

## **The Absence of Something**

### **Part 1**

#### **Chapter 1**

Izabella enjoyed watching.

The act provided her with some fulfillment. From her living room window, she was the secret spectator of strangers' lives, watching as they moved along the street. She could tell just by their stride how their day went and where they were headed. As the sun fell below the skyline, she finished a bottle of red pouring her last glass bringing a slight sadness as this had become routine. Unbuttoning her shirt she was still dressed in her respectable attire made up of a blazer, slacks, button-up, and heels. With her feet, she pushed off her heels rubbing her callous feet wincing at the sight. Sneakers would be a preferable alternative, but given her position dressing the part was an unwritten requirement. One she had grown used to as it was apparent the world doesn't work well for those who lack appearances, especially women.

As it grew darker outside, her reflection became more vivid revealing a woman home all alone. If she could even call it that. To her, a home had pictures of family, friends, and pets plastered on its walls with the fur left on fabrics by passing dogs, footprints printed on the floor, and items misplaced in harmonious chaos. This was just space with blank walls and stale air, that housed furniture all of which she didn't even pick herself. She hired an interior designer to redecorate when she moved in with hopes of making it feel like a home, handing her a magazine that showed a family sitting on the couch in a beautifully decorated french contemporary living room. Now sitting on that same exact couch she didn't feel the anticipated connection as she rubbed her hand across the fabric realizing nobody had ever sat on it. There were no imprints, misshaped cushions, or stains. It was a blank canvas. Lifting her wine glass she took one last sip and spilled its contents onto the fabric. *There*. She smiled contently.

Watching as the red liquid bled deeply into the white fabric, her phone buzzed against the coffee table. She picked it up reading a text from Florance. *Drinks at 9?* Looking through the conversation she realized she had left her on read with a text that was sent months prior. *Thinking about you*. She sat back on her couch staring into the distance, if she chose to go for drinks she wanted a fun time, not anything serious. She twisted her wine glass at its stem looking back at the red stain, but then again there was nothing for her here. She texted back. *Okay*.

She left her hollow glass on the table and headed to the bathroom where she washed off her makeup. The water on her skin provided a sense of relief. She never liked the way makeup created a second layer between her and the world covering her face with a false complexion. Although many women felt more secure with it on, she felt like a fool. Only really applying it to meet the standards created by other women in the industry. Even though she never thought she needed it, makeup told the world that she was healthy and valued herself enough to put in the effort. Wiping her face with a towel she stared down in disgust at the colors that rubbed off on its

fabrics. Black. Beige. Pink. She applied moisturizer and mascara carefully navigating the wand with her hand. *There*. She looked into her mirror seeing her real face.

Now standing in front of the grand mirror in her bedroom, she attempted to close the latch to her necklace each time growing frustrated as it kept falling out of her butterfingers before eventually closing. She fixed the drop necklace to the front completing the outfit as she dressed in a maroon slip dress paired with a black leather jacket and boots. Taking one step back she looks at her whole outfit rubbing the necklace on her chest as it shone in the light. Her mother had given her the necklace and she felt closer to her when she wore it. Picking up her bag she texted Florance. *On my way*.

Outside her building, she could feel the warm summer air brushing against her skin and hear the shouting and yelling of people walking by. The Ophelia was a lounge where Florance and Izabella have frequently met for drinks in the past and it was only a few blocks down. As she navigated through the street she began to recall the last time she saw Florence.

It had been planned for weeks in a group chat literally named *barhopping*. They would all be in the city for the first time since college and collectively planned a six-bar tour of the lower east side. The night started strong with Florance enthusiastically ordering a round of shots, and it was probably the coke but she was convinced she could out-drink Izabella. Who was much taller than Florence. She still attempted, getting to their sixth shot which slightly impressed Izabella who was feeling the effects as Florence remained to appear sober. However, when she got up to go to the bathroom she fell straight to the floor and they had to carry her body into the cab.

Then there was a soft glow of white light shining on her boot prompting her to look up at the vertical theater sign that read *Ophelia*. On the exterior, the lounge was dressed in black moldings around the windows and door and she could hear the buzzing chatter from inside. She opened the double doors into the art deco-style lounge, which was surprisingly busier than normal as she navigated through people before spotting Florance at their usual spot. She hugged her from behind and sat beside her at the bar resting her bag on the granite table where she was showered in yellow light from the backsplash. It was honestly a sight, one would have to crane their neck to see the bottles on the top shelf and in the middle of it all, there was a peculiar white stuffed bird that perched watching over its occupants. She hugged Florance from behind who was sipping on a half-finished mojito.

“Sorry that I’m late.”

She waved her hand, “No, please I was enjoying myself.”

Florence had no problem doing things on her own, even if Izabella didn’t answer the text, there was no doubt that she would have come anyway. Even then passing the time by talking with strangers and asking about their lives, where they would show her pictures of their kids or exotic vacations. She would spend hours with them talking and ordering more drinks. At the end of the night, they would ask for her number which she would make up even if they were nice.

“How are you?”

“I’m good. I got a new job. Marketing for Pierpoint.”

“Really.” Izabella raised her eyebrows.

Pierpoint had been firm in direct competition with her own. Lumasoft and Pierpoint both specialize in data analytics, and to many investors, her company had the technological advantage, but Pierpoint had the reputation. Unlike Pierpoint, their decisions depended on machine learning instead the traditional consulting route. More than anything there had been an ongoing ethics battle on wall street as people needed to decide whether they trusted machines or people more.

“I know, but I needed a job.”

Izabella pinched the bridge of her nose, “I could have literally given you a job.”

“I just didn’t want to work under you and have it interfere with our relationship.”

The bartender dressed in a white button-up and suspenders leaned over the bar.

“What can I get for you?”

Izabella looked up at the bartender trying to remain calm, “Negroni. Please.”

“You got it.” Then he quickly disappeared behind the bar.

Izabella then turned to her friend, “You could have at least talked to me about it, instead of leaving me in the dark.”

“You left me in the dark. I haven’t seen you in months.”

*She was right. You’ve been absent.* Izabella didn’t know what to say as the drink arrived. She picked up the drink taking a swig, “I had work.”

“Okay sure.”

Izabella knew that she was lying to herself. Her job was hard and required a lot of hours but she still had time enough time to at least contact her friend. But she couldn’t, it was too much. Instead, she’d fill her days up with work even fixating on future plans after hours to keep her distracted. When that failed, she added wine to the routine. But she didn’t want to talk about that.

She took a deep breath, “Are you seeing anybody?”

Izabella instantly regretted asking that question. Florence was always seeing someone but not seeing them at the same time. Whenever she would explain her relations with people to Izabella it was hard for her not to get a migraine. She was conventionally pretty with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a petite build which is why it wasn’t surprising when guys would follow her around in college thinking they were a couple. Even she thought they were a couple. Only for Florence to go out with the most sketchy drug addicts that couldn’t hold a job, and when they cheated on her she would be heartbroken. Izabella could never understand why these people intrigued her but her feelings were still real and she’d sit there at a rundown dinner with Florence’s favorite waffles as she let out her heart.

Florence moved her head side to side, “a couple.”

*God no.* Izabella motioned for another drink.

She bit her lip and nodded as Florence explained the three–no five–people she was seeing. Looking at the stuffed bird that sat behind her bobbling head, she began to disassociate from thinking of the bird and what it had done throughout its natural life. *I bet it’s easier being a bird.* But soon enough Florence was going to ask for her advice.

“So what do you think I should do about Greg and Tom?”

“Here’s an amazing idea. Why don’t you just fuck them both?”

Florance looked down at her shoes with her finger at her mouth thinking for a moment, as Izabella’s drink was handed to her and she took a long sip.

“You know what you’re right,” and the conversation ended.

*Thank god.*

“How about you?”

“Naw.”

“Wait what happened to Jason.”

She had an intense three-week relationship with Jason. They had met on a dating app which Izabella had been seriously opposed to in the past preferring to meet people naturally. But as time passed it was clear the natural method didn’t work and matched with Jason who proudly stated on his profile that he was a nurse. The relationship started strong just after the first date they felt the connection. They would stroll around Washington square park and eat lunch as they people-watched, he’d hold her hand and kiss her forehead. Spending nearly every day together she’d smile seeing an extra toothbrush on her sink or an unwashed shirt on the floor that smelt of his cologne. But then, came an unbearable weight of sadness that made her too weak against gravity she lay in bed soaking her pillowcase in tears. He came over wondering why she hadn’t texted or called to find her in that state, he held her in his arms until she fell asleep. The next day he was gone with no text or call, she waited by her phone until he messaged her stating that she wasn’t emotionally ready for a relationship. It scared him, she scared him. She threw her phone at the wall and drank her favorite bottle.

Izabella looked out of the bar, “Um. Turns out he had this whole aminal fetish, specifically cats. He wanted me to wear ears and like meow and shit. ”

“Really!”

“Yeah, fucking weird.”

As Florence asked more questions, she looked out into the crowd of people, there was a group gathered around a table cheering and patting one guy’s back, a couple leaning against the wall holding hands and talking close, and ladies in a booth that laughed. Izabella then looked down the bar to find a man with curly blonde hair sitting alone, she caught her breath. Feeling her heart beat faster her body froze dropping her glass which caused people to turn their heads. She couldn’t think as her hands shook and her vision got blurry, Florence grabbed her arm and said something muffled in her ears. Grabbing her bag she turned toward the exit, the room’s light was over baring and made her dizzy as she searched for air. Feeling the metallic door handle she pushed out letting cool air into her lungs. She leaned against the wall and slowly slid to the floor feeling defeated. *When is this going to stop?* It had never happened at work but it did in other places such as the grocery store, the subway, and on the streets. Episodes where she lost complete control and was unable to think or move, scared the hell out of her. If it did happen at work, she feared what the board would think of having a CEO who had these episodes that lacked control, undoubtedly they would vote her out. Florence walked out of the looking around

before realizing she was on the floor and helped her up dusting off her dress and offering her a cigarette. She nodded placing it in her mouth as Florence lit it.

“Are you okay?”

She blew out smoke, “Yeah.”

“If you wanna call it a night...”

She looked at her shaking her head, “No.”

“Okay, then I’ll get the cab.”

Florence headed to the street to flag down a cab as she stood there feeling the smoke tickle the back of her throat before being released into the air in a grey cloud. She couldn’t let this episode derail the night, if she did it would then control her by dictating what she couldn’t do or where she couldn’t go.

A yellow cab stopped and she put out her cigarette.

## Chapter 2

Izabella looked out of the cab window close enough that the heat of her breath fogged the glass. She tilted her head up admiring the buildings that held scattered lights confined in square boxes wondering how it was to live in their world, what their thoughts were, and their struggles. Closing her eyes she would imagine herself in their shoes, perhaps they were with family having dinner or watching a movie on the sofa. She smiled.

Her concentration was broken by Florence's voice, "You know that I am here for you."

She placed her hand on Izabella's which she pulled away.

"When everything happened I just felt so bad..."

Izabella turned to her cutting her off, "We don't have to talk about it."

The cab stopped in front of a place with heavily graffitied walls and a teal metal door with a bouncer outside. Despite its appearances there had been a line of people stretched around the block. Florence had mentioned earlier that she knew a bartender working the current shift as she took Izabella by the hand and cut to the front of the line receiving glares from those waiting.

The bouncer let them in opening the door to a checkered tiled floor that read, *The Square*. Florence pushed her through velvet curtains and into a dark circus-themed club with a grand stage and banquettes situated at the edges of the room. A woman wearing a red dress hung from the ceiling in an aerial loop hanging from a single leg twirling in the air as people danced in the hallways some half-naked and others with masquerade masks. They sat in front of the stage as a burlesque dancer hung from fabrics attached from the ceiling weaving her body through in a controlled elegance. She was already swaying from the drinks they had earlier.

Florence turned to her, "I'm going to say hi to my friend. I'll be back."

She held up two thumbs up, "Okay."

Florence got out of the banquet and headed towards the bar. She was mystified by the chaos of it all, confetti fell from the ceiling reflecting from the many flashing lights as people danced flinging their limbs in the air with boundless energy. Typically a circus displayed tricks of animals, an elephant balancing on a tiny stool or a tiger jumping through a ring of fire, this was a circus of people.

Florence came back with two drinks and a friend. He had messy brown hair and wore a loose-fitting white shirt that was only buttoned up two times reeling his cheek covered with stick-and-poke tattoos. One of which printed *beer* over his left breast.

Yelling over the music she introduced him, "This is Alex."

He leaned over the table, "Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure."

They both look like they have done a few lines at the bar as Florence repeatedly wiped her nose and Alex fidgeted with a loose ring on his index finger engraved with a skeleton wearing a sombrero.

She took a sip from her drink placing it on the table, "How do you know each other?"

Florence and Alex look at each other confused, "Um. Through... friends?"

They were clearly not friends, "Mhm Okay."

He pointed at Florence and her, "How did you guys meet?"

"College."

"We were partners for a class."

Izabella scoffed, "More like I did all the work."

He took out a little baggie with white powder from his shirt pocket and placed it on the table using his phone to cut up lines with a black card before sliding it to Izabella.

She took the phone hesitantly, "This is good stuff right?"

He shook his head, "Of course not. We already took some."

She bent down plugging one of her nostrils with a finger snorting two lines. The power quickly turn into a sticky liquid that dripped down her throat as he shook her head and whipped her nose. Feeling like she had just been brought back to life, her heart rate pick up and her skin buzzed with excitement.

She slammed her hands on the table and leaned over, "Time to dance!"

Florence pointed a finger in the air and slurred, "You do that."

She jumped out of the booth dancing with a man dressed in a white Elvis-style jumpsuit masked with thick black eyeliner and short frosty blonde hair who smelt of sweat. Looking over at Alex laughing in the banquet as Florence fell over spilling her drink when suddenly the Elvis impersonator grabbed her by the cheeks and planted a kiss before disappearing into the crowd. She wiped his lipstick off her lips leaving a red stain on her hand and laughed. *What just happened?* She didn't give it much thought blaming it on the excitement of the night before picking up her drink from the table and looting Alex's baggie.

Moving deep into the crowd dressed in extravagant feathers and sparking sequin dresses, she looked up from the chaos to see the woman in the red dress hanging upside down reaching towards the crowd. This was what she was looking for the liberty of the moment, where people acted like animals unapologetically doing as they pleased. Opening the baggie she dug her knuckle scooping out little amounts, then bringing it to her nose leaving a streak. She rubbed her hands down her face feeling her fingertips stick onto her cold skin that belted with sweat. Holding her neck she choked on air as the pounding in her chest slowed. Her surroundings that moments before brought excitement appeared as a dizzy nightmare. She fell backward into Florence who held her up.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Izabella squirmed her body in an odd fashion.

Florence pulled back her hair, feeling her cold skin, "Alex!"

He turned around now facing Florence and Izabella, "What happened to her?"

"I don't know. Help me!"

Alex picked up her feet, and they carried her through the wall of strangers who looked down at Izabella.

They laid her on a banquet table with Izabella looking around in a confused daze trying to keep herself up with her weak muscles as she slid down. Her mind slowed not completely understanding what was happening as she focused her vision on Florence's face as she patted the

side of her cheek. Feeling her eyelids droop lower she could hear her own wheezing as her body fought for air. She reached for Florence's hand and she held tight. Alex ran back with a nasal spray and sat her up on the table as her head hung at her shoulders. He got close to her face yelling something that sounded muffled in her ears, then placing the spray into her nose and squeezing it. She took her last breath before collapsing on the table.



## Part 2

### Chapter 3

Izabella woke up to the smell of rubbing alcohol in an LED-lit room that buzzed with distant conversations and the sounds of beeping machines. She rubbed her eyes feeling a tug from her left arm realizing she was attached to an IV drip that hung clear liquid over her head. Keeping her arm straight she winced at the sight, the thought of its catheter rubbing along her vein disgusted her. Looking around her body she didn't appear to be hurt, but she knew she didn't wear the white wristband for no reason. *What happened?* All she could really remember was being back at The Square and then her memory seems to go black.

A soft voice from the corner said, "Hey."

Izabella turned her head to a brunette woman in the bedside chair wearing a cardigan. It was Anna, her sister-in-law and apparently her emergency contact. She was now stretching the way a cat would after a long nap. It looked like she had been sitting there for a while based on her tired eyes.

Anna caressed her hand staring at her with her warm brown eyes, "How are you feeling?"

Izabella looked at her confused, "What happened?"

"You overdosed honey."

"What!"

"That's what the doctor told me. They said it was Fentanyl."

Izabella leaned back into the hospital bed closing her eyes, *this can't be happening.*

"I had the doctors check you out and they said you were fine. They wanted you to rest."

She frantically patted around her body and then her bed, "Where's my phone."

Anna took it out of her tote bag and handed it to her. Izabella turned the phone on that lit up with a screen full of missed calls and notifications, "It's 1 pm!"

She rushed out of the hospital bed before Anna stopped her, "What are you doing? I have to go..."

Anna cut her off, "Just sit. I didn't want to bring it up but."

She lay back down as Anna handed her an envelope, "What is this?"

Anna remained silent. The envelope was already opened undoubtedly by Anna which meant she already knew. *This can't be good.* She unfolded the letter inside.

*Dear Izabella,*

*The board is sorry to hear about your emergency last night. However, due to the present circumstances, we have determined in a unanimous vote it would be best that you attend Dayview rehab in San Diego if you wish to continue your position as board chair.*

*Best regards,*

*The entirety of the board.*

She read it over twice with her mouth open as Anna began to explain, "I don't know how they found out. But, they had an emergency meeting and asked me to hand this envelope to you."

Izabella put down the paper. *How do they know? I know it was Ron. That piece of shit had been after my seat and this letter serves as a preliminary vote of no confidence.*

She turned to Anna shaking the paper, "How do they even know?"

Anna put her hands in the air, "Again, I have no idea."

*To send me to San Diego of all places. That prick.* Izabella disliked being in her hometown telling people that she didn't want to be recognized by old acquaintances, but in reality, there were too many memories. She put her hair up into a bun, it was a nervous habit she had which served as a way of regaining control then reading the letter again word for word this time bringing it closer to her face. *Fuck. This was really happening.* She placed her fingers in her mouth biting down on her nails. *They will never be able to ship the next product on time without me.*

Anna gently lowered Izabella's hands from her mouth and squeezed it, "It will be fine. I think going to Dayview will be beneficial for you. Take a few weeks off to relax. Doesn't that sound nice?"

Izabella looked at her unconvinced. If she wanted to "take a few weeks off to relax" she would have booked a ticket to Cancun. Where she could sit under a cabana as a waiter serves her passionfruit margaritas until she eventually passes out to the sound of those crystal waters washing up to the white shore. This was not a vacation, this was punishment.

A nurse with brunette hair and glasses came in, "I'm going to unhook your IV."

Izabella extended her arm and looked away and the nurse said, "So, you're a scaredy cat Frankinstine."

She gave her a side eye and Anna giggled. *She did not just seriously say that.*

The nurse ripped off her IV quite forcefully causing Izabella to wince in pain and then bandaged her arm. *That's going to leave a bruise.*

The nurse threw the IV in the trash and turned to them, "You are all set to go."

Anna said, "Thank you."

The nurse nodded disappearing in the doorway.

She threw her legs to the side of the bed, "I'm going to the restroom."

Anna got up from her seat, "Do you want me to go with you?"

She waved her hand and shook her head, "No. It's fine."

Izabella walked out the door to a medical bay of the hospital, where nurses drank jumbo-sized dunkin' Donuts coffee and spoke quickly into phones looking into a screen staff undisturbed by bypassing paramedics pushing incoming patients in a stretcher. Spotting a restroom, she navigated past the jungle of misplaced hospital beds with staring patients, the distant groaning from the rooms with curtains drawn, and the stream of physicians that bolted past her. By the time she held the latch to the thick wooden door, she felt overwhelmed by the chaos and slipped inside the solitude of silence and the strange coolness typical of bathrooms. She appeared to be alone with the sound of her footsteps echoing across the three-stall space fixed with a single sink. Looking into the mirror she barely recognized herself. Her mascara was smeared on her pale skin with bits stuck in her eye and her hair was matted in an impossible knot. She tried to rub off the smeared mascara but it only spread more leaving the inky black residue on her fingertips. Looking down at her trembling hands she couldn't believe what was happening. In what had happened. She stepped back with a shaky breath and pushed at her chest, *I almost died last night.* Never would she have ever thought she would be in such a situation, and all because of one small mistake. Now she was at risk of losing everything. Bringing her hands to her face she paced vigorously as tears flowed.

She screamed, “WHAT THE FUCK!”

Kicking into one of the stall doors, which surprisingly vibrated. She looked under seeing two feet and the sound of the toilet flushing, beginning to panic she looked for somewhere to go but the door latch slid open. She ran over to the sink pretending to wash her hands she watched from the mirror, as the older woman glared at her not breaking eye contact as she exited the bathroom even bumping into Anna at the door.

“Are you doing okay?”

Izabella just looked at her with red eyes and wet cheeks.

Anna walked over to her grabbing a paper towel, “I know it’s hard.”

She sniffled as Anna rinsed her face softly dabbing around her eyes and removing the black mess.

Anna had always been kind. The first time her brother introduced her, they had gone to a bar to get drinks and it had initially just been them at a table when two guys who were clearly drunk came over. They forced a conversation onto Izabella who clearly wanted to enjoy her drink in peace. However, they persisted in asking questions that she never wanted to answer as her brother idled. She knew it was these strangers' obnoxious way of flirting as Anna sat there crossing her arms and staring them down.

On the cab ride home, Anna broke her silence, “I don’t like how those guys treated your sister. You should have done something..”

Ivan turned to Anna, “Oh please it was just a bit of fun. She’s used to it anyways. Right?”

He tapped on Izabella’s shoulder and she looked over at Anna’s worried face.

She had been right, she had not enjoyed that encounter. She felt overwhelmed by the drunken strangers that pushed her buttons further with every new question that managed to be more degrading than the last. They had treated her like a mindless girl. Wanting so desperately to put them in their place she restrained herself knowing that it had been her brother’s favorite bar and she didn’t want Ivan to walk home with a black eye.

Izabella smiled, “It was fine.”

However, Anna wasn’t convinced.

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“We are done.”

Anna threw the napkins into the trash, “You should probably start packing. I’m driving you to JFK tomorrow.”

She stared at her for a moment before giving Izabella a hug, “It will get better.”

Anna began to walk when Izabella called out after her, “Anna.”

She looked back holding the door, “Thank you.”

Anna smiled and closed the door.

## Chapter 4: Day 1

San Diego greeted her nicely with an aerial view of its coastline and pacific blue waters, she remembered a time when she never wanted to leave claiming that it had been her home. But now she couldn’t wait for her flight back. As she rolled her carry-on out of the airport she looked around for a taxi when she a man dressed formally and holding a white sign with her name on it as he searched through the crowd. *Of course, Anna would order a Chauffer.*

She walked up to him, “Hello.”

“Ms. Salas”

“Izabella is fine.” She hated when people called her *Ms.* it made her feel like a child. Entirely she found the whole title system sexist, a man is assigned *Mr.* from birth and a woman’s title is changed based on marital status.

“I will take that.”

He pointed at her suitcase which she handed him, which he put in the trunk of the black Mercedes-Benz that was parked on the busy street. As she watched him, she felt the warm sun on her skin. Admittedly She did miss that. Today she could tell was particularly hot as her whiter New Yorker skin slightly sizzled cleansing her as she closed her eyes.

He closed the trunk and opened a side door, “Ready?”

She got in.

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From her window, she had a view of the bay with a sailboat that slowly floated across the waters with the glistening skyline in the distance. When she was much younger her parents would take her and her brother to the bay on days like this where they would ride bikes along the water.

She blinked hard, “What’s your name?”

He looked into the rearview mirror, “Justin.”

“Are you a local Justin?”

“Chula Vista. What part are you from?”

“San Marcos. Where are we heading anyways?”

“Somewhere around Rancho Santa Fe.”

She tapped her fingers on the side door, “Hey, can we make a quick stop for one last drink?”

“Mrs. Anna made it clear not to stop.”

*I swear to god Anna.*

“Can we at least take the coast?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Soon the grayness of the surrounding buildings turned into luscious green pine that lead to the sea. Where She’d stand with her feet in the grainy sand admiring the little red crabs that hid within the rock reefs watching as the seagulls flew overhead. She could hear its roar calling for her in the distance slowly touching her feet until it couldn’t be ignored. The ocean has always intimidated her. She’d go in allowing it to encompass her at first being gentle holding her body afloat, but soon it crashed down leaving her hair tossed as she coughed up its salty fluid. As the tide rose it reclaimed what it desired washing it over and making it lost in the confusion of currents. It took everything but her no matter how much she begged.

Izabella awoke suddenly with her head bumping against the window, she rubbed her eyes looking around at a long driveway lined with eucalyptus trees whose bark shredded off as their leaves fluttered in the wind. Enclosed by surrounding hills the street bore no sign and the entrance would have been easily dismissed unless one was searching for it. Izabella peered from the back

seat through the front window where an iron gate opened letting the car through to a roundabout with a fountain that slowly trickled water in front of the Spanish-style villa painted white. They stopped steps away from the door where she watched an older woman dressed in a white button-up, straight-fit jeans, and red loafers. The woman stood there in good posture looking inside the car adjusting her wide-framed glasses as she did so. *She looks like an owl.* Justin opened her door and she stepped out of the car, as the woman approached holding a clipboard.

“Welcome to Dayview. I’m Dr. Belmont.”

Dr. Belmont put out her hand which she shook, surprised by her grip, “Nice to meet you.”

Justin left her luggage by the car as a staff member dressed in all-white linen brought it into the house.

“Izabella. Is it?” She checked her clipboard making sure.

“That’s right.”

Dr. Belmont held out her hand, “If I could take your phone.”

“Seriously?” Dr. Belmont insisted. Izabella gave her a side eye as she handed her phone over.

Dr. Belmont turned it off and slipped it into her back pocket, “Now, if you would follow me.”

Izabella turned around waving goodbye to Justin who was getting in the car before following Dr. Belmont through the archway and front door, which opened into a foyer with decorated tile leading up the staircase and black iron railing. The natural light that came through the second-story windows reflected off the white walls decorated with pictures of the staff with Dr. Belmont framed first. Izabella trailed after her down a hallway when they began approaching a taller man with messy dirty blonde hair headed their direction that stared at her as she passed. *Does he know me?* She looked back at him and surprisingly he did the same and she quickly looked forward.

Dr. Belmont stopped at the end of the hall opening the door that bore a golden plaque with her name on it.

“Come on in.”

Izabella sat on the sofa as Dr. Belmont quickly fixed her paper at a desk in the corner of the room. As she waited she looked out the windows she could see the olive trees sway in the wind, reminding her of the one back at her family home. She’d lay on a chair by the tree in the sun as she closed her eyes listening to the sound of its leaves sliding softly against each other. Only there she was able to take naps at times waking up to her brother lying on another chair.

Dr. Belmont sat down in a leather chair across from her, “Again, welcome.” She smiled. “I’m the lead coordinator here at DayView, and you will be seeing me in one-on-one therapy sessions as well as around the general premises. Today you will not do much except for settling in and attending tonight’s meeting at 7.”

Dr. Belmont handed her a piece of paper, “This is your schedule. It details activities that you are expected to attend for your own benefit. Aside from that, you will be meeting with me

every morning at 10 for therapy and with the onsite psychiatrist weekly. Which I believe you will be meeting with after our session tomorrow.”

Dr. Belmont flipped through her clipboard and readied her pen as he stared at Izabella, “These questions are just baseline and everyone who joins the program is encouraged to respond truthfully.”

“Okay.”

“Why are you at Dayview?”

“Because some dumbass gave me shit coke and I overdosed.”

“On what?”

“Fentanyl.” Izabella hated saying the word.

“Do you consider yourself an opioid addict?”

“Fuck no.”

“How often do you use cocaine?”

“Occasionally.”

“What is occasionally?”

“Maybe once a month.”

“Were you under the influence of another substance when you overdosed?”

“I was drinking.”

“How much?”

“Just a little over the usual.”

“What is the usual?”

“Maybe a bottle a night.”

“Is that every night?”

Izabella thought for a moment. *That hadn't been every day. Right?* She tried to think about the last time she was sober. It had become routine for her to just stop by the store and grab a bottle of wine after work, and unintentionally finish it. “I guess so.”

“Would you consider yourself an alcoholic?”

“No.”

Dr. Belmont raised an eyebrow, “Why is that?”

“Because I can stop whenever I want to.”

“Then when was the last time you were sober?”

Izabella couldn't answer that question. “Maybe, I am an alcoholic. So is everyone else I know and they are fine. I'm hurting anybody.”

“Are you sure about that?” Izabella looked at her confused.

“Did you not overdose on Fentanyl?”

Izabella leaned back into the sofa, “That was a mistake.”

“See, I don't think it was. Anna gave me your history before you came here.” She patted her clipboard. “She really cares about you and she wants you to get better.”

Izabella bit her lip, “And what if I admit that I'm an alcoholic?”

“It’s the first step in your recovery. While you are under my care we are going to look for the root cause of your addiction and work from there. Do you have any questions?”

She shook her head.

“Great. Your room number is 205 and after tonight’s meeting, we have karaoke night. It’s quite fun actually.” Dr. Belmont looked generally excited.

Izabella got up, “Okay. Thank you.” Leaving her office.

She walked back towards the front of the house when she heard voices coming from outside. Peering through the french doors into the backyard she could see a group of people out at the pool where a woman on a lounge chair was laughing with a guy sitting next to her. *Should be interesting.*

Her bedroom had been upstairs and when she got there the door had already been cracked open. Pushing the door open to a white room that faced the front house which provided a view of the driveway and it was furnished with a queen bed and desk in the corner. Her suitcase had been next to the bathroom door when she picked it up and placed it on the bed. Then she realized there was a giant quote plastered onto the wall in front of her bed that read, *The hardest part in recovery is admitting you have a problem.* She went over to the wall attempting to peel off the wall sticker but it wouldn’t budge. She hit the wall, “Fuck me!”

Giving up she retreated back to bed where she opened up the suitcase and began to throw pieces of clothing onto the bed searching for a bathing suit realizing she did a hasty job packing. The night before she had gotten drunk again after arriving back at her apartment from the hospital throwing random articles of clothing into her suitcase, and now she only had a mismatched bikini. Izabella sighed.

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Walking on the hot pavement with bare feet dressed in leopard print bottoms and a neon pink top as she approached the pool placing her towel on the lounge chair one away from a lady who was sunbathing with a floppy hat over her face. Izabella began to lie down looking around at the trees that hung from above providing a canopy of privacy as birds flew over singing their song. *This is time for me to relax and just let go.* Izabella lay her body on the lounge chair finally relaxing her body closing her eyes smelling nearby lavender and hearing the soft buzz of bees.

When the lady turned over lifting her floppy hat. “Hi, there!” She said in an obnoxiously high-pitch country accent as she waved her hand.

Izabella opened her eyes, *Fuck me.* “Hey.” She said fakely.

She held out a hand, “I’m Alice.”

“Izabella”

Alice still held out her hand smiling. *Does she seriously expect me to get up and shake her hand?* Alice kept the same position. *Fuck me.* Izabella got out of her seat to shake her hand and sat back down.

“I’m going to call you Izzie.”

“Izabella is fine.”

Alice waved over to a guy in the pool, “Say hi to our new friend Izzie!”

Izabella shot her a dirty look. *This bitch.*

The guy with straight black hair waved, "I'm Johnny!"

Izabella looked over at the jacuzzi and pointed, "Who is that?"

"That's Parker" She put her finger to her mouth.

*He can't be worse than her.* Izabella walked over to the jacuzzi and took her towel with her. She got in on the opposite side of the jacuzzi as a scrawny pale guy with light blonde hair played with the bubbles produced by the jets. It was easy to relax in the warm water as jets fired into her back and she began to close her eyes then the peace was interrupted by Parker's voice.  
*What now!*

"Hey, your Izabella right?"

"Yes." She said shortly.

"Parker"

She nodded, "Nice to meet you." Then she began to close her eyes again.

"Where are you from?"

It was clear that she wasn't going to be able to relax, "San Diego."

"So you're a local."

"That's right." Parker kept on staring at her.

Exhaustively she asked, "Where are you from?"

"Park City."

"I heard it's nice in the winter." She didn't know what else to say.

"Oh, for sure I hit the slopes often."

"That's nice."

"How's San Diego?"

She raised her hands bringing attention to their surroundings, "It's beautiful."

"Where do you live now?"

"I just moved to New York a few years ago, but I have a family house in San Marcos."

He pointed around her face, "You look ethnic, your eyebrows, what are you?"

Izabella took a deep breath, "I'm Mexican." *Not again.*

"There's no way. Where are your parents from then?"

"My dad's from Tijuana and my mom grew up in Santee but her family is from Guadalajara."

"You're too white."

"Sorry to break it to you, but I'm Mexican."

"So your dad's an immigrant."

"Yeah."

"Did he come here illegally?" *This arrogant piece of shit.*

She was growing frustrated, "No. He had a green card and like a good American he received his citizenship when I was 4."

"Then you're an anchor baby!"



Izabella got out of the hot tub wrapping her body with a towel, “First of all you are using the terminology wrong. Secondly, why do you care?”

“You’r right anchor baby but for father.” Parker struggled to wrap the concept around his head using his hands.

She pointed at him, “What are you even? ”

“Pure Aryan race.” He said proudly.

She laughed, “Oh course you are”

Caleb looked at her as he made a fist in the water and slowly tried to raise it.

Izabella points at his fist and yelled, “If that fist makes it past your waist I’m going to drown you.”

He hesitated before relaxing his hand in the water.

“That’s what I thought.” She headed back to the lounge chair.

She angrily laid her towel on the chair next to Alice, “Fuckin Hillbilly.”

Alice frowned and looked at Parker, “Unfortunately he is a bit.”

Izabella sat in the chair crossing her arms “He’s an idiot.”

Alice stretched getting up, “Well I’m going to take a dip.” She walked on her tippy toes toward the pool as if she was on a catwalk flaunting her perfect body as the men gawked. *You have to be fucking kidding me.* Alice tied up her blonde hair into a ponytail showing her perfectly symmetric face and button nose before getting in the water in which she exclaimed, “It’s so cold!”

Izabella had enough. Wrapping her towel around her once again and headed back to her room.

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On her way back to her room she took an alternate route discovering a fountain decorated with beautiful mosaic tiles surrounded by lush green plants and chairs to sit on. *This would be a nice place to read.* She heard the sound of a tv commercial from down the hallway, stalking the sound until he came into a room of a woman a few years older than herself sitting down on a couch and flipping through the channels on the television. *I can check the finance channel for updates on Lumasoft.*

Izabella stood in the doorway still wrapped in a towel, “Can I see that?”

The older woman with brown hair and a round face looked at her skeptically, “You’re not supposed to be wearing that it’s against the rules.”

“What?”

“When you are indoors you need pants and a top.”

She walked over motioning for the woman to give her the remote, “Okay, just give it to me.”

The woman moved away from hiding the remote behind her head, “I booked the reservation it’s my time to the tv.”

“Come on, don’t be a child.” Izabella didn’t want to fight over the remote but she desperately needed to look at the financial channel. She stood there for a second looking at this

woman physically defending the remote before realizing that there were buttons on the side of the tv. Izabella walked over to the wall where the television was mounted located the buttons that changed the channel and pressed on it.

The channel changed and the woman behind her shouted, "Hey!"

Izabella continued to change the channel searching for CNBC as she flipped off the women from behind.

"This is outrageous." The woman marched out of the room.

Izabella didn't care she frantically flipped through the channels, but she couldn't find it. *Where the fuck is it?*

"We got rid of CNBC before you got here. Anna recommended it."

The woman was back, and she was standing behind Dr. Belmont with crossed arms at the doorway.

"Of course she did." She walked out the door handing the woman her remote in defeat.

Halfway down the hall, she yelled, "Fuck!"

Izabella closed the door to her room took off her bathing suit and handed it in the bathroom before changing into sweat shorts and a Nirvana t-shirt. Tired from her travel and the rehab's eccentric guests she lay on the down comforter as it absorbed her body. *This is possibly the softest bed I've ever been on.* She wasn't much of a napper but she was willing to make an exception.

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The sound of a bell rang throughout the villa startling Izabella awake. She looked out a window seeing that it was dark outside, remembering she had to attend the meeting. She rubbed her eyes, put on sandals, and hurried downstairs, following the voices she heard coming from down the hall. A light showed through the grand doors of the conference room as people talked inside and began sitting in a circle. Izabella sat in the last empty seat, seeing the guys she passed earlier in the hall.

Dr. Belmont sat with her legs crossed with a notepad in her lap, "Now that we are all here, does anybody want to start the meeting by sharing?" People were quiet. "How about you Izabella?"

She straightened in her chair and cleared her throat, "What?"

"Would you like to start?"

"Okay. Hi, my name is Izabella." She looked around to a circle of blinking eyes and admitted hesitantly, "I guess I'm an alcoholic. I'm here since I accidentally overdosed on Fentanyl." Izabella laughed nervously. "I thought I was given coke and now I'm here." She tapped her knees and smiled.

There was silence for a moment before Dr. Belmont interjected, "Thank you for sharing. It's always awkward the first time. Anybody else wants to share?"

Parker raised his hand.

"Hey. As many of you guys know I'm Parker and I'm addicted to weed." Izabella looked at him confused, *How the fuck does that even happen?* He gestured to Dr. Belmont, "Thanks to

Dr. Belmont I am able to share with you guys some trauma that I have been carrying with me for a while.” Parker stopped as his voice grew shaky and tears started running down his face.

Dr. Belmont handed him a box of tissues.

As he patted the tears off his face he continued, “I had a really close buddy of mine that committed suicide recently.” He paused taking a deep breath, “And unfortunately I was the one to find him.” More tears ran down his cheeks as Dr. Belmont put her hand to her chest. “I came to his house and his mom said he was upstairs and when I got to his bedroom I thought get was in the bathroom. I knocked and it was silent. I decided to open the bathroom door and he was there naked with a belt around his neck attached to the doorknob.”

Johnny leaned forward, “Was he watching porn?”

Parker was sobbing, “Yes. Why?”

Izabella looked around, “I don't think that was a suicide.”

Dr. Belmont started to clap her hands, “Thank you for sharing. I’m proud of you.”

Parker continued to wipe his tears.

Dr. Belmont pointed around the circle, “Anybody else wants to share?”

Everybody shook their head.

She stood up enthusiastically, “Perfect! Let's clean up and start Karokkee night.”

Alice clapped her hands.

Izabella picked up her chair and carried it over to place it onto the continuing stack seeing the man she had passed earlier that day walking out of the conference room. She chased him down the hall lit by overhead lanterns that reflected yellow light off the glossy Spanish style-tiles.

She caught up to him walking at his speed, “How do you know me?”

He looked down at her, “I know of you.”

Izabella looked at his khaki shorts and white line-in short-sleeve button-up, “You’re in finance?”

“Investment, actually.”

“That’s how you know who I am. What’s your name by the way?”

“Caleb. I have stock in Lumasoft, and when I saw you I could feel my portfolio drop.”

She looked at him, “Yeah, well thats out of my control.”

“Why are you even here?”

She pointed back at the conference room, “Did you not just listen to me?”

“No, every time you spoke it gave me a panic attack.”

“Well, this is all an accident.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was given coke that turned out to be Fentynal and I overdosed.”

“That’s bad.”

“I’m aware.”

He stopped in front of Izabella, “So, this is an accident.”

“Completly. What's your name by the way?”

“Caleb”

“How are you dealing with it?”

They entered the game room where Dr. Belmont worked on setting up the karaoke machine, “I don’t think anybody knows I’m here. I was supposed to go to Mykonos.”

“This isn’t definitely Mykonos?”

“Far from it.”

They sat in the sectional as other people began to fill the room that has a pool table and a large projector screen that stood behind Dr. Belmont.

Dr. Belmont tapped on the mic, “Welcome to Karaoke night!”

Only Alice clapped.

Dr. Belmont cleared her throat, “I’m going to start the night off with a tune and I’ll hand the mic off to whoever wants to go.”

Caleb leaned over to Izabella’s ear, “She’s going to sing *Set Fire to the Rain*.”

“No.”

He nodded his head, “Every week.”

The tune to the song started as Dr. Belmont closed her eyes finding the rhythm.

“I think it frees her.”

Izabella watched as Dr. Belmont passionately sang out of tune before turning to Caleb, “What do you do for your firm?”

“Portfolio Management.”

“Then you are actually good at your job.”

“Some would say.”

Over the sound of Dr. Belmont attempting to hit the high note, she moved closer to Caleb's ear, “Do you have any family?”

“I did.”

She looked at him skeptically as he pushed back his hair and took a deep breath before turning back to her, “You?”

“A brother.”

“What kind of guy is he?”

“He’s actually my twin.” She smiled. “I wish I had my phone, I’d show you photos. You guys have similar hair, except his is curly.”

“A twin. Are you guys close?”

Staring at Dr. Belmont, “He’s my best friend.”

“That’s nice. I wish my brother was still close to me.”

“Did something happen?”

“He doesn’t talk to me anymore.” She look at Caleb who looked hurt by what he had just said. *Wonder what happened?*

Everyone clapped as Dr. Belmont bowed at her performance.

She held up the microphone, “Whose next?”

Alice jumped up clapping her hands, “Me!”

Dr. Belmont hesitantly handed her the microphone and she quickly searched for the next song.

Caleb leaned into Izabella, “This is hard to watch.”

“What is?”

“I’m surprised they let her do this.”

Upbeat R&B music began playing as Alice swayed her body and in seconds she sang more profanity than a truck driver could manage in a week.

Izabella watched in pure shock, “She really isn’t holding back.”

“No, she is not.”

“I mean every lyric.” She shook her head in disapproval before turning to Caleb, “That would get me so canceled so quickly.”

“That’s probably why they took away our phones.”

Once Alice finished Parker clapped.

