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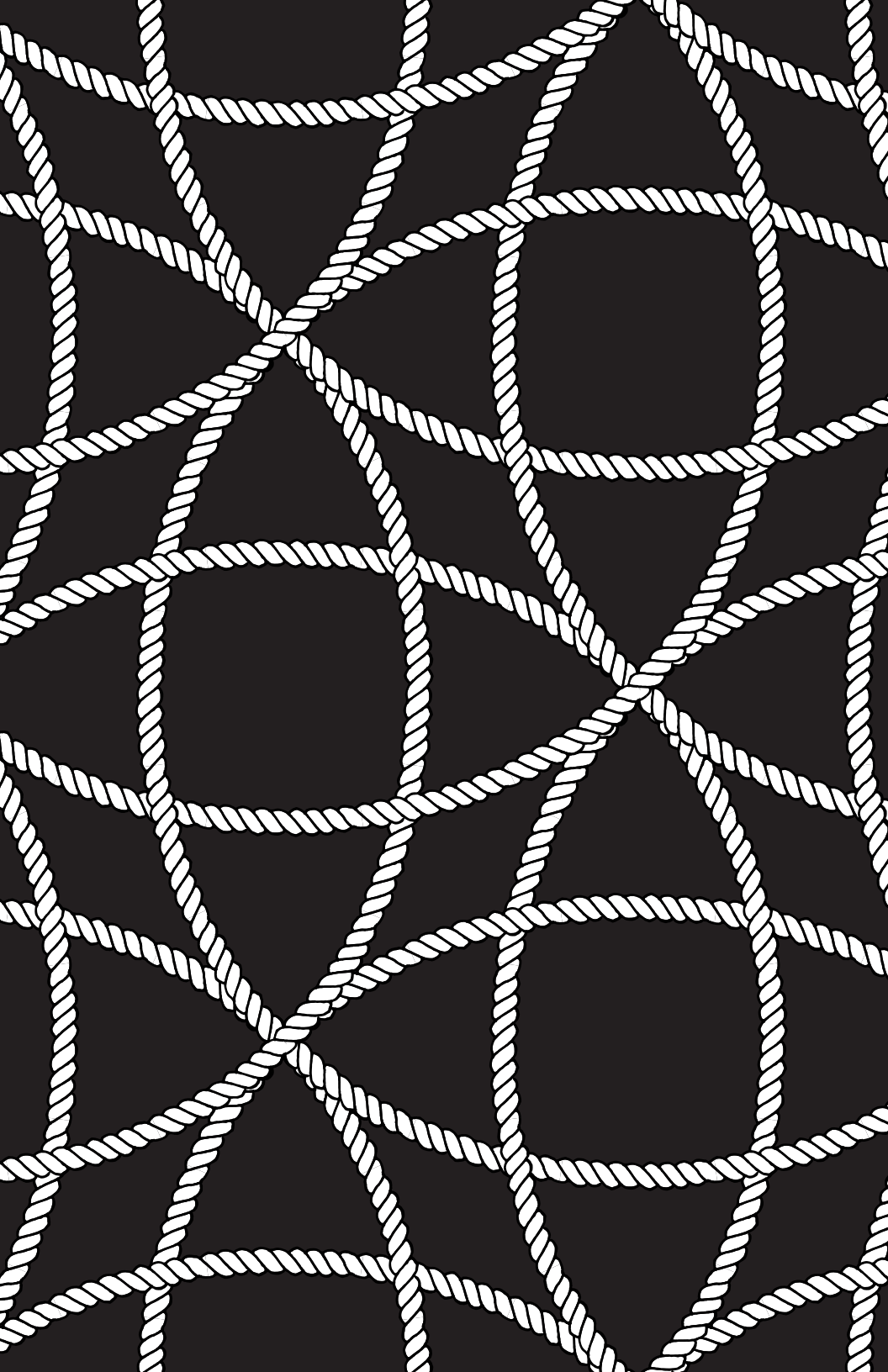
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FOR MY SISTER,
WHO REMEMBERED

AND MY GRANDFATHER,
WHO FORGOT







CHAPTER ONE



IF LIFE WAS a highway, Evan Kiernan's consisted of riding shotgun while his mother inched along in the right lane of I-95 looking for an exit so his little sister could pee.

This time, they were headed to Manhattan. It should have been only a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, but in Evan's experience, what *should be* rarely translated to reality. For example, kids *should* know who their fathers are. Diamond rings (plural) *should* lead to weddings (preferably singular), instead of pawn shops and moving trucks (plural). Five-year-olds *should* have a greater bladder capacity, and seventeen-year-olds *should* still be in high school—not riding shotgun while their mothers drive them to move-in day at NYU.

But maybe, for once, Evan Kiernan was about to be exactly where he should be. According to his mother, the Promising Young Artist program was his destiny, as if the sparkle-winged gods of the arts had arranged for his early college acceptance. Really, it was her, conspiring with his art teacher, Mr. Burns, to fill out the application behind his

back. Evan had been sure he had no shot in hell at getting into the elite program, which accepted one upcoming senior. *One*. But somehow, against all odds, they'd chosen him. He was still convinced it was some sort of mistake, due to his mother's exaggerated belief that her son was exceptional and Mr. Burns's glowing recommendation letter.

But the written application wasn't the main criteria. His portfolio had gotten him into the program, and he couldn't deny being proud of that, even if he wasn't sure he was really Greenwich Village material. And as Hailey kicked the back of his seat in time with "Look What You Made Me Do" on the radio and wailed about needing to pee for the thousandth time, he couldn't deny his that it would be amazing to have a little time to himself for once.

"Rest stop ahead!" his mom exclaimed, removing her hands from the steering wheel to applaud as she read the sign. "One more mile, okay, Hails? Envision the desert. *Be* the camel, baby." She brought her thumbs and forefingers together as if meditating before taking hold of the wheel again.

Evan glanced at the speedometer. They were crawling along at six miles per hour. He ran a hand through the dark curls flopping into his eyes, then pressed his palm against the freshly trimmed sides, trying to ignore the small feet pounding his back. The song switched to "Flowers," and when his mother started singing along with Miley Cyrus, he cringed and tried to go somewhere else—anywhere else—in his mind. He could have envisioned the desert, or been the camel, but instead, he went back to Advanced Drawing class.

To the day he drew *her*.

The drawing that changed everything.

It was his first day at Pennwood High School. They'd just moved out of their mother's ex-fiancé Dave's house and into a little Cape Cod with peeling white paint and a picket fence missing a few teeth.

That morning, he'd pulled rumpled jeans and a black-and-red flannel shirt from the box at the foot of his bed, wishing for another

ten years of sleep. Hailey had woken him multiple times through the night, scared and disoriented in her new room. His mom was downstairs already, in her bathrobe and slippers, cooking the traditional fresh-start breakfast/peace offering. He wondered, sometimes, if she'd become a realtor just to have the inside scoop on immediately available rental properties.

"You want me to iron your shirt?" she'd asked over her shoulder while flipping a pancake.

"Nah." He gave her a sideways hug with one arm and reached for the coffee pot with the other.

She rubbed her cheek where his had brushed against it. "You should shave."

"I can't find the razors," he said, even though he hadn't really looked. "It's fine."

"Come on." She cracked an egg into sizzling butter. "Don't you want to make a good first impression?" She said it a little too brightly, and even without his contacts in he could see from the puffiness of her eyes that she'd been crying already this morning. He wanted to throttle Dave.

First impressions had lost their charm years ago, but transferring to Pennwood had been easy enough. After reviewing his portfolio the previous week, the head of the art department had agreed to place him in Advanced Drawing, Ceramics, and Advanced Painting Techniques.

"Honestly," Mr. Burns had said during Evan's registration appointment, glancing between his sketchbook and his mother. "He's probably more advanced than the staff here. Have you considered art school?"

"He's always been exceptional," his mom had gushed while Evan looked at his shoes. She'd insisted he be tested for the gifted program in kindergarten, and ever since, she'd been using that word. *Exceptional*. She might as well have called him an alien. Exceptional was just another word for different. He'd read somewhere that all great artists

and writers feel that they experience the world fundamentally differently from everyone else, and he assumed that's why so many of them became alcoholics and vagrants and mental patients. But Mr. Burns made Evan feel like maybe it was possible to be both *different* and *normal* at the same time—that unconventional didn't have to mean unhealthy. And best of all, he kept a framed photo of his husband on his desk, which meant his mom wouldn't be trying to line up any dates with another one of his art teachers.

His first assignment in Advanced Drawing class was to draw a face entirely from memory, so Evan closed his eyes and tried to picture Hailey. He couldn't believe how hard it was to conjure up a detailed image of his own sister's face. She had brown eyes like his, but how far apart were they in relation to the corners of her mouth? Her nose was . . . kid-sized, but what was the exact shape? Glancing around at his classmates' work, they seemed to be having the same problem, laughing at each other's attempts to draw friends or teachers from other classes. People they recognized, but who were all strangers to him.

Mr. Burns went behind his desk to pop a CD into an ancient-looking stereo system, and suddenly the deep thrum of electronic trance music transformed the atmosphere of the room. The rhythm became hypnotic as the beats per minute steadily increased and the notes blurred, like a dream. Evan stared at the backs of his eyelids, feeling like he was lost in some sort of European dance club. He tipped his chin toward the ceiling, and flashes of red flared through the darkness. Splotchy afterimages danced like flames, like the time they went camping with Dave and Hailey wouldn't quit shining a flashlight in his face and gave him a migraine.

But then slowly, like a Polaroid picture, a pair of eyes began to develop.

Not brown and familiar. Not his mom's or his sister's or anyone's from his old school. These eyes were a startling jade green, peering at him around a huge, heavy black door.

A girl.

Her nose and the apples of her cheeks were sprinkled with freckles, and her mouth was open in a tiny gasp of surprise, revealing a small space between her two front teeth. She was frozen in this expression, as if he'd knocked on her door and snapped a photograph as she opened it, shocked to find a stranger there.

He was afraid that if he opened his eyes, he'd lose the image, so he fumbled for a pencil and began drawing furiously without looking at the paper. Who was she? Why was she opening the door? Would she invite him in?

He didn't want to be a stranger to this girl.

But as soon as he finished the last wavy strand of her soft, black hair, it was as if the door closed.

The sound of murmuring and stools scraping the floor brought him back. When he opened his eyes, the whole class was gathered around his table, staring in silence.

It was only pencil, but the luminosity of the eyes was apparent even without color. He'd captured the girl's surprise, and there was something so perfectly adorable about it.

"Who is she?" someone whispered.

Evan opened his mouth, then closed it again. He couldn't tell an entire classroom full of seniors that he had no idea who she was. Not on his first day at a new school. Probably not ever.

"Just . . . a girl I used to know," he said with a shrug, and looked into her pencil-drawn eyes again, overcome with a sense of wonder.

She was beautiful, but not in a magazine cover way.

She was beautiful because she was so . . . so . . . real.

And that, he knew, was ridiculous because she was absolutely not real. He was sure he'd never seen that girl before in his life.

He would have remembered.

Ten months later, here he was, pulling into a rest stop in New Jersey with his mom and sister on his way to NYU because of her. *The*

Green-Eyed Girl, painted life-sized in oil, became the centerpiece of his portfolio. The piece that earned the attention of his program mentor, Dr. Vanessa Mortakis.

Absolutely luminous, she'd called it in the acceptance letter. *Intensely realistic and gorgeously sensitive. I can't wait to work with you in New York.*



WHEN DR. MORTAKIS strode into the admissions office later that afternoon, Evan exchanged a surprised glance with his mom at Dr. Mortakis's hourglass figure in a tight black dress, glossy ebony hair to her waist, and blood-red heels that defined her calves beyond professional levels. None of that had shown up in her headshot.

"Evan Kiernan!" she exclaimed warmly, as if greeting an old friend. "Welcome to NYU!"

"Thank you so much." He shook her cool, slender hand, and her delicate bracelets jangled. "This is my mom, Melissa. And my sister, Hailey."

"You must be so proud," Dr. Mortakis said, clasping hands with Evan's mother, then bending down to shake with Hailey, too. "And you must be really proud of your big brother."

Hailey bounced up on her toes and nodded, and Evan felt a twinge in his chest. Ever since the acceptance letter arrived, his mom had been waving off his concerns about the cost of after-school care for Hailey and who would drive her to ballet or tuck her in when their mom had to work late. *You're her brother, not her dad*, she kept insisting. *It's your job to grow up and live your life. It's my job to take care of the two of you. Okay?*

"You are cute as button!" Dr. Mortakis exclaimed, booping Hailey's nose, and she giggled. Clearly, the professor hadn't been along for the car ride.

“He’s so good with her,” his mom bragged as they took their seats in the admissions office. “He even illustrates little stories for her.”

Dr. Mortakis’s eyes brightened. “Really? Well, we have an excellent illustration department. That could be a great option for you.”

Evan smiled politely but kicked his mom under the table, hoping she wouldn’t pull out any doodled-on receipts or grocery lists from her purse to display *The Adventures of Kitty-Corn*. Whenever they were sitting in the waiting room at the doctor’s office or waiting for their food at a restaurant, Kitty-Corn embarked upon another zany adventure. It kept Hailey occupied, but it wasn’t exactly Promising Young Artist material.

“Let’s take a look at your course load for this semester,” Dr. Mortakis continued, and Melissa Kiernan’s purse remained mercifully on the floor. “I’ll answer any questions you have, give you a little tour, and then let you settle in before classes start up on Monday. Okay?”

She donned a pair of red reading glasses and opened his welcome packet on the desk. Evan’s heart raced with anticipation, making his face tingle a little.

He was really here. Really going to college early. Really a promising young artist.

“So, all our first-year students take English Composition and World History in their fall semester. You’ll get a science gen ed out of the way with bio, and then Fundamentals of 2-D is a prerequisite for upper-level studio art classes. However, I thought I’d sign off on one upper-level art history class, so you’re enrolled in Mythology in Modern Art, as well. I teach that one, and I’m here any time you need me, okay? If you’re ever feeling concerned or overwhelmed or even just homesick, I’m only a text, email, or two-block walk away. Melissa,” she said, covering his mom’s hand with hers. “I’m going to take great care of your son.”

“I know you will,” his mom said, smiling, but Evan could see the tears in her eyes already.

A few hours later, his clothes were unpacked and his desk was set up, and she and Hailey were all-out weeping in the doorway.

“This was your idea, remember?” he said, trying to make her laugh, and it worked. “If you don’t want me to stay, I can just tell Dr. Mortakis what a forger you really are—”

“You’ll do no such thing.” She laughed, and kissed his cheek. “And I’m not repentant.”

After they left, he sat alone on the twin XL mattress, waiting for his roommate to arrive. Waiting for his new life to begin. He was used to fresh starts and new schools, but this was different. As long as he kept his scholarship, New York would be his home for the next four years. He’d never lived anywhere for four whole years. And after graduation, if he liked it here, he could stay.

For seventeen years, his life had felt like painting by someone else’s numbers, waiting for grown-ups to tell him where to color next.

Watching the sun go down over New York City, he let it sink in. He wasn’t someone else’s canvas anymore. Now, he was the hand, holding the brush.



C H A P T E R T W O



EVAN ANGLED HIS flea-market chrome desk fan toward his face and closed his eyes. It was too hot to draw. The sweat on his palms kept smudging the pencil lines, and he was beginning to panic. He had to turn this smudgy mess in by two o'clock.

His son-of-a-billionaire roommate, Henri, was out, but his socks remained, stinking up the room. Evan got stuck with the Czech student who spoke no English but was somehow passing all his classes. Rich dads work wonders—not that he would know.

His first assignment for Mythology in Modern Art was to choose an ancient culture, then explain and illustrate three symbols of their mythology in a contemporary and relevant style.

Evan chose Egypt and decided to render the symbols as tattoo designs. He began with the scarab beetle. The ancient Egyptians believed that every morning the sun was pushed into the sky by a scarab beetle—a symbol of power and determination. He stylized it heavily in black and white—the sun and each section of the insect's body and outstretched wings containing a different line pattern.

Next, the wedjat eye. Horus, the falcon god, supposedly had an eye that could heal and protect humans against evil. He sketched the almond-shaped eye with thick lines, the half-lidded pupil, the hooked J-line and then the straight one coming down from the bottom lid. It needed something—a hint of stippling on the inner lids for dimension. But of course, as soon as he got it perfect, he smudged it.

Damn it.

Holding his sticky palms up to the fan, he closed his eyes and of course he thought of *her*. That wedjat eye would look incredible peering out from her inner forearm. Or maybe—

Stop it, he told himself, and opened his eyes. She's not even a real person. This is pathetic.

He cleaned up the smudges with a putty eraser, determined to complete his work on time. The final symbol he'd chosen was the phoenix. Sacred firebird. Symbol of immortality, rebirth, and life after death. Though he'd been too nervous to draw the beetle and the eye without the option of an eraser, he went straight to ink for the fiery bird. Flames had to be drawn without thinking, so he let his subconscious do the work. Zero to permanent in less than ten minutes. Perfection.

Evan smiled, sure Dr. Mortakis would be impressed.

His first full week of independence was coming to a close, and he'd decided he could get used to it. Afternoon classes meant sleeping in, and there were no bells telling him when he was allowed to eat. He didn't have to rush home to get Hailey off the bus. He'd sketched out a few frames of *Kitty-Corn Explores New York*, but he'd spent most of his free time drawing for fun. His thoughts, his time, and his paper were all gloriously his own.

Blowing on the page then tapping a phoenix feather with his index finger, he declared it dry and slipped it into a plastic, waterproof sleeve. It was definitely going to rain—he could smell it. It only takes one ruined masterpiece to learn your lesson: always use protection.

Stomach growling, Evan slung on his backpack and hooked his lucky golf umbrella over his arm. It was one o'clock, which left an hour to grab something to eat and hopefully dodge the storm before class. He knew he should go to the cafeteria or one of the restaurants around campus that accepted his meal plan, but he was in the mood to splurge a little. The stairwell was oppressive. Even the painted cement was sweating. The second clap of thunder shook Manhattan just as Evan hit street level. Scanning the sky between the scrapers, he saw a definite black cloud line.

The air itself seemed excited by the promise of a downpour as he passed through the gates of Washington Square. The wind kicked up, swirling little tornadoes of trash in the street as people hurried their dogs along and pedaled their bicycles faster. Evan walked faster, too, until a girl's voice stopped him short.

"Oh, shit!"

In a sudden gust of wind, a long slip of paper somersaulted across the sidewalk in front of him, then flew into a cluster of evergreen bushes, followed by a frantic girl.

"Shit, shit, shit!" She dove down into the mulch, thrusting her arm into the thick greenery. Evan stepped closer, unsure of whether he should try to help retrieve the paper or guard her bag, which she'd abandoned beside a stack of books on the wrought-iron bench to his right.

The wind made the decision for him. Like a wild bird, the girl's paper took flight, and she continued the chase. He moved protectively toward the bench, eyeing her belongings with curiosity. A worn unzipped backpack lay on its side, advertising a wallet, a hoodie, and a pair of drumsticks to the pickpockets of New York. On the other side of the bench, she'd left a stack of library books: a splashy biography of The Who's drummer, Keith Moon, sat on top of a poetry collection and a thick self-help volume entitled *Freeing Yourself From the Narcissist You Know*.

The first, fat raindrop fell on Evan's nose, and immediately, umbrellas popped up all around him, like fast-motion blooming flowers. People scrambled indoors and under awnings, holding their belongings a little closer as they ran. Evan glanced around the park for the girl while struggling to open his umbrella, finally turning around so the wind could help instead of strong-arming it closed. But as soon as the rusted metal button loosened the carriage, he lost control. Metal-spiked nylon careened inside-out, directly toward a cluster of pedestrians.

"Sorry!" Evan shouted, trying to grab the rim and right the umbrella without poking anyone in the eye. He heard a yelp, and then someone was grabbing onto the other side and helping him pull it down and right side out again.

As soon as the umbrella popped back into shape, Evan blinked in surprise at the girl suddenly standing under it with him, close enough to touch.

Green eyes.

Freckles.

Wisps of dark hair escaping a long, damp braid.

And a soggy slip of paper clutched triumphantly between her thumb and forefinger.

"Sorry," he repeated, feeling as if he'd been struck by lightning.

"It's okay," she said with a breathless laugh, brushing the wind-blown hair from her face as she looked up at Evan, then paused. Instead of ducking back out like any stranger would, she blinked as if trying to place him.

The city rushed around them in a wave—rain pelting their legs, people scrambling past in annoyance—but her eyes were like pieces of sea glass, shining like something broken and lost and beautiful. He was afraid to look away, sure she'd melt like sugar in the rain, but she just stood as if the same electricity was running through her, rooting her to the ground—

Until tires squealed and a cab driver laid on the horn and the girl blinked as if waking up from a dream.

“Oh, my books!” she exclaimed, scrambling toward the bench.

He followed, holding the umbrella over her as shook the books in an attempt to dry them.

“Can you hold this a sec?” she asked with a grimace, handing him the slip of paper before yanking the hoodie from her backpack.

She’d handed him a receipt from the New York Public Library, but as it fluttered in his grasp, he noticed the handwritten stanzas scribbled in purple ink all over the back.

“Thanks,” she said, snatching it back. “Sorry. That was weird, wasn’t it? I mean, *I’m* weird, showing up under your umbrella and asking you to hold my stuff when I don’t even know you.”

“It’s okay,” he said with a smile, nodding toward the paper. “Glad you found it.”

Her wet cheeks flushed pink and she pressed her lips together. “Oh. You witnessed that?”

“It must be a really good poem,” he said. “To leave your wallet for it.”

“Actually, it’s a song lyric,” she said, slinging her backpack over one shoulder. “But yeah. Thanks for not robbing me blind.”

“Your eyes are much too pretty for that,” he blurted, then shook his head as heat rushed to his face. “Sorry, that was . . . that was weird.”

“Well, now we’re even.” Her smile bloomed, revealing a slight gap between her front teeth, and he felt like one of those stunned cartoon characters with little birdies circling his head, ringing bells.

Her phone buzzed in her palm, and when she checked the screen, she let out a groan. “Shit, I’m late again!”

With an apologetic wave, she stepped back out into the storm, attempting to cover her head with the hoodie. Her long, black braid swung like the pendulum of a clock, and in a flash of panic, Evan realized she was walking away.

“Wait!” he called, just as she reached the Washington archway. Her head whipped around, and his heart stopped.

This is impossible.

“Here.” He extended the umbrella, motioning for her to come under it.

She hesitated, cocking her head and squinting, droplets falling from her eyelashes, but the sky roared again, and she quickly ducked under, grimacing at the clouds.

“Are you headed to class? I can walk you. I have time.” His stomach was growling, and another sizzle of lightning made him think about Benjamin Franklin and kites and keys and sudden death by electrified lucky golf umbrella. But lucky golf umbrellas don’t get you killed. They help you meet your dream girl in the rain.

“No, I’m not in school,” she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m headed to work.”

“Where do you work?”

Her phone buzzed again, and she let out a frustrated sigh. “The Black Cat Café. It’s just off the square. I was supposed to be there at one.”

“Me, too.”

She arched a suspicious eyebrow, and he felt his face go hot.

“Well, I don’t work there, I eat there. I mean, I was on my way to buy food there. Assuming there is food there?”

She nodded, suppressing a smile. “Drinks, too.”

“Great. That’s great. Because clearly, my brain stops working when I’m hungry.”

“This way,” she laughed, pointing to the left, and they started walking, trying to avoid puddles as the downpour slowed to a steady purr. Following her lead, Evan found himself exiting the park, staring at the blinking yellow light of the crosswalk when he only wanted to look at her. It was easier to convince himself that they weren’t really identical when he was looking straight ahead instead of into her eyes. The light

changed, and her arm bumped his as they huddled close to stay dry while crossing the street. He thought he'd spontaneously combust.

He shot her a sideways glance. Were there really deep purple undertones in her black hair? It was the perfect color to complement her green eyes, striking as Georgia O'Keeffe's black violets.

They ducked under the awning of the Black Cat Café, and Evan collapsed his umbrella. A pair of window boxes overflowing with red geraniums framed either side of the heavy black door inset with a sleek line painting of a sitting cat, its tail curled into a backward S on the glass.

Opening the door, she shivered in the blast of cool air on her wet skin, and he wished he had a jacket to wrap around her shoulders.

As soon as they stepped inside, a girl with unnaturally red hair started laughing from behind the counter. "Oops. Forgot we only have one umbrella."

"Yeah, it's mine on the way home," the girl with the black hair replied with a pointed look, then unzipped her backpack and tented the wet books on a table by the window to dry. She hung her sweatshirt over the back of a chair, checked her phone, then looked down and sighed at her soaked shoes. "I need to go stand under the hand dryer or something." She turned to Evan apologetically. "I'll be right back."

Evan's chest throbbed when she turned away, and he thought of the time Hailey's father, Bill, took him fishing. The tug on the line. The resistance. The way his reel spun as the fish swam away from the shore with a hook in its lip while he fumbled for a hold to pull it back.

He had painted that for the spring Fine Arts Festival, too. *The One That Got Away* hung right beside *Green-Eyed Girl*.

Who is she? Everyone asked the question when they passed the larger-than-life girl peeking out from behind a heavy, black door. "Come on," his mother had whispered slyly. "You can tell me." But how could he? There was no model, no *girl he used to know*. He didn't even copy some girl from the internet. "I just . . . I had this dream . . ."

he began, but his mother threw up her hands and started laughing. “Okay, TMI!”

“It wasn’t that kind of dream,” he’d insisted, but she just offered a patronizing, “Sure, honey, whatever you say,” and went downstairs to take dinner out of the oven. It hadn’t even been a dream, exactly, and certainly not the kind she was insinuating.

Suddenly, he became aware of the redhead’s stare and turned away to inspect the menu printed on a large wall-mounted chalkboard. His face was hot as he struggled to focus. He was in a New York City café, where people were expected to order and eat food.

Looking over the prices, his empty stomach sank. If he was going to eat anywhere other than the cafeteria this semester, he needed to find a job. He had already stopped by the university library, food services, and the custodial offices, but nobody had an opening for the seventeen-year-old kid spending his senior year of high school at NYU. Evan didn’t want to ask his mother to Venmo him more money. Maybe if she closed a deal on another property, she would send more, but he didn’t want her to have to do that. She needed that money for Hailey’s after-school daycare now.

He tried to ground himself to reality and study the daily specials. Lots of girls had green eyes and black hair and a gap between their front teeth. So, he had a type. So what? It was his empty stomach making him lightheaded, muddling his thoughts. How could he have seen clearly in that downpour, anyway?

But the way she looked at him.

There was *recognition* in her eyes.

Wasn’t there?

“So, you’re a friend of Mara’s?” the red-haired girl asked.

“Yeah, kind of,” he said, shrugging, but all ten pints of his blood rushed to his head. *Mara*. The name clicked as if he’d been trying to remember it. It fit perfectly. It should have been the title of the painting—except he hadn’t known her name when he painted her.

It wasn't her, he reminded himself.

"I mean, we just met on the way here."

Evan looked toward the register, where someone had decorated the display cups with black marker and arranged them in ascending order: a twelve-ounce undersea small with studded octopus tentacles gripping the cup; a sixteen-ounce *Día de los Muertos* medium covered in blooming skulls; and a twenty-ounce Empire State large with the geometric skyline of Manhattan.

"Yeah, those are Mara's, too." The redhead sighed. Evan read her name tag, scrawled in loopy handwriting, *Samantha*. "It's sickening, the way she's good at everything, isn't it?"

He laughed uncomfortably. He hadn't even known her name until thirty seconds ago, let alone what she was good at. She was a living, breathing stranger—not the girl whose portrait had gotten him into NYU.

Still, try telling that to his heart when she returned, smoothing her still-damp braid. "Okay, so, what can I get for you?"

"Um . . . How about this?" He pointed to the Empire State large display cup.

"A large? Sure. Large what?"

"Surprise me. As long as I can keep the cup."

"This cup?" She picked it up, eyebrows scrunched in confusion.

"Yeah. I'm kind of like a collector of disposable art," he blurted, immediately wishing he hadn't.

She pressed her lips together, and Evan could hear Samantha stifle a snort from the back room.

"Disposable art?"

"Yeah. It's a thing. And you know, whoever designed those cups is a really good artist. So, I thought maybe I could buy one."

"Well, I guess I could sell it to you. But then I'm going to have to make a replacement."

"Wait, *you* made these?" he said, feigning surprise.

“I draw when I’m bored,” she said, shrugging and trying to push the smile off her lips. She grabbed the cup. “So, what do you want in it?”

“Umm, coffee I guess?”

“Hot or cold?”

“Uh, hot I guess?”

She picked up a marker but paused. “Are you sure? You want to think about it for a minute?”

“No, I’m sure. Hot coffee. That’s my final answer.”

She laughed. “Name?”

“It’s Evan. I mean, I’m Evan.”

“I’m Mara.” She smiled, holding his gaze for an extra beat. “You want something to eat, too? You said you were hungry.”

“Right . . . um . . .” He leaned back, looked in the case, and blurted out the first thing he saw. “I’ll take one of those bear claws.”

“Oh-kay, coffee and a bear claw coming right up.”

He thanked her as the door opened and a pair of girls walked in, relieving them both from his painfully awkward ordering process. Pretending to read something on his phone, he took a seat by the front window and considered that, on the hottest day of summer, he had ordered steaming coffee and a bear claw for lunch. She must think he was real idiot. She was probably right.

Evan dropped his hand below the table to open his gallery. Swiping back to April, he scrolled through the photos of the Spring Fine Arts Festival.

He stared at *The Green-Eyed Girl* for a long minute, then hit delete. The only thing weirder than meeting a disposable art collector would be meeting a complete stranger who painted you last year.

He jumped when a phone buzzed from the empty table beside him, and he realized Mara had left it behind with her library books. He tried to catch her eye, but she was busy steaming milk for the girls at the counter. When Samantha brought his coffee and bear claw to

the table a few minutes later, he pointed toward the phone, which was buzzing again.

Samantha took one look at the screen and rolled her eyes. “She *so* needs to block her.”

Without further explanation, she picked up Mara’s phone to decline the call, and Evan could see that the screen was lit up by a caller simply labeled “X.”

Shaking her head, Samantha carried the phone behind the counter, where she shoved it into Mara’s back pocket and whispered something into her ear. The steamer went silent, and Mara’s hands went to her face in before shaking her head. Samantha raised her palms in surrender before going into the back room.

Evan looked from Mara’s sagging shoulders to the library books on the table.

Freeing Yourself From the Narcissist You Know.

If the caller was Mara’s ex, that at least meant she was single—but from the way her posture changed after finding out about the call, maybe not quite free?

The bell above the door jangled as a sudden rush of dripping, laughing students poured through the front door of the café, forming a line that would keep Mara and Samantha busy for the foreseeable future. Tables began filling up, so Evan rose to throw his dirty napkins away and set the crumbly pastry plate in the dish tub. Feet anchored beside the garbage can, he wanted to say *it was nice to meet you*, or *that was a really tasty bear claw*, but Mara was occupied with the blender. With a sigh of resignation, he turned for the door. But just as he reached for the handle, he heard his name.

“Evan?”

His heart jumped.

“Thanks for the umbrella!” she called.

“Sure,” he said, trying to swallow his heart so he could speak. “Yeah. Any time.”

“See you later?” Across the crowded café, she held his gaze, unmistakably inviting. As if whoever “X” was, they were completely irrelevant now.

He nodded, feeling a smile consume his entire body. “Absolutely.”



WHEN DR. MORTAKIS asked if anyone would like to come up to the front to share their three symbols of an ancient culture’s mythology, Evan slid a little lower in his seat. A few students displayed cartoonish Greek and Nordic symbols that were clearly not as skillful as Evan’s Egyptian ones, but he wasn’t ready to share in an upper-level art history class quite yet. He was also too distracted by his empty cup and the girl who’d written his name on it.

Mara.

She wanted to see him later—but how much later? After class was too soon. Was tonight too soon? He could go back tomorrow and ask her to dinner, or to a movie. He didn’t have to babysit, didn’t have to ask his mom if he could borrow the car. He was in the driver’s seat of his own life now. He could go wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted, with whoever he wanted—

But then Evan remembered he was really just a high school senior. He was only seventeen—and she was out of school. Did that mean she was twenty-two? Twenty-three?

“Your next assignment,” Dr. Mortakis said from the podium, clearing her throat and jolting Evan back to the present. “Is to visit an art exhibit here in the city. It can be anything that intrigues you—a museum such as the Met or MoMA, or a small gallery in the Village. Your job is to search for the past in the present. You’ll need to find three pieces of artwork that are considered *modern*—remember, nothing before 1860—that incorporate an ancient or mythological subject. To ensure that you’ve put your time in, I’m requiring both a

photograph and a sketch. I have some flyers here at the podium if you would like some ideas, but let's take a look at a few examples up on the screen so you know what to look for."

Evan tried to pay attention to the flurry of slides depicting a Cubist Virgin Mary, a Dada collage of Greek heroes, and an Impressionist version of Icarus plummeting into the sea, but he wasn't sure how much to write down. Would she test them on these slides if they weren't in the book, or were they only examples? He wrote furiously, but even as his pen flew across the page, his mind drifted to Mara. What kind of song was she writing on the back of that receipt? Did she sing or play the drums, or both? Who was this narcissist she was trying to free herself from—and just how persistent were they? Was she in actual danger? Should he check in sooner rather than later, just to be safe?

"Many people believe that modernism was about leaving the past behind," Dr. Mortakis said, as the screen went dark and the lights came up. "But that's not only incorrect, it's impossible. Modernists left tradition behind in favor of experimentation. Rather than strict realism, these artists began incorporating their own interpretations of reality into their visual art. But they were not attempting to erase the past. They simply interpreted it through a new, more interesting lens. As King Solomon said so eloquently in the Book of Ecclesiastes, 'What has been, will be again. What has been done, will be done again. There is nothing new under the sun.'"

Finally, the hour was up. Slinging his book bag over one shoulder and hooking the soggy umbrella over his elbow, he picked up his empty skyline cup and headed for the door.

"Evan?"

Dr. Mortakis smiled warmly at him, fanning a stack of papers.

"I thought you might really enjoy this exhibit," she said, handing him a glossy postcard advertising Coney Island: A History in Pictures, at the Neptune Gallery. "It's only open for a few more days, though, so you'd better hurry."

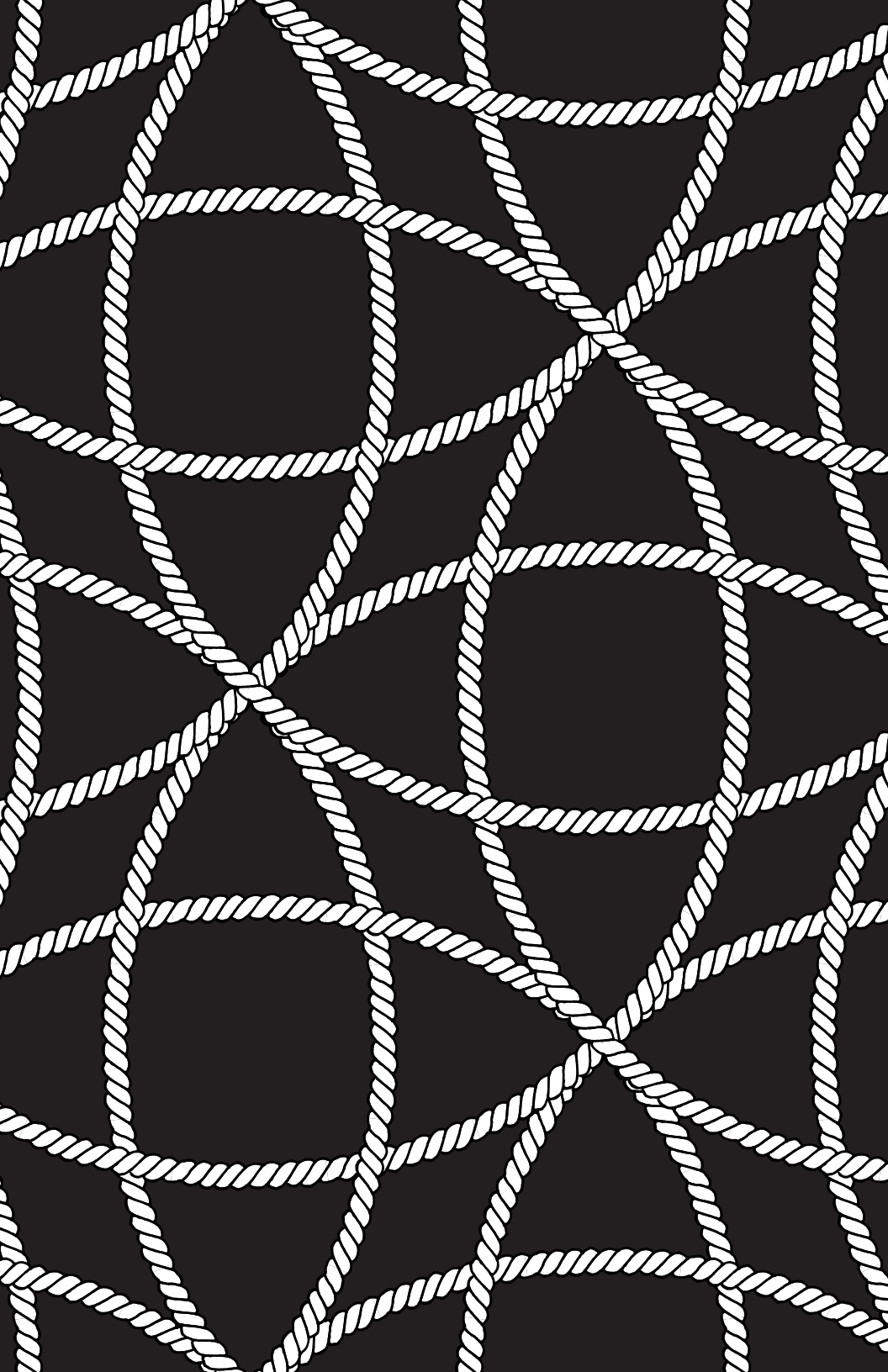
“Thanks.” He nodded, scanning the info. “Oh, hey, I wanted to ask you—do you know of any place I could get a job on campus? Something flexible with my class schedule?”

“Hmm.” She tapped her lips with a crimson-tipped finger. “I’ll see what I can do. And let’s make that first mentor appointment, okay? How about Monday for lunch? With Labor Day, I don’t have any classes, so we’ll have plenty of time to chat.”

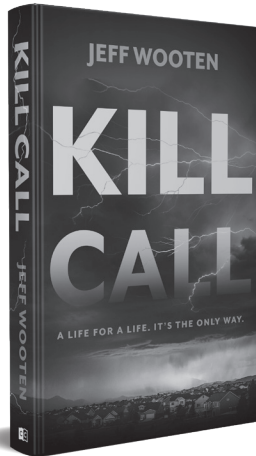
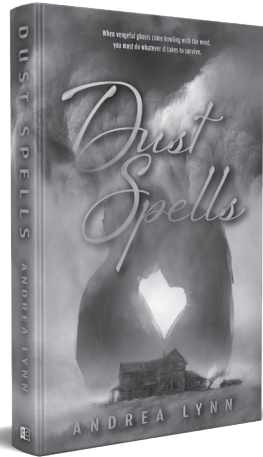
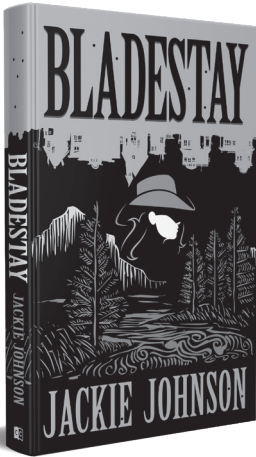
“Sure. Um, where’s your office again?”

“Actually, there’s a little place I like off Washington Square—the Black Cat Café. How does that sound? Twelve thirty?”

“Perfect,” he said, attempting to appear nonchalant, as if she weren’t some sort of fairy godmother making all his wishes come true. “I’ll be there.”



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Mara Cassidy is going to die... Again

FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS, EVAN KIERNAN'S LIFE HAS FELT LIKE PAINTING by someone else's numbers, moving and transferring schools every time his mom has a breakup. But when he's accepted into NYU's Promising Young Artist program for his senior year, the future suddenly feels like a blank canvas. However, it soon becomes clear that the city has peculiar ties to his past. A thunderstorm finds him under the same umbrella as an eerily familiar green-eyed girl. A visit to an art gallery brings him face-to-face with a heavily tattooed portrait of himself. He sees things that aren't there—at least not anymore. And the girl he's falling in love with is somehow at the center of it all. When history suddenly points to a devastating future, Evan must race against time to figure out who is pulling the strings and change the green-eyed girl's fate—a race he's already lost twice.



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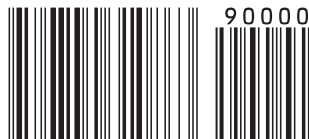
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