

# COUSINS, ONCE REMOVED

by Zoë Wise

The summer after I turned fifteen, I'd take any excuse to sunbathe and flaunt my newly curved body in front of my cousin, Tuck. That was the year he introduced me to kissing, when our lips would lock like puzzle pieces. My dad, a scientist who studied mosquito-borne diseases, had left that summer for one of his extended trips to far away parts of the world: Louisiana, Malaysia, and this time it was Burkina Faso. Usually we had Tuck's mom, my aunt Josie, to keep us from fooling around too much, but that day she was inside, fighting a losing battle with cancer. I perched outside in a lawn chair, half-reading and half-swatting away my own mosquitoes while Tuck's arms were down the front of his ATV, tinkering with the engine.

“Soon as I get this fixed, want to go for a ride?” He had a slow way of speaking, like he was chewing his words before he swallowed them. I liked that about him.

Tuck was eighteen with no immediate plans to do anything after high school. The front of his neck was soot black with grease and his

blond hair was colored ash with dirt. I loved to watch as he worked over his machine—a typical heartthrob, the kind of guy you would read about and wish you could make your own.

Our small town Healy was little more than a road stop for summer tourists who wanted to see the nearby national park, and having lived there my whole life, I was perpetually bored. The only thing that kept me going crazy during bleak winter nights of forty below was magazines. I devoured them; I read them like scripture. I studied the bodies of women who were tall and lean like string cheese; I cut out my horoscopes and pasted them to my walls; I chanted their sex tips aloud under the covers with a headlamp at night, committing techniques to memory for the day they might come in handy.

Tuck was waiting for my answer. I flipped a page and made a vague noise, pretending like I wasn't dying to wrap my arms around him and ride away into the wilderness, and he went back to his four-wheeler. He ran his hand through his hair and spreading even more grease in it, and then he caught me off guard. He stepped away from his machine and pounced on me, knocking me off my lawn chair and rolling me into the ground, the gravel pressing into my bare skin. I screeched as he kissed my neck, wrapping his hands around my hips and slathering them with engine grease. Then I pushed him away so he wouldn't get any ideas about how far I'd go.

This was our daily routine: lots of wasting time, some flirting, and when Aunt Josie mustered up the energy to leave the house, we made out

in his bed. Our relationship had begun the way I assumed all love affairs began: with those old fashioned, romantic moments. One day I had been brushing my hair in the reflection of the window, looking out over the snow that lingered up to my hips, and I turned around to see Tuck, watching me from across the room. He put a finger to his lips and gave me a smile, then walked over to me. My dad was home, putting popcorn in the microwave in the other room, and the smell of butter floated through the air while the kernels exploded. Tuck stepped up to me, closer than ever before, and put both hands on my breasts. I could smell his breath. I didn't know how to react so we stood there, listening to the microwave and my dad humming Christmas songs, just looking at each other like it was the first time we'd met. Eventually Tuck let his arms fall down to his sides and muttered "Sorry." He stepped away, sitting on the couch just as my dad entered the room.

Now, as his hands lingered all over my swimsuit-clad body, I pulled away from him. I didn't want him to get any ideas, but with all the kissing lately, it wasn't easy.

"I'm hungry." I stood up. "Let's see what your mom made for lunch."

We walked in to high wooden ceilings, couches with cheap material and worn out edges, and no lunch ready. I wasn't really expecting lunch; Josie had been doing nothing but sleeping lately, but when she could she still made the effort to feed us. The nurse who came by to check on her scolded her with a halfhearted cheer for exerting herself, but

we knew her kind heart and expertise in cooking made Josie her favorite patient.

“Heeelllooo, Aunt Josie?” My voice echoed through the cabin, and I looked at Tuck.

“Mom?”

In the back of the log house we found the door to her bedroom closed. Tuck knocked a few times, then whispered to me. “She couldn’t sleep last night. I heard her moving around, but she wouldn’t take any pain medicine.” He creaked the door open to check on her. “Mom?”

Nurse Katie stepped out, barely opening up the door enough for her to squeeze through. From the small crack in the doorway I could tell it was dark in her room.

“Is she finally sleeping?” Tuck asked.

Nurse Katie bit her lip and looked between the two of us. “Why don’t you go meet me at the table,” she offered. “I’ll make you something to eat.”

We sat down and Tuck squeezed the top of my knee under the tabletop. I was still wearing my swimsuit and nervous of where his hands might go next. His fingers lingered on my leg then trailed up until they reached the edge of my bikini, where they began playing with the strings. I pushed his hands off just as Nurse Katie walked in with two sandwiches on a plate.

“Your mom wanted to make chicken salad this week,” she explained. “She had me pick up the ingredients on my way over.”

We took the sandwiches on the plate and began to chew. Mayonnaise dribbled out the side of Tuck's mouth and he kept eating, waiting until he was done chewing to lick it clean. I only got through half of my sandwich before I put it down, realizing that she watched us the whole time we ate.

"What's up, Katie?" I asked.

She fidgeted a little bit with the rings on her fingers. "I'll get you a glass of water." She spoke directly to Tuck, who had finished his sandwich and was now paying attention.

Nurse Katie returned with a pitcher and two glasses. She poured one for each of us, watching the slow stream of water as it filled the cup, then sat down again. "This is hard for me. Your mom..."

We just looked at her.

"Tucker, Sadie, Josie passed away this morning." Nurse Katie broke out into tears as she spoke. "I'm so sorry."

It hurt, but the feeling didn't sink in yet. My instinct was to get up and hug the woman who was crying, but I stopped myself to look at Tuck. His face was red, a scowl resting between his eyebrows as he spoke.

"The doctor promised she had another year left."

Nurse Katie responded, forcing the words out between small sobs. I was surprised she wasn't used to this with her career choice, but at least she matched the way I was feeling. "He said two to ten months, Tucker. There's really no telling with this kind of thing."

Tuck rose from his chair to run to his mother's room and I followed. Between my mom being dead my whole life and my father constantly traveling for work, Aunt Josie had practically raised me. And now, according to Nurse Katie, she was gone. In a small bed in the corner his mom laid, her once thick hair in patches around her scalp like a broken halo. Over the past year I had witnessed this woman, a woman who I loved and admired, shrivel to half her size, her body shrinking into itself as if she were a balloon deflating. I hated my father for leaving me with this.

We walked up to the body. The room was still dark and I was suddenly cold, colder than I had ever remembered feeling. The smell, a smell I've never forgotten, was like burnt cinnamon and baby powder. Tuck touched her hand lightly and nudged it to get her attention.

“Mom?”

Her eyes were open a little bit so Katie closed them shut, then lifted a sheet over her head. As Tuck began to cry against his mother's body I went to the bathroom and vomited into the sink. Nurse Katie came up behind me and stroked my back.

“Do you want me to call your dad, sweetheart?”

I wiped spit away from my mouth. I pushed her hand away from me, thinking this woman would have no idea how to even try to reach him. It was time to grow up.

“I'll do it.”

\*

I walked home from the funeral alone, kicking rocks the whole way and keeping an eye out for any of the bears or moose that liked to roam around the neighborhood. The reverend had preached words of kindness and remembrance to a church filled with the familiar faces that made up our small mountain town, and after the service I had stood outside, shaking hands and watching Tuck quiver, ignoring questions about when my father would be back. My father should have been there, and I felt knots of anger in my stomach thinking about his absence. When I had called, his assistant answered, saying that my dad was out in the field and couldn't be reached. I left a message and wrote him an email instead, praying he would read it and come home before the funeral. It had been a week, and I still hadn't heard from him.

I arrived back at the house before Tuck, my eyes tight from crying, weakness creeping into my bones. He was off riding his four-wheeler, carrying his mom's ashes and disposing of them amongst the birch trees and shrubbery. I had wanted to go with but he shrugged me off and zoomed away, leaving me alone in an empty parking lot. The fresh air felt nice so I let the walk take up my afternoon, kicking pebbles and picking wildflowers along the way.

As I walked down the path to Tuck's cabin, skinny trees lining the trail down, I saw something small and fuzzy at the foot of the patio. A short dog with orange and white markings was chewing on a moose antler

that Aunt Josie had put in front of her flowerpots as a decoration last year. The dog had huge ears that stood up and long whiskers, and where a tail should have been there was instead a short nub covered with fur. When the dog saw me it let out a little growl, a throaty noise that had it come from a bigger dog perhaps would have been frightening, but from this twenty-pound Corgi was just plain cute. It scooted the antler away from me with its mouth and chomped against the bone even more ferociously. I sat down on the porch stairs to pet it, and bits of the fur from the dog's back clung to my hand.

By the time Tuck returned, the dog had forgotten about the antler completely and I was tickling the spot above its rump.

“What's this?”

“It was just here when I got back.” The dog turned over on its back so I could rub its belly.

“Does it have a name?” Tuck bent down to look at the dog. Failing to find a tag he ran his fingers around the collar, a faded blue and white thing with four letters embroidered into it and read aloud. “Jojo”

“Should we look for its owner?”

The dog jumped up, its short legs prompting it onto its hind feet, and began to lick Tuck's face. For the first time since his mom had died he smiled, and wrapped his arms around the creature to pick it up.

“She's so light.” The dog's back legs rested against his chest and her front hung over his shoulders. “Let's get this girl inside.”



He walked in, pushing away the mosquito netting that covered the door, and I swooned at the sight of the two of them. I knew that the dog wasn't ours to keep but Tuck looked content and relaxed as Jojo nuzzled up against his neck and closed her eyes, like he was going to be okay.

\*

Lounging in the living room watching Tuck brush the dog with one of Josie's old combs, I heard the house phone ring. My heart leapt with anticipation—I had yet to hear from my dad, and every time the phone went off I hoped it would be him calling so I could beg him to come home. I ran to the phone, but Tuck got there first.

He picked up the receiver, his voice cool and calm, and leaned against the nearby wall. "Hello?"

I tapped my foot, watching him.

"Oh hey, Ted."

Hearing my father's name, knowing it was him on the other line, made me antsy. I moved to face Tuck directly and motioned for the phone, but he pushed me away and gave me a finger that signaled wait a minute.

"Thank you." His face dropped, and I figured that my dad was expressing his sympathy for the loss of Aunt Josie. "No, you don't need to come back. We're fine."

My mouth opened, staring at him in disbelief.

“Yeah, Sadie is taking good care of us.”

Tapping my foot again, louder this time, I waited for a second and then reached for the phone, but Tuck had about a foot on me and he easily pushed me away.

“Okay, I’ll tell her. Thanks for calling.” He clicked the phone into its spot on the wall then looked at me, standing in front of him with my mouth gaping open. “What?”

“Why did you do that?” I exploded. “I haven’t talked to my dad since May.”

Tuck shrugged. “He called me, not you. Don’t be such a baby.”

“Now he won’t come home!” I felt like I would cry but held it back, feeling my lip quiver and biting it to stop. “We’re all alone here.”

Tuck grabbed me by the hips and pulled me into him. “Why would we want him here,” he spoke, his voice softer and kinder than before, “when we could have the house to ourselves all summer?”

Other than kissing Tuck to get him to stop crying, we hadn’t done much fooling around since his mom died. I had insisted on sleeping on the couch, staying over only so he wouldn’t be alone.

“I just miss my dad.”

Ignoring my comment he began to kiss me, soft at first but then harder and even biting my lip. As an automatic reflex I kissed back, and then he took off my shirt. I wasn’t wearing a bra and my boobs hung out in the open, small and juvenile like lumps of dough before the yeast rises. If we were in a movie I would have thought the scene was romantic, but

because it was just me, my cousin, and no adults, I was nervous and rigid. During the second that Tuck pulled away from me to take off his shirt I panicked, looking around the room for something to help me come up with an excuse. He went back to kissing my neck just as Jojo ran into the room with a sock on her mouth. I pulled away from him to get the sock.

“Naughty dog,” I scolded. “Tuck, I think this means we should take her for a walk.”

Separating himself from me like it was the hardest thing in the world, he groaned, then picked up the dog and carried her off to the bathroom. While alone I looked around for my shirt—how had it made it to the other side of the room? I went for it as I heard the door shut, followed by the sound of his footsteps coming back.

“Where were we?”

He was back before I could get the shirt on, and he kissed me again. I was hot and clammy, my heart was pumping in my chest, and I couldn’t seem to find the words to tell him to stop as he pulled down my pants to expose my undies, covered in cartoon cats, then stooped down on both knees to kiss the tops of my legs. He was getting closer; too close for my liking, but my mind was filled with a combination of anxiety and numbness, too much confusion to do anything other than play along. I put my hands on his head and ran my fingers through his hair, cooling off and feeling some of the sweat on my scalp. Closing my eyes tight, I took a few deep breaths and then finally spoke as he reached to pull down my underwear.

“Stop.”

“Yeah right.”

He reached again and my arm flew down to prevent him from exposing me any further.

“I said, stop.”

He paused to look up at me. “What do you mean?”

My voice was so quiet I was surprised he could hear it at all. “I can’t. I’m not ready.”

Despite reading all the sex tips and memorizing their techniques, when he was actually there in front of me something in my gut told me that this was not the moment, not the guy. I didn’t want my first time to be with my cousin, wrapped up in the memory of Aunt Josie’s death, in the house she practically raised me in, and witnessed by a strange dog. I suddenly felt very young. Tuck stood up, stared me in the eyes for what felt like forever, and then punched the wall directly next to me. I flinched when his fist bashed against it, instantly thankful it was the wall and not me that was now breaking into pieces. Drawing his arm back, Tuck shook some of the drywall off his knuckles and walked over to the freezer to get an icepack.

“You’re just like all the high school girls,” he muttered. “All talk and no action.”

He slammed the door and then walked off to his room, stomping the entire way. Loud, angry music, the kind with screaming and violent guitar solos, rang from down the hall, and I went to the bathroom. I

found Jojo and carried her to the couch, nestling into the faded material, and wrapped my body against her so she was the little spoon. I closed my eyes and cried until the couch cover was soaked through and Jojo became tired of licking up my tears. Using my last bit of confidence I then got up, walked back to the phone and listened to the endless ring of my dad's assistant's line.

\*

I didn't know the intimate details of my mother's death that summer. I was born in the city of Fairbanks, this much I knew, and that she died shortly after giving birth to me. Nothing more. Much later, I learned that my father, who gave up his tenure-track job at a university after he fell in love over a single summer, brought tulips to my mother's hospital room after I was born: the white kind with bursts of pink in the center that can be bought in bloom even in Alaska in the month of February. My mother had prepared for a home birth in the same house I grew up in, the one she and my father had just finished building, but when her midwife began to panic over my position, she convinced my father to pack the two of us up in my mother's warmest winter clothes and make the icy drive north to Fairbanks. I came into the world amidst the gurgle of the raven's call; the ominous bird's laughter echoing into my mother's hospital room as my father arranged the tulips into a vase next to her bed.

For their return the radio forecast had promised safe driving conditions, yet as soon as my parents drove over the first river the temperatures dropped and snow began to sink from the skies. The snowflakes, some as large as quarters, fell with such frequency that even in the low beams he could see no more than ten feet in front of him. Thirty-four miles out from our house, right before you cross the bridge to enter the borough, a moose stepped in front of my parent's car, causing my father to swerve, his instincts acting before his brain, and ram the passenger side of the car into a tree that grew too close to the highway. Immediately following the impact the car caught fire, fumes wafting as airbags filled every empty spot in the front seats. My father weaseled his body out as quickly as he could, pulling me from the car seat in the back, completely unharmed, and wrapped me up in his thick winter jacket. He placed the bundle that contained newborn me against the snow before reaching back for my mother, whose body he found crushed against the tree, flames licking upward from her feet and overtaking her dead body.

On the highway a dead moose, chest split open and spouting blood, lie between the scattered tulips, thrown from the back of the car when the windshield gave out, snow accumulating over the scene like ashes. He picked me up and held me close to his body as he waited on for help to arrive, the weight of his arms around me, sinking into a lifetime of guilt and despair. Upon learning these truths I pictured my father as I have always known him: grey etching around his face, loneliness seeping between his brows, and the weight of the blame he placed on a helpless

child, an image of his past life from which he became irrevocably detached.

\*

The next day when I opened the front door to air out the place, Jojo escaped. It really was an accident, despite what it looked like: I didn't realize she was sniffing around my feet as I opened the front door to let in a breeze. I would never tell Tuck this, but I was actually relieved—she had become the justification for staying inside the cabin, and I was eager to get out.

Looking for the dog atop his ATV, we rode through Healy like it was a racetrack. The houses and cabins that made up our neighborhood spread out across the valley like a braided river, connected by a complicated system of dirt roads that, if you followed far enough, would eventually lead to the highway and then somewhere, anywhere better than where we lived. We rode around without speaking until Tuck came to a halt so abruptly that my whole body whipped forward, pushing me into him. I then saw a flash of an orange and white body following someone into the open door of a house. The house was skinny and tall—giant wood logs painted blue on the outside and a red front door. A house filled with quirk; the kind that attracted seasonal workers and eccentrics, the kind of people who move to the middle of nowhere to be alone. It had characteristics of a typical Alaskan cabin: a square with an arched ceiling

pointed up, with a small room built after the fact that could only be a bedroom, and a porch.

“Let’s go in,” Tuck whispered.

“I don’t think we should,” I responded, louder. “Do you really think that was Jojo?”

“Shut up!” He parked his wheeler and jumped off into the road, heading for the front porch.

Still sitting on the machine, I watched Tuck puff his chest in a way that almost made him look like an adult. There were an impressive number of birdhouses and feeders surrounding the porch: some painted tropical colors, some bare wood, in shapes of beehives and castles and even some simple, box-shaped ones. Every little house looked like it was occupied, with bits of straw poking through the tiny holes. Tuck knocked, and then suddenly a woman was in the doorway. She appeared without us noticing her, as if the wind had brought her in and she happened to land directly in front of him. Jojo was panting at her feet, a giant smile on her face and tongue drooping toward the ground.

“Hello,” the woman breathed.

“I think you have my dog.”

She reached down to pick up Jojo, the dog’s giant ears almost obscuring my view of the woman’s face.

“This old lady?” She laughed, a pitch too high for my liking. “This is Mary Lou! She’s been missing for two days now and only just came



back to me. Can you believe it?” The woman plopped a kiss on Jojo’s head.

“Hey lady, that’s his dog, Jojo!” I yelled from across the road.

The woman’s eyes flickered to where I was seated, then back to Tuck.

“Jojo?” Her eyes fell on the collar before she erupted with laughter. “That’s the brand of collar!”

From where I sat I saw that the woman was about the same height as Tuck, though a little older, as old as one of my youngest teachers. The braid of long brown hair arranged down her neck was executed with such flawlessness that I was impressed even from afar. I was intrigued, yet a feeling in my gut also told me I should stay away.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

Tuck shifted, what looked like shyness creeping in. “Tuck.”

“Hi Tuck. I’m Anna. Who’s your friend back there?”

He grumbled something I couldn’t hear, something that I imagined included the words “cousin” and “Sadie.”

“Well I’m very sorry but this isn’t your dog. If you’d like, you can throw the ball in my backyard for Mary Lou.”

Tuck looked back at me and motioned for me to follow. I wasn’t particularly interested in walking into a stranger’s house, but she was young and didn’t seem dangerous, and I wanted to make sure Jojo was okay. Anna led Tuck inside, and as I followed I noticed that he couldn’t stop staring at her butt. Her pants weren’t really pants, they were light

grey leggings, the kind I would never wear, the material almost see-through. She was in good shape; it showed through her clothes. She chatted as if we were friends she had known her whole life.

“I just moved here last month,” she began. “I’d never been to Alaska before. Do you go to school here?”

Tuck boasted that he graduated, and I lied and said next year I would be a senior. Looking around, I noticed that every bit of the walls in Anna’s house was covered with different sketches of birds. Some of the birds I recognized from the sky and from hopping around in the trees, others were foreign and exotic, with feathers much too bright for Alaska. There were stuffed birds, the kind you’d see in a museum, arranged with a few small trinkets placed at their feet as if in offering. Mobiles with wooden birds hung from the ceiling. She didn’t have a couch or a TV, only pillows on the floor around a coffee table and a bookcase so full there were extra books piled on the floor around it.

“Sorry about the lack of seating,” she scratched her head as if itching for an excuse, while the dog made itself comfortable in a little bed by the window, the name *Mary Lou* printed on the side.

“What’s with all the birds?” I asked, and Tuck shot me a look like I had asked the rudest question in the world.

Anna laughed and spread out her arms as if in welcome. “I’m an ornithological artist,” she explained, as if I knew what that meant. She clarified. “I paint birds for encyclopedias. That’s what I’m doing here this summer.”

“I didn’t know anyone still used encyclopedias.”

“Birders do.” She winked.

Tuck nodded. “That’s so cool.”

It was my turn to shoot him a look—I knew for a fact that all he cared about were sports and things that go *vroom*.

“Come on Mary Lou!” He raised his voice when he spoke and then looked at Anna. “Outside is this way?”

We followed her to the backyard and Tuck threw the ball while Jojo—now known as Mary Lou—slobbered all over as she dropped it off in front of him. I picked it up once and threw it but she brought the ball back to Tuck, so I gave up and turned to Anna. We were silent, as if we were both looking for something to talk about, and I crossed my fingers behind my back in hopes that she wouldn’t ask if we knew where her dog had been.

“So Sadie, tell me about yourself.”

I didn’t know what to say. My life was about as average as a folding table.

“What do your parents do here?”

“My dad’s a scientist. He’s in Burkina Faso right now.” I used the actual country instead of saying “Africa,” because I wanted to sound like I knew where it was.

“And your mom?”

“She’s dead. Childbirth.” I was so used to this line it came out as easy as my own birthday.

“I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged, pointing my thumb at Tuck as he played with Jojo. “It’s no big deal. Tuck’s dad left and his mom died like a week ago.”

“Oh, Sadie.” She looked over at Tuck, who was smiling as he faked a throw for the dog. “You guys are all alone?”

“We take care of ourselves.”

Anna was holding her hand to her heart, her eyes wide open, and I could see the wheels ticking in her head. She eyed me up and down. Tuck skipped over with the ball, now chewed in half, and asked where he should put it. I was about to say something to get us out of there, but she spoke up first.

“Do you guys want to stay for lunch?”

Tuck’s eyes grew big like saucers and his stomach rumbled as if it was answering for the two of us. He nodded.

“Perfect!” Anna clapped. “I’ll get the grill!” She bounced back into her house to find it.

“Why did you say we’d stay for lunch?” I hissed at Tuck. “Now we’ll never get rid of her.”

Tuck shrugged. “She’s hot.”

I rolled my eyes, pretending to be more annoyed than hurt. Pain swelling, I turned to him. “Keep playing with Jojo. I’ll help.” I needed to size up the competition.

\*

In the kitchen Anna hid her face in the fridge and was pulling out different vegetables. “The veggies I’ve planted just don’t seem to want to grow yet,” she sighed. “I had to get these from Fairbanks. Can you shred six?”

She handed me a bag of skinny carrots. I found the knife and cutting board and began cutting a carrot into tiny slivers, as tiny as I could manage with the knife, guessing that this was what she meant by shredding them. I was halfway through my first carrot when Anna saw what I was doing and laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry, Sadie. You’re cute. Here.”

Anna handed me a cheese grater. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do with it.

I pushed her away. “I prefer shredding my carrots this way.”

She hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“Yep.”

As I went back to my work Anna watched over my shoulder, made a sound like she was going to say something, and then decided against it. When she had finished the rest of the salad I was only on the second carrot.

“Sadie, I think that should be enough.”

Hardly enough to show the color orange in the salad bowl, the small pile of shredded carrots made me feel like a kid. Outside Tuck yelled that the chicken breasts were done.

“I’ll finish,” I grumbled. I didn’t want Anna to think I was useless, so I went back to my work.

“If you’re sure,” her voice trailed off. She left the salad bowl next to me on the counter and vacated the kitchen.

By the time the skin under my fingernails was orange, Tuck and Anna were sitting in their chairs chatting like old friends. The grilled chicken breasts sat on the three plates, losing their heat, and completely unnoticed by them.

“You’re finished!” Anna smiled, as I toted the salad bowl outside, and stood up.

She served a bit of salad onto all of our plates and we finally ate. The chicken breast was cold, and even though hardly any mosquitoes roamed the yard, a small one had died on my dinner while I was inside shredding. I pushed the food away from me and folded my arms.

Anna noticed me. “You’re not hungry, Sadie?”

“I just remembered I don’t like chicken.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Anna frowned.

“I’ll eat yours.” Tuck reached over and grabbed the meat off my plate before I could stop him.

I forked a big leaf in my salad, pushing it around on the plate a bit and finally forcing it into my mouth, chewing with disgust over the situation I had found myself in.

\*

The next day I successfully convinced Tuck to drive me on his four wheeler to the town's only grocery store, Mountain Mart, so we could stock up on the food using the open tab my dad had set up for me. I rode with my arms wrapped around his waist, my hair flapping behind me and whipping my body as we passed the highway riding along the well-carved ATV shortcuts that led to town. I dinked around the small store with food items piled to the ceiling, fingering candy bars I knew would just turn into pimples on my cheeks and loading four frozen pizzas into my tiny basket, thinking about how we would have to tie them to my backpack to get them home, but how good it would taste later that night. I was looking at a package of instant rice, wondering if I should maybe try to turn it into something healthy, when a vaguely familiar voice said my name.

“Sadie?”

It was Anna. My first instinct was to pretend like I hadn't heard her but I remembered that never worked in real life, so instead I turned my body to face hers and smiled.

“Hi, Anna!”

“How are you doing?” She eyed my basket and I moved a pizza box to cover the chocolates.

“Oh you know, just shopping.” She had asked us to come back for dinner today, but I had had hoped Tuck forgot.

“I missed you guys yesterday.” She pointed to the pizzas in my box. “You know, I’m making pizza for dinner tonight. Why don’t you guys come over? It’s way better homemade.”

I shifted where I was standing, adjusting the weight of the basket to my other arm. It would be nice to have someone else cook for us again, sure, but did I really want to go back to her house?

“You could see Mary Lou,” she added in. “She’s been telling me she misses you guys.”

Either Anna actually thought she could speak to her dog, or she thought I was dumb enough to believe her. No matter which one it was, I really wanted to see the dog again and I knew Tuck did too, so I accepted.

“Come by around six.” Anna smirked, pleased with herself, and reached down to pick out a few tomatoes.

\*

That evening for the first time in my life I made something edible entirely from scratch. We arrived ready to eat, thinking she would give us each a slab of dough and some sauce and cheese, but instead when we knocked on her door and found ourselves graciously ushered in, her



kitchen counters were covered in flour, vegetables, blocks of cheese, and large chunks of meat. I looked around, taking it all in with what could have only been a puzzled expression.

“Where’s the pizza?”

Tying an apron behind her back, Anna handed me another one, frilly, covered in stains, and bright blue. “We’re making it!”

Tuck eyed Anna up and down, her apron longer in the front than her shorts in the back, and the small, generic t-shirt she wore with her sports bra showing where the neck scooped wide open. Mary Lou had followed us to the kitchen and was now pawing at the back door to go out.

“Tuck, why don’t you go throw the ball for Mary Lou? This is girl time.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Tuck needs to learn how to cook too, you know.”

“I know. I thought it would be more fun just the two of us.”

After cutting onions ‘til my eyes watered, peeling garlic and slicing peppers and laying them all out with tomatoes on a baking sheet, Anna instructed me to cook them in the oven while we started the dough. She knew the recipe by heart but we used a cookbook so I could take the lead, and I measured out flour, water, olive oil and yeast into a bowl, only forgetting the salt until Anna reminded me. We wiped down the kitchen table and covered it with more flour, sprinkling small handfuls across the old wood, then kneading and pushing into the dough with our wrists,

flattening it then balling it up again and then finally leaving the dough in a big lump and covering it to let it rise. We pulled the vegetables out of the oven, pureed them, and then set them to cook on the stovetop, letting the water evaporate from the pot until we had a thick, deep red sauce. Tuck came in while we were working only to find us laughing over the flour on my forehead, spread across like dirt, and then again, giggling over the grunting noises made as we pushed the dough into the tables with our knuckles.

When we finally called him in the dough had set. Anna and I had chopped up a variety of meats, cheeses and veggies, and we made different combinations on all three pizzas, each promising to share with each other. Before they went in the pizzas looked delicious, and if it weren't for the goopy dough I had worked so hard to form into a circle on the pan, I would have eaten it right then and there.

\*

On a day in late June when the wild roses were in bloom, I finally spoke to my dad on the phone. Over email he claimed that he had been calling but had only reached the answering machine, so we scheduled a time that would work for the both of us. We were supposed to join Anna for a hike that day, but Tuck said he would tell her to wait and went on without me while I lingered in my empty house, anticipating the call.

The day before Tuck, Anna and I had walked Jojo out on the boardwalk, where the tourists hang out and spend their money on overpriced Alaska-themed gadgets. We put a bandana from one of the shops on Jojo—pink, of course, with the words “Bark Ranger” printed on the front. It was a bit of an overcast day, but Anna had promised her that if we helped her weed her garden and transplant some starters she would treat us to ice cream, so we parked at the far end of the boardwalk and strolled along, not minding the clouds overhead. We were just leaving the ice cream place—I had gotten birthday cake flavor with chocolate sauce, and Tuck got dairy free raspberry sorbet, the same as Anna—when we ran into Nurse Katie. She was searching through her purse for something, and she nearly stopped in her tracks dead when she saw us.

“Tucker,” she began. “Sadie. How are you doing?” Nurse Katie put both arms on both of my shoulders, looking me directly.

We both assured her that we were fine, and that no, we weren’t dead yet. Once she evaluated us for herself—clean clothes, licking ice cream cones, clearly happy and back to normal life and accompanied by an adult to boot, she relaxed. Then she asked to be introduced to Anna. We explained the story of how we all met—leaving out the part about holding her dog hostage. Anna shook her hand, and then Katie pulled her to the side to talk about grownup things. Tuck pouted that he wasn’t involved, and I tried to lick a piece of solid chocolate out of my ice cream. We were about to part ways when Katie remembered something.

“Wait, Anna,” she searched through her purse again, not finishing her sentence until she found what she was looking for. She pulled out her cellphone and began looking through it. “Let me give you Sadie’s dad’s number. He’s in Africa right now, but he can be reached.”

Back at my house, waiting for my dad to call, the phone rang exactly two minutes after the clock struck ten. I picked up as quickly as I could.

“Dad!”

“Sades?” He exclaimed, as if it was a surprise to be talking to me and not someone else. His voice sounded muffled and I pictured my name soaring across satellites in outer space to get back to me.

“I miss you.”

I heard feedback for a second, then his voice again. “I miss you too. I’m so sorry about Josie. Are you okay?”

The last time he had called Tuck told him he didn’t need to come home, and I would have given anything to change that. My voice cracked as I spoke, and I hoped he could hear my tone across the connection.

“When are you coming back?”

There was a pause. I could practically see my dad, full beard and a sun hat, scratching his beard while calculating his words. “My team isn’t scheduled to leave until August fourth, honey. But if you need me, I guess I could try to sneak away.”

I bit back tears at his empty promise. Now that Anna was in the picture, I was a little more confident about my chances of survival, plus I

knew Tuck wouldn't try anything so long as we were around her—not that he wanted to anymore, I feared. I resolved that I could hold on a little while longer.

“It's okay, Dad.”

From millions of miles away I could hear his sigh of relief. “I'm so happy to hear. Our team just made a breakthrough. Did you know children who drink well water in Ouagadougou are eight times as likely to die from malaria?”

“No, I didn't.”

On his end I heard a horn and the sound of loud, urgent voices speaking in French.

“Wait—” he spoke to someone else on his end for a moment then back to me. “I'm sorry Sades, I gotta go. Love you. See you in August.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

The line fell silent and I stared at the receiver, wishing I could have transmitted the truth halfway across the world.

\*

Though we had lived in Alaska our whole lives, neither Tuck nor I had ever gone hiking. To me, the idea of walking for fun seemed ridiculous, but Anna swore by it.

“It's the most amazing feeling in the world,” she explained as we climbed out of the car. “To be outside, stretching your bones, one with

the earth.” According to Anna we were going to walk for three miles in one direction and then turn around and walk three miles back.

“Yeah but why do we need to walk when we can ride Tuck’s four wheeler?” I questioned as we scrambled down into the dried up riverbed.

“Because it’s beautiful, Sadie.” Anna smiled and pointed to the nearby mountains in the distance. “Look at how gorgeous it is here! You live in one of the most beautiful places in the world.”

Tuck and Mary Lou were already a few paces ahead of us, Mary Lou yipping with excitement as she chewed on a stick.

Dry Creek was exactly what it sounded like—a dried up creek made up of a collection of stones, smoothed by water. It only actually resembled a creek after a big rain, when the water came rushing through it, tanned and muddy. I had learned in school that ancient native Alaskans had left fossils in the area, relics and stones that were thousands of years old, but even the history hadn’t been enticing enough for me to actually walk through it. We climbed under the highway overpass, past the parking lot and made our way upstream.

After a while my thighs hurt and my feet ached; I had worn my flat-bottomed tennis shoes that weren’t really for athletic activity but more for looking cute with shorts. When I yelled ahead that I needed a break, neither Anna nor Tuck took me seriously.

“Stop complaining, Sadie,” Tuck scowled. He turned to Anna as if he was suddenly on her side and not mine. “She always does this.”

Anna looked back at me. They were a few paces ahead of me, I had been falling behind, and breathing was becoming difficult.

“Are you okay?” Anna called back.

“Fine!”

We kept walking, and from behind I observed Anna and Tuck’s arms swinging in rhythm, lingering as they accidentally grazed each other’s and then grinning stupidly at each other. Their heads were tilted toward each other and they were speaking quietly so I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

“What are you guys talking about?” I yelled.

Anna looked back and saw me struggling, the sweat seeping through my clothes, and stopped walking.

“We were just talking about how I was a vegetarian for ten years,” she explained, then looked at me. “Maybe we should take a breather.”

We sat down on some nearby boulders and I was thankful that I got to rest on them instead of climb over them. Jojo was struggling to mount a larger rock so I pulled her up to my lap, her chin resting against my thigh as she lay down.

“Tuck is very interested in vegetarianism,” Anna continued.

I snorted, and then looked between them. “You’re serious?” I couldn’t help but laugh, but then I remembered how short of breath I was. Anna handed me a water bottle from her bag and I gulped it down.

“I should have brought my inhaler.” I said, mostly to myself.

Anna looked concerned. “You didn’t tell me you have asthma, Sadie.”

“Only exercise-induced.”

“Why didn’t you bring it then?” Tuck cut in.

“Because nobody told me we would be exercising,” I retorted.

Though I wouldn’t have admitted it to myself at that point, I was angry with Anna for the attention she was getting from Tuck, and with him for the attention he was giving her. I took another gulp of water and filled the small bowl Anna had set out for Jojo, who began to lap it up.

“Jojo’s so thirsty!” I looked up at Tuck, who was frowning.

“Her name is Mary Lou.”

I ignored him, petting Jojo’s ears as she drank. “Good Jojo,” I purred.

Anna stood up. “We should head back.”

“But we’re not even halfway there!” Tuck cried.

She smiled at him. “That’s okay. You and I can go hiking some other time. Sadie doesn’t like it.”

“That’s not true!” I stood up, spilling the dog water on the boulder below me. “I just need my inhaler!”

Tuck rolled his eyes.

“I love hiking,” I insisted.

“Sure you do,” he taunted.

“Just like you want to be a vegetarian,” I snapped back.



Tuck took off in the direction we came from, yelling for the dog by the incorrect name, and Anna packed up her water bottle in silence and helped me down from the boulder.

“Maybe you would like bird watching, Sadie.”

It was perhaps the most boring thing I could imagine.

“Sure, Anna.”

\*

When Anna brought up the idea of bird watching for the second time, her face lit up and her smile arched as if she was letting us in on life’s biggest secret. Out of magazines, I was flipping through a book on her couch—*Migration: A Love Story*—and Jojo was perched with her chin on my leg again, snoring with her eyes wide open. Anna clasped her hands together, like this was a present she had been waiting to give us.

“We’ll hike for about a day out past the Teklanika River, then camp. There’s a certain bird that nests there in the summer, and I need to take some pictures and do a color study. I would love it if you two came, it will be so fun. I can’t believe you haven’t been backpacking before!”

I looked across at Tuck, hoping that he would read my mind that I did not want to go, but instead he signed us up.

“Hell yeah! Does this mean we get to camp?”

Anna nodded. “Just for one night. We should be able to head back the next day.”

“Can Mary Lou come?” Tuck asked.

“I don’t think so,” she hesitated. “She’s got pretty short legs for such a long hike.”

“I’ll carry her if she needs it!” Tuck was sitting up, looking at Jojo on my lap, desperate.

“Okay then. Sadie, you can borrow my extra hiking boots so your feet don’t hurt.” She winked at me.

I looked down at my tennis shoes, still dusty from climbing over rocks the other day. “I’ll be fine.”

She smiled timidly. “Okay then. And please don’t forget your inhaler this time.”

I went back to my book, ignoring the fact that she was treating me like I was ten. “I won’t.”

\*

A mile into the trip I tucked my shoes behind a rock. Slipping into Anna’s extra pair that she had been keeping tied up to her pack and feeling the blisters that were forming on my heel, I cursed myself for not taking her up on her earlier offer. Our feet were about the same size, hers maybe half a size bigger, and when I put on the shoes I couldn’t help comparing myself to her. Up until I had met her, I had been pretty secure that the type of woman I was: fashionable, smart, and great at wearing makeup, basically everything my magazines told me I should be. Knowing

Anna however, seeing Tuck's eyes follow her, flipped everything I knew about sex appeal on its head.

Anna wasn't old but she wasn't that young. When I had asked her if she was married and had any kids, she at first looked startled and then laughed off my question like it was a joke. I didn't quite know what to expect out of someone who was twenty-seven. She didn't wear any makeup like I did, her hair was unabashedly laced with silver threads, and she liked to show off her uneven tan lines on hot days regardless of how weird they looked in her tank top. In her shoes I felt ugly, like the kind of person who would eat homemade granola and only wear organic cotton underwear. When she wore them she looked like a shoe model.

By the time we reached our camping spot I felt like I would collapse into the earth. Anna set up two tents while Tuck found wood pieces for a fire; I gave myself a foot massage and picked some wild blueberries nearby. Jojo accompanied me, her small snout sniffing berries from the branches as she bustled through them, dropping the ripe ones into the tundra. When I got back Anna was loading her gear into a tent.

I wasn't sure how the sleeping arrangements were going to work with only two tents—on one hand I would have rather shared a tent with another girl, on the other, I didn't want that other girl to be her.

“Where should I set up my sleeping bag?” I asked.

Tuck looked up at my question as if he had been wondering the same thing.

“Well, I don’t think there would be enough room for all three of us in one.” Anna squatted close to the ground and shuffled through her pack. She pulled out a small compressed sack, pulled the strings on the side of it, and then pulled out, in what seemed a never-ending chain of material, a sleeping bag.

“So should we do girls tent and a boys tent?” Tuck called.

Butterflies showed up in my stomach over the anxiety that Tuck didn’t even want to share a tent with me anymore.

“You choose, Sadie. You can share with either Tuck or I.”

“I’ll share with Tuck,” I said without question. “He’s my cousin, after all.”

Tuck looked as if he could spit in my face.

“Cool.” Anna went back to setting up her bed space. She pulled out an inflatable sleeping pad and puffed air into it.

After eating, we laid on camping mats by the fire. Tuck was poking sticks into it ‘til they burned, watching each one disintegrate and then finding another. Anna was sketching a plant in a notebook. She looked up to see me sitting stiff against a rock, staring up at the sky. The sun was awake as it always was that time of year, not as brilliant as during the day but still bright enough to keep the skies a shade of light baby blue.

“Don’t you just want to live in Alaska forever, Sadie?”

“No way.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m getting out of here as soon as I can.”

“Oh really?” She put down her sketchbook to look at me. I hadn’t brought any magazines and was instead braiding a few flowers with long stems I found to make a crown for Jojo. “What do you want to do when you grow up?”

I could have reminded her that I was already an adult, but instead I held my tongue. “Probably be a hairdresser. Or an actress. Either way, I want to live in L.A.”

“I see.” She nodded then paused, like she didn’t know what to say. In the distance I could hear a raven cackling, making the throaty gurgle it always makes before something bad happens. “What does your dad think about all that?”

“He doesn’t care.” I finished braiding the flowers into a loop, biting the fat stems in half with my teeth and pushing another flower’s stem through the hole. Throwing my braided crown on the ground, I moved closer to the fire to heat up. “It’s not like he’s around long enough to change my mind.”

Anna reached to grab my hand but I pushed her away, positioning my palms over the fire to warm up.

\*

That night while Tuck and I were curled up in our sleeping bags next to each other, I couldn’t sleep. At home I had blackout shades, but out in the wild I was a prisoner of the constant daylight. Even though we

were a week past solstice, in the middle of the night the sun barely touched beneath the horizon.

Tuck wasn't sleeping either, I could tell by his quiet breathing, and even though his eyes were shut I was pretty sure he was still awake. I put my arm across his body as if he was a big teddy bear, and nestled up against him, making the tent feel cozy and warm.

Outside I could hear the wind rustling the willow bushes, birds chirping, and I wondered if Anna knew each bird call by sound. I pictured her in her tent, obsessing over a book about birds, and laughed to myself. Tuck didn't make a noise or a movement as I cuddled his backside. Where before he would have at least put his arm around me, now I was just ignored.

A few minutes later I scooted my body closer. He was warmer than I expected and his heartbeat was strong beneath my arm, which was now wrapped over him. I had closed my eyes to make it seem more natural so I peeked one open, noticing that the open side of his sleeping bag was facing me. Taking a deep breath and feeling a little nervous, I slipped out of my sleeping bag and put my feet in his, sliding my body in more and more until the front of my knees touched the back of his, making two parallel lines out of our bodies. Still, Tuck didn't budge an inch: he remained in the same position, facing away from me, stiff and rigid.

Another tent away the sound of Jojo's snoring was soft and light, like a small woodland gnome. I hoped Anna was asleep over there and

reminded myself to be extra quiet. I wanted to make Tuck mine under her nose but without her knowing—a silent victory I would forever be able to hold over her. After a few more minutes of unbearable quiet, I couldn't take it. I wanted to be with him; after walking behind him all day, seeing him with Anna, I knew that I was finally ready, and I wanted him to know it too. I sat up and took off my shirt to reveal no bra, then reached over him to pull his body to mirror mine.

He had been facing away from me and I now hovered over him. "I'm ready," I whispered, as quiet as I could, and pressed the front of my bare chest close against his. His eyes slowly opened as if he was coming to consciousness and I leaned in. I began to kiss his neck but when his eyes opened fully and he realized what was happening he made startled noises of surprise. I shh'd him quiet, then breathed heavily into his ear. All too quick, Tuck shook me off of him. He stopped me as if I was being inappropriate and edged away, retreating to the far end of the tent and watching with accusing eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm ready," I repeated, louder, tears on the brink of forming in my eyes.

"Ready for what?"

"Don't you want me?" I choked on the words.

In the other tent Jojo was awake, barking as if there was a real danger.

“You’re too young for me, Sadie.” He spoke slowly, in a low, deep voice.

I bit my lip and wiped tears away when I heard Anna moving around outside. Tuck simply shook his head while I grabbed for my shirt as quickly as I could.

“Is everything okay in there?” Anna was beginning to unzip the tent from the outside, Jojo yapping repeatedly at the echo of her own bark.

I had just gotten my shirt over my head when she popped her head inside, looking around for danger. On her hip was a gun, a big enough caliber only to piss off a bear.

“We’re okay,” I mumbled. “Just a really big mosquito.”

Jojo jumped inside and scooted around the tent, acting brave and sniffing everything, as if she could have scared off anything bigger than a squirrel. Tuck yawned.

“I’m going to sleep next to the fire,” he announced.

“Are you sure? There are a lot of bugs out there.” Anna look outside at the dead fire pit then back inside. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I’m sure.” Tuck collected up his sleeping bag and sleeping mat then moved past me.

“Goodnight,” he mumbled.

After Jojo hopped out Anna zipped up the tent for me, closing me in and leaving me alone. The walls of the tent throbbed around me in



tune with my heartbeat; the rainfly resting overhead attempted to block the sun but it still trespassed into the tent. The only way I could escape myself was to close my eyes and curl up onto my side against my sleeping bag, wrapping my knees into my chest. Working to steady my breath I begged myself not to cry, and then wrapped my arms around my body and waited until morning.

\*

The next day mosquito bites crawled up the back of Tuck's arms like constellations. As I walked in the back, not speaking to him or Anna, I thought of my dad, his arrival still over a month out, and wondered if the mosquitos in Africa were as bad as in Alaska. He had told me once that in some places, mosquitoes come out only at night when people are sleeping, and during the daylight hours you can live as if they never existed at all. I wondered why it couldn't be like that here.

The three of us trudged along, stopping occasionally to filter water or eat berries from the side of the trail, counting down the miles 'til we reached the nesting spot Anna had read about. Hiking had become much easier with my inhaler, and while I still hated it, I was starting to enjoy the silence and the sheer beauty of the valley.

Eventually, Anna's anticipation kicked in and she began to walk a little faster. When the bushes broke and we found ourselves in deep

tundra, our feet squishing in the permafrost as if we were walking through foam, only then did Anna slow down and tell us to watch our step.

“What is that thing?” Out in the distance was a collection of giant boulders, bigger than anything you’d find in Dry Creek.

“It’s a glacial erratic,” Anna explained. “They’re boulders that were carried into the valley during the last ice age.”

“Carried by what?” I asked.

“Glaciers, obviously.” Tuck placed both arms against his hips as if he was the one in charge, clearly proud for having figured that one out before I did. “Let’s go check them out.”

It took us nearly an hour of walking across the spongy tundra to get to the erratic. When we finally arrived, Anna pulled out some ropes that we could use to climb. She looped one around a ridge on the top, as if she had known it would be there all along, and demonstrated how to hoist our bodies up.

About fifteen feet up the boulder flattened out enough for three humans and one dog to sit comfortably. Once we were all safely upon the rock, Anna put down her sack and reached to the bottom of it to take out the special gear she had toted all this way.

“This is it,” she declared. “The birds I’m after live in this valley. This is as good a spot as any.”

I watched as Tuck helped to set up Anna’s long-range telescope, her camera, and her watercolor materials, and then we all sat down to

finally do some bird watching. After that point we weren't allowed to talk unless it was in the quietest of whispers.

"Sorry about this, Mary Lou," Anna cringed as she put a bark collar around her dog's neck. After the first noise out of Jojo we heard a small buzz of electrocution, a whine, and then the dog was silent.

It took only twenty minutes of sitting in the same spot, doing nothing but watching the landscape, before I fell asleep. I was exhausted from a restless night alone in the tent and I had woken up feeling sore and groggy. I hadn't brought anything to read and I wasn't wearing a watch, so when I dozed off and woke up again, feeling more refreshed than I had after last night's sleep, it was like time itself hadn't even passed. The only difference I noticed was Anna and Tuck, who were now positioned away from me.

"Zoom in close when you see one. Snap an initial picture, but as soon as it starts to move use the instant focus to take as many pictures as you can in sequence."

"Is this how you do it?"

"No, like this."

I opened my eyes to find her leaning over him, her arm stretched around his, directing his fingers to a certain control on the camera, her touch dainty yet with the aura of an expert. They were closer than I liked, their bodies lingering against one another's with a longing I could feel from the other side of the rock. Tuck turned to look into Anna's eyes, and then slowly leaned his head in to plant a kiss on her lips. My mouth

practically fell open with shock and rage. Still unaware that I was watching, Anna kissed him back, looking surprised at first and then slowly closing her eyes to get into it.

My heart sank like an anvil, falling through my stomach, through the rock, and through the earth below it. I wanted to explode and scream at the top of my lungs but my voice was gone, my throat was parched, and all I could do was watch. All of a sudden Anna opened her eyes and urgently pulled away from Tuck as she caught a movement in the direction the telescope was facing.

“Look there!”

Tuck grew excited, more excited than he should have been over any old bird. His fingers on the camera clicked repeatedly, and in a practiced movement Anna jumped between looking through the telescope then back to her paint set, trying to match the color on her paper to the one on the actual bird.

“It’s moving!” Tuck snapped picture after picture in the motion she had showed just minutes ago.

They did this until the bird finally left and the excitement died down, then the two of them were left panting, as if they had ran a long race and hadn’t just been sitting in the same spot for hours.

Afraid they would begin kissing again, I sat up.

“Did you see it, Sadie?”

I moved to stand, to raise my body up over theirs on the rock, but when I stood I felt my weight shift under me. Jojo had stirred at the same

exact moment as me, knocking me off balance, and my foot searched to gain traction. For an extended moment I wobbled against the rock, Anna and Tuck both reaching out for me, then finally gravity got the best of me. I let go of it all as I fell fifteen feet to the earth below, thinking of my dad's voice, the smell of the earth, and finally, the taste of Tuck's lips, longing for their warmth as I landed on a collection of much smaller, sharp granite rocks.

\*

The hospital room I woke up in smelled like pastries and bleach. A machine was beeping next to me and someone had placed a teddy bear next to my bed. I was alone in the room. There was a TV but it was off, and through the open door I could hear Tuck's voice, talking to someone in the hall. Next to my bed was a cup of water and I drank the whole thing, finishing and still feeling parched.

My head hurt and my entire right arm was in a cast. It took me a second to remember where I was: images of Tuck and Anna kissing that before I had been so sure of were suddenly questionable, blurry memories my mind I wanted to forget but couldn't. Through the haze I remembered the sound of Anna's voice making calls on her satellite phone, my arm twisted backwards and aching through a helicopter ride, Tuck squeezing my hand. When had I fallen asleep? The pain in my head was thick and deep, as if half of my brain had knocked against my skull and it was still

shaking from the impact. I sat to look out the window and saw green leaves on the trees, so I knew I couldn't have been out for long. Out the window was a grey, slightly worn down city, and I recognized the dull landscape of parking lots and public medical centers as Fairbanks.

The conversation coming from the hallway ended and Tuck ran into the room as soon as he saw I was awake. He hurried to the side of the bed and wrapped his arms around me, leaning in for a hug.

"We were so worried about you, Sades." He hadn't called me by my childhood nickname since I was thirteen and had no boobs.

"We?" I grumbled.

"Anna and I."

"Oh," I flinched.

"While you were asleep the doctor said you broke your arm in two places, but other than that and the concussion, you're going to be okay."

"I never want to go bird watching again."

"He said you might have some memory loss around the event."

Tuck looked down.

I wished I could forget what happened in the tent, or that at least he would, but all that was hazy was the helicopter and after. Before I had to respond, Anna walked in with a huge look of relief on her face, her phone clipped to a belt loop like she was GI Jane.

"I just spoke with your dad. He's coming home."

"Is he still in Burkina Faso?" I couldn't believe that finally my dad would be home and we could be rid of Anna.

“He’s on his way here. He has to stop in Paris, but he’ll be back in a week.” She sat down on the edge of my bed. “He also said you’re both to stay with me until he returns. I’m so sorry this happened to you Sadie, but Tuck and I will take good care of you.” She began to stroke my hair, combing her fingers through it as if the touch of her would be anything less than horrific.

\*

After the doctor said I was well enough to leave the hospital, Anna drove us home. I didn’t ask how she got her car. She and Tuck sat in the front seats, her hand resting on the steering wheel. I watched to see if they would touch each other again in front of me, his hand only inches away from hers, but Anna seemed jittery, standoffish when he came near. She listened to the radio and sang along while I was quiet in the backseat, looking out the window and trying not to think about what was happening between them.

I watched the interior of Alaska zoom by through the window. We passed birch trees, a few moose, and the small village of Nenana, built upon a river with the same name. Slowly the mountain range in the distance that I knew as home became closer and closer, and every time I glanced at the clock I reminded myself we were a minute nearer to my dad’s return. Jojo snored in my lap, and for the first time all summer I looked forward to school starting up again, to have something to do other

than hang out at Anna's all day and watch Tuck be captivated with her weird life. Listening to them talk from the backseat, their conversation filtered in while my eyes were shut. Anna kept her eyes on the road as she drove.

“So what do you think you'll do now that you don't have to go back to school, Tuck?”

I had heard many people, my father and his mother included, ask Tuck this question, and every time he had given a vague grunt and no solid answer.

“I don't know.” He looked out the window for a second, then back at Anna. “Now that my mom's gone... I think I'd like to travel. I've never even left the state.”

“Traveling is one of the most important things you can do when you're young,” Anna responded. “If you don't have anything tying you to one place, you don't have a reason not to.”

I wanted to scream from the backseat that he had me.

Tuck finally gave his signature grunt and the conversation died. I dozed off to sleep in the back, dreaming of a life of my own outside of Alaska, and all the places I would someday go.

\*

For the next couple days I stayed in Anna's room. She set up an extra mattress on the floor—claiming she would have given me the bed



but she thought it would be too hard to climb in with my arm in a full cast—and Tuck slept on the beanbags with Jojo, still insisting on calling her Mary Lou.

I read on the beanbags while Anna worked at her desk, also in the living room. One book, *The Florida Bird Bible*, had her name on the side of it. I opened it up to find paintings of birds so perfect they looked like photographs, species I had never seen before. Feathers were brilliantly painted, with such realistic detail that I tried to reach out and stroke them. I pretended not to notice when Anna looked up from her work to see me reading her book and smiled.

After playing fetch with Jojo, chopping wood outside, and doing all the dishes, Tuck came into the living room.

“Hey Anna?”

She took a moment before looking up from her work, keeping her pencil to the paper as if mid thought.

“I thought maybe we could go on a walk together? Just the two of us?” he added.

I pretended to keep reading while actually listening.

“Not right now, Tuck. Why don’t you take Sadie?”

He ignored her comment and went back outside to play with the dog.

The next day, in the living room again, Anna blew him off again. Tuck had made his way through various activities around the house, rode his four-wheeler around, and was now back, sitting on a beanbag next to

me and reading a book on birds of the Alaska Interior, acting as if he cared about any birds that weren't on his dinner plate. After flipping through most of it he put it down on the floor and went to bother Anna again.

“Hey Anna, want to go watch for ptarmigan chicks? This book says they should be a good size by now.”

Anna didn't even look up from her work.

“I can't Tuck, I'm really behind. I spent too much time goofing off this summer and I'm under a deadline.”

“Fine,” he snapped at her excuse, and left the house.

A couple hours later Anna sat up from her painting.

“How would you like to go to the library, Sadie?”

I was halfway through *Migration: A Love Story* for the second time; everything else on her bookshelf had been at skimmed through at the very least. While I didn't want to spend any unnecessary time with her, I was also bored out of my mind, and I figured I would be stuck in the house with her anyway if I said no.

At the library Anna helped me carry my new pile of reading material back to the car. I had grabbed a couple magazines, the usual, but also picked up a couple of books on dog training, curious if I could teach Jojo anything cool. On the way back we stopped at the post office and Anna ran in to check her box. I watched from the front seat of her car as she walked out of the small trailer-turned-post-office, carrying a pile of

letters and packages. Back in the car, she turned on the engine then handed me a thin brown envelope.

“This is for you.”

“What is it?”

“You have to open it!”

My fingers ripped apart the packaging as fast as they could with the use of only one arm, and inside I found a blank journal with an embossed golden picture of a bird on the front. I flipped through the pages, expecting the sequel to *Migration* or another book of the same genre, and stopped when I realized there was nothing written inside.

“It’s blank.”

“It’s for you to fill in.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve gotten to know you pretty well this summer, Sadie. The journal is for you to write down your thoughts and feelings, or whatever comes to mind.” She made eye contact and I looked away. “My mom gave me one when I was your age, and it really helped me to process my feelings and grow up.”

Anna put the car in drive and headed back toward her house. Quiet music played in the background, a little fuzzy from the far away radio station. My heart burned in my chest and I scrunched up my face, trying not to cry. Anna looked over at me when trying to switch lanes, and her smile faded when she saw the look on my face.

“What’s wrong, Sadie?”

How could I tell this woman what was wrong? “You’re not my mom, you know.”

Anna responded slowly, as if thinking deeply about each word before it came out. “I know Sadie.”

The words flew out with fire and haste. “Do you think you can just come here and adopt me? I don’t need you. It’s your fault I have this stupid cast on anyway.”

By this point the car was pulling up outside her house.

“I know Sadie. I’m—I’m sorry if I made you mad. I just wanted to do something nice for you.”

She began to cry, her mouth still curved up to show her teeth and making sounds like a fish. I opened the car door with my left hand, struggled to unhook myself from the seatbelt, and threw the journal into the dirt of the driveway.

“Keep your stupid journal. You don’t know anything about me.”

I stormed past Tuck, sitting on the front porch taking pictures of the birds in the birdhouses with Anna’s camera. Jojo jumped up to greet me but I shoved her away, ran into Anna’s room and closed the door.

“Sadie!” Anna shouted from the other side of the door after catching up with me. “Please just talk to me.”

“Go away,” I cried against my makeshift bed, waiting for her to leave me alone.

It was just the room and I. As I longed for my father to be home I sobbed, teenage hormones tangled up in a chaos that I hurled at this poor

woman. After a beat she walked away, the sound of her shoes hitting the hardwood flooring, and I could hear her sigh as she collapsed against a chair in the living room. Tuck spoke and I crawled to the door to open it a crack and listen in to what he was saying.

“What’s wrong with Sadie?”

Anna sighed again. I imagined her throwing her arms up in the air as she spoke. “It’s like nothing I do is the right thing.”

Tuck sat down against the other beanbag, the sound of its innards squishing around as he landed in them. “You know why she doesn’t like you, right?”

“Doesn’t like me?”

Tuck shifted around on the chair before he spoke. “Because we’re together.”

“Because we’re...” Anna stopped. “Oh my god, Tuck. We’re not together.”

They were both silent, then Tuck spoke first.

“What does that mean?”

I heard her stand up. “Look Tuck, what happened on the rock, that, that was a total mistake,” she stuttered.

From behind the door I smirked, happy but also a little sad for Tuck at the same time. I could sense everything he must have been feeling, and his emotions became confused with my own.

“A mistake?”

Anna's feet picked up again, the sound of her pacing the living room echoing back through my doorway. "I shouldn't have kissed you back, I'm sorry." She stopped. "I mean, you're eighteen. That's practically illegal."

Tuck's turn to stand up now, he hurled accusing words at her. "So we're not together?"

"Tuck," she stammered before dropping her voice lower. "I'm so sorry you thought that."

The house teetered with quiet, then Tuck's footsteps made their way to where I was sitting, one ear out the door, one inside Anna's room. I scrambled to my bed on the floor to make it look like I hadn't been listening in. Tuck slammed the door open and it hit against the wall, the doorknob leaving a dent in the drywall.

"We're going." He helped me up, arranged my sandals on my feet, and led me out of the house, my pile of magazines left behind.

"But Tuck," I looked back at the dog, lingering at Anna's heels and trying to navigate the commotion.

"Bye Jojo," he spat.

On the way out I looked back at Anna. She had Jojo in her arms, the dog's long body pressed up against hers to face the other direction, the same way that Tuck had gathered her into his arms when she first showed up on our porch.

\*

Instead of heading down the turn-off for our houses, Tuck drove past the junction and continued onto an old dirt road that turned into an ATV trail we used to ride, back when we were closer. We headed into the wilderness; past the cabins, into a valley surrounded by smooth, rounded mountains. Wringing the throttle as hard as he could, he took us through torn up tundra and knee-deep mud puddles. I pulled up my feet against the side of the machine to keep them from getting wet, a useless endeavor. Clinging on to him with one arm, we rode hard over rocks and fallen branches. He led us across a rocky creek with iron-red water and then the trail petered off as the terrain turned into a mud pit. At one point we slowed and our wheels began spinning in place, searching for traction against the soft earth. Eventually, when Tuck's thrusting proved no good, he got out and tried to push. We were stuck.

"Can you rev the engine while I push?" Tuck asked.

I scooted up and put all my weight towards the front of the wheeler, hitting the gas with my good arm as Tuck pushed behind me. Instead of moving, the machine's back wheels covered Tuck with thick, wet mud.

"Can't you push harder?"

"Can't you rev it more?"

"Broken arm, hello?" I pointed to my cast.

"Well do you wanna try pushing?"

“Shut up.” My feet sunk into the mud as I jumped off to look at the wheels. We were stucker than stuck. “I guess we have to walk back.”

“Hold on.” Tuck opened up the back compartment and pulled out a clear, plastic bottle with a golden liquid inside of it.

“I stole this from Anna,” he announced. “It will make our walk back more fun.”

I didn’t want to drink it but I didn’t want to lose Tuck, now that we were finally alone together again and I was back on top. Putting my lips up to the bottle I tasted the thick, fire colored liquid. I wanted to spit it out again but I forced myself to swallow.

“That was disgusting, Tuck!”

“I know.”

“So then why do you drink it?”

Tuck shrugged. “It can be fun. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

I looked at the bottle and looked at him. “You actually drink this stuff?” I knew that the other kids at school would get bored and raid their parents’ liquor cabinets, but I had never thought someone like Tuck would do that.

“Sometimes.”

I took another swig and then passed the bottle to him, feeling the burn all the way into my stomach.

\*



Somewhere along the walk our hands found their way into each other's, reminding me of how warm but rough Tuck's palms always felt. My feet in their sandals, soaked wet from the uneven trail, burned in ways I had no idea was possible. By the time we got back to our neighborhood my head looped in circles and my steps felt uneven. Exhausted and achy, my legs were covered with mud and my feet bled from blisters. The burred reality around me made the pain in my feet a little more manageable, the stiffness of my arm in the cast forgettable.

Instead of waving goodbye at the turnoff to my house, I caught Tuck by the elbow.

"Can you walk me home?"

"Of course," he murmured, and I wondered if now would finally be my chance to prove myself better than Anna.

"Good."

Still keeping hold of my good hand, Tuck and I strolled towards my house, stumbling and swaying over the potholes in the dirt road. When we stopped in front of the door, he kissed me on the lips for the first time in weeks. His mouth pushing against mine desperately, he breathed against me expectantly, so I kissed back.

"Aren't you going to come in?"

Tuck leaned in to put his face next to mine. He smelled like his familiar mixture of oil and sweat. "Is that ok?"

“Yes,” I whispered, my mind numbed by the golden liquid. We had finished most of the bottle together and I was beginning to feel a little queasy.

I didn't need to lead him inside but I still did, his hand in mine. I wasn't thinking about the mud footprints left in the hall or how his jeans, caked with mud, sat in a mess on the bathroom floor when he took them off. We perched on the edge of the tub and washed off our feet using the showerhead, my left arm useless holding the showerhead steady as he wiped the mud off my legs, laughing as we splashed each other and not caring that the water landed in the furthest corners of the bathroom.

Once in my room, with Tuck down to his boxers, I still made him turn around when I changed. I wanted to put on the sexiest clothes I could but I didn't even own underwear that had lace; I felt ashamed that the first time a guy would see me naked he would be taking off the world's most generic panties. The giant cast on my right arm didn't help; I felt like a cardboard cut-out doll. I put on a fuzzy pink robe, my cast sticking on the material, and joined him on the small, twin sized bed.

Now that Tuck was right where I wanted him, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to actually do with him. He had always been the one to make the first move, and even though I had memorized all those techniques, the alcohol in my system caused my mind to come up blank. We both sat on the bed, and after a minute of staring at each other he put his hand on my hip like no distance had grown between us.

My nerves jumped around inside my stomach and I felt as if I might float up to the ceiling like a balloon. I looked around for something to grab on to, a bed sheet or a pillow, and I realized suddenly how juvenile my room looked: posters of boy bands on the walls, pages from coloring books I had filled out last year, everything on my bed a different shade of pink. A training bra I hadn't worn in years was for some reason creeping out of my dresser, half open in the corner.

"Sorry there's no birds," I muttered.

Tuck, who had been leaning into my body, stopped. As if he was an old man just remembering what he looked like in the mirror, he looked at me with an unknowable expression, his face blank. Moving his hands away from my hips he fingered a strand of my hair, then placed it behind my ear and kissed my forehead. I brushed him away.

"I'm ready," I reminded him for what I hoped would be the last time.

Tuck stared at me with sad eyes for a moment before speaking. "Okay."

\*

Years later, while attending a private college in Washington State, the girls I met would giggle about the first time they had sex. Sitting in a circle sharing a six pack of wine coolers, my dorm mates would laugh about their ex-boyfriends, their prom dates, and a couple of shy girls

would look to the floor, take an extra long swig from their bottles of fuzzy navel, then turn bright red as we filled in the blanks for them. *That girl's a virgin*, someone would whisper, acting as if the worst thing in the world you could do was save yourself for someone who deserved you.

For a long time I became a master at avoiding this subject. I would carefully sneak out to the bathroom before anyone could ask me the question, or amuse my girlfriends with pictures of dogs from the animal shelter where I volunteered. While I'm sure now that this technique had its flaws, it worked to keep those girls from making a show of my private life, and part of me was secretly happy that I could tiptoe the line between shy girl and girl with a dark past, hiding the fact that I was actually a girl who had a secret that burned so much, even in thinking about it she feared she would turn to ash.

One night in my second year my roommate Tasha, who had spent the night partying at a frat house, called me distraught and asking for a ride. I picked her up on the way home from the library. I had chosen to live with Tasha exactly because she was one of those shy girls, and she never asked me questions I wasn't ready to answer. Tasha climbed into my front seat that night, her miniskirt crawling up her stomach to show the tops of her legs, and landed hard on her bottom, turning to me with makeup-streaked eyes and matted knots in her brown hair.

“What's wrong Tasha?” I asked, reaching over to buckle her in.

Tasha shook her head, sniffing and wiping her tears away with the tops of her wrists as I drove. “George.”

She smelled like cheap beer and cigarettes, an odor I had yet to smell on her, so I decided to stop at a drive through to get her a bite to eat. When she stopped crying to munch on fries I asked her what happened.

“I found him with another girl,” she sniveled. “At the party.”

“I’m so sorry.” My heart broke for my friend.

Tasha stared at a fry for a second before breaking out in small sobs again.

“You didn’t...?” I began, remembering a conversation we had the week before where she questioned if he might be the one.

Now completely crying, Tasha nodded. I unbuckled myself and reached over the food to give her a hug, light from the parking lot dimly filtering in through the dark of the night.

“I should have listened to what everyone said about him. You would have never done anything this stupid,” she wiped away more tears.

As I sat there, in the car listening to my friend cry, I wondered if history itself was made up of women picking the wrong men. I wasn’t sure what part of my story it was exactly that had kept me from sharing it. Was it the fact that he was my cousin? Or was it shame for my younger self, my notions and naivety, and that the most defining moment in my life was when I had lost my best friend?

What I told Tasha was this: The morning after losing my virginity I woke up to birds singing outside my window, sunlight creeping in through the curtains, and my father, opening the door to my bedroom

and crying with horror as he saw Tuck and I wrapped up in each other's arms, my cast sticking out like a white flag.

"What is this?" He threw the first thing he could find, which happened to be Tuck's boxers, at the bed.

Tuck scrambled to find the covers and hide his naked body with them. My pink fuzzy robe was hanging on the bedpost and I pulled it down, slipped my arms into the sleeves and turned my back.

"Dad, I didn't think you'd be home today." I stammered over my shoulder.

"Clearly," he snapped, and turned around to leave the room.

Letting out a small yelp, Tuck pulled on his boxers. "Where are my pants?"

"You can find a trail of mud leading to them in the bathroom," my dad called from the other room. "But you'll have to walk past me first."

Tuck gulped.

"It will be okay," I reassured him, half doubting my own words.

Running to the bathroom, Tuck scurried out of my room with his hands against his boxers, as if he had to hold them up to his body to stay on.

"Sadie! Get in here!" My dad yelled from the living room.

When we were both fully dressed, Tuck and I sat on the couch watching as my father paced back and forth. The room was silent other

than his stomping, and every ten or fifteen seconds he would stop walking to shoot something accusatory at us.

“Mercedes, you’re fifteen.”

“I know, Dad.”

More pacing.

“Tucker, she’s your cousin.”

“I know, sir.”

Pacing, again.

He finally stopped and sat down on a chair facing us. “I trusted you to take care of yourselves,” he turned to Tuck. “To take care of her. How could you?”

Tuck looked at the floor and kicked the edge of the rug around a bit before speaking. Why did I feel like I was the one who was supposed to be in charge?

“I’m sorry, sir.”

My dad sighed. “I think you should leave now.” He spoke to Tuck, but did so while gazing directly in to my eyes.

Without saying anything Tuck stood up and went straight to the door. Before leaving us he turned, glanced at me with those same sad eyes, and reached his arm out as if he was grabbing for something to hold on to. When nobody reached back he turned around and left, closing the door behind him.

Everything I had felt that summer came rushing back to me: fear of what Tuck would want from me, longing for my father, anger at him

for not being here, heartache over seeing Tuck with Anna, and finally the regret of what I had done the night before, which had already left me feeling fragmented. But it wasn't until I sat there, my father looking down at me, chastising me for what I had done while he was away, that I felt vulnerable, as if a piece of me would snap in half if I let it go on a minute longer. I stood up. "He had more right to be here than you, Dad."

My dad's face puffed up a little as if he might explode through his eye sockets. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

I shook a little as I spoke, afraid of my own words. "Tuck actually *acts* like a part of the family. We're there for each other. You just come and go as you please."

My father, now sitting in the chair facing mine, gawked for a couple seconds, then wrapped his arms around his torso, curled into his body like a small baby, and looked to the ground. Behind him on a table sat a picture of my mother, the last picture taken, her long hair hanging down her face around her wide smile, two hands cusped to the bottom of her overlarge belly. The picture caught my eye and for the first time I noticed the resemblance between our faces—the dimples on one side of our cheeks, the ski jump noses and the dark, colorless eyes, the kind I wished I could replace for blue. The similarities were suddenly obvious.

I found myself standing over my father so that I was bigger than him, my chest feeling as if it would burst through my ribcage. My voice got louder. "You weren't here all summer. You've never been here. You're not my dad."



My father was in the same position, weakly looking into the mud-stricken carpet.

I stomped my foot and shrieked. “You can’t even look at me!”

As my voice echoed in our empty house I felt it lingering, ringing back across the canyon between us that had been growing larger with each year of my life. The sharp edge to the silence struck my father got up and walked, head down and his cheeks a morose grey, across the house to his office and shut the door behind him. I stood alone in the living room with a big empty hole in my torso, its presence making me want to fold up into myself, the end of summer looming in the horizon.

\*

I didn’t see Tucker for one week. Taking out the trash the next morning, I found a small journal resting on the cement right outside my front door. Dirt had been wiped from the front cover so that remnants of mud only remained in the edges of the bird’s wings; the fist couple pages were crinkled as if they had been soaked through, hung to dry, and shaken free of dirt. I adjusted the garbage bag over my shoulder and walked around back to the bins, lugging the plastic overloaded with possessions from my room into the bear-proof containers where we kept our garbage. Overnight I hadn’t slept, I had spent the night stripping my room bare of everything that characterized it as my own: posters and pages from coloring books tacked to the wall, any throw pillows or decorations the

shade of bright pink, and magazines, old *Cosmopolitan* or *Vogues* I had read so many times that the edges of the pages were beginning to fade and wear away. After dropping the trash I used my one good arm to flip through the journal. There was no note.

Later that week outside the Mountain Mart, I sat in my dad's car while he was inside shopping, restocking the essentials I had let go bad over the summer, things like eggs or butter, items that I always ate when prepared for me but never seemed to use on my own. It was stuffy inside the car with the windows shut so I unbuckled myself, rolled up the sleeves of my all black sweatshirt, climbed onto the hood of my dad's car and laid back against the red-hot metal, letting the sun warm my cheeks. Since my dad had returned and found me with Tuck, I had been acting as if I was see-through. I would wander around my house in sweatshirts and layered on pants, sometimes cleaning small things like ledges or bookshelves, picking up and collecting bits of myself I had strewn about the house over the summer and dropping anything that reminded me of childhood in the trash. Whenever I saw my father I remembered the look of complete disgust on his face the morning he found us together, and I felt a large hole in my center, one that made me vulnerable. My father and I would avoid each other's glance, lasting until one the other retreated to another room of the house. While sleeping with Tuck had been intended as a point of pride and a success over Anna, I somehow felt confused by everything I was feeling—shame of how I had acted, hurt by how my dad had been treating me his whole life, and remorse for where that had

gotten the both of us. Now, on the hood of his car, skin toasting through layers, I was content to be caught in the exact time and place I had found myself, the physical sensation of sun warming my body reminding me that I was not impenetrable. My father would have to adjust.

Shifting around on the hood I heard a familiar sound of an engine coming up behind me from the direction of the freeway. My heart picked up with a rhythm in my chest and I sat up, hands flying to my hair to pat down any catastrophes that I might have forgotten to brush through, mentally evaluating what was my best angle in the outfit I wore. For a second I let myself lament the baggy, form-obscuring pieces, then remembered that I didn't care. I cranked my head around my neck and saw Tuck, on his four-wheeler, directing his machine to the side of the building that we were parked on, ending up not too far from where I sat. His machine stilled in the dirt lot, dust flying into the air from his wheels, and I watched him take off his helmet, run his hands through his always-greasy hair, and spit onto the ground below him. I considered what I could say to him. I was his last family member. All I knew is that I couldn't, and never again would be able to run to him and wrap my arms around him, hugging him like I had before this summer. We would never be Tuck and Sadie again.

He made the first step to veer towards and my head nodded, a little bit at first, but then stronger, shaking from left to right. I imagined a line straight across my face from temple to temple, one that spelled out everything I had to say to him. *No*, I forced my look to read. *Just no*.

\*

Later, when telling my story to Tasha, she wrapped herself up in a duvet on the couch next to me and asked if I ever regretted that look. I told her that at that moment not so much, but of course, in the weeks immediately following the event, I couldn't help but feel remorse at the loss of not only a friend, but also a cousin. I described how I wished I had hugged him, cried into his sweatshirt, the two of us making up in a dramatic display and me following him back to his four-wheeler. Together we would ride off, away from that town, leaving only the dust from the wheels behind.

But then I explained how at fifteen my dreams couldn't see past two years from then. They couldn't understand that I would grow out of my beauty shop phase, that I would start reading real books, at first picking through the adult fiction section at the library and then eventually reading biology textbooks off my dad's shelves, ultimately dedicating myself to my studies so completely that I won a full scholarship to an out-of-state school to study the sciences. That over the winter I would get a part time job working for mushers down the road, the ones that moved in to Anna's old place, and I would learn to love dogs not just for who they are, but what they can do. I didn't know then that I would grow my hair long, stop wearing makeup, stop caring so much what I looked like on the outside. That I would eventually learn that beauty really comes from

within, that you can dress yourself up or do whatever you want to your hair but if you don't have confidence, integrity, and passion, then nobody's going to want to deal with you in the first place. I had Anna to thank for that.

“Well what about Tuck?” Tasha asked me, and I shrugged my shoulders and looked to the side.

“He's out there.”

“Do you think he ever thinks about you?” she stared deep into my eyes as she asked, and I realized how good it felt to talk about him.

“I think he still regrets it. Otherwise he would have looked me up.” We're quiet for a moment before I added in my last thought. “We're family, after all.”

\*

I saw Tuck once more after that day: he was in a casket, eyes shut to mimic his mother's, dressed in blue with awards pinned to his chest. It was seven years from our summer: I had just been accepted into my top choice of master's programs in veterinary science when two soldiers in their dress uniforms arrived at the front door of my apartment. It wasn't quite May. Outside the buds on the trees bustled with color, even though in my hometown there still would have been two feet of snow on the ground.

As they stepped through the doorway to my apartment the soldiers took off their hats and I offered them a seat. I made the boys tea; my insides were swirling and, thoroughly distracted, I had a hard time focusing on what they were saying.

“What’s this about?” I asked as I poured piping green tea into three cups. I stirred globs of honey until they dissolved. They were about my age, had short, clean haircuts, and their skin was tanned as if they had recently seen a sun brighter than the one currently hidden behind rainclouds.

“Your cousin, ma’am.”

I blinked, thinking for a moment who it could be. “My cousin Tuck?”

One of the soldiers nodded, explaining that I was the only family member who Tuck had listed on any of his paperwork when he joined the Marines. Other than my father, I was his only relation left alive.

“These are for you, ma’am.” The soldier on the left stood up and handed me his tags, then explained the details of a landmine in the desert outside Fallujah, and that Tuck had been brave to the end. They asked if I wanted his belongings and I said yes, then I signed a few documents and that was it. They left without finishing their tea.

Sitting at the living room table, my cellphone next to me, I directed the buttons to pull up my dad’s name on the screen, disappointment only a fingertip away. He ought to have known, but I couldn’t help think of the last time the three of us were together, and how

in the years that followed him and I grew farther and father apart, him disappearing to even more foreign locations, eventually accepting a job at a university in Alabama and leaving me to finish out my senior year in Healy alone.

“I don’t think so,” I said the words aloud, even though there was no one to hear me speak, no one to commend me for my decision.

\*

At his funeral *Taps* played while a small crowd sat in the first two rows, only a few dressed in black, dabbing handkerchiefs to their faces and fanning themselves out with programs from the service that morning. I had flown in to San Diego the night before, catching the last flight out of Seattle and making my first stop the pet supply store, where I bought the largest crate I could find and an overly ferocious pink collar. Smiling as I fingered the collar at the register, it reminded me of something fifteen-year-old Sadie would buy in all seriousness; in a way, I made the purchase for her.

Once Tuck’s military friends had spoken, once the preacher gave a eulogy, and once we had sang a popular radio song as a final farewell, I shook hands with the fourteen people in attendance and hugged a crowd of nameless faces. One of the soldiers, the very last to give his condolences, approached me and asked me to meet him in the parking lot to load Tuck’s belongings into my rental car, which I was to drive back to

Seattle. He pulled his car up to mine and went to the trunk, opening up and unlatching a crate holding Tuck's most prized possession: a dog, an ex-marine, now lost and hopeless without her partner. I let the dog smell my hands and then got down on both knees, petting her ears, the sides of her face and her belly, nearly laughing at the thought of the kind, sweet dog, working abroad sniffing bombs.

"She's a Belgian Malinois. They completed two tours together, then she retired with him," he explained. "Here." He handed me a picture of Tuck, much older than the Tuck who, in my mind, would for eternity ride the back roads of Healy on a four-wheeler. This Tuck was in full uniform and smiling like I had never seen him smile before, standing next to a muscular dog with a large tan body, a black face, and ears that stood up like car antennas.

"Thanks," I swallowed, both shaky but excited. "What's her name?"

"Jojo." The marine hesitated handing off the leash, eyeing me up and down before he asked his final question. "Are you sure you're up for it?"

I nodded. I had never been more ready for anything in my life.





Zoë Wise's writing has appeared in a variety of places including *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *West Texas Literary Review*, *The Northern Review*, and others. Before landing in Alaska Zoë lived in Burkina Faso, Jordan, Montana, and Georgia, though she spent most of her life in Bellingham, Washington. Zoë has two corgis and two degrees in Creative Writing