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RED SEA

By Audrey Wenzel

The memorial service for Emily Dunbar took place on a rainy April Sunday. I tried to avoid stepping in puddles as I approached the crowd, a mass of black and gray made ever drearier by the drizzling rain. My bright red umbrella stuck out like a stoplight in the misty park, a blister among the somber shades. It was the only umbrella I owned, but I almost wanted to toss it away and let myself be drenched. I kept to the back of the mourners to avoid attention.

Emily's mother led the service. Her husband stood silently at her side, hand on her shoulder like a solemn golem protecting her while she fought back tears.

"This park was Emily's favorite place. She knew every type of tree that grew along the path, every bird that nested in their branches..." Mrs. Dunbar choked on a sob, holding a small cobalt urn closer to her chest. "She told me once that she wanted to die in this park when she was old and gray, feeding the birds with her last breath."

When her speech was finished, Mrs. Dunbar turned the urn with shaking hands under a tall oak tree with thick leaves that sheltered the ground beneath it from the rain. The amount of ashes that poured out was barely a handful. In front of me, a man in a wrinkled trench coat leaned close to a woman with a black beret.

“I heard they only found her foot,” he whispered. The woman shook her head and sighed.

“Poor thing.” She clucked her tongue. “Sharks must have gotten her.”

As the service ended, the mourners slowly dispersed, and I turned to leave as well. The rain fell steadily, plinking dully as it rolled off umbrellas and rusted steel benches. It was as though the grief of the mourners had mixed with the water, making it feel heavier and oppressive.

“Mara.” A voice called my name, and I turned towards the source. It was Emily’s older sister, Mallory. She always looked so neat and serious, but now mascara smudged her cheeks, and her eyes were dull and sorrowful. She wore a solid black A-line dress with silver buttons on the left side up to her neck. I tugged my black turtleneck higher on my own neck.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said, wincing internally at my own generic platitude, my inability to say something meaningful and comforting, but it was all I could think of in the suffocating atmosphere.

Mallory shook her head. Strands of blonde hair shook loose from her bun, curling in the humidity. “I didn’t want to believe she was dead. I still don’t.”

“I guess... there’s a chance she could still be alive,” I said, looking down. “If they haven’t found the rest.” The falling rain disrupted the puddles at my feet, blurring my

reflection, but the red streak of my umbrella glared back at me. I felt more out of place than ever.

"I know it's not likely. But I won't give up looking, even if it means finding the worst. What I want most is the truth." Mallory stepped forward, placing a hand on my shoulder. I met her gaze, which held a glint of stubbornness. Strength. "I know it must be a lot for you, too. First Jonah, and now Emily... if you need anyone to talk to, know that I'm here. We need to support each other in times like this."

I tried to smile, but my lips felt heavy, stiff. I nodded instead. "Thanks, Mallory. I'm glad she had a sister like you."

As I walked away, I felt Mallory's eyes on my back. I didn't turn around. The feeling only faded after I closed the door to my apartment behind me, sliding off my coat like shedding skin. With the rain shut outside, everything was still and quiet. I sank to my knees on the wooden floor and cried.

I stood barefoot on a beach with black sand. It was soft and cool between my toes, shifting with every step. When I reached the edge of the water I stood still, watching the waves roll in. It was night, and the sea was dark and quiet. The sky was empty, but the water seemed to reflect the stars that should have been there, pinpricks of bright white light that wavered on the surface. As the waves reached my toes, one speck of light was left behind, a smooth, white seashell so bright it almost hurt to look at. I reached down to pick it up, but although it looked smooth, the edge cut my finger. A shock traveled through me and I shivered as the wound bled. The blood dripped onto the shell and quickly spread to cover it. In an instant, the red traveled across the sea, dyeing every wavering star in

crimson. I reached once more to pick up the shell, and it sliced my fingers every time I tried to grab it.

In a sudden swirl the red-dyed sea rose up, a wave towering above my head and crashing down to swallow me whole. Saltwater poured into my mouth. I couldn't breathe. The waves dragged me deep into the ocean, but there was no more water, only emptiness, a black hole that suffocated every sense.

I sat up with a sudden jolt, gasping for breath as afternoon sunlight streamed through the sheer red curtains and wooden blinds I forgot to close. The feeling of drowning, of empty suffocation, gradually faded. I was in my bed, safe, half-covered in white linen sheets and an old polka-dot comforter fraying at the ends. Sweat clung to my skin, hot and tight. The wall clock read 12:28 in roman numerals. It ticked evenly, reassuringly. The rise and fall of my chest slowly settled into even breaths to match it. The black blob at the edge of my bed shifted, disturbed by my sudden movements, and stretched into the shape of a cat who came to nuzzle my cheek affectionately. I held him in my arms, comforted by his content purring.

"It was only a dream, Morpheus," I whispered to him. "You'll protect me from my nightmares, won't you?"

Morpheus responded only with more purring, but it set my mind at ease. Slowly, I pulled myself out of bed. I gave Morpheus his wet food breakfast as he rubbed against my legs, took my Prozac, and ate an apple. I couldn't bring myself to eat anything more.

I stood in the living room of my apartment for a while. I stared at my desk, at the pages of textile patterns and scribbled notes and the sewing machine with a half-finished

sample swatch hanging off. I tried to force myself to sit and work. I only had two months left in my leave of absence from graduate school. I tried to avoid looking at the wall above the couch, at the framed photos that covered it, but they snuck into the corner of my eye and made it impossible to focus on anything else. Eventually I returned to my bed in defeat.

I finally looked through my unread messages and missed calls. Emails from my graduate advisors. Texts from the few friends who made the effort to keep in touch, though I hadn't seen any in a while and the number seemed to keep dwindling. Some messages from Jonah's former partner, Riley, checking in and giving updates on their life without him. Voicemails from my father from his home in Florida, asking how I was doing. Another offer to stay with him for a while. The warmth and sunlight might do me good, he said. He always did hate the dreariness of Maine, heading south the first chance he got, with mom long gone and the kids moved out. He only stayed for a few days during Jonah's funeral.

In the end, I didn't respond to any of them.

"How was the service?" Liam, my coworker, asked as soon as I stepped behind the front desk. He was an ordinary-looking man in his mid-thirties, and the simple but sleek hotel uniform suited him perfectly, like he was meant to work a check-in counter. I liked the uniforms at the Apex hotel, a dark blue cotton-polyester blend with white trim and white button-up undershirts with high collars. The female uniforms had neckerchiefs with a blue and white Western floral pattern that I particularly liked.

"Depressing," I said flatly. Seeing no one else around, I sighed and slumped on the polished wood countertop, putting my head in my arms. "I might be a bit out of it tonight."

“I figured,” Liam said sympathetically. I heard a crinkling sound, and looked up to see a paper bag being slid my way. “I thought you might forget to eat again, so I brought you some of Maggie’s famous lasagna.”

Sure enough, looking in the bag revealed a container of his wife’s delicious four-cheese baked lasagna and some plastic utensils. I smiled gratefully. “Thanks, Liam.”

“Anytime. I’ve gotta clock out, but you text or call if you need anything, alright?”

I nodded. He smiled and saluted before leaving me at the desk. This was how most of my interactions with Liam went-- brief moments in the changing of shifts, a few words before one of us went home and the other took their place. He’d comforted me when I had a breakdown the first time I came in after my brother’s death, started bringing me some of his wife’s cooking when he learned I wasn’t eating well. Our interactions were never long, but they meant a lot. I never reached out to him outside of work, even though he always offered.

For a while, the lobby was empty and silent as it often was during the night shift. I didn’t like looking at the lobby, especially when it was empty. It wasn’t a very fancy or expensive hotel despite the grand name, and the lobby was small but far too busy for its size. The floor was carpeted in an awful geometric pattern of interlocking circles that had too many gaps and line thickness inconsistencies, while the walls were a polished limestone that glared in the lights and looked more like they belonged in a bathroom. There were only four chairs around a too-low round wooden coffee table, and I desperately wanted to know what was going on inside the head of whoever decided to make the chairs’ upholstery match the carpet.

My complaints about the lobby were endless, and only grew the longer I worked there. There was a small chip in the bottom of the wall near the elevators, which occasionally left little off-white flakes on the floor. The limestone floor tile at the entrance extended too far into the disgusting carpet and the metal edge was raised a little too much, so whenever a guest pulled their suitcase across it you could hear the bump. The floor tile looked similar to the wall tile, but it was actually a slightly darker color with more marbling, which was only obvious if you really paid attention.

I didn't like staring at the lobby, analyzing all its faults. I just needed something to think about. If I didn't think about the way the desk gate was a little too narrow, I'd think about Emily's service. I'd think about my red umbrella so vividly out of place, like blood streaked on sand. I'd think about the tiny pile of ashes which had already started melting into the rainwater that leaked under the tree by the time it was over. The black mascara tear streaks on Mallory's cheeks, and the stubbornness in her eyes. Emily's eyes, the same blue-green color, the same intensity of her expressions. The last time I saw Emily angry, bitter, distraught. Jonah. The last time I saw Emily happy, laughing as the wind blew her hair and a camera's shutter snapped. Jonah. A camera shutter. A flash. Two bright lights far too close and too late to escape and a terrible crunching grinding screech shattered glass and--

"Mara, are you okay? I'm here, breathe." Naomi, my friend since college and the night shift manager. A hand on my shoulder. People were putting their hands on my shoulders a lot recently. Since when had I started hyperventilating? My vision was blurry. My nails dug into my palms, leaning against the counter.

"I--" I tried to speak, to say I was okay, but my words choked in my throat, and I realized I *wasn't* okay.

"Breathe," Naomi said softly. "Count with me. One, two, three, four..."

With Naomi's help, I settled my breathing and wiped my tears. When I was finally able to speak, I cleared my throat.

"I'm sor--"

"Nuh-uh. No sorries, hun," Naomi rebutted before I could finish the word. I winced instinctively.

"I know. But I just--"

"No 'buts,' either. You're going through a lot right now. I'd be more surprised if you didn't cry over it. Come here," Naomi pulled me into a tight hug. She was a big woman with a vice grip squeeze, which was a bit uncomfortable but not unwelcome. "If you don't think you can work today, you can go home and rest. There aren't any big deliveries planned tonight, I'll be just fine by myself."

I pulled back and shook my head.

"No, I want to stay," I said. It wasn't the first time Naomi had offered to let me leave, and I'd taken her up on it before. I knew that I wasn't really needed, that I only had this job because of Naomi's recommendation. At first I'd needed extra money while doing graduate studies. Now, I needed a reason to leave the house. I needed to feel like I had a purpose here, that I *was* needed. Naomi's brown eyes softened and she sighed.

"Alright. You can handle the money and stay in the back unless something comes up."

Maybe the back was better than the lobby. It was dimmer, simpler. There wasn't as much to distract me there, but there also wasn't as much to overwhelm me. No threat of guests yelling in my face at 3am with breath reeking of alcohol, complaining about missing cable news channels or pillows being too dense. Counting money was something I could do.

The night passed by and the dawn rose crimson.

I lay in a red room. Maybe it wasn't a room; a space. There were no visible walls or floor, only a warm red as far as I could see. The color was solid, but there was a faint wave to it, like an opalescent sheen that was difficult to focus on. I tried to stand and found there was some sort of surface underneath me. It felt solid but rippled as I walked. The ripples intensified the further I went, making waves around me. Suddenly, my foot slipped and I stumbled forward, falling not onto the surface I was walking on as I expected but through it.

I grasped for something to hold onto but there was nothing, only red. I was falling fast through the red and under it and in between it all at once, a fall with no end until the red began to warp. Handprints formed in space and pushed towards me, stretching the red like latex, but too smooth for latex, like satin, like no material I'd seen before. At first I thought the hands were coming to save me, to stop me from falling, and they did, but then they kept pushing. The hands grabbed my arms and legs, my shoulders and waist, covering every inch of me. With wide eyes, I watched as a face started to form along with two hands stretching towards my neck. The features were just starting to form, a small nose, high cheekbones stretched taut against the strange surface, a pointed chin--

I was awoken by a claw digging into my heaving chest. A pair of bright yellow-green eyes met mine instead of a half-formed face. After a moment, I wiped the tears from my eyes and stroked my savior.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Morpheus purred loudly, vibrating against my chest where he lay. It was only 12pm-- I’d barely gotten any sleep since getting home at 8am, but I couldn’t go back to sleep. I didn’t want to have a dream like that again. I resigned myself to get up and try to work.

I found myself unable to avoid looking at the wall of photos today. They hung on the plain eggshell wall above the white leather sofa. Jonah had picked out the couch for me when I got my own apartment after he decided to move in with Riley. He always liked simplicity, minimalism, black and white. The decorative pillows, woven purple and navy bohemian and blue and gold arabesque patterns, were my own touches. Now, the splashes of color seemed out of place against the monochrome surrounding them.

All of Jonah’s personal photography was black and white. He liked to photograph places and things that showed how temporary everything is, the way time changes the world. The old Blockbuster with the letters on the sign fading and the “B” almost unrecognizable, its parking lot cracked and covered in weeds. The empty Baptist church by the reservoir, windows broken and body strangled by ivy and vines. A long-abandoned car at the edge of the woods, rusted and bent, tires long gone and debris scattered on the ground.

His photos of people had a similar feeling of fleetingness, encapsulating small moments of vivid emotion. The backs of four men, sitting in the bed of a pickup truck with

arms around each other and beers in hand as they watched the summer sunset over a rocky beach. A very surprised woman, holding an outstretched hand towards a wide-brim hat that had just blown off her head. An elderly gentleman with kind crinkled eyes pausing in his perusal of the local newspaper to pat a shaggy dog that sat next to him on his bench.

A familiar face stared at the lens, dangling a piece of translucent sea glass in front of her eye. In another photo, she lay in profile in a meadow, holding a puffy dandelion to her lips and blowing the spores into the sky. In yet another, there was her long straight hair as she stared out a train window, a small smile visible in the faint reflection. There was even one with her sitting in the branches of the very tree her ashes now lay under, long slender legs kicking freely in the air and a big smile on her face. Jonah took a lot of pictures of Emily. He said she was a good muse, always inspiring him, and I could understand why. Emily always wanted to get back together, even though they'd only dated for a few months in high school. There was a gravitational pull between them, their interactions always on the precipice of something more. I wondered if Jonah knew she was fleeting, too. I wondered if he knew they both would vanish before long.

There weren't many photos of Jonah. He didn't like being in front of the camera. There was only one picture of him and me, right in the middle of the wall, taken by our father when he came to visit a few years ago. It was clear that his camera work was more amateurish than Jonah's, but it was a nice picture. We sat side by side on a dock, smiling and laughing with matching chocolate ice cream cones in hand. Our feet dangled over the pier, and we twisted our torsos to look at the camera. We weren't identical twins, but we had the same short, wavy dark hair that curled wildly in the humidity, the same round

cheeks tinged faintly with sunburn. I stared at that picture until my vision blurred and I couldn't see anymore.

Dully, I registered the sound of my doorbell. I finally managed to move to answer it on the third or fourth ring. To my surprise, Mallory stood outside. She looked a lot more put together than she had at the memorial service, hair neat and tight, eyes once again clear and filled with confidence. Mallory always came off severe and determined, like she could see right through everyone. Perhaps it came with being a journalist. Her serious air always unnerved me a little, though I knew it was silly.

"You weren't answering your phone, so I came to check on you," she said when I opened the door.

I looked down, biting my lip as guilt tightened my chest. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Mallory said, waving her hand. "Come for a walk with me?"

Although she asked it as a question, I knew there wasn't much room to say no. I nodded, but I was still wearing my pajamas. "Let me change first."

"Sure, I'll wait."

I closed the door, and sudden terror gripped my heart. That's right-- I was still in my nightgown, which had a low scoop top. My neck was exposed. Mallory hadn't seen anything, had she?

I raced to my room, heart pounding as I stared in the bureau mirror. No, that was right-- the marks had long faded. Mallory wouldn't notice anything. Still, I changed into my usual black turtleneck sweater and a long white skirt. I took a moment to calm myself down before returning to the door.

It was a chilly late afternoon, cloudy but with low risk of rain. Mallory took me to walk along the beach. There was a strip about two miles long a twenty minutes' walk from my apartment, just past a small pine forest. It wasn't a very popular beach because the first mile was rocky and difficult to trek, but once you passed that, you would come to a beautiful stretch of smooth sand hidden away beneath a rocky cliff. I used to frequent this little spot with Jonah and our friends, especially in the summers when it was usually empty compared to the popular beaches. Sometimes we'd even sit on the cliffs above and watch the waves at high tide.

Mallory led the way across the tricky rocks with confident steps as I stumbled behind her, regretting wearing a long skirt.

"Remember the first time I came here with you three?" Mallory asked without looking back. "You and Jonah were freshly eighteen, and Emily insisted you all try drinking for the first time to celebrate adulthood. Of course, none of you could buy it yourself, so she begged me to grab a twelve pack of beers and supervise."

My nose crinkled as I recalled the memory. I'd been hesitant, but Emily had an infectious smile I couldn't refuse, and at that time I would have done anything she'd asked me. "I remember. I hated the taste."

Mallory laughed. "Yeah. You only took a couple of sips with a face so sour you'd think you were drinking lemon juice. It was shitty cheap beer. Jonah drank a few, but in the end it was Emily who downed more than half the pack and got properly drunk. Of course, I was the one who had to take care of her, but I knew I would from the start. And she knew she could count on me."

A sense of unease grew in me as we neared the sandy strip, though I couldn't place why. Mallory continued, "That's how Emily was. Impulsive and bold, dragging everyone into her plans and doing everything larger than anyone else. You know, she always visited my office without warning, and even though I scolded her I never wanted her to leave. Everyone loved her. Without her laughter on the writing floor, work feels too quiet and meaningless."

I thought about Emily's laughter, clear and light. It really did draw you in; her smile was like a lighthouse beam. Even her tears were magnetic, her sadness making those around her feel sorrow too. But the way anger and despair warped her face was different, a twisted facsimile of herself. It hadn't seemed like her at all.

Mallory waited for me to catch up when she reached the end. We stood silently for a few minutes on the boundary between sand and rock, smooth and sharp. The sun was beginning its descent and the tide was coming in, the calm waves growing choppy.

"This is where they found her foot," Mallory said, staring out at the water. A strong breeze blew by. Mallory, tight and secure from her bun to her form-fitting grey peacoat and black leggings, was unmoved. I, with my untied hair that was getting too long for comfort and much looser clothing, felt like I might get blown away as the gust pushed against me.

"Here?" I asked, breathless.

"You know, it was too decayed to get a proper DNA analysis. They could only identify it by her shoe." Mallory said, fist clenched tight.

Bright pink Nikes, size four. Small feet, distinctive shoes. I could imagine the scavengers picking her body apart, crabs and lobsters and maybe sharks gnawing at her soft flesh and bones until her foot detached. I shivered, feeling sick.

“I haven’t come to this beach in months,” Mallory continued. “But now, I need to find answers. Any trace of her, even if it’s only fragments of bone.”

I looked up at the cliffs not far away, the jagged sea-worn rock running up in a slight overhang. I remembered sitting up there with Emily, with Jonah, the three of us back in high school when everything was so much simpler. In the summers during college break, when we were slowly growing up and growing apart but stuck to our traditions. I had sat there with Emily four months ago not long before she went missing, mourning Jonah together. The cliffs were low, but not low enough to jump from without injury or death. My head felt light, my stomach nauseous as the thought came to me.

“Why... how do you think she ended up in the sea?” I asked, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“It wasn’t suicide,” Mallory said with a trace of bitterness. “I’ve heard people speculating about that, saying she was too heartbroken after Jonah’s death. But I know my sister better than anyone. Emily was devastated, but she wasn’t suicidal. Something must have happened.”

“Do you think...” I hesitated, watching the growing waves in the distance rise and fall as if in sync with my stomach. “Do you think someone...?”

Mallory turned to me, her feet crunching sharply on the gravelly sand that lay on the boundary. I felt compelled to meet her intense gaze; the heat of it was like sitting too close to a campfire.

“I’m not ruling it out. There’s something suspicious about the way she disappeared. It makes the most sense to suspect foul play.” She took a few steps closer. My heart pounded so loudly in my ears I had to strain to focus on what she was saying. “If she came

to this beach alone in her mourning, it's not impossible that someone might have found her and taken advantage. You know the people who frequent this beach better than I do. Could you give me a list of everyone you know who might come here in the off season?"

I opened my mouth wordlessly, unsure what to say. I felt like my brain was going round and round on a looping roller coaster. "I... I can try? I just... I'm sorry, this is..."

Mallory's expression softened and she put a hand on my shoulder, warm even through my coat. "There's no rush, take your time to think and get back to me later. I know this is a lot to take in, and it's a very serious thing to consider. There's no guarantee that a local is involved, anyway, it's just a speculation I have. I'm only sharing my thoughts with you, because I know you're close to Emily and know this place well. If anyone can help me figure out the truth, it's you."

I nodded vaguely, turning my gaze back to the ocean.

I froze.

There, floating on the water, was Emily.

She was split into pieces, arms and torso and all dismembered, but every piece was there-- everything but the foot that had been found and turned to ash. Her head was facing away from me, long dirty-blond hair darkened from the water and trailing like seaweed. Slowly, with the roll of a wave, the head turned around. Emily's face was taut and withered by decay, eyes wide and milky. Somehow, it looked like they were staring right at me.

"Mara? What's wrong?" Mallory followed my gaze and frowned. "Do you see something?"

Shakily, I pointed to Emily's corpse. I watched Mallory incredulously as she only looked more confused. "There's nothing but seaweed. Are you okay?"

I looked back at the water, and to my surprise, all traces of Emily had vanished. I dropped my arm limply. Was I hallucinating? I hadn't been getting enough sleep. But it looked so real. My whole body shook.

"I... It's nothing. I'm just... I'm just tired. I don't feel well."

Mallory's face softened with concern, and she put the back of her hand against my forehead. The touch was scalding, and it took all my willpower not to pull away. "You do feel a bit warm. I'm sorry to add to your stress, I know you're still upset by all this. What's most important is taking care of yourself. Let's get you home."

I nodded again, but said nothing as we made the trek back. Mallory supported me across the rocks and escorted me home.

I didn't want to sleep.

Sleep meant nightmares, restlessness, intense fear and anxiety. I didn't want to risk dreaming again of drowning, strangling, red seas or red rooms.

But I knew that I wasn't sleeping enough, and that it was getting to me. That had to be the explanation for what I'd seen at the beach, or else...

It had to be a lack of sleep. Still, I couldn't will myself to lie down and relax until 2am, when I finally took a couple of sleeping pills and prayed for a dreamless night.

I sat in the passenger seat of a car driving through endless darkness. The engine hummed steadily, and soft alternative rock music crackled from the speakers in the back. Jonah hummed along with the tune, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel. I was

looking down at my phone, but all the text and images were garbled in nonsensical patterns.

"I'm glad to see Emily seems to be doing well," Jonah said as the song changed. "She was so unsure about the nursing program, but I think it's a good fit for her. She looks happier than she did last time."

I nodded, looking out the window to stare at nothingness. Right-- we'd just been at Emily's place to celebrate her birthday, and Jonah was driving us back to my apartment. "I think so too. But she's always happy to see you."

Jonah nudged me with his elbow. "She's happy to see you, too, you know."

"Sure," I rolled my eyes. "But she doesn't try to cling to me like an octopus."

Jonah took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh. It was only a short drive from Emily's, just 15 minutes, and then Jonah would stay the night before heading back to the home he shared with his partner in the city come morning. That's how it should go, at least. But a pit in my stomach told me something was wrong, and the tension in the car was thick.

"Mar... you still haven't told her--"

"No," I interrupted, "I don't want to. I keep telling you not to worry about me."

"And I keep saying the same. I've been with Riley for a while now, and I don't think that's going to change. Even if Emily still has feelings for me--"

"She does."

"--Nothing is going to happen between us," Jonah insisted. "I'd be happy if you two got together."

I slumped in my seat, wrapping my arms around myself and refusing to look at him. “She doesn’t like me, though. You’re the only person she has eyes for, and I always knew that. I never wanted you to break up with her for me.”

“I’ve told you so many times, that wasn’t the only reason--”

“I know. But it still feels like it.”

Jonah huffed a laugh. “I know you find her aversion to cilantro endearing, but it’s a dealbreaker for me. I can’t date anyone who doesn’t like such a staple seasoning.”

I elbowed him in the side, but couldn’t stop the small smile creeping on my face. “Says the guy who dips fries in salsa.”

“It’s just another form of potato chip!”

“The texture is entirely wrong,” I argued, sticking out my tongue. “Oh, and let’s not forget that you ate a bunch of those gross American cheese slices every day after school for years.”

Jonah gasped in dramatic mock offense. “I can’t believe I’m being criticized on my taste by you, of all people, who thinks mayonnaise and jelly are acceptable on the same sandwich. *That* is a crime against humanity.”

We laughed. Jonah was always good at changing the mood like that. Yet still, the feeling of wrongness in my chest wouldn’t dissipate, getting worse the further we drove in the darkness.

“Do you want to watch another Del Toro tonight?” Jonah asked. “I hear *Crimson Peak* has really good costumes.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “I think we’ve watched enough Stephen King adaptations to last a while-- something new is good.”

“We haven’t gotten through all of them yet! It’s our birthright as Mainers to watch every adaptation,” he laughed.

My sense of foreboding grew. I wanted to yell at Jonah to pull over, to stop driving before it was too late... too late for what? Something bad was going to happen. But somehow, I couldn’t react to this feeling at all. I only laughed with him and looked back at my phone.

“Emily sent a picture of us,” I said. I couldn’t see it on the glitching screen. I felt trapped in my own body, a marionette unable to act against a set script. “She got a good shot. You have some frosting on your nose.”

“Really? Let me see,” Jonah glanced over as I held up the phone.

He only took his eyes off the road for a second, but it was too long. Out of the darkness came a sudden blinding light. We both reacted quickly-- I raised my arms instinctively and Jonah swerved the wheel to the right. The truck hit his side. I saw the terror in his eyes as the metal contorted around him, and then everything was spinning, crashing, crushing.

And then, the only sound was my ears ringing. The only sight was Jonah’s mangled arm protruding from the crumpled wreckage. His blood-streaked hand held my phone loosely, the shattered screen dark.

No, this wasn’t right. I remembered blacking out when the car was hit and waking up in the hospital with only a broken arm and devastating grief. I never saw Jonah’s body, and I didn’t remember him ever taking my phone.

I pulled myself off the glass-littered pavement and slowly walked towards the wreckage. The phone in Jonah's hand lit up, and despite the cracks, I could see clearly what was on it:

I stood on a cliff overlooking the beach. The wind blew around me like it was pushing me towards the edge.

"It's your fault," Emily said behind me. I turned to look at her and her hands curled around my neck, squeezing tightly. Her eyes were beautiful and empty.

Her nails dug into my throat as she pushed me backwards and together we fell.

The sensation of hands around my neck remained, and I gasped as I struggled to my feet. I bumped into furniture and doorways as I made my way unsteadily towards the bathroom. My reflection in the mirror was lit only by the pale light of breaking dawn. I gripped the countertop tightly and fixed my eyes on my neck.

There was nothing there. No hands, no marks. The pressure I felt loosened a little, but it didn't feel right. The wounds had been shallow, just a few scratches and bruises that only took a week or two to heal. I had watched them gradually fade, but now I wondered if maybe they'd never gone at all. Maybe they were only hiding, waiting to reveal themselves when I dropped my guard.

I ran the tap and grabbed a washcloth from the cabinet, knocking over the soap bottle in the process. It rolled off the sink, clattering on the ground and pouring a slow puddle of ivory liquid. I ignored the spill, wetting the washcloth and rubbing my neck. The water was cold and the terrycloth was rough. Still, I couldn't see the marks, so I scratched at my skin to find them, scrubbing again and again as hard as I could.

There! Now the remnants of Emily's hands revealed themselves. Indents appeared where I dug my nails and the washcloth's abrasion turned my neck red and swollen.

No, this wasn't right-- I didn't want these marks. I wanted them gone. They should have been gone, why were they still here? My breathing quickened and the sensation of being strangled returned. Emily was haunting me, wasn't she?

I stumbled out into the hall, to the living room. Twilight dyed the black and white photography on the wall in shadowed red. Emily sneered at me from those pictures, so I tore them off the wall. The sea glass, the field, the train, the tree, I threw every image of her to the floor, stomped on them, pulled the paper from the shattered glass and tore her apart, but still she would not leave me alone. Emily appeared in pictures she hadn't been in before. She stood in the distance of the abandoned Blockbusters parking lot. She peeked out of the doorway of the old church. She looked out the shop window as the woman's hat blew past.

One by one I took them down, but every time I thought I'd taken off the last image of her, I noticed her appear somewhere else. Why hadn't I noticed before? Emily was in every single photo. All of them had to go.

"MRRROW!"

I flinched, pulled out of my focus by Morpheus' screech. I turned to see him standing next to the last frame I'd just tossed behind me, staring at me with his back arched. Realization struck-- I'd almost hit Morpheus.

Like a curtain falling, I became aware of the destruction around me. The light from the window growing ever brighter illuminated the disastrous scene, softening the edges of cracked wood frames and glinting off countless shards of shattered glass. Torn photo

scraps lay scattered at my feet. Jonah's photography. My feet and hands were marred with lacerations, covered in blood. I suddenly felt the sting from the cuts, the dull throb of my neck from rubbing it so hard.

What had I done?

I slowly stepped across the carpet, flinching at the pain in my soles, and sank to my knees in front of Morpheus and the last frame. I turned it over with shaking hands. It was the picture of me and Jonah on the dock, the one our father had taken. Blood from my thumb smeared the cracked glass.

What had I done?

Jonah had told me once, *"When I take a picture, it's like I'm saying 'I was here. I saw this, and this is how I saw it.' Every photo I take has a piece of me in it, y'know?"*

I had single handedly destroyed the dozen precious fragments of Jonah I had left. I felt like I'd ripped apart my own heart, and a blinding ache squeezed the gash where it used to be.

"I'm sorry," I croaked in a scratchy voice. It hurt to speak. "I'm so sorry. Morpheus, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry--I can't-- I didn't mean-- I didn't-- I can't, I-- I'm sorry, I'm sorry--"

My voice rose in volume as I choked out the words and tears flowed forth. Morpheus licked the blood from my feet as I sobbed on the living room floor. I didn't deserve his forgiveness. I didn't deserve anything. My wails carried on until my throat couldn't make another sound.

Throughout the day, I slowly cleaned up my apartment. I turned off the tap that I'd left running, wiped up the soap that now covered the tiled floor. I treated my wounds, letting the sting keep me awake and focused. I picked up the scraps of photos, carefully laid them out on the table in hopes I could put them together again, even though I knew that what I'd done was irreparable. I swept and vacuumed, taking care to make sure every little bit of glass was taken care of. I checked Morpheus over to make sure he wasn't injured, and gave him lots of extra treats.

Every once in a while, I had to stop and sit down wherever I was as all the energy drained from me. I didn't have it in me to cry any more, so I simply stared at the wall or toilet or couch until I mustered the strength to clean again. Soon it was time to go to work.

"Hey, Mara-- woah, what happened to your hands? Are you okay?" Liam's cheerful smile faltered to a look of concern as I approached the hotel desk. I glanced down at my hands, which I'd wrapped in gauze.

"Just cut myself by accident on some broken glass," I said quietly. "It's not as bad as it looks."

Liam didn't seem to buy it, looking me over skeptically. "Are you sure? You look awful-- I mean that in the nicest way, you're a lovely young woman, but-- you know what I mean. Have you been getting enough sleep?"

My mouth twisted wryly. "Sleep is the last thing I need. I'm fine, really." There was nothing he could do to help me, anyway.

"What do you mean? Just shoot, I'll do whatever I can."

I blinked. Had I said that last part out loud? I shook my head. “No. This is something I have to handle myself.”

“Are you positive?” He asked, putting a hand on my shoulder. “You don’t have to deal with everything alone. I care about you, I’m always here if you need to talk--”

“NO.” My voice came out in a shout and we both flinched, equally surprised at my outburst. I shrugged Liam’s hand off of my shoulder. Taken aback, he held his hands up and stepped away.

“Okay. I’m sorry if I overstepped. I’ll head out; Naomi should be in any minute. There’s some meatloaf in the back for you if you want it.”

I clenched my hands into fists and didn’t look up until I heard the sliding front doors close behind him.

The lobby was empty and quiet, like most nights. I felt like it looked even uglier than usual, more sinister. The awful pattern on the carpet seemed to be constantly shifting, bending into curved eyes and warped sneers. The walls weren’t any better-- the patterns in the limestone were more subtle, but they were almost more grotesque in their insect-like squirming.

“Excuse me, Ma’am, my room card isn’t working.”

There were insects in the walls. Slugs, worms, maggots, writhing all around me. Didn’t this woman see them? She looked like someone who wouldn’t like insects. Her paisley shirt was riddled with them, though.

“Uh, Ma’am? Excuse me? Hello?” The woman waved her hand in my face, and I blinked, putting on my customer service smile.

“I’m so sorry, let me help you with that right away. You said you’re missing your room card?”

“No, I said my room card isn’t working. I have it right here,” she frowned and held the card directly in front of my eyes. It didn’t have any insects on it. “Is there something wrong with you?”

“Yes, sorry. What’s your room number?”

“One oh four. Jeez, finally...”

I took the card and moved to the computer. When I tried to type in the room number, though, I found the keyboard was all wrong. The letters weren’t where they were supposed to be. The symbols were warped. What number had she said again? What was I trying to find?

“I can’t believe this, she’s been staring at the screen for five minutes. Hello? Are you on drugs or something? We never should have come to this shitty town...”

I looked up. There was a man next to the woman, now, and they seemed to be arguing, but I couldn’t tell about what. I saw their mouths moving, but the sound was a dull buzz. Their tongues were giant slugs that hung from their lips.

The woman slammed her hand on the counter. I jumped and tried to focus on her-- she looked mad. She was saying something about her room key. I couldn’t understand any of it.

My eyes trailed to the wall behind her. Among the squirming insects, a new pattern was emerging. Hands, hair, legs, body... a person began to take shape. I knew who it was going to be before she was fully formed. Emily was definitely haunting me, for now she

stared at me from the wall across the lobby, form wavering as the insects circled around her. The lighting in the lobby seemed to dim as Emily put her finger to her lips.

Suddenly, I was falling, and I hit the ground hard. It felt much harder than the sandy beach should, but it made sense, falling from a cliff. I lay there for a while before there was a tug on my legs and I was being dragged by the ankles. I slid across the sand inch by inch, leaving patchy streaks of blood in my wake. I couldn't move or speak; I was already dead. The person dragging me seemed to be struggling, gasping for breath and stopping every few seconds. They didn't have to drag very far. Soon the water rolled over my corpse, filling my mouth and unmoving lungs. When I was fully submerged, the dragger let me go, and the waves pulled me away.

I opened my eyes to see Naomi standing above me, holding my legs in the air with one arm and her phone in the other. She looked panicked, tears in her eyes.

"No, this hasn't happened before-- I'm her manager, she just suddenly collapsed at the desk-- yes, the Apex hotel on Pine Road-- I elevated her legs and-- wait, hang on, Mara? Are you awake? Are you okay?"

I blinked a few times and weakly nodded my head. Relief flooded Naomi's eyes, and she kept talking on the phone. "Yes, she's awake-- she still doesn't look good, though. Her hands are bandaged and they're bleeding through-- no, I don't know why-- okay, I'll keep an eye on her until someone gets here."

She hung up and gently lowered my legs, crouching next to me. "Can you sit up, or say something? Anything to let me know what's going on."

"I'm okay," I said. I slowly sat up. My head felt like lead and everything was wobbly. "It's just not right. I wasn't the one being dragged."

"What?" Naomi looked concerned again. I pulled myself to my feet, and she tried to steady me. "Maybe you shouldn't be standing up right now, hon. I called the paramedics, they'll be here soon. Your hands are bleeding, what happened--"

"It's wrong," I said. "I was the one who dragged her."

Naomi's brows were knitted tight. "I'm not sure what you're talking about, but we're going to get you help, okay? Here, drink some water."

She handed me a glass. I took a small sip; it was cool and soothing on my dry throat. I looked at my reflection in the water-- heavy bags under my eyes, hair disheveled. My features wavered in the ripples. That was where I belonged.

I lifted my hand and dumped the water on my head. It brought me to my senses a bit.

"Mara?!" Naomi tried to take my arm again but I wouldn't let her, stumbling back and knocking against the countertop.

"It's all wrong," I whispered. "I should be the one in the sea. It's all my fault." Before anyone could try to grab me again, I stumbled past the counter and towards the door.

"Mara! Come back--"

"Don't you see?" I shouted as I walked. "I dragged Emily into the sea! I can't, I have to... I have to make it right!"

Maybe that surprised her enough. No one tried to stop me anymore as I walked out the sliding doors.

I had to go to the beach. Emily was at the beach. I had to put her back in the sea. Or she had to put me back in the sea. That's right-- I should be in the sea. I died on the beach on that day in December and now I was only a walking corpse in a body that wasn't mine because I should be in the sea.

I ran past the buildings and roads, through the strip of pine. The scenery blurred around me, senses focused only on moving forward. There was a dull pain in my feet as I struggled to cross the rocky patch, but it wouldn't stop me. This was the last barrier between me and the sea.

There was the beach. There was the sand. I could still see the blood from Emily's head where it poured. She wasn't there, though. Where was she? Where did she go? Right, the sea. I was supposed to be in the sea.

There were the waves, the thick seafoam running up to meet my feet. My leather shoes sank into wetted sand.

"Mara?"

Who was calling me? That was Emily's voice. It was Emily. I whirled around.

It wasn't Emily. It was Mallory. She stood behind me with a concerned expression, holding her white sneakers in one hand. Why was she here? *Was* she here? She could be a hallucination, too. She grabbed my arm and it felt real. She pulled my shoulders and made me face her. When would people stop touching my shoulders?

"Mara? Can you hear me? What are you doing?"

Maybe she wasn't real, after all. Her searing touch could be all in my mind. It shouldn't be so hot.

Maybe it didn't matter if she was real.

"I killed her," I said.

The grip on my shoulders froze, then loosened. Mallory's face morphed from concern to confusion.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I killed Emily." Maybe this was Emily I was talking to, not Mallory at all. Emily was supposed to be at the beach. They had the same eyes. "I'm sorry, I killed you. Don't you remember?"

Emily's face drained of color. She didn't respond, so I kept talking. My head buzzed like bees were swarming my brain. I was crying again.

"You tried to kill me. You said it was my fault, so you tried to kill me, but I hit you, and I didn't mean to kill you, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to, but I killed you, and you're dead. I don't know why you're here. You were in there," I pointed to the sea. Emily's brows knitted close. Her grip tightened again. I wished her hands were on my neck instead of my shoulders.

"Mara, listen to me. I'm not Emily, I'm Mallory. Emily's sister. Look at me carefully, okay?"

I did. Blonde hair, a sharper nose than Emily's, thinner lips. She wasn't Emily. She was Mallory after all.

"You're not Emily," I said. Her shoulders relaxed a little.

"Right. I'm not. I think we need to take you to the hospital. You're not well. Will you come with me?"

"You're not Emily. Emily's in the sea."

"Mara, please, will you come--"

“It’s supposed to be me.”

I tore free from her grip, turned back to the ocean. Whoever was behind me tried to grab me again, to pull me back, but I wouldn’t let them. They shouted something again and again but I couldn’t hear. All I heard was the roar of the waves. All I saw was Emily, waiting for me in the seafoam with open arms.

I elbowed and scratched until I was free and stepped heavily through the water, deeper, deeper, to my waist, my neck, and then the water towered above me. A wave crashed down and I was swallowed whole, pushed deep down, spinning, floating. Emily smiled at me. She wrapped her arms around my neck. She kissed me and my mouth was filled with seawater.

She disappeared as my vision blurred. There was a deep thrum in my ears, but it was quiet. Around me was only deep blue-green, brown, black. Black, and then nothing.

Nothing.

...

And then there was something again. A pressure pushed hard against my chest. I coughed and sputtered and everything poured out of my mouth. Through a haze, I saw Emily’s face-- no, Mallory-- above me, hair dripping and clothes matted against her skin. She opened her mouth, but I couldn’t hear a thing.

My eyes slid shut again.

“I just want to know how it happened,” Emily said. Her breath curled in the cold December air, unwarmed by the wine she was drinking from the bottle in her hand. Two

more lay next to her. Strands of long brown hair freed themselves from where they were tucked into the back of her puffy black jacket. She wore fraying black jeans and bright pink Nikes.

We sat at the edge of the cliffs above the beach, looking out over the dark sea that merged with the sunset sky at the horizon. It had been just over a month since Jonah died. We'd been mourning separately, for the most part. I'd been planning the funeral alongside Riley, dealing with a constant stream of family questions and condolences. Whenever I did see Emily, we could only hug and cry for a while without the space for words. Today she invited me to come to the beach and mourn together. I knew she wanted to ask about the accident.

I gripped the wine bottle Emily had given me tightly. I didn't like to drink much, but today I wanted to. It was half empty now. I liked the label design; white paper facestock with embossed stems of asphodel branching around the brand's name, adding a bit of raised texture which I traced with my finger--

"Please, Mara. I know it's hard to talk about, but I need to know."

Drawing a deep breath, I met Emily's gaze. Dark circles hung under her blue-green eyes, and her lips had sore patches from biting. I figured I didn't look much better.

"The other driver had a stroke at the wheel and swerved a few lanes over," I told her the same story I'd told a thousand times, but it never got easier. "We didn't know what was happening until it hit us."

Emily looked down. "That's it, then? Just an unavoidable accident, the wrong place at the wrong time?" She drew in a shaky breath that came out as a sob. "I knew I should have let him leave earlier. Or forced him to stay a little longer. I thought he was getting annoyed

at how clingy I was, but if I had been a little clingier, more demanding... Fuck, why did you have to leave then?"

I bit my lip. I didn't want Emily to blame herself. If there was anyone to blame, it wasn't her. "I'm the one who wanted to leave early. I was tired, and I wanted to watch a movie with Jonah and go to bed and... it's not something that could have been predicted. You couldn't have known. I still feel like it's my fault, though. Especially because..."

I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat. I stared at my fist, clenched in the sparse clifftop grass. "He was looking at my phone," I quietly admitted. "He wanted to see the picture you sent, and even if it was only for a second, and even if the car was already going to hit us, I wonder if it would have made a difference if he'd been looking at the road instead."

There was silence for a few long moments. I hesitantly raised my head. Emily's eyes were staring at me, wide and bloodshot. She staggered to her feet, tossing her now-empty bottle to the ground. It made an ugly clang as it hit the others.

"It really is always you, isn't it?" she spat. I flinched, surprised by the vitriol in Emily's voice and the warped anger on her face. I'd never seen her like this before.

"What do you--"

"It's always you who takes Jonah away from me," Emily said as she took a step closer. My gut plummeted. "Back then in high school, you were jealous of me taking his attention, weren't you? I knew you were the reason he broke up with me. Every time Jonah left my side, it was because you were tired, or busy, or didn't like something, or didn't like me!"

I felt like my heart was lodged in my throat. It hurt so much to hear how Emily saw me.

"I... that's not... no, I never, how could you..." I trembled, struggling to tell her the truth. "Emily, please, I-I never hated you. I *liked* you, a lot-- I still like you-- I mean, that wasn't the reason for anything, I was never jealous of..."

She stood over me now, and I leaned back, drawing in my knees. "Because you liked *me* too much, Jonah dumped me?"

My breathing was heavy and shallow, head dizzy. This wasn't how I wanted this to go. "I told him not to! I didn't want him to break up with you for my sake! But... he just... he didn't want to hurt me, or you--"

"So you're saying it's my fault, then?" Emily's eyes held no kindness, only hatred. For the first time, I was terrified of her. "I'm just so irresistible? I drove Jonah away, I sent the picture he was looking at when he died-- it's all my fault, is that it?"

"No! It's not your fault, I'd never--"

"No, it's not. It's your fault, Mara. It's all your fucking fault!"

Before I could process Emily's movement, my back was on the ground and a pressure was squeezing my throat. I stared at Emily's twisted face above me with wide eyes, realizing with horror that she was choking me. Her nails dug into my skin, squeezing tighter.

I panicked. I struggled to get away from her. I gripped the neck of the bottle I still held in my right hand and swung it hard at Emily's head.

There was a heavy thunk and a sickening crack as it made contact and shattered, and Emily cried out as she stumbled back. "Ow! What the fuck?!"

I scrambled to my knees, coughing and gasping. "I-I'm sorry-- I didn't mean... but, you were..."

Emily took wobbly steps backward, holding a hand to her head where it had been hit. The wound oozed darkly with wine; with the color of it and the darkening surroundings, I couldn't tell if blood was mixed in.

"Get away," she forced out through gritted teeth. "Don't--" The rest of Emily's words were cut off by a heart-shattering scream. I watched as she took one step too far back and plummeted off the cliffside in a streak of black and pink.

There was a dull thud far below, and then silence. I sat there for a long time, barely daring to breathe. Eventually, I willed myself to approach the cliff's edge.

Emily lay on the beach below, body crumpled in a twisted unnatural heap. Red spread from her head and dyed the sand around her.

In a daze, I shakily made my way down to the beach and dragged Emily's body into the sea.

Everything was a dull ache. There was a roar in my ears and a burn in my lungs. I tried to open my eyes, but the light was blinding. My whole body was a sack of rice and my head was stuffed with lead. It took a few minutes before the roar started to subside and I could open my eyes enough to see.

The ceiling was white, and I could vaguely see a pale yellow curtain hanging from it. My senses returned to me one by one; the sharp smell of disinfectant permeating the air, the beeping of a nearby machine, the sensation of my dry tongue heavy in my mouth that still tasted faintly of seawater.

I turned my head to the left. There was some sort of IV in my arm, machines with wires attached to me in various places. It was almost the same as when I'd woken up in the hospital after the car accident; confused, alone, wishing I'd been the one to die instead of someone important to me.

I looked to the right, and my steady breathing hitched. I wasn't alone, this time. Mallory sat at my bedside. Her hands were clasped in her lap and she leaned forward, steely blue-green eyes meeting mine. She looked more disheveled than I'd ever seen her, hair loose and crispy with dried saltwater. At least it looked like she'd been given a change of clothes.

For the first time in days, I felt truly awake. I knew that what was in front of me was real.

"You're awake," Mallory said. I nodded weakly. "Can you speak?"

I swallowed drily, wincing at the soreness, and cleared my throat. "I think so."

Mallory's hands squeezed tighter, and she inhaled deeply. "Tell me the truth."

I did. I told her everything that happened with Emily that day on the cliff. "Even I don't know if I really killed her," I whispered hoarsely. "But I did try to hide her body. I put her in the sea."

Mallory took it all in quietly, calmly. There was a long stretch of silence. Eventually, she asked: "Why?"

"I don't know." I stared at the blank ceiling. "I was scared, I think. I didn't want to face it. I didn't want to believe it. I made myself forget, until now."

Silence again. I looked at Mallory, who stared down at her hands with an indiscernible expression. "Do you regret saving me?" I asked.

Mallory raised her eyes. Now that I thought about it, her eyes were different from Emily's, after all. They were kinder, even though I wouldn't have blamed Mallory if she hated me enough to strangle me herself.

"I don't know," Mallory finally said, rising to her feet. "Maybe I should. But I'm tired of tragedy. I don't want to see anyone else die, even if..." She trailed off, taking a deep breath. "I said I wanted the truth. Now I need to figure out what to do with it."

Mallory left the bedside, disappearing past the yellow-curtained cubicle and leaving me alone. I didn't know if I deserved her mercy, if everyone would be better off without me. But maybe she was right.

After Mallory had gone, I was able to rest. I slept for a long time, and didn't remember a single dream.