

"Touching and powerful . . . Reid masterfully grabs hold of the heartstrings and doesn't let go. A stunning first novel." —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

FOREVER, INTERRUPTED

A NOVEL

TAYLOR
JENKINS REID

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO



FOREVER, INTERRUPTED

~ A Novel ~

TAYLOR JENKINS REID



WASHINGTON SQUARE PRESS
New York Toronto London Sydney New Delhi

To Linda Morris
(for reading the murder mysteries of a twelve-year-old girl)

And to Alex Reid
(a man the whole world should fall in love with)

Every morning when I wake up I forget for a fraction of a second that you are gone and I reach for you. All I ever find is the cold side of the bed. My eyes settle on the picture of us in Paris, on the bedside table, and I am overjoyed that even though the time was brief I loved you and you loved me.

—CRAIGSLIST POSTING, CHICAGO, 2009

PART ONE



JUNE

Have you decided if you're going to change your name?" Ben asks me. He is sitting on the opposite end of the couch, rubbing my feet. He looks so cute. How did I end up with someone so goddamn cute?

"I have an idea," I tease. But I have more than an idea. My face breaks into a smile. "I think I'm gonna do it."

"Really?" he asks, excitedly.

"Would you want that?" I ask him.

"Are you kidding?" he says. "I mean, you don't have to. If you feel like it's offensive or . . . I don't know, if it negates your own name. I want you to have the name you want," he says. "But if that name happens to be my name"—he blushes slightly—"that might be really cool."

He seems too sexy to be a husband. You think of husbands as fat, balding men who take out the trash. But my husband is sexy. He's young and he's tall and he's strong. He's so perfect. I sound like an idiot. But this is how it's supposed to be, right? As a newlywed, I'm supposed to see him through these rose-colored glasses. "I was thinking of going by Elsie Porter Ross," I say to him.

He stops rubbing my feet for a minute. "That's really hot," he says.

I laugh at him. "Why?"

"I don't know," he says, starting to rub my feet again. "It's probably some weird caveman thing. I just like the idea that we are the Rosses. We are Mr. and Mrs. Ross."

"I like that!" I say. "Mr. and Mrs. Ross. That is hot."

"I told you!"

"That settles it. As soon as the marriage certificate gets here, I'm sending it to the DMV or wherever you have to send it."

“Awesome,” he says, taking his hands off of me. “Okay, Elsie Porter Ross. My turn.”

I grab his feet. It’s quiet for a while as I absentmindedly rub his toes through his socks. My mind wanders, and after some time, it lands on a startling realization: I am hungry.

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

“Now?”

“I really want to get Fruity Pebbles for some reason.”

“We don’t have cereal here?” Ben asks.

“No, we do. I just . . . I want Fruity Pebbles.” We have adult cereals, boxes of brown shapes fortified with fiber.

“Well, should we go get some? I’m sure CVS is still open and I’m sure they sell Fruity Pebbles. Or, I could go get them for you.”

“No! I can’t let you do that. That would be so lazy of me.”

“That is lazy of you, but you’re my wife and I love you and I want you to have what you want.” He starts to get up.

“No, really, you don’t have to.”

“I’m going.” Ben leaves the room briefly and returns with his bike and shoes.

“Thank you!” I say, now lying across the sofa, taking up the space he just abandoned. Ben smiles at me as he opens the front door and walks his bike through it. I can hear him put the kickstand down and I know he will come back in to say good-bye.

“I love you, Elsie Porter Ross,” he says, and he bends down to the couch to kiss me. He is wearing a bike helmet and bike gloves. He grins at me. “I really love the sound of that.”

I smile wide. “I love you!” I say to him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I love you! I’ll be right back.” He shuts the door behind him.

I lay my head back down and pick up a book, but I can’t concentrate. I miss him. Twenty minutes pass and I start to expect him home, but the door doesn’t open. I don’t hear anyone on the steps.

Once thirty minutes have passed, I call his cell phone. No answer. My mind starts to race with possibilities. They are all far-fetched and absurd. He met someone else. He stopped off at a strip club. I call him again as my brain starts to think of more realistic reasons for him to be

late, reasons that are reasonable and thus far more terrifying. When he does not answer again, I get off the couch and walk outside.

I'm not sure what I expect to find, but I look up and down the street for any sign of him. Is it crazy to think he's hurt? I can't decide. I try to stay calm and tell myself that he must just be stuck in some sort of traffic jam that he can't get out of, or maybe he's run into an old friend. The minutes start to slow. They feel like hours. Each second passing is an insufferable period of time.

Sirens.

I can hear sirens heading in my direction. I can see their flashing lights just above the rooftops on my street. Their whooping alarms sound like they are calling to me. I can hear my name in their repetitive wailing: *El-sie. El-sie.*

I start running. By the time I get to the end of my street, I can feel just how cold the concrete is on the balls of my feet. My light sweatpants are no match for the wind, but I keep going until I find the source.

I see two ambulances and a fire truck. There are a few police cars barricading the area. I run as far into the fray as I can get before I stop myself. Someone is being lifted onto a stretcher. There's a large moving truck flipped over on the side of the road. Its windows are smashed, glass surrounding it. I look closely at the truck, trying to figure out what happened. That's when I see that it isn't all glass. The road is covered in little specks of something else. I walk closer and I see one at my feet. It's a Fruity Pebble. I scan the area for the one thing I pray not to see and I see it. Right in front of me—how could I have missed it?—halfway underneath the moving truck, is Ben's bike. It's bent and torn.

The world goes silent. The sirens stop. The city comes to a halt. My heart starts beating so quickly it hurts in my chest. I can feel the blood pulsing through my brain. It's so hot out here. When did it get so hot outside? I can't breathe. I don't think I can breathe. I'm not breathing.

I don't even realize I am running until I reach the ambulance doors. I start to pound on them. I jump up and down as I try to pound on the window that is too high above me to reach. As I do, all I hear is the sound of the Fruity Pebbles crunching beneath my feet. I grind

them into the pavement each time I jump. I break them into a million pieces.

The ambulance pulls away. Is he in it? Is Ben in there? Are they keeping him alive? Is he okay? Is he bruised? Maybe he's in the ambulance because protocol says they have to but he's actually fine. Maybe he's around here somewhere. Maybe the ambulance was holding the driver of the car. That guy has to be dead, right? No way that person survived. So Ben must be all right. That's the karma of an accident: The bad guy dies, the good guy lives.

I turn and look around, but I don't see Ben anywhere. I start to scream his name. I know he's okay. I'm sure of it. I just need this to be over. I just want to see him with a small scrape and be told he's fine to go home. Let's go home, Ben. I've learned my lesson to never let you do such a stupid favor for me again. I've learned my lesson; let's go home.

"Ben!" I shout into the nighttime air. It's so cold. How did it get so cold? "Ben!" I shout again. I feel like I am running in circles until I am stopped in my place by a police officer.

"Ma'am," he says as he grabs my arms. I keep shouting. Ben needs to hear me. He needs to know that I am here. He needs to know that it's time to come home. "Ma'am," the officer calls again.

"What?" I yell into his face. I rip my arms out of his grasp and I spin myself around. I try to run through what is clearly a marked-off area. I know that whoever marked this off would want to let me through. They would understand that I just need to find my husband.

The officer catches up to me and grabs me again. "Ma'am!" he says, this time more severe. "You cannot be here right now." Doesn't he understand that this is exactly where I *must* be right now?

"I need to find my husband!" I say to him. "He could be hurt. That's his bike. I have to find him."

"Ma'am, they have taken your husband to Cedars-Sinai. Do you have a ride to get there?"

My eyes are staring at his face, but I do not understand what he is saying to me.

"Where is he?" I ask. I need him to tell me again. I don't understand.

“Ma’am, your husband is on his way to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. He is being rushed to the emergency room. Would you like me to take you?”

He’s not here? I think. He was in that ambulance?

“Is he okay?”

“Ma’am, I can’t—”

“Is he okay?”

The officer looks at me. He pulls his hat off his head and places it on his chest. I know what this means. I’ve seen it done on the doorsteps of war widows in period pieces. As if on cue, I start violently heaving.

“I need to see him!” I scream through my tears. “I need to see him! I need to be with him!” I drop to my knees in the middle of the road, cereal crunching underneath me. “Is he all right? I should be with him. Just tell me if he is still alive.”

The police officer looks at me with pity and guilt. I’ve never seen the two looks together before but it’s easy to recognize. “Ma’am. I’m sorry. Your husband has . . . ”

The police officer isn’t rushed; he isn’t running on adrenaline like me. He knows there is nothing to hurry for. He knows my husband’s dead body can wait.

I don’t let him finish his sentence. I know what he’s going to say and I can’t believe it. I won’t believe it. I scream at him, pounding my fists into his chest. He is a huge man, probably six foot four at least, and he looms over me. I feel like a child. But that doesn’t stop me. I just keep flailing and hitting him. I want to slap him. I want to kick him. I want to make him hurt like I do.

“He passed away on impact. I’m sorry.”

That’s when I fall to the ground. Everything starts spinning. I can hear my pulse, but I can’t focus on what the policeman is saying. I really didn’t think this was going to happen. I thought bad things only happened to people with hubris. They don’t happen to people like me, people that know how fragile life is, people that respect the authority of a higher power. But it has. It has happened to me.

My body calms. My eyes dry. My face freezes, and my gaze falls onto a scaffolding and stays there. My arms feel numb. I’m not sure if

I'm standing or sitting.

"What happened to the driver?" I ask the officer, calm and composed.

"I'm sorry?"

"What happened to the person driving the moving truck?"

"He passed away, ma'am."

"Good," I say to him. I say it like a sociopath. The police officer just nods his head at me, perhaps indicating some unspoken contract that he will pretend he didn't hear me say it, and I can pretend I don't wish another person to have died. But I don't want to take it back.

He grabs my hand and leads me into the front of his police car. He uses his siren to break through traffic and I see the streets of Los Angeles in fast-forward. They have never looked so ugly.

When we get to the hospital, the officer sits me down in the waiting room. I'm shaking so hard that the chair shakes with me.

"I need to go back there," I say to him. "I need to go back there!" I yell louder. I take notice of his name tag. Officer Hernandez.

"I understand. I'm going to find out all of the information that I can. I believe you will have a social worker assigned to you. I'll be right back."

I can hear him talking but I can't make myself react or acknowledge him. I just sit in the chair and stare at the far wall. I can feel my head sway from side to side. I feel myself stand and walk toward the nurses' station, but I am cut off by Officer Hernandez coming back. He is now with a short, middle-aged man. The man has on a blue shirt with a red tie. I bet this idiot calls it his power tie. I bet he thinks he has a good day when he wears this tie.

"Elsie," he says. I must have told Officer Hernandez my name. I don't even remember doing that. He puts out his hand as if I were going to shake it. I see no need for formality in the midst of tragedy. I let it hang there. Before all this, I would never have rejected someone's handshake. I am a nice person. Sometimes, I'm even a pushover. I'm not someone who is considered "difficult" or "unruly."

"You are the wife of Ben Ross? Do you have a driver's license on you?" the man asks me.

"No. I . . . ran right out of the house. I don't . . . " I look down at my feet. I don't even have on shoes and this man thinks I have my driver's license?

Officer Hernandez leaves. I can see him step away slowly, awkwardly. He feels like his job is done here, I'm sure. I wish I was him. I wish I could walk away from this and go home. I'd go home to my husband and a warm bed. My husband, a warm bed, and a fucking bowl of Fruity Pebbles.

"I'm afraid we cannot let you back there yet, Elsie," the man in the red tie says.

"Why not?"

"The doctors are working."

"He's *alive*?" I scream. How quickly hope can come flying back.

"No, I'm sorry." He shakes his head. "Your husband died earlier this evening. He was listed as an organ donor."

I feel like I'm in an elevator that is plummeting to the ground floor. They are taking pieces of him and giving them to other people. They are taking his parts.

I sit back down in the chair, dead inside. Part of me wants to scream at this man to let me back there. To let me see him. I want to run through the twin doors and find him, hold him. What are they doing to him? But I'm frozen. I am dead too.

The man in the red tie leaves briefly and comes back with hot chocolate and slippers. My eyes are dry and tired. I can barely see through them. All of my senses feel muted. I feel trapped in my own body, separated from everyone around me.

"Do you have someone we can call? Your parents?"

I shake my head. "Ana," I say. "I should call Ana."

He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Can you write down Ana's number? I'll call her."

I nod and he hands me a piece of paper and a pen. It takes me a minute to remember her number. I write it down wrong a few times before I write it down correctly, but I'm pretty sure, when I hand over the piece of paper, it's the correct number.

"What about Ben?" I ask. I don't know what exactly I mean. I just . . . I can't give up yet. I can't be at the call-someone-to-take-her-home-and-watch-her phase yet. We have to fight this, right? I have to find him and save him. How can I find him and save him?

"The nurses have called the next of kin."

"What? I'm his next of kin."

"Apparently his driver's license listed an address in Orange County. We had to legally notify his family."

"So who did you call? Who is coming?" But I already know who's coming.

"I will see if I can find out. I'm going to go phone Ana. I'll be back shortly, okay?"

I nod.

In this lobby, I can see and hear other families waiting. Some look somber but most look okay. There is a mother with her young daughter. They are reading a book. There is a young boy holding an ice pack to his face next to a father who seems annoyed. There is a teenage couple holding hands. I don't know why they are here, but judging from the smiles on their faces and the way they are flirting, I can only assume it's not dire and I . . . I want to scream at them. I want to say that emergency rooms are for emergencies and they shouldn't be here if they are going to look happy and carefree. I want to tell them to go home and be happy somewhere else because I don't need to see it. I don't remember what it feels like to be them. I don't even remember how it feels to be myself before this happened. All I have is this overwhelming sense of dread. That and my anger toward these two little shitheads who won't get their smiles out of my fucking face.

I hate them and I hate the goddamn nurses, who just go on with their day like it isn't the worst one of their lives. They make phone calls and they make photocopies and they drink coffee. I hate them for being able to drink coffee at a time like this. I hate everyone in this entire hospital for not being miserable.

The man in the red tie comes back and says that Ana is on her way. He offers to sit down and wait with me. I shrug. He can do whatever he wants. His presence brings me no solace, but it does prevent me from running up to someone and screaming at them for eating a candy bar at a time like this. My mind flashes back to the Fruity Pebbles all over the road, and I know they will be there when I get home. I know that no one will have cleaned them up because no one could possibly know how horrifying they would be to look at again. Then I think of what a stupid reason that is for Ben to die. He died over Fruity Pebbles. It would be funny if it wasn't so . . . It will never be funny. Nothing about this is funny. Even the fact that I lost my husband because I had a craving for a children's cereal based on the Flintstones cartoon. I hate myself for this. That's who I hate the most.

Ana shows up in a flurry of panic. I don't know what the man in the red tie has told her. He stands to greet her as she runs toward me. I can see them talking but I can't hear them. They speak only for a

second before she runs to my side, puts her arms around me. I let her arms fall where she puts them, but I have no energy to hug back. This is the dead fish of hugs. She whispers, "I'm sorry," into my ear, and I crumble into her arms.

I have no will to hold myself up, no desire to hide my pain. I wail in the waiting room. I sob and heave into her breasts. Any other moment of my life, I'd move my head away from that part of her body. I'd feel uncomfortable with my eyes and lips being that close to a sexual body part, but right now, sex feels trivial and stupid. It feels like something idiots do out of boredom. Those happy teenagers probably do it for sport.

Her arms around me don't comfort me. The water springs from my eyes as if I'm forcing it out but I'm not. It's just falling on its own. I don't even feel sad. This level of devastation is so far beyond tears, that mine feel paltry and silly.

"Have you seen him, Elsie? I'm so sorry."

I don't answer. We sit on the floor of the waiting room for what seems like hours. Sometimes I wail, sometimes I feel nothing. Most of the time, I lie in Ana's arms, not because I need to but because I don't want to look at her. Eventually, Ana gets up and rests me against the wall, and then she walks up to the nurses' station and starts yelling.

"How much longer until we can see Ben Ross?" she screams at the young Latina nurse sitting at her computer.

"Ma'am," the nurse says, standing up, but Ana moves away from her.

"No. Don't ma'am me. Tell me where he is. Let us through." The man in the red tie makes his way over to her and tries to calm her down.

He and Ana speak for a few minutes. I can see him try to touch Ana, to console her, and she jerks her shoulder out of his reach. He is just doing his job. Everyone here is just doing their job. What a bunch of assholes.

I see an older woman fly through the front doors. She looks about sixty with long, reddish brown hair in waves around her face. She has mascara running down her cheeks, a brown purse over her shoulder, a blackish brown shawl across her chest. She has tissues in her hands. I

wish my grief were composed enough to have tissues. I've been wiping snot on my sleeves and neckline. I've been letting tears fall into puddles on the floor.

She runs up to the front desk and then resigns herself to sit. When she turns to face me briefly, I know exactly who she is. I stare at her. I can't take my eyes off of her. She is my mother-in-law, a stranger by all accounts. I saw her picture a few times in a photo album, but she has never seen my face.

I remove myself and head into the bathroom. I do not know how to introduce myself to her. I do not know how to tell her that we are both here for the same man. That we are both grieving over the same loss. I stand in front of the mirror and I look at myself. My face is red and blotchy. My eyes are bloodshot. I look at my face and I think that I had someone who loved this face. And now he's gone. And now no one loves my face anymore.

I step back out of the bathroom and she is gone. I turn to find Ana grabbing my arm. "You can go in," she says and leads me to the man in the red tie, who leads me through the double doors.

The man in the red tie stops outside a room and asks me if I want him to go in with me. Why would I want him to go in with me? I just met this man. This man means nothing to me. The man inside this room means everything to me. *Nothing* isn't going to help losing *everything*. I open the door and there are other people in the room, but all I can see is Ben's body.

"Excuse me!" my mother-in-law says through her tears. It is meek but terrifying. I ignore it.

I grab his face in my hands and it's cold to the touch. His eyelids are shut. I'll never see his eyes again. It occurs to me they might be gone. I can't look. I don't want to figure it out. His face is bruised and I don't know what that means. Does that mean he was hurt before he died? Did he die there alone and lonely on the street? Oh my God, did he suffer? I feel faint. There's a sheet over his chest and legs. I'm scared to move the sheet. I'm scared that there is too much of Ben exposed, too much of him to see. Or that there is too much of him that is gone.

"Security!" she calls out into the air.

As I hold on to Ben's hand and a security guard shows up at the door, I look at my mother-in-law. She has no reason to know who I am. She has no reason to understand what I am doing here, but she has to know I love her son. That much has to be obvious by now.

"Please," I beg her. "Please, Susan, don't do this."

Susan looks at me curiously, confused. By the sheer fact that I know her name, she knows she must be missing something. She very subtly nods and looks at the security guard. "I'm sorry. Give us a moment?" He leaves the room, and Susan looks at the nurse. "You too. Thank you." The nurse leaves the room, shutting the door.

Susan looks tortured, terrified, and yet composed, as if she has only enough poise to get through the next five seconds and then she will fall apart.

"His hand has a wedding ring on it," she says to me. I stare at her and try to keep breathing. I meekly lift up my own left hand to match.

"We were married a week and a half ago," I say through tears. I can feel the corners of my lips pulling down. They feel so heavy.

"What is your name?" she asks me, now shaking.

"Elsie," I say. I am terrified of her. She looks angry and vulnerable, like a teenage runaway.

"Elsie what?" she chokes.

"Elsie Ross."

That's when she breaks. She breaks just like I have. Soon, she's on the floor. There are no more tissues in sight to save the linoleum from her tears.

Ana is sitting next to me holding my hand. I am sitting next to Ben's side, sobbing. Susan excused herself some time ago. The man in the red tie comes in and says we need to clear some things up and Ben's body needs to be moved. I just stare ahead, I don't even focus on what's happening, until the man in the red tie hands me a bag of Ben's things. His cell phone is there, his wallet, his keys.

"What is this?" I ask, even though I know what it is.

Before the man in the red tie can answer me, Susan appears in the doorway. Her face is strained; her eyes are bloodshot. She looks older than she did when she left. She looks exhausted. Do I look like that? I bet I look like that.

"What are you doing?" Susan asks the man.

"I'm . . . We need to clear the room. Your son's body is going to be transferred."

"Why are you giving that to her?" Susan says, more directly. She says it like I'm not even here.

"I'm sorry?"

Susan steps further into the room and takes the bag of Ben's stuff from in front of me. "All decisions about Ben, all his belongings, should be directed to me," she says.

"Ma'am," the man in the red tie says.

"All of it," she says.

Ana stands up and grabs me to go with her. She intends to remove me from this situation, and while I don't want to be here right now, I can't just be removed. I pull my arm out of Ana's hand and I look at Susan.

"Should we discuss what the next steps are?" I say to her.

"What is there to discuss?" Susan says. She is cold and controlled.

"I just mean . . . " I don't actually know what I mean.

"Mrs. Ross," the man in the red tie says.

"Yes?" Both Susan and I answer at the same time.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Which one did you mean?"

"The elder," he says, looking at Susan. I'm sure that he meant it as a sign of respect, but it's torn right through her. Susan doesn't want to be one of two Mrs. Rosses, that much is clear, but I bet she resents even more being the elder one.

"I'm not going to give this any more credence," she says to everyone in the room. "She has absolutely no proof that my son even knew her, let alone married her. I've never heard of her! My own son. I saw him last month. He never mentioned a damn thing. So no, I'm not having my son's possessions sent home with a stranger. I won't have it."

Ana reaches toward Susan. "Maybe it's time for us all to take a step back," she says.

Susan turns her head, as if noticing Ana for the first time. "Who are you?" she asks. She asks it like we are clowns coming out of a Volkswagen. She asks it as if she's exhausted by all the people that keep appearing.

"I'm a friend," Ana says. "And I don't think any of us are in a position to behave rationally, so maybe we can just breathe—"

Susan turns toward the man in the red tie, her body language interrupting Ana midsentence. "You and I need to discuss this in private," she barks at him.

"Ma'am, please calm down."

"Calm down? You're joking!"

"Susan—" I start to say. I don't know how I planned on finishing, but Susan doesn't give a shit.

"Stop," she says, putting her hand up in my face. It's aggressive and instinctual, as if she needs to protect her face from my words.

"Ma'am, Elsie was escorted in by the police. She was at the scene. I have no reason to doubt that she and your son were as she says . . ."

"Married?" Susan is incredulous.

"Yes," the man in the red tie says.

"Call the county! I want to see a record of it!"

"Elsie, do you have a copy of your marriage certificate that you can show Mrs. Ross?"

I can feel myself shrinking in front of them. I don't want to shrink. I want to stand tall. I want to be proud, confident. But this is all too much and I don't have anything to show for myself.

“No, but, Susan—” I say as tears fall down my face. I feel so ugly right now, so small and stupid.

“*Stop calling me that!*” she screams. “You don’t even know me. Stop calling me by my name!”

“Fine,” I say. My eyes are staring forward, focused on the body in the room. My husband’s body. “Keep all of it,” I say. “I don’t care. We can sit here and scream all day but it doesn’t change anything. So I really don’t give a shit where his wallet goes.”

I put one foot in front of the other and I walk out. I leave my husband’s body there with her. And the minute my feet hit the hallway, the minute Ana has shut the door behind us, I regret walking out. I should have stayed with him until the nurse kicked me out.

Ana pushes me forward.

She puts me in the car. She buckles my seat belt. She drives slowly through town. She parks in my driveway. I don't remember any of it happening. Suddenly, I am at my front door.

Stepping into my apartment, I have no idea what time of day it is. I have no idea how long it has been since I sat on the couch like a cavalier bitch whining about cereal in my pajamas. This apartment, the one I have loved since I moved in, the one I considered "ours" when Ben moved in, now betrays me. It hasn't moved an inch since Ben died. It's like it doesn't care.

It didn't put away his shoes sitting in the middle of the floor. It didn't fold up the blanket he was using. It didn't even have the decency to hide his toothbrush from plain view. This apartment is acting like nothing has changed. Everything has changed. I tell the walls he's gone. "He's dead. He's not coming home." Ana rubs my back and says, "I know, baby. I know."

She doesn't know. She could never know. I walk carelessly into my bedroom, hit my shoulder on the door hinge and feel nothing. I get into my side of the bed and I can smell him still. He's still here in the sheets. I grab his pillow from his side of the bed and I smell it, choking on my own tears. I walk into the kitchen as Ana is getting me a glass of water. I walk right past her with the pillow in my hand and I grab a trash bag, shoving the pillow into it. I tie it tight, knotting the plastic over and over until it breaks off in my hand and falls onto the kitchen floor.

"What are you doing?" she asks me.

"It smells like Ben," I answer. "I don't want the smell to evaporate. I want to save it."

"I don't know if that's going to work," she says delicately.

"Fuck you," I say and go back to the bed.

I start crying the minute I hit my pillow. I hate what this has made me. I've never told anyone to fuck off before, least of all Ana.

Ana has been my best friend since I was seventeen years old. We met the first day of college in line at the dining hall. I didn't have anyone to sit with and she was already trying to avoid a boy. It was a telling moment for each of us. When she decided to move to Los Angeles to be an actress, I came with her. Not because I had any affinity for Los Angeles, I had never been here, but because I had such a strong affinity for her. Ana had said to me, "C'mon, you can be a librarian anywhere." And she was absolutely right.

Here we were, nine years after meeting, her watching me like I'm going to slit my wrists. If I had a better grip on my senses, I'd say this is the real meat of friendship, but I don't care about that right now. I don't care about anything.

Ana comes in with two pills and a glass of water. "I found these in your medicine cabinet," she says. I look in her hand and I recognize them. It's Vicodin from when Ben had a back spasm last month. He barely took any of them. I think he thought taking them made him a wimp.

I take them out of her hand without questioning and I swallow them. "Thank you," I say. She tucks the duvet around me and goes to sleep on the couch. I'm glad she doesn't try to sleep in bed with me. I don't want her to take away his smell. My eyes are parched from crying, my limbs weak, but my brain needs the Vicodin to pass out. I shuffle over to Ben's side of the bed as I get groggy and fall asleep. "I love you," I say, and for the first time, there's no one to hear it.

I wake up feeling hungover. I reach over to grab Ben's hand as I do every morning, and his side of the bed is empty. For a minute I think he must be in the bathroom or making breakfast and then I remember. My devastation returns, this time duller but thicker, coating my body like a blanket, sinking my heart like a stone.

I pull my hands to my face and try to wipe away the tears, but they are flowing out of me too fast to catch up. It's like a Whac-A-Mole of misery.

Ana comes in with a dish towel in her hands, drying them.

"You're up," she says, surprised.

"How observant." Why am I being so mean? I'm not a mean person. This isn't who I am.

"Susan called." She is ignoring my outbursts, and for that, I am thankful.

"What did she say?" I sit up and grab the glass of water on my bedside table from last night. "What could she possibly want from me?"

"She didn't say anything. Just to call her."

"Great."

"I left the number on the refrigerator. In case you did want to call her."

"Thanks." I sip the water and stand up.

"I have to go walk Buggy and then I'll be right back," Ana says. Buggy is her English bulldog. He drools all over everything and I want to tell her that Buggy doesn't need to be let out because Buggy is a lazy sack of shit, but I don't say any of this because I really, really want to stop being so unkind.

"Okay."

"Do you want anything while I'm out?" she asks, and it reminds me that I asked Ben to get me Fruity Pebbles. I get right back into bed.

"No, nothing for me. Thank you."

"Okay, I'll be back shortly." She thinks for a minute. "Actually, do you want me to stick around in case you decide to call her now?"

“No, thanks. I can handle it.”

“Okay, if you change your mind . . . ”

“Thanks.”

Ana leaves, and as I hear the door shut, it hits me how alone I am. I am alone in this room, I am alone in this apartment, but more to the point, I am alone in this life. I can't even wrap my brain around it. I just get up and pick up the phone. I get the number from the front of the refrigerator and I see a magnet for Georgie's Pizza. I fall to the floor, my cheek against the cold tile. I can't seem to make myself get up.