

# PROLOGUE

## AUGUST 2016

When they found Mira Cillo at the bottom of the quarry lake, her fingers were shot through the loose weave of her sister Francesca's sweater, at the neck. They were so tangled, jammed through past the knuckles, the coroner had to cut away the yarn to separate them.

Ben kept thinking about that.

Ben heard this from Kyle Kulik, who had graduated that summer from Bismuth High and was training to become an EMT. Kyle's voice shook as he told Ben it was the sight of the Cillo girls as they were lifted from the water, blue and wilted, with hollows around their eyes and, later, froth cones around their lips, that made Kyle realize being an emergency medical technician wasn't for him if it meant plucking hot dead girls out of the quarry.

Ben knew in a hazy way that he was focusing on the wrong thing. It didn't matter that the girls were wearing sweaters in August. Or that pink-tinged foam could appear from dead lips even after it was wiped away. It must be shock that was causing Ben to focus on the little things instead of the big horrible

thing right in front of him: that the girls next door dumped their bikes the night before behind Johnny's Foodmaster and hiked three-quarters of a mile through the dark to the highest ledge. And fell.

Frank Cillo noticed his daughters were gone at eleven o'clock bed check. He called the police immediately. At 11:29 p.m., cell phones across the Northeast jumped with a shocking mechanical buzz and read, "AMBER Alert now. Bismuth, MA: Missing," with the girls' names and ages. To get an AMBER Alert that fast meant Frank Cillo knew Someone at the Department of Justice. He also knew Someone at Bismuth High School, Saint Theresa's Church, the Parks Department, and the Bismuth Boat Club. Friends he'd gone to school with, played football with, served in the army with. Fellow football boosters, Lions, and Rotarians; members of the Massachusetts Association of Personal Injury Lawyers, the Workers Injury Law & Advocacy Group, and the Brotherhood of Malpractice Attorneys. Friends who brought macaroni and cases of Budweiser when Francesca and then Mira were born after his wife's miscarriages, and later, after she passed at forty-three. Networks of prematurely grizzled men with yellowing shirts and eyes who owed Frank Cillo, directly and otherwise.

Between 11:29 and 11:36, lights flicked on in bedrooms throughout Ben's neighborhood of compact brick colonials clustered in the throat of Powder Neck. Calls were made among the houses. Mothers panicked and checked their

children. Fathers shrugged fleece jackets over undershirts and staggered toward the Cillos' house, the glare of flashing police lights filling their glasses.

The only ones who wouldn't have seen the AMBER Alert would have been the girls themselves, since their shared and heavily monitored cell phone rarely moved from the top of the refrigerator. That technology was barely present in the Cillo household only reinforced for the Bismuth mothers how *healthy* the Cillo girls were, what firm limits Frank Cillo set.

It was around January that the girls started acting weird. By early summer, their weirdness had become a topic among the neighborhood boys. Some argued it made sense, with Connie's accident only a few weeks before. Connie with her helium laugh and her dumb nicknames—Sistah, Sangue, Cuz—the slangy, silly words Mira and Francesca used for Connie, the ones that thrilled Connie as much as they annoyed Ben, bounced around his head.

Ben touched the picture on his phone with his fingertip. The divers had left the sisters attached, removed their pants but left on their panties. The photo was a pocket shot, a quick yank of the camera out of Kyle's pants, a snap-and-stuff. The image ended above the ribs, leaving waists and legs turned inward toward each other, as though they were curled in bed whispering to each other. At that angle, Ben couldn't tell Mira by the oval coffee-colored stain on the back of her right thigh, above where her knee folded. Still, he knew them by the lengths

of their legs. In the foreground, the shorter set was shadowed, and covered by what Ben thought might be downy fuzz. In the background was a longer set, with the familiar rise of the thigh even at its most lax. The lovely swell.

He told himself that it was another girl. Not Mira.

Ben blinked hard, focusing on their bare feet, small and wrinkled. According to Kyle, the sisters had lined their sneakers side by side on the flat rock, the one the boys called the altar. Ben thought the rock looked more like an old man's throat, its skin loose over tendons, with the tip as its chin. The summer before last, Ben had stood on the chin, showing off for a sunbathing Mira. He pointed at her, turned, and made a clean dive. Seconds before breaking water, he saw the viscous stuff that floated on its surface, iridescent swirls of silver, blue, and purple, and it alarmed him. He'd struggled to surface quickly and didn't bother waiting for the reward of Mira's reaction. Instead, he powered to the wall, scaled it quick, and towed off hard.

Ben let the sisters' deaths as they had been told to him play once more through his brain: misguided adventure, impulsive spree, deadly escapade. The local bum who stole recyclables after dark told the police he saw them riding their bikes toward the quarry on August 8th at 10:30 p.m. By 5:44 a.m., when the first streaks of purple streamed across the Boston skyline, the entire recovery team had descended, red-and-white trucks

screaming, tearing into the quarry, where the first responders in scuba suits had already pulled the girls out, entangled.

It was the parts in between that gave Ben trouble.

Like, why would the girls ever come to the quarry at night?

"It seemed fun," Ben said, his voice hollow.

Why would they fall off a ledge they knew as well as they knew the bedroom they'd shared since birth?

"It was dark."

Ben closed his eyes and tried to imagine the girls who bathed in the sun bathing in moonlight. Catching sight, maybe, of something in the water. Something worth leaning too far over to see. That got Ben to wondering in what order they fell. It made sense to Ben, now that he thought about it, that Francesca and Mira would have reached for each other. According to Kyle, the girls had been in the water for at least six hours, because the blotches on their skin had joined up. Ben opened his eyes and counted on his fingers, from 11:00 p.m. to 5:44 a.m.

The girls must have been quick. Quick to get there, quick to line up, quick to place the rocks that were found in their sweater pockets. Quick to fall off the high ledge into the black water, one after the other.

Not one after the other exactly. If it had been an accident, they would have tried to save each other. They would have done that.

Fingers snarled in wool.

Francesca first, then Mira.

Mira first, then Francesca.

Ben shuddered. Though he knew it was wrong, he preferred to think of them falling at the same time, holding hands. Because, by the start of the summer, they had sealed themselves together and off from the rest of the world.

Ben used two fingers to enlarge the image on his phone, but it blurred into meaningless pixels.

## PART 1

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*Palm*



## AUGUST 2016

Mira's letter arrived seven days after she died.

Mira. Was. Alive.

The idea hit Ben like a punch to the throat. It grew into a vibrating, ludicrous shiver of hope that he'd seen another girl's body in Kyle's photo. A different beauty with long arms and gold-flecked eyes and a perfectly straight back, another girl had fallen alongside Francesca. Not Mira.

But: the swell of a thigh. He knew that swell tanned in white shorts. He knew it peeking from under the hem of a skirt, sitting at her desk in English, toes curled under, leaning forward. He knew it taut, lying on her back on a towel at the club and the quarry, one knee up.

Of course Mira was dead.

Ben studied the envelope, wondering if it was a sick joke. But there was the handwriting, Benvenuto Lattanzi, 20 Springvale Street, spelled out in purple ink on a long white generic business envelope, stained where it had passed through hands. Mira had put the letter through a convoluted dance to be delivered next door, a dance that made little sense until you

realized that arriving too late was the whole idea. A deliberate misspelling of Springdale Street that kept the envelope circulating around the city. That was like Mira: resourceful. Good at sneaking out in the middle of the night to meet Ben.

Good at sneaking out in the middle of the night to die.

Ben moaned. He pressed the curve of his fist into his mouth.

"Ben?" his mother called from her bedroom, her voice threaded with worry.

Overhead, his mother's footsteps quickened. Ben's head snapped. He pulled himself together fast and tore open the envelope, extracting the letter. It fluttered as his hand shook. More of Mira's handwriting, but the words wouldn't come together, and Ben felt like he was reading Spanish, which he sucked at, as if Mira's sentence was a string of cognates at which to guess. Sweat prickled under his arms. He rubbed his forehead with his wrist and held the letter close, his eyes skittering over the words. Finally, the words decoded themselves.

*Everyone wanted to touch us. Including you.*

*So remember the seven places you touched me.*

*That's where you'll find the truth.*

*Start at the beginning. In my words.*

Ben wiped sweat from his eyes. Mira had left him something. Mira had left him her words. Letters, notes. Something. Where?

*Remember the places you touched me.*

A whole summer had passed since Mira broke contact with him, after Connie's wake, days after Easter. But Ben remembered those places. Places where Mira had let him stroke, brush, caress, graze, kiss, nuzzle.

Stay.

He couldn't go there, not now.

She had done things with him in those places, innocent things, then more. The parts of Mira that Ben had touched were etched on his soul.

Palm. Hair. Chest. Cheek. Lips. Throat.

Then—

Not now.

Ben shook it off. Mira had given him a puzzle, one that Ben could solve, that would give him answers for the holes that haunted him, the parts of Mira's life between what he saw from his bedroom window and the diluted version he got when they were among friends. For Ben had spent endless hours wondering about the pretty mysteries of Mira's life that seemed far away, but were playing out right next door. Ben drifted again to a place he knew he shouldn't go, and the shame and pleasure was awful.

A creak above. He stuffed Mira's letter in the back waistband of his shorts and looked up as his mother flew down the stairs, slowing at the bottom, attempting to model normalcy. She'd had practice at remaining calm when evil intruded into

their lives. Specifically, when it targeted her son. Ben imagined her pacing upstairs moments before, whispering “You’ve got this” to herself, over and over.

“I heard a strange noise,” she said, her hand reaching toward his face, then pulling back. “Are you all right?”

It was like she thought death was contagious. Ben had considered the possibility. First Mrs. Cillo died (ten years back, and Ben barely remembered her); then the Cillos’ cousin, Connie Villela, in March; and now the Cillo girls. Was death a germ you could catch, like Mrs. Cillo’s depression, and Connie’s deadly allergy, and the girls with their . . . what?

Nothing.

Maybe he should call in sick. This would be the fourth day he hadn’t gone in to work, and the clubhouse manager had sent word that he was considering replacing him. Ben had been saving his paychecks to get Mira out of Bismuth. The timing worked. If he showed up five days a week for two months for two summers, the \$232.80 in his bank account would grow to \$2,000.00. It was the half grand he needed to buy his father’s failing BMW. His father had been on his side since he’d turned sixteen—he was eyeing a new convertible—but that could change with weak grades or another roach and a vial of Visine found in a dirty pants pocket. Mira hadn’t known the plan, but she had only needed to say the word, and they would have left Bismuth for foreign highways. Getting out of Bismuth had become an obsession nearly as great as Mira herself.

Ben rammed his nose with the heel of his hand. He hadn't realized he was crying.

"Oh, Ben," his mother said softly, producing a tissue. "Maybe it's too soon to go back to work." She had been "giving space" and "being available"—the things suggested by her friends, who no doubt wished more than anything that this awful story would go away and they could get on with their tennis and low-glycemic diets.

*Start at the beginning.*

"Can you take me to the boat club *right now*?" Ben begged.

His mother searched his face while Ben took in the sight of her. Her unwashed hair fell in finger-combed rows. One freckled breastbone pointed out of a graying tank. The ends of her eyes drew downward into the soft wince that accompanied the subject of the Cillos. Another person might translate the wince into empathy for the Cillos, but Ben knew better. His father's historic falling-out with Mr. Cillo had been brutal. The intervening years with a scant eight feet between their houses had been strained. Mr. Cillo's daughters dying? That was plain awkward.

"I'm glad you want to go back to work already," she said. "But I want you to be prepared. Have you spoken with Eddie since the incident?"

Connie's brother Eddie, the Cillos' cousin Eddie, his oldest friend Eddie, now steeped in death's perfume. Ben forgot he was going to have to face Eddie, never mind work around

him to find more of Mira's "words." Not that he didn't have experience. The Lattanzi-Cillo bad blood had kept his relationship with Mira secret from Eddie, who valued family loyalty and would've seen it as a betrayal from both sides. Though Eddie loved Ben and Mira both, he could not love them together.

Sangue. Cuz.

It was all so stupid.

"Because I imagine you'll see Eddie today," his mother nattered, oblivious to Ben's darkening expression. "Give him our love and support, and let him know we're here to help. You might even tell him about the scholarship Daddy set up in the girls' names."

Eddie had little to fear. After Connie's wake, Mira had dumped Ben cold. Mira's sudden silence was the first thing Ben thought of when he woke, and the last thing he thought of as he drifted off to sleep. In the mornings, he rose and stood at his window, staring at her house. Constantly, he checked his phone, though a text was as unlikely as the idea Mira might one day disappear from the earth. Later, he rationalized that girls were a headache, especially girls you had to see in secret, most especially girls who were complicated puzzles that often left him feeling dumb. He'd convinced himself that no longer having to hide hiding their relationship from Mr. Cillo (and, truth be told, Eddie) was a relief. That the last time he and Mira

had been together was sublime, and now it could never be corrupted by lesser, fumbling attempts.

Lie after lie after lie.

“Oh, bud.” His mother’s hand fluttered, producing another tissue.

Ben kneaded his fist against the spot between his eyes. “I want it on the record that I will not serve as the goodwill ambassador for the Lattanzi household.”

“I’m sorry. It was inappropriate. Give me five minutes and we can go,” she said. She knew Mira had been something more to Ben, though she was careful to talk about the “loss of his friend” and the “four stages of grief when losing a friend,” imagining she was minimizing Ben’s devastation by defining their relationship. Though it was only day seven, his mother had suggested there might be value in Ben speaking with someone—Saint Theresa’s Spiritual Director Nick Falso, for example—if only because she was running out of things to say.

Ben waited in front of a calendar encased in lucite on the wall. Someone had interpreted August to mean fireflies caught in a mason jar, with moody, Monet swirls, the flies whirring in useless motion. Ben had looked forward to this summer, because it had meant more time around Mira without the distraction of school and sports and *activities* (his; the girls had none). Days swimming at the club and the quarry had their

allure, especially for guys who had no real interactions with the girls otherwise, and who planned their days around seeing them in their bathing suits. Ben preferred the early evenings, when the windows were open and the sounds from next door drifted in: upstairs, a shower running overlong, one of the girls washing the metallic funk of quarry water from her hair and skin. Outside, the thrilling vacuum rush of the gas grill, which meant they'd assemble at the picnic table soon, Francesca fussing over her father's plate, Mira indolent from the day's sun.

Ben wondered if summer would always be a tainted season for him now. Before he left, he touched his finger on August 8, leaving a smudge.

Ben made for the gate that led to the clubhouse, through shrieks and lifeguard whistles, and beyond, the tidal roar and squeals of gulls. The wooden shell housed a snack bar and locker rooms. Built around the tired pool and facing the ocean, it captured and amplified the noises of both. The manager, Kenneth Laidlaw, lingered around the entrance, waiting for him to arrive.

"Lattanzi!" he called.

Ben jogged past him with a wave and beelined for the locker room, rank with ammonia over urine. Boys tumbled in, first three, then five. One boy pushed another. Ben glowered at



them, waiting until the last one had zipped his fly and left to begin his search for Mira's note.

The manager stuck in his pustuled forehead. "You stroll in twenty minutes late and sit here catching up on your fan mail?" he whined.

Ben slid Mira's letter into his bag. "I'm getting changed."

"Looks like you're dressed. Get behind the counter. The place is jammed and Eddie's been alone for half his shift already. Have some sympathy, Benvenuto. The dude's been fed a tragedy sandwich."

Ben cringed. The manager was an ignorant putz who would never feel empathy for Eddie, but it was a convenient excuse to abuse Ben.

"I'm aware. Thanks though."

"Then help the man!"

Ben knew the note was somewhere inside the clubhouse. Mr. Cillo might have had eyes everywhere, but not between their hands at the snack bar last summer. Ben had sensed Mira coming before he'd seen her, making her way through the kinetic energy of sugared and sunburned kids. Behind her, the sun glared white. It hurt to look at her. She'd worn her father's button-down shirt over her wet bathing suit, and it clung in places. Ben had dreamed of her that morning and felt sure she knew. It seemed possible he was still dreaming and coming to the best part. Water beaded on her eyebrows and lashes. Ben wished he could fold her inside a towel and lead her away,

wished he could tell her that's what he would like to do, but the recurring theme between them was Ben sounding stupid, and so he almost always said nothing.

And then she was there.

"Hey," he murmured.

Mira blinked. "Hey."

"A real live mermaid!" Eddie boomed as he came out from the supply room. Ben stiffened, waiting for the cascade of hugs and kisses between cousins, a display that tapped the hollow in his chest. Ben wasn't jealous that Eddie got to touch the girl everyone wanted to touch. It was that Ben had nothing like that in his life. No extended family that acted like every time they bumped into one another was the first time in a year. It was excessive and vulgar and lovely, and Ben ached for it.

"Ever hear of a towel, sweetheart?" Eddie said, pushing past Ben and leaning over the counter to plant a kiss on her cheek.

Over Eddie's shoulder, Mira's eyes fixed on Ben.

"I hate it here," she murmured.

"Look at the bright side. Some of us don't have a choice every day between the club and the quarry; we gotta work for a living. We'll get you a towel. Benny, you seen any extra towels back in the lost and found?"

Ben slunk away for a towel, relieved for the chore. The exquisite pain of Mira's closeness, especially when she looked slightly porny, was more than Ben could bear. He was certain his ears glowed hot.

“Don’t!” Mira said suddenly. Ben stopped short. “Don’t bother. Francesca wants to leave.”

Eddie planted his fists on his hips. “Someone giving you girls trouble?” Eddie’s play at being his uncle Frank’s surrogate seemed stupid to Ben, the way Eddie pretended Mira needed a protector of her virtue when his own sister fooled around with everyone. Whatever myth Mr. Cillo had created about his daughters, it was contagious, because even the same boys who sneered at the Cillos’ untouchability upheld it. Mr. Cillo’s no-dating rule was an excellent excuse to avoid the ball-busting fail of asking out his daughters.

“Relax, no one’s giving us trouble,” Mira said. “Get me a Coke, okay?”

“You got it.”

As Eddie’s head disappeared inside the cooler, Mira held out a bill. Ben frowned, confused. The Cillo girls never paid at the snack bar. Not unless the manager was hovering, and even he refused Francesca’s money.

“You know Eddie won’t let me take that,” Ben said, low and conspiratorial. She had allowed him to speak that way to her: her gesture required it. He was grateful.

Mira pushed the wet dollar on him. “I want to pay like everyone else.”

Mira shifted from hip to hip, tangled in the damp cage of her father’s shirt. Ben took the dollar. That’s when it happened. Mira’s two fingers, reaching past where they should, a stroke

on the inside of his palm. So light he thought he'd imagined it, but knew he hadn't, because of Mira's smoldering look after. He'd practically danced away, looked the fool, tacked the dollar right up on the cork board for anyone to ask about. A flash of amusement, a sly smile before she padded away without her Coke, leaving wet footprints on the cement. Ben's elation dissipated into panic, and he sweated the rest of the afternoon, wondering if Eddie had seen any of it go down. Maybe for Mira, the thrill was in the risk of getting caught. Ben knew there were couples who purposely had sex in places like alleys and golf courses and the bathroom stalls at the boat club because it was more exciting. Getting caught became what Ben and Mira feared most. Because that would mean the end.

Ben conjured the feel of Mira's fingertips grazing his palm, and the memory made a stir in his pants, luscious and sad. Around that same time, Mira was changing, all nervy jangle, her limbs spring-loaded. On a towel, her knees sliced at the air, discontented. Listening to her sister, she would thrust her long neck forward; the slightest sound or movement made her head snap. Coiled and constantly alert, it was as though she might leap from her skin, or from this world. In a dream, Ben had watched as Mira launched herself off the altar, her legs flush back, her popped throat bound for the sky.

"Dude!" his manager shouted, ducking in. Ben considered how easy it would be to take off his pimpled head with a swift kick of the door. Instead, he stashed his bag in a locker and

picked through a mob of sweaty kids to reach the hinged half gate that led behind the counter. Eddie's back was to Ben, operating the shake machine and pouring Goldfish into tiny cups at the same time.

Ben slapped an apron around his waist and cracked open a fresh mega-sized carton of Goldfish. "Help's here!"

Eddie swung around fast. Always ready for a fight. The cousins and siblings shared the same loosely wired nerves. Where Mira displayed the genetic reactivity throughout her body, and Connie in her hair-trigger laugh, Eddie was known for snapping. He once smacked Steven "Piggy" Pignataro for cupping Connie's butt when he was drunk, and Piggy still had to plug his ears when the T rumbled by.

"Geez, Benny, you took your time. Slap dogs on the turner and help me do drinks."

Ben quickly glanced around the snack bar space, desperate for a flash of white. Would the note be the same size as the first letter? The same color? In an envelope again? He felt Eddie's sharp eyes on him and turned fast, plugging in the relic electric turner. "Laidlaw didn't even warm up the turner for us," Ben mumbled, his face hot.

"Douche," Eddie said, settling, turning away from Ben.

The lunch crowd came in waves, dashing Ben's chance to search. They worked silently until the mob subsided, Eddie at the front end, taking orders and keeping the brats in line, and Ben working the back, pushing out hot dogs, Goldfish, and

sugary drinks. Ben wished more than anything that he'd come early and beat Eddie and the crowds. The action seemed to taint the place, making any note Mira might have hidden impossible to find. He began to doubt he was right. Maybe he was reading too much into it, getting too technical: did Mira consider a palm stroke "being together"? Was it even worthy of a memory? What was? Ben snuck a look at Eddie. What if Eddie had found the note before Ben arrived and threw it away? Or worse: what if he had it? Ben studied the back of Eddie's short neck. He needed to get Eddie talking. He needed to know.

Ben waited until the last customer slapped away in her flip-flops.

"Yo, Ed. Can I ask you a question?" Ben said lightly, washing his hands at the sink to avoid his face.

Eddie turned and slumped against the counter, guarded. "Depends on the question."

Ben dried his hands with a bar towel and softened his voice. "I was just gonna ask you how you were doing, man."

Eddie folded his overdeveloped forearms. Fresh ink circled his bicep. The last time Ben had worked with Eddie, there was one star. Now, two new blue stars connected by swirls circled his arm.

"Three stars," Ben said, pointing.

"Three stars together up in heaven now. Tight as they were in real life. They were saints, my cousins. *Mia sangue*. Don't

you believe anything you hear about them being depressed or nothing.”

“I don’t.”

Eddie went on as if he hadn’t heard. “They were fine. I mean, they were sad, about Concetta. We all were. Are. Devastated.” He rubbed the back of his neck and bulged his eyes. “But not enough to do *that*.”

Ben didn’t take offense to Eddie getting his back up. He knew there were lots of people interested in the accident for the wrong reasons. He needed Eddie to know he wasn’t one of them, but Eddie was too raw to remember that Ben was one of the good ones.

“Anyone who knew them knows it was an accident. It’s good your family’s got church and all. And Mr. Falso,” Ben faltered. “I mean, it’s got to help. To have a higher power, to look to, to look *up* to, when terrible things happen . . .”

Eddie pushed off the counter and moved to the electric turner to spin the hot dogs. “What do I know? I ain’t been to church since . . . whenever.”

Ben knew he meant Connie’s funeral. The whole thing had been a shit show, from his own parents’ uptight, robotic appearance to Eddie’s mom on Xanax propped like a rag doll in a metal folding chair to Eddie’s dad smoking on the curb with the men, including his brother-in-law Frank Cillo, cracking knuckles and talking about throwing a Molotov cocktail on the front porch of Connie’s doctor’s mansion. Half the guys

in the neighborhood went just to see the Cillo girls dressed up. Francesca wore a black scoop-neck top with a skirt, like a ballerina. Mira's dress was simple and sheer around the hem, and it whirled when she walked up to the casket and settled in a flutter on her calves when she kneeled down; Ben remembered that. They squared their shoulders toward each other, talking to no one, not even relatives, their faces pale ash. Mira strayed from Francesca's side once, to rearrange a disordered vase of pink-and-yellow-sprayed carnations from the Parks Department, slipping the flowers into different positions with meticulous care. She never acknowledged Ben, which seemed okay—that was how they did things. It was acceptable for a Lattanzi to attend a Villela wake, but grabbing Mira Cillo and crushing her against his chest in front of her father and his parents was not.

Both girls stayed out of the line of relatives that led away from the open casket, in which Connie was perfectly intact, if unrecognizable. Ben's head had throbbed from the masses of stargazer lilies, cheap, since it was Easter season, their gaudy, pink blooms clobbering everyone with a medicinal funk. And though Ben was sure he hadn't brushed against them, he found yellow powder on his sleeve. The second Ben's parents paid their stiff condolences and left, Ben bolted and accepted a hit off Kyle's joint right in the parking lot.

There had been no funeral for Francesca and Mira. Only a private cremation.



Ben wedged hot dog buns into cardboard rectangles. “I wanted to say. I know my dad and your uncle had their differences. But we feel your pain.”

“Benny, what are you talking about?” Eddie said, shaking his head.

Ben’s stomach tightened.

“Not for nothing, but ain’t no one’s thinking about the Lattanzi-Cillo feud right now. In fact, maybe it’s time all that crap went away,” Eddie said, tonguing hot dogs aggressively into buns.

Ben agreed gruffly. The unfairness of Mr. Cillo warming to the Lattanzis after Mira’s death was too much to think on. “Sorry, man. I didn’t mean to make it about that.”

Eddie kept his back to Ben, his shoulders relaxing slightly. “I know you didn’t. You’re one of the good ones. Guys are easier, you know. Uncle Frank’s a guy’s guy. He didn’t know what to do with girls. Feminine protection and mood swings and shit. It had to be hard. You think you’re doing the right thing: treat them like glass, keep the dogs away, protect them, hold them real close. And still this happens. Sometimes I think this family’s cursed. Like the Kennedys or something.”

A kid waved a dollar over the counter. “Can I have a Ring Pop?”

Eddie threw the kid a lollipop. “Suck it.” He moved to the fridge and pulled out a mesh bag of lemons and drew a short knife from the drawer under the counter.

“Nah, you’re not cursed.” Ben pretended to wipe down the sales counter and peeked over the ledge, searching for a note tacked underneath. “The truth will come out,” he murmured distractedly.

Eddie froze, his knife hovering over the lemons. He turned his head. “Ain’t no truth to come out. They fell.”

Ben stepped forward. “God, everything I say keeps coming out wrong. I’m not thinking straight. Tell you the truth, Eddie, I loved them.”

Eddie’s shoulders fell. “I know you did. Nobody knows why any of this happened.” He let the lemon roll away, signed the cross over his chest, and looked up. “Only The Man knows.”

Their shift went along predictably, each falling to his own thoughts. Ben was glad for the quiet, scanning his eyes over every nook in the snack bar. If Eddie was paying attention, he might have noticed that Ben was taking unusual care, lifting the rubber dividers in the cutlery drawers, dusting behind massive plastic mayonnaise tubs, and inspecting the back of the money drawer. Eddie sliced more lemons than they would need for ten pitchers of lemonade. Ben enabled his distraction, grabbing a two-pound bag of sugar and three fat plastic pitchers and filling them with water from the tap. Eventually, Ben left Eddie with his lemons and tended the dogs. Rolling the dogs on the turner, he meditated on where he’d gone wrong in his calculations. Mira’s secret note would not be found; Ben

had checked every inch of the space. His mind skipped to the next place they were alone, and wondered when and how fast he could escape the snack bar to get there. His dead ex-girlfriend was watching from somewhere above, he was sure of it, and he was failing this task. As he gazed over the empty counter, his mind played a terrible trick. He saw Mira in her father's shirt, soaked not from the pool but from the quarry lake. Ben shivered. Pretend-Mira smiled and handed him a dripping dollar bill.

The dollar.

Ben dropped the dogs and walked swiftly to the tiny hall that led to the back pantry. On the cork board, among tacked-up messages begging for more hours, mysterious keys, and a coupon for Dunkin' Donuts was Mira's dollar. He had pinned it on the board that day, got busted by Mira doing it, and hadn't cared. It seemed right, a secret reminder every day of what he was busting his butt for: eyes on the prize and such. He lifted the corner and found her note underneath, folded into a delicate sliver. His fingers fumbled, and it fell to the ground, light, achingly slow.

Ben snatched it off the sticky floor and cleared his throat. "Eddie, you good?" he called shakily. "I gotta go to the can!"

Eddie grunted over a mountain of chopped lemons. Ben slipped off his apron and sidled from behind the counter, ducking into the locker room. He landed hard on the bench and peeled apart the tiny folds.

*Daddy tells Francesca that it's all in her head.  
But I've seen it happening with my own eyes for years.  
Now, she bleeds.*

Ben's face burned. He thought of what Eddie had said about Mr. Cillo living among all that feminine protection. He didn't know what felt worse, reading about Francesca getting her period or the way it made him mad at Mira, like she was trying to shame him from beyond. He set the scrap of paper on the bench, walked to the sink and splashed his face with water. His reflection in the cloudy mirror said defeated, the butt of a bad joke. Francesca was a sore spot for Ben. She knew about him and Mira, and though she never outwardly acknowledged it—its futility made it inconsequential—he knew she didn't approve. That overdeveloped jaw she slid back and forth, a judge-y, clicking noise that sounded like *tsk, tsk*. The idea that Mira would waste a note on Francesca pissed him off.

What was all in Francesca's head, anyway? Ben didn't want to know. He pulled hard at the corners of his eyes as Eddie screamed.

The door swung open and Eddie shouldered in, staring at his hand swathed in a crimson dishrag. Their manager ran behind, yelling, "You may nev-er swear in front of the guests!"

Eddie raised his good hand to slam the door in the manager's face.

His face was the shade of a ping-pong ball. Ben yanked his

shirt over his head and wrapped it around the dishrag, pushing Eddie gently onto the bench. Eddie stared at Ben, his mouth a tight line.

“Can you speak?” Ben said, squeezing the mass of cloth.

Eddie whispered, “It stings bad.”

Ben matched his whisper. “Because of the lemon. You gotta put pressure on it. I know it hurts. But unless you do, the blood won’t stop.”

The manager busted back in. “I called an ambulance, ungrateful as you are.”

Eddie rose to say something and fell backward. Ben caught him with a hand on his back.

“No way am I taking no ambulance to the hospital,” Eddie gasped. “That’s the last thing my mother needs.”

“Is an ambulance really necessary?” Ben said.

“Are you gonna drive him there?” the manager spat, his voice pitched up. “Besides, someone’s gotta stay and clean up. For all I know, Villela left a digit on the cutting board. The place looks like a slaughterhouse.”

“Fine!” Ben yelled. “You man the counter, I’ll sit with him and wait. Stick up the cleaners’ sign.”

Ben knew he was treading a fine line: nothing was off-limits for his manager. Just six years older than Ben, he was an immature toad, and the only person in town sadistic enough to use Ben’s status as “touched” to keep him in line. Taunts of “delicate sensibilities” and “having issues” were whispered for

Eddie to miss, and thus not report to Ben's ad hoc protector, Kyle Kulik, which would ensure a good tire slashing of the manager's Corolla.

The manager blinked. "What. Did you just say to me?"

Something blazed inside Ben. He smiled ferociously, let his eyes loosen and jitter. The manager backed into the door. He tucked his chin into his chest, swearing he would never again hire a messed-up psycho, and left.

Ben watched the door until he heard the scrape of the sign on its hook, then rose.

"You're gonna be all right, Eddie boy," Ben said, flinging open lockers until he found a pile of thin white towels, which he tore into strips that shed dust. He wrapped them around Eddie's wrist, then circled the palm where the knife had made a clean diagonal slice toward the pinkie. He counted Eddie's fingers: 9.5, since the pinkie was severed near-through. He used the strips to tack the finger back together tight. When no blood showed through, he pushed Eddie's head between his knees and rubbed his back, lowering his own head against a wave of nausea. Through the slats, Ben spotted a flash of white. Mira's note had gotten knocked off the bench, and was right under Eddie's nose, if he was looking.

"Close your eyes, man," Ben said.

Eddie groaned.

"The palm's a bad place to get cut, that's all," Ben yammered, eyeing the note. "Like a nose or a lip, it goes and goes.

Might not be using that hand in basketball for a while, but you'll be fine. Maybe keep those eyes closed."

Ben studied the mummified hand to distract himself from the note. He was impressed by his own handiwork. It hadn't been easy to cover the palm in a way that kept the slice closed. Or the finger on. He hoped it would stay on. Maybe he should call Kyle. Where was the stupid ambulance? Ben knew it could be tricky to get across Bismuth in the middle of the summer with the endless construction, and then the long ride out to Powder Neck meant they might be waiting a while. Ben placed his hand over Eddie's and squeezed.

Eddie moaned.

"Gotta stem the bleeding," Ben murmured.

Eddie swooned forward. Ben caught the collar of his polo shirt and righted him, slapping his cheek lightly. "Eddie? Eddie, listen, stay with me!"

"I'm coming, Concetta Marie. It's your big brother, Eddie. I'm coming to take care of you . . ."

"Jesus, Eddie! Listen: Do you remember how funny Connie was? How much she looked up to you, and the girls? Remember that time the three of them had a yard sale and Connie sold your special 1975 Carlton Fisk World Series card to the creepy dude with the handlebar mustache for twenty-five cents?"

He shook his head and laughed anemically. "I wanted to kill her. She didn't know."

“And the girls got mad at you, like you were the one who did something wrong? They were ready to lynch you for yelling at her! All for one, they said. You guys talk about blood. Those girls were Connie’s oxygen, man. She wouldn’t have wanted to be around if they were gone. It’s a terrible thing to say, but Connie loved her cousins so hard, I don’t think she could’ve handled it.” Ben could hardly believe what was coming out of his mouth, but it seemed to help, so he kept going.

“Maybe not,” Eddie whispered, rocking over his thumb.

“Sometimes stuff happens for a reason. Maybe they’re better off in heaven, together.”

“Ouch,” Eddie whispered.

“Ouch,” Ben said. “They’re angels looking down on you right now, and you’re gonna be fine.”

“You hurt one, you hurt all of them. That’s what they said.” Eddie shifted uncomfortably. “Truth be told though? She could be kind of annoying sometimes.”

“Nah. She was a cute kid.” Connie had been barely a year younger than either of them, but Ben went with it. “A real cutie.”

“She wanted to please people. Delicate, too. Not just her condition. She was sensitive. Easily led and easily hurt, a bad combination, my mom always said.” Eddie coughed thickly into his swaddled hand, the signature hacky cough that always made Ben wonder. In basketball, he’d stop and spit lugeys, two or three times a game, into trash barrels in the gym or on the



asphalt. He wasn't nearly as bad as Connie, where any real exercise would send her into spasms, but Ben wondered if there was something rogue about the Villela genes, where doing ordinary things made them implode.

Ben shook the image from his brain. "Led?"

Eddie's lips were turning blue, and he trembled. Ben snatched a dirty towel from the warped particleboard shelf and wrapped it around Eddie's shoulders and gave him a loose, one-armed hug. Sirens wailed in the distance. Ben figured they had reached the breakaway stretch and would arrive in less than a minute.

Eddie slumped into Ben. "Connie wouldn't like me saying that."

"Nah, she knows you loved her."

"And she loved those girls. They were the sisters she never had. I shouldn't have said that, about her being led. When she died up there on the hill, they were just having fun."

It seemed to Ben that Mira and Francesca were always leading Connie away from things that could hurt. Like stopping her from heading behind the boathouse with two dudes. Running interference between her and Piggy, both drunk. Just the way she died—running after the girls, forgetting her EpiPen—smacked of Connie's refusal to be left behind, and her recklessness.

Eddie slumped forward.

"They're coming. Hold on, buddy."

“It’s like I’m bein pun’shed. You eva feel that way? Like you’re bein pun’shed?”

Ben didn’t like the way Eddie was slurring his words. “Punched? You’re talking gibberish. Try and relax. That siren’s for you.” Ben tapped his sneaker on the floor, eyes sweeping the locker room desperately. He was starting to think Eddie might be the next Bismuth teen casualty.

“Not punched, knucklehead,” Eddie whispered. “Punished. For not having protected them good enough.”

“Shh now.”

“You. Them.” Eddie shook his head hard at the floor. “I could’ve protected you, too, but I didn’t. I didn’t tell when I knew.”

“That was a million years ago.” Ben didn’t like where Eddie was heading. Coach Freck had been in jail for seven years. His list of baseball players he touched—and Ben’s place on it—was old news; Ben was better now, and Eddie would never have said anything if he wasn’t half out of his mind with blood loss.

“You’re talking nonsense,” Ben said, a little roughly.

Eddie’s head tipped up, and he held Ben’s eye. The door banged open and a girl and a guy, paramedics not much older than Ben and Eddie, charged in, the guy pushing a wheelchair. The girl was small and pretty and grim looking, with a hard fringe of honey-colored bangs and a turned-up nose. The girl felt Eddie’s pulse while her partner kicked out the feet of the wheelchair.

Eddie raised his good hand weakly. “I ain’t walking out of here in that.”

The guy shoved Ben out of the way and lifted Eddie underneath his shoulders. “You ain’t walkin’,” the girl said, wrapping a blood pressure cuff around his bicep. Eddie’s head lolled. Ben followed them out, suddenly conscious of his own shirtlessness, which seemed disturbing even though they were at a pool. He avoided the eyes of the mothers whispering “Villela” like an answer, or a curse. Little kids stared at Ben’s ribs. He looked down and saw blood smears across his torso like war paint. Walking behind the paramedics in their navy pants and white button-down shirts, Ben felt like a savage. He took mental inventory of the gawkers’ feet: tan toes, wrinkled toes, fat smooth kid toes. When the ambulance whined away, Ben wandered back into the locker room. Under the bench, Mira’s tiny note was speckled with blood. He snatched his nylon bag out of the locker and tucked the note inside, his thoughts flashing to a story where a man sewed a leather bag for a woman who carried her heart outside her body. Ben had found it hard to read—the descriptions of the heart made him gag—but it was exactly the kind of bag in which he could keep Mira’s letter (and the notes he would find. Oh, the notes!) protected, near his heart.

His cheeks grew hot at his own familiar dorkiness. Where the Cillo sisters made other guys behave worse than they actually were, Mira made Ben want to commit heroic acts.

Ben slunk back to the snack bar. Because they had no more shirts, the manager ordered Ben home immediately, and he waited for his mother in the parking lot, leaning against the plaster pelican with the Bismuth Boat Club sign in its beak, hugging his elbows to hide the blood.

## SEPTEMBER, 2015

Mira rolled off the bed and into the bathroom, unwinding her arms, pajama pant cuffs swishing above her ankles. She shifted on her hip and sighed.

Francesca had been scraping for close to an hour. She tore the brush through her hair, ripping from the roots, creating tangles. Mira thought of other times she'd seen her sister in the same trance. Like when their father found the tablet Francesca had borrowed from school, and she'd gone glassy-eyed under his hollering, tearing sheets of skin from the sides of her fingernails. And when he blocked her from getting her driver's permit, biting the insides of both cheeks so hard they swelled, which made her look pouty. Even further back, after their mother died, and Bambi Maggiore appeared in the doorway with a pan of lasagna. They'd sat on the couch watching their father's ears turn red, Bambi's drugstore Vanilla Musk invading the room. Mira had watched Francesca file her fingernails into points and make fists, leaving four purple marks on the heel of each hand.

And though she knew the answer, Mira asked, “What’s wrong?”

The black nest of hair in the bristles grew.

“You’re going to be bald,” Mira warned.

The brush caught a snag. Francesca’s mouth twisted as she yanked. Mira eased Francesca’s hand from the handle. “Let me,” she said, tugging the clump. She cupped her sister’s shoulder and skimmed the brush lightly over the tangle.

Francesca stiffened.

“I’m trying to be gentle.” Mira set the brush on the slim edge of the pedestal sink. “Here, I’ll use my fingers.”

Mira weaved her fingers into her sister’s hair. Francesca relaxed slightly, her arms falling to her sides, eyes half closed, exhausted. Mira caught a bright red flash, a trick of light in the mirror, she thought, until she saw the tendrils of blood trailing down Francesca’s lax fingers.

Mira sucked in her breath. “You cut yourself!” she gasped, pointing into the mirror.

Francesca raised her hands, fingers curled into claws, twisting at the wrists. The blood reversed direction and curled back on itself, past the palm and the wrists and down the blue insides of her arms.

“What did you touch?”

“Nothing! I didn’t touch anything!” Francesca bent her elbows and gazed about her waist, as though admiring a pretty dress. “Am I bleeding from anywhere else?”

Mira shook her head. “Just your hands. Let me look at them.”

Francesca offered her palms to Mira, who lowered her head over the dark puddles. A thin stream bled from identical holes in her palms and crested the creases of her cocked wrists.

Francesca started to shake. “It keeps coming.”

Mira grasped her hands and squinted. She could not place where the bleeding started, or how such a thing could happen without cause, and she blinked to clear her vision, but nothing changed.

“Make it stop!” Francesca cried, her voice warbling.

Mira dropped her hands and shook a towel from its metal hoop with a hollow clang. She pressed it between Francesca’s fists, squeezing the tops between hers. As the towel grew bright with blood, a sticky warmth inside Mira’s own palms made her pull away.

“What?” Francesca squeaked.

“The blood is coming from both sides,” Mira sputtered.

Francesca swayed, her face draining of color.

“I’m getting Daddy!” Mira said.

“He’ll think I did it,” Francesca said.

Mira’s forehead shot up. She hadn’t considered what Daddy might think: that Francesca had tried to do what their mother had done, but a nonnarcotic version, messy and overblown. All that was missing were razor blades in the sink.

“Then stick your fingers in the holes,” Mira cried. “In the palms. Do it.”

Francesca nodded mutely and let the towel fall, dropping her middle fingers delicately to the centers of her palms.

“Press harder,” Mira breathed. “It’s not going to stop unless you press harder.”

Francesca bit on her lip and balled her fists. “There’s so much blood. It’s not going to stop. You need to plug both sides.”

Mira dug her fingers into the pulsing stars on the backs of her sister’s hands, taking jackhammer breaths to stem the shock that was catching up with her. “Oh, Francesca.” She leaned in until their foreheads touched. “What now?”

Their heads snapped at footbeats on the stairs, slow and reluctant. Their father usually receded from his daughters’ before-school manipulations, which were fraught with higher emotions than other times of day. But this morning, there had been no drawers slamming, no rumble of hairdryers, only whispers: Francesca’s, harsh; Mira’s, pleading. He cleared his throat. More whispers, rushed. He pushed open the door, eyes still cast down.

“Time for school!” he called.

“Daddy!” Mira cried.

He gaped at the sight of his girls attached at the hands, blood between them. Mira was never to see their father in his bathrobe. It was an unwritten rule of their house, one of many

bodily-related vagaries, like when he showered, or what he slept in. Mira was surprised by her overwhelming wish that he cover himself, put on his uniform—suit, shiny wingtips, black socks—so that she didn't have to see him in this state. She tried to look away from his body, barrel-chested in his robe, thin legs below. He was her beloved dad, but somehow she was disturbed by his swollen parts. What was it about Mira that gave her weird, out-of-place thoughts? A normal girl didn't hear the T coming and back away from the urge to leap onto the rails. She didn't cradle a baby and consider how easy it would be to hold its nose for a minute, maybe two. Didn't know the smell of gypsy moth caterpillars when they burned in an aluminum watering can filled with lighter fluid. Sometimes the only thing that stopped Mira was her mother's voice in her head, reminding her that where she was, it was quiet.

He pushed past Mira and scooped the towel off the floor, blotting Francesca's hands clumsily. Mira thought it was not like their father, to seem clumsy, but Francesca wasn't making it easy for him, twisting and drawing away.

"Should I call an ambulance?" Mira said, her voice small.

His cheeks flapped as he shook his head. "Why, baby? Why would you do this to yourself? Why?"

"I didn't slit my wrists!" Francesca said. She flipped her hands to expose the backs and threw them under his nose. "I have holes, Daddy! I have holes in my hands!"



He held her hands, turning them over and over, examining them for what seemed like an eternity to Mira.

"I didn't make them," Francesca whimpered. "They were there when I looked down."

He raised his eyes. "Do they hurt?"

Francesca nodded, wincing. As their stare deepened, her wince dissolved until her face was neutral.

"I'm going to ask you again. Do they hurt?" he said.

She shook her head no.

"Good. That's good. Mira: get the long Ace bandages from my bathroom, under the sink," he said, never dropping contact with Francesca's eyes.

Mira ran into her parents' bathroom and dug around the tiny vanity, knocking over old bottles of her mother's hairspray, nozzles encased in amber globules. It was touching that Daddy kept these relics, but it also seemed sort of lazy to Mira. She found the bandages and ran back to find Francesca with her face buried inside their father's shoulder, his big hand cradling the back of her head. Mira felt the familiar sting of envy, and then shame. Francesca was her blood.

"Daddy," Mira whispered.

He released Francesca and unfurled the bandages, wrapping them swiftly around her hands. Francesca cried softly.

"I'm sorry, baby, but we have to stop the flow," he said.

"I can't go to school like this," Francesca cried.

“You’re not going anywhere until we sort this out,” he replied.

Mira crept closer, breathing in her father’s smell of coffee and eggs, aftershave and sleep.

“Are we going to the hospital?” Francesca sniffled.

“No!” he said, catching himself and saying more softly, “No.”

“Dr. Amendola, then?” Mira said.

He drew Francesca close to him, shooting Mira a pointed look past her sister’s head that meant *yes and stop talking now*. Mira frowned. He pushed Francesca away and held her chin.

“You’re going to be okay, do you understand? You’re going to go downstairs and Mira is going to make you a nice breakfast. Orange juice, too. I’m going into my office to make some phone calls,” he said.

Francesca broke into sobs. “But what if it starts up again?”

“We’ve got it under control. Don’t use your hands for anything for a while.” He steered her into the hall and down the stairs. Mira followed. When they got to the bottom landing, he turned before his office door. “It’s nowhere else, right?”

Francesca looked back at him, her face blanched. “The blood? No!”

“Good.” He shut the door.

Francesca slipped into the red leather banquette. Mira opened the refrigerator and spoke quietly into the sterile space.

She needed to prepare her sister, who hated doctors keenly. “I think he’s calling Dr. Amendola.”

“Daddy wouldn’t,” Francesca said sharply.

Mira flinched, tossing her father’s cold eggs and toast from his plate into the trash. She dropped fresh slices into the toaster and topped his mug with sludge from the pot, staring at the ombre coffee as it swished inside, catching the light, gradations of black and brown. As she swept away the crumbs from around the toaster, she felt the grainy sharpness of each tiny morsel under her the soft side of her pinkie. The toast popped exuberantly, it seemed, and she placed it on a plate, dragging the knife across the rough surface, the butter melting fast into sharply defined crevices. She looked over her shoulder at Francesca, her head bowed above her bandaged hands crossed in front, prayerful. Mira had noticed that in times of shock, life’s details became overly distinct, scoring themselves into her memory. She first noticed it the morning after her mother didn’t wake up. Her ordinary world took on a surreal quality, with higher colors, textures, and distinctions. It was a cruel trick her mind played, because those moments were the ones she wished to rush past, yet somehow they were made more vivid.

In those times, she’d hear her mother’s voice too, commands reminding her of thing she already knew.

*You can make it stop, Mira.*

Though she heard her mother's voice less often now, which made her relieved and sad at the same time.

She pushed a plate of toast toward Francesca, who shook her hair about her face. "I'm a freak," she said.

Mira exhaled through her teeth. She flicked the gas under the tin teakettle (a gorgeous gust of gas and flame) and disappeared into the dining room. From the built-in china cabinet she chose two tea cups and matching saucers. Mira thought she could see the brushstrokes in the gold filigree pattern encircling each cup. She balanced them on top of each other with the saucers in between, china tinkling as she walked.

Francesca sobbed again.

The teakettle whistled. Mira ran to lift the pot and the whistle died. As she poured steaming water into the tiny cups, Mira wished the water would move faster. Anything so that she could finish her pretty tableau and make Francesca feel better. Mira dropped a tea bag into each cup and stepped back swiftly, a small cock of her head. She moved the tag of one cup to the opposite side and stood back again, frowning. She disappeared into the pantry and returned with a box of sugar cubes, which she stacked in a glass bowl, and poured milk into a matching glass creamer. She scanned the kitchen and settled on a cutting board, on which she set the cups, sugar, and milk.

Francesca blotted her nose on the inside of her shoulder and reached for her tea.

"Wait," Mira said. "Let me serve you."

Francesca sniffed. "I can serve myself."

"Let me serve you." Mira used a small gold spoon to deposit two squares of sugar and placed the cup in front of Francesca.

"We're not supposed to have caffeine," said Francesca.

"It's mint tea. It's calming."

"Daddy said I should have juice."

Mira placed the gold spoon in front of her. "There is no juice."

Francesca stirred her tea awkwardly. "Do you think I tried to . . . you know? Do it, and I don't remember?"

"Of course not," Mira said. "That's crazy. Besides, there were no instruments."

"By instruments you mean razor blades," Francesca said.

"You ought to drink your tea," Mira said, marching to the refrigerator and pulling out a bowl of hard-boiled eggs. She cracked one and peeled it, washed it and set it on a shot glass. Mira wrinkled her nose at the smell. She placed the egg next to the tea. "And eat. Please, Francesca." Mira thought of feeding Francesca, after she found their mother. Right before Dr. Amendola was about to insert the feeding tube, Francesca had allowed her sister to pop a bite of yellow custard into her mouth, for show. No one but Connie understood that Francesca could fast for months and still go on, gaunt and spiny, but herself in most ways.

"Salt?"

"Stop trying to make everything pretty and perfect. What

are we going to tell Connie?" Francesca pushed the egg away. It fell off its perch and rolled across the table.

Mira set the egg back on its perch. "You don't have to explain. I will. She'll want to come over right after school."

"What if I don't want Connie knowing?"

"Connie knows about your episodes. This is just another one."

"She'll make such a big deal out of it. She's my blood, and I love her, but she gets so worked up."

"Connie's in awe of your talents. Besides, your talents make her special by association," Mira said, thinking, *even if no one knows but us*.

But Francesca ignored the gap in Mira's logic. Instead, she snorted. "Special."

"Gifted, then," Mira replied.

Francesca raised her hands. "You can't even call this a gift. A gift is something you use for good. The birds, the languages, the fasting. At least those things aren't horrid. And I can hide them. Seem like a normal sixteen-year-old. Holes in my hands are not something I can hide."

Their father's voice came, rushed and insistent, behind his closed office door. Francesca mashed her cheek against her swathed palm and stared through the kitchen doorway. "Who's he talking to? And why can't he talk in front of us?" she murmured, piqued.

"Eat. Before I go." Mira said.

“Don’t leave me home alone. Staying home is so depressing.” Francesca covered her head with her hands. “I’m a freak. This will become one more reason for Daddy to keep me locked in the house.” She dropped her head to the table with a thump and tented her forearms around her ears, shoulders rising with fresh sobs.

“You are not a freak.” Mira came beside her and leaned over, pressing her body over her sister’s heaving back, as if to stamp her with her calm. “This new gift only makes you more special.”

“Please stop using those two words!” Francesca cried, muffled.

Mira turned her head to the side, her sister’s hair cool on her cheek, and thought for a moment. “Touched.”

Francesca’s body stilled underneath her.

From his office, their father’s voice grew excited. Mira straightened and Francesca wiped her tears, both faces to the door.

Francesca straightened her neck. “Shh!”

“I didn’t say anything.” Mira said.

Francesca slipped from her seat and ran lightly across the linoleum tile to her father’s office. She pressed her ear to the door.

“Francesca, get away!” Mira whispered, harsh.

Francesca’s head snapped, eyes bulged. “He said Nick!”

Mira wasn’t sure. It made no sense, that her father should

call Mr. Falso about Francesca's problem that seemed so personal. But she was used to agreeing with her when it was easier. Her best skill was being Francesca's ideal audience, of saying exactly what her older sister needed to hear. It was a talent she had cultivated through years of fielding Francesca's insecurities, nearly always related to the veracity of someone's love for her (this boy, their father, Mira herself). Mira knew the truth: Francesca's heart was so big and she loved so hard that it was nearly impossible for anyone to love her back as fiercely. Mira had often pictured Francesca's heart—overgrown, muscular, pulsing—barely contained inside her narrow chest. So, when they talked, Mira never asked, "Are you certain?" Rather, she asked for details that served to make Francesca's vision more real: the color of his cheeks, the set of his shoulders, the smile on his lips. Anything to keep Francesca calm, anything to keep her near. Because nothing frightened Mira more than when Francesca moved away from her into that space inside herself and went dim.

Mira inched toward Francesca. "Then I'm certain it has to be Mr. Falso." She brushed her older sister's hair behind her ear and whispered inside it. "There's no other Nick."