

THE STORM

by

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ABSTRACT

Set in a world where natural disasters start increasing in both intensity and frequency, this work examines what it means to be self-reliant when the world is falling apart. As the largest recorded hurricane heads for the eastern coast of the United States, Sierra Egan evacuates her Florida home with her boyfriend and makes her way toward safety—a shelter in Atlanta, Georgia. When Sierra and her boyfriend breakup and part ways along the evacuation route, Sierra assumes her history of self-reliance will work to her benefit. But an anti-government couple, a beach cult, a lonely storm chaser, an interdependent family, and a pregnancy call this into question, forcing Sierra to ask whether or not it's possible to survive a world like this alone.

For my parents,
for everything they do.

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PROLOGUE

The first hurricane I was old enough to remember came when hurricanes were still normal. I was ten. Charley spun through the Caribbean Sea before hooking right into the Gulf of Mexico and toward the western coast of Florida, where my parents raised me. The day before he hit, my parents moved through the house, packing what needed to come with us and photographing what we'd leave behind. In my room, I packed my Powerpuff Girls suitcase. I chose practically—a few outfits, extra underwear and socks, comfortable shoes. I wore my rainboots because they took up too much space inside the suitcase and selected the coloring book that had the most untouched pages, my frequently used crayons, and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The hardcover was thick and took up a lot of space, but I knew it would take me a while to read, so I made room, packing my clothes around the book.

When my mother came to see if I was ready to go, I was making a list of my possessions in a composition notebook, drawing tally marks next to things I had more than one of—VHS tapes, CDs, pillows.

The shelter for our zone was a high school in south St. Petersburg, less than five miles from St. Pete Beach. The bleachers in the school's gymnasium were compressed and locked against the walls to make room for cots and people. The basketball hoops are down. Kids crumpled newspaper pages and tried to make baskets. Their misses and scores rained down on people unlucky enough to have the cots below the net. My parents and I were near the bathroom, three cots in a line. We lay Scrabble on my mother's cot, and my parents played distractedly, not so much letting me win as trying not to beat me, while they listened to updates on the weather

radio built into our crank radio light. Every ten minutes, the radio cut off, and my father stopped playing to crank the handle for one minute. When his hand got tired, he offered to pay me fifty cents for every minute I cranked. By the end of the night, he owed me \$17.50.

When they got tired of playing Scrabble, my parents settled into their cots with their own books. Though the books lay open in their laps, my parents talked across the gap between their cots. For days before the storm, St. Petersburg prepared for a direct hit. Depots ran out of sandbags and plywood, and grocery stores ran out of water, canned goods, and batteries. I didn't know until years later that my parents were certain our home, just off the beach in Evacuation Zone A, would not be waiting for us when Charley was done. While my parents planned for the worst, I slid quietly off my cot and wandered into the chaos of the shelter.

I heard snippets of conversations as I passed by families in their line of cots.

"I don't know what we're going to do if—"

"The insurance company said that they'd—"

"—think next time, hopefully there won't be a next time, but if there is—"

"—keep praying, that's all we can do."

Some cots were filled with people sleeping, trying to rest up knowing the storm would soon keep them awake. Other cots held children playing card games or babies getting their diapers changed or the weary bodies of the elderly, curled in on themselves.

There was also the occasional single cot with a gap big enough on either side to indicate the solitary status of the occupant. Sometimes the occupant was someone in their twenties—probably a college student who didn't go home or someone new to the area—or it was a woman

with a baby or very young child. In a cot near the vending machines, there was a man sitting on the edge of his cot. I remember his plaid shirt and his receding hairline, the way what hair was left stuck up in white tufts over the top of the newspaper he was reading. When I passed in front of him, his eyes fell on me.

"Hello," he said.

I stopped in front of him, the manners my parents taught me conflicting with the rule that warned against talking to strangers. "Hi," I said finally.

"What's your name?"

"Sierra."

"Do you think you can help me with something, Sierra?"

I offered no response, but he took my staying as response enough. The old man reached around to grab the rest of the newspaper sections, which rested behind him. He flipped through until he came to the Sunday comics. He held out the pages to me.

"I don't know what to do with the funnies," he said. "Would you do me a favor and take them off my hands?"

Every Sunday morning, when my parents sat down to read the paper, they handed me the comics section. This was the activity we did together as a family—reading the Sunday paper together, each of us silently turning the pages of our chosen section.

Charley hit on a Saturday, so I'd already read the comic section the old man was trying to hand to me, but I took it anyway with a polite smile, so as not to offend.

The old man smiled, but then his face twisted downward into a frown. His eyes looked confused. He dropped one side of his newspaper and clutched his chest.

I took a frightened step back, unsure what was going on or what I was supposed to do. The father of the family in the next cot over stood and came toward us.

"Sir, are you okay?" he asked, but the old man did not respond. He kept clutching his chest and then started falling to one side. One by one, all the adults in the area sprung into action as they realized what was happening.

"Sir, are you on any medications?"

"Sir, is anyone with you?"

"Is he alone? Does anyone know?"

I took another nervous step backwards, then another, and then I was running. My feet pounded the polyurethane, and I wove through cots until there was a cramp in my side and I could no longer hear the sounds of whatever was happening to the old man. I walked the rest of the way back to the bathrooms and my parents, taking deep breaths and trying to calm my heart, which pounded so loud I was sure everyone else could hear it. When I reached our line of cots, my parents were still talking, still facing each other. They turned toward me only once my cot squeaked as I climbed into it.

"Where did you go?" my mother asked.

"Bathroom," I said, then turned on my side, facing away from them. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep, clutching the Sunday comics.

As the night wore on and the rain fell and the Tampa Bay Area braced for impact, there was a shift. Charley swung right sooner than expected, tearing through South Florida, then crawling east toward Orlando, where many of the evacuated Bay Area locals were staying. In St. Petersburg, it rained all night, but the power never went out. In the morning, we packed our things and went home. We kept the news playing in the background while we spent days putting everything back where it belonged. Images of Fort Myers and Orlando—dismantled trailer parks, fallen trees, twisted cell towers and tangled power lines—flashed across the screen. A reporter in a windbreaker stood in front of Cinderella's castle and remarked on how astonishing it was that Disney World was relatively untouched. There were trees down in the background, but even the morning after the storm there were already guests walking around the park, taking advantage of the emptiness. A family walked behind the reporter, the kids in a line perpendicular to their parents, their arms outstretched and fingers barely touching, taking up the entire walkway. The reporter didn't notice, just detailed the preparations Disney had made for the storm and relayed the park's hours for the day, telling everyone that the Wishes show would be up and running the following day but that Tinker Bell would not be in attendance.

The next story showed a man in a sweat-soaked t-shirt standing in front of where his trailer home used to be. He pointed to the pile of splintered wood and twisted metal and told the anchor that he didn't know what he would do next.

By the time the storms get bad, it's twenty years later, and my parents have already left Florida so my mother could take a tenured position at the University of New Mexico. Once the fires started jumping the California border, though, they chose to relocate north where the

dangers were limited to blizzards, which seemed, to them, more manageable. Now, they sit inside and read their books while the snow piles around them. They have no way to leave and no one to take care of but themselves. This is their ideal lifestyle.

When Lorenzo is spotted out in the Atlantic, I am running a consignment shop in downtown St. Petersburg and Toby is working on designs for a contract he landed in Miami. He sits at our dining room table on a conference call while, around him, I pack the things we need to take to his parents' house—clothes, personal documents, cash. I also pack spare bedding because Tammy and Lee never have thick blankets or enough pillows.

Though the house we rent is in Evacuation Zone D, Toby's parents asked if we'd ride the storm out with them. Toby's parents, in their late sixties and coming to terms with the things they are no longer capable of doing, are worried about their ability to care for themselves if the storm gets too bad.

"They're in Evacuation Zone E, Toby. What do they think is going to happen?"

"I know, but with the storms getting worse and worse, they're worried there's going to be something they won't be able to handle. And no one will be able to get to them during a storm."

"What happens if these storms don't stop? Do we just move in with them?"

When my parents moved north, they called only to give me their new address. They didn't need help moving, nor did they ask if Toby and I wanted to come with them. I am their only child, which is one more child than they intended to have. Both academics, they spent their twenties and most of their thirties paying their university dues, publishing their research, and working their way towards PhDs and tenure-track positions. For a few years, they taught at

universities across the country from each other, my father teaching undergraduate creative writing courses in Florida while my mother taught gothic literature in Oregon. Once a month, one would fly to visit the other. I was accidentally conceived on one of these visits. They were both thirty-seven. My mother quit her job and returned to Florida, where they already owned a home, and they made adjustments to their lives that allowed them to take care of me while also maintaining their independence, like hiring a nanny and investing in a play pen. For this reason, I was unsurprised when, in the middle of an environmental crisis, my parents were still voluntarily and unwaveringly on their own.

Toby's parents are different.

"I don't think anyone knows what the plan is, Sierra," Toby says, setting aside his blueprints and pulling me onto his lap, "But I promise you can retreat to the guest bedroom whenever you need to be alone."

"I appreciate you." I say, cupping his face. I rise and collect things from the kitchen to make dinner. A box of pasta, half a jar of pesto, a bag of frozen shrimp.

"How's everything going with the shop?" Toby asks. He rolls up his designs and slides them into a cardboard tube. I remind myself to add them to the pile of stuff to take.

"It's going." I pull out a pot and fill it halfway with water. "Just a lot of calls to make to let everyone know we're closing. I have to get down there tomorrow to board up the shop."

"Is anyone helping you with that?"

"I haven't asked."

Toby laughs.

"What's funny?"

"You." Toby stands and comes around the counter. He lifts the bag of frozen shrimp and carries them to the sink to thaw them and remove the tails. "You have employees. You should use them."

I shrug. "If you want a job done right." As the water boils, I pull a chunk of pasta from the box and crack it. "No one helps you with your designs."

"No," Toby says, tossing a shrimp tail into the sink. "But I ask for help when I need it."

"I ask for help when I need it." I approach him and grab a shrimp, pull the tail from the meat, and toss the tail down the garbage disposal. "I just never need help."

While we wait for Lorenzo to hit, we play euchre at Toby's parents' dining table. A casserole bakes in the oven, and we have our fingers crossed that the power will stay on. For this round, Toby is my partner. Toby made me learn to play euchre before I met his parents. Tammy and Lee grew up in Michigan where euchre is played competitively, constantly—at family dinners, at weddings, at birthdays and funerals. I took to the game, but I found it boring, so wrapped up in hypotheticals. You had to make guesses about what was in your opponents' hands based on what cards they were throwing down, and then try to figure out what cards were in the kitty and, thus, out of commission for that round. When ordering trump, the general rule of thumb is to depend on your partner for one trick. I hated this guesswork, so I only ordered trump if I could make three tricks myself. These were my favorite hands, the hands where I could go it

alone, but they happened rarely because Toby was always eager to call trump, sometimes naming spades trump and winking at me while I stared at my hand full of red. We lost often.

The power goes out after a particularly terrible hand. Everyone throws their cards on the table, Toby's mother adds two points to her and Lee's score, and Toby gathers the cards to shuffle. Then the lights flicker and go out. We notice how loud the air conditioning had been only by the sudden absence of its constant hum. Toby and I turn on our phones' flashlights.

"I'll check the casserole," Tammy says. She moves toward the kitchen, and I turn my flashlight to light her way.

"We'll check the breakers. Come on," Lee says, standing. Toby and his father head for the utility closet. The light on Toby's phone fades as they round the corner.

While Tammy pokes at the casserole, I light the candles we left on the kitchen counter. I leave Tammy a few as a makeshift lamp, then carry three at a time, cradling them against my chest, to light a way around the rest of the house. As the candles burn, the house fills with a mix of seasonal scents—balsam, cinnamon, fresh linen, piña colada. Toby and Lee reappear, shoulders slumped. Tammy brings the casserole to the dinner table with a trivet and sets both, one on top of the other, on the dining table.

"Casserole's done at least." She distributes plates and silverware. "Everyone, take a seat. We're about to have out last hot meal for a while."

Lee turns on the weather radio.

"—made landfall on the east coast of Florida at a category four with winds up to 135 miles *per hour*. Hitting land is slowing Lorenzo down, which means he's getting weaker but also

means that we won't be on the other side of this storm any time soon. Storm surges up to fifteen feet have been predicted, but, as of now, we're still waiting to see what we're actually in for."

Above the radio broadcaster's fast-paced voice, forks clink against plates and the storm whips against the walls and plywood-covered windows. Without the noises of a house with power, we are left to listen to Lorenzo rage around us. We are at his mercy.

After dinner, Lee rinses the dishes with cold water and stacks them in the sink while Toby and Tammy sit at the dining table playing a distracted game of War and listening for tornado and storm-surge warnings on the radio. I retreat to the living room and stretch across the couch, taking most of one side the sectional. I turn on my cell phone and use the limited service I have to check the weather reports. I pull up a map of the storm and hit play, watching the past two hours of Lorenzo's movement as well as a projection of the next two hours. I do this for a few minutes, checking every available weather radar. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Lorenzo will be gone by morning. Resting my head on my arm and tucking my feet into the couch cushions to keep them warm, I fall asleep watching a NOAA official discuss the severity of the storm, the damage it will do in just the first twelve hours it's on land.

"This is one of the biggest hurricanes we've ever seen," she says, "and there is a strong likelihood that things will only get worse."

I wake to Toby shaking me and calling my name.

"Sierra," he says urgently. "Sierra, get up. We've got to move."

"What's going on?"

"The roof," Toby says, standing and pulling at my arms, lifting my sleep-heavy body upright. Behind him, Tammy runs to the bathroom carrying two couch cushions. Behind her, Lee drags one of the twin mattresses from the bunk beds they keep for Toby's nephews. There is a loud creaking, like a thousand branches snapping in half at the same time. Everyone stops to look up, then they're in motion again, faster now.

"What was that noise?"

"It's—" Toby's voice is breathless and stammering. He rushes after his father and lifts the other end of the mattress. "It's the roof. It's coming apart at the seams."

"So what are we doing?" I ask, following him toward the bathroom.

"We're going to get in the bathtub," Toby says. Tammy is already in the tub, holding her couch cushions. There are tears falling down her cheeks, but her face is, otherwise, calm. I wonder if she realizes she's crying.

"But this is an exterior room, there's a window, we need to get to the center of the house." I grab Toby's arm and start gesturing for the others to follow, but Toby pulls me back.

"No, we need to get in the bathtub and get under the mattress."

"That's not going to protect us if the roof comes off, Toby. We need to get away from exterior walls. Your parents can go under the kitchen counter, and you and I can—"

"No, we need to—"

"Toby, I'm telling you—"

"No, Sierra." Toby squeezes my wrist hard and pulls it into his chest, jerking me forward, inches from his face. "We need to stay together."

For a moment, there is only the deafening sound of the storm—wind humming between houses, debris pounding against the house like we're inside a meteor shower. Tammy and Lee stare at us from the bathtub. Lee holds the mattress up, waiting for us to join them. I am wide-eyed. So is Toby. The creaking resumes, and everyone looks up again.

When I pull my wrist from Toby, I don't have to pull hard. His grip and his face have already softened.

"Sierra," he says.

"We don't have time," I say, climbing into the bathtub. He climbs in next to me.

We crouch in the tub, holding pillows and hoisting the mattress over our heads. The house creaks all around us, competing with the sounds of the whistling wind, air rushing inside where the roof now lifts.

We wait for the deafening sound of the roof peeling off, for the unbeatable pull of the wind. The mattress grows heavier the longer we hold it up. Soon, we crouch low, using our curved spines to bear the weight. Each breath I take feels heavy. On either side of me, I feel Toby and Tammy shake. I know that I should feel comforted that I am with them, that if this storm takes us like this, at least I won't die alone. But all I find myself thinking about is how close to me Tammy and Toby are, how I can feel their heat and sweat as the bathroom grows warm with our body heat. I find myself longing, despite my fear, for Lorenzo's wind, for

anything that will get me out. I lean against the wall, and the ceramic is cold where my shirt has lifted and exposed my back. I close my eyes and wait for the storm to be over.

Hours later, we are in Lorenzo's eye. The winds die, and we are able to crawl out from under the mattress and unfurl our tired bodies. From inside the house, it is too dark to see where the roof has separated, but a breeze blows through the house. Toby and Lee gather supplies. Tammy figures out who to call for help. I walk to the end of the driveway, hugging myself and rubbing my aching arms. There is a circle of red around my wrist, and I hold it in front of me, raising it above my heart to help prevent bruising. Most of the houses on the block are roofless or buried beneath fallen trees. Tammy and Lee's house took less damage than most, but there is one lone house that stands completely intact. This house is not even boarded up because of its hurricane windows. It looks like a mirage.

Toby finds me standing outside. He's wrapped in a throw blanket. When he reaches me, he opens his arm, blanket draped, like a wing. We hold eye contact for a moment before I step toward him, let him fold me into his embrace. He buries his face into my hair.

"I'm sorry," he says against my scalp.

I hold my wrist up, and, when he pulls away, he sees the mark he left me. Toby takes my hand, letting the wind blow the blanket from his shoulder, and kisses my wrist, then kisses me. I rest my head against his chest, and he grabs the other end of the blanket from the wind, brings it back around us.

"The National Guard is coming," he says. "They're going to get everyone to shelter before the next wave hits."

"I can't believe it's not over yet. We're only halfway through."

Toby pulls me closer, and my arms press against his ribs and mine.

Tammy and Lee call for us from the front door.

We pack as much as we can, and quickly. Lee pulls documents from their office—passports, birth certificates, social security cards. Tammy pulls down frames from the walls and takes the pictures out, leaving the empty frames stacked on the coffee table. When I'm done gathering my things, I find Toby on the floor next to his bag, staring at his phone. Over his shoulder, I see that it's the security feed from the camera we have at home. It's offline, probably because our house lost power too, but he refreshes the feed anyway.

The National Guard comes in a caravan of canvas-covered trucks. They pile us in and line us along benches. There are a few more couples Tammy and Lee's age, but there is also a young family, their dog and two children curled into the parents' laps. Two men sit across from Toby and me. They are both covered in insulation and dust and dirt, all the things that rained down on them when their roof came off. They hold hands, but also hold the things they could salvage—a framed invitation from their wedding, a black urn with little silver pawprints up the side, a small bag full of clothes. Tammy leans into Lee, who strokes Tammy's hair and whispers, every few minutes, "Everything's going to be okay." This mantra is directed to Tammy as much as it is to us and to himself. Toby cries silently, the tears converging with the sweat on his face.

"Are you okay?" I ask and take his hand.

Toby shakes his head. "I'm scared."

I don't say anything in response, but Toby slouches so that he can rest his head on my shoulder. I feel his sweat against my skin, but I don't push him away. Don't move to bring him closer either. The rest of the truck is quiet except for the noise of the engine. Out the opening of the canvas, I see only blackness until another emergency vehicle drives by going the opposite direction. In its headlights, I catch a glimpse of the debris-filled road—the fallen branches and wires, the splinters of wood and metal the drivers must navigate around. The truck makes a turn into a parking lot, and everyone shifts, restless, ready to get out and get settled and wait out the rest of the storm. We are being taken to a high school whose gymnasium has become a shelter. There, we will sleep on the floor without air-conditioning or overhead lights. We will ride out the storm in heat and darkness. After Lorenzo, Toby's parents will take their insurance money and move north, like my parents, to brave the blizzards. Toby and I will return to our rental and optimistically take down the plywood and move the sandbags to the garage. When we get word of the next storm, a bigger storm named Melissa, we do not even think of staying.

CHAPTER ONE

Only a month after Lorenzo, we are packing again. While Toby is in line at the gas station, I fold laundry in front of the TV. Each piece of clothing gets rolled tightly and then sorted into either my or Toby's bag. On the news, the anchor shows images of newly-submerged Miami and says there's no hope of the water receding any time soon. In the closet, still tucked away in their poster tube, are Toby's designs for the Miami contract. He put them away as soon as we got back from the shelter, knowing before the phone call even came that the contract would be null and void. He doesn't know if there was an "in case the land we want you to build on gets destroyed" clause, but he doesn't have plans to pursue legal actions. There's nothing that can be done when Mother Nature's at fault.

Across the bottom of the screen, headlines scroll past: FIRES IN CALIFORNIA CAUSE STATEWIDE EVACUATIONS. FREQUENT EARTHQUAKES HAVE SCIENTISTS WORRIED ABOUT FAULT LINES. RESIDENTS OF TORNADO ALLEY HAVE BEEN UNDERGROUND FOR WEEKS, TOO AFRAID OF THE UNPREDICTABLE FUNNELS. UNITED NATIONS CONVENES TO DISCUSS PLANS FOR GLOBAL MASS EVACUATIONS. The news always discomforts me. Aside from the apocalyptic headlines, it makes my stomach knot to think of how little control I have over what happens next. We are at the mercy of these storms and the mercy of our government, going to whatever shelter we are assigned, leaving when we're told to leave, packing only what we have room to pack. When I finished school and needed a job, I started the consignment shop so I could be my own boss, so that the only person I had to rely on was myself. Even now that I have employees, I rarely delegate. I am at the store almost every day, even when I'm not scheduled to be. Surrounded by

all of these disasters, with so much that isn't up to me, I've taken control of what I can—packing lists and advance shelter reservations and oil changes.

I stare at the television, listening to a report on evacuation zones. They show a map of the southeast corner of the United States, highlighting in red the areas that must leave. Florida, our little finger-gun of a state, at the bottom of the map is completely scarlet. When the door coming in from the garage slams, I am sitting still, watching the words pass by beneath the anchors, holding a pair of Toby's socks to my chest and rubbing the seams of the fabric with my thumbs. I fold the socks into themselves and shove them into Toby's bag as Toby comes into the living room. His shirt is ringed with sweat stains, his forehead glistens, and even from a distance I can smell the fumes of gasoline.

"The gas station," he says, "was a madhouse."

"What happened?"

"I just always forget how crazy it gets when a storm's coming. Everyone suddenly needs gas at the same time and they stare you down while you fill up, like they're scared you, with your three gas cans, will get the last of it." Toby goes to the kitchen sink, washes his hands, and splashes water onto his face. "There was a guy there, probably in his sixties, he had like five gas cans and he was having a hard time carrying all of them at one time, so I offered to stay with his others while he carried a couple to his car. Then he stayed and helped me carry mine, which was really nice of him."

"I'm surprised he trusted you, he's lucky you didn't steal his gas." I fold up one of Toby's shirts and tuck it into this duffel bag.

"I wouldn't have done that."

"But you could've." Toby is quiet. I look up and find him squinting at me. "What?"

"You're so skeptical of everything."

"I'm just saying these are scary times, Toby. That man didn't know you, didn't know if you were trustworthy." I pull another shirt from the laundry basket and hold it up in front of me.

"I don't think you can trust anyone these days." When I look to Toby again his eyes are focused past me. I turn to the television in time to see the headline underneath the same news anchor and expert from before: NOAA CONSIDERS RE-EVALUATING THE SAFFIR-SIMPSON SCALE IN LIGHT OF INCREASED HURRICANE INTENSITY.

"Well, Jim," the expert says, "the scale as it stands has any hurricane with sustained winds of 157 mph or higher at a category five. There's nothing above that. But the last few storms all maintained winds of 180mph, even reaching briefly into the 190mph zone, which has NOAA wondering if we're going to start seeing 200mph storms."

"How serious is 200mph?"

"Winds of 130mph will destroy pretty much everything that's not concrete or deeply rooted. Winds of 200mph," the expert pauses, as though considering his next words, "at that point we're looking at winds strong enough to peel skin from flesh."

I startle at a touch on my shoulder. Toby has moved to stand behind me. His hand rests lightly on my shoulder. I reach up and touch his fingers, still wet from the sink. We stay like that for a moment, even as the news broadcast cuts to commercial. When the first storms came through, we'd had the arrogance all Floridians have, that "we're built for this" attitude that means

stocking up and hunkering down even when the evacuation orders start rolling out. But Lorenzo shook us, so we're taking Melissa, and anything that comes after her, seriously.

Toby gives my shoulder a light squeeze and then heads back out to the garage. I finish folding the laundry and then drag our duffle bags over to the front door, where we've been slowly gathering our supplies—cases of canned goods, jugs of filtered water, a weather radio, blankets and pillows to sleep with during the drive and then to cushion the cots we'll end up on when we make it to the shelter in Atlanta. They started building shelters after the fourth storm, Dorian, damaged the high school gyms and elementary school cafeterias that the government was using to house evacuees. Made of concrete and set in the ground, the new shelters are multi-level and hold thousands. As more people started evacuating, the shelters started selling advanced reservations, holding spots for families who had the money to skip the line. Toby and I are lucky that he has friends who worked on the design and build team in Atlanta. They were able to get us two spots for free. Sometimes, when I think about it, I feel a little relief wiggle its way into the knot in my stomach, but other times I think about the people we're skipping in line and I want to vomit. Outside, I hear Toby talking to one of our neighbors. I look out the window by the door and see Sandra, the middle-aged mom who lives next door with her three kids and always asks us when we'll have a little one running around. She and her husband are taking their kids to Atlanta, too. Only, they'll be waiting in line outside, hoping they got there early enough to get in, while we go right inside and get two cots, probably next to an outlet. I flip the blinds closed and go back to the living room to consult my clipboard and distract myself from my growing nausea.

I find Toby in the garage at the workbench he and his dad built when we first rented this house. In front of him is a pile of flashlights. He flicks them on one by one, testing the intensity of their beams, replacing batteries whenever one is too weak or won't turn on. All around Toby, the garage is in a state of disarray. The sheets of plywood we usually store in the rafters are left down. There wasn't enough time between storms to warrant putting them away. We'll put them up again before we leave tomorrow, but it feels like locking a door on a house with no roof.

I tap the side of the washing machine and Toby jumps.

"Sorry." I move toward him. "I finished our bags. They're by the front door." When I reach Toby at the workbench, I put one hand on his back and reach with the other for one of the flashlights. I flick it on, focus the beam on the ceiling. Toby floats his hand in the light, putting his thumb beneath his fingers to form a mouth and hooking his pointer finger to form an ear. He separates his thumb from the rest of his fingers and then brings them back together, over and over, making the shadow dog bark. I turn the flashlight off and hand it to him.

"I was just thinking," Toby says, "I haven't evacuated for a storm since elementary school."

"Charley?"

Toby nods. "My parents lived in a flood zone. We didn't go far, just to my aunt's house. I was so young I didn't get how serious it was, so my cousin and I just watched movies in her room while my parents watched the news." Toby lines the flashlights up parallel to the batteries while he talks. "When we were packing to leave, I put all of my VHS tapes, my Legos, anything that was on a low shelf, up on my bed so the flood waters wouldn't get them." Toby blows a

quick burst of air from his nose. "It wasn't until a few years later, until Katrina, that I realized how bad things could get." Toby rubs his hand along the workbench. "And now this—"

"Hey," I turn him so we're facing each other and put my hands on his arms, just below his shoulders, like he'd done to me. "We're going to be okay. We've got plenty of food and water, we've got more than enough time to get to Atlanta, and there will be two spots waiting there for us." Toby nods his head but doesn't say anything. I pick up the flashlights and nudge him with my shoulder. "Come on. We've got half a box of pancake mix, a pack of bacon, and seven eggs. I'm making a breakfast-for-dinner feast." I start back into the house but when I turn to look behind me Toby is still standing there, looking around the garage and rubbing his hand back and forth across the workbench he and his dad built. He looks as though he is saying goodbye.

"There's a couple things I want to add to the pile," he says. "Sentimental things. Stuff you've made me over the years, photo albums, things like that."

"Okay." I shift my feet, thinking about the size of my packing list and the size of my trunk. "I'll see if we have any room."

"I want to bring these things with us, Sierra."

"I understand that, but we only have so much room, Toby."

"But this is important to me." Toby grips the workbench, his knuckles turning white.

"I know that, but it's more important that we have space for the things we *need*."

"And we don't *need* photos albums?" he asks, mocking my emphasis.

"No, Toby," I snap, then close my eyes and take a deep breath before continuing. "We don't, not when all of our photos are also online. What we need is water and food and clothing, and if we room for anything else—"

"Do I even get a say?"

"Of course you do but—"

"Are you even going to miss any of this?" he asks.

"Any of what?"

Toby pauses, looks around the garage. In the rafters there are boxes of our childhood things lined up next to each other. There are the holiday decorations we've accumulated over the years. The fake Christmas tree Toby found in a dumpster and brought home for our first Christmas. We don't even use it anymore, but we can't seem to get rid of it. "Aren't you going to miss all the things we don't have room for, all the things we can't save?"

"Well of course I'll be sad it's gone, but it's just stuff. We can always get more stuff."

Toby presses his lips together, looks at anything but me. "What about the stuff we can't replace?"

"Like what?" I am still holding the flashlights. They are starting to slip from my arms and I have to readjust to keep from dropping them.

"Like the box you keep in the closet with the tickets to everything we've ever been to together, the bed we bought when we rented this place, the crockpot we've cooked some of our

best meals in. All the stuff we've used to build a life together. All of that will be gone and we can't get it back."

"You're acting like things are going to get better, like Melissa will blow through and then we'll be able to rebuild our lives, put them back together just the way they were." Without free hands, I start gesticulating with a flashlight, pointing it at Toby and sweeping it through the air. "This is the thirteenth storm this season, Toby, and it's only October. You see the news, too. The rest of the world is falling apart. There's nowhere we can go that is going to be completely safe. We might not ever again be able to have a crockpot or a mattress that's only ours or a shoebox of mementos. Life is different now, we don't get those luxuries."

Toby and I are both silent. Him looking down, me looking at him.

"I'm sorry," I say, finally, "that I'm not attached to our things like you are, and I'm sorry that it makes you feel like I don't care about what we've built together. I do care, and if things were different, if things were normal, I would be more upset about everything we might lose, but things aren't normal. I don't think they're ever going to be again. So I can't be sad about it. I just don't have time."

Toby taps the workbench with his knuckle a few times and then finally looks up at me and gives a small, repetitive nod. "I forget sometimes," he says, "that we're so different." He starts coming toward me, or what I think is toward me, but when he reaches me he moves past me, only briefly touching my arm before he walks into the house. I stand there, wounded, clutching the flashlights so hard to my chest that I can feel their plastic digging into my sternum.

In bed that night, I can't sleep. In my head I try to remember all the things on my packing list, try to replay everything I saw in the pile by the front door, everything I saw Toby carrying over there. Toby is asleep next to me, on his side and facing away. He snores lightly, just a little hum of air being brought inside him. Around two, I get up and find the clipboard on the kitchen counter. By flashlight, I check the list against the pile, adding a little tick mark next to the things Toby has already crossed off. There are additional items in the pile, things Toby must've added after I went to bed. There are the quilts my parents gave us when we moved in together, quilts my mother's mother mad. Stacked neatly atop a case of water are the thickest books we own—*East of Eden*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, *Ray Bradbury: The Collected Works*. There is also a box haphazardly thrown together of photo albums and loose photos from our life together. In my mind, I picture the trunk of my hatchback and play mental Tetris with the things in front of me. Eventually I give up. In the kitchen, I gather the things I need to make myself a cup of tea. While the water boils, I lift myself up onto the counter. I listen to the hiss of the gas releasing from the stove and igniting against the flame. When we'd moved into this rental, we'd been surprised to find a gas stove—a rare thing in Florida. The first few weeks we'd burned everything we cooked. Toby went through a boycott period where he used only the grill and toaster oven when he needed to cook. I got used to the flame, though. I liked how quickly it brought heat and, at the same time, how easily it took that same heat away. I bought copper pans and a cover for the handle of my kettle. I quickly became in charge of handling all the foods that required the stove top, cooking breakfast and boiling pasta. When we talked about buying a house, I told Toby I wanted a gas stove again. I'd become accustomed.

Sitting in the darkness, part of me is upset with Toby for thinking I don't care about what we'll be losing, and another part of me is upset with him for caring so much about the things that don't matter. Even if Melissa takes everything, which she likely will, we'll still have food, water, shelter, and each other. What use do we have for a shoebox of old ticket stubs? For a bunch of photo albums?

Steam starts to leak from the spout of the kettle, so I turn the heat off before it can whistle and wake up Toby. When the water hits the tea bag in one of my many yard-sale mugs, the smell of vanilla chai fills the kitchen. I pour in the last of our remaining milk and stir until the tea is opaque. While the tea cools, I wash my spoon and empty the tea kettle, put everything back where it belongs. Then I sit at the counter, my hands wrapped around the mug to warm them. By the time the tea cools, I am sleepy. I take only a few sips before I empty out the mug and return it to its place, too. On my way back to the bedroom, I pass by the pile of things by the front door, my gaze falling on the box of photos. Before I can think about what I'm doing, I pull the box from the pile and rearrange things to make it look like nothing is missing. I open the hall closet and hoist the photos onto the top shelf then move some cleaning supplies in front of it. I close the closet door, stand there for a moment with my hand on the knob, then let go and walk away.

CHAPTER TWO

For breakfast, I make an entire pot of coffee and spread the last of our cream cheese onto the last of our bagels. Half the coffee goes into mugs and the rest stays in the pot for us to pour into thermoses right before we leave. It's 5am, which is already later than I wanted to leave, but Toby reminds me that the reservations we have at the shelter mean we don't have to leave at 2 am like everyone else.

The neighborhood is silent. It's still dark outside, the streetlights still on, as we carry armfuls out to the driveway. The trunk and the backseat are quickly filled, so I have Toby get the sandbags and plywood in place while I unload everything onto the concrete and re-load it, playing real Tetris this time. Eventually, everything fits. The trunk has just enough room to close. When Toby is finished securing the house, he takes his time moving things we'll need to the front of the car. He shoves a few granola bars into the glove box and makes room in the console between the seats for CDS, a pack of gum, and one of those sleeping masks I only ever see people wear on planes. He preps the car like we're just going on a road trip, like this drive is just part of the adventure. And, for a moment, handing him a set of Prince CDs and an Enya album, I forget and start to believe the same thing.

We don't talk much, too tired to think about forming more words than, "Can you hand me that please?" or "Thank you." But, once everything is loaded, once the foyer is cleared, the dishwasher emptied, the beds made, the air turned down low, and the lights and sprinklers all turned off, we stand halfway down the sidewalk, holding each other, and look up at the house we've lived in for three years.

After college, Toby and I packed up our respective dorm rooms and moved into this house, the first home either of us had ever shared with someone who wasn't our parents. We bought things slowly, building a home together piece by piece, room by room, until this house felt as much like ours as it could. Though we still didn't feel ready to get married, hadn't discussed the idea much beyond that it was a possibility in the future, we'd started saving to buy a house together. Before the storm hit, we had plans for what we wanted our home to look like, for what we would do with a house that was ours. But, once the storms started, especially after Lorenzo, we stopped talking about it, stopped putting money aside for it. It's difficult to plan for a future in a world like this.

I squeeze Toby lightly and say, "Ready?"

"No," he says. "But let's go."

I take the first driving shift, backing us out of the driveway and putting us into motion. As we slowly exit our neighborhood, we are silent. The car is so packed that we can't look behind us, but I glance occasionally at our house disappearing in my side-view mirror. Toby, on the passenger side, can't see our house but he stares out the window and at his mirror until we turn left, away from the sign that marks the entrance to our neighborhood, and start toward the highway. I place my hand on Toby's leg. He takes it into his and holds it, in silence, until we reach the entrance for the interstate. Then he lets go, reaches instead for the aux chord. He plugs in his phone and looks for something to fill the silence.

It doesn't take us long to hit traffic. Once we're on the Howard Frankland, between St. Petersburg and Tampa, the cars slow to a stop. The dim, foggy, early morning light fills with

brake lights and car horns. After sitting for thirty minutes with my foot on the brake, the lights of the cars around us start to blink out. I follow suit, putting the car in park and turning it off to save the gas Toby sweated in line for yesterday.

"What are you doing?" Toby asks sleepily, having started to drift off against the window.

"We're not moving so I turned the car off."

"It's going to get hot though."

I roll my window down and lean my seat back a little. The breeze off the bay trickles in and the car starts to smell like salt and fish and a little car exhaust. Toby rolls his window down, too, and then curls back up against the side of the car. This is why I took the first driving shift. Toby is not a morning person.

People around us start getting out of their cars and milling about. One man climbs onto the hood of his car and then pulls himself up onto his roof. He stands there like a mountaineer, legs spread, fists mounted on hips, and peers out ahead of the traffic. Whatever is blocking us must be too far away to see because when he climbs down he offers his audience only a shrug. A Bayflight helicopter comes in low overhead. Everyone looks up. I lean forward to look through the windshield and watch as it heads past us, growing smaller and smaller until it disappears without landing, confirming that whatever is holding us up is far away and not good.

I grab my phone from the cupholder and pull open the maps. The blue dot that is us sits in the middle of a long red line that stretches a little way behind us and a long way beyond us. Miles ahead, near where I-275 splits into I-75 and I-4, there is a little red triangle with the symbol for a car accident. I turn the navigation off and put my phone back in the cupholder.

"We're going to be here for a while," I say, but Toby, his mouth hanging open, is asleep.

When Toby finally wakes up, I am fifty pages into *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. The last time I read this book was during Charley, so it feels familiar but entirely strange at the same time.

"I knew those would come in handy." Toby sits up and stretches. His eyes are open but only slightly, and he blinks rapidly, trying to clear the sleep.

"What house are you?" I ask him.

Toby looks over at me, confused, until I tap the cover of the book.

"Oh," Toby thinks for a second. "Ravenclaw. You?"

"Slytherin."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

I smack Toby's arm but, before I can say anything, there is a police officer approaching our car. He leans down into my window and says, "How are we doing over here?"

"Is this because I hit him?" I ask. "Because he deserved it."

"No," the officer laughs, but it is a small tired laugh, the kind you give when a joke isn't enough to distract you from what's on your mind. "I'm just going around lettin' folks know that it's going to be a while yet before this traffic starts moving."

"How much longer?"

The officer shrugs. "We're really not sure at this point. There's a real bad accident up ahead that we're having trouble clearing, so just get comfortable. If you turn your radio to the emergency broadcast station, we'll let you know when things are about to start moving again."

"Alright, thank you," I say.

The officer tells us to have a nice evening and then moves on to the car behind us.

"Must be serious," Toby says, more awake now.

"I hope everyone's okay."

A few cars ahead in the lane next to us, a couple of guys unload a small charcoal grill from the back of their car and carry it over to the shoulder of the road. A woman follows, holding a metal coffee pot, the kind you take camping to make coffee over a fire, and one of those huge plastic containers of coffee. The guys start pouring charcoal into the grill and carefully lighting it while the woman scoops coffee into the pot and others start lining up with thermoses and mugs. Even during an evacuation, the smell of brewing coffee can bring together a crowd.

"Should we go over there?" Toby asks, nodding his head in the direction of the forming line.

"We don't know those people."

"I don't think they know each other either."

"I'm okay. I don't need coffee." I thumb the pages of the book in my lap. "You can go though, if you want."

"I don't want to leave you here by yourself," he says, but his hand is already on his thermos, pulling it out of the cupholder.

"Harry and I will be just fine," I say, patting the open pages.

Toby leans over and kisses me as he unbuckles his seatbelt. He unplugs his phone from the charger and shows me that he's tucking it into his pocket. "You text me if you need anything," he says. "Or, if you change your mind, just come over and find me."

I nod then bury myself back in my book, only glancing up as Toby passes in front of our car and disappears into the crowd. As he goes, he doesn't look back.

At the beginning of our relationship, I pretended to like going places with Toby, hanging out with his friends. But over the years we'd learned each other's rhythms, learned that Toby wants to be around people and I want to be by myself. So I started staying home and going to bed early so I was already asleep when Toby crawled into bed smelling like cigars. In the morning, I'd make him breakfast and ask about his night. After he ate, he'd wash our sheets. It was like this that we lived happily, barely noticing each other's absence.

As I try to read, I am distracted by the sight of bodies moving through my periphery. More and more people pass by the car as they make their way toward the smell of morning coffee and the noise of talking people. I finally relent and close the book, losing my page. I grab my thermos, roll up the car windows, and get out, locking the car behind me. There are people everywhere, glancing at me as I pass in front of their windshields, slipping by in the narrow gaps between cars. Everyone smells of sweat-tinged deodorant and coffee—a typical Florida morning.

I find the coffee line first. While I wait, I notice a man and a woman standing off to the side. At their feet rest two protest signs. I can only see the woman's, which reads, *TRUST NO ONE*. People move around them as they go to and from their cars. They give the couple a wide berth and stare pointedly ahead, not daring to make eye contact. One man, the kind of person who likes confrontation, has stepped up to them and is having a conversation. He is wearing a baseball cap and has an unopened can of beer in each hand.

"—in the 40s and 50s, there was Project Cirrus, which focused on using rain as a weapon. *Then* from 1962 to 1983 there was Project STORMFURY where NOAA tried to use cloud seeding to slow *down* hurricanes, which didn't work because you can't slow down a hurricane, they're too big. But you know what's easier than slowing down a hurricane?" The man with the protest sign pauses, waiting like a patient teacher for the man in the baseball cap to answer. There is silence until finally the woman answers.

"Speeding them up."

"Are you suggesting," the man in the cap says, "that the government is causing all these storms? Puttin' us through this on purpose?"

The couple nods eagerly.

"But it's not the government, it's global warming."

"That," the protest man says, "is what they call it to put the blame on *us*, to make us think it's our fault that the planet is falling apart, but really they're the ones setting this apocalypse into motion."

"And why would they do that?"

The protest man shrugs and then smiles. "Noah's arc."

The man in the cap tries to stifle a laugh but can't. He takes a step back and lets himself devolve into hysterics. The couples' faces fall from satisfied smiles into confused frowns. When the man finally straightens up and collects himself, he holds out the beers in his hands to the couple, who take them, their brows furrowed.

"Thanks for the laugh," the man says. "Y'all have a good one."

As the man in the baseball cap retreats, the man with the protest sign yells, "We're not a joke," and throws the beer can after him. The can hits the pavement and explodes, sending a shower of foam and liquid across the asphalt.

"Do you want cream or sugar?"

I turn to realize I've made it to the front of the line. A woman next to the grill offers me powdered cream and sugar, and I accept both. She pours them into my thermos and then directs me to the guy manning the grill. He fills my thermos with coffee and smiles. I thank him and turn back to where the protesters were, but they're gone. There is only the cracked beer can and a circle of wet.

I find Toby sitting in one of the camping chairs people have lined up along the shoulder. There is a group of people sitting and standing around him, and he is nodding his head as they speak. He turns and sees me coming. A look of surprise and then joy hits his face. He stands up as I get closer and gestures for me to take his chair.

"Everyone," he says as I sit, "this is my girlfriend, Sierra."

There is an echo of hellos as greetings move across the group. No one tells me their name, but one guy says, "We were just talking about how they're going to change the hurricane categories."

"I saw that on the news yesterday," I say, wrapping my hands around my coffee even though the temperature is already climbing toward the eighties and I am sweating just from walking around.

"It's ridiculous. Everything above a certain intensity is a 5, why do we need new categories?" another man says.

"Some people aren't evacuating for this storm because they think they can handle a five," says a woman in a camping chair next to me. She leans forward as she talks. "Maybe new categories would make them leave."

"I don't need Melissa to be a category eight to know that I need to get the hell out of Dodge," the same skeptical man says.

"I also heard," says a young mother, standing and swaying her sleeping child, "that they're thinking of building little temporary communities, with shared kitchens and bathrooms, ones they can put up between storms and then pack away when people leave."

"Sounds like we're being forced to go camping," another woman says.

"What about privacy?" I ask.

The young mother shrugs. "I haven't known privacy since I had this guy." She nods her chin at her baby.

"I mean, look at us," the woman in the camping chair says, sweeping her arm across the lines of cars, the people milling about, the group that has amassed here around us. "We're going to shelters or to stay with family or friends, and then who knows what. I don't think we get privacy anymore."

The sound of a car door slamming startles everyone and we turn toward the source of the noise—a white, dented, and dirty van. The bumper is plastered with stickers, both faded and new, with sayings like *Question Authority!* and *Legalize Freedom, Outlaw Government*. I know before I see them that it's the couple with the protest signs. They are sign-less now, but they come toward the group holding armfuls of quarter-sheet flyers.

"Taking our privacy from us is exactly what they want," the man says, handing flyers to the people standing near him. The woman comes up to me and hands me one. The fliers are a bright red, and in bold black letters across the front it reads *ARE YOU AWARE?*

"They want us to build communities together, so we can spy on each other," the man says. The woman nods in agreement with him, smiles at everyone she hands a flyer to.

"Get out of here with your big brother shit," another man says.

"You have to listen—" the protest man starts to say, but the other man puts a hand under his stack of fliers and flicks up, sending the paper into the air like a bully flipping a lunch tray. The morning bay breeze takes the fliers out across the road. They lay flat against cars, tumble down the road, and float over the edge of the bridge, out into the water.

The protest man turns red in the face and he steps up to fight, but before he can say anything the woman is there. She pushes him back toward their van, whispering words to him

that none of us can hear. The man's eyes scan across the crowd as he retreats and, for just a second, we make eye contact. Before I realize what I'm doing, I crumple the flyer I'm holding. The man looks at me, looks down at my hands, and then finally turns away.

The traffic is still not moving long after the conversation dies, and the sun rises to high noon. Everyone wanders back to their cars to seek shade and air conditioning. Toby uses the can opener on his keychain to crack open two cans of car-temperature Chef Boyardee ravioli for lunch, but when he hands me mine the smell turns my stomach. Bile hits the back of my throat and I have to hold my hand against my mouth to keep from puking in the car.

"Are you okay?" Toby asks.

I shake my head no and hand him back the can. Luckily, the windows are already down, so I can stick the entire upper half of my body out of the car. I breathe slowly and deeply. The wave of nausea starts to subside, and I lower myself back into the car. I reach into the back for my purse, fish out an Altoids tin, and pop two in my mouth.

"What was that?" Toby asks.

"I don't know but, as soon as I smelled that food, I wanted to puke."

"Did you eat too much Chef Boyardee as a kid?"

I shake my head and inhale slowly again. The mint on my breath coats my throat and calms my stomach. My can of ravioli sit in the cupholder, and I keep my nose turned toward the window while Toby eats. When he finishes his can, he picks up mine and eats the whole thing, scraping the tomato sauce from the side. Afterward, he takes the cans and puts them in a trash

bag in the trunk so I don't have to smell them. I dig an almost empty bottle of Febreze out from under the passenger seat, spray it into the air vents, and then crank the A/C to full blast.

It's a little before one when we hear the announcement over the emergency broadcast that traffic is going to start moving. Toby is in the driver's seat now. We both rearrange our seats, moving them forward and pulling them upright, and then buckle in. The traffic starts to roll slowly forward, and there is a sudden loudness as all the cars around us start turning on and honking at those who've yet to get going. With traffic the way it is, it will take us at least a day and a half to make the normally eight-hour drive to Atlanta. With four days until the storm, we should have enough of a buffer to account for any unforeseen obstacles, but I feel nervous and out of control in the passenger seat.

"What are you thinking so hard about over there?" Toby asks.

I turn to face him and realize that I'm biting my thumb nail and furrowing my eyebrows. I lower my hands and relax my face. "Don't you think that lane might be faster?" I ask, nodding to the right lane, where cars are moving much quicker than we are.

"I know how to drive, Sierra."

"I know."

"Just trust me."

"I do," I say, but I stare out my window and watch four, five, six cars go past us without even a sign of slowing down. In front of us, cars start to peel right, out of our lane and into the lane that's moving, but Toby just keeps staring straight ahead, which means that I am the one who sees the accident first.

There are three or four lanes closed off ahead and to the right of us. In the empty lanes, a charred SUV is resting upside-down on its roof, the driver's side crumpled and curved like it had been punched, hard, by a giant fist. A large truck with a cracked front fender is resting off on the shoulder. A man stands outside of it, staring straight at the ground. As we move closer, the cars that had gone past us to the front get stuck waiting to merge into the one lane that's still open. Toby steals glances out my window, but mainly he stays focused ahead so he can merge left and let others merge after him.

"Oh man," he says. "That does not look good."

Five police cars, lights spinning and flashing, and a fire truck, its hose still unfurled, surround the scene. In the grass on the side of the road are the circular patterns of helicopter blades. As we pass by, I can see into the open back door of one of the squad cars. There is a little girl, maybe three or four years old. She is streaked with black—ash or grease or both—and her eyes are wide and staring straight ahead. The only other adults besides the driver of the truck are police officers and firefighters who direct traffic and clean up the scene with solemn faces. There's a pause in the flow of traffic as everyone tries to merge. Toby brings our car to a complete stop.

"That's a brutal accident," he says. His eyes dart towards it, trying to take in pieces. "I think that little girl lost her parents."

"What?"

"The little girl, in the police car. She's all by herself. I think the driver of that car was her mom or dad or someone. I think she's alone now."

Where we are, the girl's straight-ahead gaze falls on me and I cannot look away. "Maybe it was only one of her parents," I say. "Maybe the other one wasn't in the car."

"Wouldn't they be with her by now, then?"

"I don't know."

"Someone would be with her."

Even when I was young, I always wanted to be by myself. I was always in my room, playing with my toys by myself or, once I was old enough, reading. I never watched TV because the TV was in the family room. Playdates were my least favorite thing to do. At first, my parents made me go on playdates because they wanted me to be socialized, but eventually they stopped forcing me, started letting me be the recluse I so desperately wanted to be. Once I was old enough to be without supervision, I started asking them to drop me off places. At first, when people I knew found me at the mall or the library or the movies, they'd ask if my parents were with me, but after a while they stopped asking. They knew that I was, more than likely, just by myself.

After ten minutes, Toby is still stalled in the merging traffic, his foot fully on the brake, pressing it to the floor of the car. His other leg bounces impatiently. Suddenly, he reaches down below his seat and hits the buttons that pops the trunk.

"What're you doing?"

"Go grab one of the blankets," he says, reaching over and unbuckling my seatbelt for me.

"What? Why?" I grab my seatbelt and buckle it again.

"We need to give her something."

"Give who something?"

"The little girl."

"What?"

"She's all alone, Sierra." He unclicks my seatbelt again.

"You can't fix that, Toby." I rebuckle myself.

"No, but I have to do *something*."

"Then you go take her a blanket."

"I can't. I have to drive the car." He reaches for the buckle again, but I slap his hand away.

"Stop unbuckling me."

Toby yanks his hand back and stares at me, surprised at having been struck. We are quiet for what feels like a long time until he finally says, "Sierra, we have to do something."

I look out the window toward the girl, who is still staring straight ahead. From this distance, unable to see her breathing, it almost seems like she isn't real. I look back at Toby, who is staring past me at the girl, and, with a sigh, I unbuckle myself.

"How am I going to find you?" I ask.

"It's going to take me a while to merge." Toby nods toward the continuing traffic. "I'm not going to get very far very fast."

"Don't leave without me."

"I would never."

I get out of the car and jog to the trunk. I dig around for the thermal blanket I told Toby to pack and find it buried under the quilts I told him to leave behind. A gap is forming in front of our car, and the cars behind us are starting to honk. I close the trunk and start toward the accident. Toby inches the car forward and the honking quiets. People are staring at me, but I keep moving. I glance back over my shoulder and see my little red Rav4 disappearing into the flow of cars.

There are cones around the accident scene, but the officials are so absorbed in clearing the debris and directing traffic that no one notices me walking past the charred vehicle remnants and toward the little girl in the back of the squad car. As I approach, the officer standing next to her springs to life and comes toward me, hands out.

"You aren't supposed to be in here. How did you even get past—"

"I just wanted to give her something," I tell him.

"I don't think that's—"

"Please, I just," I pause and glance at the girl who is still staring straight ahead. There are dried tear trails down her cheeks and blood on her clothes. "I saw her and I just want to help. It's not much," I hold the blanket out in front of me, "but I wanted to give her something."

The officer hesitates, looks between me and the girl, but ultimately steps aside.

I nod my gratitude and then step forward, approaching the girl slowly. I crouch down in front of her. She is wearing a pink dress with a taffeta tutu, and I can see now that the blood staining her clothes probably isn't hers. She has temporary tattoos up and down both of her arms, like she's just come from a child's party. I don't ask her name or tell her I'm sorry. I just spread the blanket out and pull it around her shoulders. I tuck the ends into her hands, and she grabs onto them, her eyes still staring out in front of her. I turn and follow her gaze to see that she isn't just staring straight ahead but is instead locked onto the remnants of the car she was once in. The car that probably took her to the party where she wore this pink dress and got those tattoos that she probably would've warned her parents not to scrub off in the bath tonight.

For a moment I consider grabbing her, scooping her up and running off toward my car. But the police officer is watching me intently and Toby is waiting for me, just me, to return to our car, which already has a backseat full of supplies—no room for a strange child I stole from the scene of a terrible accident. So I touch her shoulder, rub one finger against her cheek, and then stand. I thank the officer and then turn and walk away.

It takes me a while to find Toby. I have to weave carefully through drivers who are distracted by the accident to their right. I get bumped a few times, though not enough to knock me down, and I'm sure my handprints are on at least a few dozen of the car hoods headed down I-75 North. By the time I spot the back of my car, I am sweating and shaking. I walk next to the passenger side of the car and knock on the window, startling Toby. He slams on the brakes and the car behind him honks. I climb in and buckle myself. I stare out the window and don't say anything.

"Are you okay?" Toby asks after a few seconds.

I nod, but then say, "Yes, fine," when I realize he missed it in-between his glances at the traffic. My knuckles are white as I grip my knees to keep my legs and my hands from shaking. Being face to face with that little girl, seeing the empty, broken look in her eyes, I am struck with how afraid she must be to be so suddenly alone. Being alone has always been a choice for me, and I start to wonder what it would feel like if it wasn't. I want to turn the A/C up to full blast and adjust the vents, but I don't want to move, don't want Toby to see my unsteady hands, so I just sweat, waiting for my body to cool itself down. Toby reaches over and rests his hand on mine. It is cold from the vent that blows right onto the steering wheel, and the freezing weight of it is comforting, but my body is suddenly so tired that I can't even muster the energy to flip my hand over and hold his.

"Thank you for doing that," Toby says.

"You're welcome." Sweat drips down the side of my face so I tuck my head against my shoulder to wipe it off on my shirt sleeve. We are both silent for a few moments, listening to the screech of brakes and the blare of horns. We stop and go so much that I start to feel nauseous from all the sudden movement.

"Which blanket did you give her?" Toby asks.

"The thermal one."

"Oh, good."

"I guess it's a good thing you packed those quilts," I say. Then, with my hands finally steady, I reach up and adjust the A/C. On full blast, it's impossible to hear each other, so Toby, his mouth open and about to say something, silences himself. I adjust the vents, wipe the sweat

from my face with the bottom of my shirt, and then lean against the window. As Toby weaves between cars and toward the left lane, my face bounces softly against the glass. But, by the time we pass the road closure, merge right, and pick up speed, I am already asleep.

We take turns driving into Georgia. The traffic is still thick and slow, but it is at least now moving steadily. As soon as one of us can no longer feel our ass or keep our eyes open, we pull over to the side of the road, wake the other one up, switch places, and head onward. It is dark outside by the time we hit the border, and eventually both of us are too tired to drive. I pull over onto the shoulder. The rumble strips vibrate the car as each tire passes over them and the vibration wakes Toby. He looks over at me groggily. I rest my head against the steering wheel and close my eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his eyes falling closed again.

"I can't drive anymore." I take a deep breath in, lean back against the seat, and exhale. "I'll fall asleep and kill us."

"Where are we?"

"Near Macon."

"Oh, we're close." Toby opens his eyes and looks around, as though the side of the highway will look different here than it did in Florida, different here than it will as we near Atlanta. "Let's just sleep. We'll drive tomorrow."

"Mhmm," I say as I lower my seat.

"Do you want to lay down in the backseat?" Toby reaches out sleepily and stokes me shoulder with the tips of his fingers. "We could curl up together like we used to in college on those twin mattresses."

"God, how did we ever fit together on those?"

"I have no idea."

"We used to do it every night."

"I know." We are both silent for a moment before Toby asks again.

"I don't think I could move right now even if I wanted to."

"So you don't want to?"

"It's just an expression."

"An expression of not wanting to." Toby withdraws his hand and tucks it back into his crossed arms.

"That's not what I said."

"It is what you said."

"I'm just tired."

Toby doesn't say anything, but I can hear his breathing, the quick uneven breathing of someone who is still awake. Awake and upset.

"Toby," I return his touch, stroking his arm with my fingertips, but he doesn't respond. Doesn't even acknowledge my voice or my touch. I turn over onto my side, facing away from

Toby, and then scooch myself towards him. I bump into the console and the gear shift, accidentally turn on the windshield wipers when I reach for the steering wheel to steady myself. But I lift myself in pieces across the obstacles of the car and press myself backwards into Toby. He snakes his arms around me but doesn't say anything. He just holds on, almost instinctively, and then loosens his grip maybe because he remembers that he's still upset that he had to ask me to want this. We fall asleep like this, but I wake up in the middle of the night to Toby getting out of the car and walking around to the driver's side. When he gets in and sees my open eyes he says, "My arm fell asleep," and then curls up alone on the other side of the car.

CHAPTER THREE

We are standing at the back of the car, stretching our legs and drinking room-temperature water we wish was coffee, when the earthquake starts and knocks us to the ground. Toby falls backward but catches himself before his head hits the pavement. I fall forward and save my face at the cost of my hands and knees, which are ground into the gravelly roadside by the movement of the earth. Our supplies start tumbling out of the open trunk and onto the ground where they either roll down the hilled roadside or across the highway. The cars that were passing us have all stopped to ride this thing out.

Eventually, the shaking stops. We give it a few minutes before either of us rise to our feet, and when we do rise we do so cautiously. Toby jogs across the highway while the cars are still stopped to retrieve the supplies that escaped that way. I go down the hill and collect things from the grass on our side of the road. My knees and palms are scraped, but the adrenaline in my system keeps me from feeling their pain yet.

After gathering our things, I reorganize the trunk while Toby checks the engine to make sure nothing has shifted or broken or leaked. He slams the hood shut and comes around to the back of the car.

“Everything seems to be fine,” he says.

“That’s good news.”

“That was a weird little quake.”

“Things are getting bad.” I pull out the first aid kit and set it aside so I can treat my wounds later. In its place, I stuff boxes of granola bars so I can make room at the front of the trunk for the empty gas cans we need to fill soon.

“Hey.” Toby touches my arm.

I stop moving, clasping my hands together in front of me and letting them hang.

“I’m sorry about what I said yesterday. I just—” Toby runs a hand through his hair. “I just want you to trust me a little, to know you can depend on me.”

“Toby, I do trust you, but I—”

I am interrupted by an aftershock, the ground shaking us again, this time with a little more force. Amidst the shaking, Toby reaches for me at the same time that I step back to close the trunk, to keep our supplies from escaping again. Because I move, Toby falls forward, skinning his knees and hands in the same gravel that tore mine, while I am left standing over him, using the car to hold myself up. When the aftershock is over, I am staring at Toby and Toby is staring at his scraped palms. I offer my hand to help him, but he gets up on his own and heads toward the front of the car to check the engine again.

We hit traffic again outside Macon.

"Must be another accident," Toby says, rubbing his eyes as he puts the car in park. Both of us are exhausted. We stopped for coffee at the first gas station we could find, but they were out of anything caffeinated. So we purchased two cups of decaf, loaded them with sugar packets, and sipped on our sweet placebos, hoping to trick ourselves into being more awake.

"I hope not."

Around us, cars are lined up on the highway like it's a parking lot. There are no brake lights because everyone has turned off their cars, but it's different than the accident back in Florida. Instead of milling about and waiting for the traffic to move, people are getting out of their cars and heading toward the front of this vehicular line.

"I don't think it's an accident," I say.

"What?"

"I think something's wrong."

I get out of the car, still holding my coffee more for the comfort of its warmth than anything else. Toby follows and locks the car behind us. We head up the road, dodging side-view mirrors and trailer hitches. We know we've found it when we find the crowd. There are so many people all bunched together, it looks like an audience waiting for a concert to begin. At the front are state rangers. They face the throng, arms held out, trying to keep people back from whatever is up ahead.

"What's going on?" I ask of no one in particular.

A man turns around, shrugs, and says, "Apparently there's something wrong with the road."

"With the road?"

"Yeah?"

"Can it be fixed?" Toby asks.

The man offers another shrug and turns forward.

"I'm going to go to the front," I tell Toby.

"Okay, I'll come with you."

"No, it'll be easier for me to squeeze through everyone alone."

"So you want me to just stay behind?"

Toby has the same tone and the same wrinkles in his brow that he did last night when I said I didn't want to lay in the backseat with him.

"It'll just be easier, Toby. That's all."

Toby takes a deep breath, and then blows it out slowly. "Do you have your phone?"

I lift it out of my back pocket and show him.

"Meet me back at the car, okay?"

I nod.

"Be careful."

"I will." It's not until I start moving forward and Toby's hand falls from my back that I even realize he was touching me in the first place. I look back at him when I feel the absence of his heat. He meets my eyes but then turns and looks at the crowd of newcomers now gathering behind him. I push forward through the bodies, slick with humidity and sweat. I mutter "excuse me" like a mantra and ignore the looks of those annoyed by someone trying to cut the line. When I reach the front, I'm not able to immediately process what's in front of me. Outside of the crowd,

the cool morning air hits me, and I feel like I've entered another realm—one in which the world has started to fall apart.

Behind the state troopers, their hands still outstretched to keep people back, there is a crack running through the earth and across the highway, the pavement dropping off suddenly. It is at least a mile wide and it continues on in either direction, farther than I can see. The exposed earth is the orange-tinted brown of clay and dirt. The raw edge looks so clean and jagged at the same time, like when you crease a paper and rip it in half or snap a cookie in two. Across the way, I can see where the highway starts again. It looks like a cartoon. I almost expect there to be a wooden ramp for us to drive up and launch ourselves over.

"What is that?" I ask, not realizing it's out loud until someone replies.

"They haven't said," a woman next to me says. "My husband and I have been here for hours. They're waiting for word from someone above them in the chain of command. They're trying to figure out what to tell us, I imagine."

"Do you think it's from the earthquake last night?"

The woman shrugs.

"How are we supposed to get past this thing?"

"Honey, I don't think there's any getting past it."

"But I have to get to Atlanta."

"I'd start making phone calls if I were you."

I pull out my phone. Instead of calling anyone, I take a picture of the crack, zooming in between state troopers and civilians to show as much of the scope of the thing as I can. I send the picture to Toby without any words and wait for him to reply. Melissa will make landfall in three days, which means we'll start to feel the effects of her bands in about two. Atlanta is only a few hours away, but with this in our way, there's no telling how much time we'll have to add on to our commute. I am mad at myself for being so tired last night, for being unable to just drive on and make it to the shelter. I am also mad at this world for not holding itself together for one more day, for falling apart precisely where I need it to stay intact, for making it so hard for me to do this on my own. My phone buzzes, and it's a text from Toby.

One of the state troopers turns one hand away from the crowd so he can lift the radio on his shoulder to his ear. Everyone at the front sees this, sees the news coming in, and they quiet—a quiet that quickly falls over the rest of the crowd like a wave.

"Folks," the officer starts, "thank you for your patience. We are now able to tell you that what you're seeing in front of you is a fault line that has opened up. It extends for about a hundred miles in either direction and does, eventually, narrow. However, we are, as of yet, uncertain of the stability of the fault line and urge you to seek shelter on this side of the line."

A murmur goes through the crowd and someone calls out, "Is there enough room in the shelters?"

Another person calls out, "I heard they were all full down here."

"We're working on getting numbers for the shelters south of here, and we're attempting to figure out transportation across the fault line," the officer tells everyone, "but, as I said, we're still unsure of its stability at this point in time."

I start backing up and making my way to Toby, leaving room for others to rush forward, to hear and see. When I emerge from the back of the highway crowd, I am further back than I remember being. There are cars I don't recognize, others have joined the crowd as they've gotten stuck behind the line of cars. I hear my name. I turn toward the noise and find Toby standing in the bed of a pickup truck, waving his arms above his head. He jumps down from the truck and meets me on the ground. He is sweating as much as I am, the back of his shirt soaked through in an upside-down triangle.

"There's a huge—"

"They said we can't—"

"Get across, I know. The news trickled back."

"We should try and find a way around," I say at the exact same time that Toby says, "I found a group of people who are staying."

"What?" we both say to each other.

"We already have those spots in Atlanta," I say, asserting my turn. "We're not that far out from the shelter. We just need to go east or west and find where the fault line closes so we can get across."

"But we're far enough out from Florida now. Why don't we just stay here?" Toby says.

"Why would we stay here?"

Toby throws his arms out to his sides. "Look at all this! It's beautiful here." He sweeps his arms, trying to encompass the trees that stand sentry over the highway. They are so, so green,

fall delayed by the heavy rainfall the storms have brought through here. When we were first dating, Toby always tried to get me to go camping with him and his friends. But I wasn't good at camping. I couldn't start fires or catch fish or set up a tent; I preferred to stay indoors and in the city where I knew how things worked and the ways I was forced to rely on other people were invisible to me—the water coming through the tap, the electricity keeping the lights on, the grocery stores always stocking exactly the foods I needed. The one time I'd gone camping with Toby, I spent the entire evening frustrated by the difficulty and unpredictability of nature. When I woke up in the middle of the night to the feeling of something crawling on my face, I screamed and then spent the rest of the night locked in the car, waiting for Toby to wake up, pack, and take me home.

"Where are we going to take shelter out here?" I sweep my arms toward the trees. "It's not like we can camp during a hurricane, and I'm sure all the shelters here are full by now."

"I found some people who have a vacation home out here. It has hurricane windows and it's way above sea level, up in the mountains."

"You found some people with a cabin in the woods? Are we in the beginning of a horror movie? If we are, you're the idiot that gets killed first."

"Come on, Sierra, it'll be fu—"

"No, Toby, riding out a category-five hurricane in a cabin in the woods with strangers will not be fun. We already have a place in the shelter in Atlanta and that's where we're going." I turn and start walking back toward our car, even though I don't know where exactly our car is.

"And what if we can't get to Atlanta?"

"What do you mean?" I keep walking, forcing Toby to fall into step behind me.

"What if we go east and the fault line never closes? What if we can't get across? What then?"

"Then I'll figure something out."

"Oh, you'll figure something out. Got it."

I spin around. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You don't trust me to do anything, the only person you rely on is yourself. If a plan isn't yours, then it's not a plan."

"That's not true."

"What about all the things I wanted to take with us, Sierra? All the things that mattered to me? The things you wouldn't even consider trying to fit into the car?"

"All that stuff you added to the pile? I fit all of that into the car."

"What about the pictures?"

I have a sharp intake of breath, like I've been sucker punched.

"You think I didn't notice they weren't in the car?" Toby says.

"They weren't necessary, Toby. Look around us, look at the world we're living in." I sweep my arms, mimicking him. "In this world, we don't have room for anything that's not necessary."

"Huh," Toby says, and I know the fact that he's calm means whatever he says next isn't going to be good. "Well then maybe there's no room for me, either."

Before I can respond Toby pulls the car keys from his pocket, tosses them to me, and walks off, disappearing into the people milling about their cars. I don't know what to do with myself. I know that what I should do is follow Toby, but my feet don't move toward him. Instead I find myself turning around and hitting the lock button on my key fob as I walk the line of cars. Eventually, my car alarm sounds. I climb into the driver's seat, leaving the door open. It blocks the path along the driver's side of my car but I can't be bothered. My heart is pumping so quickly, from the argument and from the walking, that it hurts my chest, but my head still feels like it's not getting enough blood. I feel clammy and have no room to react before a wave of nausea hits me and I am vomiting. I have barely enough time to lean the top half of my body out of my car and over the asphalt before I'm spewing everything in my stomach, which isn't much.

"Oh, honey, are you okay?" a sweet, southern woman's voice calls out, I assume, to me.

"I'm fine," I say, still leaning out of my car, too weak to move, even to wipe my own mouth. The lower half of a woman squeezes past my car door, steps around my vomit, and comes to stand behind me. She squats down, the rest of her coming into my line of vision. She is middle-aged, her hair still naturally dark but peppered with strands of grey. There are wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, the light ones that come from years of laughter. She is wearing a dark grey jumpsuit with a medical logo on the breast pocket.

"I'm a nurse," she says before asking if she can take my pulse. I nod at her then feel her fingers on my neck. She stares at her watch and counts. "Your blood pressure is high, but that's to be expected after getting sick like that. Have you eaten anything weird today?"

"No." I sit up finally, fumbling to find a napkin in the car to wipe off my mouth. "I haven't eaten much at all actually. The canned food we brought makes me nauseous for some reason, so I've been eating crackers and granola bars, things like that."

The woman nods then asks, "Is there any chance you might be pregnant?"

I look up at her, suddenly feeling sobered. "I don't...I don't think so."

"Alright," the woman says as she stands and then extends her hands to me. "Come with me."

She helps me lift myself out of the car and reminds me to close my door and lock it before we walk away. Before I can say anything, she hooks her arm with mine and keeps me steady and supported as we head away from my car, weaving along the highway-turned-parking-lot. I feel uncomfortable, being supported, but she doesn't seem to sense this. As we pass through, some cars, the ones on the edges, are doing twelve-point turns, heading somewhere—either back to where they came from, towards a closer shelter, or off to find a way around the fissure up ahead. The woman brings me to an ambulance and lets go of me to open up the back.

"Hop on up," she says as she climbs into the back, again offering me her hand. I take it, place my foot on the step sticking off the back of the vehicle, and together we pull me into the mobile hospital room. "I'm Terry, by the way," the woman says as she flits about the vehicle, opening up cabinets and drawers, pulling out medical instruments and a cardboard box.

"Sierra," I reply as Terry hands me a large plastic cup.

"First things first, I'm going to go up front and you're going to pee in this."

"Excuse me?"

Terry holds out the cardboard box—a pregnancy test, the kind with a dropper. I remember taking one in college when Toby and I had a pregnancy scare. I'd sat in my dorm room, nineteen years old, using the dropper to administer my own pee to the test like a scientist. Toby sat next to me on the bathroom floor while we waited for the timer on my phone to go off. My roommates were in the common room talking about a party they wanted to go to that night, oblivious to the fact that we were waiting to see if our lives were changing. Toby held my hand and told me we were in this together, while I thought about how different my life would be with a child, how much I'd have to rely on others. It takes a village, after all.

The test that time had been negative. Toby and I celebrated by going to that party with my roommates, getting drunk, and then having unprotected sex in the reckless habit that teenagers have of immediately forgetting the consequences of their actions.

I sat for a minute staring at the box as Terry made her way up front. When I didn't move, Terry looked back at me.

"Everything okay?"

"What if it's positive?"

"Then it's positive," she says.

"Can I even have a kid?"

"Well—"

"In this world," I sweep my hand toward the front of car, gesturing toward the cracked fault line. "I don't need anyone depending on me but myself."

Terry is silent for a beat before she says, "First, we need to know if that's even a question you need to be asking."

I nod at her. She turns around. I unzip my pants.

Terry's timer goes off after three minutes, and she picks up the test. She stares at it and then turns to me. "Normally I'd say congratulations, but I'm not sure that's what you want to hear."

"It's positive?" I reach for the test. In the little oval window cut into the pink plastic, there is the solid control line and then a second, darkening pink line right next to it. Cabinets and drawers rustle again as Terry moves about the back of the ambulance.

"You're going to want to take a prenatal vitamin every day starting now. Try eating your meals before you're hungry. Sometimes that helps with the nausea." Terry hands me two bottles—prenatal vitamins and water. "Stay hydrated or your amniotic fluid will get low. Once you get where you're going, and once Melissa passes through, you're going to need to get to a doctor—make sure everything's okay."

I pop the vitamin into my mouth and take a swig of water. Just last year, a friend from college was having her first kid, and she'd asked me to help her with the gender reveal. I went to the 20-week ultrasound and watched the wand move over her stomach, revealing little pieces of her child. The nurses labeled things as they took pictures for the doctor—right leg, left arm, stomach, lungs, bladder. When they moved over the heart, and I saw it flutter in real time on the monitor, I looked to my friend who had soft, silent tears falling down her face.

"This isn't going to be like it's supposed to," I tell Terry.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, the way people do pregnancies." I set the water bottle next to me on the gurney and nervously pick at the skin around my nails. There will be no joyous announcement to Toby or my family. I already know this. Even if Toby and I weren't fighting, a pregnancy in a world like this is different. But considering what just happened between Toby and me, a pregnancy is not exactly the magic cure. "I'm not going to surprise my parents with grandparent onesies," I tell Terry, "or pop a balloon with colored powder or hang my ultrasound pictures on my fridge. After this storm, I might not even have a fridge to hang things on." I look out the window in the back door of the ambulance. "I don't even know if my boyfriend is still my boyfriend right now. If I bring this child into this world," I look down at my stomach, "I don't know that I can give it the life it's supposed to live."

"Look," Terry sits on the gurney next to me and puts her hand on my knee. "I'm not going to tell you what to do because there is no right or wrong answer here. If you decide to have this baby, great. If you decide not to have this baby, that's fine too. But know that the ultrasounds and the gender reveals and all that, that's not what makes you a mom and that's not what a good pregnancy means. A good pregnancy is one where you do what's best for you and for this child."

We sit in silence for a few minutes, Terry's hand on my knee. Finally, I nod. "I should probably go find my boyfriend."

Terry nods back. "Take those vitamins with you. Those are yours now."

"Thank you."

"And get to shelter soon, okay? You need to be around medical professionals, just in case. Don't want to go stressin' this baby out, ya hear?"

I nod as I hop down off the gurney and open up the back of the ambulance. Before I step out of the vehicle, I turn back to Terry. "Thank you for what you said. For everything, really."

"Oh," Terry waves a dismissive hand. "This is my job. You don't have to thank me."

"Where do you go now?" I nod my head up toward to front of the line of cars, and Terry glances back over her shoulder.

She shrugs. "Wherever they send me. I'll probably stick around here for a little while, treat the chaos, but then eventually I'll head to a shelter somewhere."

"Well, be safe," I tell her.

"You too."

I step down from the ambulance. Tnd the door closes behind me with a *thunk* and a *click*, and I am back in the heat of the Georgia sun. It is becoming afternoon now; we've been here so long. I have no idea where Toby could be, so looking for him means wandering back toward our car while I keep an eye out. More cars left while I was with Terry, so there are more empty spaces on the road, but there are also more cars lined up, and people still head toward the front to see what's going on. There is a helicopter flying over with a news logo on the side. I almost want to wave at it so I can go back later and find the footage, see myself standing alone amongst the chaos of this scene. I wonder if I'd look at this footage with the child that's currently inside me. Would I point myself out in the crowd? Would they ask me why I'm by myself? But I don't wave to the camera. I just continue on.

In and around the cars that are still here are families trying to figure out what they should do. They stare down at cell phone screens, holding them out to each other and then nodding or shaking their heads. They scroll through news feeds and zoom out on maps to try and get a sense of what they're supposed to do, of what the right path is through this mess. I am so focused on people watching that I almost pass my car entirely. I stop only because my people watching gaze falls on Toby and, startled, I stop in my tracks.

Toby is leaning against the car with his hands in his pockets. His hair and shirt are more sweat-soaked than before, and little beads of sweat fall from his forehead down the side of his face. He looks up at me, not angry, not even annoyed, just looking.

"You locked me out," he says.

"I'm sorry. I had to go somewhere. I wasn't feeling well."

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I tell him. I consider for the briefest second telling him I'm pregnant, but, considering where we'd just left things, I don't. Telling him I'm pregnant after a fight like that would be like putting a Band-Aid over a bullet wound without first digging out the bullet itself. I hand Toby the keys, and he unlocks the car. When we both get inside, he turns the car on, pops opens the vents, and sets the air conditioning to as cold and hard as it will go. I reach across him and turn the car off.

"Are you crazy? We can't waste gas like that."

"I was just going to blast it for a second to cool us off."

"That's still a lot of—"

"Fine." Toby turns on the battery and rolls the windows down, then pulls the keys completely out of the ignition and drops them into the cupholder. We both sit there for a few minutes in silence.

Then, we turn to each other and both try to speak at the same time.

"I can't—"

"I don't want to—"

We both fall silent again. Toby leans back against his seat and gestures for me to go first.

"I can't stay here, wherever we are, Toby." Toby nods but doesn't say anything. "We have a plan, a plan we made together, and I want to follow that plan. I don't want to rely on these strangers to keep us safe. I want to rely on us. Well, and the government."

Toby smiles a little. "Did we make a plan?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, did we make a plan or did you call your friends, get us those spots in the shelter, and make a plan for us?"

"Well, I—"

"Sierra, you don't know how to rely on anyone but yourself. And that's not necessarily a bad thing, but it's not a thing that works in a relationship. I can't spend the rest of my life following along with whatever you've decided is best for us. I have to be able to have a say, at least some say, in what's going on in my life."

"I don't know how to fix what you're telling me to fix, Toby."

"It's not a matter of fixing it, Sierra." Toby sighs, reaches up and grips the steering wheel just to have something to squeeze his feelings into. Finally, he drops his hands and turns to face me. "I don't think it can be fixed, Sierra. I think this is who you are. And I don't think who I am is compatible, anymore, with who you are."

"Are you...are you breaking up with me in the middle of a hurricane evacuation?"

Toby doesn't say yes, but he doesn't say no either. Instead he says, "I'm going to take my things and go with that group I found. I'm going to ride out the storm here. When it's over, I'll get in touch with you, make sure you're alright."

Part of me wants to blurt out that I'm pregnant, but the other part of me puts my hand over my mouth and turns away so that I don't. Instead, I bite down hard, grinding my own teeth together, and press my fingers against my lips. Tears well up in my eyes but don't fall. There is a small anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach that wants me to let someone else take over, let someone else make the decisions, the plan, the choice. But the rest of me knows that the only way to survive this—this breakup, this storm, this pregnancy—is to be in control of it.

"Okay," I say finally. Turning to face Toby.

"Okay?"

Toby looks at me and I look back and we stare at each other for what feels like a lifetime. He finally breaks the silence with, "I know I just said that you only rely on yourself, but," he pauses, "are you going to be okay?"

"Oh," I wave my hand dismissively, defensively, "I'll be fine. I've got the car, I've got supplies. It's just a road trip."

"I was just—"

"I'd ask if you're going to be okay, but you've found people already. A whole group of people."

"Sierra—"

"You know, you used to be okay with me. You used to like the way I was." I pause. "The way I am. You didn't used to mind me making decisions all the time."

"No, I didn't used to mind," Toby says, his voice raising for a second. I look at him, a little startled. He runs his hand through his hair, and when he speaks again his voice is softer. "I didn't used to mind, but now I do."

I nod, turn, and stare out the passenger window.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Sierra." Toby wipes away a tear I didn't feel falling down my cheek. "There's just something wrong with *us*."

I reach for my own face, find a few more tears I didn't know were there.

"I'll be fine," I tell him. "Really, I promise."

"I know you will," Toby says as he maneuvers himself across the console and the drive shift and tucks his legs next to mine. I reach down and pull the lever that flattens my seat and we lay there, sweating and—at least one of us—crying, and we hold each other.

Toby takes his duffle bag and half the food and water. He doesn't want to take one of my grandmother's quilts—"I grabbed them for you," he says—but I force him to. It is because of him that we have these quilts in the first place. There is another couple, a man and a woman, standing behind Toby. They are some of the people he's going with, and they are here to help him carry his things to their van. Toby lays his duffel bag down and sets the quilt on top, then pulls me into a hug.

"You're going to be okay, right?" I ask into his shoulder.

"I'm going to be fine, and so will you," he says into the top of my head. "Keep in touch, please. Let me know you're okay."

"I will. You do the same."

Toby walks away and I am reminded of the first time we met. Our junior year, my roommates had convinced me to attend a party at a house where one of their boyfriends lived. After taking a few group shots and steadily sipping on whatever beer I could fish out of the inflated kiddie pool on the dining table, I needed food but none of my friends wanted to leave the party. In the house's pantry I found a box of that just-add-water pancake mix. When Toby stumbled across me, I was squatting in front of a cabinet near the stove, trying to extract a griddle.

"Do you need some help?" he asked.

I whirled around, suddenly embarrassed to have been spotted rummaging through another person's things, suddenly aware that this wasn't exactly party etiquette. "Do you live here?" I asked back.

"No, I don't."

"Okay, good." I stood up holding the griddle and shut the cabinet I'd been practically inside of. We stood there for a few seconds that felt like minutes, glancing at and then away from each other, until finally I held up the griddle and said, "Do you want pancakes?"

At first, Toby kept trying to help, reaching over to stir the batter or flip a pancake he thought I might burn. He did this until I grabbed both of his arms, led him to a nearby barstool, and told him to sit. He stayed there, nibbling on pancakes as I brought them over, asking me about my major, my interests, my life before college. I told him about studying communications, rummaging through strangers' kitchens, and growing up near the beach while I stacked pancakes too high on the only clean plate I could find. When my roommates told me it was time to leave and disappeared toward the front of the house, I went to follow them, telling Toby how nice it was to meet him, but he stopped me. Toby grabbed both of my arms like I had his and led me toward the barstool but missed and ended up pushing me against the kitchen island, the counter lip pressing into the small of my back. When he kissed me, he tasted like maple syrup. When I finally started to leave, I kept glancing back over my shoulder and catching sight of him staring back from the kitchen.

As Toby disappears into the people and the cars, he doesn't glance back at me, and I am hit with an overwhelming sadness over how much I really wanted him to. When I can no longer see him, I take a deep breath and turn away.

From the beginning of the trip, the only contact I'd had with my parents was the occasional text message—simple updates on our evacuation followed by their perfunctory *okays*. Before me, my parents were both academics who decided not to have children because they liked living a life that was, for the most part, unaffected by anyone but themselves. They spent evenings quietly reading or watching television, and they took vacations that were usually centered around something one of them was researching. They spent time together but were also unaffected by spending time apart. Once they had me, their routine changed only in that they often took turns parenting in order to preserve the other's solitude.

When I call their landline from where my car is still parked on the highway outside Macon, it takes four rings for my mother to answer the phone.

After our greetings, I tell her that there's been a problem with the evacuation.

"A fault line opened up on the route, so I can't go straight into Atlanta anymore."

"What are you and Toby going to do then?"

"Well, Toby's actually not here anymore. We broke up."

She pauses for a second before asking, "Well, where did he go?"

"With a group of people he met that have a cabin out here somewhere." I fiddle with the air vents even though the car isn't on, flicking them up and down.

"And you didn't want to go with them." It's a statement not a question.

"I'm going to try and make it around. I think, if I drive west, I'll eventually find a way to get around."

"What if you don't?"

"Well, then at least I won't be on the coast."

"Okay."

We are silent on the phone for a second. I think about telling her I'm pregnant, because I'm alone, because she's my mom, because it feels like something that someone should know. But telling her also feels like giving up control, so instead I say, "I just wanted to let you know what was going on."

"Thanks for calling. Let us know when you get where you're going."

We hang up the phone and I open up my navigation app. I find my location, then trace a straight line out to the west coast. I drop a pin, request directions, and start the car.

CHAPTER FOUR

The start of the drive is uneventful as I make my way back south a bit so that I can start to make my way west. No one is heading south, so the roads are clear. Every once in a while, an emergency vehicle or an electric truck passes by, on its way to be in position for the post-disaster clean up. While I'm looking down at the GPS, a notification flashes at the top of my screen—a text message from Toby. I don't open it, just swipe it away. For the first time in four years, I don't know where Toby is or what he's doing. There is a small part of me that finds this strange and sad, but mostly I just feel free.

There are saltine crumbs all over the front of me from the crackers I've been nibbling on while I drive. I took Terry's advice—eat before you're hungry—and it seems to be keeping the morning sickness at bay. After the pregnancy scare we had in college, Toby and I discussed what we would do if we actually got pregnant—a pregnancy plan, my roommate called it when I told her about our conversation. If we caught it early, we decided to go with the non-surgical option, the pill. But if we were too far along, we'd carry the pregnancy through, opting for adoption if we weren't ready to care for a child. All of our options included Toby being there with me, through the chemically induced miscarriage, through the birth, through adoption or parenting, but when I talked to my roommate I told her I didn't think I would tell Toby if I had another pregnancy scare. That I thought, ultimately, I'd just take care of things on my own.

If I'd told Toby about this pregnancy, I don't know what he would've wanted to do. There's a chance he would've wanted to keep it, but, if he was feeling so unhappy that he could break up with me in the middle of a hurricane evacuation, I don't think he'd want to raise a child

together right now. I don't know that there would've been, that there is, another option right now, though. I don't imagine abortions, surgical or non-surgical, are top priority in the middle of a disaster. I can't image a Planned Parenthood still being fully-staffed during a category five.

After we'd discussed our pregnancy plan, laying practically on top of each other on my dorm-issued Twin XL mattress, Toby asked me if I wanted to have kids in the future, if that was part of my life plan.

"I don't know." I shrugged.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Toby propped himself up on an elbow to look at me. "You've never thought about it?"

I shrugged again. "I mean, my parents didn't have me until they were in their thirties, and I was an accident, so I never really thought kids needed to be part of my plan. I kind of figured one day I'd decided, 'Oh you know what would be great right now? A child.'"

"Your decision to have children sounds like your decision to get Thai food."

I covered Toby's face with my hand and then gently pushed him back so he was lying flat again. I curled my body around his side, one leg on top of his legs, my head resting where his arm met his shoulder. "I just kind of figured one day I'd know I wanted to have kids, and then I'd have them. Or, if that feeling never came, I wouldn't have them."

"What if the person you're with definitively wants or doesn't want kids? What do you do then?"

"I think the person I'm supposed to be with will be okay with figuring it out as we go."

"Huh," Toby replied.

It was my turn to prop myself up on an elbow and look at him. "Why? Do you want kids?"

Toby nodded. "One boy, one girl."

"Oh."

"I always thought one of each would be good."

"Yeah," I pause, "that sounds nice."

There are old wives' tales, I know, about how to tell if you're having a boy or girl—what type of cravings you're having, whether you carry high or low, what side of your body you sleep on, whether or not you have morning sickness. When my friend from college told me she was pregnant a couple years ago, she'd said she had a feeling it was a boy even though she was only twelve weeks. When it came time to actually find out the gender, she'd been right. Sitting in the driver's seat of the car I've had since high school, nibbling on crackers and guiding myself and my occupied uterus toward New Mexico, I don't have a feeling about anything—not what sex this baby is, not how far along I am, not whether or not I should keep it. I don't even feel the weight of carrying another life yet, though I know that at some point I will.

When I think of my childhood, the first memory that comes to mind is the days I spent at the beach with my father. On days when he needed to get through a pile of articles or catch up on some grading for his classes, he'd pack me, his papers, and a small lunch into his car and take us to the beach. While he sat in a beach chair halfway between the parking lot and the ocean, I played in the first few inches of water, my feet calloused by the part of the ocean floor that was

covered in bits of shells broken by the moving tide. I'd sift through the sand and pick out the shiny shells, the ones that were smooth and reflected rainbows. My father would grade papers or read, glancing up at me occasionally, sometimes calling out my name without looking up just to hear me respond. At the end of the day, I'd present my curated collection of shells to my father, my bathing suit filled with sand, and he'd flip through his stack of papers, showing me all the marks he'd made in his bright blue pen—here was the work we'd each done.

Once, while digging in the sand, I struck a particularly jagged shell and yanked my hand back to discover a finger pricked and bleeding. I hadn't occurred to me, even that young, that I should ask my father for help. Instead I just stuck my finger in the ocean and let the sting of the salty waves wash over it until it finally stopped bleeding. It wasn't until that night, while my father gave me a bath, that anyone noticed the cut on my finger. Even then, the discovery was uneventful. My father dried me off and dressed me, wrapped my finger in a Band-Aid, and left me to brush my teeth and hair before bed.

When my parents moved to New Mexico while I was in college, my father told me the thing he'd miss the most about Florida was the ocean. While helping them pack, I found an old cigar box in my father's nightstand filled with the shiny shells I'd found during our days on the beach. Some of them were dulled and broken, brittle with age, but he had them, all of them.

I fill up my tank again just before nightfall and then stop at a grocery store to find something my stomach will tolerate besides crackers. There are only, from what I can tell, two employees in the entire store. A middle-aged woman manning one of the registers and a similarly-aged man organizing what little food is left on the shelves. I roam the aisles and scan

the labels of the food rejected by the panicked masses—little jars of olives and minced garlic, packaged meat, bruised fruits, pre-made sushi. The bread aisle is still relatively full. There is a loaf of the mountain bread my parents always used to serve with dinner and I carry it gently in my arms like a child. I wander toward the dairy aisle, grab the soft table butter that comes in a plastic tub. As I head toward the front of the store, I remember all the times I used to see people grabbing food off the shelves of grocery stores and eating it right in the aisles. If there was ever a time for such lawless behavior, it would be in the middle of a near apocalypse. I hide away in the greeting card aisle, lowering myself to the floor and leaning against the Hallmark Get Well Soon cards. Knifeless, I open the bread, rip a chunk from the floured crust, and use it to scoop up some of the butter—like a chip into salsa.

It is like this that the male employee finds me, sweeping his broom down the aisle I've settled in. As he passes by, he nods to me and I bring my feet into my chest to give him more room to pass by. When Toby and I first moved in together, I was always finding reasons to be by myself for a little while. I'd take a bath or a nap, go see a movie he didn't want to see, offer to housesit for family and friends. It was in these quiet moments that I could finally feel myself relaxing, unwinding, recharging. In those moments, I would brace myself for whatever was coming next. And Toby let me have those moments—bought me bath salts, left the movie times folded open on the kitchen counter, didn't ask to come when I had plans to be somewhere else. Sitting in the aisle, I'm reminded of these moments and reminded of Toby, and I wonder if maybe, in those moments, there was something I was missing out on.

I rise from the floor. At the register, I pay the cashier in cash, and she tells me to have a nice night. It isn't until I'm already at my car that I realize the streetlight I parked next to isn't on and that there is glass shattered under my feet.

"Don't scream," the male voice says as one hand pulls my arms behind me and another puts a blade to my throat. I let go of my single grocery bag and it falls to the ground, the bread letting off a small *thunk* as it hits the pavement.

"Just take whatever you want," I say.

"Why are you following us?"

"What are you talking about?"

"We saw you and your boyfriend on the bridge," a woman's voice says. "And now you're here. You expect us to believe that's a coincidence?" The woman comes to stand in front of me. In a semi-apocalyptic world, I suppose there is no reason for protecting one's identity. It only takes me a moment to recognize her, and, once I do, I also recognize the only other car in the parking lot—a white van, the back plastered with bumper stickers.

"I don't know who you think I am, but I'm not following you."

"Where are your keys?" the man asks.

"In my front pocket."

"Get 'em," the man says to the woman, and then the woman's hand is digging into my pocket, her fingers knocking against me in a way that makes me feel violated.

The woman unlocks then opens the trunk and all the doors. She rifles through everything, tearing all of my belonging and supplies out of the car, slashing at the seats with her own knife and ripping at the exposed cushions.

"What do you want from us?" the man asks.

"I don't want anything from you. I told you I'm not following you."

The man jerks me back and his knife nicks my throat.

"Don't lie to me. I know they sent you after us because we've been telling everyone the truth."

"Who's 'they'?"

The woman crawls out of the backseat, holding one of the books Toby packed. She flips through the pages and then drops it on the ground. It falls open, crushing its own pages. "I don't see anything."

The man keeps his knife tight against my throat, but he releases my arm and sticks his hand into the back pocket of my jeans. He pulls out my wallet, hands it to the woman with the instruction to check me out, and then grabs my arm again.

"You're not going to find anything because I'm not following you," I say. I can feel a warm line of blood falling down my neck from where the knife nicked me, and I wish, for probably the first time in my life, that I wasn't alone.

"Sierra Egan of St. Petersburg, Florida. Age, 25."

"So Sierra, where's your boyfriend? He hiding somewhere? Waiting to ambush us?"

"He's not with me anymore." A lump starts to form in my throat and I cannot cough it away for fear of hitting the knife, so my voice breaks when I say, "Please, I'm just trying to get to a shelter. That's all."

From across the parking lot, I hear the *woosh* of the grocery store's automatic sliding doors. Someone calls out, "Hey!"

"Someone's comin'," the woman says.

"We know who you are now," the man says, his mouth up against my ear. The woman waves my wallet at me and then sticks it in her back pocket. "Stop following us, or next time we'll make sure there's no one around to save you." The man lets me go and pushes me forward. I fall to my knees as he and the woman run for their van. I hit the pavement hard enough to tear my jeans and my skin. I can feel the gravel grinding into my knees. From behind me, running footsteps approach. The male grocery store employee drops down beside me, putting his hands on my shoulders.

"Are you ok—"

"Don't touch me," I shriek, recoiling from him and flipping to face my car so I can see both him and the direction the couple ran off in. Their van is gone now.

"I'm sorry. I just—" The man stand and backs away. "Are you okay? Can I get you something? Do you want to come inside?"

"No, no, I don't want anything," I say, though I don't know that I'm even consciously talking to him. The words coming out of me feel more involuntary, like my body is just going through the motions of interaction and survival.

"Can I just—?" he looks around at my scattered belongings, my mutilated car. He squats and picks up the book the woman threw to the ground. He smooths out the pages and closes it. *East of Eden*. He holds it out to me. "Here."

"Go," I say, staring down at the pavement. "Please just go."

"If you come inside, I could—"

"Just go!" I lunge at him and knock the book from his hand. "Go!" I shriek at him again.

The man stands and runs from me back toward the store. Every few paces he glances over his shoulder. When he's put some distance between us, he stops, his shoulders heaving as he tries to catch his breath, and stares at me from afar. My shoulders are heaving too. I sob so hard I almost gag. When I look up again the man is gone and I am alone in the dark of the parking lot, lit only by the faint light of the streetlights around me. I realize, without thinking, that my hand has gone to my stomach. It rests there, my palm protectively pressing against my skin. I crawl toward the car, scooping up *East of Eden* and a few other things the woman tossed as I go. I use the door handle to pull myself up and manage to close the trunk, then crawl into the backseat of the car. I close and lock the door behind me. I lay in the backseat on my side, clutching the book and crying in the darkness for a while. The practicality of what has just been taken from me won't hit me until later, until morning. For now, I am struck only by my own vulnerability, my own inability to protect myself. Before my eyes start to close, from exhaustion and from tear-induced swelling, I reach into the backseat and pull out the quilt Toby packed, my grandmother's quilt. I toss it a little to open it up, tuck my feet into the edge, and then pull the other end up to my chin.

In the morning, I crawl into the driver's seat. My joints are stiff from spending the entire night curled into myself. When I start the car and flick on the windshield wipers to clear the morning dew, there are a couple water bottles, a package of Pop-Tarts, and another jar of olives

sitting on the hood of my car. Across the parking lot, the grocery store's doors and windows are now boarded up. All that remains is locked inside.

CHAPTER FIVE

The gas runs out near the Alabama-Mississippi border. The car running out of gas feels less dramatic than I thought it would. A few clunks and clatters and then a slow, powerless drift as I manually steer it onto the shoulder of the highway. I sit in the driver's seat until it starts to feel too enclosed, even with the windows down. The engine is still a little warm when I climb onto the hood of the car and pull my knees into my chest.

Every so often a car passes by. I consider sticking out my thumb, trying to flag someone down and hitch a ride, but besides not wanting to leave my things behind, I hate the idea of being wholly dependent on a stranger. It is the afternoon, so I know I could call my parents and they'd be awake, but I also know that there isn't much they can do to help me from where they are.

A car heading in the opposite direction pulls off to the side of the road a few hundred feet ahead of me. It's a large truck, low to the ground, and surrounded by what looks like a thick, metal cage. The paint looks rough and textured, like something's been added to it, and the bed of the truck is enclosed. A man gets out of the car and looks around him. He spots me and stares at me for a moment while he fiddles with the keys in his hands. Then he resumes his task, opening up the bed of the truck and pulling out a gas can. He fills his truck then puts the gas can back in the bed and pulls out a tripod. From the backseat of the truck he pulls out a camera, a nice one with a long lens. He crosses the road to my side, but keeps walking off the pavement and out into the grass. He sets up the camera, pointing it east. He fiddles with it for a while, then stand behind it, arms hanging at his sides, and watches the sky.

I wait a moment to see if he's going to be there a while, and then I slide down off my car slowly and quietly. I head for the bed of his truck and test the handle. Unlocked. I slowly lower the hatch and look inside. There's a lot of equipment—tripods, video cameras, and those fuzzy microphones that attach to them—and four gas cans. One gas can isn't going to strand him anywhere, I think to myself. But it will get me out of here. It isn't until I wrap my hand around the red, plastic handle of one of the cans that I hear the footsteps and then a click.

"You need to let go of my gas."

I turn my head slightly toward the voice and see the barrel of the gun first.

"I'm sorry. I got mugged last night. I'm just trying to get where I'm going."

"So am I. Now let go."

For a second, I can't let go of the gas can. My body and my mind fight for two different kinds of survival. Finally, I let go, spreading my palms wide so he can see them. He doesn't lower the gun, but I see his shoulders relax. I step away from the truck, but, before I get too far, I grab for one of the tripods in the bed and whip it at the man as hard as I can. In blocking his face, the man drops the gun and trips backward. I grab for the gun, but before my hand hits metal, the man is launching himself across the gap between us, tackling me around my waist and knocking the air out of me.

I lay on the pavement gasping while he sits on top of me, holding my hands together. When I finally get enough air in my lungs I try to talk but can't yet form the words.

The man says, "What?"

"Please," I finally manage, "I'm pregnant."

The man lets go of my hands and rises off of me. He scoops up the gun from the ground, though, keeping it low but still pointed in my direction.

He is silent for a moment while I sit up and try to catch my breath, waiting until I can take deep breaths again before he speaks.

"What are you doing attacking me then?" he asks. "If you're pregnant."

"I need the gas." I rub my hand along my stomach, as though I'll be able to feel something, to tell if something's wrong.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I nod. "I think so."

"I feel like I should apologize, but you're also the one who was trying to rob me."

"I just need to get to Atlanta," I tell him. "Someone stole my wallet last night, so I can't get any more gas. I'm just trying to get to a shelter."

"In Atlanta, you said? You're heading in the wrong direction, then."

"There's a fault line—"

"The one outside Macon?"

I nod again, then stare down at the ground.

The man shuffles his feet, swings his hands around a bit, as though he's having a conversation with himself. Finally, he tucks the gun into the waistband of his jeans.

"I'm not going to Atlanta, but I can get you as far as the east coast. You'll probably have a better chance of getting around the fault line there anyway."

"Are you offering me a ride?"

"That's the best I can offer you."

"You don't need to do that. Really, if I can just have a little gas—"

"That'll run out, too, eventually. And then what are you going to do?"

"I'll figure something out."

The man smiles and lets out an incredulous puff of air. He holds out his hand to me, and I take it. Once I'm standing, he picks up the tripod I threw, slides it back into the trunk, and then closes the bed and locks it, putting the gas cans out of my reach.

"Look, a ride is the best I can offer you. It's your choice, but I'm leaving here in about twenty minutes, so you've got a decision to make." The man turns and walks toward his camera, which is still set up out in the grass. I retreat to my car and sit in the driver's seat with the door open. This hitchhiking scenario is exactly what I wanted to avoid, but at this point I don't know that there's much else I can do. If I don't go with him, I'm still depending on someone else's willingness to donate their gas. That's if someone else actually comes along. And the man is right, eventually whatever gas I'm given will just run out again, and I'll be in the same situation I'm in now, just on a different road. I stand up and fish my keys out of my pocket, pop the trunk.

"What can I bring with me?" I call out to the man.

He turns around to face me. "I've got some room but not much. You can bring whatever fits, just don't touch any of my equipment. Or my gas."

I nod and head towards my trunk.

"Do you need any help?" he asks.

"No, I can handle it."

It takes me fifteen minutes to sort through my belongings, lug them to his truck, figure out what will fit and what won't, and then lug the discarded things back to my car. I don't pay much attention to what exactly I'm taking, focusing more on the shape and size of the things and choosing whatever fits into the open spaces. When I'm done, I close up my car, leaving the keys inside the cupholder. If the car even survives the storm, I won't be coming back for it. When I get into the truck, the man is looking at a laptop that sits between the driver and passenger seat like the ones police officers have in their squad cars. He's looking at a weather radar, and I can see Melissa circling out in the Atlantic.

"What's that for?" I ask.

"I'm a storm chaser. This is the radar I use to track the storms."

"A storm chaser?"

He doesn't respond, only refreshes the radar, makes a few clicks, and then starts the car.

"What does a storm chaser even do? Besides chase storms, I suppose."

"I take photographs and footage of the storms to sell to news outlets and websites."

"So business is booming for you right now."

"I guess you could say that." The man shrugs as he pulls the truck back onto the highway and starts heading east. "What's your name anyway?"

"Sierra."

"I'm Charlie."

As Charlie accelerates, I lean toward the window and watch my car in the side-view mirror. For a while, it just gets smaller and smaller, until eventually the road slopes downward and my car disappears altogether.

For the first part of the drive, I fight sleep by listening very intently to the radio. It's a re-broadcast of an NPR story about a man who fell in love with a woman who turned out to be a con artist. He talks about his inability to trust, how he hasn't made any new friends since this woman broke his heart because he doesn't trust his own judgement of character anymore. I want so desperately to close my eyes and lean into the side of the car, but it hadn't occurred to me until we were driving away that I should be uneasy about Charlie. My desperation and lack of options clouded my judgement and got me into the car, but now that we're moving and isolated, my instincts have kicked in. I'm suddenly very aware of being a woman alone with a man I don't know in an enclosed space. I am entirely dependent on him not being a terrible person.

"Where are you evacuating from?" Charlie asks, and I nearly jump, not expecting him to talk.

"Florida. Tampa area."

"I've spent some time in Florida. You all get a lot of storms down there."

"That we do." I lift my drooping eyelids with my pointer fingers, holding them open against their will.

Charlie looks over at me. "You can take a nap if you want to?"

"I'm fine." I drop my hands, shake my head. "So why storm chasing?"

"Well, when the storms seasons are good, it's a lucrative business. People always want good footage of a big storm." Charlie gestures at the radar, at Melissa swirling all by herself.

"What about when the seasons aren't good?"

"Well," Charlie drums his fingers against the steering wheel for a moment. "When you chase a storm and you get out ahead of it, and get to watch it move, maybe it even drops down a tornado," Charlie whistles, "that is the best adrenaline rush there is. You're standing there, watching this thing come at you, and it's beautiful but it's also terrifying."

"Have you always done it by yourself? I though storm chasing was usually a team activity."

"I used to have a team. But they weren't as committed to it, weren't always there when I needed them." Charlie shifts in his seat, sitting up a little straighter. "And when you're doing stuff like this, it's easier to make hard calls when the only person you're worried about is you. The only person who can put me in a dangerous situation is me."

I nod and then sit silently.

"What about you?" Charlie asks.

"What about me?"

"Why are you out here by yourself?"

"Well," I take a deep breath, "I was evacuating with my boyfriend, but we broke up."

"While evacuating? I assume he knows that you're pregnant."

"No, actually, he doesn't."

Charlie glances over at me.

I wave my hand dismissively. "It's alright. I'm used to doing things on my own." I flip my phone over in my lap and the screen lights up. It's 2:57 pm. There's another text message from Toby. I clear it from the screen without opening it. "Are you in a relationship?"

"Storm chasing isn't very conducive to dating. I'm on the road a lot and my schedule is unpredictable because the weather is unpredictable. During storm season, the storms come before everything else, which doesn't exactly make me a prime suitor."

"Must be nice to be so free though. You don't have to worry about anybody but you."

Charlie shrugs. "Why don't you take that nap you've been fighting?"

"I'm fine," I say, but my body yawns against me.

"You can sleep. I won't be offended." Charlie adjusts his hands so that he only has to hold onto the steering wheel with one. The other rests in his lap.

"I want to stay up," I tell him. "Keep you awake."

"That's very kind of you, but, like I said, I'm used to doing this on my own." Charlie flips open the console between the seats to reveal a stash of 5-hour Energy drinks and chewing gum.

"I'm also," he starts, closing the console, "not going to hurt you, if that's what you're worried about."

"That sounds like something someone who was going to hurt me would say."

"Well, if you never fall asleep, we'll never know."

"Huh," I chuckle. "Fine." I start to pull my legs into my chest but realize this position sticks my ass out toward him, so decide to sleep with my legs stretched out in front of me instead. I lean away from Charlie, head vibrating lightly against the window. "Keep your hand to yourself, though. If I wake up with a stray hand, I'll break it."

"Do you even know how to break a hand?"

"If you don't touch me, we'll never know."

Charlie chuckles. "Will the radio bother you?"

"No, leave it on. I like the background noise."

When I was young and growing up in Florida, my parents would drive once a year to North Carolina to visit my mother's parents. I'd always stretch out, the whole backseat to myself, while my parents stayed cramped in the front. They'd switch off every couple of hours, taking turn getting us where we were going and picking the drive-thru for whatever meal was up next. I'd often fall asleep curled up across two seats while my parents listened to Dean Koontz novels on audiobook. I'd close my eyes and listen to the introduction of the characters and the start of the plot and then wake up to detailed descriptions of bloody crime scenes and thrilling chases. Sometimes my mother would notice I was awake and would switch the stereo over to the radio,

but other times she'd be too busy listening and I'd get to hear the end of the story. The case was always solved, and the main character almost always managed to solve it himself.

I wake up to a weather report on the radio. Winds and light rain have started hitting the eastern coast—the beginnings of Melissa, her twirling skirt brushing up against us. I am so tired that it takes me a while to open my eyes. I lay there with them closed, my breathing still slow and steady, while I listen to the weather report and wish for the car's motion to lull me back to sleep. But then the car slows to a stop and I open my eyes. Charlie is unbuckling his seatbelt, the glaring, fluorescent lights of gas station behind him. He looks over when I sit up.

"I'm going in to use the restroom, maybe grab a snack. Would you like anything?"

I blink at him, then yawn and rub the sleep from my eyes. "Um, I'll come in with you."

Inside there is only one employee working and he stands behind the counter, a handgun resting within reach.

"Security's tight," I mutter to Charlie when we get to the restrooms in the back.

"Well, when you're by yourself these days." Charlie taps his jeans where his own gun is tucked away, then he disappears into the bathroom.

As gas station bathrooms go, this one is not the worst I've ever seen. The tradeoff being that it smells very strongly of bleach, which makes me wonder what the bleach is covering up in the first place. It's only once I'm in the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror that I remember that I haven't showered in two days. I pull my shirt off and, lacking a clean, dry surface, let it hang out of my back pocket. I wet some paper towels, the cheap, brown kind that

feel more like paper than towel, and rub some soap into them. I wash my neck and face first, then my armpits. My hair is oily, but I manage to finger comb it back into a little bit neater of a ponytail than it was originally in. I pull a few pieces loose around my face, trying to feel a little like myself, a little more human. I sit carefully on the toilet ledge and paper towel bathe my feet. When I'm done, I slip my shoes and shirt back on, feeling a little better, though not completely clean.

Back out in the store, I find Charlie in the chip aisle, holding out a bag of baked barbeque chips in one hand and a bag of kettle-cooked barbeque chips in the other.

"Having a hard time choosing between barbeque and barbeque?"

He doesn't turn to face me when he answers, "I want the texture of a baked chip, but the baked chips always seem to have less in the bag."

"Why not get two bags of baked?"

Charlie turns to me, points one of his chip hands toward me. "You're absolutely right."

I start toward the register, but Charlie calls out after me. "You're not going to get anything?"

"I don't have any money," I tell him. "I was robbed, remember?"

"Ah, yeah, well," Charlie puts back one of the bags of baked chips. "Get something, whatever you'd like, on me." Charlie heads for the counter and doesn't turn back when I try to protest. I look up and down the aisle, uncomfortable with the idea of spending money that isn't mine, of owing Charlie a penny more than I already do for the free travel. But my stomach

rumbles, and the growing life inside me has decided it wants white cheddar popcorn. I grab a bag from the bottom shelf and bring it up to the counter where Charlie is also buying a newspaper.

"What's the paper for? Isn't it old? All the presses shut down after the last couple storms, I thought."

"Yeah, but I like the crosswords."

"Do you do the sudoku?"

"No, I don't."

When we get to the car, I take the bag of stuff from Charlie and wait in the car while he pumps the gas. I feel useless, unable to contribute financially to the journey, so I start straightening up the car—gathering water bottles full of sunflower shells, empty snack bags, crumpled napkins. I bundle them up and take them to the nearest trash can. As I do, a large truck pulls into the gas station, the kind with wheels so big you need a stepstool just to get into the thing. White boys hang from the window, hooting and hollering, leaving a trail of cigarette butts and beer cans. The waste of their evening spills from their car when they open their doors, get out, and head inside the gas station.

"Dumbasses," Charlie says under his breath at the same time that I mutter, "Jackasses." We turn to each other and shake our heads. Charlie gets into the car and we pull back out onto the highway.

A few hours later, we stop on the side of the road and Charlie pulls out a hot plate to make dinner. He won't let me help him, so I sit on the back of the truck and watch while he heats up canned beans.

"There are beers in the little cooler next to you, if you'd like one."

"I think I'm good, but thanks."

"Oh, shit, that's right. I'm sorry."

I wave him off. "You brought beers as part of your storm-chasing supplies?"

"Every once in a while, you just need to crack a cold one."

"Fair enough."

"Can you toss me one?"

In the cooler, there are ten Bud Lights. I toss one to Charlie. He catches it, cracks it open, and takes a long gulp. I take a chilled water bottle. Charlie pulls out two metal bowls, splits the can of beans between them, then hands me a sleeve of crackers.

"If you crumble them on top," he says, "it's almost like you're not eating just beans."

I laugh. "This is what eating on the road is like for you?"

"When you do it as often as I do, yes."

We eat in silence for a few moments, me sitting and Charlie leaning. The setting sun turns the cloud-filled sky an ombre of purple, pink, and orange.

With the food hitting my stomach, I can feel the potential for nausea diminishing. I don't yet feel any hungrier than I normally am. I wonder at what point I'll start to feel what this life inside me needs. Charlie stares intently into his bowl, making sure that each spoonful has a ratio of beans and crackers. He takes a sip of his beer.

"I'm sorry I'm not good at this," he says.

"At what?"

"At interacting with another person." He takes another sip of beer, longer this time. "I'm not used to having someone else on the road with me."

"Honestly, I'm a little jealous of your career choice."

"Why's that?"

"Because, you get to make your own decisions all the time, without anyone else to consider. This is the kind of job I was looking for when I was in college." I take a bite of food. Now that the sun is starting to set, the air is filled with the sound of crickets and the occasional bird. Every once in a while, something rustles in the grass. Both Charlie and I quiet and wait, looking for the source.

"So what is it you did end up doing after college?"

"Well, I figured the best way to work alone was to be your own boss, so I got a degree in business and worked a few years in retail before opening up a consignment shop."

"You opened up your own store?"

I nod, my mouth full.

"That's impressive."

"It's small and new. At first, it was just me, but last year I hired a couple of employees to help out. Although, now I don't know what will happen to the store if it even makes it through Melissa."

Charlie takes a sip of his beer and for a few moments we sit there, the only sound between us the noise of eating our roadside meal. I run out of crackers and want more but don't dare break the silence with the loudness of the plastic Saltine sleeve. Finally, Charlie drops his beer can, crushes it with his boot, and then reaches into the cooler for another, but he pauses with his hand in the ice.

"Everything okay?"

Charlie takes his hand out of the cooler and points at the sky to our left. "There's a storm brewing out there."

I squint at the sky he's pointing to, but all I see are clouds. "How do you know?"

Charlie jogs to the front of the truck and comes back out with the radar on his computer.

"Yeah, that's a storm." Charlie shows me the screen. "See that?" He points to a small red mass on the screen. "That," Charlie taps the screen and then points to the clouds, "is that."

"Do we need to move?"

"No, it's far enough out that it won't hurt us." Charlie taps my leg, and I jump down. He pulls a tripod from the bed of the truck and then grabs his camera from the cab. He sets his equipment up, pointing the camera at the clouds that have started to thicken and darken. They are

low to the ground from here, only inches away, it seems, from touching the earth. There is a lightning strike, then ten seconds of silence before the distant rumble of thunder.

"See, we're not even close to it," Charlie says.

"So what are you looking to get a picture of?" I say, going toward the camera and squatting to look at the viewfinder.

"Usually a tornado funnel or a lightning strike. Like this one here." Charlie goes into the gallery and finds a picture of the lightning strike we just saw. On either side of this picture are normal pictures of the storm, it is only in this one frame that the lightning appears, and then it's gone.

"Wow," I stare at the picture for a few second. "That's incredible."

Charlie smiles.

"Don't get a big head about it."

"No," Charlie laughs, sets the camera back up and takes a few more shots. "It's not that. I'm just not used to having someone here to share this stuff with. Usually I have to wait until the storm is over and I can post the pictures or sell them."

"Well, thanks for sharing it with me."

Charlie straightens up from the camera. "Alright, I've got it set to record a time lapse now, so we can just leave it alone." With the storm out in the distance, a breeze starts to blow from behind us. "How would you feel about a fire?" Charlie asks.

From the bed of the truck, Charlie pulls starter logs, kindling, and pieces of variously-sized wood. Charlie carries them over to the grassy part of the shoulder and clears a small area of any brush. While he does this, he tells me to collect rocks from the wooded area down the hill. When I was young, I hated girl scouts because I was the only one who could never start a fire. I begged my parents to let me quit, but I had asked to be in girls scouts in the first place, and they were the kind of people who believed in seeing things through. I dreaded every camping trip, where I'd be made to try and start a fire, only to have to let someone else take over after I spent hours scraping a flint stone without ever producing a flame.

When I come back, Charlie has the wood stacked in a perfect teepee. He outlines the fire with a circle of the rocks I brought him, pours a little lighter fluid over the wood, and then flicks a lighter. The fire ignites explosively, burning outwards and causing both of us to shield our faces and take a few steps back.

"I don't think that's how you're supposed to light a fire." I feel my face and arms, checking for eyebrows, eyelashes, the fine peach fuzz of my light arm hair.

"Not quite a boy scout, but I still got the job done, didn't I?"

"I guess," I say, laughing.

Charlie goes back to the car and rustles around, moving and lifting things. I watch the fire intently until I hear him call my name from behind me. When I turn around, he is holding up my grandmother's quilts, something I hadn't even realized I'd loaded when I transferred my belongings from my car to Charlie's.

"Do you mind if we sit on this?" he asks.

"Not at all. Blankets are meant to be blankets."

Charlie carries over the quilt and lays it on the grass, folding it in half to provide a little more padding. I stand while he does this. When the blanket is settled, we awkwardly lower ourselves down next to each other, bringing our respective legs into our respective chests to keep them from touching. I hand Charlie his beer. He thanks me and takes a sip.

"I almost don't want to go to the shelter," I say, ripping up a few blades of grass with my idle hands and then tossing the shreds into the blaze.

"Why not?"

"The last time I had to go to a shelter, I was a kid. It was during Charley, do you remember that storm?"

"Only vaguely." Charlie taps the edge of his beer can. "I was in middle school and living in the mid-west, so Charley wasn't a big news story for us."

"Hmm, well, it was really big here. And my parents and I went to this high school because we lived in a flood zone. Everything was just," I pause, my hands in the air searching for the words, "so beyond my control. In addition to the fact that I was a kid, in shelters you have no say in what happens to you." One of the pieces of wood cracks, water boiling and becoming steam, and all of the wood shifts and then resettles. I stare straight into the flames as I talk.

"There was a guy there. I was walking around without my parents, and I walked past his cot." I tell Charlie about the newspaper, about the man clutching his chest, about everyone rushing to him but no one knowing what to do. "The whole rest of the night, I felt helpless. Like there was nothing I could do, because we were trapped there until the storm passed."

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

"My parents didn't even notice I was upset." I shrug, blink my eyes back into focus, turn to look at Charlie. "That's why I envy your job. You don't have to deal with people ever, just the storms."

"It's easier to control people than storms though."

"I'd still take storms any day."

"The storms are bigger now than they used to be, more unpredictable."

"So are people." My phone is still in the car. I don't know if Toby has texted again, but I still have not replied to anything he's said, haven't even opened the messages.

"You don't get it, Sierra, do you?"

"Get what?"

Charlie turns to face me. "When I had people with me, this job was so much easier."

"But you said—"

"Yeah, I'm the only person making the calls out here, sure. But that also means that when things go wrong, I'm the only person to blame. And I'm the only person left to pick up the pieces."

"I don't understand."

"I'm lonely, Sierra. All the fucking time, I'm lonely." Charlie takes the last swig of his beer and then tosses the empty can at his truck. "Being by yourself all the time." Charlie shakes

his head, but, before he can say anything else, I take his face with both of my hands and kiss him. Charlie pushes forward, moving slowly, seeming to ask permission with every cautious movement as he lowers me to the ground. He places one arm on either side of me, our lips still together. With the quilt folded in half, our tangled legs are on the fabric while my back and head rest in the damp grass. As we continue to kiss and run our hands along each other's bodies, I can feel the wetness of the earth soaking into my shirt and hair, the blades of grass tickling the back of my neck.

It isn't until after we've finished and are laying, half dressed and not touching in the dim glow of the dying fire, that I realize I am thinking of Toby. The tears I didn't really cry for him are now falling, one by one, down my cheeks. Even as the fire dies down and the sun sets and we are submerged in almost total darkness, I can feel the heat and presence of Charlie's body beside me. But when I turn to face him he is facing the sky, eyes closed. His hand is stretched out at his side like mine, but we are still inches from touching.

CHAPTER SIX

I wake up to the smell of coffee and the feeling of a heavy blanket on top of me. For a moment, I forget everything and reach for Toby in the mess of fabric on our little full-sized mattress. But my hand touches grass and I open my eyes. Charlie is pissing into the fire pit, putting out any of the last few glowing embers. He turns and says, "There's coffee on the hotplate," as he zips up his fly and then heads toward the car. "We'll want to get going here soon." He calls out over his shoulder.

I sit up, pull on my clothes, and wrap the quilt around me. It isn't cold, but it also isn't warm in the morning mist. I pour myself a cup of coffee and sit on the edge of the trunk, drinking it until my bones are warm enough for me to untangle myself from the quilt and fold the blanket back into the trunk of Charlie's car. I climb into the passenger seat. Charlie climbs into the driver's seat and unceremoniously starts the car. He takes off in the direction we'd been heading—east.

When we see the coast, it surprises me. I roll down the window when Charlie wakes me up and tells me we're nearing the beach, but instead of the salty air I expected I get the smell of rotting sea life. The ocean is gone. Where it should be is only the sand that it previously covered. Instead of the reflective horizon of ebbing water, there is only the dull beige of the ocean floor.

"Where is it?" I ask Charlie. "Where did it all go?"

"The storm is getting closer, it's pulling the water out toward it."

"So it'll come back?"

"Oh, yeah. With a vengeance. The storm will bring all that water back in the biggest storm surge this coast has probably ever seen. Experts have predicted that it'll wipe out a lot of the coastal towns and even make it pretty far inland, far enough in to do some damage anyway."

"Like a tsunami?"

"Very much like a tsunami, yeah."

I lean my arms against the open window and lay my head on top of them, watching the oceanless beach pass by. Suddenly I think of my father and pull out my phone to take a picture to send to him. I wonder if he's seen anything like this before, or if he'll be just as awestruck and terrified as I am.

"I'm going to pull over and get a better look at things. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. This is your trip."

As Charlie nears a parking lot, we notice different things at the same time—him, the two other cars in the parking lot; me, the tiny silhouettes out where the water isn't. At first, I mistake them for buoys, dropped by the receded water, but when I realize they're too clumped together and also moving I say, at the same time as Charlie, "People."

Charlie parks a few spaces over from the other cars, leaving them room, and I am grateful for his caution. When we get out, I retrieve my grandmother's quilt from the trunk, wrapping it around myself to guard against the beach's breeze. Charlie pulls out his camera and sets it up. He squats to look through the viewfinder, then stands to look out at the beach, and then squats again. During the entire drive, neither of us mentioned what happened last night. It reminds me of the

days in college before I started dating Toby, when I used to hook up with boys and then distance myself—purposefully not texting or calling, pointedly not going close to them or touching them when we were at the same party—because I thought this was what they wanted. I thought they wanted the same thing I did—to act as though what had happened hadn't mattered, act as though we didn't want to be close to each other. This time, though, I actually don't want to be close. Sleeping with Charlie didn't feel like I was reaching for something. It felt like I was being given something.

It is because I'm thinking about this and looking out towards the sand instead of back towards Charlie that I don't hear the people approaching, don't even know there are people here aside from the people already off in the distance until one of them calls out.

"Sierra?"

I turn, wondering how anyone could've recognized me from behind, all bundled up in this quilt, but then I know because I see Toby standing with a group of people and holding a case of beer.

"Toby?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm trying to get to Atlanta still," I say, pointing to Charlie, as though that offers more clarity rather than confusion.

"Who's that?" he asks, then squares his shoulders, stands as tall as he can, like a bear.

"This is Charlie."

"Why are you with him?"

Toby, his chest puffed out, his eyes jealously scanning Charlie, his tone suggesting that I've made an error in judgement, snaps something in me and I'm more annoyed than I've ever been with him. He can't choose to leave me in the middle of an evacuation and then judge the choices I make on my own. He can't run off with strangers he met on the highway and then judge me for accepting help from a stranger when I needed it most.

"Hey," I shout, grabbing his attention. Toby turns to me, so does Charlie. "I was mugged, actually. They took all of my food and my money, so I drove the car until it was out of gas, and then I had to take whatever came my way."

"I'm flattered," Charlie says.

"I didn't know that—" Toby starts.

"Of course you didn't. How could you?" We are both silent for a few moments while we glance toward and then away from each other. Finally, I point to the case of beer in his hands.

"What are you doing with that?"

"Oh," he says, as though he'd forgotten he was holding it, "we're having a bit of a party out in the, um, ocean."

"What happened to the cabin in the woods? Haunted?"

Toby laughs. "Something like that, yeah. We came out here to check things out before the storm hits. We'll leave early in the morning."

"Will you be sober by then?"

"Who knows? Won't be many people on the road, though, so I don't think anyone's worried about it." Toby shifts the case of beer around to get a better grip on it. "You're welcome to come join us," he says, then looks at Charlie, "both of you."

Charlie stares at Toby.

"We might," I say. Toby shrugs and hurries to catch up with his friends. He tries to walk quickly but ends up just waddling awkwardly to keep from jostling the beer too much.

"So," Charlie says, once Toby's out of ear shot, "that's him?"

"That's him."

Charlie gestures toward Toby's retreating back. "Shall we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to go hang with them for a bit?"

"I have to get to Atlanta, though."

"There's time for that, and there's time for a little fun."

"Why would you want to go with them?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Charlie holds his arms wide and faces the horizon. "The ocean is gone. We can go out there and drink beer where there was once water and everything that lived in it."

"I still have to figure out a way to get myself to Atlanta. We're at the coast, you said my ride ends here." I point at the ground.

Charlie looks at me, looks out at the waterless horizon, then back to me. "If you come, I'll take you to Atlanta."

"Don't you have to chase the storm?"

"The storm doesn't hit until tomorrow night. I can get you to Atlanta and get back here with time to spare." Charlie picks up his camera. "Come on, let's go have some fun."

Charlie follows Toby, not even bothering to take his sneakers off. I watch as he takes ungraceful, sinking steps in the soft, dry sand. I lean against the hood of the car. The people out in the distance are still small, little specks of silhouettes against the sand. Toby and Charlie sink down to that size, too, as they gradually get further away from me. I have a general sense of nausea in my stomach, and I don't know if it's from the pregnancy or seeing Toby just now. There's a bubbling anxiety from not being in Atlanta yet, from feeling transient in the path of an oncoming storm, from not being in control of my own life in this moment. I have an itch to just start walking that is quelled only by the fact that I don't think I would make it very far. I wish that I knew how to hotwire a car.

But instead, under-skilled and lacking resources, I stand in the coastal breeze and think about what it would be like to be doing this with a child. How different will these evacuations be when I'm more pregnant? How different will they be after I've given birth? I wonder, if I go through with this pregnancy, if I'll even be able to carry to term. I know the pressures of smaller storms can affect pregnant women, cause them to go into early labor. What would a storm the size of Melissa do? Push the baby right on out of me?

If I already have to depend on a stranger's generosity when I'm on my own, who will I be forced to depend on when I have a child?

I'm struck, in the chill of the beach breeze, by how lonely I feel. When I was with Toby, even though I never fully let myself depend on him, I didn't feel the loneliness I feel now. It's a loneliness I feel everywhere—my chest, my stomach, my bones. My body feels empty and cold, so I climb down from the hood of Charlie's car and start toward the people, Toby's people. I hear them before I reach them. I don't know how long they've been drinking but they are already hooting and hollering and making the kind of noise that echoes off the empty, waterless horizon.

I find Toby standing around a fire with a few of his people. He has exchanged the armful of beer for an armful of kindling. He holds it steadily, leaning down occasionally to offer it to the woman who is fostering a flame on a small, flat piece of wood. Seeing him, even though I'm still upset by what happened between us, feels like putting on a favorite shirt. A few feet away, Charlie is standing by himself, taking pictures of the ocean that has retreated. At his feet, dug into the sand to keep it upright, is a beer. Though I still feel uncomfortable relying on Charlie's generosity, there is a part of me that is interested in what this relationship, whatever it is, is teaching me. Rather than choose between the two men, I settle myself in the sand a little ways away from the people. I pull the quilt tighter around me and try not to make direct eye contact while I watch the group, but this doesn't stop someone from coming over to hand me a beer.

"You're Toby's friend, right?" The girl who asks is lanky. She has no fat on her body but also no muscle. Her shoulders stick out from her t-shirt like a hanger, and her jeans are belted tightly at the waist. I take the beer from her but don't open it.

"Yeah," I say. "Toby's friend."

It occurs to me that I've never before been called Toby's friend. We'd started dating so quickly that, by the time we were going to places together, I was already his girlfriend. It also

occurs to me to correct this girl, to tell her I'm Toby's ex, but it doesn't seem relevant. When an apocalypse of a storm is coming any day now, it doesn't seem to matter that this girl and her friends know that Toby and I dated.

"Where are you headed?" The girl stands over me—towers over me, really. She must be at least six feet tall. The sun extends her narrow shadow over and beyond me.

"Atlanta, to a shelter."

"You and your friend?" She gestures over at Charlie.

"Oh, no. He's a storm chaser so he's off to stormier pastures. He's just giving me a ride."

The girl looks down at the can of beer that's still unopened and in my hand. She looks back up at me, but I still don't open the beer. I don't do anything but feel the coolness of the still-wet sand seeping into my shorts through the quilt. "What about you?" I ask her finally, to clear the awkward air between us. "Where are you headed?"

"Somewhere a little further inland, maybe an abandoned apartment complex somewhere. We want to be a little more inland, but we don't want to lose sight of the coast."

"What do you mean? You're staying here, like here on the coast?"

"Yeah," she says as though I should know this, "Toby didn't tell you?"

"Didn't tell me what?"

"We're riding out the storm here. That's kind of our thing." A hollering comes from behind the girl. She turns around, and I lean to the side so I can see that, behind her, they have

finally managed to get the fire going. The woman who'd been working on it is high-fived and back-patted and handed a fresh can of beer.

When the girl turns back, I ask, "What do you mean your thing?"

"We just don't think there's a point in running from the storms. They're going to keep coming, ya know? So why not experience them and put our fate in their hands."

"That's an," I pause, "interesting way of looking at it."

The girl opens her mouth to continue but someone calls out, "Hey, Sarah!" and she whips around.

"Sorry," she says to me, "I have to go help them with something."

"Sure thing," I tell her. And then, just before she's out of earshot, "Thanks for talking to me." Sarah throws me a smile and a friendly wave over her shoulder.

My first instinct is to walk over to Toby, but I stop myself. This is what we broke up over, after all, me always making the decisions, me always telling him what to do. For a while, I just watch the party unfold—couples hanging off each other, others stoking the fire and starting to cook some food, others still sitting around and talking. I am reminded of the drum circles my friends in high school used to make me go to. Even then, I usually sat by myself.

Charlie wanders over to me. He doesn't sit down but instead squats next to me, bouncing a little on his bent legs.

"I think," he starts, "this is pretty cool."

"A storm chaser kind of party."

Charlie laughs. "You look miserable," he says, staring at me now.

"These people Toby's with, they're not going to evacuate tomorrow. They're just going to hunker down somewhere around here and leave themselves to the mercy of the storm."

"Oh, that would make sense."

"That would make sense?"

"There's these beach cults. I've heard about them from other chasers, but I've never seen them. They believe that there's no use running from Mother Nature. We're at her mercy, so we might as well just live our lives as we would and give ourselves over to whatever happens."

"Even if what happens is death by storm surge?"

Charlie nods.

"That's insane."

Charlie shrugs. "People have believed crazier things."

"Toby can't know that's what these people have planned."

"He knows, Sierra." Charlie stands. There are little wet crescent moons on the back of his pants from resting on his heels. "Whether or not you want to acknowledge that he's made his own choice," Charlie shrugs again, "that's up to you." Charlie walks away, headed toward the collection of beer piled in the sand.

By the time Toby comes looking for me, he's drunk and I'm lying on my blanket near the fire listening to someone play *American Pie* on a guitar. The player mumbles a lot of the verses, but when he gets to the chorus everyone sings along, loudly, and a chill runs down my spine. I catch myself rubbing my hand across my stomach. When I hear footsteps approaching, I drop my hand to my side.

"There you are," Toby says as he stumbles over his own feet. He catches himself by falling onto his knees and then leaning over to lay on his side, propping his head up on his hand, elbow digging into the sand. He can't be comfortable, but he doesn't move.

"Here I am."

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asks.

"Mhm." At my feet is the can of beer the girl gave me when I first got here. It is still unopened and now warm from being near the fire. I want to ask Toby about these people and their staying, to ask him why he's making this choice. I want to see if his mind is made up, or if maybe I can convince him to come with us. I imagine us, for a moment, in the Atlanta shelter together, as if none of the events of the past few days even happened. But, as I open my mouth, Toby speaks.

"I missed you."

"You did?"

"Yeah," he says. "But in a weird way. I don't miss us, really."

"Oh," I say, a little wounded.

Toby talks on, drunk and oblivious. "I miss having a partner. Someone who knows me, who I could rely on." The fire snaps and pops. The girl who built the fire stokes it with a long stick and some of the weaker pieces crumble, sending up a fountain of sparks. "Even though it frustrated me that you didn't really need me the same way, I did sometimes appreciate that you always knew what to do. I don't know how you do that."

"It's exhausting, actually." I sigh, draw little patterns in the sand with my fingers. "I feel like I always have to have the answer."

"I never said you needed to."

"I know you didn't." I wipe away my drawings with my hand, clear the slate. "That's just how I was raised."

Toby looks to the fire and stares silently for a few seconds. "At first," he starts, his words a little slurred, "I thought you were just guarded, that you needed to grow to trust me. I just kind of hoped that eventually we'd reach a place where you were comfortable, where you'd relax and start to depend on me for things, too. But," Toby hiccups, "you never really did." He looks at me, his eyes glossy and a little droopy from the alcohol. There's a little sadness in his eyes, too, almost an apology.

"That's not your fault, though." I reach for his arm, let my hand rest there.

Toby looks at my hand, then looks at me again. "I know that now."

I open my mouth to apologize—for being unavailable, for not being what he needed, for hurting him for so long. I want to tell him that I wanted those things, too, that I wanted to depend

on him, to be cared for, I just don't know how. But, before I can say anything, Toby speaks again.

"I think maybe you'd just rather be alone."

"What are you talking about? I'm not alone." I gesture to the party.

"Exactly," Toby says, mimicking my sweeping arm, "you're at a party and sitting by yourself."

"I'm allowed to not want to talk to anyone."

"No one said you weren't."

"And I didn't come here alone. I came here with Charlie."

"Oh, come on," Toby sits up. "That's only because you absolutely had to hitch a ride. If you weren't mugged, you'd be in the shelter in Atlanta by yourself right now."

"The only reason I was going to be by myself is because you left."

"The only reason I left is because you were doing everything on your own anyway."

I scoff. "You know what, Toby, I was actually starting to feel bad about the way I made you feel, but if that's how you feel about me, then maybe I was right all along not to depend on you. You aren't worth depending on." I stand up. I pull my blanket up with me. Toby cries out as it sprays sand all over him.

"Sierra," Toby stands and starts to come after me, "you don't need to—"

"I don't need to do anything, Toby. And I don't need you." I shove past him and start walking, heading out further into where the ocean used to be. I find Charlie out there, laying on the ground with his camera.

"What are you doing?" I call out to him.

He doesn't move, just shouts. "Getting some more pictures of this."

"Haven't you gotten some already?"

"I'm in the business of extreme imagery," he says. The shutter clicks a few times, and then he stands. "I can never have too many pictures."

"What's the best picture you've ever taken?"

Charlie looks at the sky for a second, then drops his head back down and looks at me. "Twin tornados. Two storms touching the ground at the same time."

"I didn't know that could even happen."

"It's really rare. Usually, if a storm becomes a supercell, it sucks up anything around it. But sometimes, if another storm merges with it, it gives the supercell a little nudge, and you get two tornadoes at once."

"That's crazy."

Charlie nods. "Those twins destroyed the town of Pilger, Nebraska back in 2014. Two people were killed."

"Oh my god."

"That's another part of this job that's lonely." Charlie raises the camera up to his eye and clicks the shutter again, then lowers the camera to check the picture. "My success is often someone else's tragedy." Charlie looks over at me.

"What's wrong with you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look upset."

"Toby was just being an ass."

"What'd he do?"

"He told me I'm better off alone."

Charlie snorts, then shakes his head.

"What?"

"Nothing." Charlie raises both of his hands, then drops them and picks up his camera, turns away.

"No, what? What was that for?"

"You disagree with what he said? You don't think you're better off alone?"

"So you think I'm better off alone too?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I think that *you* think that you're better off alone."

"And what if you're right? What if I do think that? Is that such a bad thing?" From behind us, party sounds echo across the empty expanse of the beach. People are singing again; this time, I'm too far away to pick out the words. There is a breeze, even without the water, and it chills me. I pull the quilt around my shoulders. "Nothing's ever happened to me that's showed me I'm better off letting someone else into my life."

"Oh no?" Charlie swings back around to face me. "And where would you be if I hadn't helped you?"

"I didn't ask you to help me."

"No, you were going to rob me instead. You'd rather steal from someone than ask for their help. Does that sound like you're better off alone? You wouldn't make it to Atlanta tomorrow if I wasn't willing to give you a ride."

"I can make it there on my own if I have to."

"Oh really?" Charlie walks toward me.

"Yeah, I can. I don't need you. I don't need anybody to take care of me."

"No, you don't need it, Sierra," Charlie says. He grabs my shoulders, bends down so his face is right in front of mine. "But wouldn't it be nice?"

I push his arms off and take a step back. "You don't need to take care of me in the morning."

"What?" he says, his arms still hanging there, suspended.

"I don't need you to take me to Atlanta. I'll get there myself."

"Sierra—" he starts, finally lowering his arms.

"Thanks for getting me here. Good luck chasing the storm." I turn. Charlie steps forward and reaches for me, but I block his hand and keep going.

"Sierra," he calls out, but I don't respond. I just keep walking.

When I wake up, wet and cold from the humidity and stiff from the hard, damp sand, it is morning and the party is over. The fire from last night is now just smoldering ashes, and Toby's people are scattered around its remnants. Some are just waking up like me, others are still sleeping alone or in pairs, and others still are milling about—cleaning, collecting their belongings. I don't see Toby, but I don't know if this means he's gone or if he's just off doing something out of my sight. Next to me, there is a little pile of supplies inside a black backpack. I sit up and look toward the parking lot, but I already know that Charlie's truck is gone.

My mind, starting to wake up, is already thinking about what I'm going to next, but my body hasn't caught up to my mind yet. My body is still in the process of realizing that we're not asleep. My eyes feel heavy and swollen, and I want nothing more than to let them fall closed again, to sleep and deal with my problems at an undefined later. Footsteps approach. It's Toby, walking toward me in the sand. He holds out a granola bar and a steaming tin mug.

"I thought you could use this," he says.

When I don't reach for his offering, he leans over to set it down in front of me and then sits beside me himself. He pulls the edge of my quilt over his stretched-out legs and the heat of his presence beside me feels familiar and different at the same time.

"Where's your friend?" he asks.

"Not my friend, and he's gone."

"What do you mean gone?"

"He left."

"Huh," Toby replies. "So what next?"

I shrug, still staring aimlessly ahead. "I have to figure out a new way to Atlanta." I reach down and take the tin mug Toby has dug into the sand. The coffee is black, but I sip from it anyway. I am so numb—physically, mentally, and emotionally—that the warmth of the liquid trumps the bitterness of its flavor. In fact, there is something about the bitterness that I find comforting.

Toby watches me take a sip. "You could come with us."

"You're going to Atlanta?" I turn to him. There is a little twinge of relief in me, as exhausted as I am, that maybe I can do this. Maybe I can let someone else take care of me this one time.

"No, were just going to hang around here, but you could come with us."

My face falls. I shake my head and wrap my hands tightly around the coffee mug. "I'm not joining your crazy beach cult."

"It's not a cult"

"Whatever it is, it's crazy, and I'm not interested. I'll get myself to Atlanta."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"You're the one that said I always know what to do."

Toby snorts. "I guess I did. Well," Toby pushes himself to his feet, wiping his sandy hands on his jeans. "I have to get going. Take care of yourself, Sierra."

"I always do."

Toby nods, then sticks his hands into his pockets and walks away. I watch until his back becomes a distant silhouette and then a blurred speck out on the sand.

It takes me what feels like a few hours to start moving. For a while, I just sit in the sand, holding and sipping the mug of coffee Toby left with me. I eat the granola bar, too, picking out the raisins and spitting them into the sand. This makes me wonder how long it takes for raisins to break down, if they'll still be there when the tide comes back in and washes away every piece of evidence that we once stood out here in the middle of the ocean. Eventually, I stand and fold up the blanket, look through the things Charlie left me in the backpack. There are a few cans of food and a couple waters bottles. Clothes and hygiene products. The blanket is too big to fit inside the backpack, so I carry it folded over my arms. I sling the backpack over my shoulders and start walking toward the road.

My phone still has some of its charge left, and I think about calling my parents. They, like me, always seem to know what to do, but they have trained me throughout the years not to rely on them, to rely as much as possible on myself. And, still, there is nothing they can do for me from where they are. So I tuck my phone in my back pocket and keep walking.

My feet move one in front of the other, instinctively. The coasts are abandoned except for people like Toby's beach cult, so I'll have to get further inland before I have hope of catching a ride, if there are even any rides to catch. The town is so quiet that my own footsteps against the pavement unsettle me. I am unused to hearing the sound with such clarity. It occurs to me that what's eerie about this place is its emptiness. There are still newspapers in the bins on the sidewalk, but they are from over a week ago. The streetlights, in the dim morning fog, are still on. There is trash in the gutters—food wrappers and straws and cigarette butts. Aside from the boarded-up windows and doors, it's as though life in this town just suddenly ceased, without warning. It's as though everyone vanished, like a rapture, and I am the only one here, still left behind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The backpack feels heavy almost immediately. My belongings bump into my spine as I walk, and their weight digs into my shoulders. After my shoulders, it's my legs—at first a general ache that radiates through each leg with each step, but then it's more focused and intense. Dull ache turns into sharp pain in my knees and shins and in the sockets of my hips. Finally, the arches of my feet start to charley horse. It gets so bad that I have to sit, take off my shoes, and knead the arches of my feet with my thumbs. Putting the shoes back on over my raw, blistered ankles is excruciating.

I do not feel the dull ache of sunburn yet, but I know better than to trust cloud cover. I know I will end this day with red skin everywhere that isn't covered by clothing. Eventually, my phone dies, so I don't know what time it is when the rain starts, but it's probably somewhere around late afternoon. The light sprinkling of Melissa's outer rim is starting to hit the coast. For a moment, the rain is refreshing, but it doesn't take long for me to feel burdened by the weight of water as it soaks through my clothes, my shoes, and my bag. It's for this reason that I settle on the house.

I choose a small one. There is a truck in the driveway, but there are cars in a lot of the driveways. The vehicles people chose to leave behind when they evacuated this little coastal town. The house is bright yellow, and the roof looks new and stable.

It's not easy to break in, with plywood covering all of the openings. At first, I try using branches to pry off the plywood—ones thick enough to have leverage but light enough for me to carry and lift on my own. When this doesn't work, I circle around the house until I find a small

window, the kind that leads into a basement. The tenants hadn't bothered to board it up, it being so low to the ground, so I'm able to use one of the large branches to break it. I am careful to break away all of the sharp edges of the window, but I still lay my sodden quilt along the bottom rim before shoving my backpack through and then sliding in after it.

I feel my way, arms out and feet shuffling, to the stairs and door of the basement. I feel along the walls until I hit a light switch. The house, illuminated, is an amalgamation of styles. Wall-to-wall shag carpets the floor and blocks of color break up the walls. The kitchen appliances are vintage, an off-white cream color. Framed family photos cover an entire wall in the living room, the black paint beneath only peeking through between golden, wood, and colored frames. The pictures are all from various decades, some faded and sepia-toned, others black and white, and others still crisp and colorful and new. I stare at one in particular, a black-and-white image of a woman in a bathing suit, leaning against the railing of a boat. There is an arm around her shoulder, but the person attached to the arm isn't in the image. I reach for the picture picture, to trace the line of the disembodied arm.

"Stop," a voice says from behind me. "Stay right where you are. I have a gun."

I hold my hands up at my sides and lean away from the wall, thinking about what Charlie said, about it not being so safe out there these days. In the dim light coming from the kitchen, I don't know if the person behind me can see my hands shaking, but I can feel them. My knees start, too, so I lock them in place. It cannot be the couple from the bridge, I tell myself. They cannot have followed me here, too. But still I shake and a pit forms in my stomach as I think of what I can use to protect myself. I am eyeing a particularly thick wooden frame on the wall when the voice speaks again.

"How did you get into my house?"

I am slightly relieved but also confused. This person lives here, but I'm surprised they haven't evacuated. I thought everyone in this area had already left. "The basement window, it wasn't boarded up."

"Then you can go back out the way you came." There are footsteps, then the voice is closer. "Start walking toward the basement."

"I'm sorry for scaring you," I say as I walk. "I thought everyone was evacuated here."

"And you thought you could come rifle through someone's things? Take what you please from what they left behind?"

"No, that's not it at all." The voice scoffs behind me, but I continue. "I've been walking for hours. I was trying to get to a shelter in Atlanta, but I didn't make it in time. It's starting to rain, and I just needed a place to ride out the storm."

"Well you can do it somewhere else."

"Bill," a woman's voice calls out.

"Shannon, get back in the bedroom."

"Bill, the storm has started, you can't just shove her back out the window."

"I can if it means protecting this family. We don't know her. Shannon. Shannon, come back here, don't—"

A woman slides past me in the hallway. She is small with short gray hair and thick, round glasses. "Forgive me," she says, flipping on a light switch in the hallway, which makes me squint, "I can't see very well in the dark. Now, let me get a good look at you." The woman looks me up and down, my limp hair, my rain-soaked clothes dripping on her shag carpet. She points to the cut on my neck. "What happened here?"

"I was mugged a couple days ago."

"Oh, my."

"Shannon," Bill calls out.

Shannon ignores him. "Is that why you didn't make it to Atlanta?"

"Among other things."

"Tell me."

"Shannon," Bill says again.

I tell her everything from the beginning, about starting out with Toby and then the break up. I skip the pregnancy and the fact that I slept with Charlie, but I tell her about the beach cult and being left behind, about walking all day today. As I talk, there is a loud rumble of thunder outside, and the rain pounds louder on the outside of the house.

"You don't have to take care of me." I tell her. "I have food. I really just need a roof."

"That's not our problem," Bill says.

I say, "I understand," at the same time Shannon says, "Bill."

"You'll stay. We don't have a spare bed, but you can take a shower and sleep on the couch."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't," Shannon says, taking my hands into hers. "But I'm a mother, and you are someone's child. You're also a human being, and I'm not the kind of person to put a human out in the middle of a storm. That being said," Shannon squeezes my hands, "if you do anything to hurt my family, I will come for you in this life and the next, you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Alright then. Let's get you into a shower before the power goes out." Shannon opens up the closet door next to her and pulls out a clean towel and a washcloth. "You can use the guest bathroom, right here," she says, pointing to the door next to me.

When I turn around, I see that Bill is not, in fact, holding a gun. He is holding a keychain mace. He tucks it, now, into his pocket.

"Shannon, we should—"

"What's your name, dear?" Shannon asks.

"Sierra."

"I'm Shannon, that's Bill. Go ahead and shower, and we'll introduce you to everybody else after," she says as she passes me and walks with Bill toward the living room.

"Everybody else?" I ask, but they are already gone.

In the bathroom, I turn on the shower and peel my wet clothes from my body, shivering in the air conditioning while I wait for the water to warm up. My shoulders are red and raw from the backpack, and my nose, cheeks, and forehead are ripe with sunburn. My feet ache but pressing them bare against the cold tile floor soothes them slightly. When the water and soap run-off hit them, they sting, but in a way that feels cleansing and healing.

There is another rumble of thunder outside and the power flickers but comes back on. I think of Toby, wonder where he is as the storm brings back the ocean it took out, all of that water and then some. I wonder if he is taking care of those people, if they are taking care of him.

I step out of the shower, feeling clean of many things, almost like I've shed the weight of the past few days for just a moment. I pull out the clothes Charlie packed into the backpack: a basic t-shirt and jeans. Once dressed, I put the toilet seat down and spend a few moments just sitting by myself. Now that the storm is here, it's feels unbelievable. It feels unreal that everything I've gone through in the past couple of days has just been leading up to this. I bend over at the waist, tucking my face into my knees and let myself, for a few moments, feel how truly and utterly exhausted I am. Then I sit back up, collect my things, and leave the bathroom.

I find Shannon first. She is sitting on the edge of the bed in one of the bedrooms. Laying in the bed is an old, frail-looking woman. Her hair is white, thin, and wispy. Her eyes are closed, and her mouth is covered by a mask that is hooked up to a ventilator. It stands guard by the bed, glowing and beeping. Even from the doorway, I can hear the woman's labored breathing. Shannon is holding the woman's hand. When I step into the doorway and block the light, Shannon looks up.

"Sierra," she says. "This is my mother, Grace."

Unsure what to do, I just respond, "Hello."

Shannon smiles at me and then at her mother. She brings her mother's hand to her mouth and kisses it, then sets it back down and lets it go. Shannon crosses the room and meets me in the doorway, closing the door behind her.

I look back at the closed door as I follow Shannon to the kitchen.

"Is that why you're still here? Why you didn't evacuate?"

Shannon nods. She opens the pantry and looks at me. "Decaf or caf?"

"Caf," I say at first, but then remember. "Actually, decaf. Thanks."

"She had a stroke a year ago that put her here. We knew she wouldn't travel well, so Bill and I made the decision to stay here." Shannon scoops coffee grounds into the coffee maker, snaps the lid shut, and hits start. "Initially, I was going to send Bill to a shelter with the kids, but Bill refused to leave me. And then we were going to send just the kids, because they're fourteen and sixteen, old enough to take care of each other if they have to." Shannon pulls down two mugs from a cupboard. One that says *#I DAD* and another that says *This might be wine*. "But the kids refused to go without *us*. So we stayed here." Shannon leans against the counter. "Leave no man behind, I guess." Shannon says this with a shrug, as though she thinks it's silly that everyone refused to leave her here, but she also has a proud little smile.

My parents moved to New Mexico to pursue career opportunities when I was in college. They didn't call to ask if I would be okay or if I wanted to transfer to the university they'd be working at, if I wanted to come with them. They just called to tell me they'd gotten job offers, that they were putting the house on the market and moving before the following fall semester. A

couple days later, they bought a house in New Mexico and my father texted me their new address.

"What will you do if the power goes out?"

"The ventilator has batteries. We'll be fine until the storm passes and then we can get help if we need it."

"Mom, we're hungry." Two teenagers come into the kitchen from the living room. The boy, clearly younger, is the one who whined. The girl, both older and taller, follows him.

"What do we have to eat?" she asks.

"Jacob, Sydney, this is Sierra. She's going to be staying with us tonight."

"Hi," the girl says, offering me a small wave.

"How'd you get here in the storm?" the boy asks.

"I walked."

"Woah," the boy says. "Badass."

"Jacob, watch your language." The coffee pot beeps and Shannon fills both of the mugs, then brings them to the dining table where I'm sitting. She opens the fridge and hands me a jug of milk. "I'll heat something up while we still have power. How does everyone feel about spaghetti?"

The power flickers again, but this time it goes out completely and does not come back on. There is a crack of thunder and it rattles the sudden darkness.

"Alright," Shannon says. "Room-temperature canned food it is."

Shannon checks on her mother while the rest of us gather in the living room. The kids sit on the couch with their father while I perch on the edge of an armchair. Bill strikes match after match as he lights at least two dozen candles that are collected on the coffee table. After he lights the candles, he hands them to the kids one at a time with an instruction—"Put that on the bathroom counter" or "Master bedroom, on the dresser, but make sure it's not near your mother's fake flowers."

Once, when he has a freshly lit candle, but both of the kids are still gone, he looks at me and then holds out the glass jar. "Can you put that on the dining table?"

I nod and take the candle, bring it into the kitchen where it washes the room with a dim, flickering, glow. When we're done, the house smells like a mix of scents. It reminds me of hurricane Lorenzo, of Toby's parents' house, of Toby. I sit back down in the armchair and pull my knees into my chest.

Shannon comes back with a small, battery-operated radio. She flicks it on and scans through the static until she finds a voice.

"—lost power across most of the east coast, and we shouldn't expect it to be coming back on anytime soon. Melissa is a low-latitude storm, so she's moving slow, about 12 mph. Now that she's making landfall, she's going to be slowing down. But, with winds peaking at 200 mph, this storm is going to be doing a lot of damage for a long time. Normally, hurricanes dissipate two to three hours after making landfall, but, with a storm this big, we're not sure how long it'll be before the storm breaks apart. Estimates right now are as high as ten hours—"

Bill reaches past his wide-eyed children and wife to turn off the radio. "That's enough of that. Let's eat some dinner, and then who's interested in a round of Scrabble?"

After we eat, I insist on cleaning up while Bill and Shannon play Scrabble with the kids. I rinse the dishes with cold water. I scrape food into the garbage disposal and instinctively reach for the switch, only remembering we don't have power when I flip the switch and nothing happens. When I'm done, I join everyone in the living room, but I perch in the armchair again, watching everyone else as they sit on the floor and sneak peeks at each other's letters in the dim candlelight. Sydney messes with Jacob, poking at him and shielding her letters from his wandering eyes, but, when he's not looking, she switches out his A with her E so he can spell the word BUTTER on his next turn. When he turns back and sees the switch, he looks to Sydney, and she winks at him.

After about an hour, the wind and the rain pick up. The game doesn't exactly end so much as everyone just stops playing. One at time, they sit back and look around, just listening to the storm bear down on us. None of our phones have service, so Bill turns the radio on again to check the status of the storm.

"—eye is completely on land now, so we're finally going to start seeing those winds slow down as the storm dissipates, but that's going to take some time. At this point, storm surges have the eastern coast of Georgia and Florida completely underwater. We're not sure yet how much those waters are going to recede. All but Northern Georgia and Southern Florida are without power, and most likely will be for a weeks to come. It's 9:07 pm right now, and we're looking at another six to seven hours before this storm is close to over. Cities near the coast are going to get

a break here soon as the eye passes over, but officials urge those in their homes and those in shelters to stay indoors."

There is a loud bang as something crashes into the house and everyone jumps. Shannon even cries out and then covers her mouth. We all look at each other and nervously laugh, but then there is a mechanical beeping. Shannon is up first, running for her mother's room. Bill and the kids follow after her. I follow last, trying not to crowd them, trying not to intrude.

"What's is it?" Bill asks.

"I don't know," she says. "It should be fine, I don't understand."

In the bed, Grace's chest moves slowly up and down in rhythm with the machine's breathing. Outside, there is the raging storm. Debris thuds against the plywood-covered windows and the exposed walls. The rain sounds like hail as it pelts the house. The wind hums as it passes through small spaces, the sound almost like a siren.

"It's the batteries, Bill," Shannon says, frantically hitting buttons on the machine. "The batteries are dying."

"Do we have extra batteries?"

Shannon shakes her head. "These batteries are new. They just came and replaced them before the storm. We weren't supposed to need extra batteries."

Bill is silent, staring at Shannon who is staring at the ventilator, willing it to stop beeping, willing it to keep working. She turns to Bill.

"What do we do, Bill?" she asks. "What do we do?"

"I—" Bill lifts his hands and then drops them. "I don't think there's anything we can do, Shannon," he says, his voice breaking. "I'm so sorry."

Shannon nods as silent tears fall down her cheeks. Eventually, her nodding becomes shaking her head back and forth, shoulders and hands trembling. Bill goes to her and pulls her trembling body into his embrace just as her knees buckle. Bill lets her fall against him, holds her up. After a moment Shannon extracts herself slowly from Bill's arms and goes to the bed. She sits on the edge of the bed and then folds herself over her mother. The ventilator still beeps and hisses and breathes, for now.

Bill stands over Shannon and places a hand on her quietly heaving back. Sydney and Jacob stand in front of me in the doorway. They stare at their mother and then, without looking at each other, they lean together. Sydney wraps her arms around her brother's shoulder. He wraps his arms around her waist. When she starts to shake with her own sobs, he holds her tighter. No one says anything, no one tells the kids to leave, no one tells me to leave, but I feel as though I'm seeing something sacred, something that is holy and not for me. I back away from the bedroom and move quietly back to the living room.

Most of my grandparents were dead by the time I was born, but my father's mother was alive until I was about to start middle school. Her death was the first time I was confronted with the idea that my parents would, someday, not be there anymore. I wasn't scared. I didn't think life would be that much different without them. But I was suddenly aware that one day, choosing to not be around them would not be a choice anymore. It would just be a reality.

I stand in the middle of Bill and Shannon's living room, not sure what to do with myself. I can hear Shannon's cries still, and the beeping of the ventilator. The radio is still on, the

broadcaster reporting tornado and flood warnings for various counties in Florida and Georgia. I switch the radio off. When I turn back, I notice for the first time a dark spot on the seat of the arm chair. It is rather large, the size of a baseball. In the dim light, I can't tell what it is, but when I touch it, my fingers come away wet. I look down at my jeans. There, between my legs, is a dark, growing stain.

The kids come into the room followed by Bill. Their head and shoulders are slumped. Bill runs a hand through his hair. There is no longer any beeping coming from the bedroom. I sit down quickly on the chair to hide the stain there and the stain on my pants. I don't need to burden them with whatever this is, especially not now.

"She's gone," Bill says, standing next to the coffee table. The kids sit on the couch. They don't hold each other, but they are both crying and leaning in, their shoulders pressed together.

"I'm so sorry." I squeeze my hands, held tightly together in my lap.

"We knew that there was a chance something like this..." Bill trails off and looks to the bedroom. Shannon still has not appeared. When we are all silent, we can just hear her muffled sobs over the roaring of the storm. The siren hum getting louder.

"What do we do now?" Sydney asks, looking to her father.

Bill sits down on the coffee table and puts a hand on both of his children. "We'll be strong for your mom. We'll get through this storm, and then we'll help your mom get through this too."

Jacob and Sydney nod.

Then, the roof creaks. It is a loud, crackling noise. Wood breaking, things ripping apart.

"What was that?" Jacob asks.

"The roof," Bill and I say at the same time, both looking up.

"Kids, get to the basement." Bill stands and goes toward the bedroom.

"Dad—" Sydney calls after him.

"Get to the basement now," he says, shouting over the noise of Melissa tearing at the house.

"Come on," I say. I hold out my hand, but Sydney doesn't take it. Instead she takes Jacob's hand. We move as two separate units through the kitchen and to the basement.

"You have to leave her, Shannon," Bill shouts. I don't hear Shannon respond but I hear Bill again. "We have to go *now*."

As we round the corner there is wind rushing inside the house and rain coming in through a corner where the roof has started to peel away. The rain comes in sideways, flying directly into our faces, soaking us almost instantly. Debris swirls around us as the roof starts to peel away even more. There is insulation and wood, probably nails and shards of other things the storm has picked up. The kids and I duck and cover our heads as we run, but the debris scratches and scrapes us. It feels like running through a thorn bush, everything grabbing and tearing at you. I open the door to the basement and the kids run down the stairs. Bill comes down the hall, the walls, now loose, waver around him. He is carrying Shannon, her body cradled in his arms, her arms reaching out behind him, reaching for the bedroom where her mother still lays. I cannot hear her, but, when they pass, I see Shannon's mouth open, screaming.

I think for a moment about when my father's mother died. My parents were each, individually, a product of their own parents. My father was not close with his mother beyond the perfunctory parent-child relationship that develops when you are still a parent, but your child is no longer a child. When she died, he was certainly sad that he no longer had a mother, but after her death his life didn't look different. As a child coming to terms with the fact that I would one day lose my parents, I think, for a moment, I wished his life had.

I am running before Bill is completely down the stairs. He calls out after me, but the sound is quickly sucked up by the storm that has broken into the house. Debris pelts me in the hallway, but I keep moving until I get to the bedroom. Grace is laying in the bed, still. She looks exactly the same. If it weren't for the film of debris over her and her unmoving chest, I would think that she was just resting, just waiting for someone to come get her. Shannon has already pulled the ventilator's mask off Grace's face, so I tuck my arms under her and scoop her up with little resistance. She is light from time spent slowly wasting away. I run again but this time more labored by Grace's body in my arms. I try to lean back, let her fall into me so that she doesn't bounce around, but the storm is stronger now, and the walls are starting to cave in. At one point, I am bending to the side in order to avoid being struck by one side of the hallway, which narrows like a tube in a wave.

At the end of the hallway, Bill is standing in the doorway, holding it open

"Come on!" he screams.

I hurry forward but the walls start to cave around me. By the time I reach the door to the basement, I am almost squatting, practically crawling forward, the weight of Grace in my arms throwing me off balance. Finally, I reach the threshold and pitch myself and Grace inside. Bill

closes the door behind us and the muffled noise of the storm sounds like silence in comparison to what's outside.

Bill grabs me first, carrying me down the stairs to where Shannon and the kids are huddled under the workbenches attached to the wall. Then he goes back for Grace. Down here, the storm is muffled but still roaring, and water has started to seep in through the walls. There is enough that, when Bill retrieves his mother-in-law's body, each of his steps is accompanied by a small splash. Shannon, tears still streaming down her face, checks me over. There are cuts and scrapes along my arms and torso, debris having cut through my shirt and skin. My jeans mostly protected me, but there is still the dark stain between my legs, much larger now, still noticeable even though the denim is soaked through.

"Sierra," Shannon says, pointing to the stain, gently pushing my legs apart, "you're hurt."

"That's not from the storm." I tell her that it started earlier, that I didn't say anything. I tell her that I'm pregnant. "Or, at least, I was." It's not until I say it out loud that I really start to process what could be happening right now, what is probably happening right now. I didn't realize it'd felt different to be pregnant until suddenly I was worried that I wasn't anymore. I place a hand over my stomach and try to feel something, anything that will tell me what's going inside me, that will tell me if there is still something there.

Shannon looks up at me, eyes wide. We are damp and covered in grime, all shaking. Our hearts are beating so loudly we can almost hear each other's. Behind us, Bill lays Grace out on a bed of rag towels. He doesn't need to, but he places her hands together on her stomach, to make her look presentable.

Shannon holds out her hand to me. I take it and hold tight.

Outside, the storm takes everything else.

CHAPTER EIGHT

By the time the eye passes over and the world falls silent and still, we are sitting in six inches of water. Bill wades across the basement and climbs the stairs first, carefully opens the door. Debris shifts, falling and clattering inward. Bill steps through the doorway and out into where the house was. He is gone for a few minutes, during which we hold our breath. When he returns, he gestures for us to follow, then comes down the stairs to get Grace.

Shannon and I walk together through the house. My arm around her shoulder, her arm around my waist. I let her guide me through the rubble. She makes brief pit stops—in the kitchen, at her bedroom—to stare at the destruction that has replaced her home. Sydney and Jacob carefully pick their way through the debris, looking for anything that has survived, though there isn't much.

Beyond Bill and Shannon's home, the rest of the neighborhood is in various states of destruction. Some houses are just as demolished as theirs, while others are only partially destroyed. Somehow, the truck that was in their driveway is relatively untouched, though it is resting a few yards over in the neighbor's lawn. This is where Bill takes Grace and where we all make our way toward.

"Where do we go now?" the kids ask.

"We're going to find a shelter," Shannon tells them. "We're going to go somewhere safe before the rest of the storm comes."

"There's more?" Jacob asks.

"We're only in the eye," Shannon says.

I wince as a cramp-like pain grips my abdomen. I let out a soft moan as it worsens, and I bend over into the pain.

"What is it?" Shannon asks, bending with me. "Is it a cramp?"

I exhale, trying to breathe through the pain. "Something like that."

"Okay," Shannon says. "We've got to get you to a shelter. Someone needs to look at you."

"We need to get going," Bill says. In the back of the truck, he's laid Grace out on the same bed of rags from the basement. Over her, he has strung up a covering with a tarp. He has wedged materials next to Grace, to keep her from moving.

"Jacob, you sit up front with your father," Shannon says, ushering Sydney toward the truck and into the backseat. "We'll sit in the back with Sierra."

"You don't have to take me with you," I tell them. "I'm not your responsibility. I can figure something out." Another pain grips me, but I stay upright this time, fight to not wince or buckle.

"We're not leaving you behind," Shannon says in that motherly tone that suggests this will not be an argument.

In the backseat, Shannon sits in the middle and lets me take the edge so I can lean against the door. Bill starts the car and turns on the radio to keep track of the storm. There are reports of devastation already, of floods and tornadoes, grounds leveled by Melissa and everything that

comes with a storm this huge. There are no reports of the fires on the other coast or the blizzards up north. Today, Melissa is the worst thing happening, to us and to everyone else.

Bill drives slowly, avoiding powerlines, downed trees, and the debris of other destroyed homes. But he also drives slowly to stay in the eye of the storm, careful not to get ahead of it, but also careful not to fall behind.

Another wave of pain passes through me, and my body tenses in response. Shannon reaches for my hand again, worming her way into my tightly held grasp. When the next wave comes, I squeeze her hand instead.

It takes us over an hour to reach a shelter. It's not the one in Atlanta, but it's the first one we can find. The rest of Melissa is bearing down on us. My pain has started to pass but my blood-soaked jeans still have me worried. The disappearance of the pain almost concerns me more than the pain. At least, with the pain, I was feeling something. Now I'm feeling nothing at all.

There is no one outside the shelter and, when we knock on the locked entrance, there is no immediate answer. Finally, a woman answers the door. She is wearing a polo and khakis with an orange construction vest over top. All five of us are still covered in grime from the house— dirt and insulation and dust from things breaking apart. The woman stares at us for a second before she speaks.

"We don't have any room," she says.

"Please," Bill says. "Our house just fell apart on top of us. We have nowhere else to go for the rest of the storm."

"I'm sorry, really, but we're already over capacity," the woman starts to close the door.

"Where are we supposed to go?" Bill asks.

"There's another shelter north, in Atlanta, you can try there."

"Atlanta? We'll never make it in time."

"I'm sorry, I really am, but there's nothing we can do. There's no way we can fit five people in here." The woman has the door almost completely shut when Shannon speaks up.

"Can you fit one?"

Everyone looks to her.

The woman cracks open the door again, but only slightly. She eyes each of us and then lands on Shannon.

"I don't know. I'd have to ask, but it's certainly more likely than fitting five."

"Go ask then," Shannon says.

The woman stares at Shannon and then turns and disappears back inside, closing and locking the door behind her. In the distance, there is the rumbling of thunder.

"Shannon, what are you doing?" Bill asks.

Shannon stands in front of me, takes my hands in hers.

"This is where we part ways," she says.

"What?"

"You're going to go in this shelter, and we're going to head to Atlanta."

"No." I try to pull my hands away but Shannon squeezes, holding on.

"Sierra, you need to get medical attention right now. You need to make sure you and the baby are okay."

"I can do that in Atlanta, too."

"No, you're going to do it here."

"You said you weren't going to leave me behind."

"We're not," Shannon says. "We're just letting you go."

"I don't need to be let go." I look around at the rest of the family, look to Bill and Sydney and Jacob. "You don't have to do this for me. I didn't ask you to do this."

"Of course you didn't ask," Shannon says. "But, sometimes, you have to let other people take care of you."

The woman comes back.

"Okay, I can take one person."

"Her," Shannon says, letting go of my hand and nudging me forward. "Come on, kids," Shannon takes hold of Sydney and Jacob and she guides them back to the truck, Bill following

behind her. They do not look back while they're walking, but when they get into the truck, Shannon rolls down the window and smiles at me.

The truck is already pulling away.

"Are you coming?" the shelter woman asks.

Inside, the shelter is nothing but noise. There are people milling about, weaving between cots and sleeping bags, finding the bathroom, finding a water fountain, finding other people who want to talk. There are families playing little games with children to wear off energy, one father jogging a small lap with his young son, who runs to keep up. People stretch and move. It is like intermission. Everyone is using the break to take care of their bodies and to discuss what happened in the first act. All of this is done in relative darkness. There are flashlight beams here and there. And spaced intermittently throughout the shelter are large storm lights, the kind that run on batteries and hand cranks.

The woman leads me, weaving through the rows of people and things. Looking at the people with their little duffle bags and clean clothes, I am aware of how much I don't have and also how much I don't care. There hadn't been time to look through Bill and Shannon's house for the backpack Charlie left me, if it was even still there. But I didn't feel empty-handed when we left, didn't feel empty. We have to squeeze past a family that has taken up some of the walkway with a fort they've made from their cots and blankets. A young boy lays with his two mothers underneath the low blanket ceiling. One of the mothers reads from a picture book, using a flashlight to see in the powerless darkness. The shelter woman doesn't say anything to them about their fort, just passes by, the corner of her mouth turning up for just a second. Next to them

is an elderly man sitting on the edge of his cot. He glances over at the fort with a scowl and kicks away a part of the family's blanket that has extended toward his space. The storm light nearest him illuminates him from below, casting his face in ominous shadow.

Another wave of pain shoots through my abdomen and I double over. The woman keeps walking and it takes her a few paces before she realizes I'm no longer following her. She asks if I'm okay, places a hand gently on my back. There is a hush in the thrum around me as people start to realize that something is happening. The woman tells someone to go get the medic and then footsteps hurry away.

There is not much room to think around the pain, but in the little room there is I think of what it would've been like to have a child. To have someone that is wholeheartedly dependent on my decisions, who relies on me for everything they need to stay alive. I hear Toby saying, *The only person you rely in is yourself*. I think about how nice that would've been, to have some who didn't question my decisions, at least not for the first few years. But I also think about the ways in which this baby would've taken care of me. I hear Charlie saying, *But wouldn't it be nice?* just as my vision tunnels and I fall forward onto the concrete floor.

I wake up in a cot with a cool washrag on my forehead and an IV in my arm.

"Good morning, sunshine," someone says. I turn toward the voice and it takes me a few seconds before I process what I'm seeing.

"Terry?"

"Of all the shelters in all the world, huh?" Terry takes the rag off my forehead and snakes a blood pressure cuff around my arm. I start to sit up, but she puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, pushing me back down. "Not so fast, Sierra. You're dehydrated, so I want to keep you resting for now."

Normally, I would protest, but after everything, it feels nice to be told that I don't need to do anything right now.

"What are you doing here, Terry?"

"Well, I was all over Georgia for a little bit, dealing with fallout from the earthquake." She squeezes the little hand pump to inflate the cuff around my arm. "They finally stationed me here to ride out the storm."

Terry stops talking while she listens to my heartbeat, counting the beats as she stares at her watch, her mouth forming the shape of numbers but not making the sound. When she's done, she rips the cuff off and tucks it back into a medical bag.

"Did I have a miscarriage?"

"Honestly, I don't know," she says. "But your heart rate is good, so let's check on baby's." She pulls from her bag a very small ultrasound, battery-operated. The kind people buy when they want to try and hear their baby's heartbeat at home.

Terry squirts gel onto my stomach and smooths it around.

"It's going to take me a minute to find anything. These things just aren't as strong." Terry presses the wand against my stomach and starts moving it, staring down at the screen in her lap. "So what happened to you since Macon?"

I turn my head to stare up at the ceiling so that I'm not trying to read her facial reactions to the ultrasound as I tell her everything that's happened since I hopped down from her ambulance on the highway outside Macon. As I talk, I am still acutely aware that I'm not hearing the sound of a heartbeat, that there is no sign of life.

I start to think about what I'm going to do after this hurricane. If Toby and his friends are still alive, I won't be joining them. I have no way of getting in touch with Charlie, even if I wanted to, which I don't. The house I shared with Toby in St. Petersburg is most certainly gone, as is my car. Though I haven't been sure what I was going to do with this pregnancy, the idea of at least having this life inside me had started to feel comforting. I was looking forward to having someone with me, even if it was someone that had to rely on me to survive. I was looking forward to not being by myself. Now, the idea of doing anything after this storm, doing anything without this pregnancy, makes me feel overwhelmingly alone.

"Well, there's something," Terry says.

"What?" There is still no heartbeat, still no sound to confirm life.

"You've got placenta previa," Terry says, turning the screen to show me the grey crescent of something at the side of the screen. "Instead of attaching at the top or the side like normal, your placenta has attached at the bottom, on top of your cervix. That's probably what caused all the bleeding and the abdominal pain. Your placenta's just in the wrong place."

"Is that bad for the baby?"

"Not necessarily." Terry brings the screen closer to her face. "As far as I can tell, everything looks fine. It just means that, unless things change, you'll be having a c-section."

"Okay," I nod, look back up at the ceiling. "But still no heartbeat?"

"Not that I can—oh wait."

There is the thump of a heartbeat. It is steady and fast-paced. It fills the space around us, silencing a radius of noise as people stop to assess and realize what the sound is.

"There it is," Terry says. "Hello, baby."

People start walking up to the cot. They keep their distance at first until one woman catches my tear-filled eyes.

"You can come closer," I tell her, waving everyone forward.

They surround me—men, women, children—some kneeling or squatting, some just sitting down on the floor, making themselves comfortable. Some of them are young, some are old, some are holding children themselves. Some of the women have a look of reminiscence on their face, a look of remembering what it felt like to hear this sound.

"That's a strong heartbeat," Terry says. She keeps holding the wand there long after we've established that everything is okay. The woman who caught my eye is squatting next to my cot, holding on the edge to keep her balance. I turn my hand over, palm up, and without missing a beat the woman takes it and squeezes. We hold onto each other and we listen to the heartbeat and we wait for the rest of the storm to come.

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