

We stand outside on the patio and look up at the sky, waiting for the snow to fall. The moon's hidden behind all the clouds and everything is white, even though nothing has fallen yet. I purse my lips into a circle and exhale steam.

She tells me the snow will start any minute. "Just watch," she says, and she never stops staring up.

Her face is angular: round eyes and high cheekbones and thick lips. She closes her eyes and breathes, and I do it, too. I smell burning wood and, faintly, pine. It's crisp, cool.

"I can smell it," I say. "It smells like snow."

She smiles and touches my hand; she traces the lines in my palm with her fingers, presses the pads, soft but firm against my skin. I open my eyes but don't look at her; I look at the needles on the pine trees and the fluffy, round clouds migrating across the sky and the dull moon shadows of the houses around us. Her touch tickles, but I don't want her to stop. I want to lace my fingers between hers and hold on but I can't get my fingers to move. They're frozen already.

I remember the first time Caroline told me she loved me. We stood on the porch and watched the leaves fall off the trees. She said, "I fucking love you." She held my hand and squeezed it and said, "I just wanted you to know." Her hand was warm and strong and fit in mine.

She moves her fingers down my palm and slides them between my fingers. "I'm going to Asheville this weekend," she says. She looks away from the white sky to me. I can feel her eyes bouncing over me but I'm making myself study the moving clouds because I don't trust myself to look at her and I can't look.

"But it's Christmas." I say it to the moon; the clouds move to let more light out and it's full. The face in it stares down at us. I can't quite make out the expression.

Caroline says, "I know. That's why I'm going."

The air freezes my lungs from the inside out but I keep breathing it.

Asheville is where Caroline's friend lives. She goes all the time to see her friend and she always tells me their stories, short little blips of scenes I picture in my head and can't escape because they get caught inside my brain and ricochet off the walls like pinballs. They're full of smoke haze and sweat and body heat and they're heavy.

Caroline lets go of my hand and the cold air hits my palm. "Shit, it's cold," she says.

The clouds cover up the moon again. The face disappears. I breathe in, hold the air until it burns and turn to look at her. Her hands are tucked in her armpits and she's shivering and I want to take her inside and wrap her in a blanket and hold her body against mine.

"How long will you be there?" I ask her.

Her big eyes look at me and I can see my breath--I know it's freezing, I know I'm freezing--but everything goes warm. "Just the weekend, probably. We can still have our holiday friend date." She smiles at me, small and assuring. My muscles are frozen; my skin is on fire. Caroline shivers again.

"Let's go inside," I say. "It never snows before Christmas."

She nods and follows me into the white light and the white noise: the refrigerator running, the warm air flowing through the vents. We walk to my bedroom--small, barely furnished--and crawl under my blanket. The thin mattress carries the vibrations from her shivering over to me and I think about what stories we could have to invade my sleep, about body heat and sweaty skin and white snow against a dark window.

Caroline brushes the back of my hand with her fingers, so lightly I can barely feel it. I wonder for a second if she means to or if she's just gone numb from the cold; I wonder for a

second if I'm actually feeling her touch or if I've just gone numb from the cold. She slides her hand into mine and squeezes.

"You're freezing," I tell her.

"One good way to fix that," she says. "Can I stay here tonight?"

She is radiant and I am on fire. Her face is inches from mine and I see dark and light flecks of blue in her eyes, freckles dusted over her cheeks, smooth lips. I think about body heat and sweaty skin and white snow against a dark window. I see Caroline with an arm wrapped underneath mine, gripping my shoulder and I see her eyes closed and her back arched. It all bounces against the walls of my brain.

"Of course," I say and I am going to swelter. My organs are knots, my cheeks are furnaces, radiating enough heat to warm the whole damn house.

Caroline smiles at me and squeezes my hand. "I'm just starting to warm up. Thanks for not making me go back out into the cold."

Caroline tells me goodnight and she slips her hand away.

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Last summer Caroline asked me, "Wanna go canoeing?" so we fought off bugs and humidity and July heat and strapped her canoe to the roof of her car.

Caroline's car smelled like old cigarettes, a little stale and a little earthy. I rolled down a window and inhaled pine. Caroline rolled the tune dial in her fingers until she found a station she liked. She tapped out a beat on my knee and I wanted to slide my hand into hers and hold onto it. I willed myself to do it, to move and reach out and do it. What if I grabbed her hand and she held mine back?

What if she didn't?

My hands were together in my lap when Caroline pulled us into a parking space.

We unloaded the canoe and dragged it down to the lake. I followed her down to the water and helped her push the boat in. The lake was murky, warm by the shore and suddenly cool where the bed plunged away below us. I climbed in the front of the canoe and Caroline climbed in the back and we paddled away from the shore, away from the trails and hikers and cyclists.

Near the middle of the lake, in a bend surrounded by dense, green forest, I heard Caroline moving around behind me. I turned to look at her and found she'd taken her shirt off. Her breasts hung lower than I thought they would, almost to her waist. Her nipples sat just off to the sides, a dark, rosy pink. "It's too hot today," she said. "Fuck it."

I remembered then I wasn't supposed to look, and I turned back around and told myself I couldn't look back anymore. I closed my eyes and saw Caroline's breasts etched there, so I opened my eyes again and looked out across the lake instead.

"You should take your shirt off too," Caroline said.

I thought about doing it, of rowing across the lake shirtless with her. I thought about her touching my back, kneading it. I thought about her eyes raking over me, deciding I was *too*: too small, too lopsided, too pale. My fingers curled around the hem of my tank top, but I left it there, hanging heavy over my shoulders.

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Caroline's asleep on her side, wrapped in my blanket on my mattress in my bedroom. She fits. She breathes and I watch the blanket rise and fall. I touch my fingertips to the small of her back, light enough I hope she won't feel it. Her spine juts out and I run my finger along it over her shirt, carefully.

She shivers and shifts. I move my hand away, but want to make her do it again.

She reaches her arm back, grabs my wrist, and pulls my arm over her waist. She holds my hand there, against her stomach. I lay absolutely still. I don't want to move. I don't want to break whatever's happening. I feel the warmth of her stomach under my palm and her palm on top of my hand. I feel her lungs expand and contract, expand and contract.

"What time is it?" she mumbles. Whatever was happening breaks. She turns around, props herself up on an elbow to look at me. I pull my hand back and tuck it underneath myself. Sunlight filters in through a crack in the curtains and washes over her, makes her golden.

I smile at how her hair moves in different directions at once and tell her good morning.

Caroline blinks and looks at me, raises an eyebrow.

"Ten o'clock," I say, processing what she asked.

She rubs her eyes. "I should start packing." Caroline sits up, pushes the blanket off herself and stands, pulling on blue jeans over her underwear.

"I've got cereal," I tell her. "Or we can go to the diner."

Caroline laces up her shoes and smiles at me over her shoulder. "Don't be sad," she says.

My cheeks radiate again. "I'm not sad."

"I'm back in three days. We'll do dinner." She grabs my hand and squeezes it and walks out of the room, leaving me in a puddle of sunlight.

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Three days later there's still no snow. Just a darkening sky and air that bites into skin and dormant trees. Mashed potatoes sit on the stovetop, the granules I poured out of the box slowly mixing with hot water to become something edible. A small ham sits in the oven, finishing up--I hope--because Caroline should be here soon. Every car door catches my breath; every shimmer of headlights catches my eye and I peer out of the window, but they all keep going.

My phone buzzes on the counter--it's her.

"Hi." My voice is nothing but breath.

"Hey!" There are other voices in the background, several of them, mixed in with broken up music. They're laughing. "You have to come over!"

The last time I went somewhere with Caroline it was to the mountains, in summer, when the trees all had green leaves. We hiked the trail to Middle Falls because she wanted to swim and we thought it would be less crowded than Lower Falls, where the water pooled and parents took their children; and Upper Falls, where there was no pool, just a hundred feet of water straight down. When we got there we were the only ones, and she looked back at me and smiled and told me to come on. The rocks made a platform underneath the falls, and she climbed up to it and I followed her. We stood under the water until our hair and clothes were soaked through. The dirt squished beneath my feet. I curled my toes in it; I felt the grit thick between them. Caroline's nipples showed, pink and erect through her shirt.

Caroline sings in my ear, "Pleeeeeease? There's beer and a band!"

I turn off the oven and grab my coat on the way out. It's freezing outside. I miss daylight and trees having leaves and flowing waterfalls.

I hear Caroline's house before I see it: music and chatter and laughter; noise. Inside, the temperature goes up at least ten degrees. Bodies are packed in, sliding against each other, and it smells like beer and sweat and incense and weed. I hug the edge of the room and try to dodge the bodies, but someone grabs a handful of my shirt and I feel lips brush my ear.

"I was starting to think you'd ditched me," Caroline says into my ear. She's yelling and still I barely hear her. "I'll get us some drinks," she says, and she worms her way through the crowd to the kitchen.

Every kick of the bass drum vibrates my skeleton. The guitars scream with the singer.

Caroline comes back with gin and tonics, one for each of us. I sip at mine: it's a glass of bitter bubbles. Caroline drinks hers like water.

All I can do is watch her drink. Around us people are buzzing, moving to the music, slow at first and then gradually grabbing the tempo and swaying to it. After every drink, the gin shines on Caroline's lips until she licks it off.

"Come on," she says, grabbing my arm. "Let's dance."

I say, "No, no, I don't want to," but I let her pull me into the circle.

She holds the gin with one hand and my waist with the other. She dips her hips low and out and grinds against my leg and I do it back and the room is a fucking furnace, or is it just us? She puts her face near my neck so I feel her breath there, hot from all the liquor and the dancing. I feel Caroline against my thigh and I want to wrap my arms around her. I want to put my hands *everywhere*.

I move my hands to her waist and slide them up up up, but she slips away when my thumbs get near her tits. Her lips brush my neck as she moves, looks behind my back, and she says, "Holy shit!"

Caroline runs past me, shoving herself between drunk bodies to cross the room and I know where she's going before she gets there. I see the girl with the pixie cut and the tattoos and I know she's the one from Asheville. I stand in a sea of nameless bodies, transfixed. Caroline slides into the girl's open arms and the girl holds her and there's bile in my throat.

I leave my drink on a table and weave my way to the bathroom and lean over the sink, gripping the yellowed porcelain. I want to turn on the faucet and put in the plug and watch until everything spills over the sides. I grip the porcelain and suck air down deep into my lungs and close my eyes to help hold the air in. The music seeps under the door, rattles the mirror on the wall.

A few minutes later, back in the living room, Caroline stands with her leg between her Asheville friend's legs. I sit on the couch, alone, and watch her until she sees me. I try to look away, but I'm not fast enough. When I look back up, Caroline's on her way to me, smiling, carrying a glass I assume is bourbon. She sits beside me, smiles, offers me her glass. I sip at it and it burns, but it's sweet.

"Have you met Kat?" she asks.

The girl watches us from her chair. Does she feel the bile now? I shake my head, no.

"She's my friend from Asheville. She surprised me. Sweet, isn't it?"

I nod. Were the mashed potatoes turning into a congealed paste?

Caroline slides over, moves to climb on top of me and settles on my lap. I feel her chest pressing against mine and all I can think is *shit, where do I put my hands?*

"You're having fun, aren't you?" she asks.

Caroline shifts her weight and my eyes fall to her chest, to the gap between her shirt and her skin and onto her cleavage. I close my eyes and breathe in and say, "Shit," more to myself than to her.

When I open my eyes again she's smiling at me, a sideways sort of smile, and her eyelids look heavy. She smells sweet, like the bourbon. "Shit, what?" she asks. She dances her fingers over my shoulders and rests her hands there. I hold my breath and move my hands from my lap to her waist and pull her closer to me and she slides forward until her knees hit the back of the couch so we're as close as we can be.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask. I ask it before I look at her.

"Oh." She moves so our skin has less contact. She says, "I don't really kiss my friends. That could be weird, you know?" Caroline's breasts want to spill out of her shirt.

I say okay and I take my hands off her hips. My skin tingles from how hot it is, how humid. All the body heat. All the sweat. I want to peel away everything. I don't want to be touched. Caroline's body is heavy on my legs.

Caroline smiles and leaves me on the couch. I sit there a while longer, watching everyone grind together in what melds into a chain, dry humping that circles all the way around the room from the center to Caroline, until the party's over. When it's time to go I squeeze through the bodies, feel their moisture against my skin, and I get my coat. Across the room, Caroline kisses Kat.

Back at my house, in my bedroom, I think about Caroline's body beneath mine, her fingers wrapped in my hair and digging against my back. I think about pressing my lips against her neck, biting the skin and leaving bright red bruises there, symbols to the world that she is mine. I fuck my hand and imagine it's her, warm and smooth and wet.

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Last summer we went back to that lake, but without Caroline's canoe. We stood on the shore and baked in the sun. We were in a little cove, surrounded on three sides by trees, away from the main trails.

Caroline looked at me, smiled, and lifted her shirt over her head. She stripped her clothes down until she was naked, and her hips swayed when she walked down to the water and stepped in. She looked back at me, dirt swirling around her ankles where she kicked it up. "Come on," she said.

She bent down to wet her hands, splash her face. Her back curved over. I could see every vertebrae, reminding me she was human.

I saw my fingers dancing over the bones, moving out to the sides and pressing down harder against her back, against her shoulders. Gripping and rubbing and wet. I saw myself making deep scratches in her skin, over and over, and I saw us sinking down--

I took off my clothes too, and she stood up and stared at me.

We waded out past where the water was warm. Into the pockets of cool where the lake bed below us plunged down. Caroline's breasts looked like buoys as she floated away from me.

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In the morning when I still haven't heard from Caroline I pull my jacket back on and climb into my car and head toward her house. Driving alone in the winter is simultaneously exciting and depressing. It's exciting because even though everything is dead, it's still beautiful; depressing because even though everything is beautiful, it's dead. Naked trees line the road, leading me across town to Caroline's house, the one with the houseplant freezing outside, on the porch underneath the doorbell that had never, ever worked.

Caroline opens the door and smiles when she sees me. The bags under her eyes puff out. Her hair goes in a million different directions at once. She says, "Hey. Come inside." I want to smooth her hair back the way it's supposed to go.

I follow her to the bedroom and she gets in bed and pulls the covers up, pats the mattress beside herself. I tell her, "I can't stay. I just wanted to see how you were."

Caroline sighs but stands back up, smiles. "It's really nice of you to take care of me," she says. She smells sweet. I feel nauseous.

I watch her watch me, watch her lick her lips and brush her fingertips over my hand--quick, easy. I watch her blink, slowly, and she leans in to kiss me. Her lips brush against my nose and

top lip, cold and wet. I take a step back from her but I still smell the liquor.

"You're still drunk."

She says, "So?" She leans in again, stumbles, and I steady her.

I tell her there's aspirin on the counter and I leave.

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I don't see Caroline for a week. When she finally calls me all she says is, "I'm having a party tonight. You should come over."

When I get there the door's unlocked so I let myself inside. The house is small but packed full of people, just like last time. A hundred little sheep in a little hellhole. They all talk too loudly and take up too much space. I squeeze past them and I want to shove them all.

I find Caroline in the kitchen, sitting on the counter. Kat stands between her legs, groping them. They both look at me and Caroline smiles like nothing's wrong. "You came!" she says. She slides past Kat and hugs me. She smells like alcohol and cigarette smoke coats her hair. Where do I put my hands? I'm still deciding when she pulls back and asks me if I want a drink.

Kat and I stare at each other. "We've got PBR and Bud Light and Milwaukee's Best," she says. I wonder who the hell she means by "we."

"No," I say, to Caroline. "I don't want a drink." I can see her fucking nipples.

The party goes until three in the morning. I watch Caroline and Kat dancing, grinding and touching and gasping against each other. I watch them until Caroline grabs Kat's hand and slides her fingers between Kat's fingers and leads her off, out of the living room. I wait a couple minutes and I follow them. Past all the drunks, down the hallway with dirt scuffed on the walls. Up the stairs and to the closed bedroom door.

They're playing music on top of the song going downstairs, but I can still hear them breathing. I hear the moaning and I know it's Caroline. It sounds like Caroline.

I remember the first time Caroline told me she loved me. We stood on the porch and watched the leaves fall off the trees. She said, "I fucking love you." She held my hand and squeezed it and said, "I just wanted you to know."

I remember feeling the calluses on her hand.