, I tried to pretend like things hadn’t changed. I convinced myself that I was doing it for you and Benny.” He leaned forward onto his desk and rubbed his temples.

“I loved your mother. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.”

“But?”

We stared each other down for a few seconds. “You think I did this?” he asked, hand over his chest.

“I don’t know *anything*, because of you and her.”

He sighed. “She wasn’t happy anymore.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “I used to be her teacher. Your mother loved literature and when we met, I guess she connected with me on that level. When we decided to get married, I lost my job and then I got into real estate. Things changed. We had you and Benny, I started working all of the time, and she stopped being happy.”

I frowned. “So you think she left because you weren’t teaching anymore?”

He didn’t answer me for a long time, and then he took a deep breath and said, “No. I think she left because she wasn’t ready to be my wife. Or your mother.”

This wasn’t what I’d hoped to hear, though I wasn’t sure what it was I was looking for. I rocked back and forth; arms wrapped around to hold the pieces together that were coming undone.

“Why don’t you talk about her?” I asked. My eyes welled up and pushed him out of focus.

The dark blob in front of me shifted. “Because she left us.”

Like a bolt of lightning, it hit me. He said ‘us,’ but what I really heard in my father’s voice was ‘me.’ He still loved her.

I wiped my eyes. “Dad.” I took a deep breath. “We lost her, too.”

He looked away.

“You should’ve talked to us. You should’ve been there to fill in the gaps. You haven’t been there. Do you know that?”

He didn’t answer.

“Sometimes it feels like you’re just going through the motions,” I said, shaking my head. I felt the lump in my throat pushing up again. “Do you love me?”

He’d had his head buried in his hands while I was talking, but when he looked up, my father had tears running down his face. It was the most terrifying thing I’d ever seen.

“Dalia, don’t you know?” he pleaded.

“Know what?”

My father sat back in his chair and looked at me. “You and Benny have always been the only good things I’ve ever done in this world.”

I looked into his eyes and knew that it was true.

Crack the Sky

My mother used to tell me stories. When I was little, she'd recall the legends her grandparents told her while she was growing up on the unofficial Cherokee reservation in north Georgia.

She would say, "The earth can feel your pain, Dalia. It cracks the sky open and fills it with your tears." I believed her then, much more than I believe her now, but maybe that was the only truth she'd ever left me with.

And maybe that's why it was a record twenty-nine degrees with blasts of lightning slicing the night air in half.

I stood on the beach in Daytona watching my ex-boyfriend smoke weed as some girl lay semi-conscious next to him. They were on a plaid comforter, shivering in the middle of January, a portrait of my life nearly a year ago. I rubbed my arm, fingering the boomerang-shaped scar.

He was fifty miles away from where he was supposed to be. His mother was sick with worry, and I'd come to his rescue, despite the long day at my dad's real estate office and the bickering inside my head alternately labeling me a saint and an idiot. I knew him too well, knew the scene too well to say no. It didn't help that his mother had been hysterical.

He was relapsing, after ten months of sobriety, and I had left him in the dust. High school graduation came and went and I'd snagged a job at my dad's real estate firm as a receptionist, bypassing college for awhile. I'd felt good about this progress up until now, up until I stood in the cold, night air watching my past play in the present. I felt a gut-wrenching guilt about how

well I'd recovered while Aaron had fallen back into our old routine with no one to keep him company, or at least no one who understood.

I was ten yards away, wrapped in a hoodie and jeans. Aaron was trying to joust his partner in crime awake, too busy to notice me. I walked closer as he reached on his other side and pulled out a small square glass bottle of vodka. I pitied him like this, running in place.

I called his name.

He jumped and then turned to me, his usually sparkly sapphire eyes dim. It took him a moment, but he focused. I shivered a bit as the waves crashed softly, but the chill I felt had little to do with the temperature.

"Dalia? What are you doing here?" Aaron's eyes hung low. He rubbed them as the girl beside him shifted.

"Your mother called me," I said.

"My mom?"

"Aaron, let's go. Get up." I was planted in the sand, watching, shivering.

He looked around himself for bits of nothing that he didn't bring. The girl sat up and looked at me. I didn't know her, but I knew that look. She needed something bad and this was the only way she would forget that she could never have it.

"Who are you?" she asked.

I gave her a woeful look and glanced at Aaron. "Does she have a ride?"

"Her friends are over there," he said, pointing out toward the Atlantic. His eyes focused.

"Oh, no, I mean over there." He pointed to a group of people heading our way.

Someone in the group waved. The girl waved back.

Aaron yanked the plaid comforter from under the girl, rolling her onto the sand.

“Hey!”

He stumbled forward. I pulled my hoodie tighter. We walked to my car.

“What time is it?” he asked.

I clenched my fists in my pockets. “Nine.”

We crunched through cold and wet sand. Aaron wrapped the plaid comforter around him and coughed. He reached for my hand.

“I have some more, if you want some.”

I snatched away from him. “You know I don’t do that shit anymore.”

“Sorry.”

It didn’t really make a difference if he was. I pulled open my car door. He struggled on his side as I buckled my seatbelt and turned the engine over. My breath burned in my nose. I turned on the heat.

Aaron winced. “You cold?”

I pulled off and it was quiet for a moment as I turned from street to street, navigating my way to I-4 toward Orlando. The lightning kept sparking the sky, but there was no sign of rain. We settled into a steady rhythm as I drove and I thought Aaron had fallen asleep, but he turned to me.

“You know I love you.” He sighed. “You weren’t supposed to have to come out here.”

I tugged on my hair and braced the steering wheel.

“Oh shut up,” I muttered.

“Dalia?”

“What happened, Aaron? You were doing so well. You were off the booze, focused...”

Aaron huffed, ran caramel hands through his sandy curls. I punched the pedal at eighty, trying to slow down, to calm down.

“Look, you don’t have to fucking shrink me,” he finally said. “You’re ruining my high.”

“You think I want to be here? Why did your mom call me?” I looked over at him. He had his head in his hands.

“Look, I just had to get out,” he said, sitting back. “You know what I’m talking about. Ten months of therapy and acting like I don’t exist haven’t wiped out your memory. *I know that.*”

I rolled my eyes. “Apparently therapy and ignoring you have been the best decisions I’ve ever made. I graduated, didn’t I? Where’s your diploma?” I switched lanes and put the car on cruise control.

He chuckled, eyes still low. “You’re still the same old Dalia. Let some foul shit happen to you like it did me and you’ll be right back on the beach with me.”

I gripped the wheel tightly and allowed my anger to subside. “So what foul shit happened?”

“Shut the fuck up, Dalia. You’re wasting the money I spent on this bud.”

Aaron turned away from me, made himself a safe haven by cramming between the car door and his seat. I sighed, angry eyes stinging as I shook my head, even more pissed at myself for coming.

I put my hand on the side of my face, shielding my tears. My phone buzzed.

“Look, Dad, I’m coming home. I’m sorry,” I said.

“Dalia, it’s Kara.”

I sighed. “Did the news get all the way to New York?”

“Yeah...Mom just told me.”

“Well tell your mom and Aunt Julia to chill. He’s with me.”

She went quiet.

“I’m driving back. Don’t be mad.”

“Where was he?”

“I’m riding back from Daytona.” I waited for her to start ranting, but no rant came.

“What’s wrong with you? Why aren’t you mad?”

Kara took a deep breath. “Dalia...shit...”

“What? What is it?”

“Did Aaron tell you what happened?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said, growing more and more anxious. I looked over at Aaron.

He was still burrowed into the car. I poked him, but he didn’t move. “What is it?”

Kara, in a regretful tone, answered the million dollar question and, just like that, I got it. I understood why Aaron was here, why *I* was here. The guilt trip was over. Aaron’s father was dead, killed by his own drunkenness at the wheel of a car.

There’d be no reconciliation for him now.

There was a beep. I glanced over at Aaron who was watching me. He knew that I knew. I spoke to Kara.

“My dad’s on the other line,” I told her. “I’ll call you back.” I clicked over. “Hello?”

“Where are you?” I could practically imagine him, face pale and tired, tie loosened. He was probably sitting at his home office desk with tomorrow’s schedule opened up.

My heartbeat quickened as I took the exit onto 417. “I’m almost home, Dad. Ms. Julia called me about Aaron—”

“She has *no* right to ask you to drive around looking for her son. Where have you been?”

I hesitated before telling him.

“*You went to Daytona?*”

“Dad, I just wanted to make sure—”

“It’s not your responsibility to make sure of anything. He routinely puts both your lives in danger. Do you *remember* what happened the last time the two of you were in a car?”

“I know.”

“Just. Get. *Home.*”

I nodded as if he could see me. “Okay.” I put my phone away and focused on the road for a few minutes, trying to figure out what to say. What do you say to someone whose father has just died? Aaron’s tattered relationship with him made the situation so much more fucked up.

He shifted beside me. We sat in silence for a moment longer than forever.

Then, “Your dad mad?” he asked.

“He’s livid,” I said, deciding to play it cool. I had to remember how to feel him. I had to understand again how it felt to be as tied down as he was.

“What about you?” he asked.

“What?”

“You still mad?” He took my hand. His fingers were warm and rough.

I licked my lips. "I'm not mad."

"You're sorry for me," he said, dropping my hand.

"Aaron—"

"He's *dead*, Dalia. You can't do anything about it. And you can't help me."

"But you can talk to me. Remember when we used to talk?" I asked.

"Now you wanna talk. What happened to letting me go being the best decision you ever made?"

"I had to help me so I can help you. You don't think it's a coincidence that I'm here, do you? After almost a year?"

"I don't need your *fucking* help."

I wanted to feel that way we used to so I could help him in a way he trusted, but it relieved me that I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself to fall back into that old song and dance.

"I don't mean to hurt you," he started.

I kept my eyes on the road.

"I need you," he said.

I shook my head. "No you don't."

"I do," he mumbled. "You left me alone."

"I didn't leave you."

"You cut me out of your life."

"No, that's not true. We could've *died*!"

We were talking over each other. No one was listening and then no one was talking. We were back to silence, back to the beginning.

I said, "Aaron, I have a butt-ugly scar on my arm the length of a ruler."

His head hung in shame. "I'm sorry about that. I wanted to come see you."

"It's not about any of that. We shouldn't have gotten ourselves into that situation in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." I shook my head. "We drank bottle after bottle, skipped class after class, took toke after toke and then rammed into a damn tree."

He eyed me. "Don't do that. Don't act like I didn't mean anything to you."

"You did mean something to me. I thought I loved you."

"You didn't love me?"

He was a child hidden in that question.

I sighed. "I thought I loved you. I thought that's why I clung to you. You think you love me too, but you don't. What you feel, I felt it, too. It's not like we didn't feel the same way about each other, it's just that it isn't...it wasn't love."

"You don't know."

"I know all too well. My right arm knows. My bones remember. I know how you need me because it's the same way I needed you."

"You think you have all the answers, because you go lay on a couch and talk about your feelings, but you can't tell me how I feel for you. Only I know how I feel," he said, pulling away from me. "Why did you come?" he asked.

It was a fair question.

I bit my lip. "I don't know. Part of me wanted to see you, part of me didn't."

He didn't say anything.

"I'm glad I came, though. You need someone."

And then his calloused hand found mine, startling me. I tore my eyes from the road to meet his. He was drowning in front of me.

His fingers stroked mine. The touch that used to set me on fire barely caused a spark now.

He croaked, "My dad..." and then there was a wail from him that I'd never heard before. Deep and guttural, he cried like a wounded animal whose insides were bared to the world. I felt useless and retarded by my newfound growth. I couldn't feel this for him. I couldn't help him ease the pain the way we used to for each other.

I turned our hands over and squeezed his tight. We were off the expressway and onto the roads near home. Finally. We'd been on the highway for much too long.

I brought his hand up to my mouth and planted a kiss there as he tried to quiet himself. I caught a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror and thought of my mother, how I knew for sure where she was but was too afraid to see her. I'd spent the last eight months convincing myself that I'd write her tomorrow only to be forced into a situation tonight that had proven that tomorrow may not be promised to anyone.

I squeezed Aaron's hand again; his grip remained strong as his cries weakened and finally came to a stop. We were in his driveway now and I was tired and sad.

The porch lights came on suddenly and Aaron's mother burst from the front door, flying down the steps. She threw the passenger's side door open and pulled Aaron into her arms, wrenching our hands apart.

It was dark, but I could see the dried mascara on her cheeks. She gave me a look of gratitude as rain finally began to fall. I thought of my mother again and her stories, wondered if the crack in the sky had anything to do with Aaron.

They stood in the rain, Aaron and his mother, and cried together. I reached over and closed the passenger's side door so I could leave them to their grief. All night I'd wanted to help Aaron more than anything, but I couldn't anymore. I would never be able to again.

Months ago, I'd confided in my therapist, Dr. Meyer, about how Aaron and I met, how we'd "clicked." I told her that Aaron moved to Orlando in the wake of his parent's divorce, at the exact same time my mother decided to split. Neither one of us could help Kara understand because her parents were still together. "Kara doesn't get it," I'd said. "Her situation just isn't the same."

Now, after watching Aaron grieve over his father, I knew he would soon say the same of me, that my situation just isn't the same.

When I got home, my dad was in his armchair in the living room. He watched me for a minute as I shifted from one foot to the other. I tried to keep it together, but there was no one to be strong for anymore.

My father shot up. "What happened?"

I shook my head, but couldn't stop crying. "I have to see her now," I said, wiping my eyes. "I can't wait until she's dead and then feel like I never tried. I can't do that."

He didn't ask any questions as he walked over to me and pulled me into a hug, somehow understanding every word.

“I can’t wait for her to die,” I said again. I could hear Aaron’s wail replaying over and over, the image of him and his mother crying in the rain together.

Picture Perfect

It soon became clear after my brother was born that it would be up to me to take care of him. With my mother slowly inching away from us and my dad working all the time, I was all the little guy had left.

At five years old, I changed his diapers, made his bottles, and I was the one who woke up during the night to take him from my mother's arms and calm him down. By the time she left, Benny called me "mama."

Now, my little brother was fourteen-years old and anxiously waiting for me to get on with what I had to say.

I'd called him from his room down to the kitchen where I was performing my own informal inventory for Thanksgiving dinner, which was only a few days away. My father was in his study and my stepmother, Nancy, was in the living room TV-shopping on QVC.

"Wanna go for some ice cream?" I asked him.

He sighed and let his head droop to the side like our father did when he was annoyed. "You called me down for ice cream?"

I made a silly face. "Come on, kid. How often do you get to hang with your big sister now that I'm a working girl?" I asked, a warm smile spreading my face.

He smiled and shook his head. "Fine. Let me save my game."

Benny rushed back upstairs to his PS3, while I moseyed over to our dad's office. I knocked quickly then poked my head in, finding my father leant back in his office chair reading a book.

“Hey,” he said. “You okay?”

I nodded. “I’m fine. I’m telling Benny,” I said.

Dad owned a knowing look and nodded with pursed lips, took a deep breath. “You sure now is a good time?”

“It shouldn’t have taken this long.”

“I should come with you guys,” he said, putting down his book.

I shook my head. “No, I got it.” I managed a reassuring smile. “Just listen out, okay? We’re going for ice cream.”

He reluctantly stayed put as I closed the door behind me. Benny was waiting for me in the kitchen. I grabbed the keys, playfully bumped my brother out of the way, and led us out the door.

We ended up at the creamery in the mall on the other side of town. I didn’t know how to come clean with this information. I told Benny I needed to pick up a pair of jeans, to which he replied with an exasperated sigh, but I was really stalling.

I had never even spoken to Benny about our mother since she’d left. As close as we were, the kind of awkward mother-son relationship we were forced into by my mom’s departure had limited our conversation.

Benny ordered a chocolate chip ice cream cone. I got the strawberry shortcake cup. We sat at the scattered chairs across from the entrance and took a moment to check out our surroundings.

It was eight-thirty, almost closing time, but the mall was still busy. A woman with three small children bustled by, each kid scrambling behind her. She gave a three-sixty-sweep every few seconds to do a mental headcount of her young. She was frazzled, but attentive and fairly fresh-faced for someone with three children so close in age. The youngest child, no more than two, kept stopping to stare at any little thing they passed. Everything was so amazing to him. The oldest, a boy of about seven or eight, kept pulling the youngest along every time he stopped while the middle child stayed close to her mother.

That interaction between the youngest and oldest kid snapped me back to Benny and the reason why we were here. I turned to him.

“You feelin’ okay?” he asked, looking at me with a worried expression.

I nodded and took a spoonful of ice cream. “How was school?”

He gave an ‘ugh’ look. “It’s school. You’re starting to sound like Dad, Dolly.”

I gave a half-hearted smile. “Benny, I have a question.”

Mouthful of ice cream, he raised his eyebrows to encourage the conversation.

Deep breath. “Why don’t you ever talk about Mom?”

He swallowed his ice cream. The playful look on his face turned into a scowl. His beautiful black eyebrows met each other halfway, blue eyes narrowed into slits.

“Um...I don’t know?” he said, attitude on full blast. He was stiff and defensive, almost angry. He groaned loudly. “Why would you ask me that?”

“I’ve been talking about her in therapy—”

“Oh, right. That makes sense,” he said with a snarl.

“Benny!”

I was surprised. I'd expected a strong response, but my little brother had never shown any hostility in all his fourteen years. Even when it was me who had to discipline him, he listened without much, if any, argument. He just wasn't a confrontational kid.

But this Benny in front of me was ready to pounce. I didn't know whether to back off or press him.

"Are you mad that I asked?"

He looked off into the distance, tapped his foot, but didn't answer.

"I feel like we should have this talk. We've never spoken about her."

"I don't know her," he said sharply.

"That's okay," I said. "Do you want to?"

He quickly turned back to me, a questioning look on his face. "*No.*"

I gave him a calculated stare, paused long enough to measure that response. Then I told him.

"I know where she is. Dad helped me find her."

Benny snapped, "Why'd you go and do that?"

"I want to eventually talk to her."

"Why?"

"I just need to talk to her."

He had a look of disgust on his face that made me feel ashamed.

"What?" I asked, snapping back. "Why are you acting like this?"

"She left us. She obviously doesn't want to talk."

"This isn't about her," I said, frustrated. I tugged at my hair. "If I go see her, it's for me."

“So why are you telling me about it? Just *go*.” He backed his chair up hard, stood up and chucked his ice cream in the trash. I thought he would come back, but he started walking away.

“Benny!”

I threw my ice cream away, grabbed my bag, and fell into an almost-run to catch up to him. He was walking fast, his long, skinny legs working through rage. I didn’t catch up to him until we reached the parking lot.

“Benny, slow down!”

He kept at the same pace, the five inches he had on me at only fourteen gave his stride a wider range, made me step twice to his every one move. I stopped chasing and shouted after him.

“Benjamin Joseph Harrington Junior!”

His hurried gait came to a halt. I took small steps to meet him and give him a measured glare before walking past him on to the car. I could hear him following behind.

“I’m sorry,” he said when he got in the car.

I turned the ignition and let silence surround us before I replied.

“I didn’t want this opportunity to pass without offering you the chance to see her. We never talk about her.”

“Nothing to talk about,” he said. “I don’t think about her.”

“Ever?”

“I don’t know her,” he said again.

“You keep saying that, but you were seven when she left. You knew Mom.”

He shook his head. “The only Mom I know is you. She was just a crazy house guest.”

I was touched and saddened at the same time. “You don’t think about her?” I asked again.
“Never ever wondered why she was crazy, why she left?”

Benny’s face hardened. “I don’t care.”

I didn’t know what to say. I’d never *not* cared about our mother or where she was or what she was doing, even when I pretended I didn’t.

We were quiet again.

I tapped the wheel. “You’ve never felt anything about it? You say you don’t care, but I know how I used to say that and—”

“I’m not *you*, Dalia. I don’t need you to treat me like your therapist treats you.”

“I’m not—”

“You are,” he said, turning away from me.

“I just thought...” I trailed off and dropped my head on the headrest. “I don’t know what I thought.”

I glanced at Benny, his clenched fists resting in his lap.

“Benny?”

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” he said.

His abrupt tone was almost like a smack in the face. It took a moment to swallow it down.

I put the car in drive and drove us back home.

“So when are you going to actually contact her?” Kara asked me a few days later.

We were at the park. It was a particularly warm fall, low sixties, not uncommon for Orlando. I was comfortable in the elements with just a sweater on, even with my hair pulled up into a bun. Kara was home for Thanksgiving break and I had the day off from my dad’s real estate firm, so we’d taken the opportunity to get away and talk.

She stood by her easel, painting the distant landscape in front of us: a handful of trees and a man-made lake.

“After Thanksgiving,” I said, from my spot on the ground. I was leaning back onto my hands, feeling light and happy.

She looked startled. “Are you scared?”

I looked up at my best friend. Her hair had grown since she’d been away to school at NYU. For a moment, I wondered what her life was like with two parents and a careless college student lifestyle.

“I’m more afraid of something happening to her if I don’t.”

She nodded, understanding.

“But I am scared,” I admitted.

“So what’s the plan, exactly? Do you have her phone number or her email?”

Kara put down her paint brush for a moment, secured her easel, and sat next to me. We fell back into the grass together.

I sighed. “Dad has her address. I’m gonna write her.”

“Alone?”

“I want to do it myself.”

The clouds shifted and the sun fell into our eyes. Our hands went up simultaneously.

Kara nudged me. “Remember Code Bora Bora?”

I giggled. “How could I forget?”

“We were so damn dramatic,” Kara panted through her laughter.

When we were in elementary school, before Aaron, Kara and I made a pact to run away to Bora Bora, where we wouldn’t have to deal with our parents. At the time, my mom and dad were nearing their end and Kara’s were always overlooking her to get to their jobs.

We were going to smoke gold Treasurer slims and sit on the beach like rich old dames in Bora Bora. The hope that fantasy gave us was enough to keep us strong, whether apart or together, but that was when we were ten. By the time we were twelve, I’d met Aaron and my mom had gotten lost.

And now we were nineteen and it was time to find her.

We were quiet for awhile. I turned to look at Kara, caught the corner of her deep, blue eyes. She shook her head.

“He’s not doing well,” she said.

“What makes you think I was going to ask?” I scoffed.

“You were looking at my eyes.”

“So?”

“So, my eyes remind you of Aaron.” Kara sat up and turned to face me. “Before you met Aaron, my eyes were pretty to you. After you met Aaron, my eyes became a reminder of him.”

“What—?”

“So, when you get quiet and stare into my eyes a little too long, I know for sure you’re thinking of him.”

I was embarrassed for some reason.

“He’s still in Boston. He stayed after the funeral,” Kara said.

Kara and her parents went to Aaron’s father’s funeral in their hometown. She flew from New York, her parents from here. She’d called me before and after the ceremony to fill me in on the details. Apparently, Aaron had caused a scene, showing up an hour late, drunken and distraught.

“Who’s he staying with?” I asked.

“Grandma and Grandpa.” She frowned. “It was nice. Sad, but nice. I think he needed to be up there for awhile. Boston is his real home.”

I nodded. It was awkward to not understand something about him that Kara did. Even though they were family, I knew their bond was nothing without me as the missing link.

“How’s school?” I asked her.

Immediately, Kara’s face broke into a huge grin. “It’s *amazing*! Did I tell you I met Anna-Eve Roswell?”

I shook my head. “Who’s that?”

Kara rolled her eyes playfully. “Only the best contemporary splatter artist on the East Coast! She wrote up one of my pieces for the local newspaper in Pittsburgh.”

“Oh, when you went for that showcase?”

She nodded, told me more about the showcase, more about the Anna-Eve woman. She talked about her classes, the guys, about New York University, about the city. She was growing

before my eyes, my best friend. She'd faced her issues with her parents before she left for college and now her life was blossoming in ways I once couldn't even imagine for myself. When we were ready to leave, I watched how carefully she packed her paints and brushes, watched how she maneuvered her easel and painting the way a mother held a newborn. I felt a twinge of jealousy. I knew after this weekend, she'd be back off to New York, chasing her future and I'd be stuck here chasing my past.

Thanksgiving Day came like a whirlwind. It started off with a cold breeze of about fifty degrees that turned into a cool sixty-seven with blue skies. I cooked turkey, dressing, and string bean casserole. Even Nancy came in to help. It was an uncharacteristic gesture, but I assumed the holiday called for uncharacteristic behavior. My father and Benny played a few rounds of soccer that ended up with Dad propped on the couch later, icing his leg as they watched a football game.

Dinner felt easy. The conversation flew from one subject to the other, laughs carrying from the table and dashing through the halls to fill up our home. I felt happy. I felt strong and secure, even with the unknown looming in the near future.

Later, Nancy and I were cleaning the kitchen while the guys were out hunting for a replacement dessert since Benny's soccer ball had knocked the pumpkin pie off the counter. Usually, the conversation between us was contrived, but today Nancy and I were managing.

"You did a great turkey," she said, loading the dishwasher.

Her auburn hair was covering her face when I turned to tell her thank you.

I wiped down the counters and put up food. "Thanks for helping."

"Yeah, well, I should help out more."

I wore a smug smile. “That’d be nice.”

“I uh...” she said.

I glanced at Nancy, eyebrow raised. She looked uncomfortable. “What is it?”

“I just, uh...it’s none of my business, but your dad told me about you and your mom.”

I winced.

She took in my pained expression and backtracked. “No, no, no!” she said, her bronze cheeks reddening. “I mean, he just told me you’re going to talk to her and I just wanted to tell you that I think that’s brave.” She smiled.

I sighed in disbelief. That was weird. “Brave?”

She nodded. “Yeah. I wish I had the guts to find my old man.”

I stood there, sort of stuck in surprise. Benny and my father came through the door.

My father sat a New York cheesecake on the countertop and headed to the bathroom to wash up.

“Dolly, can I talk to you?” my little brother asked.

I was still staring at Nancy. She smiled again and left the kitchen. Benny tapped me on the shoulder.

“You won’t believe what she just said to me,” I gushed, facing him.

Benny rolled his eyes. “Later. Come upstairs with me.”

I followed him up the staircase and into his room. He had posters of who he claimed were famous soccer players all over his room. His bed was unmade and a little messy.

I gave him a look.

“Don’t even start,” he said, sitting at his desk. He motioned for me to take a seat on his bed.

“You’d better get this room cleaned up,” I said, settling onto his rumpled covers.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

“No ‘yeah okay’, just do it. You know better—”

“I talked to Dad about Mom,” he said quickly.

I closed my mouth and switched gears. “Okay...and what happened?”

“I asked him what he thinks.”

“What’d he say?”

“He said I could do whatever I felt comfortable doing...you know...within reason.”

Benny kept his head down, hands intertwined. He fidgeted like our father.

“I’m writing her tomorrow,” I told him. “Tomorrow is D-day, or whatever.”

My effort to lighten the moment fell flat.

Benny shifted. “I’m not talking to her.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not seeing her.”

“Okay.”

He moved from his chair to his closet, rustled around in there, and came out with an old tin lunchbox that I saved loose change for when I was ten to buy for his first day of school. I dug my knuckles in my thighs and waited as he sat back down and sifted through the junk he’d collected.

He came out with a crumpled photo and handed it to me. I recognized it after a few minutes. I'd given it to him myself years ago. My little brother was a baby, wrapped in a tribe blanket, held close by our mother. Her eyes were closed, unaware of the camera stealing her private moment. She looked peaceful, sane, and good.

She was the mother I remembered, the one Benny could not.

"Give that to her," he said.

I promised I would as I held our mother tight between my fingers.

Brown-Eyed Girl

I remembered her happy, with bright brown eyes that shone in the sun, an angular, feminine face, glorious jet black hair that worshipped the small of her back, and dimples that held my kisses when I was small enough to fit in her lap.

Today, she looked worn and wrinkled. My mother walked in wrapped in a shawl looking like yesterday's paper after a heavy rain. She came straight over, pulled me out of the booth, and hugged me tightly. She smelled like cinnamon and sweat. It was awkward and jolting.

I let her hold me.

She finally let go and sat across from me. We stared at each other. Now that she was closer, I could see the details: age under her eyes, the lines around her mouth. She reached across the table and ran her hands through my hair, moved my face every which-way. Tears brimmed in her eyes, but I sat there, scared to breathe.

She wiped her eyes. "Are you hungry, baby doll? Did you order anything?"

I shook my head.

She gave a warm smile. "You remembered this diner, huh?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"I would bring you here after your ballet rehearsals and you and I would get a great, big banana split."

I gushed at the memory. "I used to love those days I had practice," I told her.

She raised her hand, catching the attention of a server. "You want to order one?" she asked giddily.

I cleared my throat. “Uh...um...sure. Okay.”

The server, a middle-aged short woman with carrot orange hair, came by. Her nametag introduced her as Janice.

“What can I get for you ladies?”

“Oh, well, we want a banana split to share.”

She winked. “Mama and daughter playing hooky today?”

I winced.

My mother grinned. “Sort of.”

It had taken me a month to draft a letter to her and now here she was, cunning and smooth—motherly—like she’d never left. We’d talked about everything trivial in our correspondence and nothing important. I’d told her about Nancy and Benny and Dad, but little about myself and nothing about my troubles.

Our server flashed a crooked-toothed smile and waltzed on to the kitchen.

“You come here often?” my mother asked, turning back to me.

“Never.”

“Oh...too far?”

“No. Too many memories,” I said, candidly.

For the first time since she’d arrived, my mother looked uncomfortable, but it didn’t last very long.

“How’s Kara?” she asked, starting again.

“She’s fine. She goes to school in New York—for painting.” I took a deep breath. “She paints really well.”

“So I’ve heard.”

I raised an eyebrow. “From who?”

A mischievous look crossed my mother’s face. “Word gets around.” She chuckled.

“How’s my Benji?”

I smiled inwardly remembering her nickname for Benny. “He’s doing great, like I told you in the letters.”

“Right. He’s become quite the soccer player, huh?”

I nodded. Our server, Janice, came with our banana split and sat it in the middle of the table with two spoons.

“Eat up!” she ordered.

My mother immediately reached for her spoon, but I hung back. I looked down in my lap and caught the corner of Benny’s picture hanging out of my purse.

I pulled the photo out, looked at it and then promptly slid it across the table.

My mother gave me a questioning glance as she slowly put down her spoon and picked it up. For a moment, I thought that she would lose it, but she cleared her throat, passed the picture back quickly, and picked up her spoon again.

“He told me to give that to you,” I said.

She smiled weakly. “My Benji. What did he say?”

“He didn’t say anything.”

“Why didn’t he come?”

A small laugh escaped me. “Why do you think he would?”

“So he could see his mother. Isn’t that why you came?” she asked, with a matter-of-fact look on her face.

I paused uneasily for a moment. “He didn’t want to see you.”

Her eyes were huge. “Well, why not?” she asked, dropping her spoon loudly.

I looked around uncomfortably. “He hasn’t heard from you in seven years. He doesn’t *know* you.”

“He knows me. I’m his mother,” she said indignantly.

“No, *I*’m his mother,” I snapped, leaning forward. I caught myself and sat back. “I took care of him,” I said in a calmer tone. “Look, I didn’t call you here to argue about Benny.” I bit my lip. “There’s a lot in those letters I didn’t tell you.”

“Okay,” she said.

I took a deep breath. “I have a lot of questions.”

“About what?”

“Why you left us.”

“That isn’t such an easy conversation,” she said, squirming. She pulled her hands off the table and sat on them.

“Well, it’s the one we’re having,” I said, watching her.

“Over ice cream?”

“*You* ordered the ice cream trying to pretend nothing has changed,” I said. I crossed my arms.

“I’m not pretending to do anything, Dalia.” I could tell she was pacing herself, but her patience only made me angrier.

“Just answer my questions, okay?”

She coughed for an awkward amount of time and then sighed. “Okay.”

I was a little taken aback. I thought I would’ve had to work harder. She gave me a look that signaled the green light, but I took my time picking my first question out of the hundreds running around in my head.

Her eyes were dim, face aged. This wasn’t the woman I remembered. I looked away and stared down at my hands, one holding the other. I had already begun comforting myself.

“I don’t know you either,” I blurted. My first question turned out not to be a question at all. She nodded slowly, but kept a straight face.

“You keep saying that,” she said, fumbling with her shawl. “But I am still your mother. You have memories with me.” She waved her hand. “You picked this spot from a memory.”

I scowled. “I knew who you were when I was five. I have no idea who you are at nineteen.”

“And I regret that every day,” she said. Dishes clapped the countertops all around us, adding a soundtrack to our dysfunction.

“That’s the choice you made.”

“That’s the choice I had to make.”

“Please explain that to me,” I said.

“Your father and I split up for reasons you can’t understand,” she said.

I frowned, jaw clenching. “Dad said you weren’t happy anymore.”

“You got Benjamin to talk to you about us?”

I nodded.

She looked impressed. “What else did he say?”

“He said you chose to leave because you weren’t ready to be a wife or a mother.”

A flicker of something ran across her face that seemed to unsettle her for a moment.

I watched her, searching her face for some expression of emotion, but she was either unreadable or completely unaffected.

“Why didn’t you at least call?” I asked.

She answered my question with a look of condescension. “Do you think that would’ve helped you adjust?”

“Adjust to what? You being a shitty mother?”

Her weary brown eyes flickered fiercely. “Watch your mouth.”

“Fuck you.”

“I will be your mother forever no matter what. You know it. I know it. The earth knows it.”

“Stop it. Don’t do that,” I said.

She frowned. “Did you bring me here to curse me?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know why I brought you here.”

“You have questions,” she said, answering her own.

I nodded. In our silence, I overheard the servers around us taking orders, the whirr of the espresso machine.

“Remember the stories you told me?” I asked suddenly.

She smiled slowly. “I do.”

“You told me our bond was unbreakable.”

“The fact that I’m sitting here is proof of that.”

“What does that mean?”

We were suddenly interrupted by Janice as she scurried over with a radiant, ugly smile that I couldn’t match.

“I can take that ice cream. Seems you ladies weren’t much in the mood for it, anyway,” she said, eyeing the half-melted mess.

My mother nodded.

“I can bring you something else,” she offered.

“Water,” my mother and I said at once.

We awkwardly glanced at each other until I broke eye contact. Janice walked away to get our water.

“I’ve been gone for years and you still haven’t given up on me and I came when you called. That’s what I mean when I say our bond is unbreakable,” my mother explained.

I scoffed. “All these stupid riddles don’t mean anything, okay?”

“Hey! This is your *heritage*.”

“My heritage? What is *wrong* with you?”

She gazed at me, unfazed. “You’re really angry with me, aren’t you?”

I rolled my eyes. “I can’t fucking talk to you.”

“You watch your tongue!”

Our server was back with our waters and then gone again. She grasped hers quickly, gulping down half her glass. I took a few sips and pushed mine away, disgust etching my face. I was about to explode.

“Tell me about you and Dad. Tell me what happened,” I demanded.

“Are you going to listen or are you going to curse at me?”

“I’m listening.”

My mother twisted her mouth. “Your father wanted children right away and I didn’t. I was only twenty years old—your age basically. I just wanted to be married for a few years, but I think your father thought having kids would settle me.”

I took another small sip of water.

“We fought so much those first couple months that I left your father and went back to Georgia.”

“You left Dad before?” I asked, contempt dripping like blood from our familial wound.

She nodded.

“So you’re a practiced runner, I see.”

My mother absorbed my insult without visible discomfort.

I backed off. “What happened?”

“I found out I was pregnant.”

“With me?” I asked.

She shook her head. “There was a baby before you.”

“A baby?” I mumbled, absorbing this new information.

“He died.” She paused. “I had a miscarriage. Your father was so distraught, but I was devastated.”

I watched her closely. “You don’t seem devastated now.”

“You don’t know anything. I was lost...the only thing I thought I could do to fill that void was have another baby. And your dad, of course, felt the same way.”

She stopped talking and just watched me as I took it all in.

“So, that’s how I happened?” I pressed.

She nodded and I let my head fall back onto the booth to give myself a minute.

She sat back, asking, “You sure you want to know this?”

I was quiet for a moment. “If all you wanted was babies, why would you leave us?”

“I lost two more children after you.” All at once, the wrinkles were everywhere, ripping her face into sections.

I swallowed uncomfortably, not knowing whether or not I should feel something.

“After the two miscarriages, I fell into a depression.”

I found my voice. “I, I don’t remember any of this.”

“You were a toddler,” she said, nodding. “Anyway, I didn’t get very far along in any of the pregnancies.”

“But my memories of you...they were happy ones...at least before Benny was born,” I said, confused. “I just don’t remember you being so sad before him.”

She reached over to touch my face, but I moved away almost instantly. A pained look ran over her face so quickly that I almost missed it and then, just as quickly, she was okay again.

“You were little. I put on a brave face and you believed mommy was okay.”

I shifted in my seat, trying to settle down. “You never answered my question. If you wanted kids and you had kids, why would you leave?”

My mother sighed. “Because it wasn’t right.”

“What wasn’t right?”

She struggled for a moment, then, “As much as your father and I love you and Benji, we had the two of you for the wrong reasons.”

I stared at her as if she’d grown another nose on her face.

“I turned my back on my family when I went off with your father and it cost me a lifetime of making up for it. My grandparents sent me to college to get an education and I ended up coming back home, a heartbroken, pregnant drop-out with a failed marriage. They hated your father.”

“I didn’t know any of that,” I said.

She sighed. “I made a mess of things.”

I glanced out of the window and then back to my mother. She was watching me with a smile playing around her lips.

“What?” I asked.

“You look just like me when I was your age.”

I nodded slowly. “I know.”

“Dalia, your father and I only got back together because we were sad we lost that first baby.”

I dropped my gaze to the table.

“Why did you leave?” I asked quietly.

“I woke up one morning and realized how selfish your father and I had been to have you and your brother just to ease our pain. I realized I didn’t want that life, so I left.”

“You think that’s okay.”

“I think I made the tough decision.”

“Why didn’t you stay?”

“I couldn’t.”

“*Why?*”

“Because I *needed* your father more than I loved him.”

I felt my heart squeeze in my chest. The years of regret and resentment, of destroying myself with Aaron, the months of repairing that damage and finding the courage to make this meeting happen, it was all colliding into this moment and suddenly everything seemed to make sense.

“My therapist says you’re the reason why I nearly killed myself.”

My mother’s hands flew to her throat. “You *what?*”

I took a deep breath. “I earned this”—I showed her my ugly, boomerang scar—“while being reckless.”

“You didn’t tell me about this in the letters.”

“I didn’t tell you a lot.” I leaned forward. “You panicked and ran.”

“I had a realization and righted my wrong.”

“You barely took care of Benny.”

“I love Benji.”

“*You left him,*” I snapped. My breath dug its heels in my throat, unwilling to move. “Are you hearing me?”

“Dalia—”

“I called you here because I thought you’d come up with some totally acceptable reason

for not being here, but you know what? There is not one goddamn good reason to abandon your children.”

There was a lump in my throat that I couldn't swallow.

“You said you needed Dad more than you loved him,” I said, running my hands through my hair.

She nodded.

“I understand,” I told her. “I almost died for someone I needed.”

She reached over and grabbed my hand, and as much as I felt repulsion to the contact, I let her hang on. I had to move past this anger.

“I held onto him so tightly that I disregarded my own life and how my actions affected those around me.” I choked up, wiped my eyes. “But I broke free, just like you, but instead of running away, I went to therapy and I got better and I came home to my family. I even tried to save my ex-boyfriend, because his father left him, too. That's why we were so perfect for each other.”

My nose was stuffed, my tears fresh, but I wasn't finished yet. “His father died and for the first time I couldn't help him, not the way he wanted. And then I knew I had to find you, because I couldn't bear having you leave this Earth without telling you what an awful fucking mess my life has been since you left.”

“I don't blame you for the drugs I smoked, for days in school I missed, or the alcohol. I did that. I had a choice to play the hand I'd been dealt and I didn't play well.”

My mother looked at me with earnest, chocolate brown eyes. “You don't understand, honey.”

Furious, I pulled out Benny's picture again and shoved it in her face. "*You left us!*" I screeched. "There is no understanding that!"

My mother shook her head through painful tears, and all I could think of was how pathetically disappointing this was. Last night, I'd stayed on an internet video chatting session with Kara for over four hours just trying to find something to wear for this very moment. After trying on fourteen dresses, four pairs of skirts, and too many shirts to count, I'd plopped into my desk chair and faced Kara as if my closet had defeated me.

"I can't find anything," I'd said.

Kara, after hours of watching me fight with myself, had looked pretty defeated, too. "Don't worry about it," she'd said. "I'm sure whatever you pick will be fine. It's about the meeting, not the clothes."

Indeed, it had been about the meeting, but at the time I couldn't, somehow, shake the dumb idea that my mother might beg my forgiveness and try to make things right if I could only find the perfect outfit.

Then she'd love me.

I felt a pain in the pit of my stomach, a deep, twisting knot forming that I knew would have the potential to ruin me if I let it. I took a deep breath and glanced out of the window and, for the first time, saw a black sedan parked on the far side of the lot. Inside, I could see my father's outline as he patiently waited, faced determinedly straight ahead.

I'd told him I could do it alone, didn't even tell him where I'd set the meeting up, but somehow he was there. I faced my mother again as she cried to herself, as the demons of her past

rose to condemn her. I wanted to be done with her, but not before I had a chance to say all the things I'd ever wanted to say.

“I waited for you to call,” I said quietly, “but you never did. You never came back and, today, you sit there and still think that’s okay. I wanted to feel like you cared and for a long time I pretended everything would be just fine, but now...” I shook my head as I watched her, this woman I barely knew. “Now I know it will,” I told her.

She broke down onto herself at our booth, the bright brown-eyed girl with an angular, feminine face, glorious jet black hair, and dimples that used to tuck me into bed. I slid out of the booth and walked away, out of the diner, slowly picking up speed until I was at a full sprint, blowing past my father.

I heard him yell my name as I ran, heard the breeze of the trees, and the wind whipping across my face. I heard tires screeching, heard the wails of a lost boyfriend, and my own screams from a memory as I ran into the soft grassy field past the diner parking lot. I ran until I couldn't hear him anymore, ran to the horizon. I ran until I was sure the ghost of my mother that I'd left behind couldn't catch me.

Afterword

I started writing about Dalia my very first semester of college in November of 2008. It began as a love story; her and Aaron against the world, not very much unlike the way they are in “Pretend Land,” really, but different. At that point, their relationship was still justifiable in my eyes. I sort of saw them as each other’s saviors. It wasn’t until I’d written more (and I wrote lots more) that I started to see a shift in focus from their relationship to the reason why they were even attracted to each other and that, of course, has everything to do with their broken homes.

Around that time, Honors in the Major became a real possibility for me to explore this story and push myself creatively. The idea for *Pretend Land* was for me to use the 150 pages of stories I’d written before HIM as reference for occurrences, habits, and character traits. None of these stories exhibited any growth or change in Dalia, so I also wanted to find a resolution for her, if it was in the cards.

I had so much inspiration and help writing these stories. Dr. Ives, who I took the summer of 2010, taught me the art of revision. I hated revision up until that point and had been going through a rough patch in writing—second guessing myself a lot. Anyway, Dr. Ives completely turned me around. Revision became my best friend. This was also the class that I wrote my first (second, third, fourth, and fifth) draft of Dalia’s meeting with her mother. It was a tamer draft with far fewer implications of real consequence. I am thankful for Dr. Ives to this day. I don’t think he knows what an impact he had.

That fall, I took a class with Dr. Neal that really put some momentum behind my thesis. It was my first semester doing HIM, and I figured writing about Dalia for workshop would give me extra feedback. I turned in an early draft of “Crack the Sky” and the best piece criticism that I got

in that class came from Dr. Neal herself. She said that Dalia and Aaron, as they were written in that early draft, had no sense of responsibility for their actions and that, soon enough, the reader would tire of it. I'd sort of tied the shoes of my characters on too tight during the time, and had allowed their frustrations to cloud my sense of duty as the writer. Dr. Neal helped me to distance myself from my characters.

It wasn't just workshop classes that helped mold this thesis. I had to read Junot Diaz to deal with Aaron. The more I wrote, the more it became clear he was bad news for Dalia, but I wouldn't face it. I was still invested in their "success," even though Dalia—as she was whispering the story into my ear and I was typing it out at lightning speed—was trying to tell me it was over. I was in denial. Dr. Milanes gave me Diaz's book *Drown* and sent me on my way and then I ended up reading "Nilda" in Dr. Neal's workshop class. Diaz was fresh air. So bold! Between Diaz's unapologetic prose and Dalia's insistence, I had no choice but to face the truth: Aaron and Dalia wouldn't survive the length of the stories, at least not as a couple. Aaron holds a special place in my heart, but I know better than to hope he finds his way back to living again someday.

During my Directed Readings semester, I also got to read Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* and it was the first time I'd ever read about a writer's relationship with her characters that sounded like mine. When she was writing *The Color Purple*, Alice kept the company of her characters and spoke about them and regarded them as if they were as real as anyone else, as if they were tangible and alive. She cried when she finished the novel and they left her.

In that same way, I communicate with my characters. I cried when Aaron's dad died, because writing isn't about what I want, at least not by the end of it all. I feel the characters pulling me one way or another, forcing me to see the way it has to be. I'm just like any other reader who tears up when they realize something terrible is about to happen.

It's been a wonderful three years with their company. I'm sad to bid them adieu, but we are parting fulfilled. Dalia's story has been told and it took a better writer than I was starting out to put it on paper. Alas, the only Pretend Land that exists now is the one you hold in your hand.