

The Undertow: A Novel

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## Abstract

*The Undertow* is a novel about the rash actions of a few determined individuals attempting to rescue a group of pit bulls who are being used for dog fighting in the Greater Toronto Area. Through the act of caring for these damaged dogs, the characters are forced up against the traumas that Canadian society has inflicted on them and begin to re-examine the roles that abuse, caregiving and forgiveness have played in their lives and the lives of the dogs they are rehabilitating. The novella is a psychological drama that slowly reveals the ghosts compelling the characters to act, without giving away whether the characters themselves fully comprehend their ghostly motivations. It pursues difficult moral questions through an ethics of care that weaves together an affinity between the human and animal in ways that also push back against that affinity. It is a novella where the silences and unspoken realities are as present and functional as what is articulated and demand equal importance on the page.

*The Undertow* is an exploration of the liminal psychological spaces that follow trauma, how the boundaries around these spaces are developed and renegotiated, and the unknowable, ever-shifting interior of the survivor. How do we go about confronting trauma safely? How much do we owe other survivors like us? What is the cost of caretaking, and what do we owe ourselves as caretaking survivors? The novella tackles the complexity of these questions and refuses the neat and satisfying resolutions that flatten the lived experience.

## Dedications

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And as always,  
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It's not enough just to call you Mom.

This is for you.

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The suture in his empty eye socket was still being tied off when the dog woke up on the operating table and started kicking, but he's sedated now. Nearly unconscious, all but dead. Tom strokes the senseless ear, dawdling. He can hear a ringing phone echoing down the clinic hall from the front desk until Kelly answers it. A bright "hello" even on the night shift. He hasn't moved since he wheeled the dog into recovery.

Tom had arrived at work and tugged scrubs over half-matted hair just as the benches in the waiting area began to fill up. Pinewood's clinic picks up cases from even the edges of Hamilton once business hours are over, and Tom works the front desk and helps the vets from the early evening until one in the morning, when he's replaced. The human half of the work exhausts him and borrowed emotions make him feel misplaced by the end of the day. He was midway through his Saturday shift and there hadn't been any crying yet, and as though it was connected to him noticing the uncharacteristic calmness of the clinic, the dog started screaming from the back.

The tech working with Dr. Hobston must have had the surgery door open because the people waiting against the windows shrank from those yelps, instinctually sharing the fear. A boy dropped his beeping game to put his hands over his ears. Tom had set the phone he'd just picked up back down in its cradle, stood up unsummoned, and hurried to the back. Behind him, a beagle howled in answer from her owner's loving grip.

He hadn't seen the dog come in. Tom had been busying doing the intake interview on a coughing schnauzer when he'd seen Kelly rush past with Dr. Hobston through the high window in the door. They'd been a blur of blood smeared, pastel scrubs and ducked heads. When he got back to the front desk, there was a wad of bills in fifties and hundreds tucked under the base of a computer monitor, enough to tilt it sideways. The waiting room had emptied out by then. Some of the bills were sticky and made his fingers tacky as he counted out nearly three thousand. He pinched the stack and ran his thumb along the fanned short edge and then put it

back where he'd found it. His jaw flexed so tightly it stiffened and cramped, but that was that. He'd done it. He'd left it.

Tom had brought up the intake file, his teeth set together, grinding. The breed had read simply: terrier mix. No name, no owner, no other information, just like Kelly had told him it would. It had happened twice before, she said. They'd been brought in by the same man - all according to Kelly - who worked at the hospital full time. Both looking like carcasses but still alive.

This incident would make three. The other two had died. Tom hadn't been working either night.

He opened the door and the muddy tang of blood and disinfectant and piss halted him in the doorway: The riot of thrashing limbs, that chaos of fear rushing up and crashing against him. Tom forgot where he was, holding an open door, reduced to a pair of unblinking eyes. Kelly is a red smear from waist to armpit. The grey pit bull mix is shredded skin and raw muscle kicking in her hold. He's panicked by his new blindness and tries to bite at Kelly's flinching grip. It's the first time Tom has seen damage this bad on a dog and he's struck, snagged on the moment like it's sharp.

The tin clang of a falling kidney dish broke the droning buzz between his ears. Two unsteady breaths later, Dr. Hobston's second dose of sedatives took effect and the dog sagged in Kelly's arms. Tom realized his eyes were watering and blinked away the sting, his fingertips numb as he closed the door to help. The other two looked far too calm to be standing in such a violent room.

Afterwards, the dog's bristly coat stuck to Tom's forearms as he picked him up. A heavy, warm body, thickly bandaged and limp with artificial trust. Tom laid him out carefully and wheeled the dog into the observation bay to recover. He hung the IV bag and stalled, watching that ribcage rise and fall. Steady, weak breath, defiantly still there.

Blinded somehow, and not cleanly. Under a layer of bandages, what's left of his short muzzle is slick and raw like a cut of meat. His teeth are parted and hover in a silent growl. This is all the personality he has for now.

Tom's lunch break was supposed to start ten minutes ago. He decides he'll spend it here.

"Tom?"

"Hey, Doc." He isn't on his lunch anymore, but Tom keeps finding reasons to linger by the grey pit bull. This time the vet on duty caught him.

"Doing alright, then?" Hobston asks, but he sounds busy. He's too distracted for it to be a real question. The only acceptable answer on shift is: *yes*.

"Sure." Tom always tries to give a little less than what's expected of him. A precaution against responsibility.

"Thanks for helping with her." Busy hands, busy eyes, but possibly sincere. Hobston is checking vitals, checking bandages. Too involved to look at Tom. "That stuff's not easy to see."

"Yeah." What else can he say?

Tom watches him work. Evan Hobston is an image of late middle age pulled from a caricature. Stiff movements at the beginning and end of his shifts, just like now, portly even though he says he jogs with his dogs. Balding even though he colours the hair he does have. He has a friendly, respectful way of giving praise that is rarely connection to a smile. His hands don't shake and are mottled red with psoriasis.

Tom chews on his lip, watches those hands work, considers that minor praise. Assesses his chances. Dr. Hobston doesn't like to chat. At least not to him.

"What exactly did I see?" Did he sound too challenging? The vet looks up from his clipboard, attention taut. Tom relaxes his hold on his curiosity, softens his face. Glances away

like he's just noticed something important about the bandage Hobston was changing. "In case you want me to call the cops, or whatever."

Hobston is well educated. A professional. No answer Tom gets from him will be the honest one he wants, he's sure. No one ever tells anyone everything they know. The world couldn't run that way. But he's always left out.

"Kelly called again when she scrubbed out. Don't worry about it."

"Okay."

Don't worry about it. Tom isn't sure if it's worry or fascination or fury. It's clearly pity that's drawing him to the dog. The pity is clear, though the eerie reflection isn't.

It looked like something else had been chewing on his brow and muzzle, but all that bloody work has been bandaged up. His front legs and haunches are covered in similar stitched and treated wounds. When he'd first seen it, the dog's right eye had been a snarl of gristle.

Hobston is dipping his head, weaving away as he works on a fur-and-bones cat, on an old sheepdog, trying not to look Tom in the face. Trying not to be compelled into explanation. Tom hears a new question knock around in his head, feels it press against his teeth before he asks it. Or someone asks it. He's not sure if it's really him, it feels that involuntary.

"He was attacked, right? He was attacked by something." Ringing silence. "Just look at the guy."

Finally, eye contact.

"He was in a fight." Hobston's answer is tight and relenting at the same time and the numbers on his clipboard seem very important.

"A fight?" The sick sound of the word creeps into Tom's voice. His throat feels thick and dried out by the implication.

"A dog fight, Tom. Don't bother with a whole routine. You're a terrible actor. Kelly's told you." Again, not a question.

“Were they all like that?” The pit bulls Tom was used to checking in were high energy but goofy, charming in their big dog-smile way. This one had made him want to hang back. He’d never been frightened of a dog before today.

Hobston sighs like something complicated is being asked of him. He finishes injecting the dose he came to give the grey pit bull and sits down like he’s being put upon.

“He woke up and didn’t understand where he was, who we were, what we were doing to him. The lights, the smells, the other barking dogs he worked up... He could hear all that, too.” Hobston runs his hand from his wide forehead to his bald spot and closes his eyes briefly. “He probably didn’t understand that he’s half-blind now. I would’ve been scared, too. Wouldn’t you?” A pause where Tom thinks Hobston might actually be asking him something. “No one wants to wake up to me unexpectedly.” The vet’s smile is a brief, shallow flash of teeth. Just the top row, the ones he’s paid to fix.

“Why *did* he wake up?” Quick, asked while Hobston is still in the rhythm of answering him.

“I think he’s built up a tolerance to sedatives.” Said in that same tone of voice that makes Tom feel as though he should understand what Hobston means. There’s a cloudy frown growing on the vet’s face now as he stands and gathers his clipboard. Tom is almost out of time.

“Who brought him in?”

Kelly has described the man to him already. Tall, shaggy-like, unapproachable in the expression. The type of person your eyes notice before permanently avoiding, in case he catches yours. Tom has been watching for him since.

The vet pauses at the door. The pink tones in his skin and the lightness of his hair give Hobston a lingering flush that came come off as irritation, embarrassment. Even exertion. Right now, it gives the vet an air of trying to hold back an admission.

“He didn’t tell me his name, Tom. Why would he?” Hobston carries aspirin with him all the time because he’s always getting headaches. It looks like he’s getting one now. “Don’t you need a smoke by now or something?”

Tom knows when he’s being dismissed. His dull and bitten fingernails press silently into his palm.

“Hell yeah, I do.”

He’s pulling on his coat when he notices the red continent-sized stains on his scrubs for the first time and he pukes in the staff room sink. It’s a relief.

He lights his cigarette in the sterile hallway before he gets outside. The door sighs closed with a heavy click, cold and weather-proof. The eternal hiss of the 401 highway is in the near distance, but the sounds of traffic bounce off every building in their directionless way until Tom is surrounded by invisible cars. He exhales his first drag and the smoke just hangs there, slow, twisting in thick air.

Mid-November in Southern Ontario. Oily streets magnify the damp off the lake, the stale smell of it alive again in the wet chill. The sky is swollen grey and close to the ground. It always seems like it’s just been raining. He regrets always forgetting the gloves Kelly bought for him for mornings like this.

Maybe it’s not his place to know. Tom answers phones and makes appointments and handles payments and hoses out kennels. Sometimes Hobston’s bad shoulder needs help with bigger dogs. There are always boarded pets that need to be walked or fed or cared for. Tom’s job feels more important to him than he thinks it is. But it’s *his*.

Maybe Hobston doesn’t trust him because he’s only been here since the summer. As soon as he thinks it, he knows it’s willful blindness. He’s just not the trustworthy type. Of all the techs, Tom is looking up from the bottom even though he signed the same paper. There were no honors on his degree.

He smokes his cigarette down to the filter and burns himself when he stabs it out against the building. Dawn leaks in from the direction of the lake and every passing windshield flashes distilled sunlight at him. A clanging train is muffled by distance.

The cash that he'd found is gone by the time he gets back on the front desk. Good. It wasn't his responsibility.

He doesn't mention what he found to anyone. He's saving that information for Kelly.

Tom doesn't work for two days, so he's back for another late shift on a Tuesday night. The lobby is empty, the hallways quiet. Even the kennels are often silent in the hours before breakfast. There's a spitting rain falling like static against the glass front of the building. The front door is locked; pet owners are expected to buzz to be let in.

Kelly has gone home, and Tom doesn't have to wait at the desk if his time can be spent better elsewhere. He's wearing his hangover in his expression, in his posture. He retreats to the back to stay busy or else throw up.

He chooses trivial tasks that take him back to the dog.

Tom had been parking in the hospital backlot at a muggy, orange nine o'clock at night in the middle of the summer when Kelly pushed open the door to meet him, still shaking. Sweat was dissolving Tom's shirt into his back but there was Kelly with her teeth chattering, fumbling with her purse.

She dropped the first cigarette she pulled from her pack and told Tom all about the dead dog.

Another pit bull, smaller but cut up the same. The guy who dropped it off hadn't stayed to hear anything and it hadn't lived long. He'd paid in cash and left right away. The body had left a dripping trail on the tile that Kelly had to clean up. The throat wound hadn't been deep enough,

and Kelly had held her for the shot. She'd wiped her eyes three times telling Tom and pulled furiously on her cigarette. The little body had been wrapped in a plastic floor mat from a truck. Kelly had held her soft head to stop her shivering as she died.

Now Kelly couldn't seem to stop doing it herself. "The cop I spoke to sounded bored. Bored!" Her cigarette trembled, ashed itself, a trickle of snow to the hot pavement. "But he promised he would investigate. That he would come by. Told me they find dead ones now and then in parks. Fields. Parking lots. Not often, he said, but..."

Kelly spat next to the wheel of Tom's Sunfire, terrible at hiding her building tears. "He just made it sound like... Like it was a waste of time to care."

Two months later they'd had a single brief follow up visit from the cop the station had first sent them. No new information, not connected to anything they knew of. Then the same man had brought in another dog.

This grey pit bull with the remaining blue eye was the third.

Tom hears the soft soles of Dr. Hobston's shoes before he comes around the corner. Soft and worn with no squeak left in the rubber. Tom has time to control his embarrassment at being caught here again.

"Good, you're here. You can help me with him. Time to see if he has any mobility back." Hobston doesn't wait for an answer before he unlatches the cage door.

Tom isn't a stranger to pit bulls. They come through the hospital now and then and he's never shrunk from a new dog. This one is doused in pain killers, dull around the edges, but there's careful judgement in the expression he levels at Tom. Foggy, hesitant. Thoughtful. Wary. Tom ducks away from how familiar that look is.

"C'mon," he coaxes, voice slipping an octave higher. He drops to one knee. "C'mon out, boy. It's cool. It's just us. Promise." He's got the lead in his hands, but he's not reaching in there

for any reason. That one sharp, watery blue eye stays fixed on him. Tom feels acknowledged by it. It's an unsettling stare.

The pit bull crawls forward, clumsy on his front paws. With his nose past the door of the cage Tom can slip the loop around his healing neck. He's braced for a fit that doesn't come. Instead the pit bull follows the tug of the lead meekly enough, recognizing the simplicity of what's being asked of him. Tom greets him by giving him the flat palm of his hand and the dog noses into it, shy, bathing it in wet snuffling. Like he remembers something in this routine.

The dog will need a new collar when the stitches come out. A real one, since he'd been dropped off without any tags or identification. No leash, no story. Tom pulls a handful of soft treats from his pocket, their jerky smell rubbing off oily on his fingers. The dog's scarred nose twitches in its bandages, his fat tongue muscled and sloppy as he licks the treats from Tom's open hand. He's careful not to jerk away, tries to will away any doubt.

He's fine. The dog is fine. Everything is fine.

He's rewarded with a push against his hand for more. The dog is stubbornly hungry, fully awake, shoving his bulky dog shoulders forward now and feeling bigger than his size. He does not look like an aggressive dog now. All patched up and swollen, he looks like the victim of a beating. Tom finds himself pressing his lips together to keep the sharp tickle out of his nose. His teeth clamp shut and he relaxes his jaw to whisper, "Good boy." He is a different dog now, relaxed and sluggish. He gives his tale an experimental little wag.

Hobston lets the greedy thing smell a hand too before he rubs an uninjured patch of flank, reaching to lift the tape carefully off the side of his face. The dog flinches from that friendly touch from his blind side, dragging his back end away and squaring himself against the vet as Hobston pulls his hand back. The dog lowers his shoulders and doesn't make a sound.

"Easy, buddy. It's okay. You don't like that, then I won't do it." Hobston stounds calmer than he looks. Tom offers the vet a handful of treats and scatters some on the floor to distract

the dog from his fear. Making him work for the food, one clear eye roaming around, calms him down.

Dr. Hobston sits back, watching the dog move. He's still favoring his front legs and sits down as soon as he's found all the treats. "I've never understood why so many people buy into the paranoia about these guys. He doesn't seem like such a bad customer now, does he?"

"He still looks it." Tom lets his questions sit under his tongue and rolls them back and forth against his teeth, watching. "If I was blinded, I might want to make someone pay, too."

Hobston approaches the dog again in a crouch, slow, and presses down the edge of the bandage. He's obviously satisfied with what he finds and sits back on the floor. Dry, healing stiches, Tom assumes.

"Half blinded," Hobston corrects, tired. "He'll be fine." But the assurance is passive, unnatural. Tom looks at him until the vet senses the pressure of the stare and has to acknowledge it. Tom raises his eyebrows.

"He might have to be put down, Tom." It's rare that Hobston addresses him so directly. It's always when he's telling him something Tom doesn't want to hear. "You know the province restrictions."

There were a lot of pit bulls in Hamilton still, even after the ban had passed. They were popular for how tough they made a fenced yard look, how impressive they seemed on the end of a leash. Status. Toughness. Tom had never understood it.

"They don't have to know. You don't have to write it down, or... or submit a report. You haven't yet, have you?" Hobston had never asked Tom to make the phone call. Kelly said he hadn't really asked her, either. There had been cash under the monitor then none of it in the till. Tom doesn't notice he's chewing a thumbnail until he suddenly tastes blood. He shoves the evidence of the habit into the pockets of his scrubs.

"He has bites all over his face, old scars..." The vet gestures to the dog's hind end and flanks. "You'd have to be stupid to mistake it all for anything but fighting. Not all of it together."

He shrugs as if it's the only answer. Under the hot bubble of indignation that pops in him, Tom is also struck with the realization that Hobston would know better. Would have seen more if there was anything to see. Would have tried something already if he could. There's no way Tom understands this more than the vet does.

"I'll make another call to the police soon, Tom. See if they know anything more. I'm sure Kelly told you about the last time. She likes being involved in a story, that girl." Kelly is twenty-six years old and hardly a girl. But Tom has the vet talking again so he can't let up now.

"Do you see it a lot around here?" Some guys he'd known in high school had mentioned it once, hollow boasts that one of them knew someone with a fight dog. The farm fields around Milton are edged by trees, empty places and privacy comes with the landscape. There was a cellar for secrets inside each of the skeletal barns he'd driven past on his way out. Even then it had made sense to him.

"Not a lot. Some. It comes from the States." Hobston waves the fact away like it's an irritation, a gnat buzzing at him. "The laws here are pathetic. Hamilton's a good place for them. Rings aren't really a thing here anymore. Not in Toronto, either. Not like in the country, out in Barrie?" He nods to himself like it's no big surprise. "The last big bust was in Chatham. I worked out there for a bit, too."

The next treat the vet offers the dog has a dose of painkillers rolled up in it. The newly named Brad licks it down without chewing, sniffing for more. Hobston sighs and drags a chair across the floor to help himself stand up. He stretches, but even that movement is awkward.

"What's going to happen to him now?" He's pressing the vet, standing to do so. Even Tom is surprised that he's trying again. Insisting. It would be ridiculous to think that the man who'd dropped the dog off is coming back for him, but Hobston doesn't exactly share much with Tom. He feels a nose press behind his knee, nudging at him, sniffing for attention. Always sniffing, the one skill that hasn't been diminished. A short verse of barking from the kennels makes the dog go stiff.

Hobston is trying not to look at Tom again. He wonders if this is the vet's tactic for responding to all the questions he wants to avoid, or just Tom's. "There aren't any loopholes for adoption, Tom. Let alone suspected fight dogs."

Serious and resigned. Not the tone he was hoping to hear.

"You couldn't register him. The standard policy is euthanasia. I read they put down almost all the dogs they pulled off the Vick property. It's the same thing here. That was a famous case and still nobody could do much about it."

Hobston looks at him with expectation. Tom flattens his expression and stares back. Like stone. Like cement. Immoveable. It's the words "standard policy" that do it to him. The dog dances awkwardly on his healing legs and whines, growing sore and tired in the time it takes the vet to answer.

Hobston sets his shield of charts down, presses two fingers to his forehead like he's trying to keep something inside and sighs. "You know it's up to the owner to safely keep a dangerous dog, and to keep everyone else safe around it. We have to assume that's what he is. He certainly looks it, like you said. Everyone will think so. And if he's..." Hobston says it like a warning, looking at Tom at a tilted angle from under his tall forehead. "That usually means some degree of isolation. Rehabilitation. Socialization. Patience."

All things his scolding tone makes it clear he doesn't think Tom can provide, but Tom is nodding anyway, repeated and insistent.

"Tom... it would just be kinder." The softness with which he says it, the slight plea in the statement, make it sound like he believes it. "This guy doesn't know anything but terror. And he doesn't know you."

No more than Tom knows him. Anything could happen. The worst thing could happen. Kelly could kick him out. Someone could get bitten. The dog is half-blind and alone and no one will want him. His nose is still tucked against Tom's knee. He's watching.

Tom has never felt the urge to protect anyone but himself. It's an uncomfortable, urgent push to finally feel it. He's tilting. He forces the practiced intensity up behind his eyes that makes most people look away.

Instead there's relief in the vet's face, an exhausted, reluctant scrunching of it in his lined brow. "You know I can't let you take him," he protests flatly.

Tom ignores the performance. Hobston is going through a divorce and does not have the energy to spare on winning arguments.

"At least make sure he gets neutered."

Tom crouches down next to the pit bull once they're alone so it can smell his face, his hands. An affectionate lick to his throat and he's almost laughing.

He waits in the parking lot and watches the streetlights switch off as day comes on. Hobston drives an unaggressive tan SUV, the backseats removed to make room for his own three dogs. He gives Tom a crate, a collar, and at the end of his shift he waits around to drive the pit bull home for him.

Tom had met Kelly his first day at work. He'd never been more grateful for a job, even if he washed his hands so many times in a day that the skin soon grew tight and chapped. Kelly had been smiling offhandedly and making easy conversation with him for days before she'd followed him out to his car and seen his life inside of it. He'd told her to stop crying, but she just started again when he only had a single load's worth of laundry for her to take home and clean for him.

He moved into her basement the next day, and with three pairs of hands it had taken one trip. Her husband, Greg, pretended not to be sore about it. Tom met the other strays, all cats, in the morning over breakfast. He'd accidentally let one out when he retreated to the

backyard to smoke. She came back for her dinner when the warm sky turned purple and Kelly's kids went outside into the night calling for it.

Kelly is a few years younger than Tom and much taller than him. She has a bit of a stoop, the posture of a tall woman working a desk job. She wears flat shoes so she's the same height as Greg. Tom doesn't know how Greg deals with so many of her searching looks because they make Tom feel pulled apart, examined like a high schooler. Everyone is a frog on a peg board in front of Kelly.

Tom's band t-shirts offset her sale-rack office clothes in their shared laundry baskets, now. Greg is a fan of polos. The children's laundry gets done separately. All Tom's things would still smell like mildew if it wasn't for Kelly.

At first all the stories she told him, everything she had to talk about, circled back around to her family. A husband she had married while still in university, two little girls, three and five. Squabbles, achievements. She didn't like being away from them while they slept, didn't like how Greg had to spread out all alone on frequently changed sheets, but working the night shift meant a certain kind of freedom. She still gets them ready in the morning and has them after school. She often asks if Tom is saving, planning.

These lives, straight as railroads, are mythic to Tom. He sees as far as Thursday, pay day. He sees as far as his closed basement door.

He forgets to tell her that he's bringing Brad home. It's forgetfulness if he claims it with a wincing apology.

Tom is convinced he only managed to sober up because of Kelly's willingness to bum him cigarettes. That, and her curious scrutiny. He doesn't want to give her the entertainment of slipping up. He's going to pay her back one day though: in gum, now that she's quit the smokes.

He can never be sure if she believes what he tells her or if she just nods because it's polite. He hopes she'll meet the dog with that same malleable agreeableness.

Hobston waits while Tom lifts Brad carefully out of the trunk before hauling the empty crate forward and setting it on the side of the road. "You can pay me back," he shoots at Tom, sarcastic. Not really expecting him to.

The lack of confidence he gets from the vet stings in his recovery. Brad pulls the leash taut, sniffs at the curb before realizing how open the street is and quickly slinking back to the safety of Tom's shins.

"Yeah, count on it." Tom can't decide if he's joking or not. He doesn't know if he will, as much as he wants to. Hobston just makes a face as he gets back in his SUV. A resigned grimace. It's not an unkind expression.

The basement apartment is small and unfinished, one unpainted wall freshly spackled, a skeleton kitchen, but the door that leads to Kelly's upstairs has a lock on his side. When it's turned, it's a comfort.

Real walls aren't so confining anymore, not after living beside the steering wheel of his Sunfire and his own dirty clothes. There's room for a mattress on the floor here and his new paints are lined up against the wall, mostly lidded, dripping to pool on the raw concrete. He has a tiny bathroom all his own. A teal little shower that hasn't been replaced.

At least he's compact himself, even though he's small and hardened and prickly because of it. At least he's got the straight line of his jaw, and women seem to like his eyes. He's heard that before.

He leads the dog around the side of the house and jangles his keys in the basement door, but the dog balks when it's opened like he'd done leaving the hospital.

"Hey. Hey, c'mon. It's okay. Everything's okay, remember?" Tom tugs at the leash curtly and Brad muscles backwards, ears down, paws planted. Flattened to the ground. Cowering. Tom gets down on one knee and lets the leash go slack, murmuring the dog's new name under his breath.

“Shh, Brad c’mon. It’s not scary. Really. I promise.” He rubs the dog’s head, whispers against that big heavy skull, warm breath on fur. “It’s just a door, weirdo. It’s just a door.” Brad doesn’t budge but instead starts to shiver, a baleful blue eye staring up at Tom like he thinks he’s done something wrong, so Tom sits on the drain of the cement stairwell until the cold leeches into his jeans. The wind is brittle in the trees lining Kelly’s backyard.

He’s too cold to stay sitting there for long, so Tom crawls awkwardly through the door, hands and knees on concrete until he’s sitting cross-legged on the warmer side. The leash drags forgotten on the ground as Brad lifts his head and follows him in. Slow and careful. One eye looking around from a submissively lowered head.

Tom has lived here over half a year and his smells of wet ash and food fragments and dead skin are ground into the single large carpet. It’s Brad’s first fascination. Tom follows him around, closing paint cans and setting them on kitchen counters, snatching up open boxes of Oreos and corn chips. Rescuing his dirty bong from a blunt, curious nose. He stores the box of fireworks that he stockpiled in June on the top shelf of his narrow closet. The downstairs kitchen is now littered with half-started canvases so ungainly large that it’s become more storage than impromptu studio. Tom had chosen the area with the tiled floor because if he moves fast, the paint just wipes off. He hasn’t finished a painting in years.

He forgets to empty his overflowing trash can until Brad scatters it across his bathroom. Tom hears the soft *thok* of the plastic bin hitting the floor but doesn’t make it in time to stop him sampling a crumpled tissue. “Hey! No! Get outta there...”

Throughout the exploration the dog makes no sound but his constant, curious sniffing. He approaches everything with a shy caution, as though he might not be allowed to roam. An absurd wrench of embarrassment catches Tom in the stomach. What does this old dog think of him? How much of Tom’s dissolving life can he smell?

He pulls the bedsheet he’s hung over the high-set window all the way across to block the morning creeping in. He drags the crate inside and tucks it in a corner of his bedroom, fills it with

the blankets he'd slept under in his car. The extra duvet Kelly has lent him covers more floor than mattress.

He tabs open a beer, turns on his second-hand, convex-screened television and watches the dog circle the apartment instead. Nose to the baseboards, occasionally glancing his way as if for reassurance. It's cold out, but Tom cracks a window anyway and sits down under it to smoke.

He's half asleep and wakes with an uncoordinated jerk. He drops his cigarette but lunges to pinch it up just before it can burn a new hole in the borrowed couch. It's not the only burned or sticky surface around him, and the blanket he'd used to hide the evidence of the couch is covering Brad's crate now and making a simple little den.

Sleep still tries to stick his eyes shut as Tom drops his smoke into an unfinished beer and makes himself stand. Hobston had also spotted him a bag of dog food. Using a handful of it, he coaxes Brad back to the crate. Again, it's easier than he thought it would be. Tom watches the dog circle and circle then finally curl up in a tartan wool, nose tucked away.

Tom watches him sleep and listens to the television shout commercials at him and wonders if the crate feels the same for Brad as a locked door does for him. He'd grown up never allowed to lock a door.

Dinner: freezer to oven to a burn on the roof of his mouth. Three, four - fine - five beers to nurse the dark into friendliness. A skunky bowl to close his eyes when getting into bed doesn't work. It doesn't count if it's not out of a spoon.

He isn't in the slow pulling glue of it anymore. No more burnt tin foil, no more cramps in the morning. It still yawns at him out of the dark, a hole in the quiet, so he leaves the television on in the next room most nights.

He has clinging bad dreams anyway. Formless and lingering, full of anxieties he can't remember, no matter how hard he tries to catch them when he wakes up.

He's tired when his alarm goes off but Brad is whining to go out.

It's a wetly cold time of year to rediscover the habit of walking a dog and Tom's fingers are always frozen. The last leaves are the only colours in all the smudgy grey days. It's almost December so it's always raining. Most of the trees are naked and cold, reds and burnt yellows paced into the mud or stained into the sidewalks. Little leaf outlines are left behind.

Kelly's backyard was their safe area at first. Walks around in a circle, avoiding the children's jungle gym, hardly any pressure on the stitched wounds under the thick collar. It takes a week for the swelling in his face to go down and behind a wooden fence it is a private matter. Kelly lives on a quiet street where everyone drives instead of walks, so the sidewalks are almost always empty.

Tom starts the list of "strange things that set him off" on day three. He never writes it down but he remembers every time the sound of the toilet flushing makes Brad run to his crate and hide; the way a paint can hit the loose element on his stove and started him shivering; the way the gritty screeches of the garbage truck outside frenzy him into barking; the fear of the outside stairs. Worst of all, his categorical refusal to go through a damn doorway on the first try.

Tom is upstairs telling Kelly what he's done, hands out in front of him like he's trying to conduct an orchestra of patience from her, when the garbage truck stops outside. *Hiss* and *screech*. A rumbling of bins against the curb.

"And Hobston made it clear that no one else would take him. That he'd have to be put down. You know I couldn't leave him to that, not after he escaped whatever happened to him. *You* wouldn't, right?" He's of course implying that she would do it, because she had. Tom hasn't even finished his planned remarks when the barking starts a floor below. The house is new and

well built, but the pit bull is the vocal meeting of power and anxiety. Tom's face crumples into a wince.

He'd been expecting Kelly to be angry. Instead she looks ready to cry. "What am I supposed to say? When you put it like that?"

Tom shrugs, helpless. He'd been betting on her easy heart giving her no choice.

"I have *kids*, Tom! You know, the little versions of me always around?" As if on cue, Lisa shows up in the doorway to watch the yelling, a stuffed bear foot in her mouth. "You've noticed them, right?"

"I just thought they were cats."

"And the *cats*, Tom!" A sigh that throws back her whole head. An appeal to the kitchen ceiling. Everyone is always sighing at Tom like they're screaming at him. "I didn't sign on for this. This is how you push it, Tom. This is 'it' being pushed." Then she's unloading the dishwasher again, sippy cups and plastic wine glasses. Clang. Clang. Life always going on.

"Just keep that door locked. Ella is on her feet and exploring."

Tom's patience with Brad gets brittle in the cold.

"Come on. Dude, let's go. Come on, not today." It's below zero and a frost has turned Kelly's backyard crisp. The dog has flattened to his belly again to deny the door. His upturned eyes are wide and trapped, like he knows what's being asked but he still can't obey.

Tom's light coat is too thin for the season and a frozen wind cuts to his skin.

"Come *on!*" Too loud. He jerks the leash. Brad flinches and springs at him, a silent lunge through the door.

Fear snatches Tom by the lungs and he bends away from the snapping jaws like a staggering dancer. Tom can see every tooth; one fang is broken and missing.

His short grip on the leash saves his thigh and a second later the dog is cowed, submitting. Shocked at himself. His mangled ears are flat, his bottom tucked. An unfinished yelp is still strangled in his throat.

Shaking, Tom takes a knee and whispers, "Hey." Apologetic tail wagging. "Hey, it's okay." A wet pleading nose at his face. "It's okay, bud. That was my fault. That was my fault."

Tom dodged the bathroom mirror for a few days after that, hating the sight of himself. He starts wearing a second sweater under his coat and buys a pair of gloves. The door takes as long as it takes.

He speaks to him softly until Brad's ears perk up instead of wilt at the sound of his name, and even afterwards the habit remains unbroken. When he's not at work Tom rarely has anyone else to talk to, so the gentle change in his register settles into permanence.

It seems that every day spent without walking a dog has been wrong for him. Just walking, no intention but a circle around the yard, no payoff but fresh air and a plastic bag full of shit. He didn't know he missed it.

She had been his brother Steven's dog growing up, a gift for the oldest, but Tom was the one who had walked her. Their mother had fed her. A stocky little schnauzer with a curly little beard. She came to them a grey puppy and only got greyer in their care. She hadn't lived to be grey enough. When Tom had asked how, Steven had told him too many answers for any to be true.

Getting out in the world again feels like an achievement. The cold is a bracing challenge he can face. He looks forward to it as much as Brad does, once he's braved the door.

When he'd had the drug with him, Tom hadn't noticed that he was alone. Isolation didn't feel lonely when he always had chemical company. When he wasn't using, his mornings felt pointless, directionless, lacking a goal he could feel as deep as the sickness of withdrawal.

Make a call. Go buy. Pray that Rory would show.

By the end, even falling asleep in the worn backseat of his car was as comforting as a hug if he'd just picked up. Without it, he saw clearly again, but the world was an empty cup.

Then Brad had come home with him, and barked, and waited by the door to be taken out. There was someone looking back over his grey shoulder at him, expectant. Waiting.

When the leash went on the first time it was like Brad remembered he was a dog before he was whatever his last owner had turned him into. Tom remembered he could walk without a destination. When he complains that he's being towed down the street like a kite, Hobston suggests a head halter to change the balance and a muzzle to make it safe. With more control over that muscled front end and the danger buckled shut, Tom decides they can leave the familiar track they've worn in the dead grass of Kelly's backyard.

Everything seems new to Brad and everything new scares him. Tom takes it slow, reins up on his nerves – just down the street and back. Easy. Scan for pedestrians, or even worse, dogs. The next day, he tries for around the block. He proves to himself that it's safe before he pushes for the next step.

See? Cars are just cars. The wet roll of tires brings nothing with it. Barking in the distance can't hurt you. It's impossible to misread the way Brad squares up at the echo of a bark, so Tom is careful to cross the street every time he sees someone with their dog approaching.

The first person who stops to greet them instead of stepping into the road to avoid them is a young woman. Smiling, carrying a backpack, obviously a dog lover. She's looking at Brad instead of Tom and she has her hands outstretched before Tom can stop her.

"Oh, what happened to him?" Cooing sympathy.

“Don’t!” As tense as Brad is, Tom chokes up on the leash. Fear that the dog might lunge clutches at him, ignites into defensive fury. “What the hell is wrong with you?” Thoughtless. Presumptuous.

The woman recoils like her hand has been slapped. She gapes at Tom as she recovers, righteous disgust sweeping in to sooth that sting of embarrassment.

“Jesus, fuck you too, man!”

Tom and Brad stand still until she turns the corner and a manicured hedge blocks the sight of her. The rage follows him home.

Brad is circling to take a shit when the cop car rolls up, silent like a shark. Fear is a cold clench at the backs of Tom’s thighs that tells him to run. His keeps his shoulders turned in, his attention averted. There’s a click of a door opening. The engine is still running.

One cop gets out in his front-heavy vest. His partner doesn’t follow.

“Hey, how’re you doing? What’s this guy’s name?” Tom has no choice but to turn around and engage. He looks down at Brad, whose big panting mouth is cracked wide in his natural pit bull smile. With the scars Brad might as well be strapped with a piece, shouting his history.

Tom watches the cop looking at him and knows exactly what the guy sees.

“He’s Brad. Brad Pitt, get it?”

“Funny. You had him long?”

Shit.

Yes, and it means Tom put the scars there. *No*, and it’s illegal now that the law has been passed.

Answer him.

“He’s my sister’s, actually.”

This cop might be young but he’s not stupid. Or lazy.

“Got his license with you?”

Tom tries to hold his shattering expression together to stop it from giving him away. He never can. His lips work with words and his eyebrows jump. Brad whines at him, worried.

Tom tugs the leash and runs.

Brad is nothing but muscle and explodes along beside him. The possibility of being caught and overpowered pulses in Tom's blood.

Brad is outpacing him, dragging him along by the leash. Through the park and the swings and the sandpit to the cul de sac on the other side, it's a straight shot. He's wearing less weight than the cop who has his vest to deal with. Brad wants to stop and fight when he realizes they're being chased and Tom is slowed by that feral resistance.

But the cop is falling behind and then stumbles to a stop, hands on his knees. Then a hand is on his radio. Tom isn't sure if the other cop has gotten out of the car to support but he doesn't wait around to see.

Tom is skinny from recovery and cigarettes and inattention but he's still fast. His body hasn't forgotten almost ten years of the soccer field. He's around the tall fence on the corner of Ashton and MacDonal Drive and six minutes later he's flipping Kelly's gate latch shut behind him. Gasping. Brad is keyed up and runs the perimeter of the yard twice. Tom leaves his muzzle on for a while, even when they're back inside.

It had flashed through him briefly, a memory twitch in the muscles as he ran; running from the cops with Shawn before he died. It was summer, the year they'd built the bonfire by the lake. Shawn had been held back a year and graduated with Tom's class: was diagnosed four days before the party. The bonfire had been for him, but they'd been drinking and shouting and the cops had snuck up on them, creeping cars hidden by the same hillock of land that hid the fire from the development of houses against the shore.

They'd run. Tom, Shawn, John, Phil, Nick. Each scattering like a spark through the woods. Tom had been running two steps behind Shawn when the fence took his friend unawares and cut up his face. Tom had had to hoist him over and scramble up after him.

On the other side of the trees were new houses and they hopped the fence of the first dark lot they came to. They'd cowered there in the garden, shushing each other in the ferns, drunk. Shawn mopping blood out of his eye with his t-shirt.

*That was awesome*, he'd said. Gasping.

He's been taking care of Brad, slowly reacclimatizing him, for over a month. Tom has a schedule and it revolves around the dog. He needs to be let out in the morning before Tom can visit the bathroom. He needs exercise, attention, company. Tom never walks him down busy streets and after the close call with the young cop, only at night. It's dark by the time he sets off for work and only just growing light when he gets back. So far there have been no more near misses.

It was less than a week ago that Tom had another of his formless, shifting dreams. Woke with a sick jerk, felt his equilibrium tip, felt the dream emotions still settled on him like a different life. He'd sat up to find Brad curled by his feet for the first time, head cocked and alert. Looking at him. Present.

After that, he'd jump up on the bed when invited. One of Tom's pillows became his.

He'd forgotten what it felt like to be rested. To not feel the tacky presence of his eyelids all day, to not wish the day was over. He dreams less with something warm tucked behind his knees, breathing. Snoring louder than him.

It's a Saturday in December and the grey lake flares with whitecaps and then disappears. Night takes its place in the distance. A freezing breeze sneaks into the waiting

lobby when the glass doors open. Tom, typing with gloves on, looks up from his computer screen and forgets himself. His jaw goes slack.

Shaggy hair, narrowed eyes. Leather jacket too light for the weather. The dog he's holding is big and bloodied and silent. Silent like the man holding him, whose arms are hooked under its torso.

This one is white. Was white, before it became a crime scene. There's blood all over that leather jacket but it's dark and hides it well.

This one's not like Brad at all. This one won't live.

Tom forgets what he's supposed to do. His fingers and tongue are stiff.

"Name?" His voice breaks on the single word.

The guy laughs. It doesn't look like he thinks it's funny. "You gonna call someone else up here, or what?"

"Call who?" He can't mean the cops, can he? Is he threatening him? Tom wishes that Kelly were here but she's checking in a rottweiler in the back.

The guy rolls his eyes. Somehow the dismissive expression is terrifying. It's like a countdown. Tom's sudden transformation into an idiot is clearly wasting everyone's time.

"Where's Hobston?" The guy says it with obvious familiarity. Like Tom should know what the routine is.

"I'll get him." Tom's feet are made of wood as he backs away without turning. The guy watches him until he's through the door. The dog bleeds on the tiles.

Another one. Executed or dying. Not found in a park or a yard, not an easy, infuriating neglect case. A violent crime brought straight to him.

Some dogs die of blood loss, shock, dehydration, even if they make it out of the fight. Exhaustion and infection too, hours or days after. Tom has been reading, creeping upstairs to

use Kelly's computer during the day when no one else is in the house. When he should be sleeping. When he could hear Brad clawing at the basement door, confused.

This dog is barely here. She lolls her head against the stainless steel, trying to get a look at them. She seems to recognize their smells: soap and human skin and laundry sharpness over a ripe human odor. Dr. Hobston is chewing the cinnamon gum that keeps him off the tobacco and he breathes it steadily over the two of them. Tom can smell the dope smoke and the sweat on the guy four paces behind him. He refuses to turn, refuses his nerves. He can hear the tense cadence of the guy's breathing and knows he's watching.

She had lain down submissively when Hobston began whispering to her, but she'd barely ever been standing. Tom has locked up. He doesn't have any whispers for her. There's no need to strap a muzzle on her, she doesn't have the energy to bite. She seems to like the sound of Hobston's low voice, a man's presence, and then the exhaustion wins out. It's clear there isn't anything to be done. This one might have both her eyes, but there's little else left of her face. Tom can't look directly at the ruin.

"Is she out?" A hoarse, surprised sound out of the quiet behind him. Tom almost looks back at him.

It's Dr. Hobston that nods, calm like always. "Yes." A sigh in the answer.

"And you're gonna put her down?"

"There's nothing else we can do." It's clear Hobston sees a purpose in treating him like any other owner to come through here.

"Can you do it now? So she doesn't come to, and... feel it anymore?"

An animal response jerks in Tom and turns him around.

He sees a face maybe ten years older than himself and made of stone. The guy's shoulders are so broad it would be comical under different circumstances. He's blocking the door. Tom feels slight in comparison. And how could he not compare?

"The last one you brought in has nightmares. About whatever you did to him."

“Tom.” A warning syllable out of Hobston. That boulder of a face doesn’t change. Tom’s jaw and hands clench in tandem.

“He made it, huh?” The slightest softening of rock. The guy doesn’t deny it. Tom is staring at him now. “Good,” he seems to decide, nodding. “That’s good.”

Is it relief, that tectonic shift in him? Tom can’t gather up his own face and looks away. The guy repeats the word “good” one more time to himself and shoulders out the examination room door.

Tom follows, sneakers betraying him on the tile. He watches from the doorway as the guy weaves between parked cars and stops at his truck. A white Ford pickup that shows every speck of rust on it. Corroded wheel wells. The guy looks back once but he’s a parking lot away and just a shape in the dark. He gets in and the truck coughs to life. A warm orange cabin light and no radio. He’s pulling out.

Tom glances back at the deserted desk.

He’s got his keys in his pocket. His car is two spots away. No one else is doing it.

Kelly will cover for him when she realizes he’s left. He’s comfortable making that bet. But Hobston will know where he’s gone.

Oh well.

It’s 10:04 on his dash clock. He’ll think of an excuse on his way back. He hasn’t used any sick days yet.

His Sunfire has a chill like a cellar but the heat kicks on as he pulls into traffic. The truck is easy to follow, sticking out rurally among all the compact city cars. Hamilton sends them in a wide swing of one-way streets to the highway where Tom doesn’t feel the need to hang back.

He hides behind his headlights. The lake lays unmoving on his right, its edge rimmed with a salted cluster of city lights.

Ten minutes, twenty. *Welcome to Burlington. Oakville. Mississauga.* White on blue. They've been on the road over half an hour when the truck takes an exit. Tom's decision loosens for a second and then snaps back into place as he changes lanes. It would feel stranger now to stop and, what? Go back to work?

His cell phone is ringing in his pocket, the sound softened by the denim. He doesn't dig it out.

Brightly lit pavement and spindly city trees, everything a dull streetlight orange. It's still early enough for night traffic and he almost loses the truck once, waiting for a break in the circulation of cars between him and Dundas. It's an off-white spot in the distance when he can see it again and it makes a turn almost immediately. Tom marks the spot on his windshield like a navigator and makes a guess when he reaches a street close to the advancing target. It's a turn in the dark.

The truck is parked outside an apartment building one block in, brick red where the outside lights hit it. Almost all the windows are shielded with curtains. The windows of the basement apartments have bars. Tom pulls a U-turn and parks several car lengths up the street. In the silence he wonders what the fuck he's doing, so he turns the key and fiddles with the radio.

He taps his steering wheel erratically through *All Along the Watchtower* and *My Kind of Lady*. Ignores his own lack of rhythm. Does the guy live here? Is he calling it a night? He uses the time to punch the license plate into a text to Kelly he leaves unsent. There were three missed calls when he flipped it open: one from the clinic and two from Kelly's cell phone. Hobston and the godmother that's younger than him. He waits through Lynnyrd Skynyrd and the

Doobie Brothers. He's fiddling with his keys and wondering exactly when it becomes pointless to stay when the guy comes out again during The Guess Who.

He has a soft guitar case over his shoulder and he's holding the door, amp in his other hand. He isn't wearing the leather jacket anymore and looks more nondescript in a black t-shirt. He doesn't seem to feel the cold. Tom watches him help the two curly-haired guys who look like they could be brothers, with a collection of amps and stands and a full drum set. Some of it goes into the truck bed, the rest into the black Civic parked next to it. The two brothers stop to laugh at something as they get in the car. The tall, shaggy guy nods but doesn't smile.

In a minute they're all on the road again, heading for the highway that will take them into Toronto. Tom's headlights flicker back to life and he steels into the third spot in the caravan, keeping pace.

They exit at Islington and weave their way through diminishing roads to a bar with a cramped parking lot and music leaking into the night. Something lively and, he's pretty sure, Spanish. Fast guitar, something to dance to. *Terapia* it announces in red plastic lettering. Some of the lights behind it have burnt out and left dark spaces like dead teeth.

He jams the burnt filter of his cigarette into his overflowing ashtray. Bone-grey ash sprinkles his dirty floor. He parks crookedly four cars away from the white truck. When he turns off the engine, Tom can feel the beat of the music through the metal and glass of his car. He can't understand the language of the lyrics or their busy cadence. It's late now, close to midnight.

He watches Tall unload the gear while the Brothers jostle each other inside, his heart rate rising like he's sitting through the uphill portion of a roller-coaster. His lessons to avoid this are written on the bone, pumping from brain to blood, and tighten up his chest until he thinks to breathe.

If he did it to the dogs – *if* – it'll only be rounding up to do it to Tom. Tom is hardly any bigger. He changes awkwardly into his jeans in the front seat and gets out of the car anyway, zipping up his jacket over his monogrammed scrub shirt.

The bouncer inside the door is as broad as two men and Tom startles like a rabbit when he's asked for ID, has to dig in his pocket for his wallet, eyes everywhere except on what he's doing. The bald bouncer squints at him like he might be drunk already but lets him in anyway. Money is money, and Tom knows he looks like a nuisance at worst.

It's so loud inside, the noise feels like resistance and Tom sticks to the steady presence of the bar when he reaches it, raw wood tacked a hundred times over with live show announcements. *The Wharf Rats. Rexdale Pails. Maria Velasquez.* Every colour of paper, line art and posed photos, copied and copied. He orders whatever is on tap and slaps down a ten. Tall and the Brothers are setting up a safe distance away on the stage.

"I don't know you." A woman about his age is suddenly beside him, shouting to be heard. She surprises a choke of cheap beer out of him. Very smooth.

"Should you?" He's wiping beer off his chin, his thin coat. His blood is in his ears.

She's smirking. "I don't know." A round little nose. Eyebrows that don't quite match her light hair. She's chewing the straw of a clear drink with a lime wedge at the bottom of it. "Should I?"

Tom realizes with a cold flood of relief that she's just flirting. Interested. An unlikely surprise, as welcome as it might be inconvenient. Her eye contact is steady and searching. Kelly would like her.

She's short, like him, but still an inch or so taller. "You a bouncer round here or something?" He tries the joke but it comes out flat.

"Pretty much. What's your name?"

Tom isn't sure where to go from there, so he laughs. "Tom." Everything he says sounds robotic to his ears.

"I teach here during the day, so I'm here a lot," she clarifies. Waits for him to ask.

"You teach? Here? What?" He wants to roll his eyes at how stupid he manages to make the question sound.

"Dance." And just like that, Tom notices the whirl of a partnered pair warming up by the stage. Tall and the Brothers and a drummer that seems to have sprung from the crowd are tuning, fiddling around. And then a bloom of tango swells out of the amps as one Brother turns to the other and begins with a strum. A salsa, maybe. Tom doesn't know what he's hearing. He's staring at the stage, at the way Tall's comically broad shoulders have relaxed on his stool. The arms that held death two hours ago hold a passable accompaniment now. He's not the star or the singer, but he blends right in.

"So, do you want to?" She's set down her empty glass and settled murky green eyes on him, dark in the low bar light.

He shouldn't go any nearer to the stage. He stalls too long.

"You can't say you don't know how. I'm a teacher."

Something in the wall of nimble guitar behind Tom halts and hollows out and Tom opens his mouth with no direction, waits for a smart response to drop into it. It takes a pathetically long few seconds.

"You'd regret it." He laughs to help cover how lame he's being and someone in the crowd behind him swears. The eyes above that cute nose skip away from him and widen at something past his shoulder that makes her face twist.

"Gabe, don't!"

A clenched grip yanks Tom back by the meat of his arm. He drops his glass, looks around, but the air is made of mud. A broad wall between shoulders in a black t-shirt. He's caught.

Bones strike bone with only skin between.

Tom's last snap of a thought is that *these are my only clean scrubs-*

Officer Dean Wright gets home still thinking about the girl with the tongue ring. Gomez had called in sick and he'd been working with Richards today, and Richards isn't prone to gentleness no matter the case. He'd looked at her sitting on her bed in the hospital and asked why the S.A.K. had shown no bruising. Back in the car, he'd kept mentioning her piercings. Halfway through their questions, Dean had known they weren't getting anywhere and they were doing it fast. She'd clammed up and refused to talk anymore. A closed-faced nurse had ushered them out.

"Girl like that? She probably just stopped counting the beers. Woke up regretting it." When he works with Richards, Richards always drives. Dean had just nodded. It was easier than arguing, and she hadn't been willing to cooperate. In the end it made no difference what he thought. "The reason we don't have resources for those rape kits is because we collect too many."

"That's sad though, isn't it?"

"Damn right it's sad." Richards takes corners too fast and hears what he wants to hear. "Sad no one knows how to behave anymore. If they did, we'd just be testing the real ones."

Dean sits quiet and cramped in his seat until the end of the shift, but he's still thinking about her when he gets home. He can still hear the rattle of the girl clicking her tongue ring against her teeth as she stared at the floor, can still hear Richards saying again, "Now, don't lie to us."

The apartment is new and yawningly empty. Undecorated. All the art from the home deco aisle of the discount superstore is propped against one wall, waiting for him to have the time. He's seen all the paintings and prints and photos before, nothing like his wife's good taste – whoops, ex-wife – but it hadn't rubbed off on him. And here he is.

He's still unpacking. He'd done the kitchen first and got tired of it. It wasn't fun when he had to organize it all himself. That was three weeks ago. His living room is an easy chair facing a television on its stand. It's enough for him.

He's pretty sure that she divorced him because of just that. Dean is always happy with the way things are. Content. He's easy. He doesn't feel compelled to fix things the way Laure does, always moving, always rustling. She loses sleep over things. He doesn't. Maybe it was sleeping too soundly that did it. Maybe if he'd been awake with her, she'd have stayed.

It had been a slow erosion until the bridge fell. He still calls her too often. He's doing it now, waiting as the phone rings.

It's late, but she stays up. He knows he's interrupting because she's always working. She picks up and he feels the little lingering triumph of getting her attention. She hasn't stopped picking up yet.

"Hello?" It's close to ten but she sounds awake. Terse.

"Hey."

"What do you need?"

"Nothing. Long day."

"I'm sure."

"What about you?"

"Always. You should have friends to call when you're bored instead of me." It could have been said more unkindly, but she means it. That's what stings.

"I have friends. They just don't like to talk." Dean's empty apartment echoes his side of the conversation back at him.

"Big surprise. A real nurturing community of personalities, you police."

"That's not fair."

"Sure, it isn't." But she doesn't commit to this argument with him anymore.

"Gomez wants me to go to a party with him."

Laure sounds tired of this conversation already. “So go, Dean. No one’s stopping you.” Nothing is stopping him from moving on with his life but her and the fact that she’s already done the same. She’s bought a new plot of land, found a new charity project. She always did love dogs. Dean can’t even finish unpacking his apartment.

“It’s just been a long time. Who knows if I’m fun anymore.”

“You were never fun.” But he’s pretty sure he can hear a tiny smile. His self-deprecation always worked.

“Hey. That’s not true.”

“True, fair. Whatever. I have to go. I’m busy.”

“Something important?”

“I’m always doing something important.”

“I know.”

“Goodnight, Dean.”

“Goodnight, Laure. I miss you.”

But she’s already hung up.

There’s a cat outside somewhere, talking to itself in the dark. He can hear it through his closed window. He drowns it out with the television, news coming at eleven.

Gomez is back the next day nursing a stuffed-up nose. He sneezes a lot.

“Hey. Keep it over there, okay?” Dean drives so Gomez doesn’t have to touch as much of the inside of the squad car. He talks in noncommittal circles for a bit before he tells his partner about the girl from yesterday, trying to make it sound like it wasn’t on his mind the whole time.

Gomez shrugs, passive. "Sounds like it was a dead end. You can't help if they don't want you to." His partner has always been easygoing, just like him. Gomez doesn't overthink things. It helps Dean put his concern away.

"Hey, look at that." Gomez is pointing. A guy walking a dog, so?

Oh.

The pit bull ban is a few years old now and even from a distance that dog looks stitched and scarred. Right in the city, too, in plain sight. It's strange enough to be worth checking out.

"You got this?" Gomez is eyeing the bleakness of the street out the windshield, sniffing.

"Yeah, don't worry about it. Stay here, no point in you sneezing all over him." Gomez tips his chin: - *Thank you.*

He gets out and it's cold enough to smart, even in the heavy uniform. Dean hopes this won't take long. The owner hasn't noticed him yet.

"Hey, how're you doing? What's this guy's name?" Fuck, it's windy out here.

Finally, the guy turns, too casually. So, he knew Dean was there. Interesting. The guy has sharp little features but his eyes are green and clear and wide, a surprise in a hard-used face. Dean can't decide if the guy looks too young or too old for the age he tries to place him at. The dog is taking a shit between them.

"He's Brad. Brad Pitt, get it?" Clever, sort of. He sounds nervous.

"Funny. You had him long?"

An uncomfortable pause. Dean can't tell from the damage on the dog how old it is.

"He's my sister's, actually."

Of course, he is.

"Got his license with you?"

There's a slow beat where nobody moves, not the guy, not the dog, not Dean, and then they're running from him, the dog leaping after his owner like he was born for it.

Fuck.

His gear is heavy and his shoes are terrible for a foot chase. He hears Gomez getting out of the car behind him but it's pointless; if Dean can't catch him, his sick partner won't be able to. Dean isn't slow. He's fit, totally average, maybe above on a good day, that's what he tells himself, but fuck, this guy is *fast*.

There's a playground in the way but the dog and his owner fly through it. Dean's chest is starting to stitch up. He hits the frozen ground again funny and a pain shoots up the small of his back. He can't keep his speed up. The moment he slows he knows he's lost them. He doubles over and snatches his radio.

"Command, have any units around Ashton and... and MacDonal be on the lookout for a man with a pit bull. The dog is grey, the man white, young, and short. Maybe five-five. Red jacket and jeans." He takes his finger off the call button. "Damn little fucker's a jackrabbit."

It feels like a long walk back to the squad car with his back twinging. It's got to be his sciatica again. Gomez is leaning on the hood, watching him with a smile he's hiding poorly. Some birds wheel wide wing spans over the trees down by the lake, but from this distance Dean can't tell if they're seagulls or hawks.

Eddie wakes up after the sun has faded into early afternoon and she stares at the slim shadows of branches being cast on the ceiling. She blinks, just another minute or so, and another hour has gone by. She feels somehow more tired. It's warm in bed and cold without.

She keeps socks on the floor where she steps getting out and slips them on over built up calluses. Still fumbling, half-blind, she gropes for her glasses. It'll be an hour or so before her eyes aren't too gummy for her contacts. She marks another day by scribbling out a space on the calendar. She isn't counting down to anything. The bathroom light would be too much, so she leaves it off to find the rim of the toilet in the blurry semi-dark. It's 3:04 pm, says the analog cell phone display, and while the sun is still struggling not to set, the apartment doesn't have enough windows to let in the light.

"Hey, you home?" She knocks with the edge of a palm at her brother's bedroom door, to the right of the crack, but there's no return sound. He's either out or unconscious. Hopefully not both. Mayhem perks her brindled ears up at the harsh rhythm of the knocks and jumps off the couch to see what's going on. She stands beside Eddie, who knocks again. "Dude, I can see my roots. I need your help!"

Nothing. The dog cocks her head, waiting.

Eddie skips doing anything in the kitchen then. To hell with him, he can feed himself. If he's even here.

Her eyes have warmed up enough for the harsh flip of the light switch and Eddie squats to dig the bottle of bleach out from under the sink. She'd had to go all the way to the beauty supply outlet on Queen Street for it and it's half empty now. Mayhem is at her elbow.

"Do you mind?" A brown-eyed blink. Innocence, or playing dumb. "Go on. This isn't for you."

It's a delicate operation of lifting her dry hair aside with gloved fingers to layer in the bleach, but the result is that she looks nothing like herself. A stranger borrowing her eyes. Edie's scalp does not appreciate it. Her brother doesn't really notice the difference. He remembers her mostly from when she was biting with baby teeth. They're a tightly wound pair now, and she's been blonde since they reconnected.

She's peeling the gloves off inside out and ignoring how much they like look like giant spent condoms cuddled up in the trash when his door opens.

"So, you *are* home." She needs to rinse her hair soon, but she follows him into the kitchen, watches him start the coffee. He grunts, hair all in his eyes.

"Got in late." Like always. She'd walked home from the bar around midnight after drinking too much to have any more fun. Gabe usually stayed until the doors get locked. She'd never seen him too drunk to keep going, but he likes to fight (or, other people like to fight with him), and leaving him there alone makes Edie nervous. Heck doesn't look out for him like he always promises her he will. Or maybe Gabe is just impossible to supervise. "You play too late. You'd get a better turn out if you started earlier, you know that."

She knows he hates to be casually nagged at like that. There's an angry wince in his posture as he pours a cup and holds his face over it. Everyone is always throwing helpful little chirps his way. "You need to print more flyers if you want a good turnout. Ask Heck to do it."

They don't own a computer. Edie arrived in the city without one and Gabe wouldn't know what to do with one if he had it. She can't stand the gaping blankness of dead screens anymore, or worse, the cold glow of a room when there's one on inside, running. Humming. Flashing at her. She still won't carry a cell phone because it had been her Motorola they'd used to record it all on.

"Yeah, well. It'll be even later tonight." He doesn't look at her when he says it. Hasn't looked at her yet, keeps giving her his back. That gives him away. There's a cold pulse in her chest.

“You’re not.” He is. “No. Not again.” It’s so soon. Every time he goes, she’s worried that he’s losing another piece of himself. Some important part is being lost under the couch forever. And he has so few left. “Not after last time!”

Her tone is pleading. Last time they’d just shot the dog at the edge of the plywood ring and Gabe had come home to slam his bedroom door so hard it cracked. Woke the neighbours. Again. The door sits funny on its hinges now and they sit precariously in their apartment, five storeys up and on their second strike.

He doesn’t answer her. Not even a shrug. He leans against the sink and sips his coffee even though it’s probably too hot. Stares at the blank wall across from him.

It’s all the answer she needs or expects. Edie has grown used to him.

“Well, fuck. Fuck you, then.” Defeated. There’s nothing she can say. It’s like debating with death. It’s too late.

Now that he’s up, Mayhem ignores Edie and reaches to paw at Gabe’s leg, asking to be taken out. Gabe puts his chipped mug in the sink too hard but he has a soft hand for the dog. His dog.

“Don’t fucking start. I don’t ever get on your case for all your shit.”

“My shit? Excuse me?” This is unfair but escalating. Edie tries to rein back the bile in her tone. One of them needs to stop this before it starts. “It’s not the same.” She can feel the chemical burn of the bleach against her scalp. She needs to rinse it before it’s too late.

“No? Tyler is just a real chill guy, then? That’s all?” He’s ready with it. Had it loaded and waiting.

Edie flushes. Embarrassment makes her angry, that chill touch of fear at her shame being revealed by someone else. Gabe is graceless about it. He is about most things.

She stands her ground, stares a hole in him, stares until he looks away. Until he’s rinsing his mug for need of something to do. *Unfair.*

“I’m careful.” It’s spoken into the sink.

That fact could never be enough, even if she trusted it. Or him.

But it's a concession. She unclenches her fists. Shakes her hands like she's trying to dry them.

"Whatever. Whatever, Gabe. Just remember to call Heck." She gets in another command just to rub his coat the wrong way one more time. "He had to take all your shit home last week when you rushed off. They hate it when you leave with the truck. Their shitbox can't fit everything in the back and they had to leave half the kit at the bar."

He's tensed and leaves her in the kitchen in a rush. That's how she knows he's listening. That he might do as he's told.

His own dad had died before their mom married Edie's dad and tried the whole thing again. He'd drowned off the coast of Cuba when he went back to visit. The only good thing Raul Garcia ever taught his son was how to play the guitar. Gabe had told her so once.

She wishes he would play it more.

The red carpeted seats and the bright yellow accents of the TTC are familiar colours to her now. The windows grimed with salt after last week's short snow. It's sweaty and crowded inside the bus and Edie has a headache. She closes her eyes and sways with the turns.

She'd rinsed the bleach out carefully with her neck craned over the lip of the bathtub, holding her breath, and by the time she was done, Gabe had left. Took the truck, like always, and left her to walk Mayhem. At least she's well-behaved, although Edie still crosses the sidewalk to avoid other dogs when she takes her out.

When her brother isn't driving her, Edie takes the subway. Often, with her headphones in, she prefers it. She's cloaked in transisters, observed only from a distance. Ignores attempts for eye contact because it will make her visible. If she holds her old discman steady, then David

Bowie and *Motörhead* don't skip. No one is snapping the radio off too hard because he was cut off in traffic, punching the dash for red lights. Instead, the benign, buzzing quiet of crowds.

It's late afternoon, but with the cloud cover, it's almost dark when she stamps off the bus, short legs on the tall stairs, boots too heavy. The plaza parking lot is almost empty, two employee cars in front of the cheap Italian place, lights still off in *Terapia*. Edie darts for the alley between the buildings to dodge the wind.

The parking lot wraps around to the other side of the buildings for deliveries, but this lot is empty too. The wind is back again and cutting and Edie remembers to dig out her gloves as she begins her trudge across the field beyond.

A laborious flat walk until the ice-hard ridges of grass rise to the train tracks, but she doesn't need to go that far. There's a couch tucked in the nearest copse of trees, facing the tracks, and the shapes and colours of her friends at a distance are there now. She's late. She punched her boots through the snow to the same spot all last winter, but now it's just a slick of frozen grassy mud. Still an inconvenient walk. That's what makes it safe.

Tyler is the tallest and the most paranoid and sees her first. One of his eyes doesn't quite pay attention to the other, but it's set in a handsome boney face. A classical structure, or something, as Edie once described him. All three of them are talking at once, but he stops and smiles to see her.

"She arrives." His black backpack is settled in the corner of the couch. Only Heck's younger brother, Alex is sitting.

"Edie!" Amy throws her arms up in greeting, but there's always a half-sarcastic lilt to her enthusiasm. Today her laugh is too highly peaked. She's been scratching at her face again and the cakey makeup can't cover it. Her hair is curled, but her nail polish is a few, chipped weeks old. Her smile is real. "Alonso is ready to open. What took you?"

"Gabe." It's an answer none of them press. Edie isn't sure if she wants them to. She dumps her heavy purse on the damp couch and wonders how Alex's denim ass can stand it.

“Well, you owe me a hundred, now that you’re here.” Tyler leans down to unzip his backpack and feels around inside of it, tosses her a single dirty yellow crystal in a sealed little bag for her money. The trade cracks the shell she carries around with her. Edie can smile. The hard part of the week is over.

In her purse is another smaller bag that zips closed. It’s printed with dozens of little cartoon angels, a bag from a toy set she’d once had years ago. When she opens it, a burned, stale smell coats her fingers. A torch lighter, a clink as the contents move around. The glass pipe is blackened in the bowl and Edie just holds it for a while, listening to her friends argue about what temperature it needs to be for snow to stick. For rain to turn to hail. The muddy sediment smell of the lake closes in and the wet tang of hot railroad iron hisses to life when a VIA rushes past. The speed of it raises a mist that settles on the four of them like metallic sea spray. Edie lengthens the moment, twirling the pipe between her fingers. Geese fly south above them, a honking checkmark. Everything is in its place.

She’ll teach from five o’clock onwards on the stage in the bar, salsa, tango, informal lessons to early birds that will blend into a night of real dancing when the band shows up. She loads the pipe, a tiny tinkle of crystal on glass.

Dancing sucks without it. Her friends suck without it. Everything does. Edie takes care to fix it early, to set the night up right.

*Self care*, she’d read once, after leaving Oakville’s manicured lawns and knowing faces behind her. *A daily practice that supports connection with one’s “aliveness.”*

She breathes the cloud of ammonium life out into the misty air. She feels a blooming in her head, behind her eyes. All around her. The feeling is out of reach to her sober. Tyler always answers his cell phone and never says no.

“I told you this shit was fire,” he says. It is. He never lies, either.

Alonso starts the drink specials and ups the cover charge when Edie clears the stage, but the music stays on loud, fast-paced and inviting. Everyone is unconsciously moving, bobbing or swaying to the tempo, but not everyone is doing it in time. It's beautiful. It's equalizing.

There is pain cramping her feet but it's a distant throb that doesn't reach her. The bar is just filling up, groups of friends claiming tables and corners. A rabble of live voices. It's too early to take her meticulously worn-in shoes off. Used satin, the Social Dance. She'd stolen them from a window display. Worn them right out and never gone back. She needed some way to start. She had to teach herself to dance with partners. Her mother had only paid for ballet.

The band has still not arrived. Edie's pulse leaps, magnified by paranoia, but she forces it back down. Gabe is being careful. None of the other guys he plays with are here, either. Alex drove home to meet his brother hours ago and get their gear, but he hasn't come back. Tyler and Amy left after the first rush hour train went past and Edie went to teach her first group of beginners. She's high and coasting, but the jump of anxiety about her brother makes her sick. Twists her in her skin.

She taps on the bar and orders a gin. Two gins later Gabe and the guys come in, carting their things. Edie's laugh flirts with a sob and she buys a drink for Alonso, who watches her like she's a firework indoors. He salutes her with his bar rag. Edie never misses how people see her. She downs her drink and goes to help angle mics and unwind cords.

There are wide flat steps bordering the front of the stage and the set up goes fast. Gabe hasn't lifted his head yet and isn't looking for her. He glances up sharp when Edie takes him by the arm and she wonders where his coat is.

"Everything go okay?"

"Fine." He's obviously not though, and he's not going to share. He'd been looser when he came trudging in with an amp handle in each hand, but he's aggressively tuned into his guitar now. Heck and Alex seem to be the only ones he can drift through, react to without

tightness. Occasionally smile around. It's happened once or twice. But they ask him nothing, and he makes Edie ask him so much.

"You sure?"

"Same as always." No better. No worse. Edie can feel her pulse in each big toe. She needs a drink before she picks out a partner for the warmup.

The stage suddenly has purpose again, instruments stretching before a show, and the energy in the bar localizes. Spreads out around the edges, gives respect to the dance floor. The regulars know what happens on the nights *Serpiente* plays.

There's a comfort in the clutter of noise that jostles the stage before they begin. Edie paces herself through a straw with this gin and scans the crowd. A bunch she's danced with before, all left feet. She likes to warm the crowd up by showing them a new wobbly colt. It makes them more likely to relax and join in. Hey, you can't be worse than that guy, right? When Edie teaches someone new, she leads. She always leads, and practiced partners won't dance with her because of it.

She spots him down at the other end of the bar. New. Conspicuously alone. Short like her and wearing his coat zipped all the way up like armor. She likes it when they're awkward and a little afraid of her. It's an easy stroll down the length of the bar. Edie bites down on the straw to keep herself cool, chill like a breeze instead of the spark from the pipe that's in her blood.

"I don't know you." She drops into the space beside him, maybe too fast. He chokes on his beer a little in surprise. Definitely too fast, then. Jeez, he is awkward.

"Should you?" His face is all pointy angles except for his rock of a jaw. He's blushing. Slight shoulders, limbs stretched between their joints. Edie feels a laugh crawling its way up her throat already.

"I don't know. Should I?"

“You a bouncer here or something?” He seems to be recovering himself but he’s not funny. If he isn’t quick, he can’t be a charmer. Edie prefers that to be lacking, too.

So she answers, “Pretty much. What’s your name?”

He laughs, but it’s a bad defense. A piece of rickety armor. “Tom. Yours?”

Tom. She doesn’t answer with hers, though. A name is permission. “I teach here during the day, so I’m here a lot.” She presents him with a minor mercy. Maybe he’ll pick up on the conversation from here.

“You teach? Here? What?”

She waves her hand at the stage, at the smooth, maintained floor. “Dance.” And when the guy’s clear eyes hit the stage, Hector strums wood and strings into life and the roll of *Mañana No* begins with a chromatic tumble.

It seems to affect Tom, whose attention doesn’t immediately swing back to her. He’s watching the band, mouth gaping a little. She finishes her drink, breaks the touch barrier first when she taps his arm with the backs of her knuckles.

“So, do you want to?”

He stalls, looking at her the way most men do when they’re asked to embarrass themselves, but there is a real panic in his face. A primal opening. It’s a powerful unbalancing. She pushes.

“You can’t say you don’t know how. I’m a teacher.”

His mouth is working for a response, flexing into a frightened smile. Edie can almost hear the excuses ticking through his head. She’s heard them all.

“I’m a bad student.”

All her fault, then. It’s an old hat that still doesn’t fit. She tries to smile through it, but something is moving behind him. Someone is pushing dancers aside, clearing a path and then Gabe is suddenly there, too close, jaw set, why is he--

“Gabe, don’t!” Don’t do whatever you’re going to do.

But Gabe snatches Tom away from her by his upper arm and a glass shatters. Edie hears Alonso shout but he's too far away. Tom only comes up to her brother's collarbone. She thinks, absurdly, drifting, of how he'd spent a summer before she was born recovering from that same bone being fractured. A second later the wet sound of the punch shakes her. She makes an involuntary sound. A scream.

Then, "Stop it! Stop!"

Tom is stumbling, barely conscious. Gabe has him by the coat and is dragging him outside. He's outrunning Alonso and his military haircut who's caught in the press of a hooting crowd. An audience cheers them outside.

The band plays on, used to instances like this. Edie is cold with fear, chases them out the front door. Ken the bouncer doesn't know quite what to do because Gabe is the regular. Tom is a stranger.

A dazed, feral little stranger, hands held up, defensive, practiced at this. This guy is wiry strong, but clumsy. Gabe is going to brain him on the sidewalk.

"Fuck, Gabe! I said stop!"

"What the *hell* is he doing here?" Gabe points. Edie comes up short. Feels lost. Watches as Tom spits blood into fresh snow. He's leaning on Heck's Civic, dripping a split lip all over it.

"What the hell are you talking about?" She's desperate to calm him down. There's a face in the window of the Open Late Italian restaurant next door, watching them. It disappears.

"He's a tech, from the animal hospital! What, did you fucking follow me or something?"

Edie feels like she's a lap behind. Her head turns between them because she can't stare at both of them at once.

"Yeah." Tom chokes it out, testing his jaw. Eyeing Gabe with a flinched posture. Ready to try and run. It sounds like it hurts him to speak. "Had to know."

Focus snapping on. *Oh.*

Edie blinks at him, at the coat riding up over a pastel green shirt hem, at his smeared red chin. He's a vet tech who followed her brother after his brother brought him a dog. She has two arms locked around one of Gabe's now. He's bristling but letting her hold him like it's an excuse not to keep hitting.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

But there's a ripple through the crowd that's emptied into the parking lot to watch – *Cops, watch it, cops* – and the electricity is sapped. Drunk observers flee inside when the siren announces itself, short and curt.

"Gabe—" He can't be caught fighting. He can't get booked. She pushes at him and he resists, watching Tom wipe his mouth. Then he runs. Down the fronts of the buildings as a cop gets out and watches him go, considering the distance and the effort. He's young and thin but doesn't try for it. The other one is thicker and middle aged with a haircut like Alonso.

Tom is sitting on the hood of a car that isn't his, bell rung. No threat. Edie's blood is electric anxiety. She's a lightning rod still absorbing what just happened. She breathes out, and out again. She tries not to look as high as she feels.

"And what's going on here?"

She shrugs at the two cops and turns on her dancing heel, heads back to the warmth and light of the bar. They let her go. She's just a woman. Alonso is waiting for her with a clutch of ice wrapped in a dish towel. She waits until her blood stops singing so off-key before she takes it back out to Tom.

When you're fighting someone, it feels like you're fighting the anger. It's right there, as physical as Gabe is. It has a face, a jaw just asking for it. But no matter how empty he is afterwards it always comes back.

His right hand stings but he's not bleeding. He discovers that after he's wiped the foreign blood off on his jeans. He must have busted the guy's lip. He deserved it, though. He deserved it for following him. He repeats this to himself as he waits around the corner down the line of storefronts, trying not to shiver without a coat.

He's not sure who called the cops but they might do it again if he goes back to the car. When he leans around the corner again, the squad car is gone, no more wolf in the parking lot meadow. He carries nothing but his wallet and cigarettes and car keys, sometimes his guitar pick. He depends on his sister for everything else. He walks back, gets in his truck and pulls out for home. He has a shift starting in a few hours anyway and it'll be hard enough with a bruised set of knuckles.

Fourteen hours later, with the smells of the ambulance washed off him, he jogs into the evening without music until Lucky calls. Gabe's thighs and chest are burning, his skin numb with cold. The sunset is bleak, washed-out behind the clouds. He catches his breath and listens carefully.

It's not another invitation; Lucky needs some repairs done. Before he got his paramedic licence, Gabe was an unlicensed contractor. His hands are all he's ever had. His tools are already in the bed of his truck.

It's a long drive to Milton, but the hypnotizing dark makes it bearable. The world is only headlights, taillights, and the pitch rural black to either side. His shift today was busy, and he spent most of it wheeling stretchers in and out of hospitals. He's jealous of those that go in and

have nothing to do but feel their pain and recover. Nothing is expected of a patient. It used to be the only time Gabe could relax, a place where he didn't have to be on guard. He hasn't had a fight bad enough to send him there in years, though. He almost misses it.

The warm breath off the lake is gone when he gets out of the truck on Lucky's farmland, replaced by winds strong from the flat fields. There's a hollowed-out school bus at the very back of the property. The last time he was here Lucky had asked him to bury a dog out by it, a few yards into the woods. He'd prayed not to hit another skeleton while he was digging. The school bus is a mobile clinic for the dogs they can patch up enough to almost die again. The woods are for the rest.

The grounds seem deserted but the barn is alive with barking. Gabe has no idea how Lucky keeps them quiet when he needs to, if he ever does. The neighbours are a short drive away and invisible at night except for the distant property lights that prove they're there.

The pit is dug into the ground directly behind the barn and plywood has been built up around it. No chain link yet, not until Lucky can find someone quiet to do it. He can't be that handy if he needs Gabe around. A fence dug in with a concrete base isn't beyond Gabe's skillset, but he pretends like it is.

There's a steel washtub with two inches of water still frozen at the bottom next to the door. Scratch lines in the dirt of two corners. Old brown stains. Brown beer bottles. A child's blue plastic truck. The audience. There are no benches.

Lucky is logging weights in a notebook when Gabe lets himself into the low drafty building. He was expected. He had been in Geordie Strachen's grade two class, watched him pick his nose and wipe it on the slow kid. These days Geordie goes by Lucky and seven months ago Gabe had treated him for a dog bite in the city. His face always has a lot of colour in it. It's pink now and clashes with his cropped red hair. They look the same worn age, too rough for their late thirties.

“Shit, man!” Gabe’s fingers become fists, but Lucky is already smiling. Obviously barking dogs cover the sound of a parking Ford. “You’re too quiet, creeping up like that. Fuck’s wrong with you?”

“You called me.” Gabe doesn’t josh. He isn’t good at it. Guys like Lucky seem to like him despite that. They like giving him shit about it.

“Come from Toronto?”

“Yeah.”

“Working?”

“No.”

“Fuck of a drive, eh?” Gabe’s one-word answers never slow Lucky down. He just needs something to bounce off. Gabe doesn’t see any coke on the makeshift office desk Lucky works at, but its evidence is in those busy wide eyes. “Hope you brought your shit, I need two more runs built at the back, too. Expanding, you know?”

The inside of the barn is a kennel and each of the dog runs has plastic walls and doors, opaque to waist height so the animals can’t see each other. The blinds don’t do much good, judging by the ceaseless noise. The smell inside the building is rank hair and old waste.

He’s here for repairs and to add to the work he’s already done. These dogs are strong. When he looks through the fencing from his towering height, every face watching him is scarred. There is a line of filthy treadmills against one wall and rat traps around the piled bags of dogfood. The barn is too cold – like a cellar.

Lucky is behind him unlocking and unlatching a kennel door. “There are some crates stacked out back. You take ‘em out one at a time, then you can get in. Don’t rush it.”

Gabe plucks a leash off the wall and opens the door of the last kennel, cautious. Slow. The stocky black pit bull inside steps back, obedient, and sits. He leashes the dog and opens the door and suddenly she’s out, and she throws herself at the dog Lucky has just taken from

the next kennel. The tan pit he has hold of surges to meet her. Snarls shake the air when the snapping of leash leather denies them.

“Watch it!” Panic-tinged, real anger from Lucky. “Shit, Gabe! Those jaws could break an arm in half!”

Gabe flexes without thinking, hauls back on the leash. He keeps his face from changing.

“See? She’s a game little bitch! See? They can’t wait to get to it.” Lucky has relaxed into laughter. Proud. Just look at his dogs. Gabe has seen a dog jump the pit, running. Blind scared. It was shot dead by its man.

Curs that quit make the sport look bad. Their fear gives up the game, and the dog men don’t want to see it. Gabe knows who that fear really looks bad on. The gentle ones die badly, but fast. He’s seen it.

Lucky is dragging the tan out the back to the crates while the rest of the dogs go wild in their runs at the sound of the near miss. The violence crackles the air in the barn. Gabe waits at the door until the tan is locked away.

“They really that tough?”

“I’ve seen a dog attack on two broken legs and bite till it died.” Lucky takes the leash from him and gets the smoky black dog put away. He’s better at it. “Scooted across the dirt like a wheelbarrow!” He wants to talk. The dogs have keyed him up. Gabe doesn’t think he gets any other visitors. “Nothing’s tougher than one of my dogs. That’s why they all want my training.”

Gabe lets a few beats pass before he asks, “They don’t train them themselves?”

Lucky scoffs, heads back inside for another dog, expecting to be followed. Gabe follows. “You kidding? They think they do, coming out here to check up on my shit, but that’s a city boy for you. Bank boys, all of ‘em. They don’t have the resources, just a bunch of basements, so they think cash is all the resource they need. Typical.”

Gabe was raised in the city, he just doesn’t look it.

Lucky takes his silence for agreement and struggles with the next dog, pulls it back from the other kennel doors. He's still talking.

"I hate it when the bank boys come out. Make a scene, get loud like they're just like us. We live this shit. They just vacation." He shrugs, too strung out to get too angry without a present target. Gabe is disgusted by the familiarity of it. It makes him angry to see his own anger, his own patterns, in someone like Geordie Strachen. The booger bully. "But they keep us going. You know? So, what the fuck, right?"

"Guess so."

Gabe doesn't ask if they're bankers or just men that own detached houses in the suburbs and have the money to pay.

His agreement is all Lucky wanted. "They should stick to their boats and cottages, eh?"

"Yeah."

"You should come out next time. For real, though. You aren't here to just work the clean up, I can tell. Men are like dogs, you know? I can tell." Lucky looks like he wants another hit. He's rubbing his hands and eyeing Gabe like a possibility. "Learn to coach, get you your own dog. Maybe two. You'll love it."

Gabe looks right back. "I don't know." Let Lucky do the convincing. Let him feel like he's earned it.

"Don't know? Please. It ain't as bad as they all make it sound. The dogs love it, you can see that. Made for it, all of 'em."

Gabe nods to keep him going, nods like that's all he sees.

"Them reporters, the paper... They get it all wrong. They don't know. You'll see."

"The rest of the guys won't care?"

"If you come with me nobody'll mind. The old guys'd only get on your case if you came alone. If you didn't know me." Lucky's grin is sharp, yellow wolf teeth all wrong inside a barn.

"But I know you ain't no one they won't like. Some fucking undercover ball-less coward."

Gabe can feel the importance of his answer like a hand around his throat. He snorts a sound like a flat laugh.

“So if I know, they’ll know. See?” Lucky’s smile is all teeth now. He thinks he’s won.

“Okay.” Shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “I’ll see what it’s like. You want the new runs attached to the old like the rest?”

Lucky nods, still distracted, focused on his new convert, on his new friend in his sport. He’ll get to show off.

“Bring a bitch if you got one. The boys’ll want to see her. Get an eye on what wants to fuck *this*.” Lucky gestures the length of him. Gabe knows what he looks like. The comment glances off him and he doesn’t feel it.

“You’ve got to come early, though, and we don’t meet here. We’ll get together in the city, I’ll tell you where. We take my van back from there. Can’t have ‘em all driving here, eh? All those cars?” He smirks like it’s the funniest thought. “No. We get the talking done there. Here’s for the bets and the fights. We don’t want to keep brawling them in parking lots anymore. That’s why they’re going to pay me good for this place. No eyes, no ears. No rush.”

No rush. Gabe bends to shuffle through his tools and get to work. He knows how long the fights can last. He’s cleaned up after several.

“Oh, and bring your piece. And coke if you got it, yeah?”

Gabe has never touched a gun in his life. Cocaine makes him crazy.

“Will do. Now let me get to work if you want this done. I have a shift in the morning.”

He calls Edie on their landline from his cell phone in the truck. He has pulled over a half-mile from the farm. He couldn’t wait.

“Hello?”

“It’s me.” He says it every time, even though call display makes it pointless. He’s not used to being announced by technology.

“Of course, it’s you. What?”

“I have a date.”

Silence on the line. More silence.

“Edie?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” She knows. Doesn’t want to know. What else could he mean?

“I’ll have the date before it happens this time, and I know the spot. I’ll know before, not after. He wants me to come.”

Silence. Gabe can hear his dog scratching at the apartment door on the other end of the line. Whining.

Edie hangs up.

Gabe drives home in the country dark with sore hands, smelling like the barn. He hasn’t been happy in so long he’s not sure what he feels. He feels light, weightless. Nervous.

He *feels*.

The chilled towel pressed to his lip doesn't help. It was dirty, now it's bloody. His mouth is soupy. He spits red onto the thin new snow in front of the cops.

"I don't know what to tell you. He hit me, that's it."

"And you don't know the guy?"

"We've never seen him before," Edie chimes in. She steps closer to Tom as if to prove something. There are still faces watching from inside the bar, but they don't want to be seen doing so. Nobody wants to get involved. There are no sides of the story offered to contradict Edie's.

"Okay. Can we see your IDs?"

It's a cursory check, and both are handed back quickly. They're satisfied by Edie's answer for Tom. One cop shrugs at the other, already detaching from a sense of urgency.

"Maybe you should head home. Call it a night, kid. You've got bad luck." Tom isn't a kid. He nods anyway, relieved to agree.

Edie answers for him again. "We're not planning on waiting around for him to come back." Making it sound like he has a babysitter, like they don't need to put any more thought into his wellbeing. Someone else will take care of him.

The snow is too new to make a sound under the squad car's tires and Tom watches it out of the parking lot, down the street, around a turn before he meets the stare that's boring into him. Her eyes are snake-green in the streetlight. He's going to have to deal with this.

"So, who are you?" She asks him the question he wants to ask her. His bruised jaw was too slow to work through it first.

"Tom. I told you." It hurts to talk.

"Funny." She clearly doesn't think it is.

"Who are *you*?"

“His sister. So you better tell me what’s going on.”

“You don’t know?”

That shuts her up. She knows. The frustration and embarrassment warring on her face are as good as an answer.

“He’s brought in three,” he pushes, holding her stare. “*Three.*”

She looks away before he does, lips pressed together. Arms crossed. The snow has stopped falling but there are melting flakes in her hair, nearly lost in all that chemical blonde.

“He couldn’t just *leave* them.”

“Why not?” That’s it. That’s what he needs to know. It’s dragged him out of the hospital, off his shift, through cities in the middle of the night.

Why? Why risk it? Who is he?

“Could *you* do that?”

Brakes in the distance, a near miss late on a Saturday night. How could she ask that? How is that a reasonable question to ask him? Momentarily, Tom’s trajectory alters, diverted.

“No, I wouldn’t-- What’s your name? What’s *his* name? Gabe? Gabriel?”

“Don’t ever call him that. I’m Edie.” So, Edie. And Gabe. That clears up nothing.

“Edie, what the fuck is going on?” His sore face has already brought on a headache. He’s fallen down a sharp plunge into exhaustion. It’s the only thing he can think to ask.

He can’t feel any more exhausted than she looks, though. She sighs and slouches onto the hood of the car parked next to the one he’s sitting on, pressed down by the weight of what he’s asking. Neither of them is wearing a coat. Why doesn’t she seem cold?

“He knows a guy. He gets a call. Gabe goes. Watches. Cleans up.” It sounds like she’s too tired to be furious anymore, but that’s really all she knows. “He’s not a part of it. Not yet, anyway.”

She's digging in her purse and a pack of cigarettes comes out. Her hands are trembling. Maybe she's cold after all. Tom holds out a hand like he's entitled. She leans forward to pass him one, agreeing that he is.

"And I'm supposed to just believe you."

"Don't you?"

Silence again. The cigarette is a Du Maurier, the brand he smoked when he could afford it. It's one less thing that's gone wrong for him tonight.

"If I could make him stop, I would." Her admission is unexpected and it just hangs there between them. It's a required vulnerability, but Edie's edges are softening for the first time as she smokes and stares at a cloud-dead sky. At the red-lighted lettering of the bar. At the brick wall.

"Okay. So why does he?"

There it is. A smile that doesn't mean what smiles should mean.

"Fuck." She ashes her smoke, stands, gestures to the bar. A final pull and then it's crushed under her heeled shoe in the snow. "Why do we do anything?"

She drinks as much as he does, abandons her attempts to make him dance and leans on the bar when she talks. He likes her. Despite himself.

Her attention feels both intense and fleeting. She's picked him, he thinks, but only for now.

"I can't believe you fucking followed him. You're crazy, aren't you?" Elbow on the bar, head in her hand. Watching him.

"Probably." He's supposed to be finishing his shift soon. The bar is crowded and hot and he's taken off his jacket and spread it over a stool. His pastel scrub shirt is a conspicuous island in a darker sea of clothing. Edie is wearing a dress made for twirling, but it's also made in black.

"I thought he was going to kill you."

“Great, because so did I.”

“He wouldn’t, though.” He can hear the reluctant affection she says it with. He’d once had that for a brother. But maybe this is different.

“I’ll take your word for it.” They’re both smiling, Tom through a split lip, Edie through more than just booze. He can tell, but he isn’t put off. A year ago, all he would have noticed was that she was high. He’d have wanted in.

Tom wears long sleeves under his scrubs most days but they’re pushed up now to counter the heat of so many bodies indoors. His arms are spotted with scars. There’s one big one from an abscess in the crook of his elbow, still hidden by a rolled cuff. His veins are only just coming back to the surface, frightened blue-green sea creatures no longer endangered.

He’s stuck with the reminders, and reminders make it harder. Edie is eyeing them and pretending not to.

“You want some?” She’s knocking something that looks like cocaine onto the bar and rolling up a blue five. Her eyes are friendly, expectant. He’s sure that for her, the question is a formality. Everything in Tom snaps taut as he forces a wave of his hand. *No thanks.*

“You go for it, though.”

“Really?” She’s not asking if she can. She’s wondering why he’s not.

“Yeah.” Declining is harder the second time. He follows that possible night through to its conclusion, snapshots of feeling in his mind; weightless fun, then needing more, then the ravenous pursuit of never coming down. Irritation and anger when he does. An itch he can’t scratch the next day. Searching for old numbers.

He has a basement apartment in a friend’s house, a dog waiting to be walked. He can afford paint now, and canvases. His face hardens up.

Edie is looking at him like he used to look at Melissa when she got clean before she dumped him. The betrayal of being left behind. Not using is a judgement leveled on you, whether they’re thinking it or not.

He's not thinking it, so he tries to soften the tension, turns his pale forearms to the ceiling. "One OD was enough. I know where that'll put me." It's an affair he won't go back to. It had felt safe and warm and endless, until it didn't. Until he was dying. "I'm not that strong." Although he wants to be. He wishes he was.

She shrugs, appeased. Growing impatient. Bends as if to kiss the bar and sniffs long and hard. The big bartender is pretending not to see. She clears her throat, swallowing the drip. Tom remembers it, can almost taste it too.

"I get it." She shrugs, quick and cramped, already on fast-forward. "Gabe sees a lot of those. Brings most of them back. He's a paramedic, you know." He can hear pride, he thinks, but it's layered under something like resentment.

"Oh yeah?" He's surprised. He tries to picture it. He can't.

"Got his license two years ago, now. Wouldn't have gone for it if I hadn't made him." She's talking fast and Tom is a good audience. "He's smarter than he looks. You'd never know it, though, huh?"

"So why does a smart guy hang around that shit?" He asks it before he can think through the question and phrase it better. He's not exactly sober. He orders another whiskey and water to dull the throb in his lip and slow the fierce pull of the conversation.

Eddie doesn't seem to mind the questioning, seems to appreciate him asking. He wonders if anyone else knows. If she ever gets to talk about it. He's guessing not.

"He treated some sketchy guy with a bite, is what he told me. Turns out he knew him from way back, from school." Eddie twirls her glass in her hands, fidgeting. Almost loses her grip on it. "They don't think they're doing anything wrong. None of them."

"But he does."

"Obviously."

"That doesn't really explain why, though. He could just call the cops."

She snorts and laughs directly at him. “And tell them he treated a guy with a dog bite? Sure, I’m sure they’d get right on that.” She’s looking at him like he’s a little kid she’s fond of. “He needed more than that. So, he gave the guy his number.”

“Seems crazy to me.”

“Maybe he is.”

“Are you?” He aims for playful and misses. She smiles anyway, but it isn’t a gentle expression.

“We had different dads.”

Is that an explanation? Tom waits for more, gives her room in his silence.

“Mom didn’t focus on him much after me, after dad. He was half grown up by then. Guess she thought she didn’t need to. Thought if Gabe’s dad was gone, the problems were gone too. ‘Boys are strong, he’ll be fine, your brother is resilient,’ ” she adds in a high voice, not her own, and rolls her eyes.

“But he wasn’t.”

“You tell me.”

He’s made nervous by how much she sees. It’s impressive and makes him feel blind, fumbling through people he can’t see clearly. He has some of that acute attention now, so maybe he’s not a lost cause. A used stamp. She’s staring at him.

“You don’t really leave it behind. It follows you.” He doesn’t know if she can hear him over the crush of voices in the bar, over the joyful leaping music of the band minus Gabe, but then she’s nodding. Still staring. It makes him nervous again. “Whatever, though, right? Can’t change it.” Could be worse. All the same flat lies he’s told himself before.

She doesn’t agree or disagree. Instead she asks, “Want to get out of here?”

He does.

It's snowing again when they leave. A silent world of snow falling fat in the beams of streetlights. Edie convinces him that it's a short walk to her apartment, but it feels longer for Tom who isn't floating on a chemical cloud. A river of whiskey bears him along, and it's considerably slower. Each time Edie allows him to catch up she seizes his jaw and draws his head up to kiss her. His broken lip is bleeding again.

There's a dog in the apartment who sniffs him out between the legs and trots off, trained not to bark. Edie doesn't turn on the lights but drags him through a kitchen to a bedroom and kicks the door closed behind her.

He hates the sight of himself naked. Concave chest and bird's bones. Weak posture. Body hair caught in the middle of not enough and too much.

"Why me?" It's hard to speak around her kisses. She's seized a lead he can't catch and he's hard and self-conscious.

"People ask, but then they don't listen." And she pushes instead of pulls.

He must have listened enough.

It's late when they wake up. The sun is low and warms the room, an early onset evening. The bed smells fresher than his own. There's a cat on the window ledge, playing with the open blinds.

He's moving before she is, his whole body a slow stumble, but when he climbs over her to get to the bathroom he sees her forcing herself alert with thick blinks. It had been long past sunrise when she'd finally put her head down. Tom isn't sure how much she slept.

He rests his head on his upper arm when he pisses and avoids catching sight of a badly bruised lip in the mirror. When he comes back in to scrape his clothes off her floor, she's looking at him differently than she had at the end of the night before. This is the person he'd met in the parking lot, reassessing what she thought she knew.

He pulls on his jeans and tries not to stare too fixedly at her lying pillowed in the comforter. Her skin is as pale and sunless as his. She's covered, but not completely. She's still watching him, not affording him the distance he gave her.

"Can I make breakfast?"

A crack in her neutral expression. "It's nearly six."

He shrugs. Pouts out an easy smile. "I work late."

With the lights on he notices the fractured door sitting strange on its hinges. He gestures at it with a thumb and a raised eyebrow.

Rolled eyes are his answer. She's dressed now, in soft indoor clothes. "That's Gabe's room."

Shrieking brakes in his head. He blinks like a deer. "He *lives* here?" Is he here now? Tom straightens unconsciously, makes himself taller.

"Ha, hardly." It's a flat, mean sound, shaped like a laugh but hollow. "He's not here now. Isn't much these days. Work, his band. His other work." She's gone around the corner and is banging around in the kitchen sink. Tom steals a last look at the broken door and wonders what's inside.

They eat runny eggs and the last of a stale sliced loaf on the couch in front of the news. It fell to full dark outside as she let him cook. She doesn't mention what she thinks of it. Quiet scrapings of beaten metal against cheap china. The streetlights are on now and Tom has a long drive to tackle with a dim headache.

"So, I have to get to work pretty soon. Because like I said, I work nights."

"Okay."

"Do you want me to leave my number?"

"If you want."

Her air of disinterest makes him hesitate. As he does, the landline rings in her bedroom. Its ring is softer than a cell phone, almost quaint. She holds a finger up to him, *One minute*, and goes to get it. Tom is instantly fidgety in a space that's not his own.

"Hello?" He's picking at a cuticle, trying not to listen, looking at the brindled dog staring him down. "Of course, it's you. What?"

He realizes what he was too drunk to register last night; it's a scarred pit bull face looking at him. She has the same wary eyes that Brad does.

A hot pang of guilt revolts in his full stomach. *Brad*.

He's up and lingering at Edie's bedroom door, signaling that he needs to leave, panic thudding at his throat. How could he have forgotten? His self-hatred is on a boil.

Edie is staring at her bedsheets, scowling. "What the fuck are you talking about?" She's rigid. She sees him but she's waving him out, distracted. Not now.

He can't wait. He makes sure the door closes properly behind him and runs the twenty-minute walk back to the bar, praying the landmarks he thinks he remembers are right. He finds his car covered in snow and scrapes it off with bare hands.

Brad is pacing circles in his own piss and nosing at the crate door when Tom lets himself in. He feels like crying. The dog already is, weedy disappointed sounds like he's done something wrong. Tom is so angry at himself that his face is hot.

"Hey, buddy, hey. Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, bud." He pulls the lock and the dog bounds out, piss-wet and rubbing against him. Apologetic. Happy.

Tom can feel the physical presence of his heart in his chest. It's straining. He's hugging the dog on the floor but when Brad shrinks fearfully from the hold - restraint means danger - he rubs at his gnarled ears until the dog stops flinching at the touch. The fused, folded ridges of skin is all that's left of them. Hobston has told him they were probably cut that way.

When he opens the door to the backyard to take the dog out, Kelly's two little girls are standing there, crouched like they'd been pressing their ears to it. Brad surges forward – excitement, surprise – and neither of them step back.

“We heard him barking!”

“No, whining!”

“Mommy said we couldn't come down.”

“She's showering.”

“We want to walk him!” Neither of them has met Brad before. All children assume dogs are boys.

“Can we touch?” Kelly has taught them well, but they don't wait for an answer. Fat little hands held out, palms flat. Brad bathes them in kisses, pulling at the leash to get close to their faces.

High-pitched giggling. Tom's belly is water.

“Tommy, he smells like pee!”

“He wants me to come.”

Eddie's ears are ringing with static pressure. She hangs up the phone and stares at it. Squeezes it in her hand, tendons standing out in her soft inner wrist. Her headache pulses against the backs of her eyes and makes thinking difficult. She closes them for a while and listens to the traffic three floors below.

He tells her both too much and too little. He tells her because he needs someone to worry. Her reactions are his only form of depth perception. She's sure of it now. He has no way to measure the water he's in without her anchor.

She still can't stop him, but that holds not relation to how responsible she feels. He's had no one else see him. He'll disappear if she doesn't keep looking.

She watches the sweeping paths of headlights on the wall until the front door opens over an hour later. Mayhem hears it before she does. The dog's ears perk up, her head raises, and she trots to the door to wait. Eddie follows when she hears the keys struggling in the lock. Her cat Rusty follows her.

He doesn't look up when he walks in; he was expecting her to be waiting there. He greets the dog instead, scratching her ears and looking at her with stern concentration. She was one of the ones that wasn't supposed to live. There's a scar on her neck deeper than the rest. Made with a blade instead of teeth. Gabe never touches it when he pets her but it's all Eddie can see.

“You shouldn't go.”

“Who said I was going?”

“Well, what are you going to do, then?”

He doesn't answer. He's feeding the dog while Rusty tries to wind between his legs, tripping him up. He lies better through his silences, but this one betrays him.

“Call again. Go in yourself. Find someone who’ll listen. Do it now, you know where he lives, where all those dogs are. They’ll listen to that.”

“I send them to the barn, they get one guy. The fuck’s the good in that?”

“It’s better than nothing.”

He snorts at that, a disagreement shot out his nose.

“Better than them getting *you*.”

He’s helping himself to a beer, avoiding eye contact again. His gaze gets lost in the fridge.

“They won’t if I don’t give them reason to.”

“Meaning?”

“If I send the cops and I don’t go, they’ll know it was me. Geordie knows who I am. That sound like a good idea to you?”

“They’ll know anyway.”

He still hasn’t looked at her. He must know it’s true. The dog men are cruel and sick and focused. They’re not stupid.

“It’s doing you bad, Gabe. You’re going to get caught. By *someone*.”

“What, like by the little rat at the bar?”

He sets the dog’s food down and faces Edie. Looks at her, suspicious anger one of his few direct emotions. All of Edie’s preparation wilts.

“Yeah, like him.”

“You find out why he was there?”

“He was looking for you.”

“No shit.”

“Wanted to know why you were saving them. Thought you were... Well, in on it. Because of course he would. Because that’s how it looks.”

“He tell anyone else?”

“Doesn’t seem like it. But the clinic...”

“Don’t worry about that.”

“How? How should I not worry, Gabe?”

He doesn’t have an answer for that, either. “I can’t believe he followed me all the way from Hamilton. Nosey little shit.”

“Hamilton? You said the farm was in Milton!”

“They don’t always do it out there! That’s the *point*.” He slaps an open hand down on the kitchen counter, a sickening, flat *whap* that sounds like it hurts. “They’ve never told me where it would be before. You don’t think I’d have done something before now, if I knew? You think I *want* to hang around that fucking shit?”

She doesn’t think that of him. Not really. Her face falls. He sees it and deflates. Mayhem looks between them with anxious brown eyes, bowl empty. Yelling riles her up. Gabe puts a calming hand on her head.

“This is bad for you. You’re going to end up like him again.”

That startles him out of his sulk. “Fuck you, Edie.”

“You are! What the fuck was all that last night at the bar? Tom didn’t do anything!”

“Tom, eh?”

“He cares about what you’re doing. Maybe he can help.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, ask him! There’s got to be someone he can tell—”

“You shouldn’t have been talking to him.”

It almost sounds like a rule and it pulls Edie up short. “Excuse me?”

“Guy was following me and knew to talk to you, you don’t think—”

“I started talking to *him*. You don’t have to fucking protect me, Gabe.”

“So why’d you run away to live with me then?”

“*Fuck* you, Gabe.”

He knows he's pushed it. He drains his beer and drops it in the box to rattle with the other empties. There are a few long beats of silence in the linoleum of the kitchen that flatten their tempers. Mayhem is at the door to the apartment, looking back over her shoulder. She needs a walk.

Gabe is getting her leash. He pauses, running the leather through his fingers. Considering it. "I send the cops to that barn, all those dogs die."

She's figured that. It's the reason he won't do it. "There's nothing you can do, Gabe. You've tried. Maybe that's... you know. For the best."

His face is stiff. He hasn't taken off his jacket.

"I'm taking her out. I have a shift later."

She crosses off the animal clinics and hospitals that's she's already checked on the map she's spread across the Ford's passenger seat. She knew it would take a while, so Edie took the truck while Gabe was walking his dog. He'll have to take the TTC to the ambulance dispatch. He never even calls her to cuss her out.

*Pinewood.* It's the second one she tries. One of the very few open past 8:00pm. She pulls into the parking lot and considers the wide windows at the front of the building. Open 24 hours downtown, there must always be someone at the desk. A woman is in there now, plugging away a computer. Edie scrubs her face in the rear-view mirror to get some colour back into it. She tries not to look so tired.

There's a speaker and buzzer to the right of the door. *Ask to Be Let In.* But she doesn't have to use them. It's still too early to lock up against those who might come during the night.

She's announced with an electronic *ding*. Several unsettled dogs and their impatient owners turn to look at her. Walking through the lobby feels like walking through a spotlighted stage.

The technician in her clean, pale scrubs looks up with an encouraging smile, soft in the eyes just in case. Edie wonders if she's been trained to pull off that expression.

"I need to talk to Tom. Is he in?" She'd realized at the first clinic she'd visited that she doesn't know his last name, but they hadn't had a Tom working there at all.

This tech gives her a slow nod. "He's not supposed to be here for another hour. He might be a bit late."

Success, a relieved flooding in her blood, but there's a crease growing between Friendly Girl's eyebrows. A twinge of confusion. Is it Edie's fault, or Tom's? Does this tech know him well?

Regardless, it appears she can't shake her helpfulness. "I can make a note, if you want," she offers. "Who are you?"

"I'm Edie. His ex. I just need to talk to him about some car insurance stuff." She doesn't need to think up lies when she needs them. They flow easily, a bottomless resource. "No big deal. I can wait."

She sits outside, where all the lobby eyes aren't evading hers, claims the curb hidden from the gaping windows by an overgrown bush and smokes. The cold cement is a chill through her jeans that grounds her in discomfort. She's still got half a grain in her purse, but she's not about to do this high.

She tries to sit on the panic, tries to smother it with smoke and action, no matter how desperate. There are other sparks of memory worming to the surface, stirred to waking by the familiar movements of her blood. The half-remembered bathroom. Everything yellow. One room completely empty. That room.

Her minds starts up the circle. Cuts corners, shaves minutes off the clock. Imagines the parts she doesn't know. She catches it after a few rationalizing rounds. It's too late to think

through it. It never made sense anyway, she tells herself. It's over and gone. She didn't bring it on herself.

But it's not too late to think through *this*. She can do something and she's doing it. Right now.

Eddie is on cigarette number four when she notices the angry-coloured Sunfire pull around the side of the building and park at an angle. It's Tom's unkempt haircut inside, bobbing over the single speedbump in the lot. Eddie picks herself up off the cold curb and follows.

*Nirvana* shuts off as the car does and Tom sees her when he gets out. His hair is the washed out red of shed leaf. She'd already forgotten how much she'd liked that.

He looks surprised to see her. Almost uncomfortably so. Eddie's plan knocks up against a barrier of hesitance.

"Hey."

"Hey. What are you doing here?"

"I need your help." She never shoots so straight. It's embarrassing. She doesn't have a choice now and it feels a bit freeing.

Tom's eyes are immediately sympathetic but the muscles set tightly around his jaw. He gives her one short nod. "Okay. With what?"

She's not sure he'll be so quick to agree once he knows. Time to see.

"He's been invited to the next... thing. Fucking dog jamboree, whatever they want to call that shit. He's going to do something stupid. I know it."

Tom blinks. "Like what?"

"They know who he is. He's going to send cops but he thinks he should go. Because they'll know. But they'll fucking know, anyway. And he..."

Tom is engaged, now. He's a full few steps closer. "He what?"

“He’s going to fuck it up because of the dogs. There are tons of dogs there, Tom, and if it gets busted up, the cops will take them and kill them and he’s... he’s going to fuck something up. Because if they don’t catch them with the dogs, then what’s the point?”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Talk him out of it. Tell him you can pass his information on to someone who’ll convince the cops to follow up. Some animal welfare racket. He knows the place, but he’s afraid of them, he’s afraid of cops... He won’t admit it, but he’s... His dad was in prison. He can’t go.” She can’t stop the words. But it’s working. Tom’s eyes are wide. “Get someone involved who can *fix* it.”

“Like who?” He’s holding his hands open at his sides, palms up. His body is a question mark. “Like who? The head doc here was taking your brother’s pit money. It was still fucking bloody, it stuck to my fingers. You think I should tell *him*?”

She’s out of options. No, she has one more option. “Will you come out tonight? Just talk to him. He’s supposed to play tonight, but just at a party.”

“Are you kidding?” He gestures to his healing lip that’s still a swollen scab.

“It’ll be fine this time. You surprised him, that’s all.”

“Right, because *I’m* the scary one.”

“Shut up.” But she’s smiling against her will.

He’s sighing. “In Etobicoke?”

“No.” The tension in her chest deflates in triumph. His *yes* is all but locked in. “Just south of here. Hector, the guitarist, he works here in Hamilton. He’s got a house. It’s his little brother Alex that lives nearer to us.” Her solicitous smile has crept up on her, the one that almost got him to dance. “Can’t afford a place of your own when you live off music and dope, right?”

She’s including Gabe and herself in that, even though Gabe’s dope has never been drugs. For now, it’s still something she can joke about without starting a cycle of fidgeting anxiety. She’s twenty-six. Death is still far off.

Tom's fingers are in his ruddy hair, tugging at it childishly. He's of a height with her. "I guess so. I'll ask around, see if anyone's got advice. If they know anyone who's dealt with it. Or... something."

She nods. Good. It's a start. A start is good.

Still, she's curious beyond what she came for. It's coming out before she can rethink it. "That desk girl. She's a bright little button."

"Oh, Kelly's great. I live in her basement." He says it decisively, makes Edie feel like she admitted too much by mentioning it. "She's a life saver."

She smiles to tamp down her urge to press. That's what you get for not controlling it.

"I'll text you the address, then. Come by as soon as you get off, okay?"

Heck's house is detached and residential but the people he parties with come out from downtown. He doesn't use like his brother, but you would never know it from his friends.

Edie opens the door on a noisy press of people to greet Tom. He's dressed in off-work clothes this time, sneakers in mid-December. Over her shoulder, in the living room, Gabe is singing the final verse of a sad song she doesn't know, the band backing him. He has a secret singing voice, used but honest. The gentlest thing about him. She sees it register in Tom's face with a little tick of surprise.

The song ends and a smatter of applause closes it out. Most of the audience is too drunk to be listening. The last chord is muddling the air when Gabe starts to argue with Alex too close to the microphone.

Edie tugs at Tom's attention, which is still fixed on the living room. "He's a bit on edge tonight."

"No kidding." Tom performs the ritual of kicking snow off his shoes before coming in. It's too hot inside for coats, so Tom's goes with hers in a pile on the stairs.

Gabe's back is to them. He's standing in the ring of snaky black cords and his curt disapproval is leveled at Alex, who is empty-handed and sulking. "You don't play if you forgot to bring one."

"Just for a couple songs, Gabe. Why the hell not?"

"Just remember your damn guitar next time, idiot. It's not my problem."

Alex sulks off with a middle finger raised towards Gabe. Edie touches his shoulder and he looks around, sharp. He untenses when he realizes it's not a fight, but then notices Tom beside her. His posture gets rigid.

"Oh, Jesus. You again?"

"Fucking relax, Gabe. I invited him."

"Of course, you did." He moves away, sets his guitar down and picks up a beer. He doesn't walk any farther than that. Then, "Are you brave or just stupid?"

Edie looks over at Tom to help him realize Gabe is talking to him.

"What? Oh, uh... probably stupid?" Tom seems to be blanking but he points to his lip. Gabe nods. Edie would never expect an apology to be offered.

"You've never been told it's fucking creepy to stalk people?" And there it is. He's warming up a bit.

"I've heard it once or twice. Only from girls, though."

Whoops, misstep. Tom is relaxed beside her, he probably meant it innocently. Edie eyes her brother; Gabe is unreadable.

"Smart girls." He leaves to get another beer. Edie releases the breath she was holding. She empties her purse on the end table next to the couch. It's time for a bowl.

"Hey, I'm not seeing that." Heck is beside her with a grin, holding a hand over his eyes so he can't see her picking at her cloudy crystal. "And in my own house no less!" But it's all a joke. Heck just prefers coke. "Who's this guy? The guy from the bar?" But he's frowning at Tom like he knows him from somewhere else.

“Heck, this is Tom. Tom, Hector. He plays the best flamenco guitar.” Heck is always all smiles, even if his bandmate once laid out the guy he’s being introduced to.

Gabe comes back with one beer for himself, darkens up as he watches her heat the pipe and exhale a thick cloud. It has nowhere to go inside.

“Just keep it over there. I don’t want to smell that shit.” He sounds resigned, at least, instead of angry. He’s about to ask Heck something but their friend is looking past him, back towards the front door.

“Damn, I didn’t think you’d come!” Then quickly, to Edie, “Put that shit away, okay? Quick.”

She knocks her pipe into her purse and looks up to greet the man clapping Heck on the back, scanning their little pod with a polite smile. Maybe shy, maybe a little out of practice. He does seem a bit older than them.

“This is my partner, Wright. Who is *off duty*,” Heck stresses with that eternal smile.

That gives Edie a jolt, but Wright’s not looking at her. His tightening expression is stuck on Tom, who’s just come back with a pair of red solo cups.

“Got a first name there, Officer Wright?” Edie tries to sound casual.

Tom notices him and freezes, a deer that’s been spotted.

“Hey!” Wright is pointing at him. “You’re the guy I chased through Waterdown Park with the dog! That fucked-up pit bull! What the hell, man?”

There’s a flash in Edie’s head while pieces stick together. Some are still missing. She watches from the low couch, looking up at the crackling tempers and sinking back.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, bud.” Tom’s voice is shaky. Edie is only a pair of eyes now, wide and blown. Her high has come on too strong, has mixed with this fight too much. She can only watch.

“Bullshit, kid. Where do you live? You got ID?”

Gabe is beside Tom now, halfway in front of him. Edie doesn't know when he got there. He just appeared. "He said he doesn't know what you're talking about." Too calm. The calm before the violence starts.

Heck's smile is gone. "Hey, Wright, leave it, man." The friendly guitarist's face is closed-up and worried. That scares Edie more than her brother's bristling.

"I'm not leaving it. You didn't see the dog, Gomez. It was all scarred up."

"Dean, not here, man, c'mon, you never come out—"

"No man, he's *right here!* I threw my damn back out chasing him!"

Tom is completely still in the middle of it all, but Edie is high enough to hear the scrambling behind his frightened eyes as he looks for the way out.

Gabe is a solid wall in front of him, though. All hackles, steel for skin. Edie doesn't know how the others can't see it.

"Fuck off, cop, he said he doesn't know you."

"Okay, step back faggot, he can answer for himself—"

It's like a concussion in the air and Edie flinches. Combustion as Gabe lunges.

There's a snarl of arms - four guys, five with Alex in the way. Attack and defend, both at once, everything *at once*. Shouts over the fleshy sound of bruising. Edie shrinks into the couch. Be small.

Gabe has rocked Wright in the face and Heck is shoving between them. Tom is locked around Gabe's waist, dragging him back to stop it getting worse. He's elbowed hard in the eye for it. Wright lays in two heavy, clumsy punches before Gabe flies at him again, all right hand.

The off-duty cop has fallen to one knee; he's slurring out a curse. There's blood on the carpet, on fists. Edie finds her feet in the lull and heaves her weight against her brother, knocking him sideways. He's off balance thanks to Tom and it works, she's dragging him now with Tom to the front door. She knows they wouldn't be able to do it if Gabe was truly fighting them. He's still cursing, though, putting up a show.

“Get him *out*,” she hisses as they stagger out the door, gesturing at the city under its sickly orange snow clouds. She doesn’t know which of them she’s talking to. “Get him away! Both of you! Why can’t you fucking *behave*?” She’s crying. She sits on the shoveled stoop and neither of them try to approach her.

After a minute their footsteps weave away like drunks, uncertain and drifting. Most of the streetlights are dark in this neighbourhood and Edie doesn’t watch them go.

There aren't many cars out this late. The tires of the ones that pass hiss in the melting snow. Gabe is still bleeding from the nose, still holding his wrist to it. He's following Tom but they both have a wandering gait. Tom has a welt rising on one cheekbone.

"Got you again, eh?" He's rarely the one to break a silence but they seem to have reached Tom's car. It's orange and ugly, but Edie has his keys. Gabe needs the ride.

"It was worse when you meant to do it."

"I bet." He could apologize, but it wouldn't matter. He's done what he's done. "You surprised me." Not an apology, but maybe an explanation.

"Clearly." Snow is falling on the roof of the car between them. Gabe isn't looking at Tom, and Tom is looking at the keys in his hand. "I told you. Just had to know. That's it."

"Know what?"

He jingles the keys. "If you deserved to get away with it."

Cars slosh in the distance. Tom gets out a cigarette instead of opening the driver's side door. Gabe has seen his sister do this, too; smoke to justify staying outside.

"I'm not doing anything." He doesn't like defending himself. It's making him scowl even though he wants to be calm. He keeps his eyes trained down the deserted road. Two voids in the wet snow where the tires roll. Orange pools of streetlight.

"Yeah? Well, maybe that's worse."

"It's not."

It's a statement not to be argued with and he drops it sharply, daring him to try. Tom doesn't press and Gabe relaxes a bit, falls out of his squared stance. Turns and leans his back on his side of the car.

"So, you kept that dog?"

Tom nods. Focuses on his smoke. Leans his forearms on the roof of the car. Gabe doesn't think he's getting a longer answer, and then, "We couldn't save his eye. He gets around fine without it."

This time it's Gabe that nods without answer. This is a conversation he can handle, one occurring at his speed. Every city sound is crisp in the padded winter silence.

Tom flicks the butt into the snow and unlocks the driver's side door. Pauses. "You want to come see him? It's not far."

It's cold out, and even if he got the keys from his little sister, he's too drunk to drive. Maybe he'll walk home later.

And he does want to see him.

"Sure."

The car was too small, too cramped on Gabe's long legs, and that had made sense. The house is too big, too nice, too expensive for Tom. Wide dark windows, boxy dead gardens that probably overflow in the summer. All wrong. They go through the back gate, Tom lifting a latch on a snowy yard full of white lumps shaped like toys. A playground set claims the center and the tricycles and picnic table are blanketed shrapnel around it.

He knows Tom is watching him look. "It's Kelly's place," he explains. "I live in the basement. You've met her before, at Pinewood."

The girl at the hospital, right. She'd had her name sewn on her scrubs. Around Edie's age. She'd been there the first two times he'd come in. He wonders how much Tom will tell her about him.

"She's got a good yard. Fence is high, that's good." Important for a strong dog, especially an unpredictable one. He says it to Tom's back who doesn't turn around. He's watching the windows that look out on the backyard.

Once they're both through the basement door, the grey pit bull he remembers differently approaches him, cautious. Nose sniffing, low on his belly, ready to flinch. This one had come from a parking lot in Brantford. The wreck of his eye had made Gabe queasy then. He'd bled all over the backseat of his truck and it never quite came out.

Gabe sits down in the boot slush by the coat rack and tries to avoid noticing Tom's surprise.

"Hey, it's okay, man. Yeah, yeah. I get it. I probably deserve it." Eventually the dog reaches him, sniffs a bruised hand. Licks it.

"What happened to him?" Tom is still standing, probably enjoying the way he's towering over Gabe now.

Gabe just shrugs and doesn't look up, won't make eye contact from his position. "Don't know. The obvious." The dog's flat grey coat is thin but healthy. It's growing in soft again. It's what Gabe focuses on. "I wasn't there. He called me after the first couple of fights to come build the pit higher. They had a jumper. This one was getting patched in the bus but they thought they couldn't save it. No good with one eye."

Gabe isn't looking and doesn't see Tom's confused frown. He hears it in his voice, though. "The bus?"

"It's a school bus on Geordie's property. They've got a vet of their own."

"So why do they give them to you?"

"Because I ask for them."

Brad has rolled onto his back between Gabe's booted feet, asking for a scratch. Giving a human he doesn't know his permission. It's touchingly vulnerable. Gabe rubs the upturned belly and feels Tom's eyes on him.

"Told them I know a good vet, that I've got to start somewhere. That it's cheaper to fix their garbage than buy in."

"And Hobston takes your money."

“Every time so far.”

“Does he know?”

Gabe shrugs. That doesn't sit so well with Tom. Gabe can tell from the tightly screwed mouth he sees when he sneaks a glance.

“So, who calls you?”

“Guy goes by Lucky. His real name's Geordie. I knew him in school.”

“Why does he call you?”

“Because he trusts me.”

Tom's silence and crossed arms ask what he won't say out loud. *Why?*

“And I think he wants to be my friend.”

It's something Gabe can't explain, but that's why he trusts it. Why people want to be candid with one another, with him, is a persistent mystery. Geordie's idea of fun is watching these soft dogs tear each other apart and he sees the same thing in Gabe. He thinks Gabe could find pride in it. That thought is insidiously persistent, too.

“What did you name him?”

“Brad. Like Brad—”

“I get it.” It's sort of funny, but he won't laugh. He's still sitting on the basement floor next to the dog, who has his head in his lap. “I've got one too.”

“Yeah, I saw.”

A twinge of fear that sparks to anger and Gabe clenches down on it. He looks up.

“What?”

Tom's eyes are wide in the middle of his backpedal. “When the bar closed, Edie walked us back to your apartment for more beer.” Not even a little convincing, but Tom's afraid of him. That helps.

Gabe schools his reaction. Her choice, no matter what had happened before she came to live with him. And Tom doesn't seem like a bad one. He shrugs. "Whatever." When he stands, Tom steps hastily back, shorter than Gabe again. "Going to return the favor?"

The beer is cheap but cold. The kitchen is full of paintings, in progress or finished and tacky, some long dried, propped and angled on every surface.

Gabe looks them over while he drinks. The only sound is a droning furnace and the familiar click of dog nails on tile when Brad joins them again, finished with his energetic re-exploration of the basement. He's happy Tom's home. He's going through the same joyful little cycle that Mayhem does when Gabe walks in. Too thrilled to be still. There's still a raw scar on this dog where an eye should be.

"So, you paint." It's a statement, not a question, because the question in this setting would make him sound stupid or simple.

"Just started again." Tom is rolling his beer can between his palms, looking at Gabe look. Artistic anxiety. "Give me something to do." The beer cracks open loudly in the tight kitchen. "It's good to have things to work on."

There's a lot of colour on the canvases. It's the first thing Gabe notices - too much colour, too abstract. Layered, like little bombs of red and taupe and sunset purple were blown all over a field of canvas. He oscillates between liking how different they are, how strangely made, and thinking that a kid could do the same thing. He doesn't 'get' them.

"How do you do these?" He points to the edge of a splatter of paint, bright blue fanning out into tiny flecks of impact.

"With this." Tom lifts a scorched metal tube out of the sink, blackened at one end, and picks up a balloon from an open package on the counter. "I just fill up a balloon and aim it. I twist the fuses myself."

So he sets off paint bombs.

“Are they loud?”

“The paint balloon muffles it a bit.”

Gabe nods at an unfinished canvas. Points with the same hand holding his beer.

Tom watches the gestures, waiting for more confirmation. “You want to see?”

“Well, if I’m already here.”

It takes Tom a few minutes to rig one up. From the way some of the paintings run and blend together he must prepare a few of these at a time when he paints for real. He uses the lighter he keeps in his box of cigarettes to spark the fuse and points the tube at the riot of colour already drying. To protect his hand, he holds it through a towel.

There’s a loud, wet sound like a muddy firecracker and green paint splatters the whole canvas, flecks of it catching the unfinished cabinets above. The indoor explosion shocks a smile out of Gabe and a laugh escapes him. Light, like a balloon released. Brad had run from the room when the fuse started to burn, primed for the explosion.

“Amazing. And you figured all this out yourself?” He looks to find Tom staring at him. Gabe realizes he’s still smiling. He crashes to earth. “You’re not worried Kelly will hear it? It’s like, four in the morning or something.”

“She and Greg and the kids are two floors up.” Tom shrugs. He wets a cloth to wipe up the errant paint the bomb decorated the kitchen with. “They’ve never complained.”

Brad’s heavy head pokes around the kitchen doorway again. He watches the two of them. Gabe helps himself to another drink and the dog pads forward to investigate the open fridge.

“Mayhem was a bait dog.” Tom looks over at him from where he’s rinsing the cloth in the sink but doesn’t say anything. “They get tossed in, tested. She didn’t last long.” Mayhem he’d taken when no one was looking, after she’d lost as much blood as she could spare. He’d told Geordie that she’d died later and that he’d taken care of it. “Eddie named her that. Some kind of joke, I guess.”

“I almost didn’t realize she... She was so friendly, I mean.”

“She wasn’t at first.” Gabe is leaning against the counter, watching the paint dry. He uses his peripheral vision to watch Tom jump up onto the kitchen counter, sitting with his legs dangling. He really is small for a guy. Dainty. Gabe can’t believe he hit him. “She couldn’t relax. Everything scared her.”

“So, what helped?”

Gabe shrugs. It wasn’t one thing so much as just letting it all happen. “Patience, I guess. Just sitting with her. Proving I wasn’t dangerous.”

Tom lets out a soft sound through his nose. Gabe tenses.

The easy flow dams up and he takes a long drink to loosen it. He’s had too much already, but he can’t stay and not drink.

Tom fills the stretching silence this time. “Brad doesn’t flinch anymore, but he’s... hesitant. Like everything is strange. Like I’m not what he knows.”

Gabe chances a look at Tom. He’s watching the dog in the doorway and the dog stands there, grey as a ghost, and watches them right back. He cocks his head.

“It’s like he’s waiting for what comes next,” Tom adds. “The part he remembers.”

“Just make sure it doesn’t come. Like you did with that cop, that must have been something.”

“He has dreams.” It’s like Tom hasn’t heard him. He just goes on. “He barks in them, or... these squealing barks that don’t quite make it out. And his legs shake.” A slivered section of the white of an eye, trembling. The gasping breath. Gabe has seen it too. Mayhem still has the same nightmares. “I was afraid he’d bite me if I woke him up. But I did. I do.”

“Good.”

“He’s never bitten me.”

“Good.”

“He tried once. Missed.”

Gabe smiles slightly. Just the suggestion of one.

“Something was bound to miss you eventually.”

Someone moves through the house a floor above, soft creaks announcing whoever it is where the wood has sagged. The house is noisy for being so new. Gabe and Tom drink and listen to it.

When it's silent again Gabe speaks so low it's almost to himself. “With mine it took time. So be patient. He's got a lot on his mind.” He makes eye contact with the dog. “Don't you, boy?”

Brad stretches, attentive, acknowledging that he's been addressed. He's watching the conversation. He hears it.

“Mayhem would lose it every time she heard the shower run, that whole first month. She still doesn't like it. Loves Edie's shitty cat, though. Weird.” He shrugs, thinking about how strange it was to see the dog licking the cat's fur backwards and that grouchy cat loving it. Purring like a motor. He doesn't like Rusty, but Mayhem and Edie sure do.

“Where'd she come from?”

She'd been the appetizer for a fight and had been left where she fell when they dragged her off the lot. “A parking lot in Brampton. Close to Toronto, though. She was stolen from someone's yard, I think.”

“How do they get away with it?”

“How don't they?” He spits it out like it's acidic and shrugs. “Fights are quick in the cities. They're kept in basements the rest of the time. It's all invisible.”

“And outside the cities?”

Gabe can tell when he's being tiptoed around, but he lets it slide. Tom has bruises that justify his tentativeness. He's a brave little shit, this guy.

So, Gabe keeps answering him. “Barns. Farms. At least that's what Geordie's setup is. He's got ten, twelve of them boarded in his barn outside Milton. Not all of them are his, he says. Not all the fights are there.”

“And they kill them if they lose?”

Gabe nods. Stares straight forward at the drying splash of paint.

“Why?”

“Because it shows they fucked up. They trained a soft dog.” His head is an empty rattle as he says it. He can taste the metal of his mouth. “They have to prove they aren’t soft.”

“So what about the cops? Why not just send them there?”

He tenses. “You sound like Edie.”

“Well? Humour me.”

“Because it’s so funny?” But it’s not and they both know it. If he was angry, he could just storm out, but the anger isn’t coming. “Don’t usually know where, or when.” It’s the same thing he always says, but Tom’s interest isn’t Edie’s persistent, unshakable disapproval. There’s more happening here than that. “Hardly any get convicted. That’s why they come here from across the border. They come here to meet our homegrown shits because our laws aren’t shit.”

Tom nods. Then, quietly, Gabe unearths the real reason. Turns it over in his mouth and considers it before admitting, “And they’ll kill all the dogs they take during the bust. To ‘save’ ‘em.”

Tom’s eyes close. He gets it. He doesn’t seem to have an answer, either.

“They’re lonely and afraid. They’re not dangerous.” One curious blue eye is watching them still. All the proof Gabe needs.

“They’re lonely and afraid, so they’re dangerous.” Tom corrects gently. “But they don’t have to be.”

“Good luck getting anyone else to think that way.”

Silence again until Gabe crushes his empty beer can in a fist. It’s a satisfying crunch until a bent aluminum corner cuts into his hand. “They try to say the dogs love it. They don’t.” He didn’t. He’d had no choice and now the fight won’t leave him. The dogs don’t have a choice,

either. "They fight for their people. All they got for all they got. And it ain't much." He's seen it. A kennel and a meal.

Tom is nodding like it helps him think. "Maybe you should quit the fighting then, too."

It's rare that anyone but Edie speaks to him that bluntly; rare that anyone sees him clearly. Rare that anyone risks it. Being seen makes him uncomfortable and edgy.

But he's not angry about it. "Yeah. Maybe." Admit to nothing. Sit here without fear and all its friends, relieved of everything. The peace won't last. "Sorry about your face."

"I'm fine."

"I know."

The distance hasn't served him well. He's tested it for a long time. Tom is listening. Gabe softens. He doesn't recognize the feeling of safety yet. He suddenly thinks he might want to try, *really* try, but at what, he doesn't know.

"Your plan. What if you don't do it alone?"

He's never thought about that. Never had a reason to. Gabe stares at him. "You *are* insane."

Tom must not know about his smile or he wouldn't use it like that.

Everything that's happened, everything that hasn't happened yet, it's a returning storm she can't catch or slow down. She sits on the stairs outside until she's let fear become anger and then she brings it inside to Hector and flings it at him in his living room.

She needs a target. She's known him three years. The way he plays gets into the blood of a dance floor. Him being a cop has never gotten in the way before.

"Great partner you've got. Can't imagine why you don't bring him around more." She puts so much poison into the words that she doesn't have to yell.

"Hey, easy," Heck warns her, the secret steel showing from beneath all his good humour. "Right Edie, because Gabe is so easy to get along with."

"He threw first," Heck's partner speaks up, defensive while holding an ice pack to his brow. He's bleeding, but not badly. "Everyone saw it. What a psycho. And where the fuck did that other guy go?"

"They left." It's non-negotiable. She says it that way.

"Do you know him?"

The lie catches under her tongue. She swallows on it. She hasn't realized why yet.

"Yes."

"What's his name?"

"Why?"

"Because he's breaking the law."

"What, for saving a dog?"

That slows Wright up like a hiccup, but he falls smoothly back into the gravity of his training. He's persistent. "Even if that's what he's doing, he can't. It's illegal. The whole dog is illegal, no matter what he's doing with it."

"So, the solution is to kill them."

He winces. "It's safer."

"You can't just have them all killed. You *can't*. It's on you that you didn't stop it in the first place." Edie feels like she's falling headfirst down this hill and that it would be worse to try and dig in and stop. Just ride it out, try to slide without wiping out.

"Edie, what are you talking about?"

"He's called you before. Or someone has." Tom's clinic must have called, some neighbour. Someone who saw. "Someone must have. You *must* have known!"

"We do what we can. Nothing is as simple as you think."

"He never even told *me*, Edie," Heck adds, appealing to her.

"Even if they get them, they get off right away. That's what Gabe said. They get out. Get going again." She's holding tears down but she can't let them spill over, not until they've listened. Tears can blind other people, too. "*That's why he's doing it.*"

There's a flicker that passes between the two partners. She sees it in the way their backs straightened at the same moment. "Doing what, Edie?"

"Your jobs."

They herd her upstairs to a recently used bedroom, tonight's substitute for the police department. Heck's had too much to drink to go in now. On the dresser there's a picture of him young, hanging off his mother, pointing out of frame. There are few other decorations. The bed is unmade. He's still unmarried at forty-something.

"He has to know it's fucking dangerous."

"Of course, he knows."

"Then why would he risk it?"

"How about you tell me if you find out?" God knows that's all she's ever wanted to know herself.

"How long has this been going on? Is that why he's been missing practice?"

“Like half a year? More? Probably longer than he told me.” Longer ago than the day he’d surprised her with Mayhem and spent the day locked in a room with a crated, bandaged dog that snarled at her. The explanation had come much later. “He finally got his invite and he’s going to call you guys. He wants to get the group of them there at once.”

They’re paying attention now, but who will fix it? Who ever actually does the work to fix anything? “He’s going to get his own fucking self in trouble, because of course he is. Who knows what’s going to happen? Who knows? *Who knows?*” She catches herself repeating it, asking them, asking herself, and she can’t stop. “Who knows?”

“So tell us then, Edie. What’s he going to do?”

“Are you going to listen?” She can tell it was the wrong question to ask Hector’s partner. Wright rolls his eyes. He’s already discounting her and she hasn’t even started yet. The sharpness of her indignation keeps her from drifting. She’s locked in. They are going to listen to her.

“Sure, sure we are.” Heck has always been reasonable. His kind face isn’t a trick.

“He’s worried you won’t unless it’s handed right to you.”

“He’s not wrong,” Heck admits. He doesn’t look happy about it. “They’re hard to investigate. But we do it anyway. We bust them. Work with the laws we have. Most cases never become public, maybe that’s why he thinks—”

“When was the last time it worked? Like a *real* bust?”

“The last investigation was in 2006, I think. It wasn’t just dog fighting, but it’s always more than just one thing in the city. It was part of a bigger whole.” It really looks like he’s trying his best to remember. “In 2004 they looked into a guy running fights in Barrie.”

Wright has fallen back, smart enough to see that Heck is having better luck. Edie steels herself, sensing she’s being played.

“He wants to find a way to save them.”

“He can’t do that. No one can.”

"It's not their fault!"

"Sometimes it doesn't matter."

Edie is the overlap between fury and despair. She is both, but one is fueling the other. She wants to attack this, to make it right like her brother does. But she also wants to run. To disappear and leave others to deal with it. This pain isn't hers.

But it is Gabe's for reasons she can only guess at, and he's in the middle of everything. By choice.

"They aren't born that way as puppies. If they were born that way it wouldn't take so much work to make them that way."

"Why do you care?" Wright is pushing again, asking from behind crossed arms.

"Why *don't* you?" She spits, the question a judgement.

"They're too dangerous to take in, you know that. That's why it's the law."

"They're *not*. Not all of them."

"How do you know?"

She hits the end of her freefall and is pulled up short before the crash. She won't rat out Mayhem and her brother. Their clear example burns in her mouth, unsaid. She doesn't use it. She pries her teeth off her tongue and grabs her purse.

"I know better than you, asshole. Some of them can't even go for walks, they're so afraid." Mayhem needs a yard. It's not a walk when Gabe takes her. It's a drag down the street.

"They're just scared."

Heck sighs. "That's exactly why dogs bite, Edie."

"Stop focusing on all the wrong shit! Figure out how to *fix* it!" She's pointing at a pair of off-duties, wildly high, gathering her bag to herself. "That's what *you're* supposed to do." She turns to leave.

"Tell him not to do anything stupid, Edie."

"He's not the fucking problem. You are."

The drive home is electric and draining, every line in the road illuminated. When she gets home, the apartment is cold. Gabe isn't home. Mayhem is there to greet her, hungry for her breakfast and asking to go out.

Dean is relieved when she strides away, swaying deftly to avoid partygoers on her way to the door. She's not their problem anymore if she leaves.

But sure, yeah. *He's* always the problem. He's the problem so much that he's not interested in hearing it anymore. Laure would like this girl.

Laure. He has the beginning of an idea, something he can't quite catch the edges of. It's a possibility if she'll listen to him. He doesn't dwell on the thought, waiting for it to shape up in its own time.

"So, what do you think?" Gomez is looking at him. Dean's eyebrows escape into his forehead, surprised that he's being asked.

"You know her better than I do."

"It's not her I'm worried about."

"You think we should follow up?" Gomez has their info, Dean is forced to assume. They could still bring that asshole in. The tender parts of his face agree with the notion, but the guy is also Gomez's friend. Gomez's friend who'd swung first. He considers his partner as he stands there, picking at the label of his beer. The man looks like he's already done something he regrets.

"Gabe's a bad bet. I don't feel like losing money on that again."

"Again?"

"He's hard to help, I'll leave it at that. Guy doesn't know what's best for him."

"She sounded pretty freaked out, though. My bet would be that she's at least half right."

Gomez shrugs a shoulder, empties his bottle, probably flat and warm by now. "There's nothing we can do about it until he calls. And even then, it won't be up to us."

"I think it's worth Milton's time to check it out if he does call."

“You heard her, he’s worried about the dogs. There’s nothing we can do about that, even if it was up to us.”

Dean sits on that, swishing it around in his beer as Gomez leaves him to get another and mingle. It’s his damn party, after all. Fifteen years in a squad car. Dean already feels weighed down by five.

Nothing we can do about the dogs, Gomez says, and he would know.

The house party dims in Dean’s ears, reduced to a radio buzz. There’s no more music playing to override it.

They can’t do anything. Not on paper. It’s time to try the possibility.

He digs his cell phone out of his jeans pocket and calls Laure. She picks up on the second ring.

“Ugh. Hello?” She was sleeping. He’d forgotten it’s two in the morning. Dean immediately gets up and makes for the bathroom, puts a door between himself and the background rumble of the party.

“Hey Laure.”

“What is it? Where are you?”

“Nothing, just... hanging with a few people. At Gomez’s.”

There’s a stretch where he’s almost sure she’s hung up. His fault, he gave her bad optics.

“So, you went to the party after all?”

“What? Oh, yeah.”

“So, what do you want?” She’s awake and alert almost immediately with one rough clear of her throat. He misses that iron capability at his back while he sleeps. Someone never absent, even when unconscious.

“I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“Yeah, well that’s what happens at—” A pause he can hear sheets rustling in. “Two sixteen in the morning.”

“How’s the property coming? Did you go through with the shelter idea?” He realizes when it falls into awkward silence on the line that he’s never asked her about it before, not since she’d told him her initial plans. That makes him feel like maybe she’s been right about him all this time. Laure has told him how many times that it’s been difficult to set up, to lease the space she needs, and he’s never once asked her if it’s been worth it?

Dean only ever feels like she was right to leave him when he’s been drinking. The guilt helps him see himself more clearly, and that’s why he doesn’t like to drink these days.

“You called me at two in the morning to ask—”

“There might be some dogs being picked up soon that need a shelter.”

He can almost see her confused expression. He knows the one. “What, tonight?”

“No, no. Soon though. We think.”

He lets her consider it. Laure always considers the angles and nothing is rushed. Everything is completed in its time. It made Dean feel sloppy by the end in comparison.

She sighs on the line again, but it has a different inflection. There’s a flicker of interest, of forgiveness for the fact that he called her so late to tell her this. For the fact that he called her at all. “Hoarding case? Neglect?”

“No.”

And then her tone stiffens right up again. “From where, Dean?”

“It might be a fighting case, Laure.”

She responds fast. She’d been thinking it before he confirmed it and she’s ready. “Are you fucking serious, Dean? Are you?”

“I just thought I’d ask.”

"I almost got shot the last time I took some in from something active. And it is active, isn't it?" She doesn't leave the space for him to answer. "And now I'd lose them anyway, thanks to the bill. So, you want to break my heart on top of it all." She doesn't say *again*.

"I know, I know. You think I'd forget how we met?" It had been one of his first calls.

"Don't." She's slipped back into curt. The wall is still up. Dean smooths two fingers from one side of his forehead to the other.

"Is it possible to take them in, though? Even if they can't get... adopted, or whatever?"

Another sigh, softening again. It's a patience born of her pity for the dogs, not because of him. "Some of them can be rehabilitated. Some can't."

"How can you tell?"

"They'll tell you."

"So they're all different?"

"Pits are born sweet, Dean. They can take a lot of shit. They'll take it and take it and they'll still protect their owner when it comes to it. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"Yeah."

"It's dangerous to seize them."

"We know."

"If you go in loud, they'll get loud right back."

"Noted." But that's the only way to catch the men behind it. Loud and fast and guilty. He's starting to understand where the problem lies, and why Gomez's friend is stuck. Even if it wasn't provincial law to kill them all, anyway.

"If you roll up when they're in the middle of something it'll be bad."

She'd done this while they were together, too; explained his job to him as each new worry crossed her mind, like it was new information for the both of them and not just for her. She could always think of every bad outcome, each worse than the next. It had made him nervous at first, until he realized she was just putting her mind to the problems of his job, like saying it all

out loud could keep him safe. If only she could work out the answer. “They don’t think they’re doing anything wrong. It’s their favorite thing. It’s their SportsCenter. And you’ll be ruining it with your stupid laws.”

“Yeah, well maybe some *are* stupid.”

He can almost hear her smile. “Yeah, well you’re not allowed to think that. And neither am I.”

“You’re not a lawyer anymore.”

“Just formally.”

He savours the banter. It’s rare now, for it to be leeches of all the poison he hadn’t known he’d left her with. He misses this.

“Whatever. They’re a bunch of fucking monsters anyway. Let them think they’re in the right, it won’t change what the courts think.”

“Are you fucking kidding?” He wasn’t expecting her raised voice. He gives the phone some space from his ear. “Dogfighting is just like your problems put to the extreme, Dean. All your competitive shit, all your gym days. Magnified.”

“*What?*” She can’t possibly mean that. He’s nothing like a fucking dogfighter.

“It’s the worst of all your ‘tougher-than-you’ bullshit. All your cop buddies. You think you’re that different?” She laughs, but it’s that dead laugh he hates. The lie laugh that used to make him so angry. “You became a cop. They got some dogs to do it for them.”

Someone is knocking, insistent, on the door. Dean had forgotten he’s hunkered down in one of two bathrooms at a party. “Okay, okay! Give me a minute!”

“What?”

“Sorry, not you.”

“Dean.”

“Yeah?”

Silence while she considers her words, he hopes. The banging on the bathroom door gets louder.

“Sometimes people feel like they need to help more than they actually *can* help. You follow through or you don’t get involved.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Got it?”

“Got it.”

“And I can’t help you.”

He’d thought for sure he’d got her. “But—”

“No. It’s fucking illegal, and I finally have my shit in order again, Dean. Things are good. I’m not doing it.”

He’s more inclined to argue for her intervention now than ever because she’s told him no. He can feel the obstinance boiling up. His mouth is already open as he searches for an argument.

But Laure hangs up the phone. He’s left with her dial tone.

Laure loses four hours of restful sleep from a call less than ten minutes long. Once her mind starts up it's hard to power it down again. The enormous weight of a life bears down on her from the dark edges of her ceiling, heavier and more suffocating as minutes pass. It's too early, or too late, to start the scaffolding of strategies she's lined up to deal with this.

Damn him.

He's always been like that. Barging into her quiet moments and uprooting them before he'd realized what he'd done, leaving memories like salted fields behind him that Laure steers around.

She closes her eyes, tries to lure sleep to her by pretending she's already there. Fritz is warm behind her knees but doesn't move when she pushes at him to reclaim more of the bed. His snores are buried in the blanket.

Up before the sun, loud clumsy noises in the kitchen. Fritz needs to go out and she needs to pee immediately after her coffee. She leaves the bathroom light off because it's still too dark for the shock. She brushes her teeth while sitting on the toilet because it makes the morning go faster.

Her old tube of a dachshund doesn't appreciate the new snowfall and she feeds him before she heads out with an open, flapping coat to feed the other dogs. She got the heat in the barn installed before October but it's still a cold walk getting there with December settled in.

The first of her psychological strategies catches her by surprise as the sun rises behind snow clouds and brings the drifting flakes into stark relief against all the greys. *The strategy that reaches for the spiritual*, and in this case, it's the way the silence eats her alive between her house and the renovated barn. The only sound in nature is the crunch of her footsteps.

Life lies heavily on her, always, but sometimes it's just a quiet snowfall. She floats through it without moving. There's a little face watching her from the glass of her kitchen door, making sure she doesn't disappear.

The second strategy, physical, takes over when she reaches the barn and it takes her a few minutes to shovel the door out of the drift that formed overnight. The physical strategy is her first scheduled routine. It starts first thing every morning, slow today because Dean interrupted her sleep and hamstrung her routine. Typical, but the coffee is settling in nicely. She'll be fine until noon when the sun hits the snow straight on and reminds her how much day is really left.

The dogs start barking even before she lets herself in, one and then another and another, no one left out. Only Jackson and Broadway throw themselves against their fenced kennels, begging for a touch through the wire, but she rubs every head she feeds. These dogs are big enough to handle the shin-deep snow and Laure opens the sliding door that leads to a fenced cattle field and lets the dogs loose, one by one.

She ticks each strategy off as her day passes, runs over each like a journal entry: the spiritual category she logged early today, because she finds God silly and nature far more wonderous in its tangibility. The snow from last night is still falling; physical, the warmth in her arms and lower back from shoveling dogfood into twenty-four bowls, the few empty kennels she currently has staring at her and seeming to suggest an idea she has already put aside. She'll ride the stationary bike in her living room later if she has time.

Next, clinical. Martha, her therapist, had suggested meditation. Sitting quietly with an absence of thought. Every time she'd tried it Laure's brain had only become louder in the absence of work, rising to a shouting pitch that clanged around in her skull, wailing over wasted time.

But watching the dogs bound around, running for nothing but the sake of it, tumbling in the snow, or in the summer, the tall grass, allows her the sense that this is all that's needed

from her for the moment. For just a moment. For half an hour every morning, anytime between six and seven, there is nothing for Laure to do but watch the dogs.

Beyond the spiritual, physical and clinical, there is the one that takes up most of her day: professional. Inside she showers, dries her hair, and puts on just enough makeup to be taken seriously at her law offices. She's practiced thirty-eight years and this doesn't take long. She puts on tailored clothes that don't smell of dogs. She kisses Fritz goodbye and he watches her from the couch, betrayed by her departure. He and the other dogs are her emotional strategy, even if her therapist would insist that she should be reaching out for more. It's been almost two years, after all. But dogs are reliable and uncomplicated. She only needs to worry when they get sick.

She's only working the cases that grab her now, her focus on animal rights and cruelties. She's never been able to do enough to unclench her grip on those kinds of injustices, never been able to douse the anger with successes. It was three years ago that she'd slammed a bathroom door off its hinges at the courthouse and gotten the idea to start a rescue instead.

She would be able to help with her hands, to feel it and see it. It had already been rocky with Dean then, and his complete disinterest in the idea had killed the rest of it.

Not the rest of the idea, but whatever was left of them as a partnership. But today she keeps having to yank herself back from distraction, thanks to him. She gets very little done.

Laure became addicted to the police scanner when she and Dean were married. She'd bought one and kept it on her desk, listening to the buzzing communications bounce back and forth as she went through her paperwork at night. Every event was a way he could die, some horror her imagination conjured on cue. She memorized pages of police codes. By the end of their marriage, Laure's obsession had morphed into a poisoned fascination with the worst types of calls; with the spark at the beginning of the crime instead of the dry files and the courtrooms at the end of it.

She'd listened to a car being called to a dog fight once. It had sparked a string of research in her free time that she still remembers now: there were dozens of fighting dogs seized in Lanark once, thirty-one in a bust in Chatham. Tillbury was bad for it, it seemed. In the mid-nineties a woman riding the Go Train noticed twelve dogs chained up in a field in north Toronto. The owner gave police a false identity and disappeared.

In 1999 the OPP seized nineteen pit bulls from a farm in Beeton. All nineteen were destroyed. They almost always are, especially with the new laws. When they were passed, Laure had worked herself to exhaustion on cases fighting it. Since then, she's learned to say 'no' when the situation cuts too deep, when it isn't safe, whatever the reason. But she remembers every case.

Laure's memory is one of her finest features. In public she pretends to forget names of acquaintances and small arbitrary details to put people at ease. Of course, she doesn't remember every fumbled word and mistaken assertion. Of course not.

But her mind is a trap that has yet to rust. It reads those statistics out to her now and reminds her that police enforce the law of destruction at the first sign of aggression. Dogs protect their owners in the chaos of arrests. Then they die for it. The punishment for loyalty.

She thinks about it through her work day and takes it home with her.

She tries to set it aside at her kitchen table for two of her therapeutic strategies at once: psychological and educational are filed under the same heading. Right now, those goals consist of a collection of textbooks stacked in meticulous groups where she should be clearing a space to eat. She has dinner while she does readings and homework, a comforting habit that has returned from years ago. The home she'd grown up in had pulled her focus violently from quiet activities, so each home she'd made for herself since then has been made for reading.

She is planning to trade the law in for psychology. Or combine them somehow. All Laure knows is that she isn't finished.

She ticks off the recreational strategy when she visits the dogs again for their dinner and almost an hour of soggy tennis ball throwing. Fritz is too spoiled to play with others and waits for her in the warm kitchen on his special rug. He's never liked another dog in his life. He dances for her when she comes back in. Even for an hour, she's missed.

Social and creative, the two final strategies she takes to bed with her, unchecked. Some days a social occasion falls into her lap and she gets close to completing the list. She knows she can't count the dogs, no matter how human the knowing looks Fritz gives her are.

She's never been able to fill out the creative slot. It's the only one that consistently eludes her.

It's cold, even under her three blankets, so she tucks a hot water bottle at the foot of her bed and rolls over and over to get comfortable. Fritz doesn't appreciate it, huffing to make his feelings known and burrowing to the end of the bed to sleep next to the warm spot. Before long, her feet are the warmest part of her.

Laure lies in bed and thinks about her strategies. She runs over each step like a rosary. Two empty beads: social and creativity.

She tries to sleep for a few hours. Pretends. Gets up and has a drink, gin warm out of the glass.

She calls Dean back when the bed offers her nothing and expects to wake him up. It's the part of the call she was going to enjoy the most. But he's already awake.

A newfound sense of responsibility present even in his dreams wakes Tom before noon. The feeling has been growing but it is ready to be born today. He's never had such a clear goal before and he doesn't recognize what's happening at first.

There's a window high in the wall of his basement bedroom. It's a rare, clear December blue that diffuses into the room until Tom feels just as crisp and cold. Clear blue, made of sky. He feels awake and transparent despite the drinking he did, maybe because drinking was *all* he did. He remembers everything, though.

There's a crash in his kitchen, a low exclamation of *Fuck!* A skitter of dog claws on tiles. Tom can't believe he stayed.

Gabe is still picking up paintings off the floor when Tom has put a shirt on and come to see the damage. The canvas he added to last night has left a wet smear along the floor.

"Nice. Looks better than way."

"Sorry."

"No, I mean it." Tom shrugs. "It's not like they're made with a specific outcome in mind. They become whatever they become." He purses his lips like it's all a very serious matter. "And that one was clearly supposed to be half green."

The way Gabe's eyes flick towards him, it's almost like a laugh. Almost.

Brad tries to investigate the paint and Tom pushes him away. Gabe grabs a rag crusted with colours and hands over a roll of paper towel to Tom's reaching hand. They start wiping at opposite ends of the mess.

Gabe takes a knee while Tom squats. There is less of an echo down between the cabinets and Gabe's breath is louder. He looks mostly at the floor and ignores their proximity. Tom tries not to stare.

“So, do you know when it’ll happen, then?” Their plans the night before hadn’t had a date in them. Gabe had just told Tom that he should be ready, even if his Sunfire wasn’t going to be much for transportation.

“You’re still good to go, then?” If Gabe could sound hopeful, Tom thought, this might have been the moment. He waits to be looked at before he stands and toes the garbage open.

“I said so, didn’t I?”

Gabe watches him from the floor. Brad comes over and nudges at his empty hand, pushes in for affection because Gabe being down on his level is an invitation. It’s another strange tableau like the night before in his doorway. They’ll be able to fit more crates in Gabe’s pickup. That’ll mean the difference.

“Want coffee?” It’s what you offer when you’re in the kitchen together in the morning. He can hear Kelly’s girls tumbling their way to breakfast a floor above, scraping chairs, talking too loudly at one another.

“Nah.” Gabe stands. They look at one another and the space feels as small as it is. Tom is running out of offers.

“What about a ride or something?”

Gabe shakes his head once. His hair is crumpled on one side. “It’s fine. I remember the way.”

Tom shrugs and doesn’t push it. He needs a walk himself and Brad is already wiggling to give him that excuse.

Gabe gets his coat out from where it’s tucked into the arm of the couch where he’d slept a few hours. He seems more himself again once he’s back in it. Tom recognizes this man, the one itching to leave. He doesn’t know the one that sits on cold floors with dogs. “I’ll call you when I know, then.” He confirms it like he doesn’t believe it.

“Okay.”

“You really are crazy.” It’s not said affectionately. Tom doesn’t turn away from filling the coffee pot and the door opens and shuts behind him with a puff of frost. Brad whines at the door, left behind and insulted. Tom waits awhile before he takes him out.

Tom packs a bowl in his blown glass pipe and considers it. He showers instead, finishes his coffee while he gets dressed. He’s been scheduled for earlier than he’s used to, punishment for disappearing, he’s sure. He opens the door and drops his keys when Kelly is waiting right outside of it.

“Who was that?”

Tom blanks. Utterly, stupidly. He’s relieved he doesn’t smell like weed on top of it.

“Who?”

“The kitchen window faces the backyard, Tom.”

“Oh.” Right. He knew that.

“What was he doing here?” So, she did notice. The words he reaches for are too slippery and loses his grasp on them, staring at her silently. No lie or truth is good enough. There’s an ice rink between his ears and no response fits its footing.

“Tom?”

“I’m helping him.” He is. He’s trying to. It’s all he can really say.

But he can see Kelly’s mind skip like a record. “What?” Her whole body spits out the word and it hits Tom like something solid.

Should he repeat himself? “I’m—”

“What’s the matter with you? What the hell do you mean?”

“He’s not hurting the dogs, Kelly, he’s not part of it and he—”

“Who *cares?*” She’s using her height on him now, leaning in until he’s forced to step back, dwarfed by the argument. “Who cares what he says? You shouldn’t even be talking to

him, let alone..." And then it dawns on her and her eyebrows slack up. "Is that where you went? When you disappeared?"

"I just needed to find out what was going on."

"Tom, that's *insane*." Something in him ices up. He's tired of hearing that.

"He was weird when I talked to him at Pinewood. Like he didn't want to be doing it. I had to know who to call the cops on because Hobston sure isn't doing it."

"And then you brought him *here*?"

She's got him there and he wilts again. It seems obvious now that he shouldn't have. Inside the house, one of Kelly's girls starts crying.

"I'm sorry, okay? It's not like it's going to happen again."

"You brought him *here*, Tom." And now she seems to be fading to sad, not angry. And Tom realizes with a slow turning of cogs that he's not getting out of this. It's done.

"Kelly—"

"You're out, Tom." She says it with the finality of a mother tested. "You're out."

Tom runs desperate solutions through his head on the drive to work and he scrapes his bumper as he pulls into his spot in the hospital parking lot. He's come up with nothing. He knows he won't be able to change her mind and that it's really the best thing, anyway. He doesn't belong there. It's too cold to go back to living out of his car, though.

He's distracted when he punches in, distracted as he changes, doesn't notice Hobston standing just inside the door to the locker room waiting for Tom to notice him.

"Tom. We have to talk."

For a moment he doesn't remember what this is probably about. Hobston looks used up. Tired. Tom pins his ID to the pocket of his scrubs and waits.

"Where did you go the other night?"

“There was an emergency.”

“Yeah? What emergency?”

“Something personal.” Keep it vague, maybe he won’t challenge it. Too many details give away a lie. Tom is mostly on time, has never missed a shift. He should have wiggle room.

There’s tightness in Hobston’s lined red face, now. Too many wrinkles for a man his age. “You can’t just take off like that without saying anything. We were short.”

“Sorry.” He is. He’s sorry he put Kelly out. He’s sorry what he did made her put him out. “Like I said. It was an emergency.” Tom refuses to look away. If he looks away, he loses.

“You’re sure you don’t want to tell me where you went?”

The vet sounds too much like a disappointed dad. It sounds too much like he thinks Tom’s the one that’s done something wrong, for caring.

“How about you tell me why you do it?”

Hobston looks like he wishes he didn’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“I mean the money. I mean not reporting it. That’s what I mean.”

Hobston closes the door he’s been holding open. He doesn’t answer. He’s buckling under Tom’s stare and Tom can’t stop what he’s started.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you know that I do, now.”

It’s completely silent in the locker room. It’s ringing in Tom’s ears. He doesn’t realize this is as much of a fight as any he’s ever been in, and Hobston is losing.

“It’s not like I went looking for it.” And just like that, the vet loses his grip and gives in. Tom can see it in the sag of those rounded shoulders. Hobston wasn’t prepared to justify himself and it all just caves in. “It just... came along.”

It’s such an apathetic answer that Tom doesn’t feel the victory. It’s a betrayal with no punch or surprise. He suspected it all along. It’s worse to hear it only because nothing changes. Nothing is fixed by him being right.

“I have my kids, I have alimony,” he continues when Tom doesn’t say anything. Like those facts should speak for themselves.

“And you have dogs.” Several. Hobston keeps photos of them in the little vet’s office mixed in with the glossy prints of his toothy children.

“Those pit bulls aren’t pets, Tom. They’re not the same. You should never have taken that one home.”

It’s not his home anymore, but now he has a dependant. That realization cuts so deep he doesn’t feel it right away. His mind blocks out the wound so he can keep functioning.

“Look. I know you came from something tough.” Hobston has cushioned his voice, opened his arms with his palms turned up like he’s appealing to him, but sympathy turns Tom into a ball of quills. “Kelly told me as much, but I see you, Tom.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know. You’re doing really good, for the most part. You’re beating it back.”

Tom is only getting sharper. More prickly. He’s not aware that he’s glaring at the vet. His expression is a wall.

“If you get too worked up, you’ll backslide. You’ll self destruct, or worse. You’ll bring someone else down with you.”

Tom doesn’t answer.

“You don’t want that, right?”

Apparently, the fight is still going. Tom feels punched off-center.

Hobston opens the door, settled again, tired but sure of himself. He’s leaving the room on top. “Just think about it, okay? I’m on your side, Tom.”

He’s left in the echoing room full of open lockers, squeezing his useless fists.

Tom works in silence and avoids Hobston for the rest of the afternoon. He decides that it can’t be considered self-destruction if he needs to start over anyway.

He waits until his shift is over to steal the crates.

It's almost the afternoon when Gabe gets in, wearing the same clothes from the night before. They're still bloodied in an obvious brown drip down the front. He must have taken the train instead of calling her when he realized the truck wasn't outside Heck's place.

Eddie has been waiting cross-legged on the kitchen counter, still itchy from the night before, her high still clinging to her. If she waits here, he won't have the chance to dodge by her to his bedroom and lock her out. She has the patience to wait. Her racing thoughts are her oppressive company.

He stops in the kitchen doorway like a dog that's been caught in the wrong when he sees her there.

"Where were you?" She stays up on the counter because it makes her taller. He can't disappear without passing by her.

"You told us to leave." And yet he sounds guilty.

"You weren't answering your phone."

"He lives in a basement." He knows more about Tom now than she does. She'd had to wonder how he lives. That only makes her angrier.

"So, you didn't end up punching him, too?"

He gives her the courtesy of eye contact with his glare.

"No. Don't be a bitch."

"It's a valid question, Gabe." Maybe Tom talked him out of it then, maybe he has come up with a solution. "He didn't deserve it the first time, either."

"I know." His voice has gone soft, just an aftertaste of defensiveness. He's crouching to rub Mayhem's big heavy dinosaur skull and Eddie's looking down on him when he says, "He's going to help."

The countertop slips out from under her and her bare feet slap the floor. She stares for longer than she realizes. "What?"

"When I get the call. He's going to help get them out."

She can feel the heat of her blood, the chill of the floor, the deadness of the air. She can't believe it. "So, you got to him, too."

"I didn't 'get' to him, Edie. I just told him what would happen."

"You got to him."

"Jesus, *he* followed *me*. He cares what happens to them."

He doesn't say it, but she hears it anyway, as clear as if he did.

*And you don't.*

It makes it worse that he didn't say it. It makes it truer.

She does care. He didn't say it but it's still not fair. She just cares about him more.

"Look, I know you don't see another way, but it's too much of a fucking risk, Gabe!"

"I don't see it because there *is* no other way. This is the way."

"They're not like you, Gabe."

She hadn't meant to say it. She watches it hit him, her eyes wide. Afraid of what it will do.

"What?" Too quiet. He looks up at her from his crouch and she steps back when he stands. Her first memories of him were that he was so *tall*. Her big brother, the shadow against the ceiling light.

"You escaped him. He died. These are just dogs." It's coming clearer as she says it. It makes sense.

"Shut up."

"Maybe it's better if they don't... if they don't have to live like that anymore. Like... like dangerous ghosts."

"I said shut up."

“Maybe that’s why they do it. Because it’s safer if—”

“*Shut up.*”

“Gabe—”

“Am I a fucking ghost to you?” He’s gone pale now and he’s looking her right in the eye. His dog has shrunk back and cowers at the door, afraid of this version of him.

“Sometimes! Sometimes that’s exactly what you are! You’re never around, and when you are around, you’re—”

“What? What am I?”

“You’re fucking... haunted! It’s followed you! It’s followed you for years, and you don’t see it!”

“You don’t think I fucking see it?” The cursing part of him is furious, the part that he has control over, but there’s terror in his face. He looks like he’s at a loss, like he’s reached a dead end. She was only trying to help. Now she’s become a barrier.

“Maybe... maybe just seeing it isn’t enough.”

“So, it would be better if I was dead.”

“I didn’t fucking say that—”

“If he’d killed me.”

“Gabe, *stop it.*”

But he’s done. Unreachable. He pushes past her on his way to the bathroom and the shower blocks her out a minute later. Wet white noise. She could trap him in there with more forced conversation, but the door is locked.

She’s been taking care of him for longer than he’s been taking care of her. Nothing has worked. She’s tired and she’s so awake.

She still has the keys.

When Edie pulls into the parking lot behind the clinic, Tom is trying to load a second crate into the back of his little car. He's pushed the passenger seat all the way back to make room for one in the front and the second just fits in the space behind the driver's side.

He recognizes the truck and stops what he's doing. She can't tell if he's disappointed that it's her behind the wheel. Her tears break past the safety of the water line, stinging hot, before she's even turned the keys and gotten out.

"What's happened?" He's surprised to see her, then. He was expecting Gabe from the sound of it. "Did he get the call? Hey, what? What is it? Are you okay?" He's noticed she's crying. She sniffs but can't stop. Her eyes leak without her permission.

"I don't know. No, not yet. Everything's fine."

"No, it isn't." They're not familiar enough to hug, but he hovers close to her like he wants to touch her. She doesn't concede to the weakness and avoids his eyes.

"It doesn't matter. It's too late to talk you out of it." She wipes her eyes and nods to the car. "Clearly."

He has the good grace to look awkward. Almost ashamed. She'd roped him into this to help find another solution, not to make it worse.

"We're going to get there first. Gabe says they're all meeting in the city. We're going to try and get the dogs out before the cops get there."

"So, he's not going with them?" A little flare of relief. Gabe being around those men, living his lie, is what she's most afraid of. Anything is better than that.

"No. We're going to go as soon as he gets the call. He's going to say he's finishing a shift."

At least there's that. Danger in another colour, but less intense. They'll have to be fast.

"Does it have to be you two?"

He looks sad. "Who else?"

“Can’t some other vet turn them in? Eventually? Someone else who’ll deal with the dogs...” She’s grasping at anything. It’s almost too late and any idea seems like it could be a lifeline until she touches it.

“No. They don’t go to vets. They have their own, apparently. Gabe says there’s a school bus on the property that they work out of. My guess is that way they can drive it around, get it where they need it.” He sounds more sure of himself than she’s ever heard him. It scares her. “And rescuing the dogs... if anyone knows where they’ve coming from, they’ll put them all down. It has to be us.”

“So where will you take them?”

That seems to catch him up. He doesn’t have an answer ready, he’s snagged for a second, dangling in a place Edie can reach him. She just needs to push—

—and then his pocket is ringing.

Tom gets out his phone and they both stare at it for a full extra ring. He flips it open, answers it, looking straight at her.

“Hello?”

Shapeless, tinny words muffled against his ear. Her own blood in hers, a hollow drum.

“Yeah, she’s here. She’s got the truck with her, yeah.”

She could take it, though.

“I don’t know.”

She could cut them off at the knees.

“Yeah, I’m leaving work now.”

Their plan is almost useless without it.

“Okay.”

He hangs up and his appeal to her is silent. Gentle. He doesn’t move or say a thing. He asks with resigned expression and what seems like a sense of duty.

He has no choice. Neither does she.

“Go get the rest of the crates.” Her voice is dead. It belongs to someone else who is agreeing to this. “You can fit at least six in the bed. Make sure you buy something to lash them down with.”

“Gabe says he’s got that covered.”

He kisses her goodbye after, but it’s on the forehead. He stands on his toes to reach.

She leaves the truck parked outside their apartment with the keys in the ignition. She doesn’t want to see her brother. He is someone else’s project now. For both their sakes, she hopes Tom will do a better job than she has.

She’s coming down and the sun setting in her eyes is like orange glass. She just wants to sleep, but it’s a long walk to the train station. She’ll have plenty of time to make two calls when she gets there. She’ll use her second quarter to call Mom.

They’re driving back to the station, officially off shift, when Gomez’s phone starts ringing. He leans across Dean to pull it out of the squad car glovebox and flips it open on his chin, one hand on the wheel.

“Edie? What’s up?” From the tone of his voice Dean can tell she doesn’t call him much. He can hear the quick buzzing of her voice on the other end of the line but can’t make out what she’s saying.

“Hang on, hang on! I’m driving, I’m giving you to Wright.” He hands Dean the phone. “She says her brother’s on his way. He got a call about a fight.”

“What? What do you want me to say to her?”

“Figure out what’s going on.”

He raises the phone to his ear, almost afraid of it. He’d say no if he didn’t have to do it in front of Gomez. He wants no more of what he got last night. “Yeah, hello?”

“Great. You.”

“Well, I’m all you’ve got sweetie, so what’s up?”

“Gabe’s going. He got a call and he’s going and he took Tom.”

“Going where?”

“I don’t know. Some farm in Milton.”

“You don’t even know where it is? The address?” He gives Gomez a look but his partner is focusing on the road.

“He wouldn’t tell me. Why would he tell me?”

“Well what do you want us to do without it?”

“I don’t know, just...” Her voice fades out, like she’s struggling to keep her mouth near the receiver. “Do you know anyone in Milton? Any cops?”

“We’re officers, honey.”

“*Whatever*. There has to be something you can do. Someone you can call.”

“Not unless you know where we’re going.”

“They’re getting the dogs out first. That’s what they said they’re going to do. What if...”

But there are enough *what ifs* that Dean doesn’t need her to fill it in.

“Come on, Edie, you have to give us more than that. Anything. Anything to narrow it down. There are hundreds of farms out there, and they know how to hide shit like that.” He’s running out of patience. “He didn’t tell you anything?”

“No!” Wherever she’s yelling at him from, there’s an echo sending her voice back to her. “No, wait.” Something instinctual perks up in Dean at that unsteady *wait*. It’s the feeling that made him want to work for the law in the first place, so he waits and doesn’t interrupt. “There might be a bus. A school bus.”

“A what?”

“It’s a moving dog hospital or something. If... if the fight is supposed to be there, that’s where it would be. Right?”

“Sure. Good bet, anyway. And you said they’ve already left?”

“He got the call a few hours ago.”

“So, they might already be there.”

“I don’t know! They have a lot of crates. They need to be fast. They won’t be fast enough.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll have Gomez try him.”

“Thanks.” As begrudging a *thanks* as he’s ever heard, like it’s being torn out under duress.

“Yeah.” He hangs up and throws the warm phone into Gomez’s lap.

“Call your psycho buddy. And turn left here.”

“What? Where are we going?”

“Your place. They you can drive me to mine.”

“What? Why?”

“Were you not listening? We’re going to need more than one car.”

“No. We are *not* getting involved.”

“Why? What, you’re scared?”

“Don’t fucking start, Wright.” But Dean is digging out his own phone to make a call and Gomez makes the left anyway.

She picks up on the second ring.

“Laure? We’re coming. I hope you have room.”

Driving through to Milton in the dark is driving through pitchy fields on either side, invisible in the black. The road is a vein of light that blinds you and keeps the dark out of focus and Tom stays close on his tail, a warm orange in his rear-view mirror. Gabe’s heart is an animal locked up. He hasn’t felt this scared in a long time.

There's no one else to do it. There's only him.

There's only ever been him. His memories before nine are lacking but he remembers his mom's face turning away more than anything else. Denial. Acceptance. Whatever kept her from noticing, it had the same result. Dad worked on the tar sands until he died and then Mom moved them to Ontario. What a laugh that it was the ocean that killed him and not the rig.

Before that, home was a loaded word. He's never bounced back from it and never made one of his own. His mom had been a refuge, but not in high water. He'd seen the waves break against her. She did better the second time with Robert, Edie's dad. Gabe has never been able to like him.

He knows with some distance that she's married to a good man now. But that has never reached Gabe. It never mattered for him. He'd been so long alone it's now impossible to convince him otherwise.

He has help, though he never asked for it. Not in words. It was strange to be heard anyway.

He thinks his way to Lucky's farm, dead air in the truck with no radio sending him around in interior circles, and he pulls up the private lane slowly. The floodlight is on but there's no van. No other cars except the school bus parked tight against the long side of the barn. He pulls even more carefully around the back and gets out. He waits for Tom, who climbs out of his low Sunfire like he's stepping out onto the moon, wide eyes in slow motion.

"Wait here."

Gabe hefts a heavy pair of bolt cutters out of the front seat of his truck. The bed was packed too tightly with six empty crates crammed end-to-end for it to fit when he loaded up.

"What do we do with them after?" Tom is at his elbow, too close. Gabe has to put his weight into the padlock on the barn door.

"We'll figure it out when we're not here." He's nervous and that makes him short. It appears that's enough of an answer for Tom though, because he doesn't ask again. Gabe is

relieved. He doesn't have anything more to tell him than that. "First thing's first, okay? Anywhere is better than here."

A satisfying cleaving of metal and a softened thump as the padlock hits the snow. Their breath is fogging as they drag open the doors. Darkness inside and shadows cast by the floodlight in the yard. Those familiar animal rustlings. One dog starts to bark and throw herself against the front of her kennel and then the rest join in, an avalanche of noise. One after another after another.

"Don't worry about all that. They just want your attention." He raises his voice over the din, battling it. Even the soaring ceiling of the barn doesn't absorb much of the commotion.

"Well, they have it." Tom sounds shaky. Intimidated, maybe. Scared. Gabe looks for weakness in him and doesn't find any in the other's set mouth. Tom's blue eyes are hard ice. He trusts that.

"Good. We'll do them one at a time. You get the crates down from the truck so we can load it from the back." He counts the kennels as though they might have changed since the last time he was here. Fourteen, a dog in every single one.

He's almost done. It's almost over. "They know me. Some of them, anyway. I'll do it."

Tom hesitates, halfway to turning back.

"I said I'll do it. Don't worry."

It's a command. Tom obeys it and trudges back into the snow in shoes not warm enough for it.

The first dog in the run closest to him is old and white, face cut up with pink scar tissue. She goes still when he approaches the gate, waiting her turn. No barred teeth, no bristled fur when he opens it, she waits while he clips on the leash and leads her out, but outside the kennel she's a tremendous power on four legs. She tries to drive him towards the run opposite her, but Gabe drags her back and leads her into the snow where Tom has the first crate waiting, poised at the edge of the truck bed. All Gabe has to do is pat the lowered door and she jumps

up onto it. It's just as easy to get her inside, all parts of a routine she recognizes. Tom is visibly relieved and climbs up to push the crate to the back, jumps down to ready the next one.

But the more of them Gabe leads out, the more agitated the rest of them get. They're confused, watching each dog go before them, rioting until it's their turn. They're too smart. They're anticipating him, and by the time he's on number six, a deep brown boy whose power is all in his shoulders, Gabe has a constant fight on his hands. They all have Lucky's manic, unstable energy, and he's starting to get tired. They're also running out of room.

To squash down his rumbling panic, Gabe stops to look at the eye-level storage along the back wall. Just like the dogs, the cabinets aren't individually locked. He pulls them wide. Inside are antibiotics, steroids. Iron supplements. Pain killers.

It's several months rent, easy, if he can find someone to unload them on. Gabe is lingering, doing the quick math.

"You can't take them." Tom is at his elbow again, reading his mind.

Gabe doesn't answer him.

"We're already taking the dogs. They have to get caught with everything else for anything to stick. Even if nothing much does." And when Gabe still doesn't move, "You know that."

"Yeah. Okay." It's as simple as that. But he leaves the cabinets open like evidence.

They're filling the last crate in Tom's car with a little wiggling dog that looks so new he doesn't have a scar on him when they're caught in a glare; headlights. Someone crept up close while they were still inside.

Gabe's stomach drops onto his bladder and fear is a flashing blankness behind his eyes. He comes close to blacking out. So much adrenaline pumps out so fast that it takes him longer than it should to recognize the cars. It's Heck that gets out of the first one. Gabe's held breath escapes him like he's been punched.

“Gabe, the fuck are you doing?”

“What’s it look like?” Tom is behind him again, his little shadow. Quietly watching.

Proving that Gabe isn’t crazy by being a part of all this.

“Well.” Heck looks caught in a hard place, between the barn and the Nissan that Wright is getting out of. “Hurry up. I’ve already called this into Milton.”

“What?”

“Relax. You’ve got fifteen minutes before anyone’ll make it out here.” Heck has never trusted him this much, but he’s looking at the truck bed full of dogs as he says it. “So you better get them out of here.”

Gabe is rooted, though. He sees his friend clearly, the one who offered him a spot in his band when he saw Gabe play, who just shuts off instead of fighting with him when Gabe fans up inside and tries to pick a beating out of him. Always the bigger man.

“Thanks.”

Heck only nods. It’s Wright who says, “So this is what you were doing?” He’s saying it to Tom, marvelling like he’s just broken a code, but Tom just shrugs back at him, still half hidden behind Gabe’s broad back. “Are there any more in there?”

“Yeah.”

“They mean?”

“Not without someone here to set them off.”

“Load ‘em up, then. We can take two more. Right, Heck? Where are they going?”

“Don’t know yet. We just had to get them out of here.”

Wright scoffs at him, hands on his hips under his heavy vest. At another time Gabe would have squared up and stepped to him. “You’re damn lucky we found you then. You should have called us.”

“What do you mean?”

“My ex has a place. A rescue. Long drive, so let’s go.”

Gabe's chest is gorge filling with water, filling up with an answer. "And she'll take them?"

"Not if we don't *get out of here.*"

"Where are they meeting, in the city?" Heck has a hand on his radio, looking like he's feeling left out. "I can suggest they get an unmarked to follow them back here."

"Parking garage off Shepard and Yonge, but they're probably already on their way."

"We'll have them check anyway. Can't hurt."

Officer Wright puts one in the back of his car. Tom drags another filthy crate from the back of the barn and helps Heck load it into his Civic before they fill it. Another dog safe, but if they double up neither dog will make it out.

With each space filled, the blood in Gabe's head stops rushing long enough for the math to shake out.

They don't have enough room for all the dogs.

How did it take him so long to notice? There are four left over.

He's frozen in the doorway of the barn and Tom is there, again. "We have to leave."

"We can't." There are four left over. Four. If he muzzles one and puts it in the cab of the truck with him, there will be three.

Three.

"It was fifteen minutes almost ten minutes ago, Gabe." He can hear the panic tamped down in Tom's voice. It doesn't reach him.

"No."

There's a warm hand on his forearm, holding tight. He does and doesn't feel it, it registers but doesn't understand it.

Who would touch him? Who would dare?

"We can't," he chokes out, "They're..."

"You tried." That makes him feel sick. "You got to ten of them."

"Eleven. I can get one in the cab."

“Eleven, then.” That hand still on him. “Thirteen, really. You saved ours, too.”

Ours. Mayhem waiting for him at home, Brad for Tom. They’d lived, too.

“Thirteen, Gabe.”

With the lights in the barn on, confused, gentle eyes watch him from behind chain link. Their brothers are sisters are all gone. Their barks are begging. A tether in Gabe is bending to snap though he’s completely still. His hands have always been fists and a sob so old and dry it might have come from before he was born tears out of his throat.

“No.” He wants to say it until they understand. He only manages to say it once.

Tom’s voice is damp but present and so, so quiet. “I know.”

“No.”

“I know.”

“We could let them out...”

“They’d freeze. That’s worse. Believe me. I know.”

Tom tugs his elbow once, detaches, and walks away. Leaving him to leave on his own. When he can.

When Gabe gets back to the cars Tom is pulling the comforter from his own bed out of his Sunfire. Gabe recognizes the busy pattern, the second-hand look of it.

“What’s that for?” His voice is stone.

Tom looks at him like it should be obvious. “It’s cold.” He throws it over the crates in the bed of the truck. Fitting it under the straps to keep it in place gives Gabe something to do.

“Hey,” he hears Tom say, and he looks up to see him catching Wright before he gets into his car. “There’s a vet at Pinewood taking money you should know about.”

In the truck and on the road again. Line dividers bright in his headlights. They all got out, loaded up, one by one. No one caught.

All but three.

His anger drips away like blood and forms a puddle, clotting in him. Gabe is a new wound, open and aching. He's crying; hoarse and private now that he's alone. Deep swallowing breaths he can't catch up with. He follows Tom's blurry taillights, driving straight and steady, watching for black ice.

Laure has been preparing since she got the call. Her practiced strategies were not enough to keep her from agreeing. Perhaps the columns she was still missing were why she said yes.

She'd doubled up the smaller, friendly dogs to free up some kennels and shoveled paths from the house to the driveway to the barn. She'd been too efficient and had been left with nothing else to do, so she drank coffee and watched the moon light up the smooth fields. The ripest part of winter, nearly here. There has been a lot of snow for late December. It will be a cold season.

The rest of her preparations happen in her head.

When Dean's car pulls in with its three-car tail, Fritz is off, bounding through the snow to protect her, his little dachshund body quivering with the force of his barks. She calls him back and he looks at her, skeptical, before returning. Laure has had many dogs, but Fritz is the one. Part of her will go into the ground with him. She puts him in the house.

Dean is the first out of the cars and he looks tired. It's still a few hours until dawn. There's a bandy-legged, muzzled pit bull in his backseat.

"Eleven," he greets her. Laure appreciates that his focus, for once, is where it should be, rather than on her.

"That's a lot." She has made room for seven. A rescue shelter is always full. Eleven will be tricky.

"We had to leave some behind," he says by way of blunting the blow. Someone else has it worse than her.

It doesn't work. "Don't tell me that." She doesn't have time for grief. Laure had been drawn to the law so she could compel change. When she learned her way around it, when the

practicing drained her, she couldn't accept its limitations. Psychology could treat what the law missed, she thought. So can this.

She recognizes Hector's car and she waves at him as he gets out. His friendly smile is always welcome. The other two, short and tall, getting out of their cars, are mysteries to her.

"Those guys?"

"Gomez's friends. They found the place."

"Ah." That's all she needs for now.

It's a tight fit. The new dogs behave themselves until they're inside where a riot of new smells and noises meets them. Some strain against their leashes while others slink in, terrified, or outright refuse to enter. One, a big brown beauty with a wide scarred up head, lies down and rolls over, begging not to go. He needs to be carried.

"Is that normal?" It's the short guy asking her while her arms are full of the dog, his question pulled from concern. "Mine does that too, sometimes."

"You've got a rescue?"

"One that got out before this."

She doesn't ask for details. "It's pretty normal. For abused dogs, anyway. New spaces mean new things to be afraid of."

"But we should put them in here anyway?"

"A fearful dog will stay fearful if it's not challenged." Laure shrugs. "They have to learn that all that is over. But slowly." She sets the heavy dog in his new kennel, her back twinging slightly as she bends. "For now, we just get them through today. What's your name?"

"Tom. That's Gabe."

"I'm Laure. One day at a time, Tom."

He laughs and it's real. Almost contagious. "You're telling me."

Dean and his partner leave as soon as their cars are empty. Better for them not to be here long. She agrees to let Dean come back to check on everything in a day or two, but only for that. She can tell he's disappointed this ordeal didn't loosen her resolve.

She empties four kennels for the dogs she didn't have room for, and the evicted ones are each chained in opposite corners and given a bed and a blanket to curl up in as temporary consolation. Tom and his friend walk the kennels, a slow orbit of one another as they press their fingers to the gates, accepting licks of gratitude, never speaking. The tall one might as well be a statue granted life, but Tom kneels to speak to each one until their tails are wagging.

Some shy dogs are curious about meeting other dogs, and one or two of the new rescues had pressed their noses to the occupied kennels as they were led in, ears pricked with curiosity. *Friend?* Perhaps these dogs want to know the others because they don't know how to have a relationship with people.

She sees how Tom and his friend stick together. Perhaps that's similar. But she needs to know why they did it. She invites them in for coffee but doesn't pour one for herself. Fritz is glued to their ankles by his long snout, sniffing them out and logging each new dog they've touched. He loves to smell shoes. They're the only part of the home that you take with you that doesn't get washed. They tell him everything. She wishes he could tell her.

Tall and short in her kitchen, looking awkward and out of place. Gabe doesn't move much and holds his coffee like a shield. He seems delicate despite everything about him. She thinks Tom can sense it, because he never drifts far.

Laure doesn't believe in small talk. She doesn't believe in waste. The coffee was just the bait to get them inside where conversation seems more natural. "Dean told me you two were taking this risk with or without him. Why?"

She directs it at both of them but it's Tom that answers. "Because they couldn't save themselves. They'd be put down if the cops picked them up there."

*Officers.* She resists the urge to correct them. No one is in the wrong here. Not according to her. “But why did *you* have to?”

Tom shrugs.

“I’m doing you a favour. I’d prefer if you answer when asked.”

For a minute he still doesn’t. He’s thinking about it. He shrugs again. “Because it was right.”

Laure decides that Tom probably doesn’t know. That he can’t see his own hatred for pain, or how much the pain of others strikes at him like there is no distance. Like they’re all connected. He also does all the talking. She knows who is protecting whom, and that makes Gabe’s still, silent presence less intimidating without him ever having to say a word.

So, Laure just nods. She drinks water from a plastic glass instead of coffee. She knows her limits. “They can’t run out with the others in the paddock. They’ll need to be walked. Individually. Even in weather like this, even in the snow. Twice a day.” It’s a lot, but Tom is nodding. Ready. An eager little thing, young and probably stupid. But useful. “You can’t let dogs like that get pent up.”

“I have another,” he adds suddenly, like he’s just remembered. “He needs a place, because... Well. Because. Because I don’t have one for right now.” It doesn’t sound like an easy thing for him to admit.

“Then we’ll have to build room for it. It, and all the others. The dogs shouldn’t be doubled up like that or leashed out in the open.”

“I can do that.” It’s the first time she’s heard Gabe speak. It spooks her a little, a voice from a solid ghost.

“Good.” She taps her glass, considering. It’s a lot of dogs. It’s cramped in the barn now but the house, other than her and Fritz, is empty. Too big, too quiet. She has an empty column under her social strategy. She turns the glass in her hands.

“You have a job?”

“I’m a vet tech in Hamilton.” It colours in the picture even more. She decides.

“There are some empty bedrooms if you want one. Temporary.” She sees the surprise, but the gratitude is more cautious. It slowly takes over his face. “The trade is you work here now, too. I need your hands, too,” she adds, tilting her chin at Gabe. She can’t tell if he’s committed or not. “I have a lot that needs fixing.”

Caregiving is tiring. It can be traumatic if it’s handled all alone. She needs the company as much as they do because dogs don’t talk back. There’s a reason that humans have grouped together throughout history. There’s less research around coping but we do it naturally. Having to think of others, having to adjust yourself. It sneaks up and fixes you. Laure hasn’t had to do it for a long time.

She’s not going to suggest that they talk about it, about the real *why*. Not at first. It will be easier when it’s all less fresh. Less acute. When feelings can be felt instead of feared. When they can be looked at with some distance.

Why are those who help others often so neglectful of themselves? She hopes there will be time to find out.