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Sierra Faye Sitzes

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# **GRAVITIES**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Sierra Faye Sitzes

May 2016

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## **GRAVITIES**

English

Missouri State University, May 2016

Master of Arts

Sierra Faye Sitzes

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is an attempt to explore, through the genre of literary fiction, the influence of hometowns and childhood friendships and how the power of these entities result in either an escape or capture. My thesis is the first two parts of my three part novel, *Gravities*, and introduces the non-linear structure of the narrative as well as set up the antagonist, Charlise Rosengren, for her both literal and figurative fall. The novel's three protagonists—Mae Silva, June Silva, and Anna Spence—are each given a perspective in their own sections containing scenes that exemplify the power both Charlise and their hometown of Fairview, Missouri has over them. My objective is to present a variety of contemporary and complex relationships centered around a common antagonist and contribute to the literary discourse of multi-voiced narratives.

**KEYWORDS:** non-linear, power, perspective, escape, capture

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Richard Neumann, PhD  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University

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By

Sierra Faye Sitzes

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I dedicate this thesis to my family for their constant support and to Thomas for his  
constant patience.

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## IN THE HEDONIST'S ORBIT

Similar to the novels of Czech writer Milan Kundera, the title of my novel, *Gravities*, is an allusion to the work's primary themes. The narrative follows three protagonists: sisters Mae and June Silva and their friend Anna Spence, and the ways their lives are dictated by Charlise Rosengren, an attractive hedonist whose actions push and pull the characters around her and in and out of their hometown of Fairview, Missouri. These two elements, Charlise's person and Fairview, act as the central points of gravity which either trap or release the characters.

My early life, specifically my school days, were controlled by boys and girls with hedonistic tendencies. These people maintained their power over others by quiet manipulation and superficial compassion. I have always resented these years and for a long time blamed my hometown as the cause for my miserable experiences rather than the people who were directly involved. Now, separated from that place and occasionally infected with the desire to return to my family and that quiet, slower life, I have been preoccupied with those events and the ways they have influenced me as a person and as a writer.

The town of Fairview is mirrored off of my own hometown of Farmington Missouri. They are both located in the same geographical position, have the same population, and the same tendency to hold on to those who grew up there. Instead of naming my hometown directly, I chose "Fairview" because it is the seventh most popular town name in the United States of America. More than half of the country's states hold a Fairview, each different, but similar in their insignificance. Plain and average and yet



difficult to escape, Fairview, though initially introduced as a point of visitation for almost every character (June is the exception), becomes the more desirable point of gravity to settle on.

The structure for these complex exchanges of power in my novel is taken from Lubomir Doležel's theories on constellations of power. In his book, *Heterocosmica*, Doležel presents his theory of agential constellations (or constellations of power) as symmetrical (each character possessing an equal power over one another) or asymmetrical (one or more characters possessing more power over the others) (98). The novel begins as an asymmetrical constellation, Charlise being the most dominant, the driving force behind the tension between characters and the major crises in the work. In the opening scene we see Charlise assert her power over Mae:

Mae made the proposition over coffee: Germany. All expenses paid. No strings. (Thank you, Aunt Lois.) For an hour she talked Berlin and Munich. She promised a tour of Dachau and a weekend close to Denmark in Sylt on the North Sea. Charlise: indifferent. This game of dissimulation was something the two women had developed and perfected together when they were teenagers. Its purpose, this act against looking eager, was to coerce the inviter to turn their invitation into a plea and for its acceptance to be an honor bestowed by the invitee.

Doležel also writes in the same chapter that “communication is an exchange of semiotic acts and, like physical interaction, is reciprocal and can be either symmetrical or asymmetrical” (98). The dialogue between Charlise and the protagonists in Part One is representative of this concept of asymmetry. Charlise is always dominant. She often interrupts conversations to shift attention back on herself or remains silent in order to do the same thing. This can be seen again in the opening scene when Bryan is asking Mae about her travels and her book. Not only does Charlise cut in to shift the attention on herself, but also to criticize Mae openly:

“I saw those pictures of you guys in Utah,” James said to Mae. “Did you like it? June said it was incredible.”

“It was fine.” Drunk and recognizing more people in the bar from their years together, Mae was casual with her glass of water, holding it by the rim and drinking from under her hand like it was whiskey. “Hot though. Reminded me of Peru a little.”

“I forgot you spent time down there.”

“Yeah. Almost two years.”

Charlise, who had been attempting to talk with a NASCAR-distracted Bryan, cut in.

“Don’t ask her too many questions about it. Once she gets started—you’ll have to hear about *the* book.” Charlise brought her thin hand up underneath her chin and mimed a cut. The clicking of her tongue echoed on the rim on her PBR can.

“I wasn’t going to talk about the book,” Mae said.

“You wrote a book?” Bryan asked.

A short pause followed his question. Mae was used to his voice being hushed and lower, keeping anyone but his subject out of the conversation, but when directed at her it was clipped. Intentional.

“Yeah. A memoir.”

“It’s good,” June said without looking up from her salad.

“Will you try to publish it?” Bryan asked.

“I’d read it,” James said.

“From what I hear, it needs more work.” Charlise drained her PBR and turned to get Todd’s attention.

This dialogue is not only exemplary of Charlise’s interruption and vindictive behavior, but also of how others react to her attacks: passively, which enhances the asymmetrical shape of the novel’s beginning agential constellation. However, the power shifts as the plot progresses.

In his novel, *Tender Is the Night*, F. Scott Fitzgerald also begins with an asymmetrical constellation of power. The protagonist, Dick Diver, is convinced and chooses to marry Nicole Warren, a psychiatric patient of his whose family promises him financial stability with the marriage. Until about half way through the book, Dick is in control of Nicole whose emotionally unstable and traumatic behavior is triggered suddenly without any warning. As the plot continues Nicole gains power over herself and Dick slowly succumbs to alcoholism and the advances of the young actress, Rosemary.

The novel ends with Nicole in a new, healthy relationship advancing her reputation and remaining in Europe. Dick is arrested, disgraced, and disappears back to the United States where he is never heard from again.

The shift in power relations is similar in *Gravities*. Charlise maintains power over June, Mae, and especially Anna, but after her fall off the wall surrounding Rothenburg, Germany, her power begins to weaken. The protagonists each reach their epiphanies which involve their own constellations shifting to support the self as their most powerful influence. These movements of power are also paralleled by both the physical journeys of the characters throughout the narrative and on their mental and/or developmental journeys as well.

In their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the relationship between lines of flight, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. Characters are always “becoming,” and these changes can be attributed to their movement, or lines of flight. These lines of flight follow the character’s physical journey and dictate whether or not a character is deterritorialized, an experience of escape, or reterritorialized, an experience of capture (586). In *The Cambridge Companion to Deleuze*, Daniel Smith defines deterritorialization as “the movement or process by which something escapes or parts from a given territory, where a territory can be a system of any kind: conceptual, linguistic, social, or affective” (208). The literal border of Fairview’s city limits defines the town as the major territory of the novel. All four characters grew up in Fairview and it is the general consensus of its society that the most important thing a person can do is escape, or deterritorialize. Those who are captured (reterritorialized) are seen as weak, their choice to stay a compromise.

Deleuze, in his essay “What Children Say,” also presents the idea of cognitive mapping. Much like *A Thousand Plateaus*, this essay argues a character’s mental and/or developmental lines of flight, what Deleuze calls “trajectories,” throughout a narrative inevitably lead to what he calls “becoming,” or the characters’ cognitive understanding of themselves at their resolution. He writes, “The unconscious no longer deals with persons and objects, but with trajectories and becomings; it is no longer an unconscious of commemoration but one of mobilization, an unconscious whose objects take flight rather than remaining buried in the ground” (3). I have structured the cognitive maps and the lines of flight presented in *Gravities* to mirror one another. The clearest example of this structure is the end of each part in the novel where each character, beginning with Anna and ending with June, reach a similar epiphany: the realization of Charlise’s real character and negative influence. The two forms of character development are inseparable because their deterritorialization or reterritorialization affects not only where they travel or settle to, but also what they “become.”

The characters’ lines of flight can be easily mapped (chronologically): June starts in Fairview, goes to Vegas, and then ends in Fairview; Anna starts in Fairview, travels to Canada, goes back to Fairview, and ends in Canada; Charlise starts in Fairview, travels to Germany, goes back to Fairview and ends in the west; Mae, excluding her travel history before the given timeline of the novel, starts in Peru, goes to New York, returns home to Fairview, travels to Vegas, returns to Fairview, travels to Germany, returns to Fairview, and ends in Bali. Their cognitive maps are a little more complex.

The end of the novel (not present in the included sections of the thesis) follows June as she decides to remain in Fairview and move into a house she and Mae inherited

from their late and childless great aunt, Lois. Despite her remaining within the physical territory of Fairview, June is the one who is most significantly deterritorialized. She is not captured by Fairview, rather her choice to stay and to remain comfortable is her escape from the town's societal conception that settling down is a compromise. Therefore, the points of her lines of flight—Fairview, Vegas, then Fairview—portray her own cognitive journey of accepting and “becoming” a Fairviewer. In this way, Anna follows June. She ends the novel deterritorialized as well. Although the last point on her line of flight is Victoria, Canada (she and her husband, Kurt, end the novel while moving), her biggest escape is not from Fairview, but rather from Charlise as she “becomes” independent. Mae has the most varied physical map, with allusions to other locations mentioned briefly throughout the work. Her need to travel stems from her desire to be deterritorialized. She is constantly seeking an escape from Fairview, through the Peace Corp, through her book, through the distance she keeps between her family and connections in her hometown. However, she remains reterritorialized, or captured, by Fairview as the town as entity is what controls her constant back and forth between exotic locations (she ends the novel working in Bali) and her inevitable return to Fairview.

Similar to Dick Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, Charlise Rosengren is reterritorialized after she “becomes” nothing. The novel ends with her sudden disappearance. At this point, all three protagonists have cut ties with her, they have shifted their own constellations of power to be asymmetrical in a way that favors them. There are rumors as to why she left, who she left with, and where she went, but no one really knows and she becomes nothing more than a series of awkward or painful memories, fading away with time.

As a guide to construct these territories and lines of flight, I used several works as models. The most influential is *Tender*, specifically the revised edition pushed into publication by Malcolm Cowley almost ten years after the author's death. In the revision of the novel, Dick Diver is more closely followed and the reader is given a more detailed view of his travels. Every new scene in the book takes place in a new, European setting. In each of these, the reader is given a new version of Dick as he is constantly "becoming" until the end when, like Charlise in *Gravities*, he "becomes" nothing to those he influenced, echoing only as an uncomfortable and fading memory.

The lines of flight and cognitive maps in *Gravities* are also influenced by a cast of ever present secondary characters. In his story "May Day," F. Scott Fitzgerald follows the actions of a handful of characters during an evening in New York right after the return of soldiers who fought in WWI. Some characters have close relationships—romantic, familial, or platonic—similar to the primary group of characters in *Gravities*, but others are seemingly unrelated. Throughout the story, Fitzgerald allows the unrelated to interact, either in passing as background characters in scenes, or as points of conflict. In his short story collection, *Dubliners* (and, more broadly in *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*), James Joyce does something similar in occasionally bringing in previously introduced characters or characters who are involved in the future of the book in another unrelated character's narrative. In my novel the core group of characters who make up the protagonists of the novel know or know of each other from their adolescence or young adulthood, but do not all share an intimate understanding of each member of the collective. Although the secondary characters from Fairview—James, Bryan, Todd, and Kelly Woods—know each other from their adolescence, the only interactions given to the

reader are in scenes with June, Mae, Charlise, and Anna. However, the secondary characters from Part Two—Jan Frieze and Frank Hueber, Tobias Frieze and Alex Bader, and Edmund and Phil, all interact with one another separate from Mae and/or Charlise. Although the six characters are never together in one scene, through a chain of events they connect and their interactions are sequential and flow from one scene to the other. These interactions parallel the previous structure of protagonists' scenes.

Each character's movements are cyclical. Not only does each of the four repeatedly return to Fairview, but it is in Fairview where the main action and tension is created between the three protagonists. These cyclical movements, physical and cognitive, compliment the theme of gravity as well as the orbital structure of the non-linear, multiple point of view narrative.

In his craft memoir *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera defines polyphonic fiction as a piece of work that is made up of individual, heterogeneous lines that work together and simultaneously to create a many-voiced narrative and that, in order for the narrative to be successful, must create an "equality of voices" (73-75). He gives examples of a variety of genres that may contribute this effect: novelistic narrative, short story, reportage, poetic narrative, and philosophic essay (73). In his own work, specifically his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he includes not only a fictional narrative, but interruptions by his own, authorial voice discussing, in a metafictional way, his choices when writing the work, historical anecdotes, and lines of music. Initially, when my work was intended as a collection of short stories with these characters, I included this type of polyphony in several of the stories, but as I synthesized the stories into a novel the changes in genre did not work with the new narrative. Kundera's idea of an "equality of

voices” struck me and led to the choice not to write in the tradition of a single protagonist, but to write three different characters, each given an equal presence and therefore an equal voice in the novel’s narrative. This is not presented accurately in the sections included for the thesis. Part Three includes Anna’s history with Charlise alongside the development of her relationship with Kurt. It is in this part of the novel that the reader is shown examples of Charlise’s constant infiltration in Anna’s life and Anna’s struggle (and eventual victory when she moves to Canada with Kurt) of escaping from Charlise’s power. Part Three also includes June’s history and her final decision settling in Fairview and moving into her Aunt Lois’ house. In the sections given, Part One and Part Two, the events from the different scenes belonging to different perspectives, specifically in Part Two, overlap and new details are given to build the plot.

As mentioned previously, the title, *Gravities*, also works as a polyphonic component. A common element of Kundera’s works is the use of titles that suggest layered themes that are explored separately, and therefore slightly differently, by the various the voices of the narrative. Specifically, he uses different genres to narrate seemingly unrelated stories and eventually connect them through said themes. Take for example his novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Each part follows a different narrative: the first follows the character Mirek and his destroying the letters from a former lover he regrets; the second follows the character Marketta as her husband arranges a threesome with another of his friends when her mother-in-law is visiting; the third is a historical account of Russian-occupied Czechoslovakia and includes a the story of two students who are embarrassed in front of their class and ascend into the sky laughing; the fourth introduces Tamina, who is revisited Part Six, as she tries to regain



her diary and love letters from her deceased husband; the fifth follows Kristyna who has an affair with a young student; the sixth revisits Tamina as she is marooned on an island and assaulted by children; the seventh follows the Clevis family and their orgy parties. Each part, vastly different in the types of characters and scenarios portrayed, works toward the same two themes of laughter and forgetting. My goal is for each section of *Gravities* to do something similar, to explore a different facet of the themes of gravity: orbits, and cause and effect.

The structure of my narrative, non-linear and cyclical with changing perspectives, was inspired by Milan Kundera's novel, *The Joke*, and Anthony Doerr's novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*. Both novels work with multiple perspectives isolated by chapter breaks. Kundera's novel has one protagonist, Ludvik, and every other chapter/perspective (Helena, Jaroslav, and Kostka) center around him and what they know of him. The choice to not give Charlise a perspective is a difference between my work and Kundera's novel and was made in order to explore her as an objective force rather than as a complex character like Ludvik. She is not complex. She is flat and all of her actions stem from one motivation: self pleasure. As a result, she does not change. Instead, she disappears.

Anthony Doerr's novel follows two protagonists, Marie-Laure and Werner. They are given equal voices, distinct perspectives, and their own chapters are separated by brief scenes given through the point of view of a cast of secondary characters. Doerr also gives the reader a non-linear timeline. He is successful in this by presenting the reader with a question and then an answer to that question. The answer then provides several more questions to keep the reader interested in past or future events. I attempt a similar technique by starting the novel in the middle of my narrative's total timeline and

organizing the plot not by time, but rather by the relevant events that build to each character's epiphany.

The actions of the characters, their lines of flight and cognitive maps, their trajectories and "becomings," the weight of their voices and the order in which their events are narrated all work to enforce the theme of gravity as well as cycles and orbiting. Each part of the novel ends with one protagonist's epiphany. The actions leading up to and the way the epiphany is realized are similar to the way James Joyce ends his iconic short story, "The Dead." Part One ends with Anna driving Charlise home after she drives them to Memphis, Tennessee in a drunken fit. It is in the car, as she is reflecting on their last embrace on top of a parking garage, that she realizes the pull Charlise has on her. She loses the desire to be pulled toward Charlise. Part Two ends with Mae watching and internally willing Charlise to fall from the wall in Rothenburg. Part Three (not included) ends with June venturing into the woods behind Lois' home and remembering childhood moments that exemplify Charlise's hedonistic behavior. Each, after her epiphany, becomes disenfranchised with Charlise.

This cyclical return to each character coming to the same conclusion imitates Charlise's behavior throughout the novel. These moments, though slightly different from one another and told through different perspectives, are intended to become predictable, as is the order in which the character's narratives are told, to mimic Charlise's static character and cyclical behavior.

## GRAVITIES – PART ONE

### Chapter One

The day Mae asked Charlise to travel with her escalated in the usual way. At one they met for coffee. By seven they were drunk enough to be cut off by their usual bartender at their usual bar.

It was a Tuesday.

Mae made the proposition over coffee: Germany. All expenses paid. No strings. (Thank you, Aunt Lois.) For an hour she talked Berlin and Munich. She promised a tour of Dachau and a weekend close to Denmark in Sylt on the North Sea. Charlise: indifferent. This game of dissimulation was something the two women had developed and perfected together when they were teenagers. Its purpose, this act against looking eager, was to coerce the inviter to turn their invitation into a plea and for its acceptance to be an honor bestowed by the invitee.

Mae told her she was going no matter what.

Charlise remained disinterested.

Mae, for a moment, considered telling Charlise she was her last choice, that her sister June had declined with the excuse of a lack of vacation days and Anna, well Anna had been on board until they considered inviting Charlise, until she told Kurt The Fiancé they were considering inviting Charlise, until Kurt, citing Charlise as the cause of Anna's last major upset, gave her the alternative of going to Canada instead. Mae wanted a straight answer. Even more so, she wanted to avoid an Anna Conversation. So she said nothing.

With their coffee gone and Mae's invitation suspended above them, Charlise suggested they go to their bar and eat.

Peddler's was a quiet place just outside Fairview with a surprising variety of beer, over twenty on tap, and no outside identifier other than a smallish sign, black and white, illuminated at night by a floodlight. The year after their college graduations was the last time the four of them—Mae, Charlise, Anna, and June—had lived in town at the same time. It was during this time, almost three years before, that they (really Charlise) had chosen Peddler's above the other two younger bars within city limits.

The place was nearly empty. An older couple sat at one of the high tables next to the windows, a half-eaten basket of fried pickle chips and giant steins of light beer on the table between them. The other group, youngish men in Carhartt overalls, sock caps, and steel-toe work boots, were sitting at the bar drinking bottles of Coors Light.

Mae chose seats away from them and ordered a pint of Hefeweizen. Charlise, a double old fashion with extra bitters.

"Good to see you're back," the bartender said. He was theirs and they called him Todd. This was not his name, but no one could remember what he'd told them before. Not even June who, to her annoyance, made it a point to value every person she met. June'd been the first to talk to him. Uncharacteristically drunk, Charlise had convinced her to write her number on a ten-dollar bill as a tip, lean over the wide, concrete-topped bar and slip it into his breast pocket embroidered with the Peddler's insignia of a unicycle. He never called, but almost a month later Mae had answered June's phone while she was driving and a man with a voice like grease introduced himself as Butch and

asked for “the tip.” Afterwards, at least, Todd was the first to serve them if he was working.

“How long has it been, Todd?” Charlise asked. She had sat herself on the edge of the barstool, her arched back and ass in the line of sight of the electricians at the other end of the bar.

“I saw you three days ago, Charlie,” he said. He poured Mae’s beer first, letting the foam spill over the side a little, and slid it to her without wiping it away. The glistening snail trail was broken by Charlise’s thin forearms and she leaned closer to Todd.

“How long have you worked here?” Mae asked.

“Bout eight years.” He started on Charlise’s old fashion.

“I’ve always wanted to bartend,” Charlise said. She kept glancing over at the men, but they didn’t notice. They were fixated on the large flat screen on the wall above the bar. It was NASCAR or some other pseudo sport that required only the skill of following a pre-determined orbit. Mae watched as Charlise asked Todd for the most interesting thing he’d seen in the last eight years. She had a version of this conversation with almost every bartender she met. Mae learned the length and detail of the stories given directly correlated with the demand around the bar and how much money Charlise had spent up to that point.

“Nothing crazy happens here. You know that,” he said while he muddled the orange peel and sugar. “Although I was here when Kelly Woods got arrested.”

“That was here?” Charlise asked and then to Mae: “He tried to sell to an off duty cop in the bathroom.”

“Really?” Mae remembered Kelly as seventeen, the senior to their freshman, the guy whose grandparents didn’t know he threw keggers in their furthest cowfield. The price of a cup had always been five bucks or a lift of the shirt. When they spoke, it hadn’t been often and they both were usually pissed drunk, he always made it a point explain how her hair, longer then, still as thick but not as blonde, would make perfect sex hair.

“You guys know Kelly?” Todd asked. “I thought he was before your time.”

“Almost,” Mae said.

“We used to go to his parties,” Charlise said.

“Well, he got out. He’s on parole, now.” Todd gave Charlise her drink and asked if they wanted food. When he went to the back to put the order in, Charlise looked up Kelly online and, for several minutes, commented on his profile pictures and those unfortunate enough to be included in them.

Mae responded the right mmhmms and yeahs but was hyper aware of Todd. He wiped down glasses and checked on the other customers, but she was sure he was listening. He’d graduated several years before Kelly and probably was or had been friends with the people Charlise was shit talking. In hopes of silencing her, Mae finished her beer quickly and ordered another from Todd. She asked when the dinner rush usually picked up, if they still brought in live music on Fridays and Saturdays, why there were summer beers on tap in February. On the television the race had ended. Several drivers were being interviewed. They all had the same jumpsuit on, differentiated only by variations of color and sponsors. With the start of the interviews one of the guys at the end of the bar started watching them and when Todd gave them their food, Charlise

drained her second double old fashion with flourish. When she talked to Mae, she talked to a spot somewhere above Mae's shoulder.

The man was older than Mae had expected. He asked them their names and Charlise small talked over her. He asked what they were drinking (*Double old fashion. It's not a real drink if its not whiskey.*), what they were eating (*Reubens, you know, real bar food.*), and what they did (*Just moved back to Fairview, but won't be here long.*), but nothing came of it. He left with his friends after five minutes of conversation.

Two beers later, the dinner crowd started arriving. A group of women they'd gone to high school with (all wearing scrubs) came up to the bar and ordered wine and vodka sprites. Charlise's scoff was just muted by the slow rising volume in the bar and despite a brief moment of recognition, they were ignored.

Mae didn't mention Germany again and Charlise did most of the talking, her voice louder with her third and fourth drinks (drinks, to boisterous disappointment, Todd refused to make as doubles) and Mae, rather than maintain an appropriate level of embarrassment, found herself falling into an older version of herself: the Mae who would keep up with Charlise drink for drink, who would loudly complain about Fairview as a uniquely shitty small town, the Mae whose every movement was controlled to accentuate some attractive characteristic under the assumption that someone somewhere was watching her.

At six thirty Todd asked quietly if June was coming to pick them up and Mae texted her. Their next drink, he told them, would be their last.

The bar was almost full, a few high tables were empty, but everyone was eating. The two of them sat there, laughing at nothing and forcing conversation on Todd. Mae

noticed more people watching and when June texted her back with an “I’ll be there in fifteen,” she asked Todd for a water. He gave it to them in highball glasses.

June walked in with James Clemmons, who worked at the same law firm, and his roommate, Bryan Parsons. She was easily noticed because of her height (she stood taller than both men) and crowds tended to part for her. June’s face, though not particularly beautiful, almost always wore an expression that masked disapproval or annoyance and enticed strangers into divulging personal anecdotes when she was in line at the grocery store or in elevators.

“We’re a little behind, then,” James said. He smiled at Mae and then, looking at Charlise’s untouched water and the empty highball glasses Todd hadn’t cleared away, exchanged a look with Bryan. Since they were high school, Bryan had a routine: if James got him out, which was rare, he’d drink two light beers and only talk to him or June. Mae got up to give James a hug. He had wrestled in high school and still had the width of his old figure, but he had lost the definition. Bryan didn’t acknowledge Mae or Charlise but looked over their heads and raised his hand to get Todd’s attention.

Todd took his order and asked June if she wanted anything. She ordered a salad.

“You guys don’t mind if I eat, do you?” Although she was leaning on the back of Mae’s barstool, she was looking at Charlise. “I worked late.”

Charlise shifted in her seat so that her hips were facing Bryan and told her sure, it was okay. She turned to Todd and asked if she could “please, please, please” have another drink. He slid over a can of PBR.

“I saw those pictures of you guys in Utah,” James said to Mae. “Did you like it?” June said it was incredible.”



“It was fine.” Drunk and recognizing more people in the bar from their years together, Mae was casual with her glass of water, holding it by the rim and drinking from under her hand like it was whiskey. “Hot though. Reminded me of Peru a little.”

“I forgot you spent time down there.”

“Yeah. Almost two years.”

Charlise, who had been attempting to talk with a NASCAR-distracted Bryan, cut in.

“Don’t ask her too many questions about it. Once she gets started—you’ll have to hear about *the* book.” Charlise brought her thin hand up underneath her chin and mimed a cut. The clicking of her tongue echoed on the rim on her PBR can.

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“You wrote a book?” Bryan asked.

A short pause followed his question. Mae was used to Bryan’s voice being hushed and lower, keeping anyone but his subject out of the conversation, but when directed at her it was clipped. Intentional.

“Yeah. A memoir.”

“It’s good,” June said without looking up from her salad.

“Will you try to publish it?” Bryan asked.

“I’d read it,” James said.

“From what I hear, it needs more work.” Charlise drained her PBR and turned to get Todd’s attention. He was busy shaking martinis for a group dressed business casual.

There had been the usual, diluted anxiety that accompanied the discussion of the book, but even after, as James and June began to talk shop and Charlise became distracted with people watching, it didn't leave.

The one time Mae had shared her work with Charlise it had been a poem she'd written in college. She still had a copy, kept it as a reference point for improvement. It wasn't good: thirty lines of abstract description written by a young writer in the aftermath of a great, but universal realization. At first Charlise had been supportive. She'd complimented the lines Mae expected complimented, encouraged her to keep writing, but when Mae explained what it was about—the fear of compromise in adult life and the changes of aging—Charlise had laughed at it. She told her if the poem had been about love (she'd read in sex and the virginity Mae would end up holding onto until she was twenty-three) then sure, but no. It was stupid otherwise. She had never read Mae's book, never showed any interest in reading it, and asked Mae about it once only to learn if she was in it.

But she had talked about the work with a level of authority that scared Mae.

To her surprise, Bryan kept talking to her—asking her questions about Peru, about the summer three years before she spent in Europe, about the safari she'd gone on in grad school with a colleague.

"There are opportunities to go to Antarctica," she said. She held the still full water. "They're pricey, but with Lois' will figured out I'm hoping to go sometime in the next couple years."

At the mention of their aunt Lois, June put her fork across her unfinished salad and pushed it across the bar to Todd.

“What next?” Bryan asked Mae. His voice was smooth and rolled over her without overtaking the background noise.

“We’re going to Germany this summer,” Charlise said. She put her hand on Mae’s shoulder. “Munich, Berlin. We’ll probably go to a concentration camp, too.”

Mae reacted to Charlise’s interruption with the same cold disinterest Charlise had used against the initial invitation.

“You two are going together?” Bryan asked.

June stood and James helped her into her coat.

“I should get you two home,” she said.

Charlise asked Todd for their tabs with a *bitte* and as they stood waiting for their bills she told Mae all the German words she knew: *nein, ja, wienerschnitzel, fünf*. Each was thick in her mouth. It sounded like her tongue was pushing them out against teeth determined to keep them in.

## **Chapter Two**

On her way to pick up Charlise for June’s brunch, Mae allows herself to think about that night at Peddler’s almost seven months before. Last time she had dwelled on it had been right after, when June had driven them home. They’d ended up fighting and it was then, despite the evening’s events mimicking so many others from her time with Charlise, Mae recognized it as the catalyst to the group’s deterioration.

The embarrassment produced by drunken, public displays had been almost immediate. It was clear June wanted to leave and although Mae recognized a lot of the

people in the bar, she recognized them through memory. June was the only one who knew them past the earlier memories and she was the only one they knew, too.

June's rare, but apparent disapproval had only worked to antagonize Mae and she remembered reverting to a habit she had when she was seventeen: if it was clear those around her were embarrassed by her behavior and that calming down was a defeat, she would talk louder and make an effort to maintain the inappropriate threads of conversation.

June and James had walked out of Peddler's in an attempt to lead Mae and Charlise to the parking lot. Almost out, Charlise saw someone she'd gone to college with drinking with someone she'd gone to high school with. She stopped, introduced Mae as her "Peace Corps Friend" and without asking about their careers or how they knew each other, told them about their trip to Germany. She talked about it like they'd already gone. The friend from college, when given the chance, would talk to Charlise with the air of someone humoring a child. The other, who had graduated after them, asked Mae about her time abroad, then about the book—June had told her about it; she couldn't wait to read it.

The question (Mae replied with a half-joke about its never being published) was repeated by Charlise in the car. Drunk, she asked loudly for the details. Had Mae talked to anyone? Sent it out to agents? Publishing houses? Mae's reversion to her adolescence was over and the anxiety that hadn't gone away after the first mention of the book grew.

Her answer to each of Charlise's questions was "no."

"Why?" Charlise had asked.

June, who had been driving in reserved silence, answered for Mae. “Publishing’s a lot more difficult than you’d think, Charlie.”

“Maybe, or maybe not.” The authority Mae had noticed earlier was back. “Not if you’re prepared to do what you need to do.”

“Charlie.” June’s quiet reprimand was the last thing said until after they dropped Charlise off at her apartment.

On their way to her house, June remained quiet, but through her peripherals Mae could see her sister glance over repeatedly at her. Mae tried to distinguish the tree line through the passenger side window, but the night was dark. No moon. No stars. Nothing bright or moving in the sky. They were driving on a suddenly still planet. Eyes unfocused she could see the faces of those she knew at Peddlers, their shifting eyes and condescending gazes projected over her reflection on the glass. When they were back in town she watched the streetlights instead, orange and artificial, and after several minutes of squinting, was able to see the pulsating halos’ unbreakable orbits against the dark.

It wasn’t until they were parked in the driveway that June spoke.

“You expect that from Charlise,” she said. She was picking at the stitching on the leather-covered steering wheel. “Everyone knows she’s still the same, but you—people haven’t seen you in years. You haven’t been drunk like that...”

“Don’t turn this on me.” Mae interrupted her. The numb from the shock of Charlise’s comment was wearing off and everything in her head felt dry—her tongue, her thoughts, her words.

“You can leave, Mae. You will leave. I,” June had looked up then, her eyes wet in the half-light. “This is my life. I’m staying here.”

Mae could have just said sorry, could have forgotten Charlise's comment and apologized to her sister for embarrassing her, but now she held June responsible for her embarrassment. She was responsible for everything else.

"You told her about New York."

"Well." June was still picking at the steering wheel. "I mentioned it. I didn't tell her a lot."

"You told her, though," Mae said. June was the only one who knew: she'd seen the aftermath, listened to Mae relay the details of the trauma, chased her when she was drunk and running away on the Vegas strip. "You said it yourself, 'she's the same,' she'll never change, and you just handed her that information."

"She was asking about you. She was worried. I had to tell her something that explained why you were being distant—"

"She doesn't care about the specifics. Just whether or not it is because of her."

The conversation ended there. Mae never clarified with June that she thought Charlise *wanted* the distancing to be because of her.

Now, minutes from Charlise's apartment, the projection of the faces begins again on her windshield. This time only one: June warning her in her hypocritical and passive way to keep Charlise from anything easily broken.

When Mae calls Charlise to let her know she's arrived, she's invited up.

"Sorry I'm not ready," she tells Mae. She answered the door in her silk robe, small, red, and spotted with makeup and hair mousse. The bottom layer of her dark hair is straightened and silky, falling down below her shoulders. The top is still frizzy. The smell

of something burning is coming from the bathroom next to the door. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to go out.”

“How’s the leg?” Mae asks.

“Kind of shaky, but fine,” Charlise says. Mae notices she’s painted her toenails black.

The living room is cluttered with takeout boxes and wine glasses whose bottoms are dotted with congealed pools of red. A wheelchair leans folded against the small dining room table and the furniture has been moved back from where Mae and June rearranged it almost three months before.

They’d come together after the accident to make it easier for Charlise to get around in the wheelchair and on crutches. June started by lighting several of Charlise’s candles. Then, the apartment had also been littered with empty wine bottles and Subway bags, all left from before the trip to Germany, and the rooms smelled stale. A bouquet of flowers, dried and rotting, stood on one of the small end tables next to one of two armchairs.

For a long time, the only sounds in the apartment had been the glass clinking together in the trash and the rustling of plastic bags. It was when Mae got to the flowers that she first felt annoyed. In the midst of the wilted bouquet stood a plastic prong holding a card. Mae had read it out loud.

*“Charlise, these are just because. Kelly.”*

“Kelly Woods?” June asked.

“Yeah.” Mae had folded the cardstock in half, pulled the prong from the vase and pushed it through the middle. “I had no idea until she told me in Rothenburg, the day we

got real drunk with those Welsh guys. One of them was laying it on pretty thick and she told him to fuck off because she had a boyfriend.”

“Kelly?” June asked again.

“Apparently.” Mae had almost reminded June about Charlise’s disbelief in secret-for-secret telling, but this was the longest they’d gone since that night at Peddler’s without fighting and she didn’t feel like cleaning with another of June’s longwinded apologies.

“Didn’t he just get out of prison?”

“He was out months before we left.” Mae took the vase to the sink and removed the molding stems. Fuzzy patches of green and purple pockmarked the remaining water that she dumped into the garbage disposal.

“Were they okay when you left?” June asked.

“I think so. Why?”

“Well if they weren’t, that could be one reason why she jumped.”

Mae, her hand in the sudsy vase, had looked up at her sister. She was loading the dryer with blankets she’d just washed from the couch.

“You think she jumped?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” June said. “I wasn’t there. But the way you make it sound—“

This was the first time the two of them had talked directly about the accident in Germany. Mae had called her after the first day in the hospital to let her know they’d be a couple days later coming home, that there had been an accident and Charlise had broken her leg, and again when they boarded the plane. When June had asked her for specifics, all Mae said was that it involved Charlise climbing on a wall and falling off.



“She says she didn’t. She says she fell.”

“Why would she climb up on it in the first place. She wasn’t with you guys, right? She went off by herself?”

“She was just up there because she was drunk. You know how she gets.” Mae was trying to fit the rim of the now-clean vase in the dish rack. Almost too wide, she got it to fit by bending one of the bars back. It was true that Charlise often went off by herself when she drank, that it usually followed an inexplicable fit of dramatics and that when she was found, she acted almost sober and like nothing happened.

They’d worked in silence for almost an hour. Mae found herself getting more agitated. The initial annoyance she’d felt with the flowers evolved and by the time the apartment was clean and the furniture widely separated, she was angry.

“She kept asking for Anna,” she said.

“When?”

“One of the guys who saw her fall, the same one who carried her down to the road to wait for the ambulance, he asked if I was Anna when I got there. I told him no, I was Mae, and he was confused until she started crying harder and pointed to me.”

“She was in shock,” June said.

“Well, yeah. Her dumbass was the one who got on that wall and broke her goddamn leg.” They were out of the apartment now. She’d opened the passenger side door, but wouldn’t get in the car. Her hands gripped the top of the doorframe and she imagined peeling the metal off the roof of June’s BMW and rolling it until was nothing keeping the sky out of the cab. June stood on the other side of the car, the new autumn

wind blowing her hair back and making her concerned eyes look bigger. Stretched. It made Mae angrier.

“As soon as we were in that ambulance and she was doped up all she could talk about was Anna. *Where’s Anna?* and *Don’t tell her I fell* and *There’s no way Kurt’ll let her see me*. Since when does she give a shit about Anna? She’s not even going to her wedding.”

“I know,” June said. “We shouldn’t tell her though.”

“Anna? She’s going to figure out Charlise broke her fucking leg. It’s the reason she’s giving for why she can’t go to the wedding.”

“I meant that Charlie was asking for her,” June said. “That she was thinking about her.”

Mae got in the car. June had been right, but she wasn’t going to admit it. It was probably around this time that the bent bar on the dish rack pushed the vase up and out and onto the floor where, that afternoon, Charlise found it in pieces and called June to ask if she’d come over and sweep it up.

Sitting on Charlise’s couch, Mae listens to the ceramic plates of Charlise’s straight iron smack against themselves and Charlise talks about the rest of physical therapy, how her therapist is cute, but probably gay, and how some mornings when she gets in the shower her leg still shakes.

“Do you know what June is cooking for lunch?” she asks.

“No idea.”

“Bloody marys?” Charlise walks from the bathroom sans robe. She’s wearing a set of black lingerie. The bottoms are high waisted and made of lace, the bra is small and see-through.

“I like that,” Mae says.

Charlise looks down at her still-skinny body, though the once hard lines of her waist and thighs have grown soft with the years of drinking.

“Thanks. It’s been years since I put it on. I was worried it might not still fit.”

“You meeting up with someone after?”

“No.” She disappears into her room and Mae can hear her pushing the hangers around in her closet. “I just wanted to wear it. I’ve been bumming around for so long.”

“Right. Well, it still looks good.” And while she spends the next ten minutes getting dressed, Mae counts the number of empty glasses on the tables and counters, then the containers of takeout, then the number of shoes on the floor. With the exception of the flowers and a frame above the television that used to hold a picture of the four of them from their trip to the Smoky Mountains it could be the same exact apartment she and June cleaned nearly four months before.

“Is it just us?” Charlise asks. Dressed, the black lace is indiscernible.

“Yeah.”

“So Anna’s not coming?”

“No, she is. Why wouldn’t she?”

While walking back into the bathroom, Charlise tells her she hasn’t seen Anna since she got back, that all Anna did was send Charlise a card. Mae follows her, hoping she’ll pick up on the cue to leave. They are already fifteen minutes late. She knows about

Anna's card. She knows Anna made it a point to send it before the wedding, that coupled with almost a page and a half of writing was a check for a couple hundred dollars to help with Charlise's medical bills.

"Well, she's coming. This may be the last time the four of us are together again like this for a while," Mae says.

"The last time?" Charlise asks. She's brushing through her hair again and as Mae watches a few long, black pieces fall from her shoulders to the floor, she realizes Charlise doesn't know about Anna's moving to Canada.

"You know. I'm leaving for Bali next month."

"Oh yeah. Congrats on that by the way."

As Charlise gets her purse and keys from the living room Mae notices the burning smell again. A light on the straight iron is flickering and its dial is turned to "high." Several dark hairs are caught around the corner of the ceramic tiles and in several places look fused to the hot panels.

"Ready?" Charlise asks. She's holding the door open and gust of September pushes away the burning smell.

Before Mae follows her to the parking lot, she unplugs the straight iron from the bathroom wall.

### **Chapter Three**

Great Aunt Lois had funded the Silva's first family vacation in almost seven years. She gave out the money. Told her great niece, June, not to feel bad about using it. She'd rather see it spent and enjoyed during her life rather than after.

The trip was planned via video chat: Mae from her small apartment in Lima and June from her dining room table three blocks from their parents. Their father was determined to stay in the States, to keep the money in the U.S. economy and was most excited about places like Texas and Florida. Their mother wanted to visit states they'd never been, to color in outlines on paper maps she'd kept since her daughters' first trip together after Mae was born. In the twenty-four years following, June would see twelve states. Mae forty-eight. Wherever Mae was, in Seoul, in Sydney during her first semester abroad, in Vancouver, she'd extend invites June would always decline. Often after the family chats the sisters would stay on.

Mae would ask her how she did it: how could June stay in Fairview and live with people uncomfortable outside their white, bible-belted bubbles?

June would tell her you just get used to it.

Mae would point out that she had never left, that she had always been used to it.

When these discussions became wearing, June would ask her about the book. When June would get her talking about it, the conversation always lasted more than an hour.

June left these conversations feeling uneasy. She'd start applying what she knew of Marxist theory to TV commercials and whatever show she was binge watching on Netflix. If she talked about it with James or Bryan she'd present it ironically and they would sympathize. Bryan would offer condolences for having a liberal sister.

Their mother and father—they knew there was a book, but not that the book outwardly criticized their lifestyle or the comfort they took in it.

During one of these video chats June asked her what she'd do if it got published and their family read it.

Mae threatened to join the expat community in Lima.

About a month before her return to the states, she finished her manuscript. She sent it to June, told her she was *her* reader. That, really, the book was hers because it had been written *for* her.

When June asked her mother what she knew about the book, she told her she knew the book was finished, but Mae was superstitious and wouldn't let anyone read it until it was published.

When June asked Mae about the book, she told her it wasn't worth it. The book would cause controversy and unless it was published, the conflict was unnecessary.

Before Mae's return to Fairview she had a meeting with an old Grad School colleague in New York. She and Travis Malloc had been in the same program, they'd done a stint together in the Phillipines as undergraduates. He'd left anthropology for publishing and claimed to have connections at a big press. He told her he'd been generating interest in the book.

The weekend before Mae was supposed to be back in Missouri, June had dinner with their parents. Mae sent them each a picture of the tarmac in Peru, the tarmac in Chicago, and then in New York. After dinner their mother pulled up Mae's Facebook to checkout Travis. If June hadn't known they'd graduated high school the same year, she would have placed him at around thirty or thirty-five. He was balding at his crown and combed his hair from a center point toward the front of his head to cover it up. In one picture he had his arms around Mae and another girl June never heard anything about.

His smile was crooked and the flash had caused a glare on a silver crown visible on his molar. In every picture he wore a gaudy, gold insignia ring on his pinky finger and had the air of a wanna-be Foucault. Despite Mae's constant stream of praise from the five years before, June didn't like him. Though Mae disguised them as minor annoyances, it was clear his faults—arrogance and a pedantic tendency to talk over others he deemed less intelligent than himself—expanded past his professional demeanor.

Their parents spent almost an hour discussing the possibility of Travis and June had to remind them that he and Mae were not “together.” That, despite Mae's obvious admiration for the guy, it was platonic. That had been clear for as long as Mae'd talked about him.

She had probably been with him then, in New York at some swanky bar for a nightcap talking about the growing community of expats in Peru or the latest batch of books published on the press. June had tried to picture their complementary figures, his blocky and hunched over, hers short, too, but graceful and leaned back, sitting at a small table illuminated by a small wall sconce drinking dry martinis, the manuscript thick in the middle of the table with the word “yes” stamped across the cover.

Mae flew into St. Louis with no problems. June picked her up at the curb outside baggage claim. Mae looked jet-lagged and had shadows under her eyes from sleep deprivation and leftover mascara.

June asked her how it felt to be back in the States.

She said it felt the same. Everything was in the same place.

They had dinner with their parents. The conversation was one sided: Mom and Dad discussed Utah and the National Parks they'd be visiting the next two weeks and the

two sisters listened. After, in Mae's old bedroom-converted-dayroom, June helped her pack.

"Remember when Mom painted this room pink when I was away at camp?" Mae asked. She was sitting on the futon looking around at the now-beige walls.

June laughed. Told her she still felt guilty about it. She, being the oldest, had gotten the first makeover and had chosen blue for her walls. Mom chose pink for Mae's. Determined that one of her daughters would be a princess, she'd bought her a canopy bed strung with white tulle and a white dresser and bedside table with pink crystal knobs. June had helped. Not being familiar with Mae's likes and dislikes until their early twenties, she had been excited to vandalize her sister's personal space without her knowledge. When they were older and drunk with Charlise and Anna, Mae had laughed about crying, that first night in the pink room and then again in the morning when the sun made the walls too bright.

"I don't want to go." Mae said.

"To Utah?"

She shrugged. The purple under her eyes had spread up and around her lids. For the time June noticed her laugh lines and a semi-permanent crease in her forehead.

\* \* \*

They spent the first night in Vegas, their father's cheap, last minute reservation ended up being a suite on the eighth floor of a minor hotel on the Strip. It was a family suite and made June feel like a child. A marble countered kitchenette with stainless steel appliances, faux leather couches and matching minimalist chairs surrounded a large flat screen—there was a master bedroom with a full bath and a second bedroom furnished



with a bunk bed and a lamp with several colored plastic shades, all bending from the stand like the heads of an illuminated hydra.

June assumed Mae would want to sleep, but she wanted to drink.

One of the hotel's pools, the one with three bars, was outside next to the strip, but it was kept private by a line of Italian Cypresses planted in front of an ornate wooden fence. Although the desert night was getting cool, tight women in tight bikinis were lounging in white cushioned bungalows drinking colored drinks bought for them by men in stiff jeans and linen button ups. There was music playing, kept quiet enough to keep the lyrics inaudible, but the bass throbbing.

Despite being covered by leggings and sweaters which contradicted the apparent dress code of the club, June and Mae were let in as hotel guests and given complimentary mimosas and a half-hidden table next to the privacy wall.

They sat in silence for a couple minutes, June preoccupied with pretty-people watching and Mae with poking at the pieces of strawberries bobbing at the top of her drink.

"I feel out of place," June said.

"It's better than staying up there with Mom and Dad."

"They're not that bad. They treat us like we're a little young and Mom puts on airs."

Mae sipped her drink. She wouldn't look at June.

"They're just proud of you."

"Proud I give them something to be proud of."

June pinched the thin stem of her glass, turned back to the aesthetic mingling, and drank until she caught a strawberry.

“I’m going to get another drink,” Mae said. She was standing, her fruit left untouched at the bottom of her empty glass. “You want one?”

“Not yet.”

At the closest bar, a group of four or five guys dressed almost identically and only distinguishable by the various pastels of their shirts watched as she approached. June watched as the bartender took her order and one in light yellow introduced himself.

The desert air felt drier when June compared it to the sticky nights of Missouri summers she was used to. Smells moved quickly away rather than linger and stagnate giving her almost no time to make or remember any associations. And even in this new environment, bright and hazy like a bizarre mirage, June had trouble placing Mae at the bar without Charlise and herself at the table without Anna.

Mae said something to make Yellow Shirt laugh and gestured to his friend, a six-foot plus version of himself in pink. The bartender poured her drink. She pointed to their table and left them at the bar.

“They’re buying us shots,” she said.

June drank until she got a hold of another strawberry. It had picked up carbonation from the champagne and stung her tongue as she pushed it to the roof of her mouth.

“It’ll be fun.”

“They better not expect anything.” June said. The only experience June had with men at bars was at Bruce’s and Peddler’s. Only twice in the five years she’d been legal

June had been approached by strange men, each turned away by a polite James or an intimidating Bryan.

“Don’t be stupid.”

They brought over cerulean shots that tasted like imitation banana and introduced themselves as John. Halfway through her double martini Mae asked it was a joke. John in the pink had an “h” in his name. Jon in the yellow didn’t.

They sat through John-with-an-h’s law school anecdotes for several more drinks until Mae told him June had finished up law school last year, that she got a job with a firm specializing in defense. June had one more mimosa and talked to the Jo(h)ns as Mae drank another martini and ordered a cosmo.

Jon-without-an-h bought another round of shots and June threw hers over her shoulder onto the gravel at the base of the trees while the three heads were tilted back. The men talked about their last trip to Vegas involving, apparently, winning a couple grand at the Luxor on the craps tables, two all nighters, and an almost-fight with a Chipendale during the Fremont Street Experience. June watched John-with-an-h watch Mae looking for the waitress to order another drink. Between attempting to impress her sister with anecdotes from laughable frat boy vacations and ignoring her progressively frequent insults, he was drinking like June. It was when he told Mae that law school had been just as difficult as her time in the Phillipines, just a different kind of difficult, that her very drunk sister dropped any attempt at remaining polite and told him she doubted a trust-funded education from a Hidden Ivy was on-par with the Peace Corp.

He laughed.

Mae stood up to leave.

“Hey,” he said and put one hand on her shoulder and one on her hip to push her back in the chair.

“No.” Mae’s voice had been rising with the alcohol, but now she sounded sober. Sharp. Her “no” cut through the ambiance of the club and caused a murmur in the still-thumping bass. People looked over at their corner as John-with-an-h grabbed for her hand and Jon-without-an-h said something about letting it go.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Just sit back down.”

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

“Come on—“

“Stop.” She was yelling now and the entire club was watching.

The other Jon and June stood, too. The former pulled his friend from Mae who was trembling and looking wild.

Some beefed up bouncer in a black v-neck came over and asked if there was a problem.

“No. Not again,” Mae said and pushed past him, bumping her shoulder hard on the side of the gateway that led out to the strip.

June rushed after her, apologizing to bouncer, the bartender, and Jon-without-an-h who accepted it and turned to talk to a redheaded woman in a g-string who was asking him about what had happened.

Mae hadn’t made it far enough for the slit in the crowd to close up behind her. People weren’t moving fast enough to let her run. June yelled for her, but she didn’t turn around. She kept pushing, weaving between a group of drunk middle-aged bikers and a

family with toddler twins in a double stroller. June chased her almost down to the other end of the strip. They passed a group of Red Hat Ladies, made up women clicking long, acrylic nails against strip advertisements disguised as playing cards, a large group of Japanese tourists wearing matching t-shirts, and a couple donning matching mullets and ostrich skin cowboy boots. There was laughing, crying, and the flashing of neon harmonized with the ever present chiming of slot machines. They passed the casino entrance of the Flamingo and someone in the entrance tried to stop June under the premise of giving her free show tickets.

It was in the crowd in front of Treasure Island where June caught up to her. They had seen the show before, when they were twelve and their uncle had brought them to Vegas for a weekend. It consisted of about ten minutes of pyrotechnics and men in sequined pirate costumes gallivanting on the half-sunk ship in the pond in front of the hotel.

“Mae.”

“Just. Give me a second.”

They were both panting, June’s hands on her knees and Mae’s behind her head, and a few people watched them with interest. The show started. Instead of the sequined pirates from their childhood, the actors were women, clad in string of sequins instead.

“Fuck this town,” Mae said. In front of them stood a mother and her two pre-teen boys, staring at the show as if it were the coming of Christ. The mother rebuked Mae for her language. “You don’t want me to say ‘fuck’ but you’ll let them load up their spank banks?”

“Mae,” June said. She put an arm around her waist and pulled her through the crowd away from the mother’s yelled insults.

“Fucking Vegas. Fucking everything.” She was tense, but not resistant, and June did her best to lead her back to the hotel as straight and unobtrusive as possible. It wasn’t until some deep voice from somewhere made a comment about Mae being “that girl” that June realized Mae was crying.

They came home to an empty suite and Mae went to the bedroom.

“Leave the lights off,” she said. She sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on her knees, hands in her hair, and started sobbing. It had been years since June had heard her cry. The last time they’d been sixteen and Charlise had made out with just-ex boyfriend at a Kelly Woods party.

“You want water?” June asked.

Mae nodded and leaned her head back on the bunk bed’s ladder. The stress lines June had noticed the before were more apparent in the light from the Strip-facing window.

When she came back with a bottle of water, Mae was pacing in red and pink glow. She took the water bottle and held it against her eyes, swore June to secrecy, and then told her everything. How Travis probably hadn’t talked up her book, that he was actually an intern at the press he had bragged about. How he could probably get her manuscript in the right hands, but it might take a while and it would probably be better for her to solicit agents. How he was confident and complimentary until they were a couple drinks in and she shied away from his touching her thigh. How he had insisted in taking the cab with her to her hotel and how he tried to force himself on her. She’d gotten

away, ran out and was rescued by a couple coming back to their room down the hall. On his way out he'd told her good luck. He told her the state the book was in now wasn't good enough. He told her it wouldn't get published unless she was prepared to do what she had to.

After, June repeated the promise she wouldn't tell anyone and she held her sister for the first time since that night when they were sixteen.

\* \* \*

Although she was quiet about it, June always felt she was on the defense around Charlise. This was why she told her about that night in Vegas and Travis and what had happened to Mae.

When the four of them were in Fairview at the same time, June would host a Sunday lunch. She'd cook up some brunch-esque food, mix a pitcher of mimosas or bloody marys and the four of them would sit at her dining room table, eat, and either nap in the living room or go out for more drinks at Peddler's.

Six months had passed since Mae's breakdown in Vegas. It was almost January and the wind was dry and cold. Anna couldn't come because of a family thing with her new fiancé. Mae never showed up.

June made hot totties for her and Charlise. The wind blew against her small house, whistling against the vinyl siding and sliding against the windows. Charlise berated Mae. She complained about how distant she'd become. She complained about how she stopped drinking, about how after Peru Mae acted like she was above them.

For a moment the wind against the house sounded like the desert wind, her and Mae's panting in front Treasure Island, Mae's inhalations between sobs, and June told Charlise a condensed version of the events.

Charlise didn't apologize, but she stopped criticizing and the next time the three of them hung out, treated Mae like she always had.

Things had gone back to normal until that night at Peddler's. June often thought about what triggered Charlise to say what she did. She assumed it was Bryan's attention, attention that was usually not directed to either Mae or Charlise. It was one thing to talk about the book, but to quote Travis—Mae hadn't talked to June until Charlise broke her leg in Rothenburg.

The lunch June was throwing now would be equal parts celebration, apology, and an homage to what she thought of their best days: the year after they'd graduated from college and had come back to Fairview before Mae and Charlise left again. Her memories before this year were vague blocks of time marked by now-insignificant events she remembered then feeling very important.

Junior year Charlise had worn the same dress as Brittany Devins to the St. Valentine's dance. She told everyone who asked that no, it wasn't from the prom shop on the highway, but off the clearance rack at Dillan's in the West County Mall. The next year, Mae's boyfriend, Anthony Williams, had messaged Charlise and asked her to come to Kelly Wood's party alone. The two of them spent the hours before curling their hair and watching makeup tutorials on Youtube. By the end of the party, Mae had broken up with Anthony who celebrated the termination by making out with Charlise. Simultaneously learning the details of the night via texts, Anna drank by herself and



called June to come over. That was when, with her eyes half-open and her shoulder-length hair dangerously close to the frothy surface of the toilet water, Anna told her she was in love with Charlise.

Ridiculous, all of it, but as she made the quiche and mixed a pitcher of bloody mary June couldn't help but compare these older memories to moments from this past year.

Then, Charlise and Anna had been together, but it had been tumultuous. June knew more about it than Mae, more than Charlise too, probably. That first night of Anna's solitary self-medication set into motion a tradition between the two of them. Without agreeing to it, June had become Anna's accountability partner. She'd come to her house, sometimes late, sometimes in the morning before they went to work, and over tea or coffee or some alcohol-free something, June would let Anna talk. Occasionally her friend would ask for advice and minutes after receiving an answer, would ask the same question again. It was the same now with Kurt. He was a better fit for Anna. He loved her and treated her infinitely better Charlise had, but the summer before Rothenburg he'd moved out, something about premarital counseling and their pastor refusing to marry them if they lived together. Anna had let Charlise move into the second bedroom. It lasted two months.

Mae hadn't been in a good place either. She referred to that summer as the worst of her life. Her first manuscript kept getting rejected; they'd taken that miserable hiking trip in Utah with Mom and Dad. She rarely went out and when she did, she ended up very drunk.

Charlise—by the end of that summer June had come to identify her as poison. Rarely was there a night when she wasn't drinking, either with Mae (the alcohol made her bitter and the night often ended with a similar-to-Vegas breakdown) or Anna (the alcohol only emphasized her insecurity with the church, with Kurt, and despite everything, revealed her vulnerability and desperation to keep Charlise close).

Almost every Sunday June had attempted to host a lunch like this. A peaceful afternoon in the midst of their ever-circulating storms. It was in that year she had learned to hone in the inexplicable power her presence had keeping people calm. Her small, one-bedroom home created a kind of eye, but despite her best efforts, Charlise would usually coerce either Mae or Anna into going out after. A stop at the wing place, a stop at her apartment for a drink, a stop at Peddler's. It was always June who would find them. She'd pick them up, the words, ecstatic or demeaning, blew around the inside of the car and battered the outside until she got them into the house. On her hand-me-down couch and rag rug her great aunt Lois crocheted were where the words died.

\* \* \*

June mixes bloody marys, but only one pitcher. In previous years, she'd mix two and have enough on hand to make a third, but the last time she picked up Charlise and Mae from Peddler's kept her from mixing more.

She had asked James to go with her after work that night hoping his and Bryan's presence would tame Charlise. The text from Mae had been clean. An immaculate *We've had a couple drinks. Any chance you could come get us from Peddler's after work?* She hadn't expected what they found.

There had been a halo of space around Mae and Charlise at the bar. The groups on either side were turned away from them and the people approaching to order drinks avoided the gaps between the chairs closest to them.

The bar had been pretty full when they got there, but it was mostly people eating dinner. Fairviewers weren't drunk at Peddler's unless it was a Friday or Saturday night, and even then, it was a subdued atmosphere—a few older women swaying into dance moves twenty years old, men hitting their friends too hard on the back, and maybe one or two just-founded couples hovering close enough to accumulate a casual audience. It was not like the bars they had frequented in college. As Todd put it the next day he saw June after she had slipped the tip in his pocket and returned to close her tab, Peddler's never saw sloppy drunks.

It had been several months since Mae had gotten Charlise-drunk. After a particularly bad breakdown in October, in which she had to chase her sister down again—this time in her neighborhood, June had only seen her drink twice, each time half asleep and content to stop after the second.

This lunch will not escalate. She puts the vodka in the deep freeze out in her garage.

Anna arrives first and when she hands June a loaf of Hawaiian bread for the spinach dip, she apologizes for being late.

“You're still here before Mae and Charlie,” June says.

From a canvas bag, Anna pulls out a bottle of cheap sparkling wine and orange juice.

“I mixed bloody marys,” June says.

“We can have mimosas, too,” Anna says. “Like old times.”

\* \* \*

“Kurt doesn’t know Charlie’s coming,” Anna says. She’d offered to help June, but she told her no, just to sit.

“We’re having this lunch because she got her cast off. Didn’t you tell him that?”

“No. You know how he gets.”

“Do you guys still fight about it?”

“Not really anymore. Now that we’re married he feels secure or whatever.”

June’s sitting in front of her. Anna has taken off her wedding rings and is pushing them together, trying to fit one inside the other.

“You still seeing that pastor?”

“We stopped after we decided to move.” As Anna rotates the rings between her fingers June imagines one collapsing and fitting in the other creating, for a moment, the golden pathways of electrons around a nucleus.

“He wasn’t on board I’m guessing.”

“I think he views the move as a failure,” she says. “For him, I mean. Brother Lars has been there through everything. Us getting together. Our engagement.” She pauses.

“That summer. We’re a good story for him, I think.”

“And you guys are still moving?”

“Next month.”

The oven’s timer goes off and June takes out the quiche. With her back to Anna she tells her she didn’t realize the move was going to happen that soon, that she thought the paper work was going to take much longer.

“They want Kurt at one of the universities to teach for the fall term.”

June says nothing. She puts the pie plate on a cooling rack.

“You’re not the first I’ve told. I mentioned it to Mae a couple of days ago.”

Anna has put the rings back on and is pushing them around her finger. June watches her. For the first time since the wedding, since those last few months she and Charlise lived together, Anna looks relaxed.

“You’ll be okay around her today?”

“Yeah.” She’s pushing the rings around her finger. “Yeah,” she repeats. “I’ve been preparing for it. This is the real goodbye.”

“I’ll miss you,” June says. “You’re the first of us to really leave.”

Anna laughs. “Never thought it would be me.”

“I’m proud of you.”

Before Charlise and Mae arrive Anna fills the time by telling her about Victoria, about the apartment Kurt found that overlooks fisherman’s wharf, about the ivy covered buildings and the dog parks.

She stops when the doorbell rings. The women come in and Charlise, with a fake but charming voice, congratulates Anna on her wedding. When she hugs her June notices her hand wrap around the back of Anna’s neck. They sit, the bloody marys are poured, and the rings remain static on Anna’s finger.

## **Chapter Four**

Returning from the east at sunrise, as Anna drives them home she imagines she and Charlise are riding the curvature of the earth, moving twice, three times, four times

faster than their orbits normally allow. In a chariot, they are the Gravity of gravities, pulling the sun behind them and pushing the moon west. These forces, Apollo's, the sun's, the earth's, others from even bigger things, are the same that pushed Charlise into the driver's seat and calmed her panic, her intoxication with the thrum thrum of Anna's slightly unbalanced tires on I-55.

Leaving June's brunch around three, Charlise had used her name as a greeting. She'd said "Anna" the way she had when she'd wake her up for class. June warned her with a look: *you've got a new life now. You know where this is going*, but Anna followed anyway.

Two hours later, they were numb drunk on margaritas.

She should have known the night would end with her applause. She should have recognized the road trip as another of Charlise's performances. Even if she had, would she have asked her to clarify on June's porch? In her own car? In Charlise's apartment? *Just hanging out or are we drinking like when we were roommates? Drinking like we did when you were subleasing when Kurt moved out? Drinking like we did when we were dating?*

These gravities pulled them to Charlise's apartment, pulled the cherry vodka into whatever sweet things they could find in the kitchen, Charlise's lips to Anna's forehead after Anna'd lost sight of her peripherals.

The dark has begun to shift into a deep blue, into a phosphorescent midnight, its slow glow attempting to open Charlise's still sleeping eyes. They are so close to home. To the end.

Anna told her about her move at Peddler's, told her because it felt good with her again. They were in their usual spot at the bar, the spot in front of the sink to be closest to Todd. She took almost an hour talking about Victoria, about the difficulty of getting a work visa in Canada, how she was lucky Kurt was a wanted commodity.

Charlise had freaked. Her voice loud enough to rally attention, but not enough to cause a scene. Then the song came on. Their song. The one they had always talked about playing if they got married and Charlise called it shit.

It was easy to tell when Charlise was building up to break down. It started with criticism, with scathing comments about the atmosphere, the drinks, her friends. They left Peddler's after she started sobbing, after she threw up because of the sobbing. She was in the bathroom for thirty minutes and then Todd asked them to leave.

"What does it matter?" she had asked Anna on the way to the car, a key protruding from the gaps between four of her fingers. "You're moving next month. You won't need to come back." And the sun or the earth or whatever bigger thing pulled Charlise into the driver's seat, the car onto 55, the women three hours away and to the top of a parking garage in Memphis.

On the winding state highway, they passed the string of Missouri wineries hidden by backroads and slowly drying trees. When she turned onto the highway, Anna realized Charlise was not going to stop driving. She had watched as the road took her from crying to talking to breathing. Scintillating. Cyclical. She had begun to talk about what she believed to be deep things. She sounded eighteen again. Every sentence or two she'd stop and breathe deeper, creating parentheticals around her metaphors of the infinite nature of the road. Her voice was high, young, like it had been on their first road trip.

End of their Senior year, Dan Jones and Kelly Woods had convinced their parents to rent a three floor cabin in the Smokey Mountains and stay home. Charlise had been invited as their token quirk—a potential for good stories—and without invitation Charlise had brought the rest of them. Mae had come, eager to be older, and had seduced Charlise into conversation for almost the entirety of the eight-hour drive by bringing up Freud and Kant and other intellectuals she'd read about online. Breathless, they explored what their thoughts sounded like.

Two nights later, the two would stay behind as the rest drove the strip in Gatlinburg and Anna would kiss Charlise.

Charlise would comment on the flat black behind the flames and how the sparks stuck to it like they were in a morose Van Gogh painting. Her fingers made air quotes around “morose.” She pronounced “Gogh” like “Goff.”

Anna would say nothing about her pronunciation. She had not given into the drunk of this newfound maturity intoxicating Charlise and Mae. Even then she recognized it as romanticized independence: they were feeling for the first time the infinity of an open road.

But she'd feel it, feel her words about the moroseness of Van Gogh's life behind her teeth. How, if Charlise knew anything about the artist, every one of his paintings was a reminder of the sunflowers and how they, like their creator, had died too slow and too early outside their portraits.

Anna'd kiss Charlise instead. Feign confidence until she felt Charlise's hand on the back of her neck.



A half an hour away from home and Charlise is still sleeping. The light has faded from blue to white and isn't as soft as the light from the fire that night or Memphis' residual light pollution. Both had smoothed things, nerves, the swelling around her eyes, the lace Anna felt on Charlise's waist under her clothes. Lace she had bought her for their one-year anniversary nearly five years before. With her arms around Anna's neck she masked the smells of the glittering city, the cigarettes they'd smoked on the way, the sweet vinegar breath that comes after vomiting.

Charlise had asked her why it hadn't worked and Anna hadn't known what to answer with. Did she mean them or, in that moment, the lack of pull from bigger things? She didn't know, so she said nothing about Charlise's gravity.

## GRAVITIES – PART TWO

### Chapter One

A wedding was being held in the valley at the small gasthaus and Jan Frieese, uncle of the bride, watched as the woman fell from the roman-built ramparts surrounding the village. He'd left the small covered area of the reception and was smoking at the side of the building, tired of the groom's family. They had not expected so many of them to make the trip.

Natie Frieese to Natlie Bader.

A German name for a German name, something the Americans kept reminding him. He supposed it was an attempt at camaraderie and had heard from at least two of the older Baders how much they liked beer, too. How much better the schnitzel and sauerkraut was here. How they felt *at home*. His new nephew and his brothers had brought their own Haufbrau steins from some Oktoberfest in the states. Another place, an older Bader told him, made her feel at home.

He rolled his cigarette on a windowsill and watched his niece through the glass. She was happy. Adam was taking her back to the states with him, though Jan would have preferred them to stay in Germany. He would miss his niece, both she and her brother were leaving their village and though they never spoke ill of Rothenburg, their departures confirmed his theory that their younger generation's sense of home was changing.

Leaning against the windowsill he looked to the wall. It had been built thousands of years before to keep intruders out. Now it brought in tourists by the thousands. His quiet village was only quiet eight months a year. When he was almost done smoking, he

saw her silhouette, female and lithe, plummeting gently into the soft brush about fifteen feet below. The brush shook a little and stopped.

Inside he asked the barkeep for the landline. He told him what he told the operator, what he told the Polizei and the girl's friend before they left for the hospital: he saw her (he'd later remember her as the drunk American girl with the strange name) jump from Rothenburg's wall.

After the Polizei questioned Jan, discreetly and on the street away from the wedding, he danced with Natlie. It was an energetic dance. His niece bounced in his arm and he was reminded of when she was an infant and he would watch her. How her favorite thing had been to sit on his knee and, if she wasn't being bounced, pout until she was moving. Her cheeks, still as full in her twenties as they had been in her infant years, were flushed. Looking, no one would guess at the question she asked him, if it was true a girl (American?) had jumped from the wall. Through his own smile he relayed to her what the he'd told the Polizei, what her brother, Tobias, had said, but confessed to seeing another figure also, a shadow he thought he saw slip under one of the covered towers that dot the wall's walkway. His niece would be the only person he would ever tell.

\* \* \*

The next morning Jan is sitting at his usual table at a café that helps border the village's central square. Like most days, he woke early, around five, and ordered a coffee as soon as they opened. This is always the time to do this, very early, to avoid the waves of tourists who patronize the café, not because of the good coffee or breakfast pastries, but because it's a good backdrop for photos. His table is outside and a light breeze pushes the pages of the book he is reading over his thumb.

“Morgen, Jan.”

“Morgen.” Frank Hueber sits at the table next to his, their chairs angled away from one another, and the waiter brings him a cup of coffee. “Not drinking at home today?” Rarely does Jan see Frank have breakfast or coffee outside of the small restaurant on the bottom floor of the Inn he and his wife run.

“Those American girls are staying at the Inn,” he says. He wipes the rim of the coffee cup with a napkin and then sets the cup on top of it on the table. “People, guests and neighbors, too, they’ve been around all morning asking what we know. Hoping to see the friend and ask her. We know nothing, of course.”

“So Lily sent you out to find out?”

Frank shakes his head, but continues to look straight ahead into the empty square. “It’s just too busy a way to start the morning.”

For several minutes the friends are quiet, but when Jan picks up his book Frank asks if there is any more news about the girl.

“She broke her leg and they’ve taken her to a hospital.”

“Do they know why she jumped?”

“No. Her friend doesn’t think she did jump.”

Frank drinks, the spirals of steam are opaque in the cool, spring morning.

“You saw it though?” he asks.

“It was far away.” Jan opens his book and adds, “The friend insists she fell.” The two men drink their coffee and read for a while, Jan from his book and Frank scrolls through the news on his phone. Jan had done the same earlier. There was nothing yet in

the local news about the fall. Eventually Frank puts his phone away and asks how Natlie feels about the accident.

“She doesn’t mind too much, I think.” Jan places his marker and turns his head to his friend. “It was towards the end of celebration. Adam was thrilled. An exciting story.”

“You don’t care too much for him?”

“I don’t dislike him. His family was a little overwhelming.”

“Tobias found the girl, right?”

“Yes. He and one of Adam’s brothers talked to her right before she fell. They say she stood on the wall to see them better.”

“I heard she was also drunk.”

“Very.” Jan laughs. It’s funny now. Memory has changed that initial play of the graceful figure’s fall into an awkward shape, tumbling longer than the fifteen feet would have allowed. “Adam’s brother, Alex I believe is his name, he said she kept calling him “Anna” and giggling. She hadn’t noticed her leg was broken and when Tobias told her and she looked at it, it was impossible to communicate with her after that.”

The village is waking up. Several people, locals, are walking through the square to begin setting up shop.

“The tourists have been getting here earlier and earlier,” Jan says.

“Lily is happy,” Frank says. The waiter walks by and he points to his cup. “More business. More stories. As much as she likes to talk about what happened, she’s adamant I keep from talking to the girl’s friend.”

“Were they staying in one of your rooms?”

“Yes. Just for a couple nights. The girl was taken to a hospital in Munich so her friend is checking out this morning.”

A couple sits at a table behind theirs. The man is excited and talking loudly in English. He tells his partner he heard that someone died yesterday, committed suicide by jumping off the wall. Frank turns to address them, but Jan talks first.

“She didn’t die,” he says. “Just broke a leg.”

The woman is middle-aged and pretty. She asks them if they know anything else about it and Jan tells them no. That’s all he knows.

\* \* \*

Jan walks with Frank back to the inn. Inside he greets Lily who is behind the small glass counter filled with bread and pastries. The small dining room is to the left.

“She’s in there,” Lily whispers. It doesn’t matter, it was clear yesterday that neither girl could speak German, but Frank whispers back, asking if she’s checked and when she plans to leave.

Jan looks over and watches her. Mae, he remembers. She is sitting alone at a table set for four people and cutting her slices of mozzarella smaller. There is something about her that reminds him of Natlie. They don’t look alike, Natlie is taller and pale. Beautiful, but she has the air of someone who spends the majority of their time inside. This woman is weathered. Her blonde hair is cut short and tousled as if she just woke up.

“Jan.” The sound of his name is startling. Frank asks him to relay to Lily what he told him at the café on the square. He finds himself whispering, too.

When the American is finished she approaches Lily and compliments her inn. Her accent is subtle, but southern. She apologizes for having to cancel her reservation for the next night and Lily is condescending when she tells her not to worry about.

It is apparent she knows they were talking about the situation, and until she saw Jan, it seemed she was determined not to talk about her friend. But recognizing him as one of the men talking to the Polizei the day before she asks him, in front of Lily and Frank, about the fall.

“What did you see? Did it look like Charlise jumped?” Her tone is clipped. Jan understands all she wants is facts and not speculation, but he is confused by the name the woman gives.

“Her name is Charlise?” Jan asks. “I was told it was Anna.” Mae’s reaction to this is unexpected. She becomes angry, as if using the name ‘Anna’ is a serious insult.

“It’s Charlise. You saw her fall?”

“I saw her jump,” Jan says.

“You’re sure?” There’s an air of interrogation. She is not desperate. It’s as if she knows what Jan told Natlie during their dance, that there was another figure, and that figure is the one responsible. Instead, he takes responsibility for it.

“It’s what I saw,” he answers, hoping it’s what she saw, too.

## **Chapter Two**

Carrying their almost empty steins, Tobias Frieze and Alex Bader see Charlise peering down at them from the wall as they leave from the back of the gasthaus.

Tobias had called out first.

“Hallo!”

“Hi!” Her voice is high, loud. It’s easy for Alex to place back home, downtown when the bars let out. She waves and they wave back.

Tobias suggests they walk to her and as they make their way up the small hill dotted with gnarled trees, tufts of wild grass, and brush they hear her recurring greeting. *Hello. Hello. Hello.*

Alex is laughing. He asks how Tobias how to call her crazy, Tobias tells him and he and he yells out.

“Verrückt Fräulein!”

They hear a ‘what’ and Alex keeps yelling the phrase. Tobias corrects his pronunciation. A cluster of thick bushes has grown about five feet out from the wall. Charlise leans over the vaulted top. Looking up, her head is small and then smaller. An arm is out over the edge.

“Are you there?” she asks.

“Fräulain, was macht du da?”

The three of them are laughing.

“Hello?”

Their echoing voices are muffled by stone and space.

Suddenly there’s more of her: a second arm, the chest, stomach. For a moment she’s hanging, sprawled in the air in a pose reminiscent of a gymnast on pommel horse.

\* \* \*

Rothenburg’s polizei find Tobias and Alex coming down the hill from the wall, Tobias carrying a girl with a leg bent in the wrong direction.



“There was a call from the valley,” one says. “Did she jump off the wall?”

“She fell,” Tobias says, “but I’m not sure she jumped. She smells a little of Jaeger.”

One of the Polizei sees the two steins in the Alex’s hands.

“Were you at the Bader wedding?”

“Yes,” Tobias says. “That’s my sister getting married.”

“And you saw her fall, then?”

“Yes. We saw her standing on the wall and we went to ask her why. I don’t think she understood us.”

The questioning continues. They sit the girl in the car. Her English is native, but broken. They ask her who she is. She tells them her passport is in her pocket.

“Take it,” she says. Her eyes are half-open, but startling: one is dark brown, close to black, the other is viper green. “Take it, just don’t tell Anna.”

“Are you here with Anna?”

“No. Mae. Mae Silva.”

“Where is she?”

Charlise looks as if she’s thinking hard and then says “Peddler’s.”

“She’s American,” Alex says. He’s acting sober, concerned, but sways as if he were on a boat. “She told us she was from Missouri. I don’t know if it helps, but when we first got to her after she fell she kept calling me Anna.”

“Is that your name?”

“No, it’s Alex.”

“She was alone?”

“From what I saw,” he says.

“But we heard other voices on the wall,” Tobias cuts in. “In English.” His cheeks are bright red and his curly, blond hair, untucked from behind his ear, has stuck to the sweat on his cheek.

One of the Polizei asks them to return to the wedding, someone has been sent to question the caller and they should tell them what they saw. They watch the Polizeiwagen drive back up into town.

When they’re closer to the wedding Tobias wanders off the road behind a dilapidated farmhouse to piss. Alex follows.

“Do you think she jumped?” he asks.

“No,” Tobias says, finishing. He grabs his stein from Alexander’s hand. “But I do think she was drunk.”

“It’s not very late in the evening.”

“Look at us,” Tobias says. He trips over a tuft of wild grass getting back up on the road. “I’ll need another of these if we’re going to have to answer questions.”

\* \* \*

The hardest questions came from her friend. Mae was with the other officer on the road down from the gasthaus. She hadn’t seen her friend yet, she had been on top of the wall just as she fell and when she looked over, she saw the two of them diving into the bush for her. *What did she say to you? And What did you say to her? And Why would she jump?*

The only thing that would comfort her was Alex’s explanations. His accent, obviously Midwestern like hers, gave her something familiar to cling to. He let Tobias

cut in with some of the other details, but he did most of the talking. At least six times before she left with the Polizei to meet up with Charlise in the ambulance, he told her he was pretty sure she fell, that she did not jump.

\* \* \*

Mae had come down into the valley with two Welshmen who stayed at the wedding after she left. When Natlie approached them, keen on reprimanding them for crashing her wedding, Tobias vouched for them and after eating the remaining food, luke-warm and almost gone on a large buffet next to the dancefloor, the four men went back into the village.

The tall redhead (he introduced himself as Edmund, but his friend, Phil, called him Ed) led them to a biergarten they had gone to earlier in the day.

“This is where we met those girls,” he said. The tall hefeweizen glass looked delicate in his large, freckled hand. “I gotta confess we’re the ones that got ‘em drunk.”

The more they drank, the more difficult it was to understand them, Ed especially. Tobias made an effort to distinguish his words through his thick accent, but Alex had given up. He was communicating with tone.

“They both were good looking,” Phil said.

“Yeah, well, the taller one, Charlise, was better.” Ed drank with exaggerated gulps “But they’re always the crazy ones, ain’t they?”

“Was she?” Alex asked.

“What?”

“Crazy?”

Ed looked at him for a moment, apparently sizing him up.

“Tell me. Alex, right?”

Alex heard his name so he nodded.

“What person, pissed or not, climbs up on a fucking wall, laughing the whole goddamn time? What person runs away from her friend in a foreign city because said friend ignores something the other said? Phil will vouch for me—it was nothing that set her off. Even her friend, Mae, it didn’t surprise her.”

Tobias and Alex listened and Phil interrupted.

“It’s true. We were at a pub watching the match and she got angry because Mae didn’t respond to something she said. Which,” he said to Ed, “I’m sure was an insult to her.” He took a drink and turned back to Tobias and Alex. “She stormed out and Mae didn’t get up to follow her right away, said something about letting her calm down before she found her. Later, we were walking and Charlise called to us from the top the stairs that led up to the wall. We went up. Ed here was in front, and when we turned the corner she was climbed up, looking over, and then she fell.”

For a minute the four men were quiet. Then Tobias asked if it looked like she jumped.

“I was behind with Mae,” Phil said. “But Ed says she jumped.”

“Looked like it.” Ed finished his beer and then smirked. “Though I may have startled her a bit.”

### **Chapter Three**

After their landlady, Lily, had walked them through their room, she recommended a small biergarten off the main square of town.

Edmund and Phil found the place without problems and were told to pick a table. Flower boxes filled with red geraniums lined the white fence that framed several bigger planters holding trees and bushes. They were almost alone. A group of local, older men sat at the covered bar smoking and drinking clear beer from tall, thin glasses. Sitting outside at a small table covered with pretzels and plates of pork and sauerkraut were two younger women. One was talking and almost finished with her beer and while the other was listening, her bright eyes wandered. She watched the street, the men at the bar, and then them.

As Edmund passed their table to order drinks he heard American accents. He ordered him and Phil the biggest beers they had and smaller glasses for the women.

When delivered, the taller one came to their table, her long, dark hair draped over her shoulder. Her irises were an unnatural green and looked set on top and away from her pupils.

“We’re supposed to thank you for these,” she said. She held the glass up, drank, and then said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Phil. He thought Ed’s idea had been a little too forward, but apparently it had worked. The other woman, smaller and tan with shorter hair, came up and thanked them as well, asking where they were from.

“We’ve come over from Cardiff,” Phil said.

“We’re waiting for some friends to meet up with us,” Ed said. They weren’t. They had travelled alone.

“But sit with us anyway.”

The taller one, Charlise, introduced the other girl as Mae. They were from Missouri, a podunk town Mae referred to as “the seventh circle of hell.” Both were pretty, Charlise like the women they’d imagined in American nightclubs and Mae like they’d imagined working on farms.

When enough time had passed to give the illusion they were stood up, the group was into their third beer and had started with the Jaeger.

They drank more. Talked more. Quickly, Charlise became Charlie, and Mae became looser with her limbs. It was clear the two women had picked beforehand which man they preferred. Mae initial interest in Phil grew the more Ed talked. She gravitated to him and occasionally brushed her arm against his. Phil looked a little like her, too. Shorter and blonde. Charlise, though she’d coupled off with Ed, became more apathetic the longer Ed committed to his boisterous bragging and, to his disappointment, was a more controlled drunk than her friend.

He asked about her eyes, and she claimed they were her natural color. As she talked he stared the striations and dots on her irises stood static like they were painted on. He noticed the pale blue edges of contact lenses. He chose not to contradict her. Instead he proposed they make a night of it.

Charlise answered by draining her beer and ordering another round of Jaeger.

\* \* \*

The group of four, drunk by three in the afternoon, meandered down the cobblestone streets and through narrow alleys in search of another place to drink. When they found it sandwiched between two apartment buildings, it was crowded with locals

watching the Chelsea match. The men were insistent they go in, and they found a tall counter where they could stand. Charlise and Mae stood with them and feigned interest.

Things became blurred. In Phil's mind Mae never left his side. In Ed's Charlise was never at his.

At one point (the light arm touches had progress to Mae winding her arm through his and onto the counter) Charlise moved between Phil and Ed and began talking to Phil with the interest she had first had for his friend.

Mae asked Charlise to go to the bathroom and the men were left alone for almost twenty minutes. They could see through the crowd to the two of them arguing.

"Think they're fighting about us?" he asked Ed.

Ed looked over his shoulder.

"Or just you." He smirked. "Maybe we'll have to trade."

When they came back, Charlise and Mae stood again on either side of Phil, but Phil, under the pretense of talking to Mae over the volume of the crowd put his arm around her.

Ed made an effort to do the same with Charlise, but she shrugged him off. Phil, who hadn't been sure if Charlise's quietness was because she was shy or arrogant realized it was neither, but rather a surveillance of the scene.

Ed ignored her now, and when she checked her phone, Phil made an effort to talk to her. He made a comment about the lock screen of her phone.

"Those are some nice flowers," he said. "From your boyfriend?"

"Kind of," she said. She held the phone up so he and Ed could better see the picture of a bouquet of peach roses and white calla lilies.

“Who?”

Despite the crowd’s noise and the sounds from the match, Mae’s question was easily heard.

“Kelly Woods,” Charlise said.

“You’re kidding me?” Mae asked.

“Was he yours first?” Ed broke his silence without taking his eyes from the TV screen.

“I would never,” Mae said. “He just got out of prison.”

“He wasn’t in for long.”

“Whatever.”

“You know, you could learn from him.”

“Yeah?” Mae asked. Her question felt posed, like a dare.

“Yeah. He did what he had to do to get out.”

Both men picked up on the weight of a hidden significance in the last line, though neither understood it.

Mae ignored her, and for a minute it looked as if the tension would pass, but after finishing her beer, Charlise put money on the table and left.

“Where’s she going?” Phil asked.

“Who the fuck knows,” Mae said.

\* \* \*

An hour passed before Mae would look for her. Phil kept insisting, but Mae was obstinate. She told him Charlise did this a lot—she would get drunk and run off and then, an hour or two later, come back sober and calm. They left and Mae, who had felt relaxed



under his arm, tensed the longer they walked. She had made it clear that this was a common problem with this Charlise girl, that she was a drunk runaway, but that there may be something else behind it.

“She does this,” she said. “When she gets drunk and upset she runs off. I should have known this was going to happen.”

“We’ll help you find her,” Phil said. Ed hadn’t said a word since they left the bar and he knew, had he his way, they’d go off and find other girls with no issues, but Phil felt a responsibility. At least fiscally. He had bought most of the Jaeger.

They checked their inn (to Ed’s chagrin they were staying in the same one) and then they came across a staircase in the wall surrounding the town. Charlise’s tall figure was at the top.

“Hey,” she yelled and waved them up.

“You can go up there?” Mae asked.

“I guess.”

Ed had gone ahead, determined to find her and start his night over. He kept far enough in front that occasionally they lost sight of him behind the curvature of the wall. Echoing footsteps indicated Charlise and Ed were running.

## **Chapter Four**

She heard it.

A faint ‘hello’ followed by a booming ‘Girly, what the fuck are you doing?’

Mae rounded the corner with Phil in time to see Charlise, standing on the ramparts of the wall and looking over. She looked back at Ed, and then at Mae.

A hundred feet away and Mae could see the poison green contacts. Before Germany, she'd never seen Charlise wear lenses. She'd bought them, she said, to be a new person in a new place.

The first four nights in Berlin had been surprising. Relaxing. Charlise was in awe of the city. Struck, she told Mae, by the feeling of being aware she was in a different country but not *feeling* like she was. She asked Mae if she ever got used to the feeling. She had listened to Mae when she told her she never did. They'd gone out in the evening, to bars and once to a club, and Charlise showed no interest in attracting men or gaining attention. Instead the two drank modestly, found quiet corners and Charlise listened to Mae's stories and took her advice to listen and to look. The painted contacts flitted over Berlin's buildings, its people, the landscape from the train's window between Berlin and Frankfurt and then Frankfurt and Munich. They were taken out in solemn silence after visiting the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site. Occasionally the color startled Mae, but in a way that was like seeing an old friend who'd lost a lot of weight in a short period of time or dyed their hair.

Then they had run into Phil and Ed and the familiar tension of competition returned. Charlise, by making first contact and introducing Mae to Phil, staked claim on Ed. When Phil asked Mae about where'd she'd traveled to her and, inevitably, her book, Charlise's voice returned from its new-found softness to its normal clipped, vindictive bite. And when Mae took her away to tell her to cut it out, that nothing she could do would keep her from enjoying Rothenburg and Phil, she drank another beer and ran away.

The total time between Mae's arrival on the wall and Charlise's fall was maybe two seconds, but later, when she remembered it for the police, the doctors, for June, she'd recall it as much longer.

Charlise's last look at her, those stupid viper-green contact lenses separating them farther, dared her.

"I dare you," they said, "to enjoy Phil now."

"I dare you," they said, "to run after me in the usual way."

"I dare you," they said, "to tell Anna and June about this."

The initial impulse to yell after her, to tell her to stop was hushed by these dares. She heard her sister. Not what her sister would say to her in that moment or later, but all the things she had already said to Charlise in moments like this. *Charlie, no one is really mad at you. Charlie, come back. Charlie, we're sorry.* She heard Anna, too. Her murmured agreements harmonized with June's pleas. Their voices didn't fade, but in half of one of the two seconds Mae imagined a future with an injured Charlise, physically crippled and her reputation crushed, and her sister's voice talked to Mae, now. It reprimanded her for arguing with Charlise. For not trying to stop her. Anna cried.

Charlise stood solid on the top of the wall, her feet flat and unmoving. Mae imagined them waver and fly up as her torso fell down. And she saw Anna strong with Kurt. She saw June leaving Fairview. She saw herself visiting Peddler's after a fifteen-year absence and Todd, older and wise, wiping down the trails from the free drinks he poured her to celebrate her book's publication and telling about Charlise and how the last time she'd been there she'd gotten drunk and kicked out and told him, sad, she knew she had been Mae's last choice for Germany.

In the second half of the last second Mae's own eyes, natural and light, dared her.

"I dare you," they said. "Do it."

"I dare you," they said. "Actually follow through with a threat."

"I dare you," they said. "Jump."

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