

UNLEAVING

Melissa Ostrom



Feiwei and Friends

New York

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK
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For my friends

1

IN THE SEPTEMBER of her nineteenth year, Maggie Arioli did not cover a slender mattress with an extra-long fitted sheet. She did not thrill over the single dorm room her sophomore status at Carlton College would have won her. She did not buy expensive textbooks. She did not lug books or anything else down campus sidewalks shadowed by trees, their leaves green but leaning toward gold. She did not admire the elegant marble pillars or trust the keepers of the columned edifices to edify her, shape and improve her, deepen her like a well and then fill her with wishes. She did not sidle between young men or young women or gaze up at the mountains of two ranges. She did not walk by McCullers Hall, with its white cupola, or the Stanton Center and its bell tower. She did not visit the musty quiet of Swan Library. She did not enter the electric sparseness of a classroom.

She prepared to leave the valley, put the mountains behind her, and stay with her mother's sister, Aunt Wren, in New York, not the city but the state, a western portion and probably, in general, an infrequently imagined place. The aunt, whose artwork entailed communications with larger, livelier worlds, said as much to her niece during the awkward phone conversation when the arrangements were made ("for your sabbatical," as Maggie's mother had lightly coined it).

"It feels like an apology," Aunt Wren had said, "clarifying not the city, the *state*, pointing out the seven-hour distance between my version of New York and other people's. I'm between Rochester and Buffalo, I'll say. Then it's: Oh. Where it snows so much. That's what we've got—weather."

As if to prove it, from nine in the morning until three-thirty in the afternoon, the span of the September trip, rain fell with increasing violence. Through the initial sprinkle, as her mother drove, Maggie mentally said good-bye to Vermont—Carlton, in particular, not just her college town but her hometown. She was half-mournful. The other half of her: *Fuck this place. I never want to see this fucking town again.*

Scotia. Amsterdam. Green interstate signs, alternately Something-Spa and Something-Falls, signaled her and Mom's proximity to Saratoga destinations. Their route took them close to a hillside town over a river. Dark buildings, severe and brick and incongruously ruffled with gingerbread trim, sat blank-windowed on their craggy inclines above the brown water, like hopeless giants reduced to their lace-edged underwear and contemplating death by drowning. New York, Maggie decided, was bleak and ugly.

Then suddenly, the mountains disappeared. Just like that. The earth flattened. She couldn't see what was coming. She couldn't see what she'd left behind. What she saw was sky, and rain filled it.

Bleak and ugly and *flat*.

The weather worsened after Syracuse. Her mother, leaning forward, gripped the steering wheel with both hands. Like a thundercloud, her dusky hair had answered the moisture in the air with threatening billows, a surge in frizz and curls. She usually would have remedied the anarchy with a hairband and ponytail, but this morning, she didn't seem to notice, not even when she glanced in the rearview mirror. She changed lanes, flexed her hands, and rolled her neck.

"Want me to drive for a while?" Maggie dabbed at her hair. Similarly huge.

"In a storm?" Mom shook her head. Woods lined both sides of the thruway, and the trees drooped in the rain. "Too much of this, and we won't have a pretty fall. It will ruin the foliage."

"Yeah." Good. Maggie pictured her old campus sopping, the leaves ripped off the branches and plastered to the ground. Maybe Carlton College would flood. An apocalyptic deluge.

They got off Interstate 90 at Exit 45 and took I-490 into Rochester. The highway became a dizzying loop that wound around skyscrapers, billboards, river, and stadium. Mom attended to the GPS with the concentration of someone expecting to get lost. Which could happen. She had only a hazy idea of where they were going. Aunt Wren was Mom's twin but, for three decades, more of a distant acquaintance. The aunt had gotten out of Carlton at eighteen, almost as soon as she'd tossed aside the tasseled

graduation cap. Her trouble had been with their parents, not her sister, but Mom had never shared Wren's contention with their folks. That difference of opinion had landed Maggie's mother in the disowned camp, until last October, when poor Grandma and Gramps died in a car accident. Mom and Aunt Wren had talked more since then.

Maggie eased back and closed her eyes. She ordered her body to relax.

Cut it out. Grab her hands, Matt. Fucking relax, okay?

Her eyes flew open.

"Lake Ontario Parkway's up ahead. Won't be long now." The traffic had trickled off. Though lightning split the sky and the windshield wipers' speedy sluice could barely keep up with the downpour, Mom exhaled and smiled a little. "Go ahead and take a nap. I can figure out the rest."

Maggie frowned. What was her mother talking about? She hadn't played navigator once.

The implication was nice, though. Her mere presence helping, comforting.

She closed her eyes again, willed her brain shut, too. She didn't sleep. Couldn't. Hardly ever anymore. It was like she'd lost the knack.

Aunt Wren lived at the dead end of a dirt road called Ash Drive. A generous person might have called the place rustic. However, holding open a screen door patched with duct tape, Aunt Wren, herself, hollered through the heavy rain, "Welcome to the shack!" and beckoned with a wave.

Maggie stared at the aunt. This could be no other than the

aunt. She looked just like Mom but also (in the severe haircut, threadbare jeans and flannel, and unmade-up face) totally different. Bizarro Mom.

From inside the car, Maggie's mother smiled nervously and raised a hand. She had her car door cracked, but instead of leaping out with her own shout of greeting, she scanned the property and murmured in hollow astonishment, "Holy crap. What a . . ." The smile looked ready to collapse. "I'm just not sure about this, honey."

This: the aunt's unpainted hovel; Lake Ontario, like a molten metal beast gnawing the pebbly shore that crept all the way up to the porch's crooked steps; the woods on the other side, black and grim and wet; and the yard, oozing mud and collecting puddles, the entire surface looking diseased, covered with lesions and sores.

Mom took a deep breath, like a person preparing to dive into the sea, shot out, and slammed her door. Running in a crouched position, head bowed, arms awning her hair, she zigzagged around the reddish pools that bubbled in the torrent.

Maggie clumsily got out of the car and shut the door. Thunder cracked. Startled, she jumped, lost her footing on the slick ground, and almost fell. "*Shit.*" Lightning illuminated the lake. It was an arresting sight, like electricity galvanizing a monster. Maggie hurried toward the porch, keeping her eyes on the muck and sand.

Mom and Aunt Wren had disappeared into the house, and when Maggie entered and shoved the wet hair from her eyes, she found the sisters, laughing and crying at the same time, embracing and rocking together and saying in bursts of emotion, "My

God, you look just like Mom,” and “I do? Then you do, too,” and “Can you believe it, Min? Fifty. When did we get so old?”

The kitchen was plain—no fancy appliances, not even doors on the cupboards—but big, clean, and fragrant with yeasted bread and damp wood. A pendant lamp hung over a farm table. The copper pots above the stove echoed this single source of light and gave the room the warm hue of a polished penny.

A noisy penny. Rain pinged overhead, indicating a metal roof, and thunder rumbled. Behind the crying, laughing, roof tapping, and sky rumbling, something else added to the racket, a regular shattering from a distant corner of the cabin.

It was like standing inside a percussion instrument.

Aunt Wren pulled away from Mom and nodded at Maggie. She swiped her face with a red plaid sleeve. Then her face—heart-shaped, big-eyed, long-nosed, eerily like Mom’s—softened. The sweetening of the expression prepared Maggie for something like a hug, so when the aunt abruptly turned and shouted over her shoulder, “Jesus Christ, Sam, will you give it a fucking rest? I’ve got company here,” Maggie actually flinched. Her back hit the screen door. It swung open and banged shut.

The aunt flared her eyes and shook her head. “Sorry about Sam. He’s mad and taking it out on the rejects.” She made a swiping motion, as if explaining would be a waste of time.

Steadying herself with a hand on a chair, Mom untied her sneakers and introduced her daughter and sister. Then Maggie found her right hand captured and squeezed and patted like a ball of dough.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Margaret.” Over her shoulder, Aunt Wren said, “She’s got our hair.”

“And frame.”

Aunt Wren raised the kneaded hand, as if to lengthen out Maggie and improve the view. She hummed agreement. “More hair and legs than anything.”

“But her dad’s brown eyes.”

The aunt grunted. “*Him.*” To Maggie, she said, “You can keep the Bambi eyes, but nothing else from that one, you hear?”

“Poor Jim. God—since high school!—you’ve had it out for poor Jim.” Mom pulled a band from her pocket and drew her hair into a ponytail. “The nicest guy and the best of fathers.”

Bor-ing, Aunt Wren silently mouthed, dragging a wry smile out of Maggie. “An accountant.” She announced this flatly, as if the profession said it all. With a final squeeze and slap on the knuckles, she released Maggie. “What’s first? Want to change into something dry? Are you tired?” She planted her hands on her narrow hips. “You’ve got bags under your eyes. A nap sound good? You can put on your pajamas. Or take a bath. Want to take a hot bath? Or eat? I made soup and bread. How about a tour? Want the ten-second grand tour? The best part’s outside, but you brought a storm with you, so that’ll have to wait.” While Maggie was deciding which question to answer first, the aunt asked, “What do you think, Minerva?” Her mouth curled at a corner. “Goddess of wisdom. Patron sponsor of the arts.” To Maggie, she said, “Minerva. Can you believe that shit? And here *I’m* the one with the artistic talent.”

“Jeez,” Mom moaned through a laugh. “Let’s not start that up again.”

The aunt collected the wet jackets and hung them by the door. “She got Minerva, and I got Wren—a common little brown bird.”

“With a beautiful song.”

As if Mom hadn't spoken, the aunt said to Maggie, “You can see from the start our folks weren't big on fairness.”

Mom's smile wilted. She held a shoe in each hand. “That's not true.”

“Says the favorite.”

“According to you. For heaven's sake, it hasn't even been a year since they passed. Have a little respect.”

“Respect would be hard.”

“They didn't love me any more than they did you.”

“Want some evidence to prove otherwise?”

“Oh, please.”

But the evidence. Where's the evidence? Until the police release their statements . . . Maggie shuddered, pressed her hands to her ears, and ordered herself, *Don't*.

Aunt Wren, poised to snap a retort, glanced at Maggie. She covered her mouth.

Mom gave the slightest shake of her head. “Show us around.”

“Good idea. This way. Then you can wash up while I throw together a salad. We'll eat and get you to bed early.”

The glimmer of the kitchen died in the gloom of the windowless hallway. Dazed, Maggie trailed her mother. The aunt led the way through the cabin, narrating as she went: “Note the wide-plank pine floors, all carefully preserved with the original dents and gouges” and “Even the paint on the walls is antique, totally authentic.”

Maggie tried to focus on her surroundings. They trudged into the living room. Rippling gray and blinking whitecaps filled the windows. Back in the hallway, the aunt swung open a door. It was

her bedroom. The woods stood close to this side of the cabin and threw its shade, like an extra blanket, over the small space. The bathroom came next. Mom oohed and aahed at the sight of the claw-foot tub and pedestal sink, then Aunt Wren nodded instructively at an opposite door in the hallway (“Linen closet”), a second door (“Studio”), and patted a bannister. Maggie looked up. The staircase was so narrow and steep, it hardly qualified as a staircase. More like a ladder.

“I’ve only got two bedrooms,” Aunt Wren said, “one below and one above. You’re up there, Margaret. In the loft.”

Mom, determinedly chipper, said, “Wow. The whole second story—all yours.”

“Go on,” the aunt said. “Take a look. Watch your step. That one’s cracked. Keep meaning to have Sam fix it. No, check the right side. Feel the switch?”

“*Ouch.*” Maggie rubbed her head.

“Whoops. Sorry about that. You don’t want to straighten there.”

Maggie found the switch. And for the first time in a long while, she experienced a stirring of pleasure. The room was . . . something else. She shuffled away from the light switch, half-bent until she got to the peaked portion.

The space spanned the length of the cabin and held the warm redolence peculiar to attics. Its wooden floors, whitewashed walls, and sparse furnishings—just a dresser, a bedside table, and, positioned under three abutted windows, a quilt-covered bed—were made homey by the pitched ceiling. The room was all roof, and it pinged softly. The rain must have let up.

The short wall to Maggie’s right held drawers; the wall on the

left, embedded shelves, crammed with novels. But the windows perfected the loft. The ones close to the staircase overlooked the trees, blackish green in the gray afternoon, except where early autumn streaked the canopy with ochre. The room was like a nest. No, grander: an aerie. She crossed to the windows over the bed, where the lake roiled. Now it was the lookout on the mast of a ship.

In her breast, she experienced a tightening—a flicker. Maybe she could do better than just hide here.

When she returned to where the women waited at the foot of the stairs, Maggie gripped the bannister and bit the inside of her lip to stop a tremble. “Thanks, Aunt Wren.” She cleared her throat. “I like it.”

The aunt cracked the studio door and stuck her head in the opening. “Sam? We’re coming in, okay?” She sidled forward and held the door to her side, like one blocking a view into a dressing room.

“Fine.” A wealth of not-being-fine crammed into the syllable.

The aunt hesitated. “Where’s Kate?”

“With Dad.”

Her fingers, curled around the edge of the door, fluttered a tap. “Linnie?”

Clank, clatter, thud. “Take a good guess.” A stomping crescendo. Then, closer to Aunt Wren: “Don’t tell Dad, okay?”

She shrugged, noncommittal and disapproving, then widened the door with her foot. “Meet Sam, my assistant.”

Mom cautiously greeted him.

He offered a dispirited “Hey.”

Maggie drew herself in with crossed arms. She scanned the miserable Sam in one glance. He was maybe two or three years older than her and dark in expression and features.

He headed for a rumbling room off the end, saying without turning, “Got the pug mill going.”

When Mom, smiling and wide-eyed, stood between the kiln and the potter’s wheel, she clasped her hands under her chin and did a slow spin, like a Broadway actress gearing up for a solo. “This is so neat!”

Her aunt grimaced. “Filthy. It could use a mopping.”

The studio, a stubby wing off the building, turned the cabin into a squat T. It *was* dusty but very bright, almost fantastically so, and not just because of the lighting overhead. If the kitchen was a penny, the studio was a silver dollar—kilns, wheels, giant roller, shelves, worktable, scale, tools, all in gleaming metal. Then stacked and crowded under and over a long counter were finished ceramic pieces, vibrantly glazed in combinations of dark blue, sea green, speckled cream, thick fog, ruby red. Maggie wanted to see the studio on a sunny day. It had to shimmer.

Mom crouched by a shelf of pots. “Oh, I like this one a lot.” She grazed a teapot with a fingertip and straightened. “Where are your sculptures?”

“Yes. Where *are* your sculptures?” The assistant was standing in the doorway of the noisy back room, swinging a kind of wire and eyeing his employer.

“Galleries, mostly.”

Mom looked disappointed. “Nothing new?”

The aunt turned. “Not really.” She lightly touched one of the

dozen pots on the worktable—tall jars, still ragged at their bases with untrimmed clay.

“She’s going through a functional phase.” Sam’s mouth quirked.

“Ha. There’s an idea. That’d be a good phase for me.”

The assistant nodded and sighed, glum again, then disappeared into the back room.

Mom wandered past the row of windows. The lake and sky cut the world into two bands: bleak gray and bleaker gray. She halted when she got to the garbage bin and pulled out half of a pale-green pitcher. “What happened?” Holding the broken piece with one hand, she reached inside for a curved shard of something else in the same shade of green.

“Bad firing.” The aunt made a face. She went to stand by her sister and toed a cardboard box on the floor. “These all have to go.”

“*What?* That’s nuts.” Mom let the broken pieces drop back into the garbage and bent to inspect the box’s contents. She pulled out a mug. “Goodness gracious. Don’t throw these out.”

“They’re rejects.”

Mom thumbed a frozen rivulet of glaze at the mug’s foot. “They just dripped a little. I’ll take them.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll send you home with a shitload, but not these.” The aunt took the mug from Mom and threw it into the garbage. It landed with a loud crack. Aunt Wren scowled at the box. “Too much flux in the glaze. Thought I had the recipe down, even added a few minutes to the firing hold, but the celadon’s still giving me crap.”

Mom clucked. “I hate to see them destroyed.”

Aunt Wren crossed the room. “I don’t believe in giving away seconds. Seconds stick around as long as the firsts do. For years and years, thousands of years. So no. Those are garbage. But these . . .” She picked a mug out of her inventory and waited for her sister to join her. “How about this one to start with? You can have your morning coffee in it. See this?” She thumbed the lip. “I call it cream-breaking-red. Sam calls it blush.”

“So pretty.”

“It’s yours.”

She thanked her and pressed the mug against her chest. Her smile disappeared when she glanced at Maggie. “Why are you way over there?”

“Oh.” She straightened from the wall and walked over.

Mom held out her new mug.

“Beautiful.”

Aunt Wren selected a second cup in earthy browns. “And for Margaret. To go with the Bambi eyes.”

“Thank you.” It was curvy and big, the browns in matte and gloss, and with a perfect ribbon of a handle. Maybe not the kind of sculpture her mother was looking for, but sculptural in its own way.

Inspecting her mug, Mom asked, “You don’t use any lead glazes, do you?”

The aunt made a squawking sound. “What kind of question is that?”

“Well, I was just wondering . . .”

“Jesus, Min. This isn’t the seventies. No one uses lead glazes anymore.” She snorted. “Unless you’ve got an enemy you want to poison.”

Mom smiled, abashed. "Sorry."

Aunt Wren met Maggie's gaze and rolled her eyes, as if to include her in her exasperation. "Should I throw together some killer glazes, Margaret? Might take a few decades to finish off our target, but what the hell. Got anyone you want me to get rid of?"

"That's okay."

The sisters laughed, easy with each other again.

Maggie turned. Did she want to get rid of anyone? Not anymore. She already had.

Quilt to chin, eyes on silvered shadows, Maggie listened.

The tumble of lake: up, down, *get up now*, fall again, *turn*, *I said, before I do it for you*, crash. Foliage pattered in the woods. More rain or wind in the leaves? They sounded the same. The house was asleep. If Maggie listened hard, she thought she could almost hear the sisters in Aunt Wren's room, the slow inhale, exhale, snuffling murmur. Did their twinness synchronize their breathing? Would they touch in their sleep? Did some deep troughs in their brains magnetize them, turn the faintest recollection of shared enwombing into a lasting pull? A tidal pull, a lunar listing. Lunacy. Enwombing, wounding. Felled and wrenched.

Wretched.

Getting hurt required planning. Or no planning. Maggie realized this after the fact. She was told how this was so.

There were variations on procedures she should have considered before the bad thing happened. Shower. Did she shave her legs? Condition? Exfoliate? Makeup. Red lipstick or pink? Eyeliner or mascara? Body. Lotion? Serviceable white underwear or satin or lace *and* satin? Sports bra? Sexy bra? Hair. Ponytail? Loose?

Clothes. Tight shirt? Tight jeans? Loose? Loose. Sneakers? Flats? Heels? Friends. Alone? With one? Or two? Single girls? Searching girls? Pretty girls? Ugly girls? Loose girls? Doing. Drinking? What kind? How many? One, two, three? Four? Sober enough to remember? Too drunk to know? To know to say no? There: That was it. Speak up, loud, even louder, scream the word, or not a person will believe it. Practically a rule. Too softly spoken, and any word must count as yes.

2

MOM HAD TAKEN the week off from her job at Carlton Library. When she returned to Vermont, she'd go back alone. Maggie was staying with Wren for however many weeks or months she wanted. She wasn't sure *what* she wanted or what she'd do while she stayed. Currently, she had no interest in deciding either. She had, however, formed a hazy notion of how this stint would begin: She was going to wander by the water, unthinking and uninterrupted, while Mom and Aunt Wren went off and did whatever—shopped, visited a museum, ate out.

But they didn't. Instead, *they* took over the beach.

The weather had turned beautiful. Morning after morning at the breakfast table, while drinking her coffee out of the new mug, Maggie would eye the bright sunshine over the sink. She'd mention taking a walk by the lake. And Mom would beam and

say, “Oh, that’s wonderful, honey.” Then: “You can join us.” As if she’d already called the lake but was willing to share.

Four days of this, and Mom never took the hint: Maggie didn’t want to join them. She wanted to be alone.

She knew it was stupid to act like the aunt’s stretch of shoreline could hold only one, two people max, and the first morning, when the dawn had broken over the water without a hint of the previous day’s harsh weather, she *had* ventured out with them. But she’d slipped back into the house after twenty minutes. She’d felt like an intruder.

Mom and Aunt Wren must have decided to avoid whatever issues they couldn’t agree on, because after that initial tension in the kitchen, they got along fine. Remarkably well, in fact—talking, sprawled side by side on the sand, or walking slowly through the surf, heads down, or in the water, slim sisters wading into a mirror of light and sky.

Maggie mostly stayed in the loft. Under the windows, curled up on the iron-framed bed, she read Aunt Wren’s old gothic romances, not her thing but a distraction.

The books didn’t always help. When the words, rather than marshaling her thoughts, began to fray and untie them, she’d sit up quickly, turn around, press her forehead against the window screen, and find her mother and aunt below, their wind-whipped hair, the waves washing away their footprints in the sand.

Every day, the lake matched the sky in blue, pink, or violet, however the sky was feeling at any particular hour. Every day, the seagulls flew in shattering reels and echoed the whitecaps in flash and color. It was a landscape orchestrated in doubles and rhymes.

And Maggie would slouch down to the bed, leaving the twinning world to the twins, and go back to a novel that, when looked at as yet another example of the romantic-suspense genre, also seemed afflicted with redundancy: the same male lead, brooding and curt, dangerous and private, violent but ultimately tender; the same female protagonist, recklessly inquisitive and full of longing; and the same storm-wracked, gabled Victorian, teetering on a cliff, sinister and beautiful.

With the raucous water and birdcalls and wind sweeping in through the loft windows, Maggie read mechanically. When she finished one book, she promptly started another. She read to blot her mind, to not remember. She read for the settings—the eerie mansions, with their hidden chambers, dark passages, and countless windows. The settings were the real characters—multifaceted, many-eyed monsters. They swallowed their inhabitants. They housed secrets.

Maybe Wren's cabin did, too. Maggie was getting that impression.

On Friday afternoon, her fifth day at the aunt's, she heard the rumble of a pickup and the spit and crunch of gravel. A door slammed. She lowered her book.

It was probably Sam, the assistant who kept to the studio. Something was going on with him; Maggie just didn't know what. He was like a phantom who made himself known with sounds, the cracks and thuds of his labor and, once in a while, a question for the aunt, who'd taken the week off from work. Just through these sounds, the sharpness of some, the heaviness of others, Maggie could tell he was unhappy. And why was that? She thought back to the first time she'd met him. Who were Kate

and Linnie? What didn't he want his father to know? How did the aunt figure into these situations?

And Aunt Wren. What was up with her?

Maggie could see why Mom had picked *here* as the place for her and her daughter to go. It was the solution on which she hinged hopes. For Maggie, healing, and for herself, the same, only with her sister in mind.

What Maggie couldn't understand was why Aunt Wren had agreed. Why would this woman—the runaway, the recluse—open her house to the sister she'd spent most of her life avoiding? Open her house to a niece she didn't even know?

Maggie dropped her frown to the novel in her lap. The characters in this one were especially aggravating—the protagonist, silly; her love interest, a total jerk. And yet Amanda Darling was convinced Colt Manning harbored a sensitive core.

Maggie snorted. *Sure, he's just pretending to be an asshole.*

Exasperated, she slapped the book shut, slid off the bed, and grabbed her cardigan.

Downstairs, she opened the screen door. Mom and Aunt Wren were crouched by the water, as if they were searching for something. *Probably my beach glass*, Maggie thought gloomily. "Mom!"

The wind and water half-muffled her call, but her mother still heard it. She looked up and smiled.

Maggie dangled the keys she'd found by her mom's purse on a kitchen chair. "Mind if I borrow the car?"

According to Aunt Wren, Maggie had two options for bookstores, one twenty minutes southeast in Allentown, the other twenty

minutes southwest in Kesley. “I always go to the one in Allenport,” the aunt had said. “So do Thomas and Sam. It has a nice selection, and it’s bigger and busier than the other one, probably because of Allenport College.”

“How do I get to Kesley?” Maggie had asked.

She drove with the windows down and followed the parkway, with Lake Ontario’s brilliant blue rippling on her right. After taking the County Line exit, she headed south, turned right onto Ridge Road, and, down ten miles or so, took a left onto Maple Grove. She had the roads almost entirely to herself and passed sweeping fields, orchards, a farmhouse dwarfed by its red barn, pecking chickens, penned goats, a John Deere tractor, a combine harvester, another farmhouse, another barn, more fields, more orchards . . .

She drove fast but could have been speeding on a big treadmill, so repetitive was the landscape. *I’ve found the middle of nowhere.* The thought gratified her. Nowhere was exactly where she wanted to be.

But Maple Grove eventually became the Main Street of a town . . . of sorts. The business section—from the looks of it, just Main Street itself—had beautiful buildings, elegant and ornate, one after the other, but except for a few, they were relics, their windows either empty and blackly glinting the late-afternoon sunshine or filled with junk. A canal cut through Kesley. The Erie Canal, Maggie guessed.

Tree Hollow Books appeared on her right, near the end of the block that came after the canal’s lift-bridge. She pulled into the municipal lot and had her pick of parking spots. After crossing the street, she hesitated outside the bookstore and admired its

swirly-lettered sign, the window display (neat and colorful with new releases), and the beveled glass door, its woodwork trim painted a glossy red.

She was prepared to find the shop as empty as the parking lot, all the storefront's charm and effort wasted, but when she entered, jangling the bells on the door, four young women glanced her way.

The floor was polished oak; the ceiling, high and decorated with pressed plates of tin. In between, from top to bottom: books, books, books. The walls *were* books. An old wooden table spanned the front of the shop. Farther down, the main space opened into smaller sections: HISTORY NOOK, BIOGRAPHY NOOK, COOKBOOK NOOK, TEEN NOOK.

By the door, an old-fashioned cash register sat on a tall counter. An employee perched on a stool there, legs crossed, a paperback splayed and propped up on her knee. She was around Maggie's age, Asian, and wore her black hair in two tight knobs, like gleaming horns. And she eyed Maggie with open interest. "You're new."

Maggie wasn't sure how to answer, so she just nodded and stuck her hands into her cardigan pockets. "Do you sell used books?"

"Basement." She tilted her head. "The stairs are way back there in the reading nook." She closed the paperback, half-stood, and asked hopefully, "Need help finding something?"

"Oh, no. No, thanks." Maggie slipped past the desk and the other customers, pretty sure they were watching her, and found the staircase.

The used section was darker than the upstairs. It was very quiet. Maggie looked around. There wasn't anyone else on the floor.

Her skin prickled with goose bumps. Her scalp tightened. A fast rattle stole the silence. It was the sound of her own breathing. She deliberately slowed her exhalation, tried to shrug off the panic, told herself, *This isn't the same. Stay calm.* She was alone, after all. She could hardly be any safer.

Until someone follows me down here. Until someone unsafe shows up.

She glanced uneasily over her shoulder. Instead of exploring the packed shelves along the walls, she stuck with the sales table at the foot of the stairs. The books were divided into sections, labeled CHEAP, CHEAPER, SUPER-CHEAP. She decided quickly, choosing a few classics she'd never read. The novels smelled musty, as if the previous owners had stored them for too long in damp basements, but they were only a couple of bucks each, so that settled it. Maggie didn't have much cash.

Upstairs, two of the customers Maggie recognized from earlier had made their way to the back. The girls sat cross-legged on either end of an overstuffed couch, unopened books in their laps and steaming mugs in their hands. They were talking about someone's Twitter addiction but fell silent when Maggie reached the top of the stairs.

She smiled stiffly and hurried out of the reading nook.

The person working at the desk looked like she was waiting for her. When Maggie set the books by the register, the clerk smiled and asked, "Find everything okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

The late-day sunlight spilled through the front windows and over the girl, teasing a blueness out of her black hair, and cast a

shadow across the counter that (because of the buns) might have belonged to Mickey Mouse. The clerk drew the paperbacks closer to her and arranged them on the counter side by side.

Maggie found her change purse in her cardigan pocket and took out a wrinkled ten.

“Aha!” The girl brandished one of the paperbacks. “Good choice. Some French in the dialogue.” Eagerly: “Do you speak French?”

“No.”

“Not even a little?”

Maggie frowned. “No.” *What the hell?*

“Oh.” She sighed. “That’s too bad. I thought maybe you would.” She set down *Villette*. “You kind of look French.”

“I do?” *Huh.*

“Well, I *think* so. I’ve never actually been to France.” She clasped her hands under her chin and considered the other two books’ covers. “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.” She hummed appreciatively. “One of the first feminist novels. Haven’t read it. Not yet. And a third Victorian. *Middlemarch*.” She twinkled a smile. “That’ll keep you busy.”

Maggie stared at the girl. Did she always comment on her customers’ purchases? And appearances? How . . . rude. It was probably a good thing she didn’t work in a grocery store. (“Oh, these are the overnight pads with wings. You must get heavy periods. And Little Debbie Star Crunches? Bad for you.”) Maggie pointedly held out her money.

The smile widened. “I’m interested in what people read.” She shrugged, as if her interest excused the nosiness, then rang up the

books. "I'm going through a Russian phase, myself," she said airily. "Chekhov, of course. Some Tolstoy. A little Dostoyevsky." She handed Maggie her change and slipped the receipt and books into a brown bag. "And I'm finally getting around to Nabokov. I started *Lolita* last night. Ever read it?"

Maggie shook her head. She had zero interest in reading *Lolita*.

"Our book club just finished *Doctor Zhivago*, but we're shifting back to contemporary stuff and doing *My Name Is Lucy Barton* next."

"By Elizabeth Strout?" Maggie had been wanting to read that.

The girl nodded. "In a few weeks." She reached down and brought back up a flyer. "Here's our schedule." She leaned forward to hand it to Maggie, then stayed that way, hanging over the desk. "We need more members."

Directly behind Maggie, someone muttered, "Really bad."

Maggie whirled around.

This girl rubbed a tattoo of a feather by the base of her throat. "There are only four of us." She twisted one of the piercings along her ear. On the side of her neck was another tattoo, not a picture but a word and numbers. Maggie had just made it out—Romans 12:9—when the girl turned to glare out the window. "You should come." She said this fiercely, almost daring Maggie to disagree.

"Thanks." She swiftly collected her bag. The two book club members had her practically sandwiched. She sidestepped toward the door. "I'll, um, think about that."

"Great!" The clerk shared a victorious glance with the other girl, as if Maggie's involvement in the book club were a done deal, then added in a singsong manner, "See you soon."

“Good-bye!” the girls from the back of the bookstore called.

Disoriented by this show of excessive interest and warmth, Maggie mumbled a good-bye and backed out of the store, holding her bag against her chest like a shield.

3

THE WIND ROLLED off the lake, grabbed Maggie's hair, and flung it straight up. She held her cold forearms and hunched in her T-shirt. Mom and Aunt Wren were gone for the day. Maggie finally had the beach to herself.

Summer was over. On the trees edging the water, orange and scarlet streaked the foliage in narrow swaths. Even the September sky belonged to fall: fitful, moody. Silver-edged clouds, like dirty fingerprints, smudged the bluest blue.

She caught her hair and held it down. Aunt Wren's bit of shoreline was like a lopsided smile, quirking on the one end, a short bluff with a bent pine, and drooping into a marshland on the other. Maggie looked beyond the cattails. In that westward direction, the land formed a narrow peninsula, craggy with giant rocks and lush with maples, oaks, and locusts. The muck, tall

grass, and vines made the place unapproachable. But even if she wanted to tackle the swamp to reach it, she shouldn't. It didn't belong to the aunt. Wren had said so herself. Isolated, severe, wild, it didn't seem like the kind of place *anyone* could own.

Maggie lowered her gaze to the sand and started walking.

The lake was inventive. Each lapping break delivered something new. Along the water-laced sheen where waves and land met, she looked for beach glass. Mixed with wet stones, the remnants of old bottles glinted. Frosted white, pale green, warm amber, deep blue, smooth and rounded—small treasures. Once she started, she couldn't stop. The search—the mindlessness of it—was addictive. As the morning wore on, beachcombing became brain-combing, a soothing repetition of walk, pause, bend, collect, white, green, amber, blue. Thoughts turned blunted like the glass, as if the waves had plucked the sharp things from her head, carried them to the lake on a retreating swell, and then tumbled them over and over, ground them into something bearable, before sweeping them back to her. *Here. They can't hurt you now.*

Nothing to wonder but the simplest question—pebble or glass? Nothing to feel but the lake circling her ankles and the sun threading warmth through her hair. Nothing to look out for but harmless things, half-buried in shifting sand, a coin among broken shells, a glimmer by a silver feather, a bright wink under sodden wood.

The simplicity of the exercise pleased her. After a couple of hours, it struck her as funny. Who needed college? What would she have done with an English degree anyway? Maybe she wouldn't bother reading those crazy-long Victorian novels she'd bought yesterday. Maybe she would give up words entirely. She'd just pick

up glass from now on, day in and day out, this way and that, walk, pause, bend, collect, white, green, amber, blue. The pockets of her rolled-up pants sagged damply with chips of glass. Her feet were numb from the cold water; her nose, sunburned. She didn't care. She was going to tell her parents not to worry. They could stop freaking out about the scholarships, put away their fears for her health and happiness. They didn't need to stress about her lost year, this year, the leave of absence Carlton had readily granted. Just to get her the hell out of the way, Maggie suspected. Put an end to the ugly press. *Shoo, shoo. And take your bad business with you.*

This was her destiny. Clean Lake Ontario of all its glass. A good occupation. A safe one. Wasn't this safe? Just her and the churning body of water, dumb and constant. No designs, no lies.

She laughed, a high-pitched trill.

The sound jarred her. She was shaking, gasping. She squeezed her eyes shut, willfully slowed her breathing. She needed to stop thinking. *Stop thinking.*

Then she stopped altogether. Not to calm down or bend and collect, but to listen. Beyond the water's hollow roar, under the screech of gulls, along with the hum of wind—a human sound, a swelling holler. She turned, just as a shouting child reached her.

The girl stormed Maggie. Not a hug. A tackle. They staggered together into the water. She was barefooted, brown-skinned, black-haired, and small enough that her barreling, as measured on Maggie, was only a hip-high collision. She laughed and yelled, "Got you!"

Startled, Maggie grabbed the child's elbows to steady them both and scanned the shore.

Aunt Wren's assistant, Sam, was scowling at the rutted drive. He gripped his hair, then strode across the beach.

The girl bounded over to him. "Daddy!"

He caught and hugged the child without looking at her. Maggie raised a hand in a halfhearted wave and began to sidle out of the way, but his expression gave her pause. "Everything all right?"

He shook his head. "Where's Wren?"

"Out for lunch with my mom. I think they're going to the Memorial Art Gallery afterward."

"Fuck." He glared at the lake. When the girl squirmed, he set her down but took her hand. His troubled gaze focused on Maggie as if he were finally registering who she was. "I—I need some help." He plowed a hand through his hair. "Can you help me with Kate? For, like, just an hour?"

Kate slipped out of his hold and ran for the water.

"You want me to watch her?" Maggie asked.

He nodded impatiently.

She looked over her shoulder. Kate jumped into the swell of a wave, soaking herself to the waist. Five years old, Maggie guessed. She swallowed. "She doesn't know me." *I am not a good choice for a babysitter.* "Won't she be scared?"

He grunted. "She's not scared of anything." When Kate flew back to him, he sat on his haunches and loosely held her in place. "Hey, sweets, give me a kiss good-bye."

The child's smile disappeared. "You said you'd play with me."

"I said I'd take you outside. I have to go somewhere for a little while."

"Can I go, too?"

He shook his head. "I'll be back real soon. Want to play on the beach with Wren's niece? Want to play with—" He glanced up.

"Maggie."

"With Maggie here?"

Her expression said no. But she answered, "Okay."

"That's good. I'll pick you up in a bit." He kissed the top of her head, straightened, hesitated. To Maggie: "If Wren gets back, tell her . . ." His mouth closed, tightened. He briefly shut his eyes. "Tell her Linnie's missing."

"Want to make a sand castle with me?" Maggie asked, scanning the beach. With what? She didn't have a cup out here, let alone a pail and shovel.

Kate ignored her and watched her father walk away. When the screen door slapped shut, the child slunk toward the house. She kicked the base of the porch stairs, as if the bottom step, specifically, were to blame for separating her from her father. Arms folded and head lowered, she lingered there, kicking the rickety wood, climbing the stairs, stopping at the closed door, trudging back down, a deliberating little person, until the studio wing's back door slammed and the old pickup growled and shot out of the driveway. Then she ran after the truck, straight down Ash Drive.

"Oh shit." Maggie, who'd thought she'd give the kid a few minutes to adjust to the notion of a strange babysitter (and, okay, give *herself* a few minutes, too), raced after the girl, calling breathlessly, "Kate! Hey, Kate! Want to see what I've got? I've got . . ." What did she have? What did she have? "Beach glass!"

She caught up with her on the side of the parkway. Kate was stomping in an eastward direction, her expression scared and pissed.

The road stretched empty and gray. A loose piece of macadam gouged one of Maggie's bare feet. She winced and then arranged her features into what she hoped passed for cheerfulness. "Want to see my beach glass collection?"

Kate scowled.

Maggie reached down to collect the small hand, but the girl jerked away. "Please?" Maggie sighed. "I'm not sure where he's going. But he said he'd be back in an hour."

Silence. They continued walking. Finally, the child halted and released a frustrated sound that pitched into a sob.

She let Maggie take her hand and escort her back to Aunt Wren's place. On the beach, she let Maggie situate her on a warm patch of sand. And when Maggie sat across from her, she let her talk. All these allowances: bitter, condescending.

Maggie emptied her pockets and made up lame stories for the pieces of beach glass. ("This one must really be jade. I'm going to sell it. Think how rich I'll be." "Here's a little topaz. Pirate booty. Bet the rest of the treasure will ride in on a wave any minute now.") Inane chatter and an unspoken plea: *Don't run away again*. She thought about the tremble in the hand she'd held on the way back to the cabin. When was the last time Maggie had reached for a hand and held it? When was the last time she'd touched someone more scared than herself? Where her fingertips had grazed the fragile wrist, Kate's pulse had fluttered like a trapped winged creature.

Sam was wrong. His daughter was not fearless. It bothered

Maggie that he believed this. It worried her that his daughter pretended to be.

Kate watched and waited, eyeing Maggie suspiciously and then checking the driveway, back and forth, again and again. She didn't talk except twice, once to clarify, "You are not my mom or my teacher or Wren," a statement that Maggie interpreted to mean, *You are nobody important.*

And a second time: After Maggie finished a convoluted magical sapphire story for a blue chip, Kate turned to stare at the driveway and said, "Stupid. It's just glass. I've seen broken glass lots of times."

"It's too early to go to bed," Mom said, "and you haven't even had supper. Did you eat *anything* today? You've got to eat, Maggie."

"I did." Earlier. At some point. Didn't she? "I'm not hun—"

"Wren and I went out of our way to stop at a bookstore this morning, just so I could buy that book you wanted. Can't you do this little thing for me? And look. Look at all this stuff we brought back." Takeout containers covered the kitchen table. Maggie's mother seized one and cracked the lid. "Cashew chicken. You used to love cashew chick—"

"Okay, okay." *Jesus Christ.* Hot-faced, Maggie sat.

Sam, who'd been frowning at the floor, glanced at her. Kate was in his arms, sleeping against his chest. There was another visitor at the aunt's table: Thomas Blake, Sam's dad. His attention veered Maggie's way.

Maggie trained her gaze on the table. She wished her mother wouldn't talk so much, wished, too, she'd known these people

would be staying so she could have complained of a headache beforehand and hidden in the loft.

After her day with Kate, Maggie just wanted to be alone.

Mom and Aunt Wren had gotten back a few minutes ago. Sam arrived hard on their heels; his father, not long after. An arranged gathering, Maggie figured. Sam must have phoned the others at some point during the afternoon.

Maggie's hour of babysitting had turned into four. The child spent the end of their time together sobbing and screeching for her dad, only quieting when the sisters returned. With relief, Maggie handed Kate over to the aunt. Sam's pickup appeared a moment later.

No one had said much since gathering at the table. Now Mom rose and went to the cupboards to collect dishware. When she began filling glasses with water, Maggie stood to help but got a "No, no, stay put."

Aunt Wren sat with her elbows on the table, her head in her hands, as if her thoughts were too heavy to mull without some scaffolding to prop them up. Thomas's folded hands on the table were white-knuckled. Sam, miserable-looking, shook his head at the floor. And Maggie—knowing she didn't have anything to do with whatever had happened to bring these people together and certain the situation wasn't any of her or Mom's business—was about to mumble about the make-believe headache and the possibility of taking her supper to her room, when Sam said, "Thanks for watching Kate, Megan."

"Maggie," Mom corrected, arranging plates around the table.

“Sorry. Maggie.” He ran a hand down his daughter’s hair. “Didn’t realize it’d take me so long to accomplish nothing.”

“That’s all right,” Maggie lied, and inched into a hover above her seat. “Think I’ll—”

“Here you go.” Mom forked a helping of chicken onto Maggie’s plate. Then, just as if Maggie were Kate’s age and needed mealtime modeling, her mother smacked her lips and said encouragingly, “Yum.”

More heat flared under her skin. “Thanks.” *Thanks for making me feel like an imbecile.*

The aunt, still holding her head, tilted up her chin and smiled across the table. “She forgot your bib.”

Maggie sighed.

Wren leaned back in her chair. “The police have anything to say?”

Sam laughed shortly without smiling. “Oh, they know all about Linnie, but they haven’t come across her recently. Officer McPherson was nice about it—asked if I wanted to fill out a report.” He raised his hand, a helpless gesture. “I said I didn’t think so. She’s twenty-one. If an adult leaves willingly, she’s not exactly missing.”

“You checked with Jess?” Thomas asked.

“Yeah. No clue.”

Mom stacked three spring rolls on her sister’s plate and put a small, covered container next to the arrangement. “Hoisin sauce.”

The aunt gave the plate a disbelieving look. “Now she’s doing it to me.”

“Eat.” Mom slipped a folded napkin under her sister’s fork. “Any other friends she might have said something to?”

“Friends. I wouldn’t use that word to describe them.”
Grudgingly, Sam added, “Except Caleb.”

Thomas smiled a little. “Caleb’s cool.”

“Caleb,” Wren repeated hopefully. “Of course. You checked with him?”

Sam nodded.

“No word?”

He shook his head.

“What about Allie?” his dad asked, holding the rice container but doing nothing with it.

“Hasn’t seen Linnie all week.”

“Ashlyn?”

“Same.”

The father set down the container and asked quietly, “Kyle?”

Sam made a face. “I even called him.”

A silence fell. Maggie easily recognized its tone: awkward embarrassment. Seemed like she caused this feeling wherever she went last year. *Tell us what happened—tell us everything*, the people who were supposed to be helping her would say. Then afterward, in expression if not words, *Shit, did you have to tell us everything?*

She forked a piece of broccoli and dragged it across her plate. Adults raised kids to tell the truth, speak up, spill the beans. But they didn’t mean it. Not always. A lot of times, people shied away from confessions—worked hard, in fact, to dismiss or ignore them. What they *really* wanted to hear was a confirmation of what they believed in or hoped for or needed. Maggie thought about Sam’s assessment of his daughter: never afraid. How often had he reinforced that quality in his daughter? *You’re a tough one, aren’t*

you, Kate? Maybe it was his way to make sure she'd be more like him and less like her mother. Whatever Linnie was or wasn't, Maggie couldn't say, but she guessed resilience wasn't her strong suit.

Mom broke the lull. "Want me to hold your daughter so you can eat?"

Her mother's offer made Maggie glance at the sleeping kid and inwardly shudder. *Better you than me.*

"Thanks," Sam said, "but I couldn't eat a thing."

Neither could anyone else by the looks of it. Aunt Wren gave his arm a pat. "Try not to stress. This isn't the first time she's . . . gone away for a while."

Sam ran a hand over his head, went back to his eyes, and rubbed them hard. "Never like this, though—packing first, and not just a comb and her toothbrush. A picture of Kate. It freaks me out."

Thomas put both hands flat on the table. "I think it's time you and Linnie called it quits."

Sam glared at his father. "How the hell can we? She's missing."

"You know what I mean. It's not working, buddy."

Sam squeezed his eyes shut, a person either closing down or taking a hit, absorbing it. Maggie couldn't tell which.

More gently, Thomas said, "You can't keep doing this."

"I owe it to her." Sam put his face in his daughter's hair. Softly, "You know how I feel about this one. She means everything to me. But look at what having her cost Linnie."

"We could say the same for you," Thomas said.

"Well, not exactly," Wren said slowly. "At least Sam was able to finish high school."

“Linnie could have gotten her GED,” Thomas snapped.

The aunt raised an eyebrow. The two friends’ expressions—one skeptical, one defensive—made Maggie think there was an old argument behind their exchange.

“You’re handling your responsibilities,” Thomas continued. “Linnie isn’t.”

“She just . . . can’t,” Sam said.

“She might be able to if she got the proper help. Not your kind. Professional help.”

A short laugh. “With what money?”

“You know I’d chip in.”

“Again? I don’t want you to.”

“This isn’t about what you want. It’s about Linnie and what she needs. You’ve set her up as a kind of mission, like if you’re patient enough and supportive enough, you’ll erase all those years she spent in foster care.” Thomas dropped his gaze and traced a gouge in the table with his thumb. “Sometimes I think this has to do with your mom passing away.”

Sam flared his eyes. “Thanks for the insight, Dr. Blake.”

Aunt Wren, in an obvious effort to ease the tension, said lightly, “Technically, he is a doctor.” To Maggie: “Thomas teaches at Allenport College.”

“*History*,” Sam said. “Not psychology. I don’t need a therapy session.”

“Everyone could benefit from therapy,” Mom said.

Maggie felt her mother looking at her but pretended she didn’t.

“Especially Linnie,” Thomas muttered. “Therapy, rehab, *something*, for Pete’s sake.”

Sam shook his head, defeated. “Linnie’s troubles are beside the point. I have to consider what Kate needs. She needs her parents. Both of them. A child deserves that. I’m just trying to make it happen.”

Mom shrugged. “Well, that’s true enough.”

At the same time, Sam’s father and Aunt Wren shook their heads. “Not in this case,” Thomas said.

The aunt cut her sister a sardonic glance. “You don’t really think that.”

Mom straightened. “Believe in the benefits of a child having two loving parents? Absolutely, I do. And I’m sure I have the backing of countless studies.”

“*Loving* is the operative word,” Thomas said.

“Linnie loves Kate,” Sam said sharply.

“Linnie’s a poor wreck,” Aunt Wren said. “Listen. More than anything, Kate needs stability. What she’s got now is not stable.” She threw up her hands. “Do you want to know how Kate will make out living in a precarious situation, living with constant trouble? She’ll grow up scared and sad and angry. She’ll grow up thinking about fighting or fleeing. She’ll grow up trying to get away.” She rapped the table with a knuckle. “She’ll grow up like I did.”

Mom’s mouth dropped open.

Her color hectic, Aunt Wren glared at her sister. Then she looked away and pressed her lips together.

“But—but our parents, Wren, I mean . . . how they brought us up with church on Sundays and good food on the table and taught us to share and be honest and work hard.” She searched

her sister's face. "Dad was a little distant, but Mom—Mom couldn't have been gentler . . ."

Kate suddenly groaned. Flushed with sleep, hair sticking up on one side, she scrunched her face, raised her head, and squinted at the table gathering, all while voicing displeasure, a sound between a whine and a cry.

Sam smoothed her hair. "Boy, you wake up grumpy, don't you?"

She dropped back to his chest hard, a head-butt, and shut her eyes again.

Aunt Wren stood quickly. "I'll get you some milk, sweetie."

Mom pulled her anxious frown away from her sister and smiled halfheartedly at Sam. "Evening naps are the worst. When Maggie was that age, I could never keep her awake when she wanted to sleep, especially if we were in the car. No matter what time it was, if we started driving somewhere, she'd pass out in seconds. And if it happened on the way to a restaurant, she'd spend the whole meal just like that. Miserable." She turned a more genuine smile on Maggie. "Do you remember that, honey?"

"No." Not the crankiness or the napping, either. Sleep. It was hard to believe she'd once slept so easily.

Maggie curled onto her side and peered out the window overlooking the woods. A paleness sifted through the trees. Moonlight or dawn? She had no idea what time it was. In the morning, Aunt Wren would go back to work in the studio, and Mom would drive home, though Maggie would see her and Dad at Thanksgiving, and her mother had promised to return again at Christmastime.

Maggie would miss Mom. But she needed a break from her. A break from reporting on how much she'd eaten or how long she'd slept or how she was feeling. Maggie would finally have time alone.

Well, not *really* alone, of course. There was the aunt. And Sam. That guy was always around and obviously not just because he was the studio assistant. Maggie suspected he'd show up even if he didn't work for the aunt, on account of his dad's friendship with Wren. Sam was clearly comfortable hanging out at Wren's place, leaving his child in her care, sitting at her table, sharing food and conversation, listening to advice and criticism—at home here, regardless of whether or not the aunt was around.

This didn't bother Maggie too much. Sam worried about Linnie. He worried about Kate. He did not worry about Maggie. In fact, he hardly seemed to notice her. He called her Megan and Mindy and, once, inexplicably, Lisa.

For six months, Maggie had been the object of interest, speculation, hatred, accusations, and jokes. She was grateful for Sam Blake's lack of interest.