

It's been three weeks since I've been to the house.

I don't know why I expected it to look different; it's looked the same ever since we bought it twelve years ago, aside from the occasional bicycle leaning against the porch bench and the Japanese maple twisting up from the middle of the front yard, delicate powdery golden flowers in full bloom.

"Do you think it'll live?" she asked when we got the maple as a sapling. We crouched beside each other, scooping dewy earth out of a brick-enclosed circle of soil.

"Dunno," I replied. "If not, we'll get another one. No big deal."

"I *refuse* to let it die."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Her brow was furrowed in the same way it was when she made macaroons for the first time. They turned out hard as rocks, but, goddamn, she made them. "This sucker will outlive both of us if I have anything to say about it. Just you wait."

It certainly has outlived us, in a way. It's thriving, roots having cracked their brick enclosure and burst up like breaching whales in a billowing sea of windblown grass. It extends its knotted branches almost the entire length of the small yard, mocking me with the indulgent nature of its prosperity.

This isn't how things were supposed to be.

"Didn't think you'd come," she says when she opens the door. I didn't even have the chance to knock.

The couch is the same, too. The coffee stain from that one time Moose jumped into my lap and jostled the mug, the loose threads at the seams I plucked at the night I was caught. It's a

godawful ugly couch, a hand-me-down from a pushy mother-in-law, the color of dried dogshit. We could never get rid of the damn thing. It was a gift, after all, something my mother-in-law expected to see every holiday they visited the house. “You should take your Christmas photos on that couch I gave you,” I could hear my in-law squawking, even now. So we did, because that’s how families work. You put up with things to keep the peace.

I hated that couch, but we watched cheesy Nicholas Sparks films on it, the ones I didn’t want to admit I enjoyed. We made love on that couch. I’m pretty sure we conceived Bella on that couch. And here I am, sitting on that same couch, the place where it all started and the place where it will all end.

Bastard of a couch.

“Me neither,” I answer. I’m viscerally aware of my fingers once again plucking at the loose threads. The action doesn’t offer the comfort that it used to.

She has her hair up in a messy bun, no makeup. She looks beautiful like that. Does she know that this is my favorite look for her? Simple, lazy, coffee mug cradled in both hands and sweatpants swallowing her form as she sits cross-legged on the decidedly less ugly easy chair across from me, one pant leg hiked up above her ankle, barefoot and relaxed. She could just as easily be enjoying our usual Sunday routine, the kids away at their grandparents, the sun hanging at its highest point in the sky, veins drinking in the caffeine after we tumbled around in the sheets, taking our time, giggling, like those days in high school when we fucked in the backseat of her car behind a Wendy’s. I don’t know exactly when it became me just going through the motions. Pretending. At the time, I’d told myself that it was nothing, just a lull, typical after a decade of marriage, something she probably didn’t even notice. As I sit on the couch, the coffee

table we bought together filling the miles between us, I know now. I know she knew all along. She just started going through the motions, too.

“Have the kids asked about me?”

“Sammy, yes,” she says. It comes out as a sigh. I notice the heaviness under her eyes, the way they linger on everything but me. “Bella... she knows something’s up.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“Not yet.”

“What was your excuse?”

She pursed her lips, taking her time. Weighing her words, I guess. “Business trip.”

“Ah.”

“She wasn’t convinced.”

“Yeah. She’s always been too perceptive.”

Heavy silence yawns between us. I pull a thread out of the cushion and let it flutter to the floor. Someone else would be doing the same thing eventually. I know it. She’s too pretty to be alone for very long. Who would she choose? Someone like me? I hope not. Shit, for both our sakes I hope not.

“They’ll be home in about an hour,” she suddenly says, “if you want to see them.”

“How will this work?” I ask, because I know if I don’t we’ll just sit here forever, me picking at the couch, her staring at the floor, or the too-expensive china vase, or the years-old family picture above the mantel.

She sighs—a gust of wind, a release of all the hopes still residing deep within her, hopes that what we used to have could be saved. I know, because I feel it, too. “Joint custody, probably. There’s no animosity between us, so that’s the biggest hurdle cleared, at least.”

“Do we sell the house?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes lift and she looks over my shoulder at the Japanese maple through the window rattling disapprovingly at the glass. “They grew up here. It’s their home.”

“You can stay here, then. With them. I already have my own place anyway. I just need to clear out my stuff.” *It’s the least I can do*, I want to add, but don’t. Better not to bring that up.

She bites her lip in that way she does when she’s trying not to cry. “Yeah,” she whispers.

More silence. She takes a deep, quivering breath, seems to compose herself a bit. I’ve always admired that about her, how strong she can be.

“You still with him?”

“Hm?”

“Brian,” she says. “Are you still with him?”

And, fuck, that’s when it all comes back, playing over and over again in my mind like a bad song that’s just catchy enough to linger. I’ll never forget their faces, both of them, as she flicked on the lights in the living room, stared at that damn horrible couch. I’ll never forget the disgust in Brian’s voice as he flung himself away from me, bare-chested and breathless, as he exclaimed, “*You have a wife?*”

“No,” I reply as I realize I’ve been quiet for too long. “No, um, he’s gone.”

“Oh,” she says, a hopeful note in her voice and—*No, no, you deserve someone better, not me*, I want to tell her, but it hurts. “Are you with anyone else?”

I swallow. “Yeah. His name’s Frank. He might move in soon. With me.”

I expect her to excuse herself to get more coffee so I won’t see her cry. Maybe she’ll ask me to leave and come back another time. Instead, she looks directly at me, her deep brown eyes wet and desperate, carrying everything I know I can’t fix. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Damn. I knew it would come to this, but I don’t have an answer, not one that would make her feel any better, at least. “I didn’t want to ruin what we had. Our family and—”

“Did you ever really love me?”

“*What?*”

“You loved me, right?” She licks her lips and her eyes lower to examine her coffee. “At least in the beginning?”

She looks so small. God. “Of course I did. All of it was real. And...” I pause, considering whether I should say this, even if it is true. “I still love you. I’ll always love you. It’s just that—”

“I’m not right for you. No woman ever was or will be, not even me,” she cuts in. She takes a deep breath and sets her mug on the table. “I guess I get it. Does he make you happy?”

My tongue feels like it’s made of paper, dry and flimsy. “Yes.”

She offers me a sad little smile. “That’s good. I’m happy for you.”

“I want you to be happy, too,” I tell her on the porch with the bicycle leaning against the bench. The one I taught Sammy to ride not too long ago, when I thought things were fine, but weren’t. “Okay?”

She only smiles at me and I walk back to my car. On the way, I pluck a burning-red maple leaf from a branch pointing at me, as if in accusation. “*No big deal,*” the tree mocks, its shadow somehow longer now, though the sun hasn’t moved. “*No big deal.*”