We Fall Together

By Scott Morrow Johnson

*WARNING: There is no hero in this story. We all want one. We all want to be the hero of our own story. But this isn’t your story.*

*“You cannot protect yourself from sadness without protecting yourself from happiness.”*

 *­Jonathan Safran Foer*

*We are all in this together.*

*There is life, and then there is us. Our souls. Our thoughts, our actions. Our sense of self. What is real, or what we think is real. It’s all ours.*

*But without others, what are we? We are the tree that falls in the empty forest.*

*It has been said that humans are born alone and die alone, but this must have been said by the same old sage who believes that everything must happen for a reason. A lot of idioms sound good, but are meaningless, really.*

*No one is born alone. By definition, we are in the company of others. Or, at least the woman who gives birth to us. She is always there, from the start.*

*Then there are others. From that quiet hospital room, to everything outside those walls, our world expands. Yet we grow more alone through time, in this life of ours. Even though people surround us, we become more and more alone. We learn what loneliness is, only by being among others.*

*We stand on an island, watching the flock fly around us. As if they are all together, and we are not.*

*The truth is, we are all alone. Together. That is how we navigate the world.*

*We try to develop a sense of independence. But we also need others. Once we make this distinction, that is when life becomes manageable. By being with others, but not depending on them.*

*This is what love is all about. We can love others. But we can be ourselves at the same time.*

*Can’t we?*

*After all, we are all in this together. Human beings.*

*Are we not?*

*Are we not?*

CHAPTER 1

Nobody likes the new girl. Not at a company full of women, anyway.

That’s how it feels to Barb as she navigates the first Thursday of her first week at her new job. This is not her first time being the new girl, but it never gets easier. Three weeks from her 30th birthday, Barb is surrounded by women who are mostly older than her. The ones who are her age and younger seem to have a clique that’s impenetrable.

It would be cliché to say it’s because she’s beautiful (which, to some, she might be, although most of those would probably settle for *somewhat attractive*) or because she’s young (although when she was in high school, the receptionist was starting elementary school). She has just never gotten along with other girls, for whatever reason. Barb can seem a little standoffish, although she has a wicked sense of humor. Sometimes she can seem condescending, although she is helplessly critical of herself on the inside.

She stopped putting time and energy into figuring it out years ago. All she knows is that these transitions are always awkward, and that she rarely fits into the box that society expects for women to be. She also grew up in a generation that is redefining what it means to be a woman. Stuck somewhere between what you know you are and what the old world still wants you to be.

There is a staff meeting in an hour, and Barb, wearing a new blouse and a pair of fashionable yellow pants that she found at a thrift store, has a lot of sales calls on which to follow up. When she’s focused on work, Barb does not care who is or isn’t talking to her. She has been the best salesperson at each of her past three stops – man or woman – and she hasn’t seen anyone at this company who might threaten that streak.

She has sticky notes all over her monitor, the results of her first few days at this job, and the result of a likely undiagnosed case of ADHD, and she plays with her hair as she decides where to begin. For all of her intelligence, Barb can be overcome by indecision at times. Her mind can get too active, and sometimes she can’t slow it down.

Coffee. She needs coffee. As strange as it sounds, caffeine slows her mind down. Helps her think clearly. Barb’s mother used to make her drink coffee in the mornings, even as a child, to calm her down. Barb hated the taste back then. Hated her mother – for that, and a lot of things. But she had come to enjoy the habit.

As she stands to leave, she hears a low, mumbling sound from between the walls. The sound of a woman’s warbly voice. It sounds like it is coming from one of those answering machines from the 80s or 90s. She can’t quite make out the words, only what they sound like.

*… cannot please the innocent. Aliens drop from mustard seeds in the desert mist. We are all broken children of mastodon …*

Barb tilts her head, trying to hear more closely, but the muffled sound only sounds like jargon. She opens her door and goes out into the hallway.

CHAPTER 2

Phillip Haston arrives at the South End branch a few minutes late. He has his laptop in a leather bag and is wearing a black tie, which feels a bit like a boa constrictor around his neck. He’s still not used to them. Phillip never had to wear a tie, back when he was on the art scene. But art scenes pay the bills for only the chosen few, while men in ties choose getting paid.

This is not his favorite branch, and not just because there are only women here. This company is roughly 90 percent women, and despite how glorious that might seem to a teen-age male, for 43-year-old Phillip Haston, it is a bit of a burden. He travels to different branches throughout the week, and at all of them he feels the eyes of judgment and hate. Being a white male certainly comes with its privileges, but in 2024 it also comes with some heavy burdens. White men are what is wrong with everything in our society, from the politicians to the school shooters to the high-society rapists. Some people look at people like Phillip Haston the same way they look at Donald Trump or Harvey Weinstein … like an evil monster. Some people see them as all the same, these white men.

Cat at the front desk gives him barely a nod as he walks into the office, and it will be up to Phillip to start the banter if he is able. He grew up the shy, awkward, artsy type in a Midwestern suburb, and he somehow got by without social skills until his 30s. He had to develop them as an adult, just to navigate this overstimulating world, and it has worked well enough for him. He is married now, with two children and a house not far from the South End.

“Morning, Cat,” he says. He notices her bright pink blouse but is not allowed to comment on her appearance. At least that is what the annual harassment in the workplace trainings he takes online have reminded him over and over through the years. “I like that artwork,” he says, noticing a piece on the wall behind her. “Is that new?”

She looks up at him and holds up a finger. She has a headset that covers one ear, and as she looks at him, she stares through him.

“Yes,” she says. “It comes with a money-back guarantee.” She is nodding. It is only then that Phillip realizes she is on a call. He looks again at the artwork – more a conversation piece than something that is actually worth noticing. It looks like a long vine coming out of a cereal bowl. It looks like something Phillip would have created during his first semester of art school all those years ago.

“Yeah, good chat,” he says under his breath. Then he fumbles for his ID badge, taps it against a door fob, and enters into the long hallway where the offices line up like prison cells. He passes closed office doors with the names of women he barely knows. Lorena asks about his kids every once in awhile, though she doesn’t know their names. Chayse and Kenley, who are closer to his children’s age than Phil’s age, don’t even know his name. Pamela tries to talk sports with him, but Phillip isn’t much into sports.

Since coming on as art director 18 months ago, Phillip has made very few connections at any of the branches. His role as a rotating floater who is at a different branch every day of the week might have something to do with it, but he senses that it is more about his penis. That is, being a man in a woman’s world. Not that anyone wants to hear him complain.

“Morning!” a bubbly sales associate named Shannon or Shanley or Shan-something says without making eye contact. She breezes by and into her office, closing the door behind her. Phillip carries on his way into the break room at the end of the hall.

He pulls at his tie again, wishing he could just be wearing a Cloud Cult t-shirt and torn jeans. Wishing he didn’t have to be keeping these corporate hours and hanging out with these corporate people and living this corporate life. This is settling for people who are creative. Another word for it is *failing*.

The words of a song he was listening to on the way to work reverberate through his mind: “*Ask how I'm doing, and I'll say I am okay/But the truth is I'm caving in/Cuz this world is a strange place to live*.*”*

As the door to the break room closes behind him, Phillip Haston has no way of knowing that his world is about to change forever.

*Katie, I should have been there for you. I know that now. Sorry is not a big enough word.*

*Why couldn’t I help you? You were drowning. You were suffocating. You were …*

*I was not there. My only job. To protect you. This was my purpose. To be there.*

*And I let you down.*

*How does a person make up for such a mistake? How does a person recover?*

*He forgets. That’s what he does. God willing, he forgets.*

*So that was what I did. For a long time. Too long. I lost you.*

*Again.*

*I am so sorry. I wish there was a bigger word.*

CHAPTER 3

“Who are you, and how do you like working here?” a voice calls out as Phillip fumbles with the Keurig machine in the break room.

He turns to see a woman who looks to be 10 or 15 years younger than he is, wearing a mask to cover her nose and mouth even though the pandemic is three years in the rearview mirror. He is startled by her openness, which is something that never came easy to Phillip. Especially here. Surrounded by all these women.

He looks around and realizes they are alone.

“I’m Phillip,” he says. “I’m the art director.” He swallows and takes her in. She seems to be an average-looking woman, with a sense of style and a kindness in her eyes. There is something that seems familiar about her, although he has never seen her before. She is nodding, waiting for more. “Oh, um,” he stammers. “I like working here, I guess.” It dawns on him that this woman might be from corporate, that she is also roving through the branches, and that this is some kind of test. “I mean, there are a lot of great things about Athena Activewear,” he adds. “The benefits, the people.”

She tilts her head. “Hello, Phillip,” she says. “I’m Barb.” She looks him up and down. “I will say this: You strike me as a bit of a bullshitter.”

“Excuse me?” he says, moving his empty coffee cup from one hand to the other. She laughs. She steps forward and touches his arm as she does. He feels nothing like attraction, but her laugh makes him feel almost immediately at ease.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “Oh, my. I need to not be so forward, you know? It’s the Midwesterner in me.”

Phillip grew up outside of Chicago. He can now hear in her voice how she said “you know?” and “Midwesterner” that the twangs of home are in her voice. Maybe that’s what makes her feel so familiar. Or maybe it’s just someone showing interest in him. Whatever it is, Phillip likes this woman. He likes being around her. She makes him feel safe in a world filled with danger.

“My bad,” she continues. “I’m not great at introductions. I’m not good around people, if we’re being honest. People suck. Mostly. But you seem like a nice guy, you know?”

“Um, thank you?”

She laughs again. She reaches for his cup, sets it down, and smiles with her eyes. He can’t see her mouth behind the mask.

“There’s a Starbucks in the office building next door,” she says. “I just discovered it yesterday. Shall we?”

Her forwardness makes him uncomfortable again, but Phillip can’t think of a way to say no. Or maybe he doesn’t want to say no.

“I’ll buy this time,” she says. “Chivalry is so 20th Century, you know?”

“Um, sure,” he says.

CHAPTER 4

Barb can’t put her finger on what it is about this guy that feels safe. She only knows that she prefers the company of men to the company of women. She hates most things about men, especially white men, but they’re more approachable in the workplace than most women. So maybe Barb is just starved for some kind of human connection.

“Short drip,” she tells the barista behind the counter. This man Phillip says, “The same.” Then he adds, “Please.”

Barb looks him up and down. He’s your basic average white male. Nothing stands out about him. His hair is mussed, which seems to be the way artsy types like it, and his clothes are wrinkled. Even the tie looks out of place. Barb wouldn’t look twice at a guy like this at the club, but he seems safe enough in this environment. Safe enough … for a man.

None of them are safe, really. Or, the ones that are, they have the potential to wander into Dangerousville. Men always seem to fall for her, not because Barb is necessarily the prettiest girl on the block. She has always considered herself average-looking, with a body that seems more on par with women in their 40s than the fit-model types in their 20s. But for some reason, men seem to gravitate toward her. And they all seem to develop this irrational attraction to her. Obsession, maybe. Barb has been in many conversations with HR departments over the years. Probably one of the reasons she moves from job to job.

“You’re married?” she says, looking at the ring on his left hand.

Phillip looks down and fiddles with the black band. “Yes,” he says awkwardly. “Her name is Stacy. We have two kids.” He smiles. He has a pleasant face. She can see what Stacy probably saw in him 15 or 20 years ago. She imagines Stacy as a soccer mom, with a thick waist and thighs that can’t seem to shed the weight despite three different crossfit trainers. All of whom are markedly sexier than this guy Phillip.

“Kids, blech,” Barb says. The barista sets down their coffees. “Oh, my,” Barb says, reaching for both cups. “Did I say that out loud?” She hands one of the coffees to Phillip. He takes a sip. “Kids are wonderful,” she says. “I love my niece. I just wouldn’t want any of my own, you know? I like being Auntie Barb.”

“Oh, I know,” Phillip says. “They can be hard.” He takes another sip. They head for the door. “But it’s the best thing that ever happened to me. Fatherhood.”

He opens the door for her. Barb hates that. She hates chivalry. She hates that all men feel this need to dote on women. The damsel-in-distress syndrome. As if they all need to be rescued. She takes the door handle from him.

“You first,” she says. Phillip looks at her strangely, then walks through. “This isn’t the 50s,” she says, then follows him. “I can open my own doors.”

He chuckles at that. He is a pleasant man. He is probably a good father. Just your basic white male. In a world run by them.

“You don’t think you’ll have kids?” he asks when they are back outside.

“Oh, hell no. I’m too set in my ways. Too wrapped up in myself.”

Phillip chuckles again. He has a calming laugh. She feels safe around him. Which she knows she should never do. It’s patriarchal society’s greatest trick.

“I was too,” he says, then takes another sip. “But sometimes our fears can stand in the way of the best things that will ever happen to us.”

She stops and looks him up and down. “Damn, Phil,” she says. “Did you read that in a Hallmark card?”

He raises his coffee cup. “Touche,” he says. “It sounded better in my head.” They continue walking. “It’s just that sometimes fear can help us, like when there’s a grizzly bear standing in the path. It motivates us to run, right? Other times, it can get in the way. If we let it. It’s meant to motivate us to do something.”

This guy and his mansplaining parables. Most times, she would run for the hills. But there is something endearing about him. Something innocent. Naïve. He has *potential.* He can be useful.

They get to the door of their office, and this time he steps aside. “Open your own damn door,” he says, smiling.

“A sense of humor,” she says. “I think we could be friends.”

He shrugs. Thanks her for the coffee. And they both go their separate ways.

*Katie,*

*I lost you. I must have searched and searched and searched. I must have been obsessed with finding you.*

*And then, somehow, I let you go.*

*I wish I could tell you how well I am doing. Can you see me now? I am not doing well. I wish things were different. I tried. I hope you know that; I did try.*

*Without you, I always felt alone. A piece of me was missing. I didn’t know it at the time, but I always felt incomplete. Does that make sense? Does any of this make sense?*

*Can you read?*

*Can you see me?*

*Do you remember me?*

*I forgot you. For most of my life. But I remember you now.*

CHAPTER 5

Phillip has a small circle of friends and hasn’t considered anyone a best friend since middle school. His wife qualifies, but she is his wife and the mother of his children. There are soul mates, and then there are friends. They are not always the same thing.

Maybe his lack of friendships is why Phillip finds himself thinking about this woman Barb in the week that follows their first meeting. He finds himself looking forward to Friday, when he can see her again. The attraction is not physical – he has never even seen half of her face – but there is something familiar about her. Something familial. She reminds him a little of his favorite cousin, but it’s not that. Maybe it is the Midwesterner in her. He can’t quite figure it out.

All he knows is that, as a married man, he should not be thinking about another woman as much as he has thought about Barb. Her sharp wit. Her easy laugh. Her confidence. There is something about her that he wants to be around. Even if he doesn’t want to be *with* her.

It scares him.

In 13 years of marriage, Phillip has never once stepped out on his wife. He has never even considered it. He is almost positive she has never had thoughts, either. Their level of trust goes beyond most relationships, as far as he can tell. Stacy trusts him so unconditionally that Phillip can basically come and go as he pleases.

With that trust, however, comes responsibility. If Stacy is going to trust him with every fiber of her body, he needs to be vigilant about not putting himself in positions to break that trust.

And so, when he is driving into the work the following Friday, listening to a song about how this could be the best time of your life, he promises himself that if he sees this Barb woman again, he will set some boundaries with her.

This is not about attraction. He continues to remind himself that. If this Barb woman was someone he could fall in love with, he would be stupid to even let her into his life. He knows how lucky he is to have Stacy, how she is his soul mate, the love of his life, the mother of his children. She is so many things to him, things no other woman could be.

And yet as he drives into the South End branch for his Friday shift, he is thinking about this Barb woman. With curiosity. With anticipation. With … excitement?

Phillip does not have a lot of close friends. Maybe it’s that. Maybe if Barb was a man, he would feel the same way. Maybe it’s knowing that someone else might be looking forward to seeing him, that he is on the mind of another person in this world, that makes him feel this way. Or maybe, having been married 13 years, Phillip has fallen into some neutral world of Stacy’s life, as if she no longer looks forward to seeing him but tolerates his presence.

Is this it? Some kind of replacement?

Phillip closes his eyes at a red light. He cannot even picture Barb’s face. He has barely seen her nose and mouth, and he can’t picture her with his eyes closed. Who is she?

Who is he?

When he arrives at the office and sees her in the hallway, she immediately feels familiar. Like family. Like the little sister he never had.

“Hey, you,” she says.

The world around him washes away. He feels himself smiling. He cannot help it.

“Hey,” he says, “Barb.”

She tilts her head. Takes him in. She is wearing that mask she wears. The pandemic officially ended more than a year ago, yet she still wears this thing. She has on a baggy sweater and a long skirt. Phillip has never considered what her body looks like.

“You look thirsty,” she says.

“Do I?”

She walks by him, grabs his sleeve.

“We need coffee,” she says.

“We?”

“Trust me,” she says. “A woman’s intuition.”

He follows, because he does trust her. Maybe too much. This woman he barely knows.

They go to the coffee shop. She orders a short drip. He offers a tall drip.

“My turn to pay,” he says. “You’ve got the next one.”

“The next one?” she says.

He pauses. Maybe he has misread her. This sounds like flirting now.

“I mean …”

“Yay! We’re coffee buddies!” she says, clapping her hands. A young woman with a name tag that says BABY pushes two coffees toward them. She hands Phillip the taller one. “Here you go, Tall Drip,” she says.

Phillip takes the cup and chuckles. He toasts her. “To Short Drip,” he says. “My coffee buddy.”

They walk back to the office, talking about his family. She invites him into her office. He pauses.

“It’s safe,” she says. “I don’t bite.”

She pulls down her mask to take a sip of coffee. She has a nice smile.

Safe. Is that what this is?

“Just for a few,” he says. “Some of us have to work.”

She laughs at that. Puts her mask back on. Closes the door behind him and sits behind her desk. He sits across from her.

“I feel like a client,” he says.

“My clients make more money than you do,” she cracks. She leans back in her chair. Her eyes are smiling. “They wouldn’t be caught dead in that cheap tie.”

He looks down at his tie. Then back at her. She winks.

“What are you afraid of?” she asks suddenly.

She is staring into his eyes. She is still wearing a mask to cover the bottom half of her face, and he realizes he really doesn’t know who she is. What he knows is that, at this moment, her eyes are hypnotic. Capable of anything.

“Excuse me?” he says.

Her eyes smile. She takes off her mask and takes a sip of coffee, and he really takes in her face for the first time. She looks different than he expected. Her nose has a bend to it, and her mouth is crooked. He feels a sense of relief in her imperfections.

“In life,” she says. “You know? What are your *fears*.”

Phillip feels his body relax. He thinks about her question.

“Heights,” he says. “Pit bulls, sometimes.”

She laughs. Not a giggle, but a long, deep laugh. She waves a hand in front of her face.

“What are we, six?” she says. “I mean *fears*.” He takes in her face. He wonders what kind of a child she was. How life has challenged her. He notices a small scar between her mouth and cheek. We all have so many stories to tell. Some we tell, some we keep in the closet. “For example,” she says. “I am afraid of death. Not the *dying* part – that doesn’t scare me at all. It’s the what-comes-after.” She pauses. Phillip is about to say something, but she continues. “I am scared of people, for the most part,” she adds. “Mostly men.”

“Men?” he says. “You know, I’m a man.”

“Yeah,” she says. “It’s weird. I’m afraid of men. But you seem safe, Phil.”

“Phillip.”

She grins. “Tall Drip,” she says.

“That’ll work.” He takes a sip of coffee, and when he looks up at her, she is staring. He looks away. Her office is decorated with scarves over the lights to dim the lighting, with a shelf of self-help books. He takes it all in, then back at her. She is still staring. It should make him uncomfortable, this silence. But Phillip feels safe here. She has that way about her.

“I am afraid of not being loved,” she adds softly. She is looking down at something on her desk. “I want to be loved,” she adds, “I *need* to be loved. By everyone.”

He sees a sadness in her that he has never seen before. It draws him closer to her. She is human, after all. We are all in this together.

She looks up at him. Her demeanor changes. Just like that. From dark to light. She raises her eyebrows. Waiting. She throws her hands in the air. As if to say, *your turn*.

“Oh,” he says. “My fears. Yes.” He looks at his coffee cup. “Relapse,” he says.

“Are you an alcoholic?” she asks suddenly. “I’m sorry. Too forward?”

“It’s okay,” he says. “Calling me Phil is too forward. Asking me about my drinking problem is no big deal. I have 10 years.”

“Cool,” she says. “I haven’t had a drink in nine months.” She sips her coffee. A different kind of drinking problem. “I love recovery. Way better than waking up in a stranger’s bed. Not knowing who you pissed off. Or who you pissed on.”

She laughs at that. Phillip forces a smile. He thinks about how sad she looked a minute or two ago, how she changes at the drop of the hat.

He thinks about his last drink. They only had one child then. Mick was just a baby. Phillip had been at the studio half-working on a project, stuck in brain-freeze, when he decided to go down the street for a drink. One drink turned into four, and he got to talking to a guy who had coke. He hadn’t done cocaine since college. His first mistake was going out into the heat and taking off his shirt. His second mistake was going back to the studio, where his creative juices led to a piece of art that looked more like a disaster. And his third mistake was going home, at 4 a.m., shirtless. He inadvertently woke Stacy and the baby, and she immediately took Mick to her mother’s house and said she wasn’t coming back until he went to treatment.

“So tell me,” he says. “Why are you so afraid of men?”

Sitting behind her BARBARA AVERY, SALES ASSOCIATE nameplate, she looks up at the clock.

“Don’t you have work to do?” she asks.

Phillip grins. He takes the hint. He stands, nods and thanks her for the talk. As his hand hits the door handle, he turns back toward Barb.

“It sucks that you have to go through life in fear all the time,” he says. “Of half the human population, I mean.”

She puts on her mask, a pair of glasses, and turns to her computer.

“It’s not a life I willingly chose,” she says.

He continues to watch her as she types, his heart swelling with sadness. The world can be an unfair place, especially to women. Phillip can jog at night, without fear. He can walk alone, without fear. He can even sit in an office with a person of the opposite sex, without fear.

This is his privilege.

She looks up at him silently, over her glasses, and he sees the sadness in her eyes again. He thinks of his daughter, of the world she has in front of her. A world he has never really seen through her eyes.

“Thanks for the coffee,” Barb says softly. “Don’t be a stranger, Phil.”

He doesn’t correct her on his name.

CHAPTER 6

Men.

To Barbara Avery, they represent the best and worst of society. Her history with men is a little like the history of the Middle East. There was a period in her 20s when she dabbled with being a lesbian, with cutting men out of her life altogether. But she just never got along with women the way she got along with men. So while she has a healthy fear of them – of most of them – she also tolerates them. She realizes she needs them. As long as she lives in a patriarchal society, she will always need them.

When she was in college, after her second experience of having a man take advantage of her, she had men best described to her by another woman. An older student told her that men were kind of like a bowl of M&Ms, a bowl that had dozens of tasty M&Ms but one poison one. *Would you still eat from the bowl?* the older student asked her. And Barb knew the right answer. It wasn’t worth the risk.

She liked that description. It worked for her. While hundreds, if not thousands, of men had come in and out of her life in different roles, only a handful of them had violated her trust. And yet, that was enough.

Now, she felt unsafe around all of them.

Maybe that’s what makes this Phillip guy so confounding. He seems safe to her, and she doesn’t like it. She knows they’re not all safe, so she can’t risk that any of them are.

Can she?

The most recent ones were at each of her last three places of employment. Trent, the fresh-out-of-college frat boy who came out and told her that he preferred older women who could “teach me a few things, if you know what I mean.” She tolerated him for a few weeks before his innuendos became dangerous, and HR took care of him swiftly. Doug, the manager at her next stop, was more subtle. He talked a lot about his separation from his wife, about how they hadn’t had sex in months, and how he had come to believe that men weren’t meant to be monogamous. She baited him with a covertly flirtatious email, then sent his response straight to HR. Then came Marvin, at her last job. He was a colleague who talked about being part of something called Incels, or men whose virginity was a result of the women around them not finding them attractive. He, too, made Barb uncomfortable enough that she brought HR into the picture.

What Marvin taught her was that punishing men for their salacious behavior was not just her responsibility, it was her passion. Someone had to take these men to task. Watching Marvin clean out his desk brought her a pleasure that could only be matched by a sexual act. It was that satisfying. To see a man, in this patriarchal world controlled by men, being put in his place, was borderline orgasmic. Maybe this was why God had put her in so many toxic relationships in the past, why He had selected her as the one to hold these men accountable.

There was her first boyfriend out of college, Victor, who drank too much one night and grabbed her by the throat during an argument. Before that, there was the man she had dated for only a week, who forced himself upon her when she had had one too many mimosas. Or the guy who trained her for a serving job when she was a junior in high school, who was cute and all but read all the signs wrong and tried to force himself upon her once at an after-work get-together. Barb eternally regretted her decision not to prosecute any of these men; she found that separating herself from them was the strategy she needed in the moment. And yet, all of these scars stayed within her, including one near her mouth from a drunken argument with an older man when she was 22. They stacked inside of her like diseases, eventually causing her mental health to decline. She slipped into a depression, then came out of that with a constant state of anxiety, which spiked in certain situations. Her therapist called it a *trauma response*. It would come at her at unpredictable times. Her therapist described it once as feeling as if you’re a nail living in a world full of hammers.

Barb’s therapist, before she fired her, thought it went back further, back to when Barb was a child. She had an older sister who excelled in school and in pretty much everything she did, and Barb’s mother couldn’t figure out why Barb couldn’t be like Greta. The truth was, Barb never wanted to be like Greta. She wanted to be Barb. But her mother continually abused her emotionally, and once it turned physical when Barb was 15 years old and her mother slapped her so hard across the face that Barb’s eyes watered and her nose started to bleed.

Through all of this, Barb’s father said nothing. He, too, was afraid of Barb’s mother. His way of getting out of the situation was also escape, to file for divorce when Barb was 13. He gave up on her. He fell behind on child support, and Barb’s mother prevented him from seeing his two daughters. When Barb needed her father the most, he was out of her life.

It has been a pattern that has invaded her entire existence. Men letting her down. Men violating her boundaries. Men being unsafe. Untrustworthy.

Unworthy.

Yes, most of them were safe, in their own ways. But because of that one poison M&M, she could never quite be sure.

Barb has no photos of men in her office. All of her heroes are women. She doesn’t get along with women, but she idolizes them. Women make the world a livable place, despite the mess men have made of it.

*… train to Bellingham on the 6. … Evidence of catastrophic glitter … No one ever finds the money.*

She presses her ear to the wall. The muffled voice from the office next door peters out. A female voice. But last time she checked, the office was empty.

Phillip had left early. Only women in the office for the rest of the day. She probably won’t talk to any of them, but she will feel safe around them.

She would rather be ignored than be in constant danger.

Men. They are as predictable as the sunset. They will all let you down in the end.

They will woo you, and patronize you, and tell you that you are the sun and the earth. Then they will expect you to hold their feelings, as if their emotions are the only thing in this world that matters. Other times, they will try to hide their feelings. As if they are so important that you are not worthy.

Men and their feelings. It’s exhausting, really.

That’s how they reel you in. And then they let you down.

For Barb, this will never happen again. She will let them down first. She will strike first. Like a predator in the woods who smells the hunter, moving slowly. Barb will strike first. No man will never have a chance.

To hurt her again.

CHAPTER 7

Stacy and the kids are just getting back from a Costco run when Phillip arrives home from work. Stacy has more flexible hours, and so the bulk of childcare falls on her now. It’s a fair trade, considering how Phillip spent most of his 30s as the primary parent.

He is an art director now; he was once an artist. When they first got married, Stacy loved him and his art. She understood that part of him. She looked at him like he was a celebrity, even though he only had two or three shows during the entirety of their relationship. That’s how love starts: we love every part of each other. While he was chasing his dream, she worked in several sales jobs, just to allow him to pursue that passion. She once sold cars during the day and spent nights and weekends working at a startup. This was love, to her. She used to tell people that Phillip found a passion she didn’t have, and all the work was worth it just to see him wake up every day and get to do something he loved.

Once the kids came along, she was less concerned with his passions and more concerned with the security he represented. A story as human as a bridal gown.

He kisses his wife on the cheek and accepts a strong hug from Lada, their 7-year-old daughter. Mick, short for McLaughlin – Stacy’s maiden name – comes in for a hug next. Mick is 11 years old and not as affectionate. Middle school will do that.

“How’s my big man?” Phillip asks.

“Really, Dad?” the kid mumbles under his breath. Phillip musses his hair and helps lift two reusable bags out of the car. Stacy gives Philip a kiss and heads into the house with the groceries. As he watches her go, what he feels is the love nobody talks about. The later phase of love. Not the butterflies-in-your-stomach or tingling-in-your-loins kind of love. The love of safety. Of being able to be who you are, around the person who is more important to you. In the 13 years that they’ve been married, she has aged but hasn’t really changed. Stacy let Philip be he who he was, and in this world that can be hard to find.

This is where we are all headed, isn’t it? It makes some people, some couples, uncomfortable. When the sparks dim, the fire turns into more a smolder. But it still keeps us warm.

Rick Astley once asked the question. What is love? It’s such a complicated question. It’s such a big word. Ancient Persian language had 80 different words for *love*. The English language has one.

We can love our lovers. Love our friends. Our mothers. And daughters and sons. Love our jobs. Our favorites sports teams. Musicians. Movies.

Memes and quotes and dresses and fondue. We love friends and hugs and the way a lover touches us. We love their smiles, and their senses of humor, and the way they fiddle with their hair. We love their bodies, and their loyalty, and how they tolerate all of our character defects. We love the way they look at us. And the way they trust us.

Love is trust, and knowing you are trusted. Do you know why people fall out of love? Because they are no longer trusted. Or they no longer trust.

Stacy has trusted Phillip with all of her heart. He has felt it from the beginning. Her trust is a part of him now, like his arms and legs. His mind and his heart. She trusts him with all her being, and with that comes a sense of responsibility. He will not betray a trust that deep.

He fell in love with Stacy from the start. Phillip was always a sucker for a smile. That’s what he first noticed. Isn’t that what we first notice in most people? A smile. A laugh. The light around a person.

Stacy’s sister, Ellen, dated a friend that Phillip knew through the gallery scene. She tagged along to some showing Phillip attended, and he was intrigued with her right away. Phillip never believed in love at first sight. He felt a physical attraction to many women over the years, even a few who seemed interesting enough to date. But we live in a world of self-created narratives, where we are the heroes of all of our own stories, and revisionist history often creeps into memory. Playing back the reel might create a narrative where he fell in love with Stacy the first time he saw her. In hindsight, that seems convenient.

But do we really know when we’re about to fall in love? The truth is, we probably think that a lot during our lifetimes.

What Phillip does remember is that his first conversation with her was free-flowing, and that he didn’t want it to end. He found her incredibly attractive, and he definitely wanted to see her again. But he was also in his mid-20s and was more concerned with whether he might have enough game to get her into bed.

He did, clearly. Although it took weeks, if not months. The more he got to know her, the less important sex seemed. She was somewhat chaste at that age, and while he had zero patience for most girls who made him wait when Phillip was in his sexual prime, this one seemed worth it.

And she was.

When the magnetic attraction and novelty wore off, the staying power came from how Stacy treated him. There was none of the drama that other relationships brought, and they just felt right together. She understood him at a deeper level. She even seemed to understand his depression.

From as far back as Phillip could remember, he had moments of sadness that he could not explain. It felt, at times, like someone died. Even when no one died. It felt like he had lost someone, even when they were still in his life. The symptoms intensified when his parents divorced when he was 12, and that marked the first time in his life when Phillip actually felt a *reason* for feeling sad.

He discovered alcohol and weed when he was 15, and pretty soon the depression was numbed out. He drank more than most, less than others. His weed use seemed normal on the art scene.

But then it got out of control. And once he got sober, the depression returned with a vengeance.

Stacy didn’t bat an eye. She was just what he needed, when he needed her. He knows now that he couldn’t have handled it alone.

“I’m here,” she told him one night, when he was lying on the floor of the basement with all the lights off. The kids were young then, and Phillip found himself wondering if life was worth living. “You are not alone,” she had said then, while leaning over him with her hands on both cheeks.

All these years later, Phillip feels depressed more rarely. But it still hits him every year or two.

“Can you make something to eat for the kids while I put the groceries away?” Stacy asks as she squeezes a gallon milk jug between two containers of leftover Thai food.

Phillip goes to the cupboard and fishes out a box of Mac and Cheese. Parenting never really came naturally to him, but he has become quite proficient. Since she was the one with the steady jobs, he took on the primary-parent role as a stay-at-home father when the kids were little. He fumbled through the role, one that he never expected or really wanted, and now he is thankful for the experience. He is closer to his kids than most fathers, and he is grateful that he got to stay home with them for the time he did.

“Mick, you wanna fill a pot with water for me?” he asks.

“I’ll do it!” Lada calls out.

The two kids fight over the gallon-pot beneath the stove. They end up sharing duties, with Mick relenting as older children always do. He holds the pot as Lada fills it with water, then together they bring it to the stove. Phillip starts heating the water, then Lada jumps on his back as he walks away from the stove.

“Oh, yeah?” he says, carrying her into the living room. He swings her to the front, wrestles her to the floor, and tickles her until she can barely breathe.

“Stop! Stop!” she yells, giggling with tears in her eyes.

“Don’t mess with the Daddy Monster!” he says as he lets up.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. As he stands and pulls it out, Stacy comes into the living room. She is taking off her coat.

Phillip looks at his phone and sees a message from an unrecognized phone number. He looks at the message, which begins: *Hey, Phil. It’s Barb.*

He turns the phone over and steps out of the room. Once he’s alone in the kitchen, he looks at it again. *Hope your night is going well. I had a work question, when you get a chance. Well, sorta ‘work.’ (wink emoji)*

Phillip starts to respond, and Stacy comes around the corner.

“Mick tell you about his math homework?” she asks.

Phillip reflexively puts his phone in his pocket. He’s not sure why. Stacy is staring at him. He wonders why he feels so uncomfortable. So secretive.

“Sorry,” he says. “That was a message …” He looks into his wife’s eyes. If he has lied to her in the past, it has only been about small things. Since he got sober, he has tried to be as transparent as possible.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket.

“I just got a text,” he says. “From this woman at work. This woman, Barb. I don’t think I’ve told you about her.”

And if there is a reason why he feels so nervous when he starts telling Stacy about Barb Avery, he doesn’t know what it is.

CHAPTER 8:

They have done their Friday coffee thing three straight weeks when Barb finally gets him to join her at an art gallery.

She has always been curious about art, but she has never really had a friend who knew much about it.

He is not there when she arrives, and so Barb walks to the closest piece of artwork and takes it in. On a wall near the entrance is a framed image of a large oval, surrounded by a brownish border that looks like lips, with sparkles in the center of the oval. The longer she stares, the more she sees. The colors dance in front of her. It becomes a mouth, trying to scream, but only glitter comes out. The unheard screams of a little girl.

Barb returns to her childhood, to the day when her Uncle Ricky put his hand up her skirt. She was 4 years old. She told her mother, who did not believe her. Barb’s mother told her to stop making up stories. Her scream came out in silent glitter.

She returns to her teenage years, when the older boy took her behind the bleachers. When he told her she could trust him. When he dared her to kiss him, and she took the dare. When he took this as meaning, he would tell the school counselor later, that she was “game for anything.” When he pinned her against the wall under the bleachers as the students above cheered loudly for the basketball team. When he got her pants down to mid-thigh and scoffed when she pushed him off.

She knew she couldn’t tell her mother. She went to the school counselor, who told her to be careful about the messages she was sending to men.

She returns to her college years. She is drunk. She doesn’t remember what happened. Or who did it. Only the wetness inside of her. And the pain. The physical pain was almost as bad as the emotional pain.

This time, she didn’t bother telling anyone. She had been conditioned to realize that no one would care.

She stares at the artwork, there on the wall of the gallery’s front room. She hears a humming sound coming from it. She leans forward.

… *regents of the beltway … knights carry shields to water … night then day then morningside …*

She stands back and stares at the piece of art in horror.

“The universe,” a voice says from behind her. Barb jumps, then turns to see Phillip, staring at the painting. “Sorry,” he says. “Did I startle you?”

“No, I just …”

“Commonly symbolized in existential art by the oval,” he continues. She looks up at him. She sees a confidence and a passion in his eyes that has never been there. “Can you see it?” he asks.

She looks at the painting again.

“I see a mouth,” she says.

“Yes. The dichotomy of emotions.” His eyes do not even look at her. “A common tactic in baroque works, symbolized by a slightly open mouth.”

“Oh, boy,” she says, heading for the next painting. “If you turn this into a three-hour lecture, I’m a gonna be pissed.”

Phillip smiles. “My bad,” he says. “I nerd out at art galleries.”

“*My* bad,” she says. “It was my idea.”

She takes him by the arm. Leads him inside.

His child-like eyes move from piece to piece. As he walks with faded jeans and an open shirt over a concert T-shirt, she sees what his wife must see in him. She imagines Stacy being the adoring wife. The doting wife, who stands by her man. The kind who puts her man first, at the expense of her own individuality. She can’t stand women like that.

And yet, she wishes someone would love her like that. She just wants to be loved. By everyone. Has any man ever truly *loved* her? Her current beau, Sebastian, certainly loves a lot of things about her. But has she experienced undying love? Her mother never loved her. Her father didn’t love her enough to stick around.

It’s really all she wants: to be loved.

“What do you see?” Phillip asks, turning to her.

He is looking at a large, framed painting that to her, quite frankly, looks like spilled mustard and ketchup. She steps back, tries to think of something interesting to say. She slips a glance his way.

“I’m feeling judged,” she says.

“No judgment in art,” he says. “It’s all objective.”

She laughs at this. “I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s just that …”

“What?” he says, turning to her. She continues to giggle.

“In art?” she says. “No judgment? It’s the most pretentious …” She pauses and looks around. An older woman with a tight hairdo is staring at her. “Shit,” Barb whispers. “Wrong crowd.”

Phillip chuckles and moves on to the next piece. This one looks like a murdered German Shepherd, or maybe some kind of roadkill.

“What makes art great,” Phillip says, staring at the piece, “is that it’s so ambiguous.”

“Meaning?”

Phillip turns to her. He grins. “I feel like I’m mansplaining,” he says. “This is precisely why my people are so intolerable, huh?”

“Your people?”

“Men.”

She grins. She places a hand on his shoulder. “You know my feelings about men,” she says. “Most men.” She pulls her hand away. “You are not most men. When you are talking about art, it’s because you know your shit. You’re actually educating me.”

He looks back at the piece of art on the wall. He stares for a long time.

“It’s amazing,” he says. “How two people can look at the exact same thing and see two totally different things.”

Staring at the piece of art, Barb says: “In art. And in life.”

He looks at her. He grins out of one side of his mouth. She turns and heads toward the next piece of work, glancing back momentarily to track his gaze. Part of her is hoping that he is looking at her backside. Not because she wants him, but because she wants him to want her.

But his eyes are fixed on the artwork.

It’s like he doesn’t even notice her.

“Wow,” he says, stopping at the next piece. Barb’s eyes fall upon it, and she is mesmerized. The people around her disappear. The world goes silent. She stares. “There is a lot of darkness in this one,” he continues. “Someone was in a really bad place, huh?” Barb watches the colors, which look like they are swirling on the canvas. “Sometimes,” Phillip adds, “art can have so much going on. The longer you stare at it, the more you start to see things that aren’t there.”

Barb can hear him but nothing else. She can see the shapes and brushstrokes, but nothing else. She feels out of sorts. Her head is spinning.

“It looks like the devil,” Phillip says. “You think?” She does not answer. “Barb?”

He places a hand on the back of her shoulder. She shudders and pulls away.

“I see my mother,” she whispers. She feels something falling inside of her. She is an elevator, plummeting. The colors come off the canvas. They surround her.

“Barb,” he says. “Are you okay?”

Suddenly, the sounds return. They are coming at her like artillery, too fast to process. She hears voices all around her.

“Barb?” His voice. “Barb, I am here. I am behind you. I’m right here.”

She turns, slowly, and finds that he is there. Just like he said he would be. Right behind her. His face is morphed at first, then she sees her mother’s face, then she sees the face of the man who left the scar near her mouth, whose name she does not remember.

“Barb,” he says.

And then she sees Phillip’s face. His hands are on her shoulders. His face is only a few inches away.

“I’m here,” he says. She shakes it off. Stares at his face as the world around her slows down.

“I am …” she stammers, not sure of what she is trying to say.

She gently pushes him away. She slips past him, walking toward the exit. She leaves that gallery and walks out into the night.

He finds her there.

“I’m sorry,” she says. She feels tears within her, but she does not let them out. Crying is for the weak. She didn’t cry when her mother slapped her. She did not cry when that boy fondled her behind the bleachers. She did not cry when the college boy raped her, or when the boss propositioned her, or when the one boyfriend who lasted more than three months broke her heart.

“Are you okay?” he asks, standing at a safe distance. She tries to read his eyes but only sees fear.

“I’m fine,” she says. Her life’s mantra. She will always be fine. Especially around men. None of them will ever see her weak. She has promised herself this. She will be fine. “Yes, it’s okay. I just … I get like that sometimes. Then I snap out of it.”

She begins walking slowly toward her car. Earlier today, she had carefully picked out this outfit. She wanted to look pretty, but not too pretty. She wanted to try, but to not look like she was trying. She wanted to look *safe.* They were having such a good time. And then the darkness within her came out. She had been so good at hiding it. If only for awhile.

“Was it your mother?” he says from behind her. She stops. She does not turn around. “You said something about your mother,” he says.

“What about her?” She is looking at the ground, her back to Phillip.

“Back there,” he says. “You mentioned … I mean, the artwork. You said it reminded you of your mother. Was she …?”

Without turning around, she says: “I don’t talk about my mother. Please, never mention her again.”

And then she walks to her car, without looking back. If he is calling after her, she does not hear him.

 She sits in her car and thinks about one thing he said. That sometimes two people can look at the same thing and see two totally different things.

 And sometimes, if you stare long enough, you can see whatever you want to see.

*Katie:*

*They call it survivor’s guilt. I have carried a lot of shame with me, Katie. Over the years. Decades.*

*I felt empty. Incomplete.*

*I was always searching.*

*And then you meet someone. Someone who make you feel so …*

*… safe.*

*… seen.*

*… complete.*

*That’s the word: complete. As if I lived my life as half a human, and now I have found the other half of me.*

*Without you, I was never complete. Now, I think I can be.*

*With this person, I can be.*

CHAPTER 9:

Six-year-old Phillip Haston rides the bus in silence. His brother, a fifth-grader, is in back horsing around with friends. Phillip pokes at the skin beneath his eye, wondering if there is a mark. The tears are building within him.

He is alone. He is always alone. Even around others, Phillip is alone. The chaos of a school bus underscores this fact as he stares longingly out the window at the passing houses. He feels like a house with no furniture. No walls. No floors. He feels that empty inside. He always has.

As they slow to his stop, Phillip chokes back his tears and slides across the seat. His brother, Justin, shoves him back toward the window. Justin’s friends laugh. Phillip feels the tears pushing against a wall inside of him. If there is anything inside of him.

He waits for Justin to depart, then makes his way back to the aisle. He presses the spot beneath his eye, thinking of that jerk Martin Busfield who hit him during recess. Phillip stayed down while the other kids cheered for a fight. Phillip isn’t the fighting type. He just lied there. Martin Busfield spat on him. Phillip didn’t move. Now, as he steps off the bus, he remembers that feeling of sensing Martin Busfield standing over him. He remembers thinking, *End it. Hit me so hard that I never wake up.*

His feet hit the pavement. He wishes Martin Busfield had ended it.

When he gets to his house, his mother is doting on Justin. Asking him how the test went. She barely even notices Phillip, who is covering his eye. He lowers his hand and walks past her, hoping she will say something.

She does.

“Phillip Haston!” she yells. “Take off your shoes before you walk on the carpet. How many times do I have to tell you?”

He turns to face her. But she is looking at Justin now. Her hands on his cheeks. Asking if he is ready for the big soccer game.

Phillip goes upstairs, to his room. He is literally alone now, although he feels less alone when no one is around. He flips through a comic book. He grabs a stuffed animal and plants a kiss on its nose. He has a goldfish on a dresser by the window, swimming in water. While he used to have two goldfish, now there is only one. He stands and looks into the fishbowl.

“Yeah, me too,” he says.

Phillip’s best friend Stevie moved to Texas three weeks ago. His mother says he needs to move on and find a new best friend. As if life is that easy.

“There are lots of kids at your school,” she told him a few days ago. “Play with them. Stop being such a loner.”

Phillip doesn’t fit in with the other kids. He doesn’t fit in anywhere. He has felt lost his entire life.

“You’re such a spaz,” a voice says.

Phillip turns to see Justin standing in his doorway.

“Go away,” he says, turning back to the fishbowl. He wonders what it must be like to swim around in water. To be free. To not have to talk. To just float through life.

It will be seven years before he is diagnosed with depression, nine before he takes his first drink. In the years that follow, Phillip will make a few more friends, including a couple he will call his best friend.

When he is 32 years old, he will work with a woman named Teri whose son will die of a heroin overdose. Teri will miss several weeks at work, and when she returns, she will reek of alcohol. Phillip will consider saying something to her, but he doesn’t know what to say. He needs to say something to her; she is his friend. But what do you say? Three weeks later, they will find her dead in her apartment, a victim of alcohol poisoning.

When he is 37, he will lose another friend to addiction. This time it is his friend Ted, from AA. Ted will text him in a Friday night, asking Phillip if he has a minute to talk. Phillip will be too tired to respond. Ted will be rushed to the hospital one day later, his two years of sobriety gone, his life cut short by a heroin overdose.

When he is 43, he will meet a woman named Barb. She will remind him of Teri, the way she laughed and made dark jokes. She will remind him of Ted, who used to go to coffee with Phillip once a week.

But all of that will come later. Today, Phillip is staring in the fishbowl, wondering what it must be like to swim around and breathe water.

“I hate you,” Justin says from the doorway. “You’re so boring.”

Phillip wants to argue with him. But he can’t think of a single thing to say.

Except: “Go away!!”

Six years from now, Phillip will learn about Katie. And then he will forget about her.

And then, years later, she will come back to him.

CHAPTER 10:

***I owe you an apology for Friday. Asking about your mom was insensitive, an invasion of privacy, and definitely not cool, especially because we work together. I am sorry for that. I hope you know I have your back. #teambarb***

*Apology not accepted because it’s not necessary!! Actually it was nice that you cared. (Care?) I hope I didn’t scare you away. I am a handful. I don’t keep friends, typically. There, you’ve been warned.*

**What kind of a person doesn’t accept an apology? LOL Diabolical As far as you and your friendships, I have seen no evidence that you are anything short of a great friend. I am honored to call you one.**

*It’s never been easy for me, being a friend. And I have this avoidance thing I do. When something feels right, I run away.*

**I just think you’re being hard on yourself, Short Drip. I am the same way. My biggest enemy is me. Unrelated: I am hitting an AA meeting tomorrow at Fremont Club. Not trying to push you, but would love to have company if you’re up for it.**

*Have never been to an AA meeting and would absolutely go, but can’t tomorrow.*

The next Friday, over coffee, Tall Drip and Short Drip talk about their families. Tall Drip talks about the gifts of parenthood, while Short Drip says she never wants that kind of life.

“Maybe I’m too selfish,” she says. “But I can’t imagine putting all my needs on the backburner for a little person.”

Tall Drip says maybe if Short Drip hung around with his family, she might have a change of heart.

“There it is,” she says with a smile. “Man telling the woman that she’s wrong, that he knows better.”

Tall Drip laughs. He asks about her boyfriend. Short Drip says he’s kind and sensitive and could be marriage material one day.

“One thing, though,” she says. “I told him about you, and he’s not cool with us hanging out this much.”

Tall Drip sets down his coffee. He has a strange look in his eye.

“Then that’s it,” he says. “If he’s not cool with this, then I’m not cool with it. Bro Code. I would never disrespect –“

“Really?” Short Drip says, her volume rising. “Are you serious?”

“Of course, I’m serious,” he says. “If he doesn’t want us to hang out, then I respect that.”

She looks around the office, searching for the right words.

“What about me?” she asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you see what’s happening here?” she asks. She waits for an answer.

“Again, what do you mean?”

She stands up. “Jesus, Phil. You and your maleness can be so blind sometimes.”

Tall Drip holds his palms in the air. Clueless.

She leans across her desk. “Two men are making a decision about how this woman should live her life,” she says. “Is that okay?”

Tall Drip grabs his coffee. Takes a sip.

“I’ve never thought of it that way,” he says.

“Of course you haven’t.”

***I thought a lot about what you said yesterday. You’re right, I can be pretty ignorant to the female experience. I think I owe you an apology.***

*This isn’t a Phil thing, it’s a male thing. Don’t be so hard on yourself. And you know how I feel about apologies.*

***I just need to see things through other people’s eyes more. I clearly hurt you, and I feel terrible about that. It was never my intention.***

*A-It takes a lot to “hurt” me. I’ve got pretty thick skin. B-Stop being so hard on yourself. Be nice to my friend.*

😊

He wonders if spending this much time with someone other than his wife is a problem.

She wonders what his true intentions are.

He wonders why he feels this connection. Is it because he reminds her of Teri? Of Ted? Is he trying to save her? Why does this person feel like family to him?

She wonders if he is going to develop feelings. She likes having a friend without all the drama.

He wonders if he can protect her from this strange, dangerous world.

She wonders when it will end. It always does.

He wonders why he feels so safe around her.

She wonders why she feels so safe around him.

Neither one of them believes this friendship will ever end. Even if a part of both of them knows it will.

***How do you feel about murder?***

*In principle? Or am I being recruited as an accessory?*

***LOL. I left early to pick my daughter up from school today, and she was standing outside talking to this boy. Handsome little bugger. Might not be as handsome if I give him a fat lip and a talking-to.***

*Yawwwwn. You’re not one of those dads, are you? The guy who makes his daughter and her prom date pose for a photo next to you holding a shotgun?*

***I’m feeling judged.***

*Probably because I am judging.*

**🤷‍♂️**

*Seriously, though. Dads who shame their daughters for being attracted to men, or women, are the same Dads who become grandpas by the time they’re 50. Lay off and let her make her own decisions. Trust me. I was a daughter once.*

***Once?***

*Long story. Maybe over coffee next week?*

***Only if you’re ready to talk about it. I’m not a therapist.***

*But you’re a friend. I trust you more than … well, anyone I can think of.*

😊

*But don’t get a big head. We all know art directors are failed salespeople.*

***Art directors are failed artists. Don’t get it twisted.***

*Hey! Be kind to my friend.*

The next Friday, Tall Drip offers Short Drip an invitation to come over and meet Stacy and the kids. Short Drip pauses. She wipes coffee from her lips.

She says, “I guess so.” As if she is wary of his intentions.

He says, “Great then!” As if he is unaware of her reluctance.

Then Tall Drip and Short Drip take silent sips of their coffee.

Not far away, a barista named Baby watches them. She sees them every Friday. She thinks they are together. She can’t understand why they are sitting so far apart.

***6 o’clock?***

*Works be me. Why am I nervous AF?*

***I don’t know. Why are you nervous AF?***

…

***Barb? Why are you nervous AF?***

CHAPTER 11:

Why is he nervous as fuck?

As the clock closes in on six o’clock, Phillip can feel an anxiety building in his stomach. He has a history of occasional panic attacks, but since he quit drinking and smoking weed, those are few and far between. But now, as he looks at a digital clock that reads 5:53, he can’t tell if his heart is beating too fast or is beating at all. He feels his legs getting woozy and has to sit down.

“Hon?” Stacy calls from the kitchen. Mick and Lada are each holding a controller and playing Mario Kart. “Can I get a hand?” Phillip’s wife calls from the kitchen.

*Phillip’s wife.* Is that what she is tonight? Is that all she is?

Will they like each other? What will they talk about? What if she doesn’t like Barb? What if Barb doesn’t like her?

What if he likes Barb less after it’s over?

Phillip goes to the kitchen, where a plate of boneless, cooked chicken is sitting on a tray.

“Could you cut that?” Stacy says. “And listen for the door. It’s five till.”

He wraps his arms around Stacy from behind and kisses her on the cheek.

“We got this,” he says.

He grabs a cutting knife and starts in on the chicken. He is almost done when the doorbell rings. His heart skips a beat. He closes his eyes and monitors his breathing. He had a therapist once who told him that breathing can regulate the nervous system. Can take us out of fight-or-flight response. Can take us from an animal state to something closer to human.

“Can you get that?” Stacy asks.

He sets down the knife. The kids are jumping up and down in the front hallway.

“Your friend is here!” Lada is shouting.

He opens the door to find Barb dressed in some kind of a pantsuit.

“I changed outfits at least 10 times,” she says. “I don’t know what people wear to dinners like these.”

“*Dinners like these*?” Phillip asks, stepping aside to let her in.

Barb spins her finger around.

“This dynamic,” she says. “It’s not exactly traditional.”

“Are you Daddy’s friend?” Lada shouts. Barb giggles.

“Yes, I am,” she says, leaning down.

“Lada, you’re embarrassing,” Mick chimes in.

Stacy comes around the corner, offering a hand.

“You must be Barb,” she says. “It’s *so* nice to meet you.”

“And you,” Barb says.

Phillip is struck by how much more comfortable his wife seems in these situations. Stacy goes to give her a hug, which seems to make Barb even more uncomfortable.

They exchange pleasantries, talk about work and where Barb grew up.

“Michigan,” she says.

“Oh, a Midwesterner,” says Stacy. She rubs Phillip’s arm. “I have a thing for Midwesterners,” she adds.

“Mom, gross,” Mick says.

They gather in the living room, where Barb interacts with the kids and makes banter with Phillip. Stacy puts the food on the table, and they all gather around.

“Are we saying grace?” Barb asks after everyone is seated.

Stacy looks at Phillip, who shrugs.

“I guess I’ve never had dinner with you, Barb,” Phillip says. “Is that something you-“

“Oh, God no,” Barb says, chuckling. “I just thought … I mean, you look like the kind of family that …” She reaches for a dinner dish of potatoes and begins to spoon them onto her plate. “Pretend I’m not here,” she says.

Phillip giggles. “That’s the Midwestern sense of humor,” he says.

“I am familiar,” Stacy says. “I must say, you are funnier than my husband.” Stacy passes a chicken dish to Mick, their oldest. “Maybe I should have married you?”

Barb smiles. “I would imagine we’re close in age,” she says.

“You’re so kind,” says Stacy. “I bet I’m –“

“Never mind,” Barb says. “I don’t want to know. Don’t ruin the fantasy.”

The banter goes on like that. Bordering on flirtation. Phillip can’t help but to think that Barb and Stacy are getting along better than Barb and Phillip do. Or even Stacy and Phillip, for that matter. He is not sure what to think of the dynamic.

They eat and chat. Chat and eat. Barb asks the kids about school and what they like to do. Stacy asks Barb about her career. The two of them get to talking about Harry Potter and go on for 15 minutes, laughing and finishing each other’s sentences.

Phillip half-expected a showdown at the OK Corral when these two women sat down across from each other, but instead they sound like long-lost sisters.

When everyone finishes their meals, Stacy asks Phillip for help clearing the table.

In the kitchen, Stacy leans in.

“I like her,” she says. “She’s prettier than I expected.”

She is cutting up the dessert and nods toward a tray. Phillip picks it up and brings it to her.

“What does that mean,” he asks, “prettier than you expected?”

“It means,” she says, as she fills the tray with pastries, “is that she is prettier than I expected.”

When the tray is full, Stacy takes his chin in her hand.

“She’s not as pretty as me, though,” she says, looking into his eyes. It’s not a question; it’s a statement.

Phillip leans forward and kisses his wife.

“Not her,” he says. “And not anyone else.”

When he brings the tray of desserts back out into the dining room, the table is empty. He hears voices in the living room. He turns the corner, and sees Barb on the floor, playing UNO with Lada. Mick is leaning over Barb’s shoulder, looking at her cards.

“That one,” Mick says to her.

Phillip leans against the door frame and grins.

“Daddy!” Lada yells. She holds up her cards. She has two left. “Shhhhh!”

Phillip nods. “Secret’s safe with me,” he says.

“We all know you have two cards left, dummy,” Mick says to his sister. She sticks out her tongue. Barb laughs.

“When you clowns are finished, dessert is ready,” he says.

“Hey,” says Barb. “Who are you calling clowns?”

“If the red nose fits … ,” Phillip says, turning back into the dining room.

Once the card game is over, Barb and the kids join Phillip and Stacy for dessert.

“You said you were dating someone, right, Barb?” Stacy asks as they tear into the sweets. This question seems to Phillip like the elephant on the table, as if Barb were to answer that she is single might fracture the marriage.

“Yes, I have a beau,” Barb says. “But to answer your next two questions: no, I don’t plan on marrying him. And I’m not having kids.”

“Hey! What’s wrong with kids?” Lada asks with a mouthful of angel food cake and strawberry sauce.

“*Love* kids,” Barb says. “I have a 2-year-old niece, and she’s my world. But if I’m being honest, auntie is the only role I need. I’m too selfish to have kids.”

“You don’t seem selfish,” Phillip says. “I mean, that’s not an adjective I would use to describe you.”

Stacy looks at him; he can feel her glare from the corner of his eye.

“Okay,” she says. “Three words. If you were to describe Barb in three adjectives, what would they be?” Phillip takes in a deep breath, thinking. “And, Barb, give me three adjectives to describe my husband. From your perspective, I mean.”

“Can I go first?” Barb asks.

“Please.”

“Creative, modest and loyal.” Barb uses her pinkie to soak up some sauce and sucks it off her finger. “Loyal to you, especially.”

Stacy watches her eyes, then looks at Phillip. He is about to speak when she addresses Barb again.

“In what way?” Stacy asks. Phillip can see something in her eyes that he does not like. As if Barb is on the witness stand.

Barb leans forward. She grabs Stacy’s hand gently.

“While I can see how much he loves you,” Barb says, “he doesn’t talk about you much with me. That’s kind of a boundary we have. We don’t talk about our relationships. But when you do come up, it’s always positive.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Stacy says. “I’m not all that.”

“You’re more amazing than I expected,” Barb says, “and from the way Phillip talks about you, I expected you to be pretty amazing.”

Stacy turns to Phillip.

“What about her?” she says.

Phillip feels himself swallowing hard. What kind of a wife asks her husband to compliment another woman?

A trusting one.

“She is one of the most honest people I have ever met,” Phillip says. “She’s funny. And she’s a proud feminist.”

Barb laughs, needing to throw a hand over her mouth to prevent dessert from flying onto the table. She swallows and says: “A feminist? I wouldn’t use that word. It’s loaded.”

“What I mean is, you are incredibly proud of your womanhood,” Phillip says. “And you’ve educated me a lot on what it means to be a woman. I mean, Stacy does too. But you’re particularly proud of your gender.”

“Yeah?” Barb says. “I don’t know if I love women, or I just hate them less than men.”

Stacy stands and begins collecting plates.

“You don’t strike me as a manhater,” she says.

“No? Well, you don’t know me that well.” Barb seems to notice Stacy’s eyes move to Phillip. “Not all men,” Barb says. “Most of them. Your husband, he’s not like the others. He’s *safe*. He doesn’t seem to have any hidden agenda. He’s just a good friend.” Phillip stands and helps Stacy. “At this stage of my life,” Barb says, “I would say Phil is the best friend I have.”

Stacy pauses and smiles down at Barb.

“Same with me,” she says. “He’s my best friend, too.” Then she heads back into the kitchen.

Barb stands and announces that it’s getting late. She goes into the kitchen, offers to help Stacy, and the two of them clean for about a half hour while Phillip helps the kids get ready for bed.

After Barb hugs Stacy and fist-bumps the kids, Phillip walks her to her car. She opens the door and sits down, leaving the door open.

“I don’t think Stacy liked me,” she says.

“Why do you say that?”

She shrugs. “Women,” she says. “None of them like me.”

“Teenage Phillip knows the feeling,” he says.

“I don’t know,” Barb says. “Maybe it’s in my head.”

Leaning on the door, his forearm just above the window, Phillip says: “She liked you. I promise. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“A women’s intuition.”

“I know my wife,” he says. “Besides, she said you were prettier than she expected. How about that?”

“She said that?” Barb asks, looking at his with an urgency he did not expect.

“I promise,” Phillip says.

Barb looks away, out into the darkness. She starts the car. She leans her head on the steering wheel, then takes in a deep breath. It’s like she’s having another episode.

Without looking at him, Barb says: “Well, this was nice. I can’t thank you enough. Thank Stacy again for me, will you?”

He closes the door and raps on the window.

She pulls away without looking back at him.

There is something about her demeanor that he cannot decipher. He used to know her so well. She seems like such a mystery sometimes.

Back inside the house, Phillip helps Stacy do the dishes, puts the kids to bed, and climbs into bed with his wife.

She kisses him on the lips. She looks into his eyes.

“You know I trust you,” she says. “With all of my heart.”

“I know that, Stacy. I do.”

She kisses him again. She is wearing a nighty and rubs a hand on his chest.

“She seems like a good woman,” Stacy says, “a woman who’s been through a lot. There are a lot of scars there.”

“I know that too.”

“I love that you have a friend,” she says. “What I love even more is that I can trust you.” The way she is looking into his eyes, he can tell that she means it. “I love the way you look at me,” she adds. “You don’t look at her that way. That’s how I know.”

“Know what?”

She just stares into his eyes, then kisses him on the lips. She holds her kiss longer than she has in a long time.

And he knows, deep in his soul, that he could never betray a trust so deep, so seeded in love, and so genuine to the core.

“I can’t explain it, Stace,” he says after she pulls away. She is straddling him now, looking down into his soul. “She is like a sister to me. The sister I never had.”

In the pale moonlight that comes through an open window, Stacy turns to look at him. Her big, beautiful eyes glow in the dim haze of their bedroom. In this light, she looks 25 again.

“But you did,” she says.

“Did what?”

“You did have a sister,” Stacy says. “Don’t you remember?”

CHAPTER 12:

She is back at work and cannot stop thinking about what Phillip said to her. It stayed with her all weekend.

*She said you’re prettier than she expected.*

It’s code. A woman’s code. At a pitch that men cannot hear.

*Prettier than she expected.*

Barb shakes her head and tries to set it free. Thoughts come without warning, and some stay without welcoming. Barb often has these intrusive thoughts. They invade her like wood ants, or closet moths. She cannot seem to kill them.

Cat at the front desk says something about Mondays being invented by the devil but doesn’t ask Barb how her weekend went. As two other colleagues pass with barely a smile, Barb is struck again by how much she has invested in this man, Phil. He is the only person she really knows at this stupid job. But does she really know him? She had decided he is different from other men, but is that really possible? A man is a man is a man. Most of them can be useful, for awhile.

But they all go away.

Is this jealousy? She can’t help but to think that meeting his wife and kids set off a chain of emotions within her that she cannot readily name. If she is jealous, it’s not Stacy she envies. It is Phillip. His life. So simple. So easy.

So privileged.

She goes into her office and closes the door. Phillip texted her over the weekend to thank her for coming, but she hasn’t texted back. Not yet. He texted her late last night, asking if she was okay. That was a loaded question, with a complicated answer. Is she ever really okay?

He should know her better than to ask that.

She sets down her purse and turns on her computer. She hears the humming of an air conditioner, and then the voice.

*… restless until the carnivores come … capitalism in the middle east … fortnight brings the lights of Avalon …*

Barb presses her ear to the wall.

*… he is just like the rest … cannot be trusted … she thinks you’re prettier than she expected …*

 Barb steps back and looks around the room. She rushes to the door, pulls it open, and fumbles with her keys. She does not bother knocking. She opens the door to the office next to hers, pushes it violently, and turns on the light.

 There is a desk. There is a dead plant. An empty shelf.

 There is nothing else. No one.

 She looks around. She presses her ear to the wall but hears nothing. She feels around, looks for an opening. She closes her eyes and waits. Except for the air conditioning, only silence. Then a voice down the hallway. Then silence again.

The door behind her closes suddenly, and Barb can feel herself falling. It’s as if someone pushed her.

Someone she knows well.

A man.

That man.

She closes her eyes and sees his face as she drops into darkness.

Phillip.

The world around her spins. She imagines a pit of vipers, closing in. She opens her mouth to scream.

She sees glitter, cascading from her mouth.

And then a knock.

She opens her eyes. She is standing in the empty room.

“Hello? Are you okay?” A female voice. One of the young salespeople. They all look alike to her. Perfect skin, curling-ironed tips, a different outfit every day. “Hello?”

Barb opens the door. Sparkling blue eyes are staring back at her. The young woman takes a step back.

“Are you, um, okay?”

“Yes,” Barb says. “I am fine, thank you.” She is always fine. She will never be anything but fine. She has promised herself as much. No one will ever make her feel unwell again.

“I just …” she stammers. “I thought I heard someone in here. That’s all.”

The young woman looks at Barb’s face, then down at her hands, then back at her face.

“You sounded,” the woman says, “like you were in trouble.”

Barb walks past her, into her own office.

“I told you,” she says, “I am fine.”

She closes the door and sits down at her desk. She takes three deep breaths and looks at herself in her cell phone camera. Her face shows fear. Shows weakness. She hates when she looks like this.

She sees she has an email from Phillip, but she does not read it.

*I am not a homewrecker. I am not that woman.*

She cannot tell if this voice is coming from the other room, or from inside her head.

“I do not want Phillip Haston,” she whispers. “But I want his life.”

Or maybe, she thinks, she just wants him to not have such an easy life. So many men have easy lives. They don’t deserve that type of privilege.

As she returns an email to a client and schedules an afternoon appointment, Barb’s mind is racing. She can clearly see the face of that boy that took her behind the bleachers in high school. She wonders what he is doing now. She would be willing to bet that his life has been easy, that he has never had to pay for his behavior.

She tries to remember his name. She wants to google him, to see where he lives. She wonders if maybe he violated another woman, or women, and thinks maybe he is in jail now.

Or maybe, like Barb, none of the women said anything. And he’s still walking the streets, waiting to take advantage of someone new.

A poison M&M that looks like all the other M&Ms, right there in the bowl, waiting to be eaten.

She remembers that boss she had that told her about the Incels. Involuntarily Celibate. Whatever the fuck that means. It’s a passive-aggressive way of saying, again, that women are somehow the problem. The guy tried to tell her that women are shallow, that they only see looks and power and checkbooks. That they are hypocrites, using sex as a way to control the males around them.

The whole conversation was despicable, really. When Barb told HR about it, she felt like an FBI agent exposing a drug cartel. Putting men in their place felt like what men must experience when they get a pretty girl in bed.

Men. Those simple-minded creatures. They are all the same.

Phillip Haston seemed different. But is he, really?

*She said you’re prettier than she expected.*

Every woman knows exactly what that means. Men, they’re so naïve. So predictable.

So much fun to put in their place.

She’ll be doing society a favor.

CHAPTER 13:

There was a lot of blood.

This is the way his mother would describe it, 13 years later. When Phillip was 13 years old.

When he first came into the world, the bed was covered in blood.

His mother would remember the doctor calling out for backup. She felt nauseous when she heard the panic in his voice. She was pushing like she had never pushed before. She was experiencing the kind of pain no person should have to endure.

All this, but …

“Did … the baby … make it?” she managed between thrusts.

Two other doctors rushed into the room. She could see their scrubs but not their faces. Things were happening fast. Phillip’s mother pushed again, then tried to ask what was happening. But she didn’t have the strength to speak.

“This is way too much blood,” she heard someone say.

Another voice asked how many weeks along she was. Thirty-two. A month or two premature.

Then she heard someone else say: “Another one?”

These were the days before ultrasounds. Mothers not only didn’t know the sex of their babies, they often didn’t know how many they had.

*Twins*.

“Quick,” someone said. “Check for a heartbeat.”

When she heard the word “heartbeat,” she pushed harder. She didn’t know she had it in her. Her eyes were closed, but she could feel the people around her. Feel the blood beneath her. Blood and sweat. She couldn’t remember how many hours she’d been here.

Please, dear God. Please. Save this child.

She felt a release, heard something like crying, and she immediately passed out.

X X X X

Phillip will spend his first month of life in an incubator. He does not know at that time that his twin never made it.

Thirteen years later, when he is old enough, his mother will tell him.

“A sister,” Phillip would say.

“Actually, they had no way of -“

“I know,” he would say. “I can feel it.”

His mother had two names when she found out she was pregnant. Phillip, for a boy. And Katherine, for a girl.

They would call her Katie.

X X X X X

What is a 13-year-old boy to do with this information? There were two of you, and now there is only one.

He will acknowledge it, then he will forget her. That’s what survivors do. They move on.

During his drinking years, Katie will never enter his mind. Not one single time.

Not even in adulthood will Phillip spend much time thinking about her. He will tell Stacy and one or two other people, but this person – his *sister* -- will seem insignificant to him. She is someone he has never actually met.

Except that in his heart, he knows he has. He was in the womb with her. For more than 30 weeks, they were one. But did he ever know her?

X X X X X

And then he met Barb. She felt like family. She felt like someone he had met before.

She felt like a sister.

*Katie:*

*She is a lot like you. What I picture you being.*

*Are you still a baby? Are you in your 40s?*

*If you had made it, you would be like her. I know that now. That is the pull I feel from her. That is the attraction that seems unnatural.*

*I am not falling in love with this woman.*

*I am finally getting to know my sister.*

*What my sister would be like. She is not you. But she is a lot like you.*

CHAPTER 14:

When she finally texts him back, Barb tells Phillip to meet her at Starbucks. He is on his way to his Friday shift at the South End branch, and he has been genuinely worried about her. They had been texting or talking on the phone every day, until she met his family.

That darkness within him has been building for a few days. The depression. It would come to Phillip at random times. Never at a good time. It could be triggered by a rainy day, a setback at work, or an argument with Stacy. Most often, it was triggered by nothing.

The timing was never great. This week, it seemed particularly unsettling.

Was this what it felt like to be bipolar? One week ago, he was on top of the world. His wife and his best friend had finally met, had gotten along, and his world felt full. The mountaintop. And now he feels himself falling. For no good reason. Depression never seems to have a motivation. Unless that motivation is to sabotage everything.

He parks his car at the office, throws his work bag over his shoulder, and heads to Starbucks. He looks around, but she is not there. Phillip pauses, then decides to order.

The barista named Baby is at the counter, but she looks different. Her face his gaunt. Her hair is thinning.

“The uje?” she asks, short for *usual*.

“Um, yes,” he says, startled by her appearance. Strands of hair fall in clumps, with patches of skin showing. She turns and grabs two empty cups – a short, and a tall – and smiles at him. She can’t be older than 20 years old.

“I look different, huh?” she says. Phillip feels caught staring. Baby sets the first cup under the tap and rubs a hand over her head. She steps forward. “Cancer,” she says. Her eyes well up. “It’s terminal.”

Phillip barely knows this woman. This *girl*. He sees her on Fridays, orders a short drip and a tall drip -- -- his “uje” -- and goes back to his weekly meeting with Barb. But today, maybe because she is desperate for connection, she is reaching out to him. He knows what it is like to feel that need for human connection.

“It’s okay,” this young woman named Baby says. “I talk about it to everyone. Don’t get creeped out by it.”

“I’m so sorry,” Phillip says. What he is thinking is that he feels sorry for her. But that he is feeling more sorry for himself. Even though he is healthy and safe. That is the way depression works.

“Why?” Baby says, capping off the first cup. “You didn’t give me cancer.” She puts the other cup under the tap and grins at him. “Sorry,” she says. “That was a joke. My humor can be a little dark.”

She hands him the tall drip.

“I get darkness,” he says.

She fills the second cup, hands it to him, and he tries to think of something deep to say.

“I am really sorry to hear about … you know,” he says.

Baby forces a smile, but he can see a tear in her eye.

Someone taps him on the shoulder. He turns to see Barb, her eyes smiling behind the mask.

“Hey,” she says. “For me?” She takes the short drip. “Sorry I’m late,” she says. Her hair is frazzled. She looks like she just woke up. “It’s been … a *morning*.”

She leads him to a table, which is weird because they always take their drinks to-go.

When he sits down, she says: “You are a good person.”

“Excuse me?”

“I overheard the end of that conversation with the barista,” Barb says. “You’re just. So *good.*”

“I don’t know what that means,” he says.

“You always try to do the right thing.”

“I try,” he says. He can feel the darkness within him. He was hoping that seeing her would take it away. But she is not a savior; she is a friend. A very, very close friend. One who seems like family. “It’s been a long time,” he says, “since we talked.”

“Crazy week,” she says, looking out the window. A crow lands on the table outside, just a few feet away. She points to it. “Doesn’t the black bird symbolize death?” she asks. “In art, I mean.”

“Yeah, means someone died,” he says, looking at his coffee cup. “Or is going to die.”

He can hear the sadness in his own voice. He wishes it wasn’t here. He wishes he was dead. If she has noticed, she isn’t letting on.

“Someone?” she says, staring at the crow. “Or something?”

She sips from her cup, sets it down, and reaches for his hand. He recoils.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s just that … I need to talk to you about something very important.”

He feels anxiety swimming inside of him, mixing in with the heaviness of his depression. He lifts the cap from his coffee cup and blows on the hot beverage.

“Oh, yeah?” he says, trying to feign whatever cheeriness he can muster. The crow wanders around, and raindrops begin to fall outside the window.

Barb takes in a deep breath and looks out the window. She turns to him, their eyes meet, and she looks away.

“I can’t do this,” she says softly. He waits for more. She looks down at the floor.

“Do what?”

She waves a hand between them, unable to speak. She swallows hard. Her fingers curl, and she is pointing back and forth between them. When she lifts her head, he expects to see sadness but only sees coldness.

“This,” she whispers.

The rain falls harder. The anxiety within him churns. The depression pulls him downward. The barista a few feet away is dying, and yet Phillip can only think of himself.

“What Stacy said,” Barb continues. “I can’t stop thinking about it.” Whatever connection has been between them, he can feel a wall building. He can feel her slipping away.

“What Stacy said?” he asks.

She takes a sip of coffee, sets down her cup and folds her arms across her chest.

“’She is prettier than I expected,’” Barb says. “That’s code for, ‘I am intimidated by this relationship.’”

Phillip rubs his temples. He had wanted to open up to Barb about his depression, something about which he has told her but she has never seen. His depression presents every year or two, and this is the first time she has been around it. But now, instead of getting support, he is being dealt more pain.

“Barb, what are you saying?”

She looks him in the eye. Like a principal, looking at a student with behavior issues.

“Stacy isn’t okay with this friendship, Phillip,” she says. “That’s I’m trying to say -- what *she’s* trying to say.”

Phillip takes in a deep breath. He feels the weight of ten worlds falling onto his shoulders. He listens to the rain falling and watches the crow as it hops onto the sidewalk and picks for morsels of food.

“Barb, with all due respect,” he says, still looking out the window. “Please don’t speak for Stacy. She loves you. She loves *us*. She loves this friendship.”

Barb groans. “Here we go,” she says. “A woman being told she’s wrong. Or that she’s crazy.”

Her tone takes him aback. Phillip was driving into work just a few minutes ago eager to see his friend, to connect with her, to open up to her. And now that person is not even here. This person is … someone else.

“I know women,” Barb says. “Okay? You don’t. You don’t even try, if we’re being honest.”

“Barb, what is –?“

“Stop interrupting me!” she says loudly. Phillip recoils. He looks around the room. Baby is looking at them but looks away. “Please,” Barb says more softly. Phillip waves his hand in the air, allowing her to continue. He feels attacked. Pushed into a corner. “Phil, I need to think about this,” she says, waving her finger between them again. “All of this. I don’t feel right about this friendship. Not if your wife isn’t kosher with it.”

Phillip waits to make sure she is finished. He takes in a deep breath. That feeling of something falling inside of him is picking up speed. Like he is in quicksand, with nothing to grab.

“Barb, I know my wife,” he says. “You might know women, but I know my wife. I know how she feels about this friendship. That’s all it is, Barb. You and I both know that. We are *friends*. And Stacy knows that too. She trusts me. With all her heart.”

Barb scoffs. “Men,” she says. “No offense, but you’re all very naïve.”

“Offense taken,” he says, his anger building. “Please do not project *your* insecurities onto *my* wife. I know her better than you ever can.”

“When a woman – *any* woman -- says something like ‘she’s prettier than I expected,’ that’s code for something deeper,” she says. “She’s intimidated by me, Phil. By our friendship. She is not okay with this, no matter what she tells you.”

“Where is this coming from?” he says suddenly. His voice is shaking. The emotions within him are overtaking him. “Did you not like my family? Are you scared of someone getting too close to you?”

“Quit trying to diagnose me, Phillip. Okay? Stop.”

“That’s what this is, isn’t it?” he says. “You told me early on that you weren’t very good at friendships. Is it because you freak out when people get too close to you?”

She stands up. For a brief moment, he thinks she might throw her coffee on him. He can see rage in her eyes.

“I need time to think,” she says. “What I don’t need is a man telling me what I feel and what I don’t feel. So I am going to go back to the office, you are going to go back to the office, and we aren’t going to talk today, okay?” He can feel his head falling. He rests his chin on his hands. She is standing over him. “And don’t be surprised if your calls and texts aren’t returned for awhile, okay?”

He feels like he cannot speak. He watches a tear hit the floor. He feels a sudden vulnerability that does not feel good. It feels like standing naked in a room full of strangers.

“Okay, Phil?” she asks.

He nods his head. It is all he can do.

CHAPTER 15:

Barb’s mother pulls up to the school in a new car funded by her father’s child-support checks. Barb has her head down as she walks from the high school to her mother’s car.

Three weeks have passed since that boy violated her behind the bleachers. She is 15 years old. Three weeks earlier, she felt beautiful. For the first time in her life. And then he made her feel something else. No matter what she looked like on the outside, she was broken down beneath. She would never be the same.

“Well, you’ve gotten us into quite a pickle, haven’t you, missy?” her mother says as Barb opens the back door and tosses her backpack inside. She slams the door, then climbs into the front seat.

“Don’t start,” she tells her mother.

“Start? I believe this started when you got caught skipping class and smoking marijuana. Like some kind of druggie.”

“God, Mom,” Barb says. “Can you just not?” Her mother groans and pulls the car out of the school parking lot. “And what do you mean ‘us?’” Barb adds. “’You’ve gotten *us* into a pickle?’ You’re not the one who got suspended.”

Her mother pulls the car over abruptly. She throws it into park and turns to Barb.

“You listen and listen good,” she says. “Your decisions affect other people, do you hear me?” That vein is popping out of her mother’s forehead, the way it does when she is having a cow. Barb considers jumping out of the car. Running somewhere. Anywhere. Anywhere but here. “We have a reputation in this town, missy. I have worked very, very hard to build it.”

“By getting divorced,” Barb says as she stares out the window.

Her mother turns back forward and places her hands on the steering wheel. She is taking in a deep breath. She grips the steering wheel like she is trying to make sawdust out of a broomstick.

“Get out,” her mother says between her teeth.

Barb doesn’t wait for another invitation.

“Gladly,” Barb says, and opens the door. She steps out and slams the door behind her. Her mother rolls down the window.

“You’re getting really good at pushing people away, Barb,” her mother says, throwing the car into drive. “Think about that.”

She rolls up the window. Drives away. Barb looks up and down the street. She’s probably eight miles from home. It’s the middle of the day. She’s still feeling a little buzzed and hates her mom for taking that from her. Weed isn’t cheap. She hates her for all the things she’s taken from her.

“Fucking bitch,” she whispers, and starts walking. She is wearing flats. Her feet hurt. It’s hot out, and she doesn’t have any water. Or money. Her wallet is in her backpack, which is in the car.

She wonders if anyone has a mother who would understand. Barb has a friend who was sexually assaulted as a child, and her mother didn’t believe her. Barb can’t take that chance by telling her what happened behind the bleachers. Heaven forbid she should sully the family reputation any further.

There is no feeling in the world like the feeling that you can’t trust anyone. Nobody. It’s a lonely existence. The falling tree in the forest. The canary in the coal mine, signaling danger. But no one will listen. You can’t advocate for yourself if no one is listening. You can’t cry for help if your voice is gone.

And so she said nothing. She will always say nothing. She will smoke weed. Or jump into another dysfunctional relationship. Or lash out to anything, or anyone, who’s close to her. But she damn sure won’t say anything. Won’t let anyone know she is hurt.

After about 15 minutes of walking and sweating, a pickup truck pulls up alongside her.

“Need a ride?” a man asks. He is at least twice her age. Barb gets in, half because she is desperate for a ride home, and half because she wants this man to murder her and leave her in a ditch. So that her mother will feel eternal guilt. So her father will finally acknowledge her existence.

“How far you going?” the guy asks. He has dirt on his face and thinning hair. He looks like he has chewing tobacco behind his bottom lip.

“The AM/PM on 125th,” she says. She can walk from there. She doesn’t want to give the guy her home address.

He takes a left turn and slows at a red light.

“You go to college?” he asks.

“High school,” she says. She can feel him looking her up and down.

“Didn’t know girls in high school had legs like that,” he says. She feels her body tense up. A wave of anxiety. Her head starts to spin. She does not know what is happening to her. She feels the same way she did behind those bleachers, as the boy pulled at her pants as she tried to fight him off. “Are you a virgin?” he asks. The light turns green, but she does not wait. She jumps out of the car, onto the asphalt. She skins her knee. The car door is open, and he throws the car in park and gets out. She stands up and starts running.

A mile later, she slows to a walk and tries to get her bearings directionally. She has cut onto a side street but can hear traffic up ahead. So many cars. All of them could be dangerous. Any one of them could lead her to a place she doesn’t want to go.

She whispers to herself. *You are okay. You can do this.* Another voice comes into her head, one other than her own. *You will be a fuck-up the rest of your life. You know that, right?*

Barb has hated her mother for years. Since even before the divorce. Her mother gave up on the marriage, and she gave up on her. Even at 15, Barb knows she can be a handful. But she did not choose to come into this world. Her mother gave birth to her, then she gave up on her. What kind of a person kicks her daughter out of a car eight miles from home?

She finds a water fountain in a park and drinks like a camel in the desert. She considers hitchhiking, maybe waiting for a woman to pick her up, but even that seems unsafe. If you can’t trust your mother, who can you trust?

It’s after 5 p.m. when she finally arrives home, sweaty and covered in filth. The door is locked. She knocks twice, then her mother opens the door and walks away. Barb enters the house and slams the door.

Her mother is in the kitchen.

“I’ll make you dinner because that’s what mothers do,” her mother says curtly. “But what I won’t do is put up with your attitude. So why don’t you-“

“You *left* me,” Barb says. She is standing in the doorway with hands on her hips. Her feet hurt. Her side aches. “What the hell is wrong with you? How could you do that to your own daughter?”

“It’s not about what I did to you,” her mother says. “It’s about what you did to yourself.”

“Fuck you. I don’t need a lecture. I need my mom.”

Her mother sets down a wooden spoon and steps forward, staring into Barb’s eyes the way angry mothers do. A glare that could kill.

“What did you just say to me?” she asks.

“I need my mom,” Barb says again.

“Before that.” Her mother takes another step forward.

“You heard me.”

“Say it again,” her mother says. “It will be the last thing you-“

“Fuck you!”

And without warning, her mother slaps her across the face. So hard that Barb sees stars. She feels something dripping from her nose and reaches up to find blood.

“Don’t ever speak to me like that,” her mother says.

Barb can feel the tears welling up inside of her, but she is not going to cry. She can’t cry. She won’t let herself. She will never let anyone see her cry.

“You’re despicable,” her mother mutters as she turns away.

“The apple doesn’t fall far, bitch,” Barb says quietly. But loud enough for her mother to hear.

And then she goes up to her room. She turns on Alanis Morrissette and wishes her father was coming home from work. But he does not have a home anymore. Not here, anyway. And she does not have a father. He gave up on her.

She is alone. She has no one.

She lies down on her bed. Closes her eyes. Imagines herself starting a fire. One that burns down the house. The neighborhood. The whole fucking city.

She imagines herself watching it burn.

*Katie:*

*It all makes sense now.*

*Why I felt so alone. So sad. I always have.*

*Imagine coming into this world a part of something. Then looking around, and it is gone.*

*You spend your first few years missing something. Your next few years seeking it. Mom could never give me what I needed. I craved a love from her that she couldn’t provide. Who could?*

*I went from having someone who was a part of me, to being alone. To seeking that other part of me.*

*My whole life.*

*Why was I the one who made it?*

*What have I done to honor you?*

*Katie, I know I have let you down.*

*I feel like I am falling. I can feel this woman who reminds me of you slipping away.*

*I cannot hold onto her.*

*I will fall.*

*You will fall.*

*We fall together.*

CHAPTER 16:

He can’t remember the last time he cried. Not like this. As he drives home from work on a Friday night, the worst Friday night he has had in years, the weight of everything comes down on him. Depression can be like a heavy blanket made of chains. He wants to climb into his bed and disappear.

When he first got sober, his sponsor told him to expect an intensity in his emotions that he had never felt before. He got a therapist, who helped him to understand what depression is. Depression comes from two places. Sometimes a person can be triggered by outside factors, like losing a job or having someone die. Other times, depression comes from a deficient brain chemistry that causes us to feel like someone has died when nothing bad has happened. We fall into a state of grief that we cannot explain. It can last weeks, or months. And it makes no sense.

Phillip is feeling both of these. His depression had already kicked in, then his friendship died. Or is dying. The combination is almost unbearable. The tears are uncontrollable.

Cloud Cult’s *Metamorphosis* album plays on his car stereo. Craig Minowa sings about what a strange world this is, about how you can ask how he’s doing and he’ll say he’s okay, but the truth is that Phillip is caving in. He is not well.

The rain is drizzling on his windshield as the wipers click in time with the music. He feels like this is not his life, like he is watching someone else fall apart. He is certain he is in a dream state. He will wake up on the Saturday morning after Barb met his family for dinner, and all will be good. They will exchange witty texts and chat about their lives and tell each other stories from their past. Things will go back to the way they were.

The way he wants them to be.

The song tells Phillip that what he builds is where he gets to go. He thinks of his family. Of this life he has built for himself. Of how satisfied he should be. How happy he should be. He tries to find gratitude. In the AA program, he learned about the importance of gratitude. He has a happy life.

But he cannot will himself to be happy. What his mind tells him is that it’s all fake. That his happiness was the dream. That he is awake now, here beneath the raindrops, feeling the pain that life brings. Life is pain, is it not? *This*  is his reality. *This* is who he is. Who he has always been. The happy person is just a dream state.

He opens his sun roof. Allows the rain to come down on him. Hoping it will wash away his pain. He opens the windows. He does not deserve to be warm and safe. He does not deserve happiness.

And then he thinks of her. Katie.

His twin sister.

The one who did not survive.

He did, and now look at him. This is what he has done with his life. He cries when people leave him. He can’t appreciate what he has. He is a privileged, white male, and all he can do is feel sorry for himself.

What would she think of him now? His angel, out there somewhere.

Maybe that’s what this is all about. Maybe he saw Katie in this woman Barb, and then he lost her again. Maybe that is why this feels like a death in the family.

The water comes down on him. He wants to drown. They say drowning is the most peaceful way to go. Whoever *they* are.

He closes the windows and sun roof, licking the rain off his face, as the song on the radio muses about this being the best time of his life. He is married. He has happy, healthy children. He has a beautiful house and a beautiful wife, who he loves very much. She loves him back.

Why can’t he just be happy?

Shame. That’s what this is about. Two babies were inside his mother, one survived. He carries survivor’s guilt. He should have been more. He should live with gratitude.

“Katie, I’m letting you down,” he whispers.

Maybe that is who Barb was to him. Maybe he finally got Katie back.

Or maybe she reminds him of his AA friend Ted, who died of an overdose. Or Teri, who drank herself to death. Barb was the embodiment of all these people who left him, and now he was losing her.

The tears come harder. The rain is louder.

Phillip heard a song once about little lights in our heart that light up when someone comes into our life and go out when someone leaves. Barb turned all these lights back on.

He cannot let her go.

By the time he is pulling into his driveway, the singer on his radio is telling him that there is only one way out of a hole. But he is not saying what it is. “Which way do I go?” the singer croons.

Phillip does not know what to do next. To keep her. To keep these lights from going out. To keep from feeling abandoned again.

He cannot turn off the tears. He sits in the car, trying to compose himself. He turns off the radio and tries to think of something happy. He looks out the rain-soaked window, at his beautiful house. He tries to breathe. The weight on him feels unbearable. He rests his head on the steering wheel. He sits in the silence.

A knock on the window. He does not know how long he has been sitting like this. The door opens.

Stacy.

“What are you doing out here?” she says. She seems to notice his face. His tears. “Oh, my god. What’s happened? Why are you *wet*?”

He cannot speak. He turns to her. He falls out of the car, into her arms. The rain soaks them.

“Phillip, what’s wrong?” she asks. “What do you need?”

He wishes she could save him. Why can’t she save him?

As she holds him, rubbing his back, he thinks about Katie again. His twin sister. The one who did not survive. The one who should have survived.

This world – this strange, unpredictable world – should be hers.

“What’s wrong, Phillip?” his wife asks.

There is so much to explain. And no place to begin. So he just cries. Like a goddamn baby. The baby who survived.

She leads him inside, to the warmth of their house. The kids are at the kitchen table, and Lada’s face goes from excitement to concern.

“What’s wrong with Daddy?” she asks.

The question only makes the tears come harder.

“Tough day at work,” Stacy says, covering for him.

She leads him upstairs, gives him a towel. Turns around a chair from the desk and helps him into it. As he is drying off, she sits down on the bed.

“Talk to me,” she says. His head is down and his hair in his face. She puts her hands on his forearms. “What is it?”

He tells her about Barb, about the odd conversation in her office. When he looks up at her, Stacy looks angry. Not at him, as far as he can tell, but at Barb.

“She is just trying to protect herself,” he says, feeling the need to protect his friend as well.

“She thinks I am, like, jealous or something?” she says.

This isn’t what he needs, not right now. He wants a solution. He wants to get out of this hole. If only he knew how. What’s the one way? He looks down at the floor. He has the towel around his shoulders, is still in wet clothes.

“Give me your phone,” she says.

Without raising his head, he says: “You don’t believe me.”

She takes his chin between her fingers and raises his head, so that he is looking into her eyes. He has to look away.

“Look at me,” she says. He tries again. Holding her gaze, when he feels like this, is nearly impossible. The shame he feels. The self-pity. He hates that he sees her like this. “This isn’t about me not believing you,” she says. “I trust you, I do. But she doesn’t trust me.” She holds out her hand. “Give me your phone,” she says. “I want her phone number.”

CHAPTER 17

The text comes in from an unknown number.

*Barb, this is Stacy Haston. I just wanted you to know that I have always appreciated the friendship you have with Phillip. I hope you don’t feel like this friendship interferes with our marriage in any way. I hope you two can make up and that you stay in each other’s lives. Your friendship has been very good for him. I am sorry if you interpreted anything I said as my insecurity.*

Barb stares at the text. Her body goes numb. She notices herself grinding her teeth. She feels like she did with that boy under the bleachers, when her mother slapped her, whenever she is alone with a man she does not trust. Her body is having a reaction. That lack of control. Her life, being dictated by others. Someone trying to control her. A *man*, trying to control her.

“He gave her my number,” she whispers.

He put her up to this. That son of a bitch. He controlled his wife, in an effort to control Barb. How dare him.

How could he make her feel like this again? She told him about the abuse. About all those men who hurt her. About her mother. About all the people she could not trust.

And this is how he pays her back. By trying to control her. By taking away her ability to choose her own path.

This is unforgiveable.

She reads the message again, then starts a message of her own.

*Lose my number. You are not allowed to contact me anymore. No coffee, no phone calls. Your only form of communication is work email. That is my boundary. I expect you to respect it. Do NOT try to call or text me. Ever again.*

She hits SEND. She turns off her phone. Anxiety is thrumming through her body. She closes her eyes. She can’t believe another man has made her feel this way.

Her phone buzzes. Her heartbeat races. The anger in her rises.

It’s from Sebastian. Her boyfriend. Asking her if she is free for dinner. She texts back that she is. She makes a promise to herself that she’ll dump him. Only after *she* pays the bill. She doesn’t need a man. Doesn’t even want a man. A world without men would mean a world without war. Without violence. Without rape. And murder. And hate.

What a beautiful place this world would be.

She reads the text from Stacy again. She can practically see Phillip, standing over his wife, as she frantically types what he tells her to type. She thought Stacy was better than this. She truly liked her. Barb saw the two of them going to coffee together, maybe shopping or going to a movie or to the spa. She saw Stacy as maybe the girlfriend she’s never had. But now she sees a different Stacy. The doting wife. Just another woman who can’t stand up to her man.

*The power men have over us.*

*Not all of us.*

She will not allow Phillip to manipulate her like that. No man will ever control her again.

She looks down at her phone. Phillip has not responded. But he will.

She knows he will.

She knows men. Simplistic. Desperate. They will not stop at anything to get what they want.

What, exactly, does this man want? A friend? It cannot be that simple. She was so naïve that way. He must be looking for something else. They all are. He hid it well, but she knows. If she had given any hint that he could have her, he would have jumped at the chance.

That’s what this is all about. Of course. What’s that saying? He wants his cake and to eat it too?

Barb is above this. She will not allow this behavior.

She will not allow a man and his toxic masculinity to force her hand. She can make her own choices. She does not need a man coercing his wife into sending a text to decide her own destiny.

How dare he.

She looks at her phone again. He still has not responded.

He will.

He will slip up. And she will make him pay. Just like she made all the others pay.

This is her responsibility. This is her drug now.

CHAPTER 18

Her door is closed when he arrives at the South End branch. He heard what she said about not contacting her anymore, but he still feels the need to knock. To ask if she wants to do coffee. As if none of this ever happened. As if it was all a dream.

He stands in front of her door. BARBARA AVERY, SALES ASSOCIATE. His stomach turns with anxiety. The tears well up in his eyes.

He cannot be here. Not now.

He leaves and heads for Starbucks. As he reaches for the door handle, he realizes that there is a chance she might be here. What would he say to her? What would he do?

*Which way do I go?*

He is relieved when he opens the door and looks around, seeing one man waiting for coffee and no one else other than baristas. Baby is here, smiling at him from behind the counter.

When they make eye contact, her smile fades.

“Wow,” she says as he walks toward her. “You look like shit.”

“Feel worse than shit,” he says. “Long week.”

“The uje?” she asks. He nods. He can barely look at her. She has lost more hair already. Probably from chemo. Who knows how much time she has left. And yet she is so cheerful. He has everything in the world going for him, and all he can do is to think about how terrible his life is. While she is handling a major tragedy with grace. The shame floods his body.

“Where is your friend today?” she asks, picking up a short cup.

He waves his hand. “Don’t bother,” he says. She fills his cup, hands it to him, and leans across the counter.

“What gives?” she says. “You look like you lost your best friend.”

Something falls inside of him. Everything in his life is perfect, except for that. It tears at his insides. And he can’t figure out why it hurts so much.

“I’m not like a replacement friend or anything,” Baby says, “but I am due for a break. Need to talk?” She pulls the apron over her head, without waiting for an answer. “Meet me out back,” she says.

He sips his coffee and goes outside. To meet this stranger he hardly knows. He stands alone for a minute or two before seeing her. He doesn’t get that same excitement that he did whenever he saw Barb.

“Some people are really good at hiding their emotions,” she says, reaching into her coat pocket. “Let me guess. You’re not one of them?” She pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Offers him one. He declines with his hand.

“Should you really be doing that?” he asks as she lights up. She inhales and shakes her head.

“Habit I just picked up,” she says. “I mean, I’m dying anyway. So who gives a fuck, right?”

“I give a fuck,” he says.

She looks at the cigarette, like she is considering putting it out, then she takes another drag.

“Well, you don’t know what it’s like,” she says. “To be dying.”

“Aren’t we all dying, technically?” he says.

“Weird way to look at life,” Baby says. “But makes sense from a literal perspective.” She takes another long drag. “Anyway. What happened with you? You look like someone died.”

“Feel like it too,” he says. “Just going through some things.”

“It’s that woman, huh?” Baby says. “The one you bring in here?” He nods. “Let me guess,” Baby says. She looks at the ring on his hand. “You’re married, but she’s not your wife.”

“Two-for-two so far.”

“And you developed a little crush,” Baby continues, “which has complicated things.”

“Not even close,” Phillip says. He is feeling a little better, just talking to someone. “She is my friend. There is no attraction there. Well, she *was* my friend.”

“She wanted more? Than friendship, I mean.”

Phillip finds himself wanting a cigarette. But that would probably lead to him wanting a drink. Which would probably lead to him taking a drink. Which would lead to …

He doesn’t even want to think about it.

“It’s nothing like that,” Phillip says. “It’s too hard to explain. And, frankly, depresses the hell out of me. Can we talk about something else?”

“As long as it’s not cancer,” she says, putting out her cigarette.

“How’d you get the name Baby?” he asks.

“My parents,” she says, then giggles. She looks like a child when she giggles. He looks at her thinning hair, estimating that she will probably be totally bald by the end of the month, and feels a sadness outside of his own. “Sorry,” she says. “That was flippant. There is a story behind it.” She looks at her phone. “But I only have two more minutes on break.”

“The shortened version?” he asks.

“I was a twin,” she says. “They named my brother Angel. So they gave us, like, one name. Angel Baby.” She shrugs and tosses the cigarette butt into a tray of sand. “There’s more to it, but people need their caffeine.”

Phillip stares at this much-younger woman — this kid, really — and feels an immediate connection. Not the same connection as when he met Barb. This is different. Like the kind of connection twins feel with each other.

“Sorry,” she says. “To leave you hanging, I mean.” He just stares at her, unsure of what to say. He wants to tell her that he was a twin. He wants to tell her about Katie. He wants to talk more. To connect with her.

*Anxious Attachment Disorder*. That’s what his former therapist called it. The desperate need to connect with people. With anyone. He never told his former therapist about Katie. He wonders if he still has the therapist’s number, if maybe he should call him. Start seeing him again. Before it’s too late.

She looks at her phone. “Whoops, gotta go,” she says.

“Wait,” he says. “Can I ask you something?”

She grins and rubs what is left of her hair.

“Two to four months,” she says. “Sucks, but it is what it is.”

She turns and goes back inside through a back door.

He stands there with his coffee, wondering what it would be like to know you have two to four months left on earth.

Except that wasn’t what he was going to ask her.

He was going to ask her if she’s ever been depressed.

CHAPTER 19:

He never responds to her text. Barb appreciates that he respects her wishes, but she also sees the intention beneath it. This is all manipulation.

She arrives on a Monday morning to find an email from him in her box. Her heartbeat quickens. Anxiety? Or excitement?

It is a long email, mostly made up of attempts to manipulate her emotions and coerce her into talking face-to-face.

This whole thing is exhausting. This man is exhausting. He needs to move on.

Why can he not move on?

The obvious answer is that he is falling in love with her. Is that what this is about? Isn’t that what she expected? Isn’t that what she *wanted*?

They all fall in love, eventually. Men are incapable of not developing feelings. With Barb, anyway. No matter where things start, this is always where they end. It’s flattering, but it’s also annoying.

She reads his email again. Of course. Why hadn’t she seen it? This is a man who had his heart broken.

These big, tough men and their feelings. For generations, they hid them. Now they throw them at women like laundry that needs to be folded. They are incapable of carrying their feelings on their own. They used to need women to satisfy their carnal desires. Now, it seems they just need women to hold their emotions for them. This is not a woman’s responsibility.

Why can’t this man understand? He took away her sense of choice. Without choice, we have no sense of control. Too many men have stripped her of control. It’s what men do. They can’t fucking stand to give up control. They have to control everything. She thought he was different.

This man, he is just like all the rest of them. How had she not seen it?

She trusted him, that’s how. When she was young, she threw around her trust like rice at a wedding. She was young and stupid. She should know better now,

Goddamn him. To put her in this position again.

Goddamn him.

She responds to the email.

*I didn't think I needed to say this, given the boundaries I have already stated, but evidently it needs to be stated explicitly for you to understand.  I do not want you to communicate with me anymore. This is a direct result of you acting inappropriately. I will no longer allow there to be space for your continued attempts to manipulate and chastise me because you feel entitled to my time and energy.  Your latest email was obviously an attempt to hijack and manipulate my emotions. I will not participate in any back-and-forth and need you to understand that this dynamic this is a result of your continued inappropriate behavior. You continue to make me feel unsafe. The most toxic people who have come in and out of my life have made me feel unsafe, and I will add you to that list. I will not be discussing this further and any future attempts to communicate will result in me contacting HR.*

Within an hour, he responds:

*Please, Barb. Can we talk about this? In person? Email doesn’t work for me. For us. There is too much to say.*

She doesn’t remember any of their names anymore. Their faces are a blur.

The younger man who told her she could “teach me a few things.”

The boss who talked about his unhappy marriage.

The man who told her about involuntary celibates — incels — as if that might earn him a charity poke.

All of these men, she took down. Each one felt more satisfactory than the last.

All of these entitled men, brought to their knees.

What she is feeling now, deep in her soul, is the kind of high for which people would pay a lot of money.

She immediately forwards the email exchange with Phillip to HR.

He needs to learn. They all need to learn. It is her responsibility. To protect the world from people like this.

From *men* like this.

She is trying to protect herself. But she is also trying to protect every other woman. She owes it to them.

CHAPTER 20:

The director of Human Resources uses the pronoun they. They are swift and succinct in their appraisal of the situation.

They call Phillip into their office. Tell him that his emails have been deemed inappropriate. Tell him that the other party – they don’t use Barbara Avery’s name – has expressed fear and a sense of being “unsafe” around him. Phillip tries to explain that he was friends with Barb, but the HR director tells him that there is evidence from the other party’s email that she never considered him a friend.

“That’s ridiculous,” Phillip says. “She came to my-“

“Please watch your tone,” the HR director says. Phillip swallows hard. “This is not a space for you to continue trying to explain why this person – this *colleague* – should give in to your overtures.” The HR director stands up from the chair behind their desk and walks around, sitting on the desk a few feet from Phillip. Their arms are folded across their chest. “This might be hard to hear,” they say. “But I am going to be frank.” They lean forward. Something in their eyes says they like doing this, that they like putting people in their place. Is that what this is all about? Putting a man in his place? “Sometimes we see what we want to see, even if it’s not the reality. We are all guilty of this. And that’s clearly what is happening here.”

“Clearly?” Phillip says, his hands flopping in front of him. “Barb was my-“

“Mr. Haston, please. Hear me out.” They walk back around the desk and sit down. “I know that in a patriarchal societal structure, you may be used to cutting people off and bulldozing your agenda. But that is not going to happen in here. Do you understand?”

He does not understand. But he nods.

“This is a simple case of a cisgender male crossing a colleague’s boundaries,” the HR director says. “Sure, you have been conditioned by societal norms to act this way, so maybe it’s not your fault.” They lean forward, hands folded atop the desk. “But that doesn’t make it okay.” They rap their knuckles on the desk and look at the email exchange on the computer screen between them. “The other party is clear that she does not want you contacting her, and yet you ignored this request. Actually, request is not the right word. You ignored this *boundary.* A clearly stated boundary. You disrespected it, and you invalidated it. Because this boundary did not fit your agenda.”

“Can I speak?”

The HR director holds up a hand.

“That will not be necessary,” they say. “The point here is that you made a colleague feel unsafe. This was communicated to you, and then you chose to continue making her feel unsafe.”

“That’s not what-“

“Please!” the HR director shouts. They collect themself, take in a deep breath, and smile. “The bottom line,” they say, “is that we cannot tolerate this behavior at our corporation. We pride ourselves on respect. On inclusion. On healthy work relationships.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying,” they say, “that you are fired.”

X X X X

Hopelessness often comes like rain. The drizzle can lead to a downpour, which can lead to a tsunami.

Phillip is drowning in it as he packs his desk while two security guys watch. He asks if he can access his computer – he does not tell them that his intention is to copy all of his email exchanges with Barb, as a way of arguing his case with whomever might listen – but they say that is against policy. He needs to leave the premises “in a timely manner.”

He cries as he packs. The two security types watch without emotion. Something about crying in front of males makes Phillip feel inherently weak. He can feel them watching him, but they turn away when he makes eye contact.

These are tears of failure and shame, but they are mainly from loss. The person he thought he knew, the one person who he could refer to as a true friend, is gone. Replaced by someone else. Some*thing* else.

He thinks about that blackbird they saw the last time they were together. Symbolizing death.

The Barb he knew is gone. This person who is sending these curt emails and forbidding him to call or text her, she is someone else altogether.

Who is she?

He misses his friend. He could feel her slipping away. And now she is gone. Forever. This person who reminded him of those he had lost. Of his former co-worker Teri, who drank herself to death. Of his AA friend Ted, who overdosed. Of a sister he never really knew.

And now this person is gone. Replaced by a stranger.

He takes his last box out to the car without looking back at the office building. Most of his best memories were at the building on the South End, so he has minimal emotional attraction to this place, the corporate office.

He drives to the highway and takes it a different direction than home. He cannot face Stacy. Not now. Maybe, not ever.

He pulls off a few miles south and drives west toward the Fremont neighborhood. He passes a homeless camp on Aurora Avenue and does not feel that far removed. He envies how they get to move around freely and use drugs at will, while he has to work so goddamn hard just to keep his shit together. When he’s feeling depressed like this, he has to work just to get out of bed every day. To put one foot in front of the other.

He drives over the Aurora Bridge and looks at the rows of houses on the hilltop to the south, blocking his view of downtown. He looks to the east and sees Gasworks Park, and the water that leads up to it. So much beauty, but all he sees his darkness.

He catches sight of someone on the edge of the bridge, a woman. Or maybe a little girl. He pulls over at the end of the bridge and walks back to find her.

He sees her, standing on the edge, looking down.

“Don’t!” he calls out. She does not look at him. He thinks of what he might say, of those words of encouragement that everyone needs to hear at times like these. But he has none. He thinks of how unfair this world is, and he thinks of the Van Halen song. *Go ahead and jump.*

When he is about 50 feet away from her, she turns and meets his eyes. She is wearing what appears to be a nightgown. She has long, dark hair that flows in the wind. She smiles and begins to walk toward him. He feels like he recognizes her.

As she gets within 20 feet, he sees that she is a child. Maybe a teenager. She can’t be more than 13.

As old as his sobriety.

“It’s dangerous out here!” he calls out over the buzz of traffic as cars whiz past them. He tries not to look down.

“Thanks,” she says. She moves in closer, and he sees something in her face that is familiar. His mother. His father.

Himself.

“Katie?” he says.

She nods. And steps toward him. Reaches out her arms. Hugs him. She smells like home. She feels like love. He does not want to let her go.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispers in her ear. When they let go of each other, she is a full-grown woman. His age, he would imagine. Right down to the day. “Katie, how did -?”

“I can’t stay,” she says. She is practically shouting over the traffic. “I just needed to tell you something.”

She takes his hands. She looks down at the water, a hundred feet below. Phillip can’t bring himself to look. He has always been afraid of heights.

“Are you angry?” he calls out. “That I, you know, ended up like this? Sad, and lost, and pathetic?”

She grins. She is in her 40s, but she has the smile of a child. Of an angel. As she takes a step back, he can see that she is starting to fade away. She is becoming transparent.

“I am so proud of you,” she says. “I needed to say that.”

His eyes fill with tears. She is fading, here in the daylight. He wants to tell her that he just got fired. That he fucked up the best friendship he has ever had. That he failed as an artist. But he imagines that she already knows.

He has a lump in his throat. She takes another step backward. She is disappearing.

“Phillip,” she calls out. “You were never alone.” She smiles. That beautiful smile. His mother’s smile. He realizes now that Barb had that same smile. “I was always there with you,” she says. “And always will be. You never have to be alone.”

Phillip closes his eyes, fighting the tears. Someone from a passing car shouts for him to “get off the bridge, you fucking dumbass!” He can feel himself falling, although he’s still standing on the bridge. And he’s not falling alone.

Katie is beside him. She will always be beside him. They will fall together.

“Be good to yourself,” she whispers. “Take care of my brother.”

When he opens his eyes, he expects to see her smile. Barb’s smile. Soothing him. Helping him feel safe.

But she is not there. She is gone. *You never have to be alone.*

He looks down, but the water below him is still. The houses on the hillside glow in the daylight. An airplane passes overhead, looking down at the billions of strangers below. It passes through a cloud, disappearing and then reappearing again. Moving so slowly from this distance.

He walks back to his car. He pauses. Looks back up at the sky. Wonders is Katie is up there somewhere. Wonders when he will see her again.

CHAPTER 21:

It is the final day of the month, and Barbara Avery is atop the sales totals company-wide. They acknowledge her at a mid-week Zoom meeting, but she hates the attention. She used to see Phillip at these Zoom meetings, usually making faces or sending private messages that mocked the process, and today she finds herself smiling at the memory. But she is relieved he is not here. At the end, he only brought anxiety.

She can see people clapping for her on the screen, but she cannot hear it because their microphones are muted. Silent applause. The irony of technology. Like “social” media. She does not recognize any of these people. They are all strangers to her.

The whole world is full of strangers.

The CEO makes an announcement about new software being developed to help more eyes get on the product. Barb is thankful that her moment in the sun has passed. She is uncomfortable with the spotlight.

She sits in her office on the South End and listens to the CEO wax poetic on sales goals when that voice starts again. The one from the other side of the wall. From *inside* the wall.

*… treasure basting flowers at dusk … long chipmunk flying low … desperate to return to the castle of heroin …*

She looks up at a piece of art on her wall. She feels a breeze on her neck. The painting is of a row of boats on water. She is struck by how much art is wasted on water, instead of what lies beneath. She stares at the piece until she sees the head of a small child, barely visible behind one of the boats.

*… creation of the luxurious bacon … without garnish and five walls … makes a trapezoid ghost patch …*

She stands up. She looks closer at the painting. The child is screaming. Or choking. No one seems to hear.

*… dictionary compels radish snakes … ivory tower hovering grip … naked zebras foul reservoir…*

She pulls up a chair and stands on it. Leans forward. Stares into the child’s face.

But the closer she gets, the more blurry it becomes. The watercolors blend into one another. She sees pixilated dots. Water washes over everything.

*… micro attention donut cloth … let the bastards think … skating twice bubble gum …*

She pulls back. The screaming child is gone. She gets down off the chair and realizes that what she saw was just a rock. Or a dark patch of water.

She sits down and closes her eyes.

*… drowning … help me … dark and wet …*

“Shut up!” she shouts. She covers her ears. She can hear her own breathing. Her heart beating.

Otherwise, silence.

The way the world is supposed to be.

She presses her palms against her ears until it hurts, closing the world out. She closes her eyes and imagines herself floating in water. Drifting. Where no one can touch her. No one can see her.

When she opens her eyes, her office seems lighter. There are no goddamn windows in here. Like a prison cell. Her chest feels heavy. The odd voice has stopped, but she still feels out of sorts.

She knows there are no men in the office. She is surrounded by women, most of whom she does not know. They are of no danger to her.

So why does she still feel unsafe?

She grabs her key lanyard and goes out into the hallway. Passes a woman whose head is down, looking at some kind of paper. Cat does not seem to notice her as Barb walks out the front door, out into the parking lot.

She sees the coffee shop and thinks of that man Phillip who used to take her there. She had almost forgotten about him. She feels a sense of longing. And anger. And disgust.

Fucking feelings. How can you feel so many at once? Love and hate. Relief and longing. Happiness and pain.

Happiness. She cannot remember ….

She turns off her feelings at once. Like a faucet. This is her superpower. Barb can turn off her feelings. Stop her tears. It’s so easy for her. She never understood why people let their feelings linger. Like an invited guest. Just fucking tell them to leave.

The sun warms her face, and when she looks up into the sky she sees a murder of crows. They flock and fly together.

If only humans could be that simple.

Barb, she will fly alone.

She hears footsteps and turns to see a man. Seemingly out of nowhere. He is tall. With an awkward confidence to him. As if someone once told him that he was handsome but that he doesn’t believe it.

“Hi,” he says, walking toward her. “Sorry to bother you.”

She feels her insides churn. She hears a buzzing sound inside her head.

“Hello?” he says. “I, um, I was just … “ He turns toward the parked cars. “I was in my car, and I couldn’t help but notice …”

Her head is down. She feels a pressure inside of her skull.

She misses the feeling of being alone.

“Can I buy you a coffee?” he asks. “I’m sorry. *May* I buy you-?“

She pushes past him, their shoulders colliding. She runs across the parking lot, back to the sidewalk. “My name’s Keith!” he calls out. These men. Conditioned not to give up. Conditioned to treat boundaries like thin panes of glass, waiting to be shattered. A woman who says no is simply a challenge.

She reaches for the front door of her office, and it opens. A woman comes out. It’s one of the younger women from the office. One of the women who was on the Zoom call earlier. One of the ones who was clapping in silence.

She doesn’t seem to see Barb. Or care to see her.

She passes, and Barb stands in the doorway, holding the door. She whispers: “You cold-hearted bitch.”

Aren’t we all supposed to be in this together?

CHAPTER 22:

He is lying on the floor of his bedroom. No one is home. The lights are off. The silence around him is deafened by the thoughts in his head. He cannot turn them off.

Phillip Haston has not moved since Stacy left to drop off the kids and go to work.

He is feeling sorry for himself, which is what depression makes him do. But he is also sad for her.

Barb.

How she runs away from everything. How she is alone. How she can’t see things that are right in front of her.

*The longer you stare at something*, he had said to her in the art gallery that one day, *the more you see things that aren’t there*.

Why couldn’t she just see? She had a person, right in front of her, who wanted nothing but friendship. Who had nothing but her best interest in mind.

He wondered what the narrative would be like if he was gay. Or if he was a woman. Would she run away?

Why was she always running away?

Phillip has asked himself often over the years what friendship is. He had a handful of friends in junior high and high school, but he was far removed from the popular crowd. Sensitive, artsy types rarely run in large circles.

The college years saw people, mostly drinking buddies, come and go. A couple of them are still in contact after all these years, but they live in different towns and exist in separate worlds.

He has grown to appreciate friendships at a different level. As we get older, we understand them more. We hold onto them.

To Phillip, a true friend is one that will be there through thick and thin. He has been that to a few people over the years, but not enough have been that to him.

Do we ever really know who our true friends are?

She was one of them. And then … what happened?

That last email. He practically memorized it. It was the first time he saw a side of her that was petty, condescending, angry. He understands how her experience, how all the shitty things that have happened to her, have shaped her. How she tries to protect herself. From threats that aren’t there.

The longer you stare …

He thinks of the email, of all the parts of her that he did not know where there.

How she told him her message needed to be “stated explicitly for you to understand.”

 *[Patronizing:* ***adj****. apparently kind or helpful but betraying a feeling of superiority; condescending]*

How she told him that she would no longer hold space for him to “manipulate and chastise me because you feel entitled to my time and energy.”

 *[Weaponizing boundaries:* ***v****. disguising controlling behavior as an attempt to set “healthy” boundaries against others]*

How she told him that expressing his feelings were his way of trying to emotionally manipulate her.

*[Emotional invalidation:* ***n****. the act of dismissing or rejecting someone’s thoughts, feelings, or behaviors]*

How she excused herself of responsibility and blamed the situation on “your continued inappropriate behavior*.*”

*[Gaslighting:****v.****psychological manipulation of a person usually over an extended period of time that causes the victim to question the validity of their own thoughts, perception of reality, or memories]*

How she said she would contact HR if he tried to communicate with her again.

 *[Threats … we all know what threats are].*

Patronizing. Weaponizing boundaries. Invalidating feelings.

Gaslighting. Threatening.

These are the tactics of an evil person.

Except Phillip doesn’t believe in evil. He believes in hurt people, trying to communicate in the only way they know.

He knows Barbara Avery has been hurt. He knows why she reacts the way she does.

So, yes, he feels bad for himself. But he feels worse for her.

For how she struggles to keep friendships. How he made her feel backed in a corner. How her experiences have forced her to be hypervigilant.

How she feels controlled by him.

Because maybe that is exactly what he is trying to do. Men are like that. They try to control the situation.

He feels sad that she doesn’t have many friends. That she finally found one, and she pushed him away. Sad because of how she sees the world. Because the world has made her see it from that lens. This is not her fault. This is the world’s fault. Humanity’s fault.

He just wants her to be okay.

He saw Barb the way others can’t see her. He saw the beauty inside of her. The light she possesses. Her uniqueness is what made her special. If she fit in, he wouldn’t feel so damned attached to her.

She wanted to be seen. And he could see her. All of her.

Just not the way she wanted to be seen.

He wishes he could be that friend to her, the friend she wanted.

But he also wishes she could accept the friend he was.

If only she knew how much he cared. And still cares.

Why couldn’t she see inside of him? Inside his mind? Inside his heart?

What he knows is that throughout the process, he has worked very hard to respect her. Even now, when he thinks about Barb, he has positive thoughts. He does not bad-mouth her. He knows that her decisions were all made because she is trying to protect herself.

But he is also a hurt person. The proverbial animal, backed into a corner. Maybe we all have an evil within us. When we are hurt, when we are in pain, it comes out.

If they traded places, wouldn’t he act the same way? Wouldn’t the monster in him come out?

As he holds his phone, he almost calls her out of habit. She is the person he could turn to at times like this. He is hurting, and she is no longer there for him. It seems strange. That he can’t reach out to her when he needs her most.

He stares at his phone. Every time it has buzzed lately, an excitement has been born inside of him. Like maybe she is texting him to apologize. To tell him she misread everything. He has so much to say to her. So much to explain.

But she has carefully set up barriers so that the only contact will come from her end.

Weaponizing boundaries. He has heard the term once before. We live in an age when therapeutic terms have become mainstream. Teenagers accuse their parents of “gaslighting” them when they’re reminded of past behaviors. Kids throw “OCD” and “anxiety” around to describe someone who makes his bed or gets nervous in front of strangers. “PTSD” is a term people use to describe a bad meal or an embarrassing interaction.

And then there are boundaries. They mean so many things to so many people now.

As a girl-dad, Phillip has done a lot of work on helping his daughter develop boundaries. She is already having challenges with friendships at school, so he talks to her about having “friends with boundaries.” There will come a time when he will need to talk to her about setting boundaries with boys. And men.

There are people with loose boundaries, who let people walk all over them. Barb was never like this. Phillip always appreciated that about her. But now, her boundaries have become rigid. What she describes as boundaries are actually a form of stonewalling.

*[Stonewalling* ***(n.)****: a negative and destructive way of communicating that involves one party shutting down by putting up a verbal or emotional wall as a way of refusing to engage.]*

Stonewalling is a learned behavior, used as a way of one party controlling the other. This is what she is doing. Disguised as “healthy” boundaries. But there is nothing healthy about it. Nothing at all.

And yet, for some reason, he still respects her.

He respects her because he knows she is in pain. She has been hurt before. She is trying to protect herself.

It just doesn’t feel good being the one from whom she is needing protection.

Lada and Mick both had falling out with friends recently, and despite all the tears and drama, they made up and came out with deeper friendships. Phillip failed. As hard as he tried, he couldn’t figure out how to patch things up with Barb.

What kind of a father is he? He teaches his kids to do something he can’t even do for himself.

He tries to imagine Barb’s face. He can’t remember what she looks like. Only how she made him feel. When she was playfully making fun of him. When she was supporting him.

He thought she would always be there for him.

He wonders if it is narcissistic to feel sorry for her, to wish she had the foresight to see that he was a person who was a loyal, good friend. She was missing out on that. Because she couldn’t see past what she wanted to see.

Phillip will never know what it means to be a woman in American society. To have men objectify you. Minimize you.

Control you.

Talk down to you.

Intimidate you.

Manipulate you.

Crucify you.

Belittle you.

Violate you.

Scare you.

Invalidate you.

Ignore you.

Abuse you.

Use you.

Refuse you.

Recycle you.

Resist you.

Restrain you.

Mishandle you.

Mistreat you.

Burden you.

Judge you.

Exploit you.

Assault you.

He will never know. He sees this behavior. But he has never experienced it, not as a woman. He can never know.

What it is like to walk in a woman’s shoes.

He stands and walks to his bathroom. Looks at himself in the mirror. He turns away. With his back to the mirror, he makes a fist and punches himself in the side of the head. He sees stars. He punches himself in the ribs. The jaw. The arm. He continues to punch himself, until the pain is unbearable. Until he has gotten what he deserves.

Then he turns back to the mirror, with tears in his eyes. Tears of emotional pain, not physical pain.

He closes his eyes and thinks of Katie. His sister. The one who never made it. The one he failed to protect. Maybe he saved her? From this world. This big, cruel world that tears women to shreds.

This is his world. A man’s world. He is the one who survived. And yet he never felt complete.

He came into this world missing something. Not knowing what he was missing. Just always feeling incomplete. He searched for that other part of him. He developed an anxious attachment style. He needed to feel complete through the love of his mother. His brother. His teachers. His friends.

None of them ever made him feel complete.

But Barb did. He saw something in her that had been missing, his entire life.

He goes into the bedroom. Finds a notebook and a pen.

He starts writing.

*Katie…*

CHAPTER 23:

The house is empty. Barb stands in the doorway and looks around. The silence calms her. There are photo frames on the wall but no photos. A white leather sofa sits in the living room, without any stains. A white tasseled blanket lies perfectly over the back. The hardwood floors look freshly stained.

She hears a humming sound. It sounds like it is coming from inside the walls. She looks toward the stairway. She steps forward.

Sunlight comes in through an overhead window. She walks into the light. Out the other side. To a stairway.

She takes each stair carefully. She hears singing from the second floor. “I can feel you breathe/Washing into me …”

A soft, quiet voice. Familiar, but someone Barb cannot picture.

At the top of the stairs, the singing goes back to a hum. She follows the sound.

At the end of the hall, an open door. Light is spilling out. She goes to the light, turns, and looks in.

She sees a small girl, maybe 5 or 6 years old, with her back to her. Humming. Barb steps into the room. The floor creaks.

The child stops humming, turns and looks at her. She has a doll in her hands.

“This girl is named like me,” the girl says.

Barb smiles. She crouches down. Touches the girl on her back.

“Of course she is,” she says. “Barbie, right?”

“Yes! Like me!” the girl says. “Barbie!”

Barb strokes the ends of the child’s hair while moving to look at her face. Hair that used to be hers. When it used to be that blond. She remembers when she was that innocent. That trusting. The girl runs her fingers through the doll’s golden hair.

“Your name is Barbie,” Barb says, staring into the eyes of a younger version of herself. “Is that right?”

The girl nods. “What’s your name?” she says softly.

Barb grins. Sits on the floor next to her. Puts an arm around her.

“I am … It doesn’t matter,” she says. “You can grow up and be beautiful and strong and smart and perfect, like you will, but most people still won’t know your name.”

“Why not?”

“Not everyone becomes famous. Not all of us have a doll named after us.” She touches the girl’s chin with the edge of her finger. The way only a woman can, that makes someone feel safe. “Some of us, we just have to survive. However we can.”

“I don’t get it.”

Those wide, trusting eyes. Barb doesn’t remember feeling so innocent, so free. So angelic. She wants to climb inside this girl, and to do it all over again. There is so much she would change.

“Life isn’t easy,” she says. “For most of us. Bad things happen. People hurt us. But we just keep on keeping on.”

“Keep on … what?”

Barb laughs. She plays with young Barb’s hair. She remembers when her own hair was that soft.

“It’s just a saying,” she says. “It means we do what we can with what we have.” She looks out the window, out into the sunlight. She feels the warmth on her face. “Or something like that.”

The girl turns toward her.

“You had bad thing happen?” she asks. Barb nods. The girl looks down at the floor. “I did a bad thing, too,” she says softly.

Barb wants to laugh again, but instead she wraps the girl in her arms. She leans in close and smells the scent of innocence.

“You will make mistakes,” she whispers. “We all do. Do not let them define you. Inside of you, there is an angel. One day, others will see it. Maybe just one person, but they will. As long as you never give up.” She rests her chin on the child’s head. She wants to stay like this forever. She releases the girl and looks into her eyes.

“You are perfect the way you are,” she says. “Do you hear me?”

The girl shakes her head. “I told you,” she says, “I did a bad thing.”

Barb takes her by the shoulders, with her fingertips.

“What we do,” she tells the girl, “is not who we are. We all make mistakes. We move on, and we don’t look back.”

She stands up.

“Remember,” she says. “You are perfect the way you are. It’s the way you were meant to be. Don’t let anyone ever tell you any different.”

Barb turns to the door. The sun shines on her back. She thinks of all the times people criticized her. Starting with her mother. The mean girls at school. Man after man after man. Boyfriends. Bosses. The teacher who told her she was mentally slow. The classmate who called her fat. The sorority that told her she wasn’t pretty enough. The stranger who told her she was too strange.

“Are you related to my mom?” the girl asks. “You remind me of her.”

Barb stands in the doorway. She feels the sunlight on her back. Something is rising up inside of her. That monster that is always waiting for a chance to emerge.

“Did I hurt you?” the girl says from behind her. As if she is sensing something.

Barb turns and sees something on the girl’s face that reflects the sunlight. It sparkles. It rolls down her cheek.

A teardrop.

Barb goes back to her, takes her in her arms. Lifts her up and hugs her. Rests her cheek on the top of her head.

“It’s okay,” Barb says. “It’s okay, baby. It’s okay.” She wipes the tear from the child’s face and looks deep into her eyes. “You are okay.”

“Then why am I crying?” the girl asks.

“Just because you cry,” Barb says, “that does not mean you are not okay. That means you are human. Understand?”

The child does not answer. Barb hears a buzzing sound. Not words, just buzzing. She looks toward the wall. But it is coming from her pocket.

Her phone. She sit up and looks around. She is lying on a couch. In her apartment. Out of her dream now. She is such a long way from home. Such a long, long way from home.

She pulls out her phone and sees a text from an unknown number. She has blocked Phillip’s number, but she knows this is from him. From a burner phone. Someone else’s phone.

“I miss you,” he writes. “I forgive you. I need you to know that.”

“The fucking gall of him,” she whispers.

She immediately hits FORWARD. Sends it to Stacy.

Turns off her phone and goes back to sleep.

*Katie:*

*Some of us are born into this world searching. For something we will never find. Something we cannot name.*

*I know now, that I was searching for something like you.*

*How was I to know? From my first breath, I was searching. Hunting. Some of us are hunters.*

*Which makes others feel like prey.*

*Even when they are not.*

CHAPTER 24:

He hasn’t showered in two days. He wears a pair of baggy shorts and a sweatshirt that smells like mildew. His hair hangs in his face. He has been in this bed for more than 24 hours, having slept for at least 16 of them.

His brain is not getting the flow of chemicals necessary to get out of bed. His brain is telling him that things will not get better. His mind his telling him that his wife and kids will be better off without him. His mind is telling him that somebody died. But nobody died. Not in the past few days.

His mind is telling him that a drink might make him feel better. A hit of weed. Maybe something stronger. Just to get himself away from himself. For a little while.

His mind is telling him that God is trying to punish him. God has never been his friend. Nor his protector. God did this.

She opens the door. A beam of light from the hallway emerges through a crack in the door. A sign of the reality he is trying to avoid. He does not know if it is night or day. The empathy that she has shown for him, day after day after day, is eroding from her face.

She comes to the bed. Sits down.

“We need you,” Stacy says. He looks at her but cannot move. She rubs his leg. “Phillip, the kids need you,” she says. “I need you.”

“I know,” he says. His ear his pressed to the pillow. He is looking at the sheets. “I know.”

“Look at me,” she says.

“I can’t.”

They sit like that. She stops rubbing his leg. He feels her stand and go to the window. She opens the drapes. Sunlight pours in. He covers his face.

A shadow covers him, and when Phillip moves his hand and opens his eyes, she is standing over him.

“She texted me,” Stacy says softly. He knows immediately who she is. She pulls out her phone and holds it up. She looks at the screen. “You told her you missed her.”

“I did,” Phillip says. “And I do.” He looks at her. He can see something in her face she has never seen before. He is losing her trust. “As a friend, Stacy.”

She looks at her phone again. “You don’t have the energy to get out of bed,” she says. “To take care of your kids. Our kids.” She is still staring at her phone. She holds it up for him, the screen facing Phillip. “But you can text this woman you met – what? – three months ago?”

“Stacy, please,” he says. “This isn’t helping.”

“Are you falling in love with her?” Stacy asks bluntly. She waves the hand holding her phone in the air. “Is that what all this is about?”

“Stacy –“

“Answer me!” He has never seen her like this. He rolls onto his back and sits up. He feels unsafe. He feels attacked. He feels … probably like Barb does.

“I love one woman,” Phillip says. “What you and I have, *this* is not *that*.”

She folds her arms across her chest.

“So what is it?” she asks.

His eyes fill with tears. Something inside of him builds like rushing water behind a wall. It has nowhere to go. He feels as if he is drowning. He has had dreams of being under the water, where the world is peaceful and safe, but right now it feels more like he is choking for air. He cannot speak. He can barely breathe.

What he feels for Barb is not love. He knows that. Not the kind of love he has for his wife. Or his kids. Not the kind of love he has had in the past for women he desired. There should be another word for what he’s feeling. An ancient Persian word, translatable by Google.

He cares for this woman. So deeply that it hurts to not have her in his life. So deeply that he cries whenever he thinks of how hard her life has been. That’s not love. It’s connection. A connection that is hard to find in this world.

He shrugs his shoulders. The words won’t come.

Stacy pats his leg. She turns and goes to the closet. She pulls out a suitcase. Begins loading it with clothes.

“What are you doing?” he manages to ask.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” she says. “I’m protecting myself. I’m protecting the kids. In the state you’re in right now, you are useless to us. You might even be dangerous to us.”

“Where are you going?” he asks.

She looks at him. The light he usually sees in her eyes is gone. She is looking at him like he is something less than human.

“I’m taking the kids to Ellen’s house,” she says. Her sister.

Phillip wants to protest, but he knows she is right. He doesn’t know how safe they are around him right now. When he is depressed, he isn’t himself.

He falls back into the bed and pulls up the sheet. Over his face. He rolls over and waits for the silence.

He wishes the sheets were made of water. He drowns in them.

X X X X

He does not even know what day of the week it is. He turns on his phone. He sees it’s a Friday. Barb Day. The day they used to go for coffee.

Coffee. Maybe that’s what he needs.

Maybe he can fix this.

He forces himself to get out of bed. He drags himself to the shower. The water only makes him feel cold. Alone. The house is so quiet. Stacy and the kids have been gone for two days. Maybe three.

He puts on a sweatshirt and jeans and goes to his car. Friday. He remembers how much he used to look forward to these days. The days he would go to the South End branch. Would have coffee with Barb. Would sit in her office and listen to the stories of her life. Friday was his day of connection.

He feels like it was just last week. Like he has been living this nightmare, and that if she sees him, all will be good again. This person who has been texting him, she is someone else. He will talk to her face-to-face – he has no other way to contact her – and they will smooth things over. Go back to being friends. Having coffee. Texting each other.

They are human, after all. We are all in this together.

He starts the car and drives toward the South End. He pulls into the parking lot and looks over at the Starbucks. He can hear her calling him “Tall Drip.” He can see her refusing to walk through the door when he opens it. He can remember the way it felt to be around her, this person who reminded him of the sister he never got to meet.

A half-dozen people are sitting at tables when he enters, and two are waiting for their drinks. He sees Baby, and their eyes meet. She has even less hair than she did the last time they talked. She smiles at him. She has a pretty smile. A kind heart. He feels bad that life has been so cruel to her.

He orders two coffees.

“A tall drip,” he says, his throat choking up, “and a short drip.”

“You don’t look well,” she says, watching him as she pours each coffee. She hands him the Tall Drip as the other one fills.

“That’s because I’m not.” The tears. Welling up inside of him again. All these goddamn tears. Do they ever end?

“Let’s go sit,” she says, nodding to her manager that she is taking a break. She caps off the Short Drip and follows Phillip to an open table.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, sitting down. He just shakes his head.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he says. “Especially not to you. What you’re going through …”

He stares at his coffee cup.

“We don’t get to choose what hurts us,” she says. “We all have problems, okay?” She rubs a hand across her head. “Some are bigger than others.”

“How are you feeling?” he asks.

“Physically? Emotionally?”

“Yes,” he says.

She grins. “Shitty,” she says. “And shitty. If we’re being honest.”

She looks out the window. He takes a sip of his coffee. She warms her hands with the short drip. Barb’s short drip. He will take it next door, he will sit with Barb and talk to her, and all will be right again.

Something in Baby’s eyes lights up. As if she is thinking of a memory from her past.

“I lost a brother,” she says, still staring out the window. He almost chokes on his coffee. “When I was 9,” she says.

“I’m sorry,” he says. She does not seem to hear him.

“He was my twin,” she continues. Phillip sets down his cup. He tries to swallow but cannot. *Twin*. As if she is telling his story. “Fucking cancer,” she says. “It’s going to take us both. Can you believe that shit?”

“It’s not fair,” Phillip whispers.

“Fair is just a place you eat corn on a stick and sit on a merry-go-round,” she says. “It doesn’t apply to the human condition.” She leans back and folds her arms across her chest. “I am ready,” she says.

“Ready for what?”

She looks upward. Runs her hand across her thinning hair again.

“He is waiting for me,” she says. “Angel. My brother. Angel Verra. We’ll get to be together again.” She wipes a tear from her face. “That’s how I am looking at it. It’s not about leaving this world; it’s about entering another. And I am ready.”

Maybe she could be the friend he needs. Maybe she could be what Barb could never be. They share this bond. This sibling bond. Single twins, alone. Navigating the world without the person who is supposed to be there.

But as he looks at her, Phillip does not feel that same sense of connection that he does with Barb. He can’t explain it. Why can’t people just be what we want them to be?

She turns her head, wiping her face, and then Baby nods toward the entrance.

“There she is,” she says, pushing the short drip toward him.

“What? Who?”

“Your friend is here.”

Phillip turns toward the entrance, and she is standing there. Barb. Their eyes meet. She looks disappointed to find him here. But she does not look away.

He stands and grabs both cups. He walks toward her. The sight of her makes his head spin. He thinks of a line from a Richmond Fontaine song: *It’s not a blinding sight/To see you this way./It’s just good to see you at all*.

“Can we talk?” he asks.

She nods. She does not say anything or show any facial expression. She just turns toward the exit. He starts to follow. He feels a hand on his shoulder. He looks back.

“Be careful,” Baby whispers.

“Thank you,” Phillip says. “And thanks for the talk.”

CHAPTER 25:

She can feel him following her as she walks back to the office, past Cat at the front desk who watches with a confused look on her face. The entire office seems to come to a stop. There seem to be a dozen people out of their offices, for some reason, watching her as she leads this man through the lobby, down the hall and into her office. As if she has an audience.

She parades this man in front of them, realizing that of all the women who work at the South End branch, Phillip chose her. *He chose me.* Is that what this was all about? Being *chosen*?

She leads him into her office and closes the door. She turns to face him. She feels nauseous, just looking at his face. His sad, pathetic face. His hair hanging down over his eyes. His disheveled clothes. He barely looks human. They stare at each other.

“I don’t know where to begin,” he says after a long silence.

She steps forward, places a finger to his lips. She actually touches them with her index finger. His lips are cold. Shock washes over his face, but he does not pull away from her. She slowly moves her hand and rests it gently on his cheek. His eyes look lost.

“Barb, what are you-?”

“Shhhh,” she says softly. She stares into his eyes. She can see the pain. There was a time when she could feel his pain. Now he just looks pathetic. Weak. She does not hold his emotions anymore. Even though she is convinced that this is what he wants from her. His emotions are not hers. Not anymore. He can fucking keep them to himself.

Maybe this is how he wants her to see him. Another way of manipulating her emotions. Another way of a man trying to control a woman. She can feel him shaking.

“Barb, don’t do this,” he whispers, staring back at her.

She rests her hand there, on his left cheek, feeling the warmth of his skin. She slowly pulls her hand away, without breaking eye contact. He is watching her with fear and confusion in his face. She can do anything to this man. She sees that now. Despite everything that has happened, he trusts her with all of his heart. Is this desperation? Is this naivete?

He is broken. But he still has not paid for what he has done. For making her feel unsafe. For taking away her sense of control. For bringing her back to that place where she promised she would never go back to.

That deep, dark place. The dungeon of her soul.

She starts to pull her hand back, then with a quickness she did not know she had, she slaps him across the face. So hard that it hurts her palm. The sound echoes. His head recoils and he reaches to cover his cheek.

“What the -?” he starts.

She shakes the prickly feeling from her hand and slaps him again, harder this time. Before he can look back at her, she uses this same hand to rip open her blouse. Two buttons fly across the room, bouncing off the wall and rolling around the floor. Phillip watches them roll to a stop, then he turns to look at her, still holding his cheek. His mouth is open. He cannot speak. She knows that feeling. That broken, helpless feeling.

“Don’t,” he whispers, finding his words. She stands with her blouse open, with her bra and the skin beneath her neck exposed. She might as well be naked. When you feel like you have no control, you might as well be naked. “Please, Barb,” he whispers. “Don’t hurt me. Not anymore.”

She grins. The feeling inside of her is probably what a lion feels like when he has captured his prey. The locus of control, shifting.

She opens her hand again. She holds her palm in the air between them. His head is down, but his eyes look up at her. He lifts his head and winces. He closes his eyes. Waiting for another slap.

 “I deserve this,” he says, mostly to himself.

She smiles, pulls her arm back and swings.

His body tightens. But her hand hits her own face. *Smack!* The sound reverberates between them. He opens his eyes. As they stare into each other’s eyes, she does it again. *Slap!* Hitting herself across the face. Probably leaving a mark.

She lowers her hand and places it around her throat. She covers it with her other hand. She squeezes. She sees stars.

“Barb, what are you doing?” he gasps. He reaches for her arms. Grabs her wrists. “Barb, stop!”

“Stop!” she yells. “Get your hands off me!”

When he releases her wrists, she reaches out and digs her fingernails into the skin of his forearms. She scratches his arms. He looks down. She lifts her left hand and drags it across his right cheek.

“Ow!” he shouts.

“Stop!” she yells again. “Someone help me!”

His hand covering his cheek, their eyes meet. She wants to spit on his face. But she knows that will not sting nearly as bad as what is coming next.

She hears a key in the door.

“Thank God!” she shouts, staring into his eyes. She smiles. Maniacally. While he stands there, paralyzed by fear and confusion, she smiles at him. “Make him stop!” she shouts, flatly.

As the door starts to open, she falls backward onto the floor. Breaks a small side table on the way.

“Barb, what’s going on? Are you okay?” a voice calls out.

The door opens. One of the younger women she barely knows stands in the doorway, holding her office key. There are others behind her. Phillip’s arms are in the air.

“I didn’t touch her,” he says.

A voice in the hallway says: “Someone call the cops. Now!”

Lying on the floor, Barb feels something in her back and hip. Her neck burns, from where she choked herself. Her cheek throbs, where she slapped herself. She tastes blood in her mouth.

How dare he make her bleed.

But she feels no pain. She feels a jolt of adrenaline. Dopamine. Serotonin.

*Joy*.

A few minutes later, as he is loaded into a police car, Barb, her shoulders wrapped in a blanket that is pulled around her, watches with a serious look on her face as two co-workers console her. It’s all she can do not to smile.

Nothing feels quite as good as making a man pay for what he’s done. We all have a purpose in this world, right?

CHAPTER 26:

People create monsters. Life creates monsters. Pain creates monsters.

At the end, she told him he made her feel unsafe. That by taking away her sense of choice, he made her feel like all those other monsters did. The men who assaulted her. Barb’s mother. The unfair world.

*You are a monster*.

She gave up on him. Then she insinuated to his wife that he was unfaithful. Then she staged an assault.

*You are a monster.*

In the book *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley wrote: “There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand.”

This describes Phillip best as he returns to his empty house, free on bail. Stacy texted him on the way, telling him that he needed to move his stuff out, that she would be returning from her sister Ellen’s house with the kids in a few days. That he needed to be gone. And out of their lives forever.

He wanted to text her back that he was set up. By this woman Barb. That Stacy needs to trust him. That …

Then he remembers that advocating for himself only got him into this mess. A man trying to tell a woman that he is trustworthy, even a woman who happens to be your wife, is worthless. We prove ourselves by our actions.

The house seems so quiet. Like anything but a home. He feels unsafe here. He will never feel safe anywhere, ever again. And he will always be considered unsafe in the eyes of the world.

*You are a monster*.

When a person is told enough times that they are dangerous, they begin to believe it. We are what the world tells us we are.

He sees the car keys on the kitchen counter. There is a note written in Lada’s handwriting, but he cannot bear to read it. The tears blur his eyes. Anger rages inside of him.

He goes into the garage. Finds rope and duct tape. He throws them in the trunk, his head swimming with evil thoughts, and leaves the only house he and Stacy have ever known. He is not supposed to go anywhere, per the terms of his bail, but he does not plan on coming back. This life that was his has been taken from him. Maybe that’s what this woman wanted. This woman who was a stranger to him just two or three months ago. Who was a best friend to him just two or three weeks ago.

And now, she has torn his whole world apart. This is the power women yield over men.

He knows that now. It is too late, but he knows it.

His car stereo blasts a song reminding him that “some things are bigger than me.” At this moment in time, everything seems bigger than Phillip. All explanation has escaped him. If there are reasons to this everything, he cannot fathom what they might be.

“I am a good person,” he says to himself as he drives. That woman told him that once. Barb. She actually said those words. They felt validating at the time.

But good people, *all* people, have a monster within them. And his monster has been unleashed.

*You are a monster*.

He drives along the side streets of the South End. The office building where he spent so many hours getting to know this woman, getting to care about this woman, getting to *trust* this woman, is only a few blocks away. His heart beats harder in his chest, the closer he gets. He imagines he has already broken the restraining order, even from this distance, but none of that matters to him now.

His brain is swimming with thoughts as he pulls up to the office building parking lot. His mind is an existential painting. Too many things going on at once. He parks his car. He sees the Starbucks across the way.

The narrator of *Frankenstein* said: “Nothing is so painful to the human mind as great and sudden change.” It spins us out of control. It takes our brain places we never ventured before.

Pain awakens the monster within us.

Hurt awakens the monster within us.

Change awakens the monster within us.

He pulls open the front door. Their eyes meet.

“Phillip?”

She looks around and walks over to him.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Come,” he says. “Come with me.”

Baby, her head now completely free of hair, her time on this earth down to a matter of weeks, if not days, nods and takes off her apron.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“Trust me,” he says. Because he has asked women to trust him before. And even the ones who have had no reason not to trust him have found a reason. They have looked at the painting that is Phillip and seen something that wasn’t there.

He leads her to his car. They drive along the streets. She is looking at him.

“Where are we going?” she asks again.

He takes her hand. She starts to pull away, then she lets him hold it.

“How much time do you have left?” he asks. She begins to weep.

“I’m scared,” she whispers. Hearing a woman say this turns on a flood of anxiety within Phillip. He spent his entire life being respectful of women. Respectful of their boundaries. Respectful of their safety. And then, when one woman says she feels unsafe around him, he feels like a monster. He has become the poison M&M.

“We are scared too,” he says.

“We? We who?”

“Men,” he says. “We feel unsafe. In a lot of ways. No one talks about that, but it’s true. We are all the same.”

She looks out the window. Pulls her hand away from his. She silently watches the city pass by. He turns on the radio. Cloud Cult is singing about what happens when we reach the end.

“I am scared of dying,” she says. “Not of being dead, but of dying. I know once I’m dead, I will be with him.” Her brother. Angel. “And I know where I am now, in this car with you. But what happens in between?”

It dawns on him that he never answered her question about where they are going. That she never asked again. That, despite her fears about the unknown, she is somehow okay not knowing.

“I saw the police cars the other day,” she says. “After you left the coffee shop. After our talk.” She looks at him. “I saw them take you away.”

His chest tightens. *I am a monster.*

“I want people to know what happened,” he says. “What *really* happened. But no one will believe me.”

“I am not everyone.”

He swallows and takes a left turn. Onto the busy traffic of Aurora Avenue. Something is pulling him toward his destiny. *Their* destiny.

“A man and a woman were alone behind a closed door,” he says. “She came out with choke marks on her neck and a torn blouse.” He slows for a red light. “That’s all that matters. In the eyes of society, that’s all that matters.”

“But what happened?” she asks. The light turns green.

“What happened,” he says, “is that I put myself in a position to be unsafe. To be untrustworthy. To be looked at like a monster.” He can fear that rising water within him again. “*I* did this. I don’t believe I am an evil person, but you are how the world sees you.”

“I don’t see you as evil,” she says, taking his hand again. He feels his heart sink. He thinks of the rope and tape in the trunk. He sees the bridge, out there in front of them.

“It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from the world,” Mary Shelley wrote in her classic story of a monster created by humans, “but on that account we shall be more attached to one another.”

He feels connected to her. Baby. This young woman he hardly knows.

He knows she is dying. He knows her twin died.

He knows he is doing the right thing.

Or maybe he is just a monster. Who doesn’t know anything at all about the human condition.

CHAPTER 27:

He slows the car and parks up the hill from a statue of Vladimir Lenin. He has never thought to ask why it is here, in this city, on the other side of the world from what used to be the Soviet Union. This is one of many, many things that make no sense to Phillip Haston. Sometimes, we just don’t get to know.

“Come with me,” he says, getting out of the car. He tells himself that he will let her decide. That he will not force her to do anything he does not want to do. She is so young. Too young to die. But she did have 20 years. More than his sister Katie got.

This woman, this *girl,* with the bald head and circles under her eyes, unbuckles her seatbelt and gets out of the car. She walks alongside him. They cross the street, walking side by side.

“I am not afraid,” she says.

He looks at her. “You said a few minutes ago that you were,” he says. He can see the bridge, to the south, as traffic passes in front of them. She has to raise her voice to respond.

“I was,” she says. “But I’m not anymore. I don’t know where we’re going. But I know it’s okay. I know you wouldn’t hurt me.”

*But I am a monster,* he thinks. He knows.

They enter the walkway of the bridge. She takes his hand. He feels a safety in her touch. He turns and looks at her, and he sees not a young woman without hair, but a woman his own age. A woman who looks a little like him. *Katie*.

Midway across the bridge, they stop. They look out at the water, and at the hundred-foot drop beneath them.

“Give me your other hand,” he says. She is Baby again. Baby Verra. This young woman from the coffee shop that he barely knows. As she takes his hand, he sees Barb. He sees Katie. He sees every person that he wishes Baby was.

Together, they climb over the railing, to the other side of the footbridge. There is a small step there, enough for one set of feet. He climbs onto it, then opens his arms.

“What are we doing?” she asks.

“We are going,” he says. “To them.”

She moves forward, allowing him to wrap his arms around her. A car slows on the bridge, and he knows they don’t have a lot of time. He does not look down. He just falls backward.

His arms are wrapped around her, tightly. His body will take the brunt of the impact. They fall together, cutting through the breeze. A silence surrounds them. He cannot see her face, but he does not feel a fear emanating from her body. He remembers what it feels like to be an embryo, to be in the safety of the womb. Before we are ejected into the world. He tightens his grip, waiting for the impact.

The anticipation is worse than the pain. That is the way life works. That is how anxiety works, most of the time. Rarely is the pain as bad as one expects it to be.

But sometimes, it’s worse.

When they hit the water, the impact knocks the wind out of him. But he does not let go. This time, he will not let go. He will be with her. Forever. He will not leave her behind. Will not breathe without her. Crawl without her. Walk without her.

He will stay with her. Together. For eternity.

They go under. He cannot breathe. Water in his nostrils, his eyes. His arms are still wrapped around her, his hand locked over his other wrist. They sink through the water, deeper and deeper. His eyes are closed. The temperature around him changes, so that he feels the warm comfort of home.

He remembers. What it felt like. To be in the womb. To have Katie there, alongside him. To promise her he would never let go.

The water around them feels less like danger and more like the maternal safety of being inside a woman’s body. Women are always safe. From the moment we are conceived, they represent safety. We don’t expect them to hurt us. But so many do.

And we keep coming back.

They sink into the sea, together. Slowly descending. Farther and farther from the air above them. His arms are wrapped around her. Her arms are out, her body in the shape of a T. Two bodies, floating inside of earth’s womb. Almost three-fourths of this world is covered in water, and yet our bodies are limited in how much time we can spend in it. We need to breathe. And so water, the only place where we can float in silence and be protected from the world, is a dangerous place for humans to be.

*Let her go*.

A voice within Phillip whispers to him. He opens his eyes. He can see her bald head. Small fish around them. Strings of algae suspended above them.

*Let her go. There is still time.*

Phillip has never been good at letting go. When his mother could not love him like he needed to be loved, he kept chasing her validation. When Stacy tried to break up with him a year into their relationship, he showered her with flowers and poems and drawings, until she came back. And when this woman Barb, who now just feels like a figment of his imagination, told him to stop contacting her, he could not stop trying. He could not *let go*.

His grip around Baby tightens as the panic within him rises. His body cannot last much longer. Five seconds? Ten? Is she even still alive?

He is suddenly surrounded by hair. Flowing, dark hair. He cannot see her face, but he knows he is holding Katie. Here, inside the womb. They are together. They are falling.

He closes his eyes. He opens his mouth. He knows this is the end. He pauses.

He thinks of Stacy and the kids, but only briefly. They will be better off without him. He knows this without reservations. This is the gift that depression gives us. It tells us who we really are. And who we are not.

And then he inhales. One by one, all the lights inside of him go out.

CHAPTER 28:

Stacy is overcome with a feeling of dread. She awakens in the night and feels that terrifying sensation that something has happened. She checks on the kids, who are sleeping. She makes sure they are breathing and goes down to the kitchen where they are staying at her sister Ellen’s house.

Her heart is racing. She is relieved to be in a house where there is alcohol, and she pours herself a glass of wine. It calms her a little, but she still has this awareness that something bad has happened.

Phillip.

She has wavered between anger and concern, between questioning his feelings for that woman and questioning her own decision to take the kids away from him. She knew he was hurting, and she walked away. In trying to protect herself, she had left him totally alone.

She finishes her glass of wine, throws on a pair of yoga pants, and grabs the car keys.

As she drives, Stacy thinks about how much of her life she has invested in this man. How much he has changed. She remembers the first time he told her that he struggled with depression, during that first year they were dating, and she wonders now whether she really knew what she was signing up for. But love is love. Can we really control how we feel about someone? We accept them for all of their idiosyncrasies. We accept them as they are. At some point, we stop trying to change them. They are all we want them to be, even if they are not as we had hoped they would be.

The lights are on at the house, but he does not open the door. It is after 2 a.m.; he is probably sleeping. She uses her key and goes to the bedroom. He is not there. He is nowhere.

Her heart sinks. She goes to the garage. His car is gone.

She wonders if he is out with a woman. With that woman. Goddamn them. Is this all that was? A goddamn affair? Right there, in front of her eyes? Had she been too trusting?

Had she put too much of her faith in him? In this man who was a stranger to her 20 years ago. And now he was her entire world. She had given up everything for him. But had she ever really known him? Was he a stranger to her all along?

When Stacy was a teenager, she heard Stevie Nicks singing the song “Landslide” for the first of what has probably been a thousand times. She remembers hearing the line, “I’m afraid of changing/because I built my life around you,” and thinking: *I will never be that. I will never build my life around a single person.* And then she met Phillip.

Her mind goes to the darkest place. His depression. She never understood it. Not really. She never felt sad like that, even after her own mother died. Bad things happen, and you carry on. But Phillip was not wired like that. Not all of the time. There were periods when he could not pull himself out of the sadness, even when nothing bad was happening.

She returns to the kitchen and fumbles for her phone. She sends him a text. She waits. She thinks about the time, the *one* time, that he confided in her that he was having suicidal thoughts. This was when the kids were young. About a year after he got sober. At the time, she had taken it personally. As if his happiness was her responsibility, and she had somehow let him down.

Now, all these years later, the guilt returns. Taking the kids was not an easy decision. But it was a necessary one. To protect herself. To protect the kids. Their kids. Her kids. What if they don’t have a father? Not anymore?

She chases the thought away. Looks at her phone. Why doesn’t he fucking respond?

Stacy does a quick once-around, making sure there is no alcohol in the house. Everything looks intact. Most of the rooms look untouched, and she assumes he has not left his bed. At least not while he was in the house. Where the hell could he be?

She calls his phone. It goes straight to voicemail. She wishes she had put a tracker on it. But she is not that kind of wife. She has never been that kind of wife. She preferred trust. She chose trust. They both did. Maybe that was her downfall. Maybe when he first told her about this woman, this random woman from work, maybe she should have lashed out in a jealous rage. Is that what women are supposed to do?

She calls his phone again. Straight to voicemail. She texts Ellen. Tells her she can’t find Phillip. That she is going to stay here until he shows up.

If he’s not back by morning, she will call the police. Report him missing.

She hopes it’s not too late.

X X X X

Twelve miles away, Barbara Avery is in the arms of a man. A new man. One who makes her feel safe. For now.

She barely knows this man, and he will be out of her life in a matter of months, if not weeks, if not days.

But tonight, he is making her feel something like love. What she knows of love, not what she hopes it to be.

That kind of love is something she stopped chasing long ago. She will not settle for anything less. And so this love is the only kind of love that she will crave.

Love. Such a silly goddamn word.

It can mean so many things.

But mostly, it means nothing at all.

Her new lover drifts back to sleep, and Barb lifts his arm gently and slips out of bed. She hates cuddling and can’t sleep when someone else is nearby.

She walks barefooted through the carpeted hallway of his apartment and pauses at a painting on the wall. It looks like a hot mess of nothing, but she stops and stares. She sees lightning clouds. Then smoke from a burning fire. Then she sees her mother’s face, twisted up with anger.

Barb thinks of something that man Phillip said about art once, back in the art gallery, back before any of this happened.

*Two people can look at the exact same thing and see two totally different things.*

X X X X

Two bodies float ashore at the Ballard Locks three days later. The story breaks that a murder-suicide has happened, that the suspect was out on bail for a sexual assault. The victim was a 20-year-old woman who had recently been diagnosed with cancer.

During the initial press briefing, the chief of police looks out at the row of cameras and says: “What kind of a monster would do this?”

X X X X

Somewhere above the city, an airplane descends on the way to landing safely. Approximately 200 people are aboard the plane, although outside of families that travel together, they do not know each other and do not speak to one another. More than 1,000 such flights will land at the same airport today. More than 1,300 major airports exist in the United States. That’s 260 million people flying, in this country, every single day. And yet most of these people travel alone.

They listen to music through headphones. They stare at their phones. They get lost in fictitious stories.

They lose themselves in these stories, hoping to find a hero.

Of all these daily flights, a very small percentage end up in fatal crashes. When they do, hundreds of complete strangers end up dying in the same place, at the same moment.

For the rest of us, we die alone.

Most of us die alone.

Who will tell our story? Who will make us the hero? Of our own story.

CHAPTER 29:

For the first day at her new job, Barbara Avery picks out a purple blouse she had only worn once before. It gives off the professional-but-fun vibe. She liked the woman who interviewed her for the position, but she sets low expectations because she rarely gets along with her coworkers.

As she stares into the mirror, she can see the lines of age beginning to form on her face. In many ways, Barb is in her prime. *It’s all downhill from here*, her mother used to say when she was in her 30s.

Paula Avery had both of her girls when she was young. By the time Paula was 30, Barb was already in middle school. And here is Barb, now a couple of months after her 31st birthday, not only without kids but not even close to having them. Or wanting them.

As she stares into the mirror, poking at her face, Barb is struck by how young of a mother she had. How unprepared Paula Avery was for such a heavy role. What’s that saying? We do the best with what we have?

Except Barb isn’t going to let her mother off that easily. She made the decision to have a child. Barb didn’t decide to come into this world when she did, how she did.

She begins applying makeup and sees the redness in her eyes. Were those tears welling up?

“You pussy,” Barb whispers, applying eye shadow. And then she says: “Fuck her, that piece of shit.”

Barb hasn’t spoken to her mother in, what, six years? Maybe seven? The last time they were together, Barb told her mother that she never wanted to have kids. Told her she never wanted to fuck them up the way Paula fucked her up.

“Paula,” she called her. Not “Mom.”

As far as she was concerned, Barb never had a mom.

During her teen years and early 20s, she sought out that love from toxic people. She allowed people to walk over her. To violate her boundaries. That’s what unloved people do. That’s what hurt people do.

She finishes getting ready and heads off for her new job. As she locks her apartment door and makes her way toward the car, she looks over her shoulder.

That’s what hurt people do.

She drives and hears a song come on her stereo. A singer she likes, a guy named Noah Kahan. She introduced that guy Phillip to him. A guy she barely remembers now.

There is a line in the song, “If we get too close, and I’m not what you wanted …” When she played it for Phillip once, she thought the line was from her perspective. She thought Phillip might turn out like all those people in her life, people who were supposed to care for her, people like her mom, her dad, every female friend she had. She was never what they wanted.

But now, a year later, she hears that lyric through Phillip’s perspective. She recalls a time when they were out having coffee, his self-deprecating sense of humor. “You don’t know me that well,” he had said, “or you wouldn’t be having coffee with me.”

She can see his face now. Most of the men she has punished, they become invisible to her. But not this one. His face was all over the news for a few days last year.

But now, she can see his face clearly, looking at her. There, in that coffee shop. His eyes giving off what she thought at the time was physical attraction. But what she can see now was love. Not that romantic kind of love, but that unconditional love someone has when they truly care about someone.

The love a friend has. For another friend.

Friends don’t give up on each other. Friends stay by each other’s side when they are acting a fool. When things get heavy. When everyone else leaves them.

“That’s all he wanted,” she realizes now, saying the words out loud as she listens to this song. “He just wanted a friend.”

A friend she could never be.

*We do the best with what we have.*

She feels something on her cheek. She swats at it, expecting a bug.

She looks at her hand. A smear of moisture.

A tear.

“Goddamnit,” she whispers. She hasn’t cried in years.

And she won’t let herself do it now.

She turns the radio up. Turns on some grunge music. From when she was a kid. She sings at the top of her lungs. One song after another. Keeping one eye on Google maps.

All the way to the office. Her new office. Her first day.

She pulls into a parking spot, checks her hair and sparse makeup, and heads inside. Her mascara is smeared. Goddamn him. For making her feel.

She checks in with the receptionist, who greets her cheerily. She asks for directions to her new office. She heads down the hallway. She passes a break room. She sees a man in there. Tall. African-American. He has a pleasantness to him. Their eyes meet.

She steps into the break room.

“Well, hello,” she says. “Who are you, and how do you like working here?”