

*the
impossibility
of US*

KATY UPPERMAN

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Swoon
READS

Swoon Reads | New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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Matt . . .

*thank you for the idea,
and everything else.*

Don't worry that your life is turning upside down.

How do you know that the side you are used to is
better than the one to come?

—Rumi

elise

On May 1st, a week after my seventeenth birthday, my mother makes an announcement that sends my world spinning.

"We're leaving San Francisco," she says while we sit in the breakfast nook of our Pacific Heights condo, the home in which I've lived for the last fifteen years. She splashes cream into her coffee, then eyes me, charily, over the top of her reading glasses. My jaw might as well be resting on the tabletop. She winces, then a slew of words comes rushing out of her mouth. "Oh, Elise. Before you get upset, let me explain."

"I don't need you to explain," I say, my voice lifting in both volume and pitch. Because I'm already upset—I'm *extremely* upset. "We can't leave San Francisco. Junior year's almost done, and next year—next year's my senior year!"

"I know. And I understand—I do. But, Lissy . . . Audrey and Janie. They need us."

Audrey, my sister-in-law, and Janie, her three-year-old daughter. The list of things I wouldn't do for them is very short.

"Audrey would never ask for help," Mom goes on. "She's too strong.

Too proud. But let me tell you: Single parenthood's not easy. Work and school and Janie . . . She's got so much on her plate, and I miss her. I miss them both, so much."

My icy heart thaws, just a little. "I miss them, too."

"They're only a couple of hours south," she reminds me, spreading cream cheese over her bagel, then mine. Cleverly, she's stretching out the quiet, allowing time for the space behind my ribs to continue warming with sympathy. After another few moments, she says, "Of course you can come back to visit, to see your Pacific Heights friends. And after your senior year, you'll be back in the city anyway, at the San Francisco Art Institute."

Her declarations are flawed at best. Yes, Audrey and Janie live a few hours south, in a tiny coastal village called Cypress Beach, but they might as well be on Saturn—that's how different their town is from my city. Also, my mom knows good and well that I don't have much in the way of Pacific Heights friends; I did a superb job of isolating myself three years ago, after my big brother died. And anyway, I haven't even applied to the San Francisco Art Institute yet, let alone gotten in. What if I don't? What if I never make it back to this city I love?

None of that matters, though. Nor do my absolutely opposing feelings on the subject of changing high schools a year before graduation.

If Audrey and Janie need us in Cypress Beach, we have to go.

I sigh, a resigned sound, and bite into my bagel.

It tastes like cream-cheese-slathered cardboard.

During the next couple of weeks, Mom advertises our condo as available for sublet, collects a mountain of empty boxes from the neighborhood grocery store, and begins to fill them with our earthly treasures. I finish my junior year in a haze of packing paper and Bubble Wrap, dreading the day we're slated to leave.

I love my sister-in-law and niece with astonishing intensity, but I do *not* want to move.

I was born in Manhattan, but we left when I was two, immediately

after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. My dad was (and still is) a workaholic, so consumed by his finance career he was apparently immune to the rising fear that seized New York City after the Twin Towers fell. Mom was not. But they were married and we were a family, so we made the cross-country move as a quartet: Dad, Mom, Nick, and me. Turns out, my dad isn't a fan of the West Coast. He bailed on California (and us) after less than a year.

For me, San Francisco has always been home. It's the city where my brother and I spent countless hours exploring steeply pitched streets, and where I mastered the fundamentals of photography. I conquered public transportation here and came to appreciate the quiet beauty of art museums and to crave soup served in crusty sourdough bowls. I had my first kiss in Lafayette Park.

San Francisco is the city of my heart.

As far as I know, Cypress Beach doesn't have public transportation. It doesn't have art museums. It doesn't have high-rises, or all-night Thai restaurants, or Fisherman's Wharf and its rich chowder, ladled into warm, hollowed-out bread. It doesn't have bustle and midnight sirens and air scented like exhaust and garlic and, sometimes, sewage. It certainly doesn't have memories of Nick.

But Cypress Beach has Audrey and Janie, and so it will have Mom and me.

We roll out of town the day after school lets out.

elise

a

side from the predictable mundaneness of driving down the California coast, house hunting, and unpacking, the last several weeks can only be described as a loneliness-infused shit storm. Without verbalizing an objection or complaint (this move isn't about me—that's been made perfectly clear—so why bother?), I've plummeted through the first three stages of uproot-induced grief (denial, anger, bargaining) and bottomed out at depression, where I'm currently wallowing like a duck in a waning pond.

In an effort to catapult me into that final, glorious, *elusive* phase of acceptance, my mom let me pick paint for my new bedroom—any color on the spectrum. She was less than pleased with my chosen shade, Obsidian, which rolled onto the walls and ceiling like thick tar. Though the silent protest felt good initially, sitting in my deep-space bedroom now isn't doing much to improve my bleak mood.

Here's the thing: Cypress Beach repels teenagers the way citronella repels mosquitoes. After a month, I've made one acquaintance, Iris Higgins, who lives in the cottage next door to ours and is half a century

beyond my age bracket. She's into gardening—like, obsessively into gardening—and she's bananas, in a good way.

My mom worries. She wants me to make friends before school starts (in a month and a half . . . *God*). She's been begging me to attend the New Student Orientation at Cypress Valley High, scheduled for a few weeks from now, and she's constantly dropping not-so-subtle hints about my needing to spend more time in town, at the coffee shop or the one-screen movie theater or the library, because those are places cool kids hang out, apparently.

Two weeks ago, in a last-ditch effort if ever there was one, she surprised me with a corkscrew-haired mess of a pup who gallops around our cottage on feet she's yet to grow into and chews table legs like they're made of rawhide.

Her name is Bambi, and I love her.

She's the reason I'm out now, at the crack of dawn, trudging down the dog-friendly beach that runs parallel to our dog-friendly town, holding a slobber-soaked tennis ball between two fingers. She's tearing around up ahead, a honey-colored ball of fluff, scaring seagulls with her ferocious *woof, woof!*

"Bambi!"

She skids to a halt, kicking up sand, swishing her tail like it's a whip. She looks at me with big cocoa eyes, trusting and adoring and expectant. I chuck her ball into the waves, exactly as she wants, and she leaps after it, crashing into the cold water like it's her job—which I guess it is. She's a goldendoodle, a golden retriever crossed with a standard poodle, a designer dog my mom undoubtedly paid too much for because the newest member of the Parker clan had to be hypoallergenic. Bambi has *hair*, not *fur*, because my niece, Janie, inherited allergies from her mama. Janie's the one who branded my dog with her name, actually, a nod to the clumsy Disney deer.

She springs out of the Pacific, neon ball clamped between her jaws, and dashes at me, sailing over mounds of slippery, stinky kelp that have washed onto the beach with the tide. She pulls to a halt just short of

my shins, dropping her disgusting ball at my feet. She shakes, a slo-mo, full-body convulsion, and I scramble to block my camera from the drops of water that go flying. I should be annoyed—I'm wet now, and the morning is gray and windy, not exactly summer-balmy—but it's impossible to be frustrated with Bambi. She is at all times obliviously joyful.

I bend to scratch her wet head, and she paws the sand with an ungainly puppy paw. "Again?" I ask in the falsetto I reserve for her and Janie.

We go through the motions another dozen times. Me, hurling the drool-drenched ball into the surf. Bambi, chasing and swimming and splashing, coming to me time and again to seek a pat and another throw.

We've got the beach pretty much to ourselves. Central California doesn't get much of a summer—not on the coast, anyway. We're lucky if the fog burns off in time to catch the sunset. Thanks to so many years spent in San Francisco, I'm used to the dreariness, but somehow it was more tolerable there, haze hovering over asphalt and structures of steel and glass. Here, where building code dictates no property should rise above three stories, the constant mist feels thick and oppressive, like a damp wool blanket.

Bambi and I walk farther down the stretch of sand, playing our endless game. As much as I hate getting up early, and as much as I dislike living in tiny Cypress Beach, I've come to look forward to these mornings with my new dog. So much so, I bring my Nikon to photograph the waves and the gulls and her. It's risky, what with her shake-off showers, but worth it. I'm snapping yet another picture, Bambi bouncing over a knoll, when movement up ahead catches my attention.

I lower my camera, letting it hang from the woven strap around my neck. Absently, I toss the tennis ball, not so far this time, because I'm watching a tall figure move down the beach. He's a ways south, but I can tell he's somewhere near my age—a small miracle in this town.

He's wearing dark track pants and a hooded sweatshirt, and his hair's black, standing out in sharp contrast to the pale sand.

He strides into the surf, fully clothed.

The air is cool and crisp, and the ocean is *frigid*. He's up to his knees when a white-capped wave breaks hard against his middle, driving him back a few steps. I expect him to wade out, back to the beach, but he presses forward, undeterred, immersing his lower half completely. He uses his hands against the surging breakers like he thinks he can control them, like he's unaware of the water's absolute power.

I'm no fearmonger—that's more in keeping with my mom's personality—but the Pacific's scary along this strip of the coast. I've seen surfers in dry suits, but unless you've got a board, this isn't a swimming beach. Thanks to the California Current, the water's bitter cold and the undertows are unreal. There are sharks, too. Big ones, which normally feed on harbor seals and sea lions, but are probably ravenous for breakfast at the moment and would likely settle for a nice big bite of boy.

"Hey!" I call as he moves farther into the swells. Stupid, because there's no way he can hear me over the wind and the waves.

What he's doing . . . It's *so* unsafe.

Without a second thought, I take off in his direction, clutching my camera so it doesn't knock against my chest. Bambi chases me, nipping at my heels.

He's up to his shoulders when I reach the dragging footsteps he left in the sand. I watch him jump as waves distend, then advance beyond him in a race for the beach. His head bobs the way Bambi's ball does after landing in the surf. If he goes any deeper, he could be sucked out to sea.

"Hey!" I scream again, waving my arms.

He doesn't hear me, or doesn't want to, because he pushes off and paddles farther out.

He's an adrenaline-seeking dumbass, or he's suicidal.

I keep my eyes on his dark hair and peel off my sweatshirt, trying

not to strangle myself with my camera's strap in the process. I toss it into the sand and take half a second to wrap my Nikon in its fabric, praying my beloved camera doesn't get stolen or lost to an aggressive wave.

Then I bolt into the ocean.

elise

i lose my breath immediately.

The water is millions of sharp pins sinking into my flesh. The breakers are powerful, but I battle them, keeping my eyes trained on the boy. Distantly, I hear Bambi's distressed barking. I spare a quick glance over my shoulder as I slog through the deepening water; she's still on the shore, hopping around. Silly dog will follow her ball into the water, but not me.

Again, I shout at the boy.

Again, no response.

Death wish, I think. And then: *Me, too*.

By the time I reach him, a good thirty yards offshore, I'm numb. My teeth are chattering and I'm not calling out anymore because my tongue's immovable. Treading to keep my head above water, I make a grab for his shoulder. He wrenches his head around and I realize, too late, that I've startled him. He jerks out of my grip.

"I'm trying to help you!" My voice is scratchy and my throat feels raked over.

He shakes his head. *No.*

"You can't be out here—it's dangerous!"

As if to illustrate my point, a rogue wave crashes over our heads. The current yanks me deeper . . . deeper . . . deeper. I'm blinded by salt water and so disoriented my arms flail outward. My hands grapple for something solid, something to help me right myself. I'm panicking—I'm a millisecond from opening my mouth to a deep breath of cold water—but then my feet touch the seafloor. My toes curl into the murky sand. I bend my knees and shove off.

My head breaks the surface and I gasp for air. I'm choking, coughing, sputtering, and my eyes sting. I blink to clear the salt from them, and then I'm searching, kicking to keep my head above water.

He's . . . nowhere.

I whip around, terrified I've lost him, this stranger I never had in the first place.

My heart turns over when his head surfaces to my left and just out of reach. I lunge for his sleeve, and my fingers close around a handful of cotton. I yank him close, then grab for his submerged hand. It wraps around mine. He uses his other to swipe water from his face, retching and hacking, pulling in air.

"We have to get back to the beach!"

He looks at me, confused and afraid and *lost*. His raven hair is plastered to his forehead, and his skin is olive, clear with the exception of a few days of dark stubble. His eyes are arresting, fiery amber, contrary to his darkness. He appears . . . not Californian. Maybe not American. God, what if he doesn't speak English?

I gesture to the beach, treading hard to keep my head from slipping beneath the waves. "Safe-ty," I holler, enunciating the syllables in a way that might be offensive, whether he's foreign or not.

He nods, still clinging to my hand.

I force my tired legs to kick, towing him along with me. He's kicking, too, but our progress is frustratingly slow. I try not to think about rip currents and sharks. I try not to think about hypothermia. I try not

to think about the stranger who's hanging on to my hand—who he is or where he came from or what the hell he was thinking when he traipsed into the ocean.

I try not to think about how I nearly drowned attempting to help him.

I focus on Bambi, running back and forth where the waves kiss the beach, woofing and howling and carrying on. When I'm shallow enough to put my feet down and tug my hand free of the boy's, she comes paddling out to swim happy circles around me. As soon as I'm clear of the surf, she takes off, jaunting down the beach, probably in search of her ball now that I'm available to throw it again.

I drag myself to the place where I left my camera and sweatshirt. My muscles are weak and my mouth tastes brackish. Years ago, my brother dumped table salt in my apple juice, just to see how I'd react; I threw up, which is exactly what I want to do now. I'm tired deep in my bones, and residually horrified. I've never been so close to dying.

How would Mom get by without me?

I shake off a torrent of sadness and turn to look for Bambi, to call her back so we can go home, where I'll shower off the salt and crawl into bed, where I'll sleep the day away beneath my soft patchwork quilt.

When I wake, this morning will be a distant memory.

I turn to find Bambi, but instead I find the boy—the idiot boy who wandered into the ocean fully clothed. He's an arm's length away, towering over me, water dripping from his coal-black hair, wildfire eyes searching my face.

I look at him, and I can't look away.

MATI

She is beautiful like shattered glass—
sharp, asymmetrical, unique.

She is soaked in seawater,
and smells of salt.
She is shades of pomegranate and peach.
She struggles to breathe,
as if the air is mud-thick,
too viscous to inhale.

I know the feeling.

She is exhausted, because of me.
My swim-gone-wrong.
My naiveté, my foolishness.

She falls, falls, falls to the ground,
nestling into the sand like a seashell.

She peers up at me,
eyes hard, expression hostile.
She wants me to go.

Instead, I sink down to sit beside her.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” she rasps.
“You could have drowned!”

She could have drowned,
and I would have been responsible.

She wrings the ocean from her long ponytail,
then pulls her shirt, drenched and transparent,
from where it clings.
I am tired and I am troubled,
but I am mesmerized by her movements—
I am mesmerized by *her*.

She glares, flagrant, and I shrink into myself.
I avert my gaze; my face sizzles with shame.

A dog bounds over—her dog.
It is discordantly cheerful,
covered in wet, wheat-colored curls.
It licks salty water from her face.
She gives its head an amiable pat,
while scowling at me.

Finally, she snaps, “You’re welcome.”

As if I have thanked her.

I should. I should say *something*.
Instead, I shiver against harsh wind,
and commit her features to memory.

She is a heart-shaped mouth.
She is slick caramel hair.
She is bottomless brown eyes.
Even in anger, she is dazzling.

elise

i throw my sweatshirt over my wet tank top (my white, see-through, no-wonder-he's-staring, thank-God-I'm-wearing-a-sports-bra tank top), clip Bambi's leash to her collar, shoulder my camera, and literally pound sand.

He never says a word.

At home, I give Bambi a once-over with an old beach towel, then stand in the shower under a blast of hot water until my skin's no longer gooseflesh. I throw on jeans and a T-shirt that bears a growling tiger, my old high school's mascot, then twist my hair into a knot at the crown of my head. Racked by a lingering chill, I shuffle into the kitchen for coffee. My mom's made a pot, a vanilla blend that's still steaming. I retrieve my favorite mug from the cupboard, a lumpy, oversize atrocity my brother spun in his high school pottery class. I pour coffee and sweeten it before wrapping my cold hands around the warm ceramic.

"Elise?" Mom, from down the hall.

I make my way to the tiny space that branches off her bedroom, the one she insists on referring to as her *library* because she's

pretentious that way. She's not a writer or even an author—she's a *novelist*. Our dog is a *companion*. The many multicolored book spines that line her shelves are a *mélange*.

She's sitting at her desk, a refinished secretary littered with file folders and pens and research materials. She writes pantie-melting romances set on the western frontier and, bizarre as it sounds, she's a household name within her literary niche. Over her desk there's a wall-spanning collage of her book jackets, matted and framed, images of ladies with barrel-curved hair and bustled dresses posing with rugged men who've lost their shirts but managed to retain their cowboy hats. She hung those jackets the night we moved in, inspiration for her latest manuscript, one she sold on proposal, the first in more than three years.

"How was your walk?" she asks, swiveling around to face me.

"Eventful." I sink into the overstuffed reading chair that occupies one corner of the room and smile at the sight of Bambi, passed out on her flannel doggy pillow.

"How so?"

I sip coffee, gauging how much I can divulge without instigating an anxiety attack. "There was this guy at the beach. He went into the water."

Mom's brow crinkles. "He was swimming?"

"I guess? He was wearing his clothes, which was weird. The surf was crazy. He might've gotten into trouble if I hadn't..."

Her eyes have gone Frisbee wide. "If you hadn't *what*?"

I fidget. I swallow more coffee. In a minuscule voice I say, "If I hadn't helped him."

"Elise Parker, tell me you didn't go into the ocean."

"I didn't go into the ocean," I say obediently.

She glances at Bambi, who raises her head as if to counter with, *Oh, she did*.

Mom looks back at me. "You're a terrible liar."

"But I'm a good swimmer." It's true. The summer before I went into

third grade, Nick and I spent hours at the pool in our neighborhood, where he taught me the crawl stroke, how to dive, and how to tread water. I'm practically a mermaid.

"Doesn't matter. Nobody's a good swimmer in those currents. Who was this guy?"

"No idea. I didn't stay to chat. He was . . . odd."

She pushes her reading glasses up her nose. "Maybe I should walk Bambi with you from now on."

"I'm fine, Mom. Besides, mornings are your writing time." It was the move to Cypress Beach that reignited her fire. She's not only writing in the mornings; she's been working all day, well into the night, sometimes. Now that she's under contract again, she seems almost happy. "And anyway, you've been bugging me to get out and meet new people. That's what I did."

"Still, you shouldn't be wandering around on your own."

"Please. *Cypress Beach: Where Old, Rich People Come to Die*. That slogan's carved into the welcome sign—surprised you didn't notice when we cruised past. Besides, I've got my vicious guard dog to keep me safe."

Mom heaves a sigh, but her mouth turns up in a slight smile. "Promise you'll stay on the beach and out of the water?"

"But what if my life's calling is to save foolish people who wander into the ocean?"

She meets my gaze, solemn now. "What if you get hurt? What if . . . ?"

What if I die? Like my brother.

"I can't do it again, Lissy," she says, her voice soft, quavering a little. "Losing Nick is the worst I've been through. If something happened to you . . ."

"I know," I say, and I do. Nick died at twenty, tragically young. I was fourteen. Janie, his daughter, was a wrinkly faced newborn; he'd only seen pictures of her, sent as email attachments by Audrey. My mom isn't over his death—I'm not sure any of us ever will be—though she's

doing better. She adores Janie, and she's gathered Audrey neatly into the Parker family fold. But she still worries. She still what-ifs.

"Please stay out of the water, Elise."

"I will." To seal my promise, I lean forward, passing her my half-full mug.

She sips, then, thankfully, changes the subject. "What are you up to later?"

"Hanging out with my slew of friends, obviously."

She frowns. She looks tired and older. I feel bad for making her worry.

"And by friends," I amend, "I mean Janie and Audrey. We're going to the park on Raspberry Street. Want to come?"

"Can't," she says, glowering at her computer. The first draft of her book is due to her editor in a month and a half, just before I start my senior year at (terrifyingly unfamiliar) Cypress Valley High. "Rain check?"

I push out of my chair. "Definitely. I've got photos to edit until then. I'll fix us lunch before I go, okay?"

"Thanks, Lissy." She moves to hand me my coffee mug.

"Keep it," I tell her. "You're on deadline."

elise

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he park on Raspberry Street is straight out of any fanciful kid's dreams. It's a huge wooden castle, with slides and turrets and a drawbridge that swings creakily anytime someone runs across it. Janie is in heaven.

She's dressed in pink: tutu, hoodie, miniature cowgirl boots, with a glittery bow pinning her wispy hair off her face. She's the cutest—blue eyes, blond hair, perpetually golden skin—one of those kids who could be in commercials, if her equally beautiful mama was into all that.

Audrey sits on one of the benches surrounding the playground, reading from a thick textbook. She's working on an early-childhood development degree, though with everything else she's got going on, it's taking her forever. She spends a few nights a week waitressing for big tips at Camembert, one of Cypress Beach's fanciest restaurants (my mom and I have been sharing babysitting duties since we moved here), and weekday mornings, she works at the local preschool (where Janie tags along and scores a free education). Every so often, she glances up to watch her little girl take a trip down the coiled slide.

While Janie plays, I snap a million pictures. Normally, I choose inanimate objects as subjects—architecture, the seashore, and cemeteries, lately—but my niece and my dog are exceptions. Their jubilation is inspiring.

Janie scampers into the grass surrounding the playground. I follow, but at a distance, because I like to see where her imagination takes her. I snap a few shots as she stoops, teetering in her boots, to pluck a dandelion from the lawn. She examines its head, gone to seed, running a finger over the white fluff. She turns to me, holding it out. “Look, Auntie.”

I lower my camera and crouch down beside her. “These are seeds,” I say, pointing. “When the wind blows, they scatter. They make new flowers wherever they land.” I almost say *new weeds* but catch myself. Janie doesn’t see weeds; she sees beauty and believes in magic. “Do you know what your daddy and I used to do with these?”

She shakes her head, wide-eyed. She loves when I tell her stories about Nick.

“We’d pretend to be the wind. We’d take big breaths, then blow the seeds. But the best part is, we’d make wishes every time. Then, when the seeds made new flowers, our wishes would come true.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Want to try?”

She nods earnestly.

“Think of a wish—something really good.” I glance over at her mama and drop my voice, as if I’ve got a special secret. “Like, maybe you could wish for cookies. When I was little, I almost always wished for cookies.”

“Daddy, too?”

I have no idea what Nick wished for. I never asked, and I’ll never get to.

I swallow around the stone of regret wedged in my throat. “Yep. Daddy, too.”

“Okay,” she says. “You blow the seeds, too, Auntie.”

We scatter dandelion fluff like gusts of wind, setting countless seeds to the breeze. We make a lot of wishes.

After, we head to the bakery for drinks and cookies. Janie gives me a conspiratorial look as we walk through the glass doors, and I wink.

Van Dough's sits in the center of town, surrounded by galleries and boutiques and touristy T-shirt shops. Cypress Beach is one of those off-the-beaten-path vacation spots frequented by Californians seeking a break from the bustle of big-city life. Though I'd never been here prior to the move, I'd formed a vague impression of its lifestyle: a charming town where the privileged flock to piss away enormous disposable incomes. It'd never occurred to me that there were actual residents in Cypress Beach, people who live in the delightful cottages and work in the restaurants and specialty shops. People with average incomes, who stroll the sidewalks year-round, like Audrey and Janie, and now, Mom and me.

Aud and I order iced teas and almond madeleines, and Janie picks a huge shortbread cookie with pink icing and sugar sprinkles. We sit on high stools at the counter that runs the length of the storefront widow, Janie in the middle, attacking her cookie.

"Unpacked yet?" Audrey asks me, breaking her madeleine in two.

"Mostly. My mom got sick of the boxes in my room and took pity on me." In fact, she unpacked everything but my vintage camera collection, which I lovingly arranged on the shelves built into the nooks on either side of my window.

"Please tell me you repainted your walls." Aud shudders. "*Obsidian*. Only you, Elise."

"What? I am a sunny person."

"Maybe, but you're also into expression, and you make snap decisions, and you like to prove your point in really passive-aggressive ways."

"I do not!" But I do, sometimes. I'm sour about the move, but I'd never complain to my mom or my sister-in-law, so I chose black paint

to demonstrate my spite. Joke's on me, though, because I'm the one who's stuck suffering. "I picked Obsidian because I thought it'd make my bedroom seem like a darkroom."

"But you process all your stuff digitally." She sips her tea, raising a graceful pinky. She's blond and blue-eyed, like Janie, and she's got this cool, effortlessly boho style: flowy floral dresses or bell-bottomed jeans and tunics, always with silver jewelry. She never wears makeup because *bare is best*—she actually said that to me once, while watching me coat my lashes in mascara. "You should've picked yellow or aqua," she says, like she's studying to be an interior designer instead of a teacher.

"Or pink," Janie says through a mouthful of cookie.

Audrey nods. "Pink would've been perfect. Janie and I can help you repaint, if you want."

"No thanks. The black suits me fine. In fact, I think it offsets my sunniness."

Aud rolls her eyes.

I'm not ready to admit I was wrong about Obsidian, though I wouldn't mind spending the time repainting with them. Audrey and Janie have lived in Cypress Beach for the last year and a half, after a move that caught my mom and me completely by surprise. Aud grew up in the city like my brother and me; she and Nick met their freshman year of high school and were instant sweethearts. Even back then, when I was nine-ten-eleven, I recognized how in love they were. How they complemented each other.

As soon as they graduated, they announced their engagement. Audrey's always-apatetic parents shrugged the pending nuptials off, but my mom threw a fit. It wasn't that she didn't love Aud—she just wanted more for Nick. Degree, career, savings account, and *then* marriage. He wasn't having it, though. They argued even after the City Hall wedding, disagreements that escalated quickly and seemed infinite. Nick was eighteen, jobless and skill-less, and Aud was waiting tables at a dingy cafe in Nob Hill. They were living in his bedroom. My mom

cried the day he enlisted in the army, her long-dormant fears regarding Islamic extremists reawakening.

After basic and skills training, Nick was assigned to a civil affairs brigade at Fort Bragg, and he and Audrey moved to North Carolina. They were nineteen, and she was pregnant almost immediately. A few months later, Nick deployed to Afghanistan. Aud was a mess, isolated and emotional and hormonal, and thanks in part to my alarmist mother, she was also *terrified*.

It was like she knew—like she sensed she'd never see him again.

Just before Nick's remains were interred at Sacramento Valley National Cemetery, Audrey and baby Janie returned to San Francisco. They stayed with Mom and me, in my brother's bedroom. But it was too hard, Aud explained when she broke the news that she and Janie were leaving the city—leaving *us*. She wanted a fresh start. She wanted to live in a place that wasn't saturated with memories of Nick, where every park, every street corner, every landmark wasn't a kick to the gut.

"Cypress Beach," she said. She and Nick had visited for a weekend after they were married, a sort of mini-honeymoon. "It's special, but it's not San Francisco. I think Janie and I could be happy there."

They've made a life for themselves and I'm glad, but at the same time, I wish my brother could be a part of it. It doesn't seem fair that Audrey and Janie—and now Mom and me—get to live in this lovely sea-side community when he can't. Our world, no matter how beautiful, no matter how fulfilling, will forever feel off-kilter because Nicky was taken from it.

"How's your mom settling in?" Audrey asks now.

"Good, I think. She says the ocean air's doing wonders for her creativity."

"We're so glad you guys came. I know the timing's not ideal for you with school and everything, but having you here . . . It's like having a piece of Nick back."

I shrug. "I got a dog out of the deal, so there's that."

Aud shakes her head, biting her lip to hide a smile. "You can never be serious, can you?"

"Sure I can." I make a churlish face and tickle Janie. She giggles and squirms, scattering cookie crumbs over her tutu, flaunting the dimple she inherited from my brother. I help her brush the crumbs from her lap before movement out the window catches my eye, and all the merriment's knocked clean out of me.

The boy from the beach.

The tall, dark boy I hauled from the ocean a few hours ago, walking down the sidewalk in jeans and a burgundy T-shirt. His hair's dry now, short on the sides, longer on top, and his eyes reflect the sun's light as he speaks to the woman he's with. She's old enough to be his mother, wearing loose-fitting khaki pants and an indigo blouse, her hair tucked under a silky scarf. They're carrying two grocery bags apiece.

It's difficult to tear my attention from the boy's angular face, his graceful gait, his scrupulous half smile. His presence tugs at me, like there's an invisible thread spanning the space between us. The same thread that kept me from turning my back when he walked into the waves this morning.

"What are you staring at?" Audrey asks. She leans forward to follow my gaze, then groans with unmistakable disgust—*ugghhh*. I turn away from the strangers outside to focus on my sister-in-law. Her eyes hurl daggers through the window, and she's crumbling her madeleine to pieces.

"You okay?" I ask.

She looks resentful, jarringly so, but she shakes it off like it's nothing—like I don't know exactly what she's thinking about the tawny-skinned boy and his scarfed companion.

"I'm fine," she says. She kisses the top of Janie's head, as if the contact tethers her to the here and now.

When I look out the window again, the boy and the woman have disappeared.